

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“The Meaninglessness of Wealth”
Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Earlier this year **Bernard Madoff** was convicted of running the largest Ponzi scheme ever. Some sixty-five billion dollars worth of fraud since the early eighties. That’s more than \$1.6 million stolen every workday of his criminal career. \$200,000 an hour. 60 dollars a second.¹ But before Bernard Madoff, before Ponzi scheme, there was a real man by the name of **Charles Ponzi**.
- Charles Ponzi arrived in the U.S. from Italy in 1903. He had \$2.50 in his pockets. He quickly learned English and spent the next few years doing odd jobs. After some prison time in Canada, Ponzi made his way back to the U.S. and by luck found his way to get rich quick using the postal system. In his day, it was common for letters from overseas to include an international reply coupon—a voucher that could be exchanged for minimum postage back to the country from which the letter was sent. To make a profit, all you had to do was purchase postal reply coupons on the cheap in some foreign country, send them back to the U.S., swap them out for American stamps of a higher value, then sell the stamps.
- Ponzi started making a good living by buying IRC’s as they were called through agents in his native Italy. In fact, things went so well he recruited investors into his system with the promise of 50 percent returns in just a few days. Within two years, he had employees all over the country recruiting new takers for this investment strategy. At the peak of his success, the Italian financial wizard as he was known, was raking in about \$250,000 a day and would walk around with a gold cane. He was rich. He was famous. He was the Warren Buffett of his day.
- But a man by the name of **Clarence Barron**, the owner of the *Wall Street Journal*, smelled a rat. Barron figured Ponzi would have to be moving something like 160 million coupons around to raise the cash necessary to pay off investors. Since there were only 27,000 postal reply coupons circulating in the world, the math didn’t add up.
- On July 26, the *The Boston Post* ran a series of articles about Ponzi's scheme. Less than a month later, on August 11, regulators raided Ponzi's office. Since he was using the mail system to run his scam, the government charged him with eighty-six counts of mail fraud. He pled guilty to one of those charges in exchange for a light sentence. Upon his release just three and a half years later, Ponzi was deported to Italy. He spent the rest of his life in poverty before dying in 1949 in Rio de Janeiro where he's buried in a pauper's grave.²
- And I wonder, even though no illegalities may be involved, I wonder how many of us scheme with the passion and the tenacity of a Madoff or a Ponzi to get more green? Money makes the world go around. Or as someone once said, “There are many things in life that are more important than money. And they all cost money.”³

¹ www.bloomberg.com, Alice Schroeder, “Madoff’s \$200,000-an-Hour Beats Tiger Woods” March 27, 2009.

² www.mentalfloss.com, Ethan Trex, “Who was Ponzi -- what the heck was his scheme?”, ©2009.

³ Fred Allen, CNN.com as reported in “Talking Points,” *The Week* (4-27-07), p.19.

- So much of what we do in this life requires us to get more, save more, earn more money. Life is so much this way it's easy to think that's what life is all about. The pursuit of money. We're like the guy in the video. Even though we know the right theology about money and finances and stewardship we're conflicted in our practice.

Transition

When [Chuck Swindoll](#) preached from this passage 5:8-6:9 he entitled his message "Straight Talk to the Money Mad." I wish I had thought of that title. I think the Teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes, would have liked that title too. The Teacher says in Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9 that...[[Slide #2](#)]

Proposition

- **The pursuit of wealth is incapable of giving meaning to life**
- It's the next thing to be thrown on the bonfire. Wealth, money, they are vain pursuits. To chase after wealth is to chase after the wind. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.* There is no meaning in life on this earth apart from the God of the Bible—money, wealth included. Or as [Derek Kidner](#) put it, "If anything is worse than the addiction money brings, it is the emptiness it leaves. Man, with eternity in his heart, needs better nourishment than this."⁴

Transition

If you haven't yet turned in your bible to Ecclesiastes 5:8 please do so now. In this section the Teacher gives...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three reasons why pursuing wealth is a meaningless proposition**

Transition

Look at verses 8-12 and the [first reason](#). *If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. 9 The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields. 10 Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. 11 As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? 12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.* The Teacher says wealth is a meaningless pursuit because...[[Slide #3](#)]...the **appetite for it is insatiable**. You will never ever have enough. Spare yourself the anxiety. Stop trying.

Main Points

- The teacher begins in [verses 8-9](#) by revisiting the theme of oppressive power, which we briefly looked at the beginning of chapter 4. The picture he paints here is of these officials who keep a watchful eye out for one another, the old boy network in full force, so that, as [verse 9](#) says, *the increase from the land is taken by all*. In other words, these greedy politicians look out for one another, helping each other line their pockets leaving the *poor*

⁴ Kidner, p. 56.

*oppressed, and justice and rights denied.*⁵ The Teacher uses this example of oppressive profiteering, which as [verse 8](#) says, shouldn't surprise anyone, to introduce his main theme; the pursuit of wealth.

- [Verse 10](#). *Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.*
- [Calvin Miller](#) in his book *A Requiem for Love* tells the story of a millionaire and a beggar. He writes, “A beggar asked a millionaire, ‘How many more dollars would it take to make you truly happy?’ The millionaire, reaching his gnarled hands into the beggar's cup, replied, ‘Only one more!’”⁶ And that's the point of verses 8-12. The desire for more and more wealth is insatiable. It is an appetite that can never be satisfied. Which is why the Teacher says the pursuit of it is vanity; it's meaningless. *This too is meaningless.*
- See, even if you successfully get more all you really do is compound the anxiety that accompanies ‘the having.’ [Verse 11](#). *As goods increase, so do those who consume them.* The more you get the more you find out you have friends you never knew you had. Sponging relatives wants your money.⁷ The IRS wants your money. Baby Bell wants your money. Accountants want your money. Or as [Tremper Longman](#) puts it, “As one's means increase, so do ‘bills.’”⁸ So even if you are successful at getting more you haven't really solved anything. You've only increased the likelihood that someone else needs a piece of your pie. And so you find yourself on an unstoppable hamster wheel.
- In fact, you also probably find yourself not sleeping. [Verse 12](#). The anxiety of this chase for more leads to sleepless nights. *The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.* Those who are caught in the trap of continually wanting more are unable to sleep. Maybe that's the real reason why there's a sleep epidemic in this country. Maybe it's because we're all money mad.
- Listen to me. No matter how much money you have there is always the possibility of and the desire for more. The lesson for us from verses 8-12 is this. If you set the acquisition of money as your highest goal in this life you have set before yourself a never-ending task.⁹ You will chase after something impossible to catch and you will impoverish your life in the process.

Transition

Look at [verse 13](#). The Teacher says, *I have seen a grievous evil under the sun*, which is his way of transitioning to another subject. In verses 13-20 the Teacher gives us [second reason](#) why wealth is a meaningless pursuit. [[Slide #4](#)] **Hoarded wealth is destructive**. Listen. *I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, 14 or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. 15 Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand. 16 This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what*

⁵ Longman, p. 157 quoting Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, p. 293.

⁶ *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 2.

⁷ Swindoll, p 55 quoting William McDonald, *Chasing the Wind* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 47.

⁸ Longman, p. 165.

⁹ Longman, p. 165.

does he gain, since he toils for the wind? 17 All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

- Have you noticed how in systematically working through books of the Bible the subject of wealth comes up frequently, almost routinely? Repeatedly God’s Word warns against the misuse of wealth. And of the different ways wealth is misused hoarding is just about the worst. [G.K. Chesterton](#) once said, “To be clever enough to get a great deal of money, one must be stupid enough to want it.”¹⁰ Somehow we forget that wealth, if not used properly, is deadly dangerous.
- Look at [verse 13](#). The Teacher says in verse 13 that he has observed a *grievous evil*. And then he explains what that evil is. *Wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner*. Somehow when we think of hoarding, those words, *grievous* and *evil*, don’t come to mind. Sad? Yes. Unfortunate? Yes. Poor soul? Yes. Greedy? Yes. But a *grievous evil*? Hoarding is a more serious offense than we tend to think.
- Also, when we think of hoarders, thanks to Dickens, we naturally think of an [Ebenezer Scrooge](#) type with piles and piles of money to be hoarded. Somehow we exclude ourselves from the rank of hoarder because we don’t have piles and piles of money. Don’t ever, for a second, think that just because money’s tight hoarding won’t be a temptation. It may be even more of a temptation when things are tight.
- Please look at the text. If you’re reading an NIV you’ll see the NIV connects verses 13 and 14 with the word or to express two separate ideas. The grievous evil is hoarded wealth to the owners harm or *wealth lost through some misfortune*. I think the ESV does a better job of capturing the single, solitary evil the Teacher has seen. It uses the word and to connect verses 13 and 14 to express one idea. Listen. *There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture.*
- In other words, it’s a double whammy against the hoarder. He’s hoarded to his own harm, which is bad enough, and his money which was meant to be given away to his children, [verse 14](#), was put into risky investments that turned sour and everything was lost.¹¹ The son is left with nothing, which is why the Teacher describes this scene under the sun with the doubly tragic, *grievous evil*. Irony of all ironies, the money that was meant for others has been hoarded then *lost through some misfortune*.
- The picture of the hoarder, this man who has *toiled for the wind*, [verse 16](#), is tragically Shakespearean, isn’t it? Look at [verse 17](#) and all the harm this man does to himself. *All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger*. This man who brought nothing into the world, [verse 15](#), *naked a man comes from his mother’s womb*, and will take nothing out of it, *he takes nothing from his labor hat he can carry in his hand*, would have been better off enjoying the wealth God had given him instead of hoarding it. [Verse 18](#). *Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him--for this is his lot. 19 Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work--this is a gift of God.*

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men*, submitted to www.preachingtoday.com

¹¹ See NLT translation of 5:14.

- Listen. Your soul needs better nourishment than the nourishment money or wealth can provide. They are worse than poor substitutes. They are absolutely toxic to your soul. Wealth, if you have it, and we all do, is meant to be enjoyed as a gift from God as our basic needs are met. But beyond meeting our basic, daily needs it is meant to be given away. It's not without reason that Jesus warned his followers of the dangers of hoarded wealth. Luke 12:15. *Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."*

Transition

Remember the words of 1 Timothy 6:6-8. *But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.* See, here's the deal. If we are unable to learn contentment in this life under the sun; if we instead pursue wealth, [Slide #5] the sobering reality is that we may find ourselves **struggling against God**. That's what 6:1-9 seems to say; the **third reason** why pursuing wealth is a meaningless proposition.

- The issue in this section, I believe, is contentment—or lack of it. **Verse 7** says *All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.* And **verse 9**. *Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite.* Discontentment. In other words, it's better to be content with what you have than to discontentedly seek after more. The old saying is true. "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush."
- In **verses 1-9** the Teacher observes God's superabundant generosity. Back to **verse 1**. Not only does God give wealth, possessions and honor *so that this person lacks nothing his heart desires* but he also gives superabundance, lots of children and long life, **verse 3**. In fact, *a man may have a hundred children [extreme abundance] and live many years [extreme generosity]; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.* In other words, a person may have the wealth of kings, tons of kids, and long life to boot but if that person can't be content with what God has given that person is better off having never been born.
- Why? Because the text says, **verse 1-2** say that God will not allow the discontented person to enjoy what he has. And that is a sad sight to observe. *I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: 2 God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.* If you are unable to show contentment with what God has given you, if you choose instead to pursue wealth, you will find yourself in a tooth and nail struggle against God himself.
- The warning of Ecclesiastes 6:1-9 is this. If you should choose to discontentedly to fight and scrap for more than what God generously wants to give your discontentment will place you in a confrontation with God. And I promise you, you'll lose that fight every time. God won't allow you to enjoy what you have, what he's given, if you're discontented.
- Here's why. We are not meant to provide for ourselves. That is God's task. We are meant to continually trust Him for what we need. Remember Jesus' words in Luke 12? *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to*

*his life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? 27 "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! 29 And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30 For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*¹²

- See, when we continually pursue more we take upon ourselves a role and a burden reserved for God alone. He alone is the Great Provider. Philippians 4:19 *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* The scary part is God allows our discontentment to run its course. He doesn't stop it. While we toil and chase after the wind he frustrates our existence. But by his grace, he does this so that we might see the vanity of our chase and go running back to him.

Conclusion

- What some people won't do for money. In an attempt to collect roughly \$44,780 in insurance payments, a 58-year-old German landscape gardener had a friend cut off his thumb and forefinger with a chainsaw.
- According to German authorities, the gardener held onto a cutting board while his accomplice, a 28-year-old trucker, sawed off his friend's fingers. The gardener then threw the severed digits away before claiming money from two different insurance companies. The police arrested both men after one of them was overheard bragging.¹³
- We cringe at a graphic story like this. And yet many of us, by what our continual lust for more, find ourselves in a far more graphic and perilous situation than losing a few digits. *What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?* Let's pray.

¹² Luke 12:22-31

¹³ Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois; source: Reuters (9-15-03)