

What We Think We Need vs What God Gives

Ecclesiastes 6:1 – 7:14

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. ⁵ Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. ⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?

⁷ All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. ⁸ 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? ⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁰ Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. ¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? ¹² For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

7 *A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death than the day of birth.*

2 *It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart.*

3 *Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.*

4 *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.*

5 *It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.*

6 *For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools;
this also is vanity.*

7 *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.*

8 *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,*

and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

⁹ *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,*

for anger lodges in the heart of fools.

¹⁰ *Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"*

For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

¹¹ *Wisdom is good with an inheritance,*

an advantage to those who see the sun.

¹² *For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,*

and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

¹³ *Consider the work of God:*

who can make straight what he has made crooked?

¹⁴ *In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.*

- Ecclesiastes 6:1 – 7:14

Today, as we consider Ecclesiastes 6-7, we're going to examine what we think we need to have a good life, and the better things God gives us instead.

Intro: From Henry VIII to Howard Hughes

History is filled with the stories of wealthy, powerful, successful men who were unable to enjoy the fruits of their success for one reason or another. Two of the most famous examples are Henry VIII and Howard Hughes. Henry VIII was the king of England from 1509 until 1547. He was the richest and most powerful king England had ever had at the time. He was also young, athletic, and handsome when he took the throne and married his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Catherine and Henry were married for 24 years, but Henry was convinced their marriage was cursed by God because Catherine could not have a viable male son to be Henry's heir. This was a very Ecclesiastes-like problem Henry faced: Who would inherit his wealth and power after he was gone? Who would ensure that all he had worked so hard to achieve wouldn't just be lost and his legacy destroyed?

Henry had also fallen in love with Anne Boleyn, a beautiful young maiden of the court. You probably know that Henry successfully got his marriage to Catherine annulled by separating the Church of England from the Catholic Church and appointing himself Head of the Church and Guardian of the Faith, thus accomplishing two things at once: Ending his marriage and making himself even more powerful over both church and state.

Well, Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn would officially last just under three years, and she would be beheaded by a jealous and paranoid Henry. Henry would go on to have four more wives – Jane Seymour (one year), Anne of Cleves (less than a year), Catherine Howard (less than two years), and Catherine Parr (almost 4 years, but Henry was very fat and sick by then). Beside his many wives, Henry VIII is best known for being very fat, although he did not get fat until after he injured his leg at the age of 44 and could no longer exercise. He ate 13 dishes at meals – mainly consisting of meat like pork, game, rabbit and even peacocks and swans. He would also plug down 70 pints of ale a week. Historians estimate he consumed approximately 5,000 calories a day. His

waist grew to 54 inches, and his body was covered in painful, puss-filled boils. Henry died of natural causes at the age of 56. Basically, he indulged himself to death.

Howard Hughes lived the life most men dream of living. He was an incredibly successful businessman, a record-breaking pilot, a brilliant engineer, a successful Hollywood movie director, a philanthropist, and a really handsome guy, too. He was probably the richest person in the world at the height of his success - or at least, one of the richest. Then, in 1958, at the age of 52, Howard Hughes started to deteriorate. He became paranoid, obsessive-compulsive, reclusive and extremely erratic. He would lock himself away from the world for months at a time, watching films – at one point watching the same movie 150 times in a row on a continual loop. He would eat only chocolate and chicken and drink only milk and he would store his own urine in bottles. He would only have his nails trimmed and his hair cut once per year. He lived like this, in various hotels, off-and-on, from 1958 until his death in 1976. When he died, the multi-billionaire was severely malnourished, at 6'4", he weighed just 90 pounds and was covered in bed sores.

I thought of these two men when I read the first two verses of Ecclesiastes 6: *“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.”*

Both Henry VIII and Howard Hughes were womanizers, serial adulterers, and substance abusers – for Henry VIII, it was ale, while for Howard Hughes, it was codeine. They were among the wealthiest and most powerful men on the planet when they lived, yet each died unsatisfied, unfulfilled, having had no power to enjoy the wealth, possessions, and honor they had been given.

Men like Solomon and Henry VIII and Howard Hughes make us wonder: What does make for a successful and fulfilling life? When we think about what we naturally believe will make for a good life or will satisfy us, we come to our ambitions and our appetites, and this is what Solomon examines in Ecclesiastes 6:1-9.

A. What We Think We Need, 6:1-9

I. Ambition, 6:1-6

Wealth, Honor, Children, Long Life

Ancient Israelites didn't long to go on *Jerusalem Idol* or *Hebrews Got Talent*. They also didn't have professional sports teams, so no one had ambitious goals to be a Raven or an Oriole. For ancient Jews, ambition took four primary forms: Wealth, honor, children, and long life. These are four universal human desires. People have a desire to accumulate wealth and possessions for themselves, to be respected and honored by others, to have many offspring to carry on their legacy after them, and to live a long life. People pursue these things passionately. Yet in the first six verses of chapter 6, Solomon shows us how these things cannot satisfy; they are insufficient.

What good is it to have wealth and honor if you're unable to enjoy it? The reasons why so many are unable to enjoy it are numerous and varied: A 2009 *Sports Illustrated* article revealed that 78% of NFL athletes are either bankrupt or in severe financial crisis within two years of leaving football, while 60% of NBA players are bankrupt within five years of leaving their sport. These are the people kids grow up dreaming to become. Retired NBA center Danny Schayes stated, "Guys go broke because they surround themselves with people who help them go broke" That kind of sounds like *“God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them.”*

The point is that God controls these things, and sometimes the way He curses someone is by giving them wealth or honor and not allowing them to enjoy them.

Then, Solomon imagines a man who fathers a hundred children, and yet none of them loves him enough to give him a decent burial:

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. ⁴ For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. ⁵ Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. ⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?

Even a life of incredible length – 2,000 years – would not be fulfilling if you cannot enjoy any good. In the end, we all die, we all go to the one place, and so no amount of money or children or long life can satisfy or remove the vain, vaporous nature of life.

By the way, this strikes me as the only place in the Bible where we're told about the destiny of stillborn children, which we might apply to all those who die in infancy. Solomon says the stillborn child "finds rest," whereas the cursed man does not. There is rest for those who die so young, but there is no rest for the wicked, according to Isaiah 48:22 and 57:20.

While Solomon names the four most common kinds of ambition, his warnings about ambition would apply to any ambition we might have in this life.

2. Appetite, 6:7-9

His appetite is not satisfied

The other thing that naturally drives us in this life "under the sun," besides our ambition, is our appetite:

In 4:4, Solomon had said, "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor." But now, he comes to an even more basic motivation for work:

⁷ All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. ⁸ 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? ⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Everyone is, at some level, driven by their appetite. But our appetite is never satisfied. Even a wise man has an insatiable appetite, as does a poor man with good sense. We all have restless, insatiable appetites. We always want more.

That's why Solomon says it's better to be content with what you actually have ("the sight of the eyes") than what you don't have but desperately want ("the wandering of the appetite"). Our appetite is the most basic, and thus perhaps the most universal, striving after wind. It is so hard for us to be satisfied with what we have, even though we know that's better. Our appetites are just so restless.

B. What is Better by Far, 6:10-7:14

So, if ambition and appetite very commonly drive everyone and yet cannot satisfy us or lead us to what is truly good and lasting, what is better? Solomon unpacks this for us from 6:10 to 7:14, in a section that can be hard to follow, but if we can follow it, it bears much good fruit for us . . .

1. Knowing Our Limits, 6:10-12

The things we cannot do or know, but God can

First, we must begin by knowing our limits. This is so appropriate here because ambition and appetite know no limits, so if we're going to break free from their grip, we have to know our limits:

¹⁰ Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. ¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? ¹² For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

Solomon says we know well what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. I agree with a number of commentators who see “one stronger than he” as a reference to God. This is not a reference to a man in particular, but to mankind or to all men in general, and while men may dispute with each other – and we certainly do – man cannot dispute with God. African-American poet James Weldon Johnson wrote a series of poems called *God's Trombones*, which he called seven sermons in verse. In one poem, he addresses the Prodigal Son, and he says, “Young Man, Young man—your arm is too short to box with God.” And that's the idea behind verse 10: Put your ambition and your appetite in their place. You cannot contend with the Almighty God.

Not only are we weak, but if we turn to use our gift of speech, which God has given us, Solomon says the more we multiply words, the more we multiply vanity. We're just full of hot air, to no real advantage.

Verse 12 closes this short section on our human limitations by reminding us again that we cannot even know what is truly good for us and we certainly cannot know what will come after us. And yet, in these last questions, Solomon is also transitioning to the next section: What is the answer to these questions? - *For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?* Only GOD, of course.

Just as surely as God is the only One who knows what will come after us, so also God is the only one who knows what is good for us while we live the few days of our vain lives under the sun. And now, as we begin chapter 7, God is going to tell us what is truly good for us.

2. Receiving the Better, 7:1-14

The unwelcome gifts that give to those who receive them

Commentators disagree as to how to understand the flow of thought in these first 14 verses of chapter 7:

- Are these just a collection of random proverbs?
- Are they the answers to the question of what is good for us during our lives under the sun? It doesn't seem like they're all telling us about good things?
- Are they all connected somehow?

As I've considered this passage carefully, I've come to agree with those who see a strong unity here. These verses have a heavy concentration of the word "better." I told you a couple of weeks ago that Ecclesiastes has the word "better" more times than any other book of the Bible – not bad for a book many people consider to be dark and depressing. Well, Ecclesiastes uses the word "better" 23 times total in its 12 chapters, and we have it 7 times right here in the first 10 verses of chapter 7. I think that argues for a unity, and it also argues for these Proverbs to be the answer to the question of what is good for us during our lives under the sun.

We think ambition and appetite will bring us what is good, but we're wrong. So, what is good? I think the fundamental answer is verse 1:

*A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death than the day of birth. – 7:1, ESV*

Precious ointment was expensive in the ancient world, because it was effective in covering up foul odors. In a world where people rarely bathed and worked hard, precious ointment could cover up foul body odor. The strongest and most precious ointment was used for anointing a body at burial, to keep the stench of decay at bay. In John 12, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed the Lord with a pound of ointment of pure nard. Judas Iscariot objected, asking why the ointment wasn't sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor. So, one pound of expensive ointment could be worth a full year's wages for a common laborer.

Yet better than the most precious ointment is a good name. A good name, not a great name. A good name reflects a good character. So, it's far better to have good character, to be good on the inside, than to smell good on the outside. Proverbs 22:1 says, "*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.*"

"And the day of death than the day of birth." How can this be? Of course, such an idea is impossible if we're living for life under the sun. But life under the sun is fleeting and vain, vaporous. If you have a good name, then the day of your death is not to be feared. As Charles Bridges says in his commentary, "Is not the day that will deliver us from sin and sorrow far better than the one that brought us into them? . . . Does not every returning birthday rejoice the heart with the remembrance – a year nearer home? The conflict then ended forever! The term of exile from the Lord then finished! . . . To depart and be with Christ is far better – born an heir of trouble, crowned an heir of glory!"

But this is only true of those who die with a good name – named a redeemed child of God. And this is ultimately what makes a good name far better than precious ointment. Everyone rejoices when a baby is born into the world. The measure of your life is not how people reacted when you were born but how they will react when you die. Having a good name on the day you die is a great contrast to the man who had 100 children and yet none of them gave him a burial at his death. When Herod the Great died, it took 500 servants to carry the spices they used to anoint his body for burial. But the day of his death was not better than the day of his birth, for he died lacking nothing but that which matters most – a good name.

After telling us the better value of a good name, Solomon then unpacks the many often unexpected and unwelcome things God gives us in order to help us cultivate a good name – that is, a good and godly character. This is how we should understand what makes these things better. When it comes to cultivating good character:

- ² *It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart.*
- ³ *Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.*
- ⁴ *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.*
- ⁵ *It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.*
- ⁶ *For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools;
this also is vanity.*

We already know Solomon is not against joy. But these verses are not describing real joy but mere distracting foolish laughter. Good food is a blessing from God to be received with thanksgiving and enjoyed with a cheerful heart, but the house of mourning is better, sorrow is better, and sadness of face is better – because mourning forces us to take the reality of death to heart and sadness of face can make our hearts glad by causing us to be more thankful and to attend to the things in life that matter more, that are truly and deeply valuable. Developing good character is largely about developing wisdom. And while wisdom is only of limited value in our brief lives “under the sun,” it is certainly far better than being a fool and seems to be vital in cultivating a good name.

Verses 7-10 then warn us against the pitfalls that can snare us and sabotage our character development:

- ⁷ *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.*
- ⁸ *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.*
- ⁹ *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the heart of fools.*
- ¹⁰ *Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?”
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*

Oppression and bribery are temptations royal officials like Solomon’s likely audience would face regularly. So, Solomon is warning us against temptations to be self-serving. He then warns us against pride and anger, telling us it’s better to be patient than prideful and angry. Again, why do we tend to get prideful and angry – because we feel like we’re being slighted and we’re not getting what we think we deserve.

Temptation, pride, and anger seem like obvious stumbling stones on the path to wisdom and a good name. But verse 10 warns us against nostalgia – a longing for the good ol’ days. This might not seem to be in the same category as oppression, bribery, pride and a bad temper, but it is – it keeps us from wisdom. It is another form of foolishness, an escapism that has more in common with the laughter of fools – both provide only temporary distraction and not real satisfaction– than it does with wisdom.

Having told us the way to get wisdom, Solomon now examines the benefits of wisdom:

*¹¹ Wisdom is good with an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.*

*¹² For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.*

“Wisdom is good with an inheritance” could also be translated as “Wisdom is good, like an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.” This translation makes sense because then verse 12 unpacks why wisdom is like an inheritance – both wisdom and money provide some level of protection to the one who has them, but wisdom is even better because it can keep you from doing foolish, self-destructive thing, and this is preserves the life of him who has it.

Conclusion: Humble Acceptance in Christ

But then, as a conclusion to this whole section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon draws out one of the highest and best marks of wisdom – a willingness to humbly accept what God sends –

*¹³ Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked?*

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

So often, in our ambition and our appetites, we find ourselves fighting against what God has ordained. But who can make straight what He has made crooked? Notice, Solomon does not ask, “Who can make crooked what He has made straight?” He intentionally asks the other way because our pride and our anger feel most justified when our ambition and our appetite are working hard to straighten something God has made crooked. It’s an acknowledgement of the reality that in a fallen and cursed creation, God often judges by making things crooked. It’s crooked that a man should earn vast wealth and not be able to enjoy it. It’s crooked that a man should have a hundred children and not one of them provides him with a burial. Yet God sometimes ordains these things as judgments on our prideful ambition, which seeks to place ourselves at the center of His universe and in the starring role in His story.

For Solomon in today’s passage, the ultimate mark of wisdom, and the key to not being driven by our ambition or appetite or by our pride or anger is humility – a humility that recognizes our own limitations. We cannot make the crooked things straight and we cannot find out anything that will be after us. If we follow our prideful ambition, these truths will drive us insane. It was crooked that Henry VIII could not have a healthy baby boy. Howard Hughes could not accept his lack of control over his life, and as he sought to grab more control for himself, he descended further and further into madness.

We must put our hands over our mouths and accept the reality of our own limitations. Included in our limitations is the reality that we cannot control our ambition and our appetite. We cannot earn a good name for ourselves. We are far too easily tempted and far too blind to the truly good things God gives us, as we busily chase the things we want instead. We must confess our crookedness here, too. For in confessing our crookedness and our inability to make ourselves straight, we can run to the only One who ever truly earned a good name, the name above every name, the only name given among men by which we must be saved, the name of the only One capable of redeeming crooked things and making them straight forever. When we come to end of ourselves, we are ready to turn to Jesus and confess our deep and absolute need for Him to save us.