

Rich Man, Poor Man



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 5.*

Memory Text: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity” (*Ecclesiastes 5:10*).

Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story called “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” It was about a peasant, Pahom, who swore, “If I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the devil himself.” Pahom then heard about the Bahkirs, people who sold land cheaply. He traveled there and was offered land at “a thousand rubles a day.” What did that mean? They told him: “We sell it by the day. As much land as you can go around on your feet in a day is yours.” Only one condition: If you didn’t return on the same day to the spot you started, the money would be lost. Pahom, delighted, started walking and walking and walking. . . . He was getting so much land! He kept going, all day, only to realize that he had better get back before the day ended. He had gone too far. He had to rush, or else all was lost! He hurried and hurried, only to collapse dead within sight of the starting spot.

His servants dug a grave and buried him. How much land does a man need?

“Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed,” wrote Tolstoy.

This week we’ll look a little more at what Solomon has to say about wealth and poverty. He said a lot; we’ll cover what we can.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 10.*

God in Heaven, Humanity on Earth

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. Though you might not understand every phrase, summarize the basic message:

However much Solomon in Ecclesiastes, as in Proverbs, focused on practical living and moral injunction, he did so always with an awareness of the reality and presence of God. Here, too, in these lines, Solomon expresses not only the reality of God but the closeness of God; that is, God cares how you approach Him, God cares how you talk to Him, and God cares about you paying your vows to Him. Solomon's God, the God of the Bible, isn't the God of deists, some distant deity who created the world and then left it to its own devices. If so, we would truly have reason to despair.

In this context, Solomon is talking about how we as humans should relate to God.

Read Matthew 21:28-31. How does this text fit in with the message of Solomon here?

The point, of course, is obvious: If we tell the Lord that we plan on doing something, we'd better do it. However, that's easier said than done. How often have we made vows to God, promising and swearing oaths that we will stop doing this or that or that we will always do such and such, only to fail? Sure, we might have meant it at the time, and really tried, but we failed either way. What's our situation then?

How do Matthew 18:21-23, Romans 2:4, and 1 John 2:1 help us understand the hope that we can have despite failures?

Have you made promises to God that you haven't kept? If so, what's the only thing you can do?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 5:10*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Heaven’s priorities transcend our temporary human existence.

Feel: God’s invitation to embrace eternal values.

Do: Reorder our priorities to reflect God’s values.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. What an Awesome God We Serve (*Eccles. 5:1-7*)

A Which of God’s attributes do you find most appealing? Why?

B “Fear God, and give glory to him,” said the first angel of Revelation 14:7. What are the implications of that statement for us? How do they relate to Solomon’s imperative: “Stand in awe of God” (*Eccles. 5:7, NIV*)?

II. Contentment and Satisfaction (*Eccles. 5:8-12, 13-20*)

A The parable of the rich fool (*Luke 12:13-21*) isn’t just about money; it’s about anything that throws our lives out of balance. What are some common modern diversions that keep us from the most important things? What is the single greatest obstacle to your own spiritual growth?

B Solomon referred to leaving this world empty-handed as “a grievous evil” (*Eccles. 5:13, NIV*). Yet our inability to take any material thing into the next life is just a statement of fact. On what should we focus instead?

C What lesson is there in Ecclesiastes 5:19, 20? How does it apply equally to people of every economic and social level?

▶ **Summary:** In a climate of impossible demands, it’s important to carve out time to reflect on life’s true priorities.

Learning Cycle

▶ **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners’ experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **Why is this lesson important to me?**

CONTINUED 

Poor Man

“For ye have the poor always with you” (*Matt. 26:11*).

Solomon now returns to a key theme of this whole book: money and those who have a lot and those who don't.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8. Kind of strange words, if you think about it. After all, it was Solomon himself or, at least, his government who set up taxation for his nation. At least in Ecclesiastes Solomon noticed some of the problems the poor had under this oppressive bureaucracy.

What are some of the problems people often encounter when working through a typical bureaucratic system? Solomon offers no solution to the problem; all he says is don't be surprised by it.

Look up the following texts; note what each one says about how the poor should be treated. What common theme appears in all of these texts?

Exod. 23:6

Lev. 19:15

Lev. 25:39-43

Deut. 15:7, 11

Deut. 24:14, 15

Earlier in the book (*Eccles. 4:1*), Solomon bemoaned the oppression he had seen under the sun. We saw, too, that there were different ways people could oppress others. A common one, known all through history, has been the oppression of the poor by the rich. The few texts above, and there are others, show how the Lord, while acknowledging the existence of the poor, gave strict rules on how they were to be treated. All human beings are equal before God—the Cross more than proves that; the sad fact, however, is that it's so easy for those who have money to wield abusive power over those who don't. Such actions, of course, are condemned in the Word.

When Jesus came to this world, did He come as someone rich or poor? What does your answer say to you about how you should relate to those who are poorer, at least in finances, than you are? What is your attitude toward them?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The story is told of a young pastor and seminarian who began suffering from insomnia, digestive-tract disorders, and headaches. Taking his problems to the doctor, he was told that the problem was hypertension. He was further told that the cause was probably the stresses and pressures he was under as he attempted to fulfill all the responsibilities for his church and his schooling with excellence.

A fellow seminarian gave him a “prescription” to read two chapters of Ecclesiastes each day and to follow the reading with a short, brisk walk. Sceptically, the young pastor tried his friend’s advice, and his symptoms gradually disappeared.

He then began prescribing the same treatment whenever he ministered to people with a similar malady.—Gary D. Preston, “The Grand Delusion,” *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 017 (Sept./Oct. 1983, archived on CD).

Consider This: What really effected this cure? How is the book of Ecclesiastes a guard against humanity’s tendency to take life too seriously? To take itself too seriously? What are some of the things in which we try to find significance? Is it possible to find it there?

► STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **What do I need to know from God’s Word?**

Bible Commentary

I. Relating to God as God

(Review Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 with your class.)

Sunday’s portion of the lesson suggested that the basic message in these verses be summarized. Have students share what they wrote or what occurs to them at this reading.

Consider This: How can we relate Matthew 21:28-31 to what we’ve just been discussing?

■ *Even though we obviously do not always treat God as He expects and deserves, what has He provided to help restore us to the right relationship with Himself?* Matt. 18:28-31, Rom. 2:4, 1 John 2:1.

CONTINUED 

The King and the Field

“Moreover the profit of the land is for all; the king himself is served from the field” (*Eccles. 5:9, NKJV*).

Read the above text. What is it saying? What message should everyone, especially the rich and the powerful, take from it? *See also Deut. 10:14, Pss. 8:6, 24:1, 115:16.*

Rich or poor, powerful or oppressed, there’s one thing we all have in common: We all live on this planet. We all breathe its air, drink its water, and eat the food that grows out of its ground. Some might get cleaner air, purer water, better food, but in the end we’re all equally dependent upon what God has provided for us.

That realization, however, hasn’t stopped the gross inequities we see in this world today, just as Solomon saw them in his day.

What would Solomon say about a world in which people can spend almost \$13,000 a night for a room at a hotel in Paris while millions of others the world over are homeless?

What would he say about a world in which people can spend \$370,000 on a Ferrari while others don’t even have shoes?

What would he say about an auction a few years ago in Canada during which someone paid \$85,000 for a bottle of 1735 wine from Germany while billions of people don’t even have regular access to fresh drinking water?

He would be appalled, for sure. The Lord has provided more than enough of everything for human beings here. Though the causes of poverty are complex, there’s no doubt that greed, corruption, and covetousness have made it a lot worse.

No question, those who have made themselves rich through the exploitation of the poor will find themselves face to face with an angry God.

Read James 5:1-8. Though the obvious message is clear, what principle is being expressed that could apply to each of us in how we treat others? Whether rich or poor, ask yourself, What could this text be saying to me?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**II. Relating to Others as God Asks**

(Review Ecclesiastes 5:8 with your class.)

The way that people treat one another is one of the major curses of sin. Favoritism, prejudice, and cruelty will not leave this world until God makes everything new. But Jesus summed up the law in His bold statements of how we are to relate to God (see section above) and how we are to treat our fellow humans.

(Have someone in your class read or recite Matthew 7:12 or Luke 6:31.)

In fact, how we relate to the ongoing plight of the poor and down-trodden in our world is the key issue in the judgment.

(Review Matthew 25:31-46 with your class.)

Consider This: What relationship do you see between the texts from the Monday section of the lesson and this parable? *(Refer to Exod. 23:6; Lev. 19:15; 25:39-43; Deut. 15:7, 11.)*

III. Relating to Ourselves in Relation to God

(Have someone in your class read Ecclesiastes 5:9, 15-17, 19, 20.)

God is God, and Lord of all His creation. Our role here on this earth is to worship Him, work at whatever He has put before us to do, and remember that we are simply the part of His creation that He asked to manage His affairs here on earth. We brought nothing into this world, we take nothing out, and we are not personally to be lauded for anything we do while here.

Consider This: What further points about God's Lordship and our stewardship do we find in the passages from Tuesday's portion of the lesson? *Deut. 10:14, Pss. 8:6, 24:1, 115:16.*

(Review Ecclesiastes 5:10-14 with your class.)

"Only the spiritual 'wealth' a man has accumulated in this life may be carried beyond the grave."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1082.

No hearses pull trailers.

Hoarding, grasping, trying to fill oneself with some substance, emotion, or behavior can become addiction. It is the action of someone trying to fill up the space that only God can fill in his or her life.

In a special edition of the *Adventist Review* published in 2003, an article by Miroslav Kis, titled "Is Addiction Sin?" had this statement: "Anything

CONTINUED 

Never Enough

A poster once read, “Money doesn’t make you happy, but it sure makes misery a lot more comfortable.”

Most would agree. But as the book of Ecclesiastes shows, money and wealth don’t solve all our problems, don’t guarantee happiness, and don’t come without problems of their own.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10. What point is being made? What principle is seen there that applies to more than just money? See also *Prov. 27:20; Isa. 56:11, 12.*

Any desire, passion, or even ambition that isn’t under the control of the Lord is never easily satisfied, no matter how greatly indulged. This problem is seen especially among drug addicts. Before long, the amount of drugs they had before isn’t enough; they keep needing more and more. It can work with a lot of other things, as well, including money.

Read Luke 12:13-21. What’s the point of this parable? Is Jesus talking against wealth per se, or is something else going on? If so, what?

Perhaps the key to understanding this parable is found at the end of verse 21, when Jesus warns about those who are not “rich toward God.” Though He doesn’t explain here, Jesus seems to be warning about those whose life is swept up in the pursuit of riches at the expense of everything else, including one’s obligations to God. As Jesus said elsewhere, to whom much is given “much [is] required” (*Luke 12:48*), and someone who has wealth has a responsibility to use it wisely. Oftentimes, though, those who have the most are the greediest, while those with the least are willing to share the little they have.

Take an honest look at yourself: What are your attitudes toward money? If you are more interested in being rich as opposed to being “rich toward God,” how can you change? Why *must* you change?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

can become an object of attachment, and that anything can displace God. Overwork, careerism, upward mobility, excessive worry, pornography, overeating, and ‘messiah syndrome’ (a feeling that no one could replace me) can be as dangerous as alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. The words ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ applies to all of us—even church members.”

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Provide your students with paper and pencils. Ask them to write this list of phrases along one side of their paper: gaining wealth, gaining power, relationship with God, good relationships, important things, enjoyable things, pleasant experiences, a meaningful life in Christ.

Then instruct them to draw a small circle in the middle of the rest of their paper. Then a larger circle outside of that, forming the hub and the circumference of a wheel. Have them draw six lines as spokes between the two circles. Then ask them to label each part of their wheel with one of the phrases on their list.

Consider This: What are the implications of some of the arrangements we could make on this wheel? What constitutes the only safe hub? Where do all the lines converge? What is the balanced circumference that affects the “ride” of life?

Author and pastor Gary Preston, in a series of articles on Ecclesiastes published in the *Discipleship Journal* of September/October 1983, states, “God’s gifts are spokes in the wheel of life. They fit beautifully as spokes, but they were never meant to be the hub of the wheel. No, at the hub of the wheel—the center of life—these gifts become powerful distractions, keeping us from the true center of life. And what is the true center of life? ‘Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man’ (Eccles. 11:13).”

Again, Gary Preston states, “In your moments of honest reflection and peaceful solitude, what do you find yourself thinking about? The thoughts that fill your mind at such moments reveal the center of your universe. When you evaluate those thoughts and that center, would you say those things in life are really worth getting up for on Monday morning?”—“The

CONTINUED 

Naked in the Dust

However much Ecclesiastes has challenged Bible students over the centuries, if there is one message that comes through, perhaps it could be found in Ecclesiastes 5:15. He’s talking about some of the foibles and challenges of wealth, such as gaining money only to lose it all before it can be passed on to the next generation (*Eccles. 5:14*).

Ecclesiastes 5:15 in the original Hebrew reads like this: “As he came forth from his mother’s womb, naked he will go again as he came, and he will not carry in his hand anything of his work when he does go.”

The point is obvious. The rich die along with the rest of us, and in death all their money becomes meaningless. Yet, the message is bigger than that. Solomon’s whole point in the book is that, Hey, look at your life—what are you living for? What matters in an existence that’s filled with *hebel*? What, then, are the important things that we should be focusing on?

Read Matthew 16:24-26. What is Jesus saying to us in these few verses?

What shall someone give for his or her own soul? Money, fame, power, passion, even love? While these things can have their place, and are even gifts from God (*Eccles. 5:18*), they also can be the devil’s tool to ensnare our souls. Whatever we have in this life, it’s only as temporary and transient as we are. When we die, that’s it, at least as far as we are concerned here. The next thing we know is eternity: either “the kingdom prepared for [us] from the foundation of the world” (*Matt. 25:34*) or “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (*Luke 13:28*) and everlasting destruction (*2 Thess. 1:9*). What earthly things, as temporal and fleeting as we are, will be worth it when “ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out” (*Luke 13:28*)?

What are the cords that Satan uses to bind you to this world? What things do you find very tempting, hard to resist? What Bible promises can you claim in order to keep your soul from sin, from despair, and from giving up on yourself?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Great Spoiler,” *Discipleship Journal*, Sept./Oct. 1983.

It would be possible to take this exercise a step further and draw in other spokes and write in some of the negative things talked about by the preacher in Ecclesiastes.

■ *How does having the correct hub of the wheel also make it possible to have a meaningful life in spite of negative experiences? What might happen to the overall balance if one of the good things was the center of our life, rather than a relationship with God?*

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

On the other side of their paper, ask your students to draw another circle in the center with a larger circle for the rim. Mark the hub *God* and the circumference *Meaningful Life in Christ*. They should then add spokes and write on their spokes all the people, places, things, and ideas that come to the forefront of their minds as they contemplate the coming week.

Ask your students to share with a partner what might change in the coming week when they consider making sure that their relationship with God is the hub of their wheel.

Consider This: What can the church community do to be of service to those with unbalanced lives within the church? within the family? within society? What church resources actively support those who are attempting to keep focused on Christ throughout the week?

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: Go back over Ecclesiastes 5 and read it again a few times, focusing on the parts of the chapter that we didn't get to discuss this week.

In the context of the rich man in Luke 12:13-21, Ellen White wrote: "The situation of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the suffering, the afflicted, was brought to this rich man's attention. . . . This man's aims were no higher than those of the beasts that perish. He lived as if there were no God, no heaven, no future life; as if everything he possessed were his own, and he owed nothing to God or man."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 256–258.

"In giving ourselves to God, we must necessarily give up all that would separate us from Him. Hence the Saviour says, 'Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.' Luke 14:33. Whatever shall draw away the heart from God must be given up. Mammon is the idol of many. The love of money, the desire for wealth, is the golden chain that binds them to Satan. Reputation and worldly honor are worshiped by another class. The life of selfish ease and freedom from responsibility is the idol of others. But these slavish bands must be broken. We cannot be half the Lord's and half the world's. We are not God's children unless we are such entirely."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 44.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In your own society, what ways are the poor oppressed by the rich? In what ways can we, as a church, help the poor in those situations?
- 2 In what ways might some of you, even as Christians, be oppressing the poor?
- 3 Solomon spends a lot of time talking about wealth because money, and the pursuit of money, remains one of the great challenges for Christians. How can we profess to be "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (*Heb. 11:13*), while hoarding up treasure here? At the same time, we have to live, we have to pay the bills, we have to feed ourselves, and this all takes money. How much is enough—or, indeed, is there ever enough? As a class, discuss the challenges we face with this difficult subject.