

Serving the Right Master Rightly

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- [0 : 0 0] I had a recurring nightmare last night, which I have recurring, and that is I go to church and I'm enjoying myself, and then someone says, and Vida is going to preach now, and I'm not prepared at all.
- But that is not today, so that's good. The passage there is there, and there's a handout, which will tell you where we're going as well. As we begin today, I want to tell you about a guy I know called Freddie.
- Freddie is a Christian. He's married with children. He's about my age. He works in finance in a big office in the city. Freddie likes sport and the outdoors.
- He enjoys a good movie. But Freddie will tell you that his real hobby is investing his money. He's got money in rental properties and the share market, and recently he's starting to put his cash in that cryptocurrency, whatever that is.
- When he's not working, Freddie is on his phone checking the markets, looking for new opportunities, and that's pretty much like everyone else in his office.
- [1 : 0 6] In fact, that's pretty much all anyone in his office talks about. Because Freddie is a Christian, he goes to church as well. He goes about once a month. His church is a pretty standard Anglican setup, and he sometimes turns up twice a month just to, you know, when he's in trouble and he needs to pray and ask God's help for something, which for Freddie is usually something to do with his money.
- Being his church, being a nice, you know, classic churchy-looking building, whenever he turns up, there's always a baptism of some random family off the street. Freddie doesn't mind, though, because he'll never see that family again.
- He was joking to me the other day about how holy he was, because one time he went to church and he arrived five minutes early to pray. You see, he's got a big promotion at work, and Freddie reckons that he's struck up a deal with God.
- If God gives him this promotion, Freddie will increase his financial giving, you know, just to cut God in with a slice of the action. But last week, when he went to church, instead of the regular minister, there was a guest preacher, and the preacher spoke on this passage that we're looking at today, which is quite a coincidence.
- And the preacher read out verse one, This verse talks about being on guard when it comes to approaching God, not being foolish with him, you know, sacrificing, promising God things on Sunday, and then serving yourself Monday to Friday.
- [2 : 5 6] Caution with God is the idea. The preacher spoke about listening rather than speaking. He read out verse two, Do not be quick with your mouth.
- Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven, and you are on earth. So let your words be few. And if that is true, who do you think should be doing the talking and who should be doing the listening?
- Maybe from heaven, God already knows about Freddie's promotion. Maybe from heaven, God already sees what would actually be good for Freddie and what wouldn't.

Maybe Freddie should have practiced some caution with God instead of trying to bargain for his favor. And you can hear that caution in verse four to six.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.

[3 : 59] Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. Instead of making empty promises to God, it would have been better for Freddie to stay quiet, to not turn up to church early that day.

Verse six says that promising God something and not delivering would even be a sin. And God will hold us to our word.

He will come and collect. That's what verse six, the temple messenger is. Don't protest the temple messenger. My vow was a mistake. I think back in those days, temple messengers were sent by the priests to come and collect when the people made all these big vows and offerings to God.

We called it caution, didn't we? But the end of verse seven says, therefore, fear God. Fear should have been Freddie's approach to God.

Less talking and more listening because God is in heaven and Freddie is down here on earth. And it's not the other way around. And that idea recalibrates our approach to God, our attitude to him.

[5 : 07] It's a stark reminder of the right order of the universe. Less talking and more listening. It doesn't mean we shouldn't pray. When we're in trouble, we should pray.

God wants to hear from us. He is our father. Remember? But a relationship that is just on our terms flips the order of the universe on its heads.

You could imagine God saying to Freddie, I've heard all your words about promotion, but did you listen to me when I spoke about loving your wife? What about some repentance?

Where are you at with that? What about some heartfelt confession? Wisdom, says the preacher, would be more listening and less speaking.

And in this church, I think that explains why we focus on Bible reading and Bible teaching. That's where God speaks and we practice our listening.

[6 : 08] The prayers afterwards, that's our chance to talk back. And speaking of churches, like Freddie's church, we love a good baptism here, especially when it's the child or the grandchild of one of the members of the congregation.

That is a great celebration. But if it's a random person off the street, which it quite often is, we want to run them through, I was going to say make them jump through some hoops, which sounds bad, but it's kind of true.

We want to run them through the promises and say, will you hold to these promises so that they know what they're saying on the day? Because the priest will say to the God parents, do you turn to Christ?

Do you repent of your sins? Caution and fear of God means not mocking him with empty promises. A young couple in my small group is getting married in September and I'm doing a marriage prep course with them.

And it's been really great to look through the seriousness of the promises. That way they can make their vows cautiously in the fear of God when they stand before him on that special day in a couple of months time.

[7 : 27] Here are those promises for married people. I, husband, in the presence of God, take you, somebody, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, so long as we both shall live.

All this I vow and promise. And I wonder how couples are going at keeping their word, for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

Every week at this church, just for the record, I personally, I see many, many examples every week of husbands and wives holding fast, coming good on those promises that they made, sometimes decades ago.

Actually, even for anyone, not just a married person, but for anyone who's ever been a bystander at a wedding, there was a promise for us too on that day. See if you recognize this.

Families and friends, you are witnesses to these vows. Will you do everything in your power to uphold husband and wife in their marriage? And we all said, we will.

[8 : 54] I hope you said that. And so, for anyone, not just married, for anyone, how are you going at helping husbands and wives love and cherish one another?

Praying for them would be a good start. maybe gently encouraging husbands and wives not to gossip about the other when they're with you.

At the 10.30 service, which I look after, we have lots of people who offer mums and dads babysitting so they can have a date night together, which is great.

We all promise before God to help married people in their vows, to keep their promises. How are we going? Verse 4, When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it.

He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. And we might be feeling a bit bashed up by these verses.

[9 : 58] A passage on keeping promises is always going to be rough when we apply them to marriages. We've all failed, haven't we? Big ways and small.

Some ways much more serious as the report on domestic violence came out a few weeks ago. There's no need for pretenses in this church.

God is in heaven, remember? He sees us down here on earth. He's aware of how much we've broken our words to one another. And so here is good news for the bashed up Christian.

God is gracious and merciful. In Jesus, we have forgiveness. Jesus' blood is greater than all the ways that we have failed to love and cherish one another.

And that is the gospel for failures like us. And as our friend Freddie sat and listened to the preacher that day, he thought about how casually he had approached God in the past.

[11 : 03] He thought about how quick and glib he was to promise and sacrifice and try and bargain for God's favor. If God is in heaven and Freddie's on earth, perhaps serving God first, promotion second, was the right order and the way Freddie should have corrected his life.

And immediately his mind went to all of his strivings for money and wealth and fortune. And that is where the preacher goes in our next point.

Look at verse 8. 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.

Here is the poor person and no matter what, they just can't get a leg up because there's an official over them. That official has a mate who eyes them off, that is, looks out for them and these two officials line their pockets at the expense of poor person.

The point is that human justice will always be trumped by human greed. And as shocking as that is, verse 8 says, do not be surprised.

[12 : 16] This is life outside the garden. This is a fallen world. And maybe with the right moral correction, maybe with the right social pressures and legal protections, we can keep human greed at bay.

But verse 10 says, whoever loves money never has enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. And it's not that poor old Freddie has oppressed anyone, but the seed of the same greed is there in his strivings for money and investment.

It's not that money is the problem, but that chasing it is never fully satisfied. The preacher says, this too is meaningless.

That is, futile. A vanity of vanities. Vapor. It's like the steam from your cup of coffee in the morning. And one of the reasons for this is that more money equals more problems.

Verse 11. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. More money, more bills to pay. My brother, he, my younger brother, he works in sales and he works really hard to hit his monthly targets every month.

[13 : 32] But when he does, he complains because the bigger the sales bonus, the bigger the bite the tax man takes. He complained to me the other day. He did really well and he complained that why does he bother working so hard doing such ridiculous hours only to be left with what he was left with in his paycheck?

As goods increase, so do those who consume them. Verse 11 says, what benefit our possessions to the owner except to feast their eyes on them?

That means it is better just to look at wealth from a distance rather than the stress of trying to acquire it. Verse 12, at least the poor laborer gets to sleep sweetly at night.

But as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. What value would you put on could sleep? These verses are about the futility of chasing money and just for a laugh, the preacher arranges these verses in a pyramid scheme.

and I'm not even joking. Tim, can you, can I please have a slide? That's how the verses are arranged. I was going to say a Ponzi scheme but we'll say a pyramid scheme.

[14 : 48] The idea is that verse 8 to 12 on the left are mirrored by verse chapter 6, 7 to 9 on the other side and similar, similar steps up the pyramid.

So if you turn the page and look at chapter 6, verse 7 on the back, there are similar ideas to what we've seen that appetite for wealth is never satisfied.

Verse 8, what advantage have the wise over fools? None is the answer. Verse 9, better to see wealth from a distance rather than an insatiable appetite for greed that will never be sated.

And thanks, Tim. And the next step on the pyramid is for people who think they can chase money safely. Verse 13, turn back, sorry for the flicking, turn back to chapter 5 verse 13.

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun, wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners or wealth lost through some misfortune so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit.

[15 : 57] The idea here is that when chasing money you won't get to hold on to it. These verses talk about harm and misfortune that follows the cash and we see that don't we?

Every time there's a recession or a stock market crash, when there's the effects of coronavirus on small business or a redundancy in your family, something ungoverned by us always swallows up money.

I have a close family friend who is much older than me and they just paid off the family home. Great. But then maybe three weeks later they were bored now that they've paid off the home and they saw a business deal and they told me they were quite money hungry about it and they remortgaged the house again and put it in the business deal.

Of course the business went bad and now the bank has taken the family home and verse 14 there is nothing left for their children to inherit. In verse 15 the preacher says everyone comes naked from their mother's womb and as everyone comes so they depart.

They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. Isn't that a famous saying you can't take it with you? You can't hold on to it either says the preacher of Ecclesiastes and on the opposite side of the pyramid over the page are similar ideas.

[17 : 22] 6 verse 1 God gives people wealth possessions and honour so that they lack nothing their heart desire but he doesn't let them enjoy them.

Actually it's a stranger who ends up enjoying their cash. So even if you invest your money wisely if you're sensible with cash you can't control whether your son or daughter marries an idiot.

It's funny because it's true. And they squander away your wealth. You can't hold on to it. You can't enjoy it. Something ungoverned by you will swallow it up.

6 verse 3 The unborn baby has more rest than Freddie. Freddie who lies at wake thinking about his promotion thinking about what the markets will do and where to find the next opportunity.

Meaningless, meaningless, a chasing after the wind, trying to hold steam from the cup of coffee. Oh, vanity of vanities, says the preacher to Ecclesiastes, a grievous evil.

[18 : 35] But that is life outside the garden in a fallen and broken and sinful world. And one solution with your money will be to do what Jesus said in our New Testament reading.

to store up your treasure in heaven. At least there, moth and rust and thief won't destroy and swallow it up. If you're looking for an investment, invest your treasure in heaven.

You know it is safe. The other solution is the top of the pyramid. It's the conclusion of the matter. Look at verse 18.

5 verse 18. 5 verse 18. This is the other solution. This is what I observed to be good.

That it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them. For this is their lot.

[19 : 41] The right approach for Freddie is to look for simple satisfactions in life. You've got a few days in life. You can either use them to chase money which is an exercise in futility or you can find contentment in simple things.

The example here is food and drink. The next time you're at a supermarket, this is the application, the next time you're at a supermarket, wander down the frozen food section and buy some ice cream.

Get some ice cream. The point is you will find more satisfaction in a really good ice cream. You'll find more satisfaction in that ice cream than Freddie will in his overall chasing of that promotion.

Restaurants are open, I think. They're open, right? If you can afford it, get dressed up and go out for dinner. Call up a friend who you haven't seen in a while and go for a nice meal.

life outside the garden is broken. We're only entitled to misery. If God gives you the chance to get dressed up and go for a meal with friends, that is a gift.

[20 : 58] That is a present to you from a loving father who is so gracious and gives us things that we're not entitled to and we don't deserve.

Verse 19, moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil.

This is a gift of God and this is the main event. A few moments ago, I used the word contentment. Verse 19 calls it accepting their lot and being happy.

If you have wealth and possessions from God, which is basically all of us in the room, that is a gift. Great. But even more than that, if you can enjoy that and be content with what God has given, that is a gift too.

Verse 20, they seldom reflect on the days of their life. You'll never have to worry about the problems of life in the garden, well most of them, because God keeps you occupied with a gladness of heart.

[22 : 06] Gladness because of what he's given you. You see, one of the futilities of chasing money is that you'll never be satisfied. Freddie is effectively saying that God didn't give him enough of a gift.

Freddie is like that wicked, horrible child at his own birthday party who's stamping his feet that mum and dad didn't give him a big enough present, even though right behind him is a room full of shiny gifts.

All the way through this passage, the pursuit of wealth is spoken of like an appetite, like a hunger. When we look at our possessions, do we think God has given us a three-course meal or do we think God has starved us and we're hungry, we've got an appetite for more?

You see, the test for whether we are Freddie's or not with our money is contentment and satisfaction. You see, Freddie thinks that money is out of reach but really it's satisfaction that he's going for.

No matter how much money he's got, he'll never be satisfied. It was contentment that was out of reach for Freddie. That is the test of Freddie's. He looked at all his money and possessions and thought God was starving him.

[23 : 27] He was too greedy to realise God had given him in life a three-course banquet every day. Freddie listened to the voices of his colleagues about wealth and investment rather than how God said to handle it.

He listened to the voices of his affluent neighbourhood. He listened to the voices of lifestyle magazines and lifestyle TV shows. They all sell discontentment with what God has given us.

In our New Testament reading, Jesus says, no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you'll be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. It's not that money is bad. Investing money to make more money is not a sin. But we become Freddie when we serve money's appetite.

When we start to accuse God of starving us, when quite clearly he's given us a three-course meal, a banquet. By worldly standards, we're all rich.

[24 : 42] Possibly even by Melbourne standards. This is a fallen world. We're not entitled to anything. Any good thing we've got, particularly money and possessions, that is a gift from our Father.

The ability to enjoy it, that is a gift as well. Let's pray that we would take that gift from God. Father God, we thank you for all the money and possessions that you have given us.

Thank you for affluence and safety and security in this beautiful country. Father, please help us listen to you.

Please would we find contentment and enjoyment in what we've got. Please would we realise all you've given us. Please guard us from being Freddy's.

Guard us from accusing you of starving us when clearly you have given us so much. Thank you even though we're not entitled to anything outside the garden, for all we have.

[25 : 56] We thank you for Jesus more than anything. In his name. Amen.