

Sunday January 24th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 5
Series: What If?
Sermon: "What Good is Riches?"

The story goes that there was a man who was very wealthy. He had everything a person of means could dream off: like fancy cars, and a mansion for a home. However, he lacked the one thing he believed would make him happy; grandchildren. His only child, a daughter, had yet to find a suitable mate, and time was ticking by, so the man decided to take things into his own hands. The rich man planned a lavish party, to which he invited all his executives, especially many young men who were single and eligible.

After the dinner portion of the evening, the rich man asked everyone to join him on the large deck surrounding the pool. He then proceeded to make an announcement. "Inside my pool I have installed several man-eating crocodiles, who we have starved for several weeks. I will give half my company and wealth, to the one single man who swims across the pool and agrees to marry my daughter." Suddenly there was a great splash and a solitary man feverously swam across the pool and pulled himself out before a croc could grab him.

The rich man rushed over and vigorously shook the young man's hand. "That was a very brave thing you did, and true to my word you can have half my wealth and company if you agree to marry my daughter." The man in between gasps for air said, "Forget your wealth and your daughter, I just want to know who pushed me in." Wealth, and the pursuit of wealth, occupies much of our society's thoughts and energy.

It seems people are willing to do just about anything to make a few more dollars. Do you remember the old Jack Benny skit where he was being held up at gunpoint and the robber said, "Your money or your life"? In the skit, Benny pauses for some time and the robber becomes anxious for an answer. Benny replies, "Hold on. I'm thinking." Our chapter today, although focusing on the accumulation of things, is really just part of the overall theme of Ecclesiastes.

The question running throughout Ecclesiastes is simply this, "What is your reason for living, or is there even a reason for living?" We have already looked at some ways people try to find meaning in our journey through Ecclesiastes, but now the writer asks us if we believe that "greed is good". This is a very timely subject considering the recent US Presidential debate in which Donald Trump made no apologies for getting all he could, and manipulating the system (legally he claims) to save on taxes.

Now, we need to be clear here. The writer of Ecclesiastes is not against wealth, after all he was very wealthy, but rather he is against the unhealthy approach of searching for happiness through wealth. All along, Ecclesiastes has been stating that true happiness, or contentment, cannot not be found apart from God. In other words, you cannot hug a bank account. Your mutual fund cares not one wit if you are ill. If all that matters to you is money, and the accumulation of the same, you will, according to the Preacher, live an: empty, futile, and spiritually bankrupt life.

"Materialism is (by definition) not owning things, it is rather being owned by things."

Sunday January 24th, 2021

Therefore, we should not be surprised by the evil activities that surround the hoarding of money. In criminal investigations, the police are always saying, “Follow the money”. I once heard, and I wish I could remember where I heard it; that almost every dollar bill in the US has at least a small minuscule trace of cocaine. Take out any twenty-dollar bill you have on your person and ask yourself, “Well, twenty-dollar bill, what have you been used for?”

Think about how much criminal activity, and the exploitation of people is undertaken to make money. The drug trade, prostitution, pornography, scams over the internet or by phone. Governments are not immune to this, as they readily embrace revenues raked in from gambling. On a related note, have you ever noticed how often when greed is mentioned, the word envy is attached? We usually say as a pair, “greed and envy”. And what an unholy pair they are.

So much of our greedy behaviour stems from our envy of others. Now we need to understand that envy is not just wanting what someone else has. In actual fact, envy is wanting someone else not to have what they have, and for us to own it instead. Think of the story of King Ahab in 1 Kings who envied his neighbour Naboth’s vineyard. The enviers don’t just want things; they want to be envied. We envy people and this corrupts our thinking. We think the one who has more is our rival; an enemy to be crushed, or diminished in some way.

I wonder how many of you remember at least a little bit about the Salem Witch Trials in the early days of the first English Puritan settlements in the US. If you ever read about them, you will remember it was an incredibly cruel thing. Many innocent people, mostly women, were burned at the stake, or drowned, because someone, without proof, accused them of being a witch. Historical research has now shown what was really the motivation behind the hysteria.

Most of the people accused of being witches were prosperous individuals. They had good land, and or ample resources. Those who made the accusations saw the witch trials as a way to remove the ones who they were envious of, and by default seize their land and goods. The victims of the trial, who received almost no judicial support in terms of fair trials, were essentially killed so someone could take what they had. The poor were never accused.

I recently read about a T-shirt saying that went, “Lord, let me prove that winning the lottery won’t ruin me.” The irony is that people who win lotteries often find their lives ruined. Many end up with tragic lives, gambling away their winnings, some commit suicide, and some have to take out restraining orders on relatives who hound them for money. There have even been murders related to lottery winnings.

There was even a man in my home town of Brantford years ago who won the lottery, and for several months told no one. But in the meantime, he divorced his wife so he would not have to share with her. By the way, she got half the winnings, and sadly a family was destroyed. Jesus was very concerned about what wealth could do to us. In the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, Jesus speaks of how the good seed of the gospel is choked out by weeds of materialism.

The fact is that there are many people in this world making a good living, but living poor lives. Life is tragic for someone who has everything but nothing to live for. Again, the problem is not money, but rather the “love of money”. (1 Tim. 6:10)

Sunday January 24th, 2021

It has, since our creation, been God's intention that we find our purpose, security, and delight in him. Yet, on any given Sunday, until the pandemic was raging, which church has the best attendance in our area; it was the mall or Costco, the cathedrals of consumerism. Even when warned to stay home in the pandemic, people are still flocking to big box stores to spend their money.

I made an observation recently about those cheesy ads on TV for things you can only order by phone. The ones that always add the line at the end, "But wait! Order now and we will double your order. Only pay for separate shipping and handling." The products are often quite ingenious. They seem very helpful.

I do find myself often thinking, "Gee, I never knew I needed a device so that I can clap my hands and the lights go out, or a hose that when the water drains out it, shrinks down to pocket size." I have always wanted a hose I can carry in my pocket. How did we ever live without such things before? However, I notice in our home, we have lots of gadgets and thingamajigs that we thought would be helpful and we never use them. They just gather dust.

Having things also leads to a real anxiety for us. The more you have, the more you are afraid to lose. We are afraid our stock portfolio will take a hit, or someone will break into our homes and steal our stuff. We have alarm systems, deadbolts, electronic tracers and microchips embedded in all kinds of things, to try and recover what we lost. My one cousin told me a few years back of an app he has on his phone.

This app randomly, and frequently, generates new passwords for his bank accounts lest someone get his info and clean him out. People are so afraid of losing things they take to securing them in banks in safety deposit boxes. Recently in England, thieves robbed the safety boxes of a bank and made away with \$7 million dollars. One woman lost \$500,000 dollars in jewelry. She reacted to the news by saying, "Everything I had was in there. My whole life was in the box."

How sad is that? Her whole life was inside a small metal box inside a bank vault. The stress of accumulating has led to a new issue in our lives where we need constant escape from the pressure. We now talk about need to get away from it all. Away from the prisons we have created with our wealth and envy. So, I ask you; how much of what we hold dear is meaningless, like chasing the wind.

In the late 1800's an American tourist was visiting Poland and was invited to the home of the renowned Rabbi Hofetz Chaim. The tourist was surprised to find the rabbi's home was very Spartan. Just a few books, a table and a simple bench. The tourist asked, "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" The rabbi replied, "Where is yours?" "Mine?" the tourist reacted "but I'm a visitor here; I'm only passing through." "So, am I," said the rabbi. So are all of us.

Now I know what you are likely wondering. That covers verse 8-20 but what about 1-7. Well at first, I saw these two sections as separate topics, but as I pondered it, I couldn't help but see their connection. The writer encourages his readers to be very careful when in the house of God. He commends us not to make foolish promises to God. And if we do make a promise to God, we should follow through and honour our promise quickly.

It is also not excusable to make a promise and then come to the “Temple messenger” or minister or church leader and claim you made a mistake and want to take the promise back. It is better to say nothing. These words are clearly instruction on our attitude at worship. We are commended in John’s gospel chapter 4 to worship God in “spirit and in truth”. The two sections are connected because what do people like to say to God when they are desiring wealth.

“Gee God if only you let me win the lottery, I will give some to the poor.” “Gee Lord if only you get me that job promotion, I’ll go to church every week.” How foolish are promises are when we make them out of envy or greed? How ridiculous we sound asking God for stuff we don’t really need.

Years ago, Janis Joplin wrote a famous song that my friends at University used to quote all the time but I had never actually read the full set of lyrics before, and they are quite telling in their bluntness and that was Joplin’s point, I think. Entitled “Mercedes Benz” the words go like this...

*Oh Lord, won't you but me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Bez?
Oh Lord, won't you buy me a colour TV?
Dialing for dollars is trying to find me.
I wait for delivery each day until three,
So oh Lord, won't you but me a colour TV?
Oh Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?
I'm counting on you, Lord, please don't let me down.
Prove that you love me and buy the next round,
Oh Lord, won't you but me a night on the town?
Oh, Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends,
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So oh Lord, won't you but me a Mercedes Benz?*

Released in 1970, this song could very well be an anthem for our age as well. The reference to “Dialing for Dollars” is to a show on television in which people had to watch to win money hoping the host would call them by phone, and after answering a question they could win cash. Joplin was seeking to critique the materialism of her age. Her point is that it is making a mockery of our faith, and God, by seeing God as a kind of cosmic dispensing machine.

Chuck Swindoll (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.119) states the situation quite accurately when we wrote, “*We’ll miss contentment if keeping rather than releasing becomes our objective. We too often love things and use people, when we should be using things and loving people. We are most content when we’re grateful for what we own, satisfied with what we make, and generous to those in need.*” So, what good are riches if it leads to emptiness and heartache. It is far better, is it not, to store up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy.