

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **The Vanity of Wealth**

*Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Vanity of Wealth

## Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of the vanity of wealth.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9:

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.

<sup>10</sup> He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. <sup>11</sup> When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? <sup>12</sup> Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

<sup>13</sup> There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, <sup>14</sup> and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. <sup>15</sup> As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. <sup>16</sup> This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? <sup>17</sup> Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

<sup>18</sup> Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. <sup>19</sup> Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup> For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

<sup>1</sup> There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: <sup>2</sup> a man to whom God gives wealth,

possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil.<sup>3</sup> If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a still-born child is better off than he.<sup>4</sup> For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he.<sup>6</sup> Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?

<sup>7</sup> All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.<sup>8</sup> For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?<sup>9</sup> Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-6:9)

## Introduction

In Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street*, ruthless investor Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas), delivers a speech on greed before the Teldar Paper shareholders at their annual meeting. Gekko is there to launch his takeover.

"America has become a second-rate power," he tells his fellow investors, pointing to greed as the answer. "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right," adding that greed in its raw and in its full essence marks the upward evolutionary climb.

Then he crescendos, "Greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA."

The Gordon Gekko "Greed is good" speech has become famous in broader reaches of our culture as an American icon. The speech is, however, a classic case of art imitating life.<sup>1</sup>

The Preacher, who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, noticed

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *What is Vocation?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 16-17.

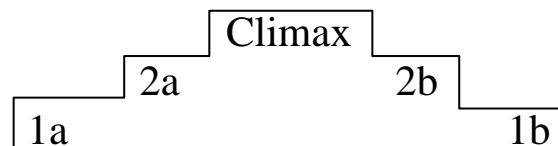
that there was a similar “Greed is good” mindset in his day. International trade was booming, and his country was well situated to make the best of it. People were doing whatever they could to become wealthy.

### Lesson

It is against this background that the Preacher warns God’s people against a greedy pursuit of wealth and to encourage them to enjoy God’s daily gifts.

And so in today’s lesson we are warned against a greedy pursuit of wealth and encouraged instead to enjoy God’s daily gifts.

Now, it will be helpful to be aware that the Preacher presented his message in a form that was familiar to people in his day. It is called a *chiasm*. We can picture a chiasm as a pyramid:



The Preacher ascends the pyramid by making points 1a (5:8-12) and 2a (5:13-17) until he reaches the climax (5:18-20) at the top. Then he descends on the other side by making parallel points in 2b (6:1-6) and 1b (6:7-9).

We, however, prefer a more linear structure, and so we will combine points 1a and 1b, and then 2a and 2b, and then end with the climax of the sermon, which is in the middle of the passage.

So, with that in mind, let us unpack today’s message.

#### **I. People Who Pursue Wealth Will Not Be Satisfied (5:8-12; 6:7-9)**

The first point that the Preacher makes is that people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied.

The Preacher gives a number of reasons why this is so.

A. *The More You Have, the More You Need to Remember that You Will be Judged Regarding Your Use of It (5:8-9)*

He begins by saying that the more you have, the more you need to remember that you will be judged regarding your use of it.

The Preacher begins his point in a strange way. He says in Ecclesiastes 5:8a: **“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.”** The Preacher warns you about the greedy pursuit of wealth, but he begins with the poor. Why does he begin with the poor? And why does he write about them in the way that he does? We might have expected him to say about the poor, **“If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do something about it!”** But instead, the Preacher says, **“Do not be amazed at the matter.”** Why should we not be amazed?

Because, he explains, **“the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them”** (5:8b). In other words, there is always someone higher up the ladder.

Verse 9 is one of the most difficult texts in the book of Ecclesiastes. One commentator says that “about twenty different possible interpretations can be made as to how the Hebrew actually reads.”<sup>2</sup> The *English Standard Version* reads, **“But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields”** (5:9). So, what does it mean?

Verse 8 indicates that people who are greedy will answer to higher officials. And eventually, they will have to answer to God himself. Even though there is oppression and a violation of justice and righteousness in this life, greedy people need to remember that the more money they have, the more they will be judged regarding their use of it.

Verse 9 seems to suggest that even the king needs to be

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<sup>2</sup> Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 77.

committed to cultivating fields. When he does that, it will be a gain for a land (that is, his people) in every way.

*B. The More You Have, the More You Want (5:10)*

The second reason why people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied is because the more you have, the more you want.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 5:10: **“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.”**

The acquisition of riches increases the desire for riches; it rarely satisfies it. The more you have, the more you want. John D. Rockefeller was one of the richest men in the world. He was once asked how much money was enough. He reportedly replied, “Just a little bit more.”<sup>3</sup>

*C. The More You Have, the More People (Including the Government) Will Come After It (5:11)*

The third reason why people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied is because the more you have, the more people (including the government) will come after it.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 5:11: **“When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?”**

The phrase **“they increase who eat them”** refers to those who come after your wealth. It might be that you move into a higher tax bracket and, if you are really wealthy, you might move into a really high tax bracket. Or, it might be that you suddenly find that you have a lot of people who call you “friend.” But, should you lose your wealth, you discover that they were only after your money and did not really care about you as a person after all.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 132.

*D. The More You Have, the More You Have to Worry About (5:12)*

The fourth reason why people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied is because the more you have, the more you have to worry about.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 5:12: **“Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.”**

The rich person does not sleep because he is worried about his wealth.

*E. The More You Have, the More You Will be Unsatisfied (6:7-9)*

Coming down on the other side of the pyramid, the fifth reason why people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied is because the more you have, the more you will be unsatisfied.

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 6:7: **“All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.”**

The **appetite** here refers not only to our appetite for food but also to our appetite for wealth. Our greedy appetite for wealth will never be satisfied.

The Preacher asks in verse 8a: **“For what advantage has the wise man over the fool?”** The expected answer to this rhetorical question is “None.” With respect to their appetite for food and riches, neither the wise man nor the fool will ever be satisfied.

But, amazingly, the poor man does have an advantage. The Preacher asks in verse 8b: **“And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?”** Somehow the poor man knows how to conduct himself properly. What does the poor man have to guide him in his conduct? The answer is given in verse 9a: **“Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.”** The poor man lives by what he can see with his eyes. He is satisfied with what he has. He is satisfied with

his daily bread.

Those who are in greedy pursuit of wealth are never satisfied. Their appetite is never satisfied. They always want more. And so the Preacher concludes in verse 9b: **“This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”**

So, people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied.

## **II. It Is Evil When People Do Not Enjoy Life (5:13-17; 6:1-6)**

Second, it is evil when people do not enjoy life.

To establish this point, we will have to move back to chapter 5:13-17.

The Preacher said in verse 13-14a: **“There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture.”**

If you greedily pursue wealth and don't know how to use it, it can hurt you.

The Temptations were some high school students having fun singing on the street corner. One day someone heard them singing, and before you knew it, they were Motown. They got famous. And they made a ton of money. And you know what? Today only one of them is still alive.

One shot himself because of his alcoholism and a broken marriage—both of which were caused by wealth.

Another used his money to get into drugs. He was found with a bullet through his head after he had been thrown out of a drug pusher's limousine.

Another one committed adultery and destroyed his marriage.

Life was simple until they got money. They did not know how to deal with it and became real-life examples of wealth accumulated by his owner to his hurt.

Have you ever considered that one of God's great mercies toward you is that he restricts the amount of money you make?

The Preacher then gives an illustration of wealth that was destroyed. He says in verses 14b-15: **“And he is father of a son, but**



**he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand."**

The rich man has lost everything. And he has nothing to pass on to his son.

And so the Preacher concludes in verse 16: **"This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?"** It is a grievous evil that the rich man toils for the wind, that is, for nothing.

**"Moreover, says the Preacher in verse 17, "all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger."**

In biblical times, eating was a social event. Eating with others was a delight and a joy. But, not so for the greedy person who has lost everything so that he must eat alone in darkness **in much vexation and sickness and anger.**

In chapter 6 the Preacher adds another story of a rich man who does not enjoy life. He says in verses 1-2: **"There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil."**

Here we see that the reason that the acquisition of wealth is evil is because there is no recognition that it is **God** who **gives wealth, possessions, and honor.** The Bible actually lists many who were extremely wealthy, such as Abraham, Job, and Solomon. Wealth is actually a gift of God and is not wrong in itself. However, the greedy pursuit of wealth—apart from God—is what is evil.

So, the Preacher says in verses 3-6: **"If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he.**

**Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?”**

In the end, it is evil when people do not recognize that God is the giver of all good things.

So, first, people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied. Second, it is evil when people do not enjoy life.

### **III. Enjoy God’s Daily Gifts (5:18-20)**

Now, third, the Preacher is ready to make his climactic point: enjoy God’s daily gifts.

This is how the Preacher expressed it in verses 18-20: **“Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.”**

Wealth is not the goal of our lives. Rather, as the catechism so wonderfully answers, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, *and to enjoy him forever.*” Many people know the first part of the answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God.” But, the second part of the answer is equally important: “And to enjoy him forever.”

I love the way that John Piper has captured this truth. If you have attended the TULIP class, you may recall seeing the statement by John Piper, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” God has made us and all things richly to enjoy. He is glorified when we enjoy the daily gifts he has given us, and we acknowledge that these come from his hand.

So, first, people who pursue wealth will not be satisfied. Second, it is evil when people do not enjoy life. And third, enjoy God’s daily gifts.

## Conclusion

*The Moneylender and His Wife*—a famous painting by the Renaissance artist Quentin Massys—confronts us with the choice that everyone must make between God and money. The moneylender is sitting at home, with a measuring scale and a pile of money in front of him on the table, carefully assessing the value of a single coin.

Yet our eye is also drawn to the woman sitting next to him, the moneylender's wife. She is leafing through a Bible, which presumably was bought by her wealthy husband. She is having her devotions, except she is distracted by all the money being counted. As she turns the page, her gaze is captivated by the coin in her husband's hand.

Massys painted this image to make a serious point. His adopted city of Antwerp had become a world center for business and trade. But Massys saw how easily money can pull our souls away from the worship of God. He knew that instead of a greedy pursuit of wealth, we should enjoy God's daily gifts.

In his masterpiece, Massys has both the husband and wife turned away from God to focus on their money. On the table in front of them, Massys cleverly painted a small round mirror, which reflects a little scene that is taking place just outside the frame of the painting. If we look at the image closely, we see the dark lines of a window frame intersecting to make the shape of a cross. We also see a small figure reaching out for the frame, as if to hold on to the cross. The face in the mirror is familiar to historians: it is Massys himself.

The artist—like the Preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes—is reminding us not to look for money to give us any satisfaction in life. Instead, we are invited to reach out for the cross where Jesus gave his life for all our greedy sins, to hold on to Jesus and to find all our satisfaction in him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 129, 138.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

We know that we have to choose to worship either money or you. We want to worship you. Help us not to pursue wealth for the sake of greed but instead to enjoy the daily gifts you give us, including the best gift of all, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.