

Homiletics Analysis: Ecclesiastes 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Ecclesiastes 5 moves through three distinct but interconnected movements. The first (vv. 1–7) addresses the posture of the worshiper before God — warning against reckless speech, hasty vows, and the multiplying of empty words in the presence of the Holy One. The second (vv. 8–9) offers a brief but sharp observation about the systemic nature of oppression and bureaucratic injustice — a reality under the sun that should not surprise but also should not be accepted with naive resignation. The third and longest movement (vv. 10–20) delivers the Preacher’s most extended meditation on wealth — its insatiability, its inability to satisfy, its vulnerability to loss, and finally, the surprising commendation of a simpler joy: receiving one’s labor, food, drink, and spouse as gifts from God and finding contentment in them rather than grasping endlessly for more. The chapter does not merely catalog life’s frustrations; it moves from the danger of approaching God carelessly to the danger of approaching wealth carelessly, and resolves in the gift of God-given contentment as the antidote to both.

This Text — Intent

God is using this chapter to confront two forms of the same underlying disease: the human tendency to treat sacred realities as instruments of self-advancement. In worship, this manifests as using God’s name and presence for social or spiritual impression management. In economics, it manifests as the insatiable pursuit of more. The Preacher’s intent — and behind the Preacher, God’s intent — is to arrest both forms of this grasping, expose their futility, and reorient the reader toward reverence before God and receptive enjoyment of what He has already given. The passage aims to produce a worshiper who is quiet before God and content before the world — not because these are ethical ideals but because they are the only rational responses to who God is and how creation actually works.

Subject Sentence: Fear God in worship and receive His gifts with open hands rather than grasping ones.

Primary Claim: God calls His people to a posture of reverent receptivity — quiet before Him in the sanctuary, content with what He gives in daily life — because grasping in either domain is vanity, and only what comes from His hand satisfies.

Interpretive Evaluation

The worship section (vv. 1–7): Wisdom literature versus mere ritual critique

Some readers flatten vv. 1–7 into a general ethical warning about insincerity — be genuine, don’t be hypocritical. This reading partially holds but falls short. The Preacher is not primarily criticizing insincerity; he is identifying a particular posture: the worshiper who comes to God’s house to *perform* rather than to *receive*. The asymmetry is stark — “God is in heaven and you are on earth, therefore let your words be few” (v. 2). The issue is not merely sincerity but smallness before the Holy One. A Wesleyan reading might emphasize this as a call to purity of intention in worship — authentic devotion versus formalism. That insight is worth acknowledging, but the Reformed reading is more precise: the text is not primarily calling for better interior states but for appropriate creaturely humility before divine sovereignty. The worshiper is to *listen* (v. 1), not merely to feel rightly. This is the fear of God, not merely the feeling of reverence.

The vow section within the worship movement

Some dispensational and Baptist readings focus sharply on v. 5 (“it is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay”) as a prudential guideline about literal religious vows. This is contextually accurate but narrower than the text warrants. The vow material is embedded within the broader warning about reckless speech before God — the specific danger of making promises to God one does not intend to keep, or cannot keep, because one approached God without sober reckoning. The Reformed reading sees this as an expression of covenantal seriousness: God holds His people to their words because He takes speech seriously. This is not about avoiding vows per se but about not treating God as a bargaining partner who will overlook careless commitments.

The wealth section (vv. 10–20): Contentment versus prosperity

This is the section most susceptible to mishandling. Prosperity-gospel readings effectively invert the passage: they take the commendation of enjoying what God gives (vv. 18–20) as a promise that God will give wealth to the faithful, missing entirely the Preacher’s relentless insistence in vv. 10–17 that wealth is vanity, does not satisfy, and is lost. This reading must be refuted directly — the text does not commend wealth; it commends *contentment with whatever God gives*, including modest provision. The gift is not the wealth itself but God’s enabling of the person to enjoy it (v. 19: “God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart”). A Wesleyan reading might use this section to encourage simplicity and generosity, which is a legitimate application trajectory — acknowledge this. The Reformed reading insists, however, that the resolution is not primarily ethical (simplify your life, give more away) but theological: the ability to enjoy is itself a gift of God, and no amount of striving produces it. The antidote to the insatiability of wealth is not willpower but God’s grace reorienting desire.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 6:4–9** — The *Shema* establishes the posture of total-person orientation toward God that underlies Ecclesiastes 5:1–7; Israel is to love God with heart, soul, and strength — the antithesis of divided, grasping, impression-managing worship.
- **Numbers 30:1–2 / Matthew 5:33–37** — The biblical thread on vows and speech before God: numbers grounds vow-keeping in covenantal seriousness; Jesus sharpens it to “let your yes be yes” — all speech before God carries the weight of covenant.
- **1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19** — Paul’s most extended New Testament treatment of the same terrain as Ecclesiastes 5:10–20: “godliness with contentment is great gain”; the love of money as the root of all kinds of evil; the rich instructed not to set their hopes on wealth but on God who richly provides for enjoyment — almost a New Testament commentary on the Preacher’s conclusion.
- **Philippians 4:11–13** — Paul’s testimony to *learned* contentment — “I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content” — grounds the Ecclesiastes 5 commendation in Christ; contentment is not native to fallen human beings but is learned, cultivated, and ultimately secured in Christ.
- **Luke 12:13–21** — The Parable of the Rich Fool: “the life of a man does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (v. 15) is the New Testament narrative rendering of Ecclesiastes 5:10–17; the man who hoards and does not reckon with God’s sovereignty loses everything precisely as the Preacher describes.

Aim: To confront both the worshiper and the worker in the reader — exposing grasping in both domains and reorienting them toward the reverent, receptive posture that alone corresponds to reality and produces genuine satisfaction.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:1	Guard your steps when entering God’s house; draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools	“Guard your steps” — deliberate, attentive approach; “sacrifice of fools” — religious activity without moral/covenantal seriousness

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:2	Do not be rash with your mouth or hasty in heart before God; God is in heaven, you on earth — let words be few	Creational asymmetry is the ground for verbal restraint; this is not general prudence but theological proportion
5:3	As a dream comes with many cares, a fool's voice with many words — proverbial analogy	Verbal excess signals inner disorder; the dreaming mind and the fool's mouth share the same rootlessness
5:4–5	When you vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; better not to vow than to vow and not pay	Direct covenantal instruction; God is not mocked by deferred or abandoned vows
5:6	Do not let your mouth lead your flesh into sin; do not say before the messenger “it was a mistake” — God will be angry	The messenger likely a temple official; God's response to spiritual casualness is wrath, not accommodation
5:7	Much dreaming and many words are vanity — but fear God	The summary: verbal excess, like restless dreaming, is hebel; the counter is not fewer words but the fear of God
5:8–9	Do not be surprised at oppression of the poor and perversion of justice — hierarchy protects hierarchy; but a king who cultivates the field benefits everyone	Brief systemic observation; not resignation but honest reckoning; the land's profit as shared good
5:10	He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; he who loves wealth, not with his income — also vanity	The insatiability thesis: money cannot satisfy the desire for money; the lover of money is definitionally disappointed
5:11	When goods increase, those who eat them increase — the owner has only his eyes	Wealth attracts dependents; the net benefit to the owner is reduced to spectacle — looking at what he cannot consume

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:12	Sweet is the sleep of the laborer, whether little or much; the rich man's abundance does not let him sleep	Irony: the worker with less sleeps better than the wealthy man haunted by his holdings
5:13–14	A grievous evil: riches hoarded to the owner's hurt; those same riches lost in a bad venture — he leaves nothing for his son	The hoarding instinct exposed as self-destructive; economic reversal is the Preacher's case study
5:15–16	As he came from his mother's womb he shall return, naked as he came — he takes nothing for his toil	The nakedness metaphor: death is the great leveler and the final refutation of the accumulation project
5:17	He eats in darkness with much vexation, sickness, and anger	The internal cost of the wealthy man's anxiety — his prosperity produces not peace but misery
5:18–19	What is good and fitting: eat, drink, and find enjoyment in one's toil — this is God's gift; to enjoy what God gives is God's own doing	The pivot: commendation of enjoyment is grounded not in ethics but in divine gift; "God keeps him occupied with joy" is the key clause
5:20	He will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart	Contentment crowds out anxious self-preoccupation; the contented person is liberated from obsession with his own timeline

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	5:1–7	Guard Your Steps: Reverence Before God in Worship
2	5:8–9	Under the Sun: Systemic Injustice Observed Without Surprise
3	5:10–17	The Insatiability of Wealth: Vanity Itemized

Division	Verses	Label
4	5:18–20	The Gift of Contentment: Joy as God’s Work, Not Man’s Achievement

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Fear God in worship and receive His gifts with open hands rather than grasping ones.

Primary Claim: God calls His people to a posture of reverent receptivity — quiet before Him in the sanctuary, content with what He gives in daily life — because grasping in either domain is vanity, and only what comes from His hand satisfies.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Reframe what worship is actually for. Most people, when they think about improving their worship, think about improving their emotional engagement or their sincerity. Ecclesiastes 5:1–2 reframes this entirely: the primary need in worship is not to feel more but to say less — to arrive quiet, ready to listen, awed by the distance between earth and heaven. The worshiper who comes to perform, impress, or extract something from God is not merely less sincere; he is backwards. Let this passage restructure your basic theology of what happens when you enter God’s presence: you are the creature; He is the Creator; you are on earth; He is in heaven. Your words should be few. Your ears should be open.

2. [Will/Behavior] Audit your words before God — specifically your vows and promises. Most contemporary believers do not make formal religious vows, but they do make commitments to God under spiritual pressure — in prayer, in crisis, in moments of conviction — that quietly evaporate when the pressure lifts. The Preacher says God notices. He does not say God accommodates. Before the next Sunday passes, identify any promise made to God — in prayer, in a moment of conviction, in a public commitment — that has not been kept. Either fulfill it or, with honest prayer, renounce it and ask forgiveness. Stop letting careless commitments accumulate between you and God.

3. [Affections/Worship] Grieve the specific ways you use money to feel safe. The Preacher’s diagnosis in vv. 10–12 is not about behavior — it is about love. “He who *loves* money.” The question he is pressing is: what do you find yourself returning to when you are anxious? What makes you feel more secure when the number goes up? The insomnia of the rich man (v. 12) is the diagnostic: his wealth has become the thing he turns over in his mind at 2 a.m. Let this passage do the work of exposing that specific form of false worship in you — not the abstract sin of greed but the particular financial number, account, or security that has become your functional savior. Grieve it. Name it before God.

4. [Mind/Belief] Receive contentment as something God gives, not something you achieve. The most quietly revolutionary clause in this chapter is in v. 19: “God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.” The capacity to enjoy what God has given is itself God’s gift — not the reward for achieving the right minimalist lifestyle or the right level of generosity, but something God does in a person. This means contentment is not primarily a discipline to be cultivated; it is a grace to be received. Stop trying harder to be content and start asking God for the gift of it. Repent of the striving and ask for the thing itself.

5. [Will/Behavior] Practice the enjoyment the Preacher commends — concretely and today. Verses 18–20 commend eating, drinking, and finding enjoyment in your work as good and fitting under the sun. This is not a background theological truth to affirm; it is a concrete practice to begin. This week, eat a meal slowly with full attention. Do your work and, at the end of the day, receive what you accomplished as a gift rather than an obligation or a disappointment. Sleep without reviewing your financial situation. These are not sentimental suggestions — they are acts of faith that declare God’s provision is sufficient for today, which is precisely what the grasping, accumulating, anxious alternative denies.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ecclesiastes 5 teaches that God is holy and sovereign in a way that makes creaturely reverence non-negotiable — not as a religious formality but as the only appropriate response to the infinite distance between Creator and creature. The fear of God that frames the chapter (vv. 2, 7) is not terror but calibrated smallness before genuine majesty. The chapter also teaches that God is the giver of all genuine satisfaction — not merely that He gives things, but that He gives the capacity to enjoy them (v. 19). This is a significant theological distinction: wealth itself does not satisfy; God’s gift of contentment does. The passage thus grounds both worship and daily life in the same theological reality — the sovereignty and generosity of God — and shows that departures from reverence and contentment are departures from theological truth, not merely ethical lapses.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition’s insistence on the sovereignty of God and the total inability of the creature to secure its own flourishing finds vivid expression in Ecclesiastes 5. The worship section (vv. 1–7) is one of Scripture’s clearest texts for the regulative principle’s underlying theology: God defines the terms of approach, and human initiative in worship is dangerous precisely because it assumes the worshiper brings something God needs. The wealth section (vv. 10–20) is a searching refutation of any theology that equates faithfulness with financial prosperity — the Preacher insists that wealth is vanity (v. 10), a trap (vv. 13–14), and ultimately stripped

away at death (v. 15). The resolution in vv. 18–20 is Calvinistic in its structure: the capacity for contentment is not a human achievement but a divine gift — “God keeps him occupied with joy” — which means the gospel’s work is not merely to improve behavior around money but to transform the heart’s desire, replacing the idol of wealth with the living God who gives joy. Philippians 4’s “I have learned contentment” and 1 Timothy 6’s “godliness with contentment is great gain” are the New Testament fulfillment of this Preacher’s wisdom, both grounded in Christ who secures what no amount of wealth ever could.

Main Takeaway

You are on earth. God is in heaven. That asymmetry is not a problem to be overcome — it is the beginning of wisdom. Stop coming to God with too many words, too many demands, too many vows you do not intend to keep. Stop letting the number in your account become the thing that gives you peace or keeps you up at night — because it will never be enough, and you will leave every cent of it behind. The only One who can give you genuine satisfaction has already given you today, your work, your food, and the capacity to enjoy them. Receive what He has given. Fear the One in whose presence you stand. That is where life is. Everything else is vapor.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating vv. 1–7 as general advice about sincerity in prayer.** The temptation is to flatten the worship section into “be genuine, not hypocritical.” But the Preacher’s point is more structural and more theological: God’s holiness and transcendence create an asymmetry that should make the worshiper *small and quiet*, not merely *sincere and earnest*. Missing this loses the fear of God that gives the entire section its force. The corrective is to keep the theological grounding — “God is in heaven and you are on earth” — as the governing premise, not a decorative detail.
- **Lifting vv. 18–20 out of context to commend a positive attitude.** The commendation of enjoyment in vv. 18–20 has been used as a general encouragement toward gratitude, work-life balance, or enjoying life’s simple pleasures. All of these miss the specific argumentative function of the section: it is the Preacher’s answer to the misery catalogued in vv. 10–17. The gift of contentment is not general wisdom about living well — it is the specific antidote to the specific poison of wealth-love that the Preacher has just exposed. Preach it in that sequence.
- **Prosperity gospel inversion of vv. 18–20.** A more serious error: using “God gives wealth and the power to enjoy it” as a promise of material blessing to the faithful. The passage explicitly and repeatedly refutes this — wealth does not satisfy (v. 10), attracts parasites (v. 11), causes anxiety (v. 12), can be lost entirely (vv. 13–14), and

is stripped away at death (v. 15). The gift is the contentment, not the wealth. Any reading that arrives at “God wants you to be prosperous” from this text has read against its grain at every point.

- **Moralizing the wealth section into a sermon on financial stewardship.** Even well-intentioned expositors can reduce Ecclesiastes 5:10–20 to practical financial advice: give generously, live simply, don’t love money. While these are legitimate application directions, preaching them as the *point* of the passage misses its theological resolution. The Preacher does not say “work harder at generosity” — he says God keeps the person occupied with joy. The transformation is from God’s side, not the disciplined human side. Applications must flow through that theological hinge.
- **Skipping vv. 8–9 because they seem disconnected.** These two verses on systemic injustice are brief and can feel like an interruption between the worship and wealth sections. But they serve an important function: they name the reality that the world under the sun is unjust in organized, institutionalized ways, and this should not scandalize the believer into paralysis or cynicism. The Preacher is honest about the world’s brokenness without allowing it to become the final word. Skipping these verses produces a chapter that moves from worship to wealth with no acknowledgment of the suffering of the poor — which is a significant pastoral gap given the section they interrupt.
- **Failing to preach the fear of God as good news.** There is a preaching instinct to soften “fear God” (v. 7) into mere respect or reverence so it does not alienate the congregation. But the fear of God in Ecclesiastes is not a threat — it is the liberating alternative to the exhausting project of self-securing. The person who truly fears God stops fearing everything else: the opinion of the crowd, the volatility of markets, the silence of God in worship. Fear of God is the cure, not the disease. Preach it that way.