

Can money buy happiness?

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[0 : 0 0] The Australian comedian Barry Humphreys, the creator of Dame Edna Everidge, called his autobiography More Please. In it he says, I always wanted more. I never had enough milk or money or socks or sex or holidays or first editions or solitude or gramophone records or free meals or real friends or guiltless pleasure or neckties or applause or unquestioning love or persimmons.

He goes on, of course I have had more than my fair share of most of these commodities but it always left me with a vague feeling of unfulfillment. Where was the rest?

Well, Barry Humphreys speaks for many who, despite their success, never seem to be satisfied. Some think that they will find satisfaction through their wealth.

But listen to this poem called What Money Can Buy. What money can buy? A bed but not sleep. A computer but not a brain. Food but not appetite.

Finery but not beauty. A house but not a home. Medicine but not health. Luxuries but not culture. Amusements but not happiness. Acquaintance but not friendship.

[1 : 1 4] Obedience but not faithfulness. Sex but not love. So whatever money can buy, it can't satisfy our deepest longings in life. And that's exactly what we see today in our Bible reading from Ecclesiastes.

And so in Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and chapter 6, we get another reality check about the way life is. So as the teacher searches for meaning in life, he wants to show us that money can't buy you happiness.

So wealth, possessions, success, the good life may be things we strive for but they'll never satisfy. And so whether you call yourself a Christian or not, we see that without God, everything we live for will fail to meet our deepest needs and satisfy our deepest longings.

Because we're reminded here that everything is a gift from God. Life is a gift. Wealth is a gift. But so is the ability to enjoy all that we have. And so unless we see life and everything else as a gift from God, our lives will never make sense.

And so the teacher is saying that you can have wealth without satisfaction, success without enjoyment, and life without meaning. And those are our three points today.

[2 : 3 2] Wealth without satisfaction, chapter 5, verse 8 to 20. Success without enjoyment, chapter 6, verse 1 to 6. And life without meaning, chapter 6, verse 7 to 12.

So let's look first of all at wealth without satisfaction. The teacher exposes the bankruptcy of wealth to satisfy. And we should know that wealth doesn't guarantee happiness.

And yet we're still deluded into thinking that the more we have, then the happier we'll be. And so the teacher has got some cold, hard truths about wealth for us.

I'll highlight them and then we'll look at each briefly in turn. Five things about wealth. Wealth is oppressive. Wealth is unsatisfying. Wealth is unreliable. Wealth is temporary.

And wealth is God's gift. So first, wealth is oppressive. Verse 8 and 9. Whenever money is involved, there's always oppression and injustice. Listen.

[3 : 28] 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.

The increase from the land is taken by all. The king himself profits from the fields. It's a picture of economic corruption. And so he says, Don't be surprised if those at the bottom of the pile are oppressed by those above them.

Because that's just what happens in a fallen and broken world. The more money people have, then the more powerful they become. And that's why the gap between the rich and the poor gets wider all the time.

In any society, wealth is generally managed for the benefit of the rich rather than the poor. And so the teacher is right. Greed for more wealth breeds injustice and oppression in society.

Secondly, he says wealth is unsatisfying. Verse 10 to 12. He says money will never satisfy you. Listen. Whoever loves money never has enough.

[4 : 36] Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. So the more you love money, the more you strive for money.

And the more money you get, the more money you want. John D. Rockefeller was the world's richest man at one point and the first ever American billionaire.

And someone once asked him, how much money is enough? And Rockefeller replied, just a little bit more. Of course, money will set us up nicely, but it doesn't guarantee satisfaction.

And so we may dream of getting the new home, the new car, the foreign holiday, the designer clothes, the latest gadgets, whatever. But when we get them, they quickly disappoint us. And we want more.

A friend of mine used to work in wealth management. And his clients were some of the richest people in Scotland. He never told me who they were, although I would always ask him. But he said to me, everybody knows who they are because they've got such a high public profile.

[5 : 42] But he told me there wasn't one of his clients that he'd describe as being satisfied or happy. Exactly what the teacher is saying here. And so the teacher goes on.

As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them? So we can end up with a whole load of stuff that we can't even use.

The best thing we can do is to look at it. Keira Knightley, the actress, said about her love for shoes. She said, I have shoes I've never taken out of the box.

I even have shoes that don't fit. I look at them and go, oh, it doesn't matter that I can't wear them. They're so pretty. So in addition, the teacher says here that wealth doesn't even guarantee a good night's sleep.

Listen to what he says. The sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether they eat little or much. But as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. So contrast the man who lies awake worrying about his wealth with the labourer who works hard, yet owns less, but sleeps like a log.

[6 : 55] And then thirdly, he says wealth is unreliable. Wealth can do more harm than good. Listen. 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. So wealth can ruin your life. It can break up your marriage.

It can harm your children. And it can damage your health. And so it's wrong to assume that wealth gives us any kind of security. Then fourth, wealth is temporary.

It comes and goes. So he 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.

This too is a grievous evil. As everyone comes, so they depart. And what do they gain since they toil for the wind? All their days they eat in darkness with great frustration, affliction and anger.

[7 : 58] So we enter the world with nothing. And we leave with nothing. We didn't come down the birth canal. We're in Gucci and driving an Aston Martin Vantage.

And that's why everything we gather in life is never actually gain. Not long after Rockefeller's death, someone apparently said to his accountant, We know Rockefeller was a very wealthy man.

How much did he leave? And without a moment's hesitation, his accountant answered everything. And so why invest our lives accumulating wealth just to lose it when we die?

Jonathan Edwards, the American theologian, said this. If one worm be a little exalted above another by having more dust or a bigger dunghill, how much does he make of himself?

He's saying that we shouldn't think too highly of ourselves just because we've got more dust and a bigger dunghill than other people. Because that's not what life is about.

[9 : 02] And so no matter how much we gain in this life, we still get frustrated, sick, angry, and we die. And so what is the teacher saying here?

He's saying that riches are meaningless if we don't see them for what they are. So how should we see them? We should see them as a gift of God.

And that's the fifth thing. He says wealth is a gift from God in verse 18 to 20. The teacher wants to give us the right perspective on wealth by introducing God to the discussion.

And so we read, this is what I have 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.

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.

[10 : 05] They seldom reflect on the days of their life because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart. Now it's a stark contrast to what has gone before.

But he's saying that wealth and possessions are gifts from God to be enjoyed. And so it's only when we see them as such that we'll find satisfaction and enjoyment because we won't regard everything we have as being ultimate in life.

Here the teacher is shining light on the meaning of life by reminding us of God's gifts. And the reference to God's giving is repeated often in Ecclesiastes and it occurs three times in this section.

So we're told that life is a gift from God, wealth is a gift from God, and enjoying them both is also a gift of God.

Because having wealth and possessions is one thing, but having the ability to enjoy them is another. A bit like a bike and the ability to ride it. You can have a bike, but you'll never enjoy it if you can't ride it.

[11 : 12] And so unless we see everything we have as given by God, we will be perennially frustrated. God gives us so many great things.

Life, health, bodies, families, friends, money, work, power, and so on. They're from him, but they'll only be enjoyed when we see them as gifts and treat them in the right way.

Because God's good gifts can be used in the wrong way. And when they are, they'll fail to satisfy and seem meaningless. But when we see life and all that we have, whether a lot or a little, as a gift from God, then we'll soon discover contentment and satisfaction and joy in all that we have.

Because we're not looking to the gifts to bring fulfillment, we're looking instead to the giver. And so if we think we just need a few upgrades to enjoy a better life, whether it be possessions, job, house, car, partner, well, we will find some instant gratification, but it will wear off and we'll soon be dissatisfied again.

And so the question that we have got to ask ourselves is, do I enjoy what God has given me? If not, then accumulating more isn't going to help because our wealth might feed our stomach, but it can't satisfy our soul.

[12 : 43] So the first thing we see, wealth without satisfaction. Secondly, we see success without enjoyment. And we see this in chapter six, verse one to six. Just listen to the picture of success that's described here.

I have seen another evil under the sun and it weighs heavily on mankind. God gives some people wealth, possessions, and honor so that they lack nothing their hearts desire.

But God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil. Now that's success, isn't it?

Wealth, possessions, honor, everything our hearts desire. And then it's fleshed out further. A man may have a hundred children and live many years.

So in the Bible, prosperity was measured by having a big family and living a long life. These were signs of success and blessing. But we are being forced here to confront the reality that your life can be a success and yet you can still fail to enjoy it.

[13 : 52] But some people may be saying, life can't be that bad. I mean, just give me a taste of that kind of success and I'll be sure to enjoy myself.

And yet to add insult to injury, the teacher says that even with success, you can still have a miserable life only to be followed by a lonely death.

And so what is the point? Well, listen to what he says. A man may have a hundred children and live many years, yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

It comes without meaning. It departs in darkness and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man.

Even if he lives a thousand years twice over, but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place. So after telling us how to find enjoyment, the teacher now plunges us back into despair.

[15 : 05] Because if someone can't enjoy their life and their wealth, he says a stillborn child is better off than they are. And he's not making light of the tragedy of a stillborn child.

He's merely emphasizing the tragedy of a life without enjoyment. He's saying you would be better off not even having lived. Because even if you live for 2,000 years, but aren't able to enjoy God's good gifts, then it's meaningless.

Because if all end up going to the same place, then the stillborn child's journey is less painful because it's far shorter. Now the teacher's words here are shocking.

And yet we can't argue with his clear logic. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer, wrote War and Peace. He made this discovery for himself and he wrote about it in A Confession.

He was leading a very successful life with great fortune, fame and family. But he said in his book, my question, that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide, was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man.

[16 : 23] A question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was, what will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow?

What will come of my whole life? Differently expressed, the question is, why should I live? Why wish for anything or do anything? It can also be expressed thus, if there is any meaning, sorry, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

And then he also asked, how can we fail to see this? And how go on living? That is what is surprising. One can only live while one is intoxicated with life.

As soon as one is sober, it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud. That is precisely what it is. There is nothing either amusing or witty about it.

It is simply cruel and stupid. And so it was the lack of any objective lasting meaning that led Leo Tolstoy to God.

[17 : 31] And so the teacher of Ecclesiastes is brutally honest about the meaninglessness of life when you leave God out of it. And it's uncomfortable reading, but it's meant to be because we are warned not to waste our time striving for success, believing it will make us happy.

Success or lack of it will never be the defining factor that gives enjoyment in life. We are being told here that the differentiating factor is God himself.

And so the teacher highlights wealth without satisfaction, then success without enjoyment. And if you add those two together, what you get is life without meaning, which is our third point, life without meaning.

Chapter 6, verse 7 to 12. What we get here is a series of rhetorical questions as the teacher drills home the point of Ecclesiastes. That is, if you try and search for meaning in life without God, then everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

And so adopting that approach to life means we'll never be satisfied. Listen, everyone's toil is for their mouth, yet their appetite is never satisfied.

[18 : 48] And so you work to eat for strength to work in order to eat for strength to work some more. And he says it makes no difference if you're wise, foolish, rich or poor.

We read, what advantage have the wise over fools? What do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite.

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. And so whoever we are, our insatiable appetites in life will never be satisfied without God.

We will always feel we never have enough. This is expressed so well in the hit movie, The Greatest Showman. The opera singer Jenny Lind powerfully echoes the message of Ecclesiastes when she sings, It's never enough.

Don't worry, I'm not going to attempt to sing it for you, but it goes, All the shine of a thousand spotlights, All the stars we steal from the night sky Will never be enough, Never be enough.

[19 : 54] Towers of gold are still too little, These hands could hold the world, But it'll never be enough, Never be enough for me. Of course, the song's suggesting that what will be enough is the love of another human being.

But as the movie makes clear, even receiving human love proves insufficient to satisfy. And so the teacher's forcing us to see that even the very best of life will never satisfy if we ignore the God who made us.

And that's why he seems to refer to God when he says, Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known. No one can contend with someone who is stronger.

So God is the one who has named all things and knows humanity because God is in control and we are not. And so we can't alter the way that God has set everything up.

God is the one who calls the shots, not us. And we can't contend with God because he is stronger than us. And so we might protest about life, but we can't change it one little bit.

[21 : 08] God has made life what it is and he gives it meaning and purpose. And so whether we believe in God or not, that is just the way it is.

And so we shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking that we can find ultimate satisfaction, enjoyment and meaning without God. And so the teacher concludes here by challenging us with two questions, one about life and one about death.

The first question, For who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who knows?

The answer, God knows what is good for us in life. He gave us life as a gift. He gives us all good things and the ability to enjoy them.

Second question, Who can tell, who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? Who can tell? Who can tell what happens after we die?

[22 : 15] The answer, God can tell what happens after we die. Again, God gave us life as a gift. And so life and death will only make sense in relation to him because as our loving creator, he knows what's best for us.

And so if we experience wealth without satisfaction, success without enjoyment, or life without meaning, it's because we're cut off from the God we were created to be in relationship with.

And so the message of Christianity is that we, as human beings, have separated ourselves from God through our self-centeredness and sin. And that's why we have this gnawing sense of meaninglessness.

And yet, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God sent Jesus to us to suffer and die for our sin so that we need not be separated from God forever. And so when Jesus died on the cross, he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[23 : 30] Because Jesus took upon himself the penalty for our sin. He experienced the ultimate meaninglessness of life without God as he hung on the cross.

He took the punishment we deserve so that when we believe in him, we receive God's forgiveness. On the cross, Jesus was forsaken by God so we would never have to be.

And then Jesus rose from death so that we can have eternal life. And so it's only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we find satisfaction in life and hope in death.

And so we don't need to search for meaning in life. The meaning has come into the world as a person to find us.

Believing in Jesus will give you all you'll ever need in life and in death. Let's pray. Thank you, God, that we don't need to search for meaning in life because you have sent your son, Jesus Christ, to us.

[24 : 39] We are lost and helpless. We struggle to make sense of life and death and we seek satisfaction and purpose. But we thank you that we find our deepest needs met and our deepest longings satisfied in Jesus.

And so may we look no further in life than the one who lived, died, rose and one day will return. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.