

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 10**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

So, the vain world drives us to the house of God, but from there are sent back out into the vain and broken world. Hopefully, chastened, hopefully with wisdom and with the sobriety that encountering the living God always brings.

So, beginning in chapter 5, verse 8, the text moves back out into the world. Some of what comes next we have seen before, so let me say a word here about repetition.

First, the repetition is in the text itself. God has deemed fit to say the same cluster of things in Ecclesiastes a number of times. So, He must think we need to hear it more than once.

Second, the realities that Ecclesiastes depicts, whether of the sun and the rivers, or of history, are full of enigmatic repetition. We don't get to opt out of cycles of futility. The injustice and oppression, the misuse of wealth, the endless grasping for the wind, these are always there tomorrow and the day after that. So we need to take a long hard look at them. To skip portions of this text as "repetitious" would betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the book.

Finally, while the themes are often repetitious, the actual content often has new details and opens up new perspectives. So let's look at oppression, and then wealth.

#### **I. Oppression**

First, then, is oppression. And here we mean bureaucratic or political oppression, which gives to this text a different angle than the oppression we spoke of previously. Here I will make three points:

First, do not be amazed. In v.8 the preacher says: 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 oppression of the poor and the violation of justice, or the robbery, the raping of justice and righteousness, should not shock you. Do not be amazed.

Happens all the time. It's the way of the world. It is what the powerful do. It's often hidden from view and done in clandestine ways, but the oppression of the poor and the disregard for justice are simply the basic way sin manifests itself among the elite.

There are two extremes to be avoided here. One is indifference or callous selfishness in the face of oppression. The other is naïve amazement, which is the point here. Don't be naïve is one of the basic lessons of Ecclesiastes. The powerful often are, there are notable exceptions, but too often they are enemies of the poor, enemies of justice, and enemies of the gospel. Don't be amazed.

The second thing here is to notice that this is political oppression. It's not random isolated thuggery. It's organized and structural. The second half of v.8 says "for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them." This is hierarchical injustice and exploitation. One official watches the back of another. And the ones further up the chain watch the lower ones. They all see what's going on. They know how the game is played. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is sheer naïveté to think the court of appeals will always hand down a more just verdict than the lower court.

Here the problem is that political bureaucracies, as we know all too well, become self-sustaining ends in themselves. And the injustice and oppression become baked into the system. The need to stay in office, to consolidate ones power, quickly corrupt the most idealistic and pure men.

It's important to see that injustice can become systemic and structural. It can become embedded in the law, in the tax code, in the precedents set by judicial decisions, in the endless rules and regulations of life-long unelected bureaucrats. And when this happens, even where it is done in the name of the poor, the poor rarely benefit. Perhaps, especially when it is done in the name of the poor. We now have whole poverty and international aid industries which employ and prosper thousands of people who supposedly are advocates for the poor. (Great Society, 18T, zero statistical impact on poverty rate)

So here you are called away from naïveté to a discerning suspicion of political power, no matter who is in office. Here you are called to discern the structures and put your finger on the root of injustice, which is first and foremost in the hearts of the men who govern with an almost insatiable self-interest.

The third point here is in v.9. This is a notoriously difficult Hebrew text, but the idea seems to be that the land is something that everyone should gain from. All have an interest in it. And a king who cultivates the land, who looks after it with justice, while rare, is a blessing.

This tells us, in this context, that the major problem from which the poor suffer is land theft. In Israel, it was a bedrock principle that the land belongs to the Lord.

The earth is the Lords, and the fullness thereof. The people hold it in trust. And the Jubilee laws prevented the accumulation of the land in the hands of a small elite. Every 50 years the land reverted back to its original tribal owners according to the way it was allotted under Joshua.

It has always been easy for the rich to rig the system to exploit the poor and their claim to the land. This was one of the reasons for God sending Israel into exile. The prophet Isaiah said: woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room and you are made to dwell alone in the land. And part of the judgment, the prophet says, is that your beautiful houses will be uninhabited, you vast vineyards shall be left barren.

Laws which enable the powerful rich, whether by eminent domain or in some other fashion, to take the land of the poor are wicked laws. They are simply decriminalized theft. It was this sort of legal corruption which allowed Ahab to steal Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21. Because land is ultimately God's he expects property rights, especially of the poor to be respected. He Himself takes great interest in this, even if it's not on our radar.

In Prov 23 he says: do not move an ancient landmark, or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong and He will plead their case against you. To exploit the poor, especially with respect to their property, is to make God your enemy, for he takes on the role of their kinsman-Redeemer. That is the oppression.

## **II. Wealth**

Our second point is wealth. Here I will make six points. First, the love of wealth does not satisfy. Verse 10: he who loves money will not be satisfied with money. The connection with oppression is that the love of money is often the reason the powerful act the way they do.

So the issue of wealth should not be thought of as distinct from the problem of oppression. It's the old saying that if you want to know what's going on among the political hierarchy, follow the money. But Solomon will focus on the effects of wealth on those who love it. Notice, it's not money per se, but the love of money, which Paul says is the root of all sorts of evil, which is the problem here. People who love money are never satisfied. Money is like seawater. The more you drink the thirstier you are. He who loves wealth is not satisfied with his income. They always think life will be better if they made 10 percent more. This lack of contentment, of satisfaction, is not restricted to the rich; it is what drives the whole consumer culture, the whole advertising industry. It works just fine on the poor and middle class, who can love stuff with all the vengeance of the rich.

The love of money, not money itself, but the love of money distorts our outlook on life. It makes us grasp and lurch. The preacher says at the end of v.10 this also is vapor. We love wealth, and we seek to grasp it, but its vapor, it slips through our hands, so we try again and again. And the marketers and advertisers know this. This restlessness is easily manipulated.

It would be naïve to assume this does not affect us – the very success of these strategies suggests otherwise. They play on our lack of contentment. The love of money creates an array of social distortions. Some are pathological, and some are more mundane. Like having to sift through 79 brands of life-transforming shampoo at CVS.

Second point is that stuff takes on a life of its own. Verse 11: when goods increase, they increase who eat them. So you make a lot of money, and now you have tax accountants and lawyers, and friends coming out of the woodwork, hangers on, an entourage, security people, cooks, gardeners, nannies and personal trainers. People to fix your stuff, maintain your stuff.

Stuff isn't free, it comes with a tax. Solomon knows of what he speaks. And you now have to manage all these people and watch for fraud and theft. Wealth brings just as many cares as it takes away. And besides the mouths which clamor around to eat your stuff, Solomon asks what advantage does all the stuff have for its owner but to see it with his eyes? (rye humor)

Really, most of the stuff you buy you rarely use. You just stare at it. You buy a boat and use it 2 times a year. Our closets are full of clothes we haven't worn in years and likely will never wear again. We do stare at them though. We really like to stare at stuff. How many pieces of furniture do you actually use? Most of them you just stare at. I mean, that's why it's over there. It ties the whole room together. It LOOKS nice. That what most stuff does. People come over and we take them on a staring tour. Would you like to stare at some of my stuff that I stare at all the time? Sure, you politely say, who doesn't love staring at stuff? Half my library is unread books. I won't live long enough to read them. But, I really like to stare at them. I feel profound and sophisticated just having some of them.

As a friend of mine told me: if you can't have profundity, the trappings of profundity are the next best thing. You can stare at the trappings of profundity all day long. Our houses, our garages our attics are crammed with stuff that bring no advantage, no gain, no leverage – other than, Solomon wryly says, you can see the things with your eyes.

Third point. Stuff steals your sleep. Verse 12: Sweet is the sleep of the laborer. The ditch digger doesn't have a sleeping problem. Sleeps like a rock. He may have little food or a lot of food, but he doesn't have any Ambien. It's the rich man with the full stomach who can't sleep. He has to worry about all the "eaters" who are clinging to him and consuming his goods. He has to guard a lot of stuff. He

has to hire security people to stare at his stuff at night when he's done staring at it all day. So behind the security system and the guns and the dogs he has a full medicine cabinet. Including the antacids for his full stomach.

Fourth point: stuff hurts you. Verse 13: There is a grievous or sickening evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt. It's not specified why, but it could be simply the mere love of stuff, the spiritually deadening quality that accompanies a lot of possession. Could be that the rich always have more rope to hang themselves with than the poor. And in v.14, the hurt increases. Those riches were lost in a bad venture. Riches make themselves wings and fly away. Providence has a way of simply taking them. And the man in view here has a son and is left with nothing to pass on to him. So the son ends up with nothing in his hand. It's the inheritance problem which we've already looked at.

Fifth point: You can't take it with you. Verse 15 refers back to the father. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and he shall take nothing for his toil that he can carry in his hand. Death is the great leveler. History's most democratic force. You come with nothing and you leave with nothing. In between, you stare at a lot of stuff. This is a grievous evil v.16 says. A man leaves life in the identical state he enters, and in between his foolish enough to strive and toil and grasp for the wind. It's a pathetic spectacle, but we don't see it clearly because we refuse to come to terms with death.

The Puritan Thomas Brooks said: It is a very high point of Christian wisdom and prudence always to look upon the good things and great things of this world as a man will certainly look upon them when he comes to die. Think of your stuff, your good stuff, your highly valued stuff, NOW, as you will think of it in the hospital 20 minutes before your death. You're not going to motion for your grieving family to come near and tell them Kohl's is having a great sale this weekend. Make sure you pick up some stuff you can stare at when I'm gone.

Sixth point: the love of money attacks all your days. Moreover, ALL his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. This is a man who will not heed Thomas Brooks' advice. He will not consider his end or his stuff in the light of his end. So his life becomes a living death. There is a kind of tragic stupidity in the love of money. This man is being harmed. He gets sick, he's anxiety-ridden, he's angry because people mess with his stuff. He lives in darkness, but he won't change his plan. He won't stop grasping. Herein lies the deceitfulness of riches. They take away the very life of their possessors.

So, we are called to two things here. Do not be naïve about oppression and injustice against the poor. Or about the power structures which perpetuate their exploitation. God has pledged himself to vindicate their cause. And, if you are a person sensitive to that, you should be on the path to the second point, which is, do not love money or goods. Psalm 127 says: It is vain for you to rise up early

and to go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for the Lord gives His beloved sleep.

Let me connect these two points by reminding you that it is often the very experience of being poor and oppressed, of suffering injustice, which awakens us to the nature of true wealth and the vanity of riches. One such extraordinary example is a woman named Etty Hillesum: She wrote this prayer to God from a Nazi concentration camp in August of 1943:

You have made me so rich, O God, let me share your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with you O God. Sometimes when I stand in the corner of the camp, my feet planted on your earth, my eyes raised toward your heaven, tears run down my face of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in you, O God, tears of gratitude run down my face and that is my prayer... I always end up with one single word: God and it is as if I were all this time storing up inner riches...

Etty died in Auschwitz three months later.

God Himself is our portion, our highest good, our true wealth, our only enduring treasure, Etty Hillesum's, and our, kinsman-Redeemer in Jesus Christ.

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