

## LESSON 5

# Wisdom for the Walk

### Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 5

### Key Verse

“Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

### Overview

Solomon answered the basic question, “Where is profit in a world marked by folly and injustice?” He gave several reminders of the need to be sincere before God. Then he balanced the evident problem of social injustice with five principles revealing the disadvantages of riches. He ended chapter 5 with an exhortation to grasp joyfully what God has given.

### Topic

Enjoying life

### Theme

The wise person grasps what is truly important.

### Desired Learner Response

The learner will decide two ways he or she can sincerely focus on living for the Lord instead of on living to accumulate more.

### Outline

- I. Need for Sincerity before God (Eccles. 5:1–7)
  - A. Sincere worship (v. 1)
  - B. Sincere words (vv. 2–7)
- II. Problem of Social Injustice (Eccles. 5:8, 9)
- III. Disadvantages of Riches (Eccles. 5:10–17)
  - A. The More We Have, the More We Want (v. 10)
  - B. The More We Have, the More We Spend (v. 11)
  - C. The More We Have, the More We Worry (v. 12)
  - D. The More We Have, the More We Have to Lose (vv. 13–15)
  - E. The More We Have, the More We Leave Behind (vv. 16, 17)
- IV. Exhortation to Enjoy Life (Eccles. 5:18–20)

### Materials

- Transparencies 1 and 8
- Lesson 5 case study from resource CD
- Ecclesiastes 5:19 verse card from resource CD

## Getting Started

Use one of the following activities to introduce this lesson.

### New Car Smell

**Ask:** What goes through your mind when you sit in a car that still has its new car smell? For those of you not driving a new car, what does your car smell like now? What happened to the new car smell? **Discuss:** How does the changing of a car's smell reflect the fleeting pleasure that comes from things? (Questions 1–4)

### Can't Wait for Christmas!

**Ask:** How highly did you anticipate Christmas when you were seven or eight years old? Who can name two Christmas presents they received when they were seven years old? Where are all those presents now? Why do we forget about what we once so highly anticipated receiving?

Solomon concluded that the wise person grasps what is truly important by appreciating instead of fixing his hopes on more things.

## Searching the Scriptures

### I. Need for Sincerity before God (5:1–7)

#### A. Sincere worship (v. 1)

In chapters 3 and 4, Solomon taught that God gives us a thirst for the eternal. Recognizing that life is more than what occurs now enables people to live in this undeniably unjust world. He continued that theme in chapter 5 and answered the question, “Where is profit in this foolish, unjust world?”

Solomon recognized that the inequities of life detailed in Ecclesiastes 3:16—4:16 could lead some people to reject God altogether. But that would not solve the problem; it would simply compound it. Therefore, he encouraged his readers to continue to go to God's house rather than give up on worship. Running away from God could never lead to an answer—only to worse difficulties.

Solomon advised his readers to worship God with the right attitude (5:1). Foolish people resist God's Word; but wise people receive it, for they are ready to listen to God. The fool might bring a sacrifice, but his action is insincere and mechanical.

**EVALUATE:** A person can be running from God and yet be very faithful in attending church and putting money in the offering plate. (Question 5)

#### B. Sincere words (vv. 2–7)

Insincere sacrifice can easily lead to insincere speech (v. 2). Therefore, Solomon counseled not to praise God hypocritically or promise more than you are committed to perform. The wise person realizes that God knows all that he thinks, feels, and desires, so he speaks only the truth. He does not try to impress God with words that are not backed up with commitment.

Verse 3 may well have been a quotation of a proverb current in Solomon's day. Just as a dream has much imagined activity but little tangible result, so a fool produces many words but little action. He gets flustered by the pressures and injustices of life. Instead of thinking clearly and speaking only what he knows and believes, his mouth may get into gear before his mind and will are engaged. Life's challenges require clear thinking and genuine commitment to God. Insincere worship and insincere words may appear beneficial, but God sees through them.

**COMPLETE:** Insincere worship and insincere speech are as beneficial as . . . (e.g., using a megaphone on a deserted island.) (Question 6)

Verses 4 and 5 pick up the warning in verse 2 not to speak rashly, especially in vows made to God. A vow was a voluntary commitment made to the Lord, usually for a brief period of time. It showed thanksgiving for God's favor or expressed devotion and love. It was never required, and not to make a vow was no sin. But, once a vow was made, the person was obligated to keep his word.

People under pressure are always tempted to make rash promises, perhaps as a lever to gain God's help. This is risky business, however, for God considers a promise an unpaid debt. Because of the seriousness of making a vow, Solomon gave three instructions. First, if you make a promise to God (you do not have to, of course, but if you do), be sure to do what you promised. Second, do not keep God waiting for you to keep your word (v. 4). Third, it is better not to make a promise to God at all than to break a promise (v. 5).

Solomon continued his warnings about vows (v. 6). He pictured a person who regretted having made a hasty vow and compounded his guilt by trying to avoid the responsibility. He went to the priest and claimed that he had made a mistake. Instead of admitting that his vow was binding, he claimed that it was just a slip of the tongue! According to Numbers 15:27 and 28, an inadvertent error could be atoned by a burnt offering and a sin offering. However, an intentional sin could not be atoned (Num. 15:30, 31).

God is not so easily dismissed, for He holds people accountable for their words. Instead of avoiding one mistake, the person who vowed and then pretended that he had misspoken was doubly guilty. He could expect only punishment from the Lord.

Solomon concluded this paragraph by saying that both dreams and words may have no reality (v. 7). Careless talk may quickly lead into promising more than one can perform. It is better to talk less and, instead, to fear God. Fearing God leads to faithful action. Rather than being caught in self-deception through insincere speech, it is much better to live in conscious submission to God. Questions will remain, for as Solomon has revealed, life is tainted by folly and injustice. However, the God Who sees and knows all can lead His people past the problems into the satisfaction that only He can give.

Angel, or messenger, refers to one who represents God to humans. In this context it likely refers to the priest at the temple.



Compare Psalm 19:1–6, which teaches that nature serves as a continual witness to God's greatness and goodness.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 8. **DISCUSS:** In what circumstances might Christians be insincere before God? What practical steps might a believer take to gain a proper perspective? (Questions 7, 8) Record learners' answers on the transparency.

**CASE STUDY:** Distribute the case studies for lesson 5. Have the learners work through the one on the left side of the page. Give them four minutes to work and then lead a brief discussion using the questions on the case study.

## II. Problem of Social Injustice (Eccles. 5:8, 9)

In Ecclesiastes 3:16 and 4:1 Solomon referred to the fact that injustice is a bitter, but ever present, reality of life. The problem of sin has destroyed not only relationships between God and humans but also the social relationships between humans.

Ecclesiastes 5:8 and 9 are difficult to understand. Some scholars interpret verse 8 as a cynical view of human government. According to this view, it is just institutionalized injustice with oppression and corruption from the local level right up to the highest corridors of power. In fact, with each increasing level of government the officials become more oppressive.

Others view verse 8 in a more positive way. They say it looks at human government realistically and admits that oppression and injustice exist. However, the checks and balances of levels of officials provide accountability that prevents total moral collapse, and God, the most exalted ruler preserves ultimate justice.

Verse 9 is difficult for either view. It may mean that in a world of obvious injustice the fruitfulness of the earth does not discriminate. Humans will be unjust to one another, but the physical world is a silent witness to a compassionate Creator.

## III. Disadvantages of Riches (Eccles. 5:10–17)

In Solomon's day, as in ours, many people assumed that money is a cure to life's ills. They knew that life is full of injustices but that wealth could cushion them from their pains. In other words, they tried to buy their way to happiness.

The Bible teaches that God's blessing brings wealth without trouble (Prov. 10:22; Deut. 7:12–14). However, as Solomon had already stated, wealth apart from God ultimately brings no advantage (Eccles. 1:3). Therefore, it is foolish for a person to make money his chief aim. In this section, Solomon taught about the disadvantages of riches, not to make his readers bitter or cynical, but to show them that pursuing money is a one-way street to disappointment. We must turn wholeheartedly to God to find lasting fulfillment in an unjust world.

**A. The More We Have, the More We Want (v. 10)**

First, what we want is always more than what we have (Eccles. 5:10). Materialism has an insatiable appetite. Riches seem to promise happiness and satisfaction, but they don't deliver. After all, riches are only things. They may provide brief enjoyment or superficial thrills, but they are incapable of bringing genuine contentment and joy. Those who seek fulfillment in what they possess find that they always feel that they need more.

**ASK:** What, if anything, do you collect? Have you ever been totally satisfied with your collection?

What else would you like to add to your collection?

**DISCUSS:** How does your dissatisfaction with your collection illustrate the point of Ecclesiastes 5:10? (Questions 9, 10)

**B. The More We Have, the More We Spend (v. 11)**

Second, the more we have, the more we spend (v. 11). If someone purchases a house, he also has to purchase things to keep it up. If he buys a car, he also has to spend time and money to maintain it. In the ancient world, a prosperous household required the expense of hiring and providing for many servants. It has often been said that work will expand to fill all the time available for it. Similarly, expenses seem to expand to eat up all the available money. In fact, many have found that the long-awaited raise or promotion does not get them ahead much at all! Once again, the pursuit of riches leads to disappointment.

**C. The More We Have, the More We Worry (v. 12)**

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 5:12. **ASK:** Rephrase this verse in your own words. **DISCUSS:** What might keep the person with abundance from sleeping well? (Questions 11, 12)

Third, verse 12 indicates that increased wealth produces more worry. Solomon pictured two men attempting to sleep at night. The first man, a common laborer, went to bed after a day of strenuous work. Although he may not have had a full meal, he had something valuable—the ability to enjoy a sound night's sleep.

By way of contrast, Solomon wrote of a rich man who had everything money could buy, but he was unable to sleep soundly. Two things may have contributed to his difficulty. If “abundance” (v. 10) refers to his ample food, then the rich man's lavish diet gave him indigestion, which made sleep hard. He ate too much and relaxed too little, so he could not sleep well. On the other hand, the following verses underscore the worries that accompany wealth (vv. 11, 12). Apparently the rich man could not sleep while his mind churned with concerns about his possessions.

In either case, Solomon was affirming that wealth and advantage do not necessarily go hand in hand. He implied that the poor laborer who ate little

but slept soundly was far ahead of the rich man who was unable to enjoy his rest.

#### **D. The More We Have, the More We Have to Lose (vv. 13–15)**

Fourth, 5:13–15 states that the more we have, the more we have to lose. A person may work diligently to accumulate wealth, stockpile it, and hoard it. However, all of this labor could be devastated by an untimely reversal. Fortune can yield to misfortune through fire, earthquake, drought, theft, or stock market collapse. One poor investment can impoverish a man by depleting his whole life's earnings. At the end of his life, when he would like to pass on to his children a substantial inheritance, he has nothing in his hand to give. Having much is no guarantee of holding much.

**ASK:** What do people do today to try to protect their wealth? **DISCUSS:** What do all their efforts say about the ability to securely protect wealth? (Questions 13, 14)

The truth is we enter life with nothing and leave life the same way. In ancient Egypt the pharaohs were buried with their riches so they could enjoy them in the afterlife. How foolish, for God's Word teaches us that we take with us into eternity only the character we have developed.

#### **E. The More We Have, the More We Leave Behind (vv. 16, 17)**

Fifth, we never have enough to escape death (vv. 16, 17). In Ecclesiastes, Solomon consistently measured advantage by the standard of death. If an activity, accomplishment or possession could not transcend death, it could not be a lasting advantage yielding permanent fulfillment. Because we cannot take wealth beyond the grave, working for it is like grasping the wind (v. 16). Just as the wind cannot be seen or held, so a person is left with nothing tangible to show for all his effort.

This led to the painful realization that the futile search for wealth leads only to frustration (v. 17). The pursuit of riches cannot give peace, but rather regrets. Material prosperity promises much, but in reality it cannot yield a truly satisfying life.

**CASE STUDY:** Distribute the case studies for lesson 5. Have the learners work through the one on the right side of the page. Give them four minutes to work and then lead a brief discussion using the questions on the case study.

### **IV. Exhortation to Enjoy Life (Eccles. 5:18–20)**

Solomon drew together chapters 3–5 in his conclusion. After all of his discussion of the disappointments of life, we might expect him to be pessimistic.

**READ:** Have the learners' skim Ecclesiastes 5:8–17.  
**ASK:** What kind of mood would you expect someone to be in after reading these verses? (Question 15)

Solomon wasn't pessimistic. He came to a conclusion similar to what he had said in 2:24–26. The inequities of life, which seem so puzzling, should not keep us from joy. The wise person sees past the superficial problems of life to seize what is eternally important. He recognizes that the only thing that lasts is what God gives. What God gives is life, so Solomon urged his readers to grasp life joyfully as a blessing from God's good hand.

In verse 18 Solomon realized that life is brief but that its brevity is all the more reason to enjoy life as God's gift. He counseled that people should not make life such a chore that they miss its joy.

In verse 19 he noted that we may be able to earn wealth, but only God can give the ability to enjoy life. His principles in Ecclesiastes 5:10–17 show that wealth in itself produces problems. It is not a guaranteed route to satisfaction, as many people suppose. Nevertheless, that does not mean that men and women should view life grimly in terms of obligation alone. Seeing life as a gift from God leads to a doxology instead of a dirge.

The one who enjoys life as God's gift keeps life and death in proper perspective. He has only limited days in this life, but God has granted them for enjoyment, not for futility.

## Making It Personal

### Talk vs. Walk

Many times our talk sounds much better than our walk appears. We may be able to fool other people, but God knows us completely. Faithfulness to God means being honest before Him. We can say we are living for God instead of things, but it is our actions and attitudes that reveal the truth.

**Ask:** This week take time to do a self evaluation before God. Remember that you can't fool Him. He wants you to see yourself as He sees you. Spend time with God in prayer asking Him to help you see yourself honestly. (Question 16) **Transparency:** Review transparency 8.

### Like Christmas Again

Few times in our lives compare to the joyous anticipation with which we looked forward to Christmas as children. But when we see life as a gift from God, we can recapture some of that anticipation with each new day. When we live for God, our life is meaningful and significant. Living for things, on the other hand, will only lead to worry and disappointment.

**Ask:** What are you fixating on each day—getting more or rejoicing for the opportunity to live for the Lord? What are two ways you can sharpen your focus on sincerely living for the Lord instead of things? (Questions 17, 18)



Principles for Life and Love	
1. Recognize the need to have a Christ-centered life.	8.
2. Break out of the circles of life by living for God.	9.
3. Find true enjoyment in life by surrendering to God.	10.
4. Trust God with your life—even the difficult aspects.	11.
5. Recognize the folly of living for money and things.	12.
6.	13.
7.	

### Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Recognize the folly of living for money and things.

### Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 5:19 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.