

**Oct 18, 2015 – Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 (Epistle: Hebrews 4:1-13, 14-18 Gospel: Mark 10:23-31)**

*True Riches and the Ability to Enjoy Them Come from God*

Last week we talked about the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked Him what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17-22). While the young man thought he had kept the commandments, he was guilty of breaking the very first one, because he valued his possessions more than he valued God. When Jesus told him to go and sell whatever he had, give to the poor and then to come follow Him, the man “*went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*” (Mark 10:22).

Our Gospel reading this week picks up where we left off last week. After the man went away, Jesus told His disciples, “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!*” (Mark 10:22). This astonished and worried the disciples. Jesus said again, “*Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” (Mark 10:24-25).

The account of the rich young man’s interaction with Jesus and Jesus’ words to His disciples, which we read this week, may trouble us as well. As we discussed last week, Jesus isn’t calling us all to a life of poverty, as Jesus’ words were specifically addressed to that young man’s idolatry. But Jesus’ words of warning to His disciples may lead us to wonder how we should view worldly wealth. This is a question that our Old Testament reading from Ecclesiastes answers.

Ecclesiastes may not be a book we hear or read from often. The writer does not identify himself by name. He simply says: “*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem*” (Ecc. 1:1). Jewish and Christian tradition says that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, as he was the son of David and the king in Jerusalem after David. He was also known for His wisdom, which was given to him by God, and the subjects talked about in Ecclesiastes fit what we know about King Solomon’s life. Solomon had great wealth (see Ecclesiastes chapter 2), so he is well qualified to tell us about money and riches.

Solomon warns us: “*He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase*” (v. 10). If you love money, you will never be satisfied. No matter how much we have, it seems like we always want more. King Solomon had more wealth than anyone. He “*made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones*” (2 Chronicles 1:15). But he found that he was never satisfied by his wealth, no matter how much he had.

Now one could argue that one doesn’t really love *money*; it’s what money can *buy* that is important. Money itself is just a number on a bank statement or computer screen, it is just a pile of paper or a jar full of coins. It is true that money itself isn’t much to love and it isn’t satisfying in and of itself, but are the things you can buy really any more satisfying? We may enjoy the stuff and experiences that money can get us for a time, but the memories fade, and the things we buy wear out, break, get stolen, or become obsolete almost as soon as we get them. “*This also is vanity*”, says Solomon (v. 10) – it’s pointless. It is like grasping after the wind (see 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

Another problem is that even if we do make more money, it often seems that we don’t ever *have* any more money. If our income goes up, our expenses rise to meet it. Even Solomon experienced this. He writes here: “*When goods increase, They increase who eat them; So what profit have the owners Except to see them with their eyes?*” We may see more coming in, but not see anything from the increase as it is quickly consumed. To paraphrase what Solomon says here: “What’s the point then of pursuing more?”

As you read through Ecclesiastics, Solomon may come off as a pessimist – someone who is jaded in his old age. But his negativity is often what we need to hear, as it reminds us how unimportant the things of this world really are and he points us to what really matters.

We start to see this when Solomon writes: *“The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep”* (v. 12). Sleep is enjoyable after “an hard day’s work”, is it not? It doesn’t matter if you’ve made as much money and eaten as much you would have liked, you can sleep well, trusting that God will bless your work. But those who are rich often have trouble sleeping, as they worry about keeping their wealth and making even more.

This does not mean that financial difficulties won’t ever keep us up at night. But it is a reminder that they do not need to. Jesus said, *“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing...which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest?”* (Luke 12:22-23, 25-26).

We worry because we put our trust in something other than God. That is why Jesus told His disciples, *“Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!”* (Mark 10:24). The problem is not the riches themselves, or their lack, but that we trust in them instead of trusting in God.

Solomon speaks of this when he talks about *“Riches kept for their owner to his hurt.”* (v. 13). As I mentioned last week, Paul warned Timothy about the love of money. He said that in pursuing riches *“some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”* (1 Timothy 6:10). Paul then told Timothy: *“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God”* (1 Timothy 6:17). The harm comes from trusting in something more than the living God.

Solomon explains another problem with trusting in one’s riches: *“those riches perish through misfortune; When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand”* (v. 14). The words translated as “misfortune” (by the NKJV) literally mean “bad investment”. We’ve seen this over the past several years as some investment companies have been exposed as being elaborate scams and downturns in the stock market have cut many investment accounts almost in half. The wealth of this world is indeed uncertain and it can go just like that.

And if all that isn’t enough, Solomon points us to the “big picture” when he says: *“As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, To go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labor Which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a severe evil—Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has labored for the wind?”* (vv. 15-16). We often summarize this by saying: “You can’t take it with you.” And that is true. So what good does it do to spend your life building up wealth? It is just laboring for the wind, as Solomon says here.

But you can leave it to your children, right? Solomon already thought of that and points out that this may not always be for the best. In Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 he wrote: *“Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.”* (see also 2:21).

All that Solomon has said here paints a gloomy picture, so it seems that we are left like the man described in v. 17: *“All his days he also eats in darkness, And he has much sorrow and sickness and anger.”* But God gives us this frank talk about riches to warn us and to wake us up to the de-

ceitfulness of riches, because riches can choke out God's word and lead us away from trusting in God to trust in ourselves and "our" ability to earn a living (see Mark 4:18-19).

Solomon doesn't stop here, however. He continues on to give us "the bottom line" and shows us what is really important. He says, "*Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage*" (v. 18). God wants you to enjoy the results of your labor; to eat and drink what He has given you. God wants you to realize that He is the source of your ability to work and the source of what you have received for your work.

"*As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God*" (v. 19). Both the riches and the ability to enjoy them are gifts from God. So our focus should not be on the riches themselves, or their enjoyment, but on God who provides both. He is the One who gives us what we need and He is the one who enables us to enjoy what He gives us. It is only God who can keep us from dwelling unduly on the days of our lives by giving us joy in our hearts.

This is why Jesus said, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33). This is what the rich young ruler did not do. He trusted in *his* riches and *his* own righteousness. He did not want to give them up for something far better.

But none of us are righteous before God. We have all failed to keep God's commandments, so we need the perfect righteousness that only Jesus can provide. When you believe and trust in Jesus 'life, death and resurrection to give you salvation, His righteousness is credited to you and considered your own. This God has given you as a gift through His Son.

Jesus' warning about riches prompted the disciples to ask, "*Who then can be saved?*" (Matthew 10:26). Jesus replied, "*With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible*" (Matthew 10:27). We cannot save ourselves, and we also cannot get true riches nor are we really able to enjoy them apart from God. But God did not spare His Son but delivered Him up for you and He will, with Him, also freely give you all that you need (Romans 8:32).

So enjoy the good of all your labor all the days of your life which God has given you. Be content and remember that what you have, and the ability to enjoy it, comes from the Lord. Trust in and delight yourself in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4). Amen.

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