

Commit to Contentment

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[0 : 00] Does money buy happiness? That's the age-old question many have tried to answer. The video you just saw was made by a YouTuber named Sean Rizwan, who went around New York City trying to guess people's incomes based on their responses to his questions.

Now, New York City consistently ranks top three among the most expensive cities in the world to live in. So the average New Yorker probably makes more than the average American, and with the inflation of the U.S. dollar, certainly more than any one of us here.

But when it comes to the question, does money buy happiness, many of them seem to have a rather pessimistic answer. See, the best outlook with God of Money was that it allows the ability to be happy, or it gives you the foundation to do other things that make you happy.

Those are fairly inoffensive statements. You know, there are things that most people can agree with. In fact, if you went around in Kuching asking the same questions that you saw in the video, my guess is we would get similar responses.

Now, how would I know that? For those of you who don't know me, I am a church planter slash pastor of Redemption Church, Serendice.

[1 : 29] And Redemption Church, we are targeting the neighborhood of Serendice, and so we're always doing ministry, interacting with people in the city, trying to ask questions on what actually are people in Kuching chasing after.

So last month, we launched our first service at my apartment on Jalan Sutong Baru, but we're only meeting once a month at the moment. So in the meantime, you'll see some of us worshipping here as we slowly ramp out the frequency of our services.

Now, one of the most common questions, or at least the question we ask all the time in church planting, is what captivates people's heart? And how does Jesus offer to replace these idols?

Money is certainly one of them. There are, of course, many layers of sin underneath the obsession with money that we will not get to this morning.

But this morning, today we want to focus on what the teacher of Ecclesiastes, whom I will quite often refer to as Kohelet, thinks about two issues, money and enjoyment.

[2 : 48] Money and enjoyment. So please turn your Bibles, keep your Bibles open, or turn over to Ecclesiastes chapter 5 right now, and let's jump in.

The first point that the teacher raises is that money neither satisfies nor lasts.

Money neither satisfies nor lasts. So after spending some time on how we should use our words in public worship, Kohelet returns to the theme of oppression, which he last left off in chapter 4.

Chapter 5, verse 8 reads, So here we have a rather ironic picture.

The poor, who might be taken advantage of in their rural villages, come to the district, which means the city center, hoping to find justice, yet their efforts are in vain.

[4 : 14] The poor might have seen the city as a place with more law keepers, and so they come to plead their case, but soon they realize even the officials make a living by suppressing the underprivileged.

And so the desire for justice becomes meaningless. But picking off where Kohelet left off in chapter 4, his point is that corruption and oppression is not so much just individuals behaving wrongly.

As is often the case, it takes one person to carry out the corruption, and another to witness it and not say anything. It takes an entire hierarchical system of government from top to bottom to not just ignore the cries of the poor, but also abuse them.

So what hope is there for the poor? Well, the syntax in verse 9 is rather challenging. In Hebrew, it reads, profit for the land in all is this, a king for a tilled field.

Now the NIV takes as if the king is the one who is participating in robbing the poor. It says the king himself profits from the fields.

[5 : 47] The ESV, however, suggests that the king is actually for the people. It reads, but this is gain for a land in every way, a king committed to cultivated fields.

Now the truth is probably somewhere in between. As Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner writes, a developed country needs the strength of central government, even if it entails the burdens of officialdom.

And what it means is that although a country's administrators, including the king himself, might be corrupted, it is still better to have a ruler than to let people run free and to have no authority watching over them.

Of course, from the perspective of the poor, this is unfair, because they come seeking mercy, they come seeking justice. Yet soon, they'll discover they will never reclaim what they are owed.

After this, the teacher turns to the topic of money. Money, he says, is a false god that never satisfies. Whoever loves money never has enough.

[7 : 07] Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This, too, is meaningless. Jesus himself warns us against the danger of serving both God and money at the same time.

He says we will either hate the one or love the other, or we will be devoted to one and despise the other. 1 Timothy 6, verse 9, also warns of the similar things.

It says, Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. See, if we make money, the end goal of all our pursuits, no matter how much we have, we will always want more.

It's incredibly easy to justify why we need more money to provide more comfortable homes for our family, to give our children quality education, and so on.

[8 : 25] But what's worse is that money blinds us to the fact that we are serving it. Author Tim Keller tells of such a story.

Some years ago, I was doing a seven-part series of talks on the seven deadly sins at a man's breakfast. My wife Kathy told me, I'll bet that the week you deal with greed, you will have your lowest attendance.

She was right. People peck it out for lust and wrath and even for pride, but nobody thinks they are greedy. As a pastor, I've had people come to me to confess that they struggle with almost every kind of sin.

Almost. I cannot recall anyone ever coming to me and saying, I spent too much money on myself. I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family, my soul, and people around me.

greed hides itself from the victim. The money God's modus operandi includes blindness to your own heart. Money is not just toxic in the way it creeps into our thinking.

[9 : 41] Money is toxic because it promises solution to our problems. If only I had more, then I could buy my way out. of my troubles.

But yet, as one of the guys who was interviewed in the video says, money buys you a whole different set of problems. Now, one of them, as verse 11 suggests, could be the problem of hangers-on.

It says here, as goods increase, so do those who consume them. Now, hangers-on refer to people who associate with you to gain some kind of advantage for themselves.

Maybe this is why lottery winners don't like to announce that they've won. Or they will have shops give payouts in monthly and yearly terms to avoid drawing attention to themselves, just so they don't wake up the next morning and find some random uncle or distantly related cousin at their doorstep.

See, the teacher argues that money, goods, are only good for seeing, only good for benefit to the eyes.

[10 : 50] They're only good for prestige and privilege. But that's not all that money can do. Because money also causes a person to lose sleep.

Verse 12 tells us that a worker, whether they eat little or much, they can sleep well. But as for the rich, the abundance of the rich disrupts their sleep.

See, abundance in the Old Testament refers to the ability to eat and drink to your heart's content. Presenting us with yet another ironic picture.

The poor, although they might not be able to eat much, rest well at night. the rich, however, stays up with their troubles and worries.

Money does not satisfy. There's another evil under the sun, however, verse 13, is that money does not last.

[12 : 03] the teacher says that in pursuing money, a person will lose life, lose his life twice. First, in the gaining of money, and second, in the losing of money.

See, as a father hoards his wealth, either to keep it for himself or to save it for future investments, he will be driven by insecurity.

But as much as this father held on super tightly to his property, Kohelet laments that he eventually lost it anyway through some misfortune, as the NIV writes, or it could also mean business failures.

Of course, many of us know stories of those who trusted the wrong person or invested in the wrong project such that they lost all their money in the night, and as verse 14 says, that these people, when they have children, there is nothing left for them to inherit.

But even in cases where money was successfully protected and passed on to the next generation, Kohelet still fails to understand the purpose.

[13 : 21] He quotes Job in saying, naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. Likewise, God, when cursing Adam and his work in Genesis 3, verse 19, says to him, by thus you were made, and to thus you shall return.

So what can we take with us? What's the point of working so hard then? If there is no contentment, either for the person who never had any money, or the person who once had a lot of money.

Money neither satisfies nor lasts. So what's the point? What is the way out, as Kohelet says?

See, Kohelet thinks that for us to lay our hopes on things that are within reach, on things that promises some kind of security, is to look in the wrong direction.

But what does he propose? Well, before we go there, let's look at another evil he identifies under the sun.

[14 : 34] And that is, enjoyment is neither certain nor pleasant. Enjoyment is neither certain nor pleasant.

So let's imagine there is someone who is truly content with everything in life. Someone who wakes up just utterly satisfied at how things are.

The teacher laments that even for such a person, enjoyment is not guaranteed. Chapter 6, verse 1, I have seen another evil under the sun and it weighs heavily on mankind.

God gives some people wealth, possessions, and honor so that they lack nothing their hearts desire. But God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them.

And strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless or grievous evil. Again, we know people who spend a good fortune of their life amassing money, property, and status only for them to face terminal illness or pass away.

[15 : 53] See, human life is fragile. All it takes is for a multi-dollar millionaire to catch a flu or for that matter suffer a serious fall or injury for the person to be taken out of action.

And of course, we think about the late Japanese former prime minister who was assassinated during an otherwise regular political event.

So even if someone has everything that they need, the teacher's problem is that these people still need God's permission to enjoy riches in life.

And suddenly, strangers, others, or in Hebrew, someone else, which can mean the person's children or another person that they know, ends up enjoying what this person has gathered in his place.

But verse three gives us a classic list of money, wealth, property, and status.

[17 : 08] It says, a man may have a hundred children and live many years, yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

Now, the Old Testament lists long life and children as two things that every man dreams of. But even for the man who has both, he might still end up living a frustrating life followed by a lonely death.

No proper burial or no burial at all. Burial is an important concept, not just for the Jewish people, but in the wider Near Eastern culture.

Community of the living sends the deceased person to be at rest with the community of the dead. 2 Samuel chapter 31 records how the men of Judah Gilead searched all night for the body of Saul, burnt it with the bodies of his men, buried their bones, and fasted seven days for the deceased king.

So for an already discontent life, to suffer such a miserable death, is as the teacher contents worse than the child who was not yet born.

[18 : 35] Who, verse 4, comes without meaning, departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. See, although the baby never got to see the sun or discover anything about this world, the child enjoys more rest than the man who lived a thousand years and bears a hundred children.

Now the point of this verse is not so much to minimize the tragedy of a child who was not yet born, but it is a literary device, a foil to highlight the emptiness of a zero days year old versus a thousand year old.

What does that matter if in the end it is a life that is empty and discontent? After all, do not all go to the same place?

After all, life, death, will render both of them equal with indifference. And the fact that everyone, the fact that we will face death makes enjoyment unpleasant because that thing which we long for will someday pass away.

And soon, we too will pass from this earth. see, Tim Keller, as he was diagnosed with cancer, talked about how one of the toughest things for him was coming to grasp with the fact that he will leave his children.

[20 : 09] And at that stage of his life, God used cancer to show what he truly loved, to wrestle and to grow him.

God now, many of us think maybe at this point, some of us will argue, look, the teacher is being too pessimistic. Surely, life isn't that bad.

Usually, we can take the good with the bad and the ugly. We can take the rough with the smooth and still find life worth living. You can take my neighbor, for example, you know, he's not a Christian, but he seems to be content with his life.

He's not worried about the ultimate meaning of things. But one person does not represent the entire humanity. The fact that there are people who are wondering about these philosophical questions means you and I are not excused.

We must at least give weight to them. See, that's the point of the book of Ecclesiastes is the teacher wants us to reflect on life from the perspective of a secular person, a person without God.

[21 : 27] In their mind, if life offers frustration than fulfillment, if life gives us nothing to enjoy or pass on to our descendants, if life is just a journey towards our destination of death, then for such a godless person, they might truly envy the life of the stillborn.

Now, if money, health, and descendants, the pursuit of those things are meaningless, then so is work, or for that matter, wisdom. Verse 7 to 9, everyone's toil is for their mouth, yet their appetite is never satisfied.

What advantage have the wise over fools? What do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite.

This, too, is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ciccollet says, as much as there are people who truly enjoy their work, at the fundamental level, we are beasts motivated by a need to fill our stomach.

That we work at the most basic level not to buy things, not to enjoy, so that it is to put food in our mouths. And so Ciccollet sees the mouth as a bottomless pitch.

[23 : 01] human appetite will never be satisfied. So in this way, no matter how much work we do, we can always do more. No matter how well we perform, we can always perform better.

So to build meaning on work, again, is also meaningless. Now, some might agree and say, hey, you know, humans are not robots that work tirelessly.

We have intelligence and the ability to reason and think. See, to that, the teacher says, wisdom itself is also folly.

For what advantage have the wise over the fools? Certainly, surely, the sage who lives his life meditating pleasantly, lives with wisdom, deserves to live in more material comfort than the idiot, knowledge.

Right? But again, that's not the case. So if the pursuit of wisdom does not guarantee improve in quality of life, the teacher says it is better to be foolish and innocent.

[24 : 15] Because at least the fool knows what to appreciate what is in front of his eyes. Whereas the wise has an insatiable thirst, roving of the appetite, they will never be content.

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Finally, Kohelet reminds us of our place, that we are created beings living in a created world.

Everything that exists on earth has already been named. And everything about humanity has already been known. this is the Old Testament's way of saying everything on earth owes its being to the command of Yahweh.

See, as much as we might want to contend or argue, protest against our Creator, we will once again do well to remember the book of Job, where the righteous men abandon the idea of debating with God after he fully recognizes the power and sovereignty of God Almighty.

It is futile then to multiply words, to try to change the nature of reality. The teacher says, rather than focusing on how things should have been, or how things should become, it is more important to face the truth of how things are.

[25 : 52] for who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow. Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?

So man is left with no moral compass to live in the present, and no certainty about the future. friends, from the two major movements of our passage, we learned that one, money neither satisfies nor lasts, and two, enjoyment is neither certain nor pleasant.

If we look to money to give us meaning, we will be disappointed. But if we try to enjoy anything beyond money, we will still be frustrated.

Because everything has already been decided by God, so what should we do? Well, we will first look at the solution that Kohelet himself proposes, and we will give him credit where it is due.

Soon, though, we will realize that we need something beyond this world to give us true contentment. So let's go back to chapter 5, verse 18, shall we?

[27 : 17] Okay. This is what I have observed to be good, that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink, and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them, for this is their lot.

Now, make no mistake, the teacher isn't saying simplicity is the solution. He isn't following the popular saying, don't worry, be happy, just eat and drink to your heart's content.

He isn't saying just dumb down your ability to reason and just live in the present. Because the key word here is God.

That whether it is food, drink, or work, work, it is an appropriate thing, or a better translation, a beautiful thing, for all of us to see everything that comes to us as being sent from heaven.

Want to enjoy a good meal at an expensive restaurant? Sure. Thinking about asking your friends out, on an otherwise uneventful Friday night, to crack open a beer?

[28 : 47] Why not? Feeling accomplished after closing out a business proposal? Certainly. You see, we're so plugged into this system of work and reward that we always need to justify why we do certain things, don't we?

Ah, you know, I've kept a good diet, one fried chicken, that's fine, you know, or I've worked hard all week, I deserve, I deserve, I'm entitled to take a break.

See, Kohelus says, why make things so complicated? Good gifts from a good father, enjoy them. Everything that comes to us is a gift sent from a good creator.

Now, there are cases where God blesses someone, verse 19, both with wealth possessions, but also the ability to enjoy them.

Kohelus tells these people to accept their lot and be happy in their toil, for this is a gift of God. These people, rather than pondering on whether life is meaningless or worthwhile, they commit to contentment in the gifts of God.

[30 : 22] And the hope is that all of us, by the grace of God, will see things that come to us, will find the world absolutely captivating and discover true peace in God.

See, at first glance, the teacher's proposal sounds pretty good. It sounds satisfactory. Don't be obsessed with money.

Don't be obsessed with money. Don't chase after enjoyment. and live life as a blessing from God. Very inoffensive statement that you could say outside of church, and anybody can accept that.

So what's the problem with this proposal? It underestimates the neediness of the human heart.

Thomas Chalmers says, let's pull up the quote, the heart's desire for one particular object may be conquered, but as to its desire for having one object or another, this is unconquerable.

[31 : 49] You know, what's the solution isn't just, bro, just don't love the world, just be content, just see the world as worthless, just find joy in God, because the throne of our hearts will always be occupied by something.

It isn't just having more willpower to say no to the world. It isn't just making better decisions in life. And he continues, Chalmers continues, in a word, if the way to disengage the heart from a positive love of one great and ascendant object is to fasten it in positive love to another, that it is not by exposing the worthlessness of the former, but by addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence of the latter, that all old things are to be done away and all things are to become new.

Brothers and sisters, the one that is worthy and excellent, the power that will expel our need for money, our thirst to build our security on enjoyment is none other than Christ himself.

In Jesus, we have someone who enjoy all the riches in this world and perfect fellowship with God. John chapter 1, Jesus created the world and claimed ownership over everything.

John chapter 17, Christ existed with glory with the Father before the creation of the world. Jesus, the perfect God and men, had infinite wealth and infinite enjoyment.

[33 : 49] But if he had held on to them, you and I would die in spiritual poverty. Had Christ hold on to his wealth, we would die poor.

Had Christ remained content in his enjoyment, we would suffer eternally. but he chose to die poor.

Jesus gave out his treasure in heaven to make you his treasure, to forgive your sins and to claim you as one of his own.

Friends, the cross reorients our hearts and reorders our loves. In Christ, we no longer have to worry about not having enough money because the cross is the very proof that God provides for us.

The cross is the very proof that the Savior of the world went out on the cross to provide a way out for you and he will secure you till the day you see him face to face.

[35 : 06] In Christ, we no longer worry about building our need on enjoyment because we are satisfied in his love.

Such as should we wake up tomorrow and lose everything we hold dear, everything we count as worthy, money, health, descendants, we would still be content in the loving arms of our Father who sent his Son to purchase for us an inheritance that is imperishable.

The gospel provides us a new paradigm such that in Christ we may enjoy all things and in all things enjoy Christ.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, as limited human beings living in a world full of attractions, we confess that our hearts are deceitful, that our hearts easily attach itself to money, to enjoyment, to attribute, to try to discover meaning in our work.

work. But Lord, your death and resurrection assures us that first and foremost, in the morning, before we put on our identities as businessmen, as lawyers, that our first and foremost identity is a child, beloved child of yours, that we rest in what you accomplished, the salvation you purchased for us.

[36 : 59] And it gives us a refreshed mind to look at the things of this world, to still do our diligence, but to find ultimate hope and meaning in you.

This is our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.