

The Proper View of Religion, Rulers and Riches

Ecclesiastes 5:1-20

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7: *“Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. ² Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool’s voice is known by his many words. ⁴ When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— ⁵ better not to vow than to vow and not pay. ⁶ Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God.”*

Background Notes

Thus far in our talks from Ecclesiastes we’ve seen that life and labor “under the sun” (without taking God into account) is a big zero. It is futile and meaningless. Think it through: without God and His revelation in the Bible, life does not make sense. Apart from divine revelation, there’s no reason or purpose in life. Life and labor just go round and round in an endless cycle of work, problems and pain - and then you die.

The answer to this is to get our viewpoint from “above the sun,” and see life and labor from God’s perspective. Realize that God is in sovereign control of all of life’s times and events, and that life and death for humans is not the same as for animals. Once we gain that perspective, and we live in the light of that truth, life does have purpose and meaning. We can be happy in our work. We can live with purpose. We can live joyously - even though we may not fully understand why God allows certain problems and pain to come into our lives, and even though life is often rough, and not just “smooth sailing.”

Solomon rose “above the sun” in several places in these few chapters. And he gave us the proper view of joyous living, when God is acknowledged and honored. Ecclesiastes 2:24-26: *“Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight.”* Also in chapter 3:12-13: *“I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.”* And chapter 3:22: *“So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage.”*

In chapter 4 this divine perspective was considered - the proper attitude and response to work and labor. Chapter 5 gives believers the correct viewpoint and the correct response in three areas: religion, rulers, and riches.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should have the right view of religion.

Verses 1-7 give us some good advice about worship, and the proper attitude and response that should characterize us as believers. Verses 1-3 teach us that listening to what God has to say is far better than telling God what He needs to know. Just as an overactive mind produces many meaningless dreams, so an overactive mouth produces many foolish words!

In verses 4-6 there is a warning against making rash vows. It's better not to make a vow than to vow and not keep it (v5), or to attempt to get out of the vow by saying you made a mistake (v6). The rest of Scripture has a lot more to say about religious vows, but let's take one application here. Marriage vows are really religious vows, because they are made before God. The teaching of the Word of God from Ecclesiastes is that it's a serious matter to break the marriage vow. That vow was made before God. Justifying divorce by saying that "the marriage was a mistake" (v6) is unbiblical. Read 1 Corinthians 7 in this connection.

So - avoid rash vows! And think through what you say. Lengthy prayers and wordy sermons are not the key to acceptable prayer and worship! Reverence for the Lord from the heart is what God desires (v7). Believers should have the right view of religion.

2. Believers should have the right view of rulers.

Verses 8-9: *"If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field."*

The truth of verse 8 is obvious when you look at any government, anywhere in the world, at any time in history. Corruption exists at every level of every government, no matter how many "checks and balances" are put in place. As a result, there will never be 100% justice and righteousness in the land, and the poor will always be oppressed. So, don't be shocked. This does not make oppression and corruption right, but that's the way it is.

In the long run, it's better to have *some* government, even though it's imperfect, than to have no government at all. That seems to be the overall point of verse 9, although that verse is difficult to translate. Even corrupt rulers don't make laws to destroy the land but usually attempt to make the land productive. In Romans 13, the apostle Paul wrote a similar

comment about government, when the evil tyrant Nero was on the throne. *“The powers that be are ordained of God”* - and even government by corrupt rulers is better than no government at all. Believers should have the right view of rulers.

3. Believers should have the right view of riches.

In verses 10-17, a number of negatives about riches are mentioned. We should internalize and live in the light of these facts so we'll have the right attitude and response to riches.

a. Riches cannot satisfy.

Verse 10: *“He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.”* Most people, including many Christians, don't believe this truth - at least they don't live as if they believe this truth!

b. Riches result in parasites and more stuff to manage.

Verse 11: *“When goods increase, they increase who eat them; to what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes?”* Riches result in more “stuff” to manage, and parasites will gather around to see what they can get from you. Life is a lot simpler when you're not rich.

c. Riches cause insomnia.

Verse 12: *“The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.”* Riches cause insomnia. You can't sleep because you're worried about your investments! Unlike the working man, the wealthy person has been sitting around all day, and thus he or she is not tired enough to get a good night's rest.

d. Riches lead to hoarding.

Verse 13: *“There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: riches kept for their owner to his hurt.”* Hoarding is a sin. It hurts both the hoarder and others. Wealth should be shared.

e. Riches can disappear.

Verse 14: *“But those riches perish through misfortune; when he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand.”*

Proverbs 23:5 says, *“Riches make themselves wings.”* Misfortune, bad investments, unexpected bills, you name it. Before you know it, there's nothing left to pass on to your descendants.

f. Riches must be left behind.

Verses 15-17: *“As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labor which he may carry away in his hand. ¹⁶ And this also is a severe evil— just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has labored for the wind? ¹⁷ All his days he also eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger.”* Riches must be left behind. “You can’t take it with you!” The divine perspective reveals that believers **can** send their treasure on ahead of them to Heaven - if we use it now for the glory of God! Without that divine perspective, accumulating riches is like toiling after wind, with sorrow, sickness, and anger (v17). Believers should have the right view of riches.

Practical Application

Get the big picture!

Verses 18-20: *“Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage.¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor— this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.”*

Getting the “big picture” means learning to look at life from God’s perspective. Once again Solomon gave us the divine perspective (v18-20) - the proper way to approach life and labor under the sun. If, in His sovereignty, the Lord chooses to give us riches and wealth, we should accept this as a gift from God, and then use it well - not hoarding it or using it selfishly, but looking to the Lord for how best to bring glory to God and benefit His kingdom.

The big picture is that, although life is short, it can be meaningful and joyous if we live a simple lifestyle and thank the Lord for all His blessings. We, as believers, can enjoy life, and not become bitter in old age. Instead we will find joy in the Lord and gladness in life all the rest of our days!

So, get the big picture!