

Homiletics Analysis: Ecclesiastes 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Ecclesiastes 6 continues and intensifies the Preacher's (Qohelet's) examination of the vanity of material prosperity, long life, and human desire. The chapter opens with a grievous evil the Preacher has observed under the sun: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor — everything a person could want — yet God does not give him the power to enjoy it, and a stranger consumes it instead (vv. 1–2). This scenario is pronounced worse than a stillborn child, who enters in vanity and departs in darkness yet has more rest than the man who cannot enjoy his abundance (vv. 3–5). Even if a man lives two thousand years yet sees no good, does not the stillborn child fare better? (v. 6). All the labor of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite (*nephesh*) is never satisfied (v. 7). The wise man has no advantage over the fool in this regard, and the poor man who knows how to conduct himself gains nothing (v. 8). Better is the sight of the eyes — what is present and real — than the wandering of the *nephesh* (desire, appetite, soul), which is also vanity and a striving after wind (v. 9).

The chapter then pivots from observation to epistemological and rhetorical confrontation (vv. 10–12). Whatever exists has already been named — what a man is has already been determined, and he cannot contend with one who is mightier than he. The multiplication of words increases vanity, and what advantage does man have? Who knows what is good for man in life during the few and vain days he passes like a shadow? And who can tell him what will be after him under the sun? These closing rhetorical questions do not despair — they locate man: finite, bounded, unable to see behind him or before him, and therefore radically dependent on something outside himself.

Broader Unit

Ecclesiastes 6 is best read as the conclusion and intensification of the unit that begins at 5:8, which together treat the theme of wealth, power, and the limits of human satisfaction. Chapter 5 exposes the emptiness of political oppression and the restlessness of the wealthy; chapter 6 closes that unit by showing that even *divinely given* prosperity fails to satisfy when God withholds the gift of enjoyment. The pivot in verses 10–12 then opens toward the second half of Ecclesiastes (chapters 7–12), which begins to offer wisdom for navigating the bounded life rather than merely diagnosing its futility. Chapter 6 is thus a hinge: the heaviest statement of the book's diagnostic work, and the threshold of its constructive movement.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Ecclesiastes 6 is to demolish the idol of accumulation — the deep human conviction that enough wealth, long life, or satisfied desire will finally deliver the security and meaning we crave — and to drive the reader to the recognition that enjoyment itself is a gift that only God can give. The passage is designed to disorient the reader's confidence in the horizontal (abundance, longevity, satisfaction) while leaving the question of the vertical (God's gift of enjoyment) conspicuously open. The rhetorical questions of verses 10–12 are not nihilism — they are calibration: placing the reader before his own finitude so that he might receive rather than grasp. The Preacher is not trying to make the reader despair; he is trying to make the reader stop trusting the wrong things long enough to receive what only God supplies.

Subject Sentence: Abundance without God's gift of enjoyment is vanity; man cannot satisfy himself.

Primary Claim: God alone gives the power to enjoy what He provides — and the man who grasps for satisfaction apart from that gift will find even great abundance to be more bitter than a stillborn's brief existence. Everything under the sun conspires to expose the one thing man cannot manufacture: the capacity to receive his life as gift.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the “grievous evil” (v. 1) and the role of divine withholding

The passage explicitly states that God gives a man wealth, possessions, and honor, yet “God does not give him power to enjoy it” (*lo' yashliteinu ha'Elohim le'ekhol mimmennu*, v. 2). Some interpreters, particularly within Arminian and Wesleyan traditions, are uncomfortable with this and soften it: the failure to enjoy is attributed to the man's own character, anxiety, or mismanagement rather than to divine withholding. This reading is understandable as a pastoral protection of God's goodness, but it imports into the text what the text explicitly resists. Qohelet says plainly that God gives the wealth and God withholds the enjoyment — and calls this a “grievous evil” (*ra'ah ra'ah*, literally “evil evil,” an intensified construction). The Reformed reading does not require resolving this apparent tension by absolving God of agency; it takes the text's claim seriously that God's sovereign purposes sometimes include withholding the gift of enjoyment, and that this is genuinely hard — genuinely grievous — while remaining within His providential purposes. The answer to the tension is not to remove God's agency but to press forward into chapters 5 and 12, where enjoyment of food, drink, and labor is explicitly called “the gift of God” (5:19; 12:13–14). The withholding is real. The gift, when given, is grace.

The stillborn child comparison (vv. 3–6) and the question of nihilism

Some readers — particularly those coming to Ecclesiastes through existentialist or secularist lenses — treat the stillborn comparison as evidence that Qohelet is a nihilist or a proto-pessimist who ultimately concludes life is not worth living. This reading cannot survive contact with the whole book. The comparison is rhetorical hyperbole in service of a diagnostic claim: a man who possesses everything but cannot enjoy it is in a condition worse than one who never experienced life at all. This is not a value judgment on existence — it is an indictment of joyless accumulation. The stillborn child is used as the extreme case precisely to jolt the reader: if your life of abundance produces less peace than a child who never drew breath, something is catastrophically wrong with what you are trusting. Reformed exposition receives this as precisely the kind of hard diagnostic that the gospel requires before it can land — the Law doing its killing work so that grace can give life.

The rhetorical questions of verses 10–12 and their function

Dispensational and some Baptist interpreters sometimes read the rhetorical questions of verses 10–12 as evidence that Ecclesiastes is a “below the sun” document offering only secular wisdom, which must then be supplemented or corrected by New Testament revelation. This reading partially holds — Qohelet is clearly writing from within the bounded perspective of covenant life under the sun — but it overreaches by treating the “below the sun” perspective as sub-canonical or merely human. The Reformed reading recognizes that the Spirit of God is doing something specific through Qohelet’s bounded perspective: he is placing man before his own creatureliness, before his finitude and dependence, precisely so that the fear of the Lord (12:13) arrives not as an addendum but as the only possible answer to the questions raised throughout. The rhetorical questions of 6:10–12 are not secular dead ends — they are theological pressure points designed to create the existential crisis that drives toward God.

The Reformed verdict

Ecclesiastes 6 reads most coherently as a sustained piece of covenantal wisdom literature in which the Preacher, under the Spirit’s inspiration, employs radical diagnostic rhetoric — observation, comparison, and unanswerable questions — to dismantle the human project of self-sufficient satisfaction. The passage does not resolve into nihilism, and it does not resolve the tension by softening divine agency. It leaves the reader disoriented from horizontal idols and facing the vertical question: if God alone gives enjoyment, what must I do with a God who gives and withholds? That question is precisely the question Ecclesiastes is designed to generate, and it finds its answer not in Qohelet alone but in the whole counsel of Scripture.

Key Canonical Support

- **Ecclesiastes 5:18–20** — The immediate antecedent passage names enjoyment of food, drink, and labor as “the gift of God” (*mattath Elohim*), establishing the positive

ground against which chapter 6's withholding is the grievous reversal. Enjoyment is always gift, never achievement.

- **Luke 12:16–21 (Parable of the Rich Fool)** — Jesus tells of a man who accumulates abundantly and plans to consume it for himself, only to hear God say “your soul (*psychē*) is required of you tonight.” The man is “rich toward himself” but not “rich toward God” — the New Testament instantiation of Ecclesiastes 6:2, with the eschatological dimension explicit.
- **Psalms 49:16–20** — “Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich... for when he dies he will carry nothing away.” The Psalmist addresses the same temptation — trusting in wealth — and arrives at the same diagnostic: abundance without God produces a man who “will never see light.” Canonical corroboration of Qohelet's claim from the Psalter.
- **1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19** — Paul's instruction that “godliness with contentment is great gain” and that the rich should not “set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” The positive complement to Ecclesiastes 6 — what does a life look like in which enjoyment is received as gift rather than seized as right?
- **Philippians 4:11–13** — Paul's testimony that he has “learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content.” Contentment is *learned*, not manufactured — a received capacity, not a natural human achievement. This is the lived experience of what Ecclesiastes 6 diagnoses as absent: the God-given power to enjoy (or be content within) one's actual circumstances.

Aim: To expose the idol of self-sufficient accumulation in the reader and to open them to receiving enjoyment, contentment, and meaning as gifts that only God can give.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:1	The Preacher identifies “an evil” (<i>ra'ah</i>) he has seen under the sun, described as “heavy upon man.”	Opening formula establishes this as a key observation; <i>ra'ah</i> will be intensified to <i>ra'ah ra'ah</i> in v. 2.
6:2	God gives a man wealth, possessions, and honor — nothing lacking that he desires — yet God does not	The agent of both gift and withholding is <i>ha'Elohim</i> — this is not chance but divine sovereignty. “Grievous

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	give him power to enjoy it; a stranger consumes it. This is vanity and a grievous affliction.	affliction” (<i>ra’ah ra’ah</i> , evil evil) — a rare double intensification.
6:3	Even if a man has a hundred children and lives many years, if his soul is not satisfied with life’s good things and he has no burial, the stillborn is better off than he.	“A hundred children” and “many years” are the cultural markers of maximum human blessing (Ps. 128). The combination of these blessings <i>plus</i> absence of enjoyment is the target.
6:4–5	For the stillborn comes in vanity and goes in darkness; its name is covered in darkness. It has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it has more rest than the man who cannot enjoy.	“Rest” (<i>nachat</i>) — the stillborn’s condition is preferable in one respect: no restless striving, no accumulated disappointment.
6:6	Even if the unsatisfied man lived two thousand years — would he not go to the same place? All go to one place.	Death is the great leveler; the length of life does not alter the verdict on a joyless existence. Two thousand years of joyless abundance still ends in the same grave.
6:7	All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite (<i>nephesh</i>) is never satisfied.	<i>Nephesh</i> here = appetite/desire/soul — the deepest craving of the self. Labor feeds the body but cannot fill the soul.
6:8	What advantage does the wise man have over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?	The “wisdom advantage” and the “conduct advantage” both dissolve before the common problem of unsatisfied desire.
6:9	Better is what the eyes see than the wandering of the <i>nephesh</i> . This also is vanity and a striving after wind.	“What the eyes see” = the present, the actual, the given. The <i>nephesh</i> ’s wandering = insatiable desire for what is not yet in

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		hand. Presence is preferable to perpetual craving — yet even this “better” is still vanity.
6:10	Whatever has come to be has already been named; it is known what man is — he cannot contend with one mightier than he.	The pivot: from observation to ontology. Man’s nature and situation are already determined; he cannot argue his way out of his creatureliness.
6:11	The more words, the more vanity — what is the advantage to man?	Rhetorical excess (more words, more arguments, more schemes) does not change the fundamental condition.
6:12	For who knows what is good for man in life during the few and vain days he passes like a shadow? And who can tell him what will be after him under the sun?	Two unanswerable questions close the chapter: (1) Who knows what is truly good? (2) Who knows the future? Man cannot see ahead or behind — he is radically bounded and therefore radically dependent.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	6:1–6	The Grievous Evil: Abundance Without Enjoyment
2	6:7–9	The Insatiable Appetite: Labor Cannot Fill the Soul
3	6:10–12	The Bounded Creature: Man Cannot Contend, Cannot Know

Subject Sentence: Abundance without God’s gift of enjoyment is vanity; man cannot satisfy himself.

Primary Claim: God alone gives the power to enjoy what He provides — and the man who grasps for satisfaction apart from that gift will find even great abundance to be more bitter than a stillborn’s brief existence. Everything under the sun conspires to expose the one thing man cannot manufacture: the capacity to receive his life as gift.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop calculating how much more you need before life can begin. (*Mind/Belief*)

Ecclesiastes 6:2 does not describe a miser or a fool — it describes a man with “wealth, possessions, and honor” and “nothing lacking of all that he desires.” The terrifying scenario is not poverty; it is abundance without enjoyment. The belief that a certain threshold of accumulation will finally unlock satisfaction is exposed here as a category error: the power to enjoy is not located in the abundance. It is a divine gift. If you are waiting to have enough before you can rest, rejoice, and receive your life — you are waiting for something that more accumulation cannot supply. The recalibration required is not a matter of getting more; it is a matter of receiving what you already have from the hand of God.

2. Grieve honestly over the joylessness that masquerades as ambition.

(*Affections/Worship*) The Preacher calls the scenario of verse 2 a “grievous evil” — and does not flinch from calling it what it is. There is a kind of Christian busyness and striving that is never named as the spiritual emergency it actually represents: joyless accumulation in the name of provision, diligence, or faithfulness. If a man has everything and cannot enjoy it, the Preacher says the stillborn is better off. That is meant to land. The application is not shame but grief — honest, undefended grief before God that the capacity to receive joy from His hand has been replaced by the compulsive management of resources, reputation, or legacy. Lament is not despair; it is the beginning of reaching for what only God gives.

3. Practice receiving today’s actual good rather than craving tomorrow’s imagined good. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 9 draws the sharpest practical line in the chapter: “Better is what the eyes see than the wandering of the appetite.” The discipline this demands is concrete: at the next meal, the next conversation, the next morning with the family you have — receive it as what it is rather than measuring it against the better version you imagine. This is not settling; it is the practice of the God-given gift of enjoyment. The wandering *nephesh* is always elsewhere — always at the next thing, the better arrangement, the fixed circumstance. The eyes can only see what is actually present. Ecclesiastes 6 is calling you to live in the present tense of your actual life.

4. Recognize that insatiable desire is a diagnostic, not just a discomfort. (*Mind/Belief*)

Verse 7 names the condition plainly: “All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.” This is not a quirk of personality or a symptom of insufficient self-discipline. The soul’s insatiability is a structural feature of the human being apart from God’s gift of enjoyment — it is what Augustine called the restless heart. When you notice that the thing you worked for has already stopped satisfying and you are reaching for the next thing, do not simply push harder or reach faster. Treat it as a diagnostic. Something underneath is being exposed — a *nephesh* that was not designed to be filled by

accumulation, but by God. The discomfort of insatiable desire is mercy: it is the signpost pointing you to what you actually need.

5. Submit your finitude rather than fighting it. (*Affections/Worship*) Verses 10–12 close the chapter with a series of statements about what man cannot do: he cannot contend with one mightier than he, he cannot multiply words to advantage, he does not know what is good for him, he cannot see the future. This is not a counsel of passive resignation — it is an invitation to a specific posture: the creature before the Creator, bounded, dependent, and therefore free. The fighting of finitude is exhausting and fruitless; the submission of finitude is the doorway to the fear of the Lord that Ecclesiastes 12:13 names as the whole duty of man. The application is worship: a deliberate, repeated act of releasing the craving for control, omniscience, and self-determination — and placing the bounded self into the hands of the One who is not bounded, does not withhold without purpose, and gives enjoyment as grace.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ecclesiastes 6 teaches something of critical importance about the nature of God’s gifts: that the gift and the power to receive the gift are both from God, and neither is guaranteed by human effort or merit. Wealth, long life, and honor are genuinely good things — the text does not condemn them — but their goodness is inseparable from God’s act of giving the *capacity* to enjoy them. This means that enjoyment is never a human achievement; it is always received grace. The passage also teaches that God is actively sovereign over both the giving and the withholding — a truth the text does not soften — and that this sovereignty is set within a framework that calls withholding a “grievous evil” while simultaneously pointing toward God as the only source of the good the man lacks. The chapter’s closing rhetorical questions further establish that man’s creatureliness — his finitude, his bounded knowledge, his inability to determine his own good — is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be submitted, and that only from within that submission is genuine wisdom possible.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ecclesiastes 6 functions within Reformed theology as a foundational demolition of the doctrine of self-sufficiency — the deep, post-fall assumption that the human being can secure his own flourishing through the accumulation of goods, the management of circumstances, and the extension of life. The passage’s insistence that God alone gives the power to enjoy directly supports the Reformed understanding of common grace and special grace: God distributes material goods across humanity regardless of covenant standing, but the *shalom* — the wholeness of enjoyment and rest — is His gift to give or withhold according to His purposes. Crucially, the chapter’s diagnostic work prepares the soil for the gospel: the man who has learned

that abundance cannot satisfy him, that his appetite cannot be filled by labor, and that he cannot contend with the One who is mightier — that man is precisely the one ready to receive justification by grace through faith, and the gift of the Spirit who produces contentment (Philippians 4:11–13) as a fruit of union with Christ. Ecclesiastes 6 is Law in its most penetrating form — not the moral law demanding obedience, but the wisdom law exposing the futility of the project of self-salvation through prosperity.

Main Takeaway

The man with everything — wealth, honor, a hundred children, two thousand years — who cannot enjoy it is worse off than a child who never drew breath. That is the Preacher's most extreme statement, and he means it. You cannot manufacture the power to enjoy your life. You cannot work for it, accumulate toward it, or extend your years to find it. It is God's gift, given by grace and received in the posture of a creature before his Creator. Stop grasping. Stop striving to satisfy an appetite your striving cannot fill. Open your hands — the gift of enjoyment is not found at the end of the next acquisition; it is waiting in the act of receiving what God has already placed in your hands today.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the passage as secular pessimism rather than covenantal diagnosis.** Ecclesiastes 6 is sometimes preached as though Qohelet has given up — as though the passage's hard questions and dark comparisons represent despair rather than carefully calibrated spiritual surgery. The preacher must establish from the outset that the disorientation the passage produces is intentional and merciful. Qohelet is not counseling nihilism; he is demolishing false hope with precision so that true hope has somewhere to land. Flatten the passage into pessimism and you remove its teeth and its gospel-preparatory function entirely.
- **Softening God's agency in withholding enjoyment.** The text is explicit that God gives the wealth and God withholds the enjoyment. Preachers who are uncomfortable with this will unconsciously shift the explanation to the man's own character flaws, his anxiety, or his ingratitude — anything to remove divine agency from the equation. This is pastorally understandable but exegetically unfaithful. The Reformed preacher must hold the tension: God's sovereignty over the withholding is real, the withholding is genuinely "grievous," and God is simultaneously the only One who gives enjoyment as gift. Do not resolve the tension — preach it. The unresolved tension is part of the passage's work.
- **Moralizing the stillborn comparison.** Verses 3–6 are rhetorical hyperbole, not a literal claim that death is preferable to joyless abundance as a life choice. If a preacher takes this comparison at face value and uses it to counsel withdrawal

from life, ambition, or engagement, he has misread the genre. The comparison is designed to shock the reader into recognizing the severity of joyless accumulation — not to advocate for any form of quietism, withdrawal, or despair. The shock is the point; the conclusion drawn from the shock should be energetically life-ward, not death-ward.

- **Applying verse 9 as a counsel of lowered ambition.** “Better is what the eyes see than the wandering of the appetite” is not a command to stop hoping, planning, or working. It is a diagnostic about the location of satisfaction — in the present and actual rather than the imagined and future. Preachers who use this verse to discourage ambition, vision, or desire for a better future have misapplied it. The target is not ambition but *insatiable craving detached from receiving* — the *nephesh* that can never rest because it is always elsewhere, always measuring the present against the imagined better. The application should cultivate present-tense receptivity, not passivity.
- **Stopping at the diagnosis without pointing to the gift.** Ecclesiastes 6 is almost entirely diagnostic — it names the evil, exposes the futility, and asks unanswerable questions. A sermon that ends here leaves the congregation in well-articulated hopelessness. The Preacher’s own resolution — that enjoyment is the gift of God (5:18–20; 12:13) — and the New Testament’s fulfillment of that resolution (the Spirit producing contentment in union with Christ) must frame the diagnostic work. The diagnosis is not the message; it is the preparation for the message. Preach the whole canon even when expositing one chapter.
- **Failing to diagnose the idol beneath the behavior.** Consistent with the Keller-inflected approach, the surface behavior in this passage is accumulation and striving — but the root idol is self-sufficiency: the belief that the human being can secure his own flourishing through horizontal means alone. A sermon that only addresses the behavior (stop accumulating so much) without diagnosing the root (you are trusting yourself to provide what only God can give) will produce behavioral adjustment without gospel transformation. The preacher must name the idol — the conviction that enough of the right things will finally deliver the security and joy the soul craves — and then preach Christ as the only One who can give what the idol promises and cannot deliver.