

# Money For Nothing, Bliss For Free

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20    September 18, 2024

For 11 of the last 15 years, Michael Jackson has been the highest paid dead celebrity.<sup>1</sup> Only seven people have held that title since *Forbes* started tracking the numbers: Elvis Presley, Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Yves Saint Laurent, Roald Dahl, and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Of course, these earnings are no longer paid to the celebrities themselves. They have left this world and its trappings behind. Their earthly riches have no impact on their eternal destinies.

We use that term “trappings.” The “trappings” of fame or power. The “trappings” of wealth. In Ecclesiastes 5, the Teacher points out that wealth can often be a *literal* trap for us - a dangerous obsession that leaves its victims tired, worried, and cheated - robbed of what’s truly good in life.

He means to horrify us with this discovery. When he shows it to us, he calls it a “sickening tragedy” - a serious, severe, grievously evil problem we’re faced with in this world. He brings us into the bathroom floor of Graceland. Into the greenhouse above the garage in Seattle, Washington. To look at the hot tub overlooking the coast in Pacific Palisades.

But it’s not just a problem we observe effecting others. It’s one that almost *all* of us are susceptible to. Philip Ryken writes, “Most Americans have at least a mild case of [a] deadly disease...[called] *affluenza*, which is an unhealthy relationship with money or the pursuit of wealth.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a serious problem the Teacher warns us about. So does Proverbs. So did Jesus, Who warned that a focus on material success will destroy our devotion to God Himself.

**Ecclesiastes 5:8 - <sup>8</sup> If you see oppression of the poor and perversion of justice and righteousness in the province, don’t be astonished at the situation, because one official protects another official, and higher officials protect them.**

Human governments, no matter what form they take, will inevitably be corrupted. While some forms tend to be less corrupt than others, there is no magic formula that protects a populace from the sin nature of their rulers. It’s foolish to think that we will solve the problem of a corrupted heart through laws or regulations or checks and balances. Those things can help, but the Teacher reveals the sad truth here: In any form - democracy, republic, dictatorship, commonwealth, monarchy - there will be injustice and oppression in one form or another.

Now, we shouldn’t be numb to it and we should do what we can to assist the oppressed, to fight for those who have been denied justice, to rescue those in need.<sup>3</sup> But don’t think for one minute that we are going to be able to solve every problem, or that one candidate will rid our society of all the bad actors. Human society is constantly fighting a losing battle against human nature.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbes\\_list\\_of\\_the\\_world%27s\\_highest-paid\\_dead\\_celebrities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbes_list_of_the_world%27s_highest-paid_dead_celebrities)

<sup>2</sup> Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 82:3-4

The Teacher says, “Don’t be astonished.” It means don’t be dumbfounded or afraid,<sup>4</sup> and don’t become bitter about it.<sup>5</sup> Well, then what *should* we do?

We should recognize that this is the state of the world. And we should remind ourselves that the only way corrupt human government can *really* be dealt with in the long term is by Christ Jesus coming and establishing *His* righteous Kingdom on the earth. In the short term, what we need are Godly individuals who are willing to use their authority for good, rather than for evil.

When we have a chance to elect a individual into power, it is not the *promises* that matter, but the *person*. Is *this* individual a person of integrity? Are they arrogant? That’s another way the term “high official” can be translated.<sup>6</sup> Arrogance breeds corruption. So, if we want a better society, we need more Christlike leaders.

**Ecclesiastes 5:9 - <sup>9</sup>The profit from the land is taken by all; the king is served by the field.**

Realistically, there’s very little you and I can do about who is *king* - who wields the power of decision-making in our nation. We vote, but it doesn’t really come down to us, right? What we *can* do is look to the heavenly King and His coming Kingdom. When the *perfect* King returns to earth, all will be made right. The government will be on His shoulders. There will be no need for checks and balances, for ethics violation inquiries, for impeachment provisions. He is our true hope and we should hold to *that* hope while doing our best to promote righteousness right where we are.

Turning from the horrors of bureaucracy, the Teacher speaks about the personal pursuit of wealth.

**Ecclesiastes 5:10 - <sup>10</sup>The one who loves silver is never satisfied with silver, and whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with income. This too is futile.**

In the 1920’s, a reporter asked John Rockefeller how much money is enough. His famous reply is one of the most revealing quotes of all time: “*Just a little bit more.*” At the time, John’s net worth was equal to 1% of the *entire* US economy.<sup>7</sup> In five words he perfectly encapsulated the folly of pursuing wealth, but also how powerfully addictive wealth becomes.

In these verses, the Teacher warns us about some dangerous consequences of wealth. But wealth itself isn’t the problem. In fact, he’ll tell us that God gives wealth to some people as a gift.

It’s the *love* of wealth that is the trouble. He says so twice in verse 10. Paul agrees in 1 Timothy 6. When we pursue material success as an end goal of our lives, the consequences are terrible.

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<sup>4</sup> *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

<sup>5</sup> Ray Stedman *Why Does God Allow This? (Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:20)*

<sup>6</sup> Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/news/local/blogs/2017/12/10/how-much-money-enough/930449001/>

Wealth is *hevel*. Here today, gone tomorrow. Sometimes toxic, sometimes just transient. You can't reliably hold onto it - the world is too wracked by time, death, and chance.

But this isn't only a problem that unbelievers deal with. The Pharisees were lovers of money. That led to many of their heinous sins, despite their pious beginnings. Or consider Ananias and Sapphira. They were *true* believers in the Jerusalem church, but were poisoned by a love of money.

Like the Teacher, we long for satisfaction. The problem is the flesh within us and the culture around us tell us the way to satisfaction is through *wealth*. It's a lie, but it's a very effective lie. We *really* want to believe it. But the Teacher shows where that way *really* ends (and remember: he knew first hand).

**Ecclesiastes 5:11 - <sup>11</sup> When good things increase, the ones who consume them multiply; what, then, is the profit to the owner, except to gaze at them with his eyes?**

Christopher Wallace, the late 20th century philosopher poet famously declared, "Mo' money, mo' problems." The Teacher was not a Notorious B.I.G. fan, but on this he would agree.

Wealth promises to solve our problems, but it ends up bringing an infestation of new troubles with it. Here in verse 11, a plague of leeches tags along to take what they can from the pile.

We see examples of this when young athletes start getting those big paychecks. The family comes out of the woodwork for constant handouts. Suddenly a large staff is needed to handle the business and maintain the brand. Then there are ever-increasing taxes to be paid.

So there's the owner, who actually *earned* the wealth, crowded out from his own table and can only look on as others devour his treasure.

**Ecclesiastes 5:12 - <sup>12</sup> The sleep of the worker is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of the rich permits him no sleep.**

Michael Jackson was the youngest vocalist ever to top the *Billboard Hot 100*. He set another record: Experts say he may be the only human being to ever go 60 days without REM sleep.<sup>8</sup> Had he not died of a overdose, doctors think he probably would have died just a few days later anyway.

From the world's perspective, Michael had it all. Wealth. Fame. His place in the history books. Palaces. Every comfort. He was the "*king*" of pop. But he couldn't get a single night's rest.

Whether it's because they are worried about their wealth, or because they've overindulged, or because they just don't know when to stop, the pursuers of wealth in verse 12 struggle to slumber, to their own hurt.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the not-so-rich laborer is rolling in rest.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/21/showbiz/jackson-death-trial/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Seow

**Ecclesiastes 5:13 - <sup>13</sup> There is a sickening tragedy I have seen under the sun: wealth kept by its owner to his harm.**

Here we have a fellow who went on the hunt for wealth *and got it!* He built his fortune. But then, rather than help him, it harmed him. It warped his character. It changed him into a different person.

We see this lived out most obviously with young celebrities - child stars who become famous and wealthy. How many of them turn into *better* people? How do those stories end? Money promises to make everything better but so often does the opposite and works miserable mischief in a life.

**Ecclesiastes 5:14 - <sup>14</sup> That wealth was lost in a bad venture, so when he fathered a son, he was empty-handed.**

When the King of Pop died, he was \$500 million in debt.<sup>10</sup> Luckily for his heirs his estate continues to make money. But imagine that: After making hundreds of millions of dollars, Michael Jackson died owing more money than the average American will make in 250 lifetimes.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of verse 14, maybe it wasn't even the owner's fault that he lost the money. Maybe he made all the right financial decisions but just lived during an economic downturn like 1929 or 2008. *That* wasn't his fault, but it *was* his fault that his hope was wrapped up in his portfolio - that what he planned to leave to his son was *not* truth or faith or hope that lasts or eternal purpose, but simply worldly buying power that can disappear like a puff of smoke.

**Ecclesiastes 5:15-16 - <sup>15</sup> As he came from his mother's womb, so he will go again, naked as he came; he will take nothing for his efforts that he can carry in his hands. <sup>16</sup> This too is a sickening tragedy: exactly as he comes, so he will go. What does the one gain who struggles for the wind?**

Last week the Teacher challenged us with the question: Why are you going to church? Tonight the question is: What are you working for?

Now, don't misunderstand - the Bible commands us to work and to provide for our families, even to save and also to give financially. But as we live life, work a job, make investments, what are we working for? We must keep in mind the truth we just read and also find in Job and First Timothy: We brought nothing with us into this world and we bring nothing with us *out* of it.

Of course, we can send eternal investments ahead that will *not* depreciate. We do that by serving the Lord and giving to the Lord and obeying the Lord as He leads us in this life. But we want to keep the proper perspective, because as Paul explains, when we give into the natural human desire

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/rich-famous-celebrities-who-lost-all-their-money-2018-5>

<sup>11</sup> <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/collegepayoff-complete.pdf>

to be rich and seek after that life, it plunges us into ruin and destruction, and by craving wealth, some Christians wander away from the faith and pierce themselves with many griefs.<sup>12</sup>

Today many of the wealthiest Americans are trying crazy schemes to live forever. But it's not going to work. We each have a date with death and an eternity on the other side. Work for eternity.

**Ecclesiastes 5:17 - <sup>17</sup>What is more, he eats in darkness all his days, with much frustration, sickness, and anger.**

Darkness can speak here of isolation.<sup>13</sup> It's said that William Randolph Hearst ended his days not in the warm embrace of a loving family, but sitting in the basement of his great castle, watching the same movies over and over.<sup>14</sup>

We just don't want to believe it's true, but how much more proof do we need? We see it happen again and again, but our flesh says, "But it *might* work for us." Again, this is not about wealth itself. It's about the inclination of our hearts and the navigation of our lives. We should believe the person who has taken the trail before us. We should see the realities, not just believe the fantasies.

**Ecclesiastes 5:18 - <sup>18</sup>Here is what I have seen to be good: It is appropriate to eat, drink, and experience good in all the labor one does under the sun during the few days of his life God has given him, because that is his reward.**

So from *hevel* we turn to hope. Once again, the Teacher gives us a glimpse of the *good* life. He says this is what's good, what's better, what's really worth it: Living with contentment in the life and purposes God has for you and to *enjoy* your life, even in small delights along the way.

Of course, suffering and difficulty are still part of life. Not *everything* we experience is enjoyable. But *generally speaking*, as you live out your daily life, God wants you to feel contented, to feel satisfied, to feel that your life has purpose, *and* to enjoy simple things like food and drink.

Have you had a cotton candy grape yet? Oh man are they good! God has created a world where you can experience basic enjoyment *even if you aren't rich!* Enjoy that cup of coffee! Relish that warm and filling, buttery biscuit. We don't have to fly to New York and spend \$1,000 on the Golden Opulence Sundae. God has scattered enjoyments all around you (and not just in what we eat).

As His people, aside from being led by Him and obeying Him and drawing near to Him, we also have the opportunity to live out a continual scavenger hunt where we discover God's many gifts in everyday life. Paul says God "richly provides us with all things to enjoy."<sup>15</sup> What a good life!

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Timothy 6:6-10

<sup>13</sup> Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

<sup>14</sup> Stedman

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17

The point of these three closing verses is that God does *not* want us to live in a perpetual state of worry or fear or bitterness or agitation. His desire is that we live in a state of joy.

**Ecclesiastes 5:19 - <sup>19</sup> Furthermore, everyone to whom God has given riches and wealth, he has also allowed him to enjoy them, take his reward, and rejoice in his labor. This is a gift of God,**

It is not evil for Christians to be rich. Sometimes we need that reminder. God gives wealth to some Christians and that is a very good thing.

Recently I was talking to a representative of *Gospel For Asia* and he was talking about how they felt the Lord leading them to establish a new work in Africa. And how there was this place asking them to come build a hospital. But, it's pricey to build a hospital. They didn't have the funds for it.

Later, an American Christian was talking to this fellow and he said, "I heard you guys are going to build a hospital in Africa. That's great!" "Well, we can't really afford it." "How much would it cost?" "About \$3 million." "Here's the check."

It's not wrong for Believers to be wealthy. The question is how they got there and what their purpose is. The difference is Abraham and Lot. Both wealthy, but for different reasons with very different results. But we should be careful we're not living like Lot but thinking we're like Abraham.

**Ecclesiastes 5:20 - <sup>20</sup> for he does not often consider the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart.**

Another way of saying this is that God keeps this person *busy* with joy.<sup>16</sup> As we live, God's intention for us is that we be *preoccupied* by joy! *Even* when there's injustice. *Even* when I'm beset by the futility of life. *Even* when the stock market crashes, God's desire for us is joy. And when we lay hold of this *generous* gift from God - a life full of joy - the Teacher declares that we won't look back with disappointment.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the language can indicate that God will keep us *singing* with joy.<sup>18</sup>

Two roads. Two ways of pursuing life. Both make big promises. Both say, "Come this way to experience the *good* life." And we've seen over and over what people look like at the *end* of each trail. One is left isolated, empty, cheated by leeches, burdened by taxes, at the mercy of economic forces he cannot control. The *other* is left at a heavenly table where God has invited Him to receive all the fullness he could ever want, with a cup running over, and a happy heart along the way and an always appreciating, eternal reward that cannot be downgraded or depleted. Choose wisely.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

<sup>17</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown *Commentary Critical And Explanatory On The Whole Bible*

<sup>18</sup> Seow