

Everything is Hevel!

Most recently we were in the book of Proverbs which is part of "Wisdom Literature" written and collected by Solomon - intended to **provide advice and guidance for living a Godly life that will be fruitful**. We are now in the book of Ecclesiastes, which most people believe was **also authored by Solomon** - at least in part; and this book continues the "Wisdom Literature" theme, but **attempts to make one overarching point**.

To understand the context for the point being made in chapter 5, we really need to go back to the start and understand what this book is all about. It appears to be (at first glance) the teenage, moody, angst-filled, emo-version of Solomon saying, "Ugh, why bother! Life is meaningless and stupid!" In fact, here are some highlights of chapter 1:

"Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!" v. 2
History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. v. 9

The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow. v. 18

"That's all we have for today. I probably should thank you for being here, but what is the point? Go eat your meaningless lunch that really won't add a day to your life and return to your pointless existence and have a blessed week, whatever that means."

But upon deeper inspection and closer reading, there is something else going on here. In verse 2 when Solomon says, "Everything is meaningless," the translation doesn't quite capture the intended meaning of the word. The original Hebrew word is **Hevel**. Which can and does mean meaningless. But it also can mean **worthless, or without substance**. But the more exact translation is "vapor" or "breath" that we breathe out on a cold winter's day. Perhaps the best example I can give to help you understand this word is imagine a thick cloud of smoke at ground level. **So thick that it looks solid**. It blocks the light and you can't see through it. But if you step forward and try to grab the smoke, there is nothing to grab. You can't pull it or push it. You can't hold it. You can't put it in your pocket for later. **Smoke appears to be something, but is actually nothing (in a sense). It is without substance. It is worthless, meaningless... Hevel.**

The **Bible Project** has a really good Video about the book of Ecclesiastes that I would recommend you check out.

So, Solomon is using this word "Hevel" to describe **Everything!** All of life is Hevel. **All of existence is without substance**, just a façade. **We are born**

naked with nothing, and no matter what we do, we will die naked with nothing. There is no point. Our lives are Hevel. And Solomon goes on to list sub-point after sub-point that proves his main statement. He says:

1. **Pleasure** is Hevel - because you die anyway.
2. Being **wise or foolish** is Hevel - because they both die anyway.
3. **Your Work** is Hevel - because you die anyway.

And on and on and on...

And then we get to chapter 5. And chapter 5 is **very similar to the other chapters** in the book. So, let's read through Ecclesiastes 5:8-17 and hear what he has to say about **wealth and possessions**.

⁸ Don't be surprised if you see a poor person being oppressed by the powerful and if justice is being miscarried throughout the land. For every official is under orders from higher up, and matters of justice get lost in red tape and bureaucracy. ⁹ Even the king milks the land for his own profit!

¹⁰ Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! ¹¹ The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!

¹² People who work hard sleep well, whether they eat little or much. But the rich seldom get a good night's sleep.

¹³ There is another serious problem I have seen under the sun. Hoarding riches harms the saver. ¹⁴ Money is put into risky investments that turn sour, and everything is lost. In the end, there is nothing left to pass on to one's children. ¹⁵ We all come to the end of our lives as naked and empty-handed as on the day we were born. We can't take our riches with us.

¹⁶ And this, too, is a very serious problem. People leave this world no better off than when they came. All their hard work is for nothing—like working for the wind. ¹⁷ Throughout their lives, they live under a cloud—frustrated, discouraged, and angry. Ecclesiastes 5:8-17

So, if we stop here, and don't understand the point of this book as a whole - this is incredibly depressing. And honestly, sounds a lot like the logic that many **non-believers use to justify** their actions and life choices. It's a very convincing argument to say - **Just do what you want, because it doesn't matter anyway.** Very Friedrich Nietzsche.

And on the other hand, we can give SO much self-importance to the things we do and are involved in that we find ourselves running on a hamster wheel getting nowhere.

But that's not the end of the chapter, and it's not the point of the chapter and book. We will get to that later.

We believe that the New Testament "reveals" or helps to explain the Old Testament. When a learned person studies the work of another, they often expand upon it. Add to it. Explain the concepts more clearly and better. And Jesus did just that. Jesus knew God's Word better than anyone - for obvious reasons - He was the Word made flesh - and so when he offers us explanation or commentary on passages of the Old Testament we should listen to his teaching. In addition, the disciples and Paul knew the Old Testament very well and learned from Jesus and each other the meaning behind these passages. So, let's compare: When Solomon said: ⁸ Don't be surprised if you see a poor person being oppressed by the powerful and if justice is being miscarried throughout the land. For every official is under orders from higher up, and matters of justice get lost in red tape and bureaucracy. ⁹ Even the king milks the land for his own profit! Ecclesiastes 8-9 Which seems to be whining and complaining that oppression and corruption is just the way the world works and there is no escaping it.

But Jesus said: "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." Mark 12:17

And Paul said: Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. Romans 13:1

Which reminds us that the rulers of this earth are under a higher authority - and so are we. They will be called to account by the God who holds them to a higher standard. We do not need to be depressed about the oppression and corruption, because we belong to another kingdom.

When Solomon said: ¹⁰ Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! ¹¹ The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!

¹⁵ We all come to the end of our lives as naked and empty-handed as on the day we were born. We can't take our riches with us. Ecclesiastes 10-11, 15

Solomon seems to be saying that gaining wealth is pointless because you will never have enough to be happy - so why bother!

But Jesus said: ¹⁹ "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. Matthew 6:19-21, 24

So, again, Solomon seems to be a whining, moody, teenager complaining about everything. A very strange juxtaposition from the wise king that we know from Proverbs. And Jesus reminds us that our purpose in life is not to store up treasures on earth. It isn't to accumulate wealth. It is to serve God and love him. The reason why it appears that they are disagreeing with each other is because Solomon has been setting us up. Jesus and Solomon are saying the same things. We just haven't gotten to the point that Solomon is making yet. He has been building us up for the hammer to drop. Here is how Ecclesiastes chapter 5 ends:

¹⁸ Even so, I have noticed one thing, at least, that is good. It is good for people to eat, drink, and enjoy their work under the sun during the short life God has given them, and to accept their lot in life. ¹⁹ And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life—this is indeed a gift from God. ²⁰ God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past. Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 I have come to the conclusion that I can brood over the past. That's the over-thinker in me. Focusing on the "Hevel" creates anxious energy. We wrap our identities and self-worth up in these things that don't really matter in the grand scheme of things. It isn't about us being significant, and it isn't about what we can achieve. It is about accepting what we have been given and being thankful. It is about serving and working for God.

Why do Christians, with very little in other parts of the world, seem so happy? Are they naïve and don't know what they are missing when they seem happier than people like us? Paul said that he had learned to be content in all circumstances. Why? Because his purpose was not about all of that, it was about taking Jesus to the world.

And Jesus agrees...²⁵ "That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? ²⁷ Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

²⁸ "And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, ²⁹ yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. ³⁰ And if God cares so wonderfully for

wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

³¹ "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' ³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. ³³ **Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.**

³⁴ "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. Matthew 6:25-34

So, what does all of this mean?

When Solomon is saying that everything is meaningless. Everything is without substance. Everything is Hevel - vapor. **He is addressing the things of "this world." The pursuits and desires of man attempting to satisfy himself.**

Attempting to serve himself. Making himself king. Making himself God. Solomon is pointing out that whatever we do in life, we should do to honor God. **It isn't about us.** This isn't the story of Bill, starring Bill, with Jesus as a supporting role. This is the story of Jesus, starring Jesus, and I get to be part of it!

The book of Ecclesiastes finishes with these lines: **Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. ¹⁴ God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.**

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Define Fear from **last week**...First we must understand that "fearing God" or "the fear of the Lord" is **not the same as terror.** This is the fear based upon some evidence that **something bad is going to happen that will lead to suffering.**

⁷ Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. 1:7

What it means to "fear God" can be best understood with three words. **Respect, submission, and taking the posture of a learner.**

I read this quote last week when discussing this topic. **"Fear is knowing what to respect, knowing how to place oneself in a learning posture."** Pg 62 It's God who we respect, knowing that he is a **consuming fire** that burns, but doesn't destroy, but rather refines. **This can only happen if we place ourselves in a submissive posture that says, "You teach, I'll learn."**

The point is... When everything around us fades away, all of the work that we have done, the wealth that we have accumulated, our very lives... God will remain. And if we abide in Him - remain in Him - we will endure with Him. And this is exactly what God wants. He wants you and I to be part of his family forever. **He wants to be with you forever.** And honestly, **he is looking forward to**

the day when all of this broken, destructive mess we call a world, fades away so that he can create a new home for us with Him for eternity. **And this new home will be perfect - just the way he intended it from the start. And nothing there will be Hevel.**

So how should we respond to this? What do we need to do to put these lessons into practice?

Steps of Obedience:

Well, the first thing we need to do is **Understand our role as stewards and ambassadors** on this earth. **We are not here living for ourselves.** We have a job, a role to fill, **a purpose that God created us for.**

It all belongs to Him and it's all about Him. He has perhaps **given you possessions, children, or relationships** to take care of well on his behalf. We need to **treat these things as belonging to God** in the first place. And our role is to serve him well with them.

When we forget our purpose and why God created us and begin to think that this life is MINE, and is all about me... we are focusing on the Hevel. We are trying to **grasp smoke.** That's not the point. It's not why we're here. We need to **serve others.** We need to **lead others to Jesus.** We need to **be in community with each other** and reach out to those that aren't yet in God's family and invite them to be part of it.

There are SO MANY people out there that are desperately grasping at smoke. Working with all their energy to get more and more of it - and are **constantly depressed, anxious, disappointed, and angry** about their progress. **Well, NO WONDER!! It's all Hevel! That isn't why we were created.** That isn't our purpose in life. **And understanding our role on this earth is the first step to experiencing true joy and purpose in life.**

I knew a family who, years ago in another church, would have told you that they were a part of our congregation. When their son got to be old enough to play soccer, they introduced the game to him. **He took to it** and demonstrated some potential. It wasn't much time before he was going to **clinics** and trying out for some of the **elite teams.** This is when **things got really busy.** They were **traveling** around the state going to tournaments. This really picked up speed in Middle School. Soccer was this kids' life. Next, traveling around the state leads to traveling around the Midwest, and possibly even further. **The parents' friends were probably those other soccer parents** who traveled around the country with them.

What happened was not only did this become his life, but it became his family's life. They traveled for soccer **every weekend** during warm months and

many of the winter months. This was their family activity. They were not ever at **Sunday morning worship or any other relationship building time**. They would say, "That's my church" but it really wasn't. Anyone who was **new didn't even know them**. They didn't grow from the body of Christ, nor did they add anything to the **Body of Christ**. For a while, I had the dad as a volunteer for the youth ministry, but that died because **youth ministry is about relationships**, and he wasn't there to build those relationships that can transform a kid's life from that very urban neighborhood.

I'm not dunking on these parents. This happens gradually. I know that this kid had some real struggles in his very young years. Soccer, physical activity, team sports, are amazing learning and developmental. They found something that he liked and was good at. That is a really good thing. His self-esteem could be boosted by finding something that he's good at and could even some day provide a scholarship. The parents' motivations were good. They didn't set out to isolate their son from the body of Christ. Those are good things.

But this good thing had become hevel. When they grasped it, there was nothing there. Here's what I mean. After all that time, the complete separation from faith development in the body of Christ, the loss of that for the parents, thousands of dollars invested in this, they had very little to show for it. Upon entering a large suburban high school the son didn't even make the high school soccer team. Now what was supposed to build self-esteem and help with development, teach teamwork and hard work taught just the opposite. The hurts of the early years caused real behavior problems and the son was left with nothing. Actually, left with less than nothing.

Could that soccer have been transformed into something that wasn't hevel? Yes, again sports, travel teams etc aren't inherently bad. First, they had to go into it not grasping for something that it could not offer, like meaning, calling, the path that God can turn into life that is full. Soccer cannot do that. But God can do that for someone who enters something like soccer, or music, or art, or streaming, politics...with the fear of God. If a person enters this with more respect for God and less for what kicking a ball can do for their kid. If a person enters with respect that causes them to submit to God, taking the posture of a learning.

If this family had first set some boundaries for their son's involvement that was based upon their allegiance to Jesus. If they had approached spiritual development with the kind of commitment and effort as they did with dribbling, shooting and passing. If they had gotten him in a midweek group with our youth ministry or something like Young Life or YFC. If dad had come to

someone further in their life with God and asked that man to help him disciple his son. If they had connected with the church on how to extend Jesus into these weekends when kids and parents weren't able to get to a traditional worship service. If they had said, "God you have us here, use us to make your kingdom visible to these people who are grasping at vapors, trying to find meaning and help us help other parents learn how to follow Jesus."

Hevel doesn't mean it's bad, but rather it becomes an idol. When I respect and position myself submissively as a learner under anything other than God, it's hevel. It's an idol which, like hevel, is meaningless, fake, and counterfeit. Stuff is hevel if it isn't your context for making the kingdom present and making disciples.

Once we understand our role more clearly, then we are ready for our second step of obedience. Which is... to **Acknowledge your personal hevel and let Jesus transform it.**

All of us get busy doing "stuff." Some of that stuff might have good motives, and some might not... but much of it is likely Hevel. When all these things that we do become offerings of worship to God - that's when it becomes non-hevel. That's when it becomes worthy and full of substance. The context we are in was not an accident. It is intentional. We have been placed in these contexts to serve God and when we aren't - that's when it becomes hevel.

What fills your time? What do you focus your energy on? Both physical and mental? Is it your career? Your kids sporting events? Your hobbies? Time with friends? Going out to do some activity? (other examples - Cultivate, Volunteering, Taking care of your yard, etc)

How can you invite Jesus into those contexts? How can you allow him to transform them into ministry opportunities? Who else is there with you? How can you honor the planning, gifts, abilities and time God has granted you in that context and serve Him there?

Last week during the sermon you were implored to choose wisdom over folly. I beg you - choose to take one conscious step toward fulfilling your God-given role on this earth. When you do, you will find it to be rich, meaningful, gratifying, and joy-filled. Anything but Hevel.

There are people in this room that came in today exhausted from just living life the way you're living it. That's not what Jesus has for you. This is what Jesus has for you: The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. John 10:10

The full life Jesus promised is the opposite of hevel!