

The Hollow Promise – Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

Main Idea: Biblically, greed and contentment cannot cohabitate.

I. The Burden of Greed | Ecclesiastes 5:8-16

In conclusion to chapter 5, a new section starts as Solomon exposes the cycle of greed that infects life on earth (under the sun). In verse 8, greed is illustrated by the figure of a “high official” who by the nature of his position sees himself as someone deceived by his own perception of power but in reality has others watching over him, “If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them” (v.8).

There is no position of authority under the sun that is not watched over by a higher authority. Jesus’ interaction with Pontius Pilate illustrates this principle in action. Though Pilate held the power of the Roman governor, the events surrounding Jesus’ trial reveal that ultimate authority rests not with earthly rulers but with God. Pilate may have controlled the courthouse, but he could not thwart God’s sovereign plan. In both cases, Solomon’s observation about the hierarchy under the sun finds its fulfillment in the reality of Christ’s submission to God’s higher authority, demonstrating that human power is always measured and limited by the divine. **The heart of the problem of oppression and injustice under the sun is not the result of God’s inability to act as an agent of change but the result of man’s distorted view of the nature of life lived for the glory of God due to his natural inclination to sin (Rom. 1:24-25).**

The way Solomon reflects over man’s misunderstanding of authority is by addressing the reality of man’s natural propensity toward greed. Greed distorts the heart by replacing trust in God with trust in gain. In verse 10, Solomon delivers his verdict: “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.” The problem is not in the possession of wealth, but in its possession of us. Like the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-24), those enslaved by riches walk away sorrowful because their hearts cling to what they cannot keep. Wealth becomes the idol that promises meaning but leaves only emptiness. The pattern is timeless. Whether in ancient kingdoms or modern economies, humanity’s obsession with accumulation leads to injustice, anxiety, and alienation. Theologian Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and that restlessness is nowhere clearer than in the greedy heart. **Greed deforms worship, it attempts to paint God with Satan’s brush turning gifts into gods and gratitude into grasping.** Greed often allows passions to reign, presenting the bait but hiding the hook. Greed’s appetite can never be satisfied.

Zacchaeus’ conversion (Luke 19:1–10) illustrates the opposite: when salvation came to his house, money lost its mastery. Christ liberated him from the tyranny of possession by filling his heart with a greater treasure. Jesus declared, “You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). The two masters demand different loyalties, and the choice between them reveals the true seat of worship. Solomon’s point becomes painfully clear in verses 13-16. Riches are often “kept by their owner to his hurt.” Wealth hoarded for self ultimately harms the soul. Worse yet, wealth can vanish overnight— “lost in a bad venture”—leaving the man as empty as the day he was born. “As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return.” Possessions offer no permanence; they vanish like vapor in the wind. As Thomas à Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, “All that is in the world is vanity, except to love God and serve Him only.”¹

To Ponder:

1. In what ways does greed manifest itself in our culture’s definition of success today?
2. Where do you see the seed of greed shaping your desires, decisions or even your worship?

¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1940), 7.

II. The Blessing of Contentment | Ecclesiastes 5:17-20

After exposing the burden of greed, Solomon turns to helping the congregation see and understand the blessing of contentment. He describes a man who “finds enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun... for this is his lot” (v. 18). The difference between the restless rich man and the peaceful laborer is not in what they have, but in how they receive it. Joy in toil is “the gift of God” (v. 19). Solomon’s theology here is profoundly God-centered. **Contentment is not self-produced; it flows from recognizing that every moment, every possession, and every breath is from the hand of God.** Greed and contentment cannot cohabitate. To enjoy God’s gifts rightly, one must first worship the Giver rightly. The problem is not wealth but worldliness—the attempt to find satisfaction apart from the One who gives all things. This truth echoes throughout Scripture. Jesus warned, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19–20). Paul later testified, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4:11). Contentment, then, is not the absence of desire but the alignment of desire with God’s providence. The godly man doesn’t deny the reality of toil, but he discovers joy in it because he knows it comes from the hand of a gracious God. The restless spirit that strives for control finds no peace, but the heart that surrenders to divine providence can rejoice in both little and much.

Contentment is not natural to the human heart; it is formed through the school of providence. This is why Solomon concludes with such grace: “He will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.” (v.20). The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs defined it as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”² **True contentment is countercultural—it resists the voices that tell us we must always have more, achieve more, or own more.** It reminds us that the good life is not measured by the size of our barns but by the stillness of our souls. The Psalmist captured this posture beautifully: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for You, O God” (Ps. 42:1). This is the essence of contentment—a longing not for more of the world, but for more of God Himself. **The unsatisfied heart is not thirsty for money but for meaning, not for possessions but for communion with God.** Only in communion with the living God does the soul find rest. Contentment, then, is not the absence of desire but the reordering of it. It’s the heart learning to say, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (Ps. 23:1) This is the antidote to the hollow promise of wealth — to find joy not in possessing but in praising, not in achieving but in abiding. The contented believer can rest, not because he has mastered the world, but because he has been mastered by grace.

To Ponder:

1. How can you practice gratitude in daily life as an act of resistance to discontentment?
2. What does it look like for you to “rest in the Giver rather than the gift”?

² Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), 19.