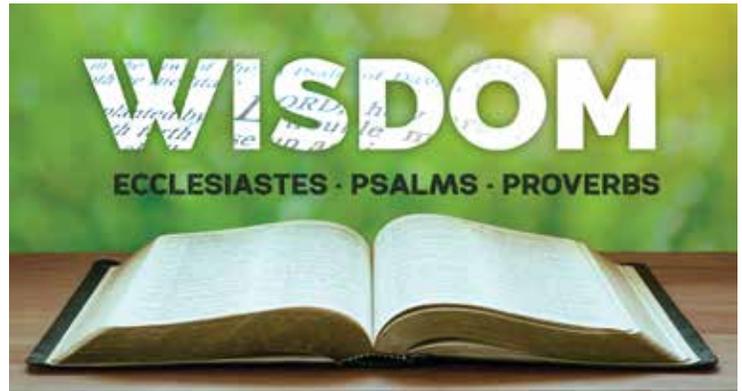


Week of June 19



DAY

1

Ecclesiastes 6:1–12 **More on Wealth and Possessions**

The devotional guide for last week finished with a long section on wealth and possessions (Ecclesiastes 5:8-20). But the Teacher continues those reflection for 12 more verses. You may want to reread the Week 2, Day 5 Devotional. (You can find it on the church app, in devotional resources.)

In this section, the Teacher uses the phrase *heVAL* four times (it will be written like this to help you pronounce this core word). The entire section begins in the NIV translation with the sub-heading “Riches are Meaningless” (5:8–6:12). This is a vital reminder for contemporary Christians who think, along with our culture, that riches are EVERYTHING.

In the years after the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the United States of America via its new Constitution, a visitor to America concluded that Americans are possessed by the pursuit of prosperity (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*). That has never changed. We need to hear the Teacher on this subject AND we find it very hard to hear the Teacher and the rest of the Bible on this topic.

He has four main points in this section:

- 1) The pursuit of wealth is meaningless.
- 2) It is meaningless because the wealthy do not truly enjoy their prosperity and they are never satisfied (said five times).
- 3) This is such a grievous evil (v. 2) that it would be better to never have been born (vv. 3-5). He uses a tragic image of a stillborn child to emphasize this.
- 4) In the end, we all die and who knows what happens to us after that? So what use is it to devote a life to pursuing wealth?

Why are we obsessed with wealth and possessions when the Bible is so consistently clear about them and has strong guidance about the proper use of our resources?

What next steps can you take to reframe your relationship with your money?

DAY

2

Ecclesiastes 7:1–22 **Morality and Ethics in Bite-Size Pieces**

Let’s be clear on a few important words. The Bible is the revealed Word of God. The Bible is the truth of God (John 17:17; Psalm 119:160, and really the entire psalm). We use the word *theology* when we talk about truth statements about God.

God exists. God is love. God is good. God is just. This is the nature of God. Humans created in the image of God are to be people of love, goodness, and justness. These are just a few of the hundreds of theological truths about God, and really, about the nature of REALITY and LIFE.

When we talk about the nature of God and of humanity, part of that conversation is about virtue or character. Love, goodness, holiness, justice, mercy, and so on are all VIRTUES. Hate, envy, cruelty, unforgiveness, and so on are negative virtues or VICIES. Virtue and vice are internal qualities that define who we are.

Morality and *ethics* are two words used to describe how we should behave or act in our relationships with others. Many proverbs are short statements with pointed advice on what virtuous, moral, ethical behavior should be pursued and what should be avoided.

The 22 verses for today contain 25 proverbial pieces of advice that range over a wide variety of behaviors. Remember, the Teacher is working with a limited perspective about the nature of God, as well as the purposes and work of God in the world. There are a few times when the Teacher is skeptical about life and has some less-than-ideal advice. But then, many other insights he gives are brilliant.

Find a few proverbs that really speak to you and consider why they are speaking to you. Be sure to note the second part of verses 2, 9, 10, and the last sentence of verse 18.

Verse 20 is the only part of Ecclesiastes that is used in the New Testament (see Romans 3:10-12).



Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1

How Wisdom Is Found

This is a summer for finding wisdom. The Teacher is on a search for wisdom. He reflects about his search in a very transparent way. He is honest about his frustrations. At times he is agnostic about his search. *Agnostic* is not the same as *atheistic*. Agnostic simply means one is uncertain, doubtful, and just does not sufficiently know something.

In Ecclesiastes 1:12-13 he describes his overly ambitious goal to know everything! And he says he has seen everything. That is presumptuous on his part, and it is not surprising that his primary conclusion (over and over - 38 times) is everything is heVAL. Meaningless, futile, vain, smoke, confusing, enigmatic... you get the picture. In the passage for today, the Teacher describes his goal (v. 23), his limitations (v. 24), his focus (v. 25), the futile results (vv. 26-28), a powerful conclusion about humanity's tragic pursuits (v. 29), and a final positive word about wisdom (8:1). In the end, he is a skeptic holding on to hope.

Here are a few key ideas to help you in the pursuit of wisdom.

Everyone has a starting point. Christians have God and the Word of God (read Psalm 119 sometime) as our starting point. That means we have a framework of truth about who God is that is a firm foundation and guiding structure.

We pursue truth with a spirit of great humility. God is vast (what an understatement) and we are finite and limited. We are foolish, ignorant, and confused. Take a few minutes and read Romans 1:28-32, Ephesians 4:17-24, and Matthew 22:29. We are neither neutral or skilled in knowing truth. We have deep biases and distortions that constantly work against us.

We find wisdom through a long, slow, deep, difficult journey.

We find wisdom through lingering conversations with those who are wiser than we are.

We find wisdom through trial and error.

We find wisdom as we pray, worship, and draw close to God.

See Ephesians 1:17-18, 1 Corinthians 2:6-15, and Romans 12:1-2.



Ecclesiastes 8:2–9

Politics and Power

The Teacher has several references about rulers in his book. In today's passage, and later in 9:13–10:20, he gives extended thought about those who rule over us. If there is an area where we need much greater wisdom, it is in the areas of politics, governance, leadership, and citizenship. Right now, as you listen to what many followers of Jesus say on these matters, there is a good deal of misconception, distorted thinking, and what the Teacher describes as foolishness. It is a crucial time, and we need a strong infusion of wisdom.

In this passage, the Teacher is primarily speaking to those who are in places and positions around the king. In the majority of places and through most of history, power has been concentrated in a monarch. That power has usually been absolute power. Democracy is rare and recent and, by the way, in a great deal of trouble.

But the context of these verses is for those advisors and officials who are near to the absolute monarch and how they need a

good deal of common sense in responding to one in absolute power. Notice the reality that power can corrupt, and absolute power can corrupt absolutely and do a great deal of evil. Through history we refer to bad rulers as dictators and tyrants. Recent and current history has them as well.

One of the most important existential (great and vital) questions is about power. What is power? What is the purpose of power? What are the dangers of power? What are the guards against the misuse and abuse of power? How does the Bible describe “true power”? How do leaders use power and authority in the right way? Above all, how does Jesus redeem power and authority? Then, how do followers of Jesus exercise power in the way of Jesus?

Here is an Old Testament passage (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) and a New Testament passage (Matthew 20:20-28) to help you answer those questions and begin to find wisdom. The Teacher gets us started and these passages will take you much further into greater wisdom.



Ecclesiastes 8:10–17

Life's Not Fair (or Just)!

One thing you will not find in the Old Testament is a reluctance of the prophets (and others) to complain about the lack of fairness and justice.

Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?
Why do evil people get away with their evil?
Why do those who oppress the poor go unpunished?
Why do bad things happen to God's people who do good?

The Teacher is at the head of the class when it comes to noticing and complaining about the travesty of justice. Verse 10 begins these reflections with the words, “Then too...” In verse 14 you read the core frustration about justice not being done.

There is a consistent tension the Bible acknowledges. Generally, there is cause and effect. It is the law of reaping and sowing. If you do bad, you will reap what is bad. If you do good, you will reap what is good. It may not be evident right away, but the law of reaping and sowing is eventually manifest. (See Galatians 6:7-10 for a New Testament affirmation of this.)

However, and here is where the tension enters, there are plenty of exceptions to this general rule. At times it might even seem the exceptions are the norm. The Teacher wrestles with that tension. The Teacher, like all who believe in God, wants justice to be done. The Teacher wants evil punished and good rewarded. Despite his doubts, he has words of hope in verse 12.

Remember, the Teacher has a good deal of uncertainty about what happens after death. The Teacher wants to believe that God will right all that is wrong and be the just Judge of all the earth, he just does not know for certain this will happen.

How about you? When are you frustrated with the lack of justice? How do you persevere in doing what is right when there is no immediate benefit for doing so?

Do you believe that one day God will right all that is wrong and all that is evil will be judged?