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The Never-Enough Trap

Greed and Contentment — Ecclesiastes 5:8–6:9

♦ The Richest Man in the Room — And the Poorest

In 2015, the world's wealthiest hedge fund manager was asked by a journalist: **'Is there a number, a net worth figure at which you would stop?'**

He thought for a moment and said: 'Honestly? No. Because it's not really about the money at this point. It's about the game. And you never want the game to stop.'

He had \$15 billion.

He slept four hours a night. He had been through two divorces. He had not taken a vacation in three years.

Ecclesiastes 5:10, *'He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.'*

Not because wealth is evil. Because the love of wealth is self-escalating — the more you have, the more you need. The Preacher diagnosed the hedge fund manager 3,000 years before he existed.

I. The Machinery of Oppression.

Ecclesiastes 5:8–9, *"If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. ⁹ Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field."*

Before addressing wealth directly, the Preacher places it in the context of the political system that produces and protects it.

The bureaucratic pyramid, where each official extracts tribute from those below while paying tribute to those above is the ancient description of every exploitative economic system.

The poor are at the bottom.

The king is at the top.

Everyone in between is both oppressor and oppressed.

'Do not marvel at the matter'

This is not callousness. It is the practical wisdom of someone who understands human nature without naivety.

Expecting justice from an unjust system will produce either disillusionment or dangerous idealism.

The fear of God provides the only stable platform from which systemic injustice can be observed clearly, resisted actively, and ultimately referred to the divine court that will address it finally.

James 5:1–4, *"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! ² Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Indeed the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth."*

James's thunderous New Testament indictment of exploitative wealth-accumulation is the most direct commentary on **Ecclesiastes 5:8–9**.

'The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord.'

The wages withheld at the bottom of the exploitative pyramid are heard by God. The machinery of oppression is not hidden from the court above all courts.

II. The Three Paradoxes of Wealth.

Ecclesiastes 5:10–12, *"He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity. ¹¹ When goods increase, They increase who eat them; So what profit have the owners*

Except to see them with their eyes? ¹² The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep."

Paradox 1: Wealth Escalates Appetite.

The first paradox is appetite escalation.

'He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver.'

This is one of the most empirically verifiable observations in the book.

Every study of human satisfaction and wealth confirms that above the level of basic needs being met, additional wealth contributes negligibly to happiness and the pursuit of additional wealth correlates negatively with peace.

Why?

Because the love of silver is a misorientation of desire.

Desire itself is not the problem, but it is the architecture of the human soul. But when desire is directed toward finite objects, it behaves like an addiction.

The stimulus must keep escalating to produce the same effect. The heart that is designed for infinite satisfaction cannot be permanently satisfied by finite accumulation.

1 Timothy 6:6–8," *Now godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."*

Paradox 2: Wealth Multiplies Dependents.

'When goods increase, they increase who eat them.'

More wealth means more overhead.

More management, more staff, more complex systems, more people with claims on the growing resource.

The net gain to the owner what the Preacher calls **Yitron** is only the visual pleasure of seeing it.

'So, what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes?'

The billionaire who owns 500 properties does not enjoy 500 homes. He enjoys the knowledge that he owns 500 homes.

The possession is mental, not material.

A mental possession of a thousand things is not superior to the genuine, full, grateful enjoyment of one thing.

Paradox 3: Wealth Destroys Sleep.

'The sleep of a labouring man is sweet... but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.'

This is the most practically observable of the three paradoxes, and it connects directly to the anxiety of accumulation.

- The labouring man has worked his body, he is tired, and he sleeps.
- The wealthy man has assembled complexity, and at night the complexity assembles in his mind.

Matthew 11:28–30, *"Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

Jesus' invitation in **Matthew 11** is the direct New Testament answer to the sleeplessness of **Ecclesiastes 5:12**.

The person whose life is organised around the accumulation of wealth carries a burden that will not let them sleep.

Jesus offers a different burden which is light, easy, and productive of the soul-rest that wealth cannot purchase.

III. The Severe Evil — Riches Kept to Their Owner's Hurt.

Ecclesiastes 5:13–17, *"There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: Riches kept for their owner to his hurt. ¹⁴But those riches perish through misfortune; When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand. ¹⁵As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, To go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labour Which he may carry away in his hand. ¹⁶And this also is a severe evil—*

Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has laboured for the wind? ¹⁷All his days he also eats in darkness, And he has much sorrow and sickness and anger."

Having shown that wealth escalates appetite, multiplies dependents, and destroys sleep (5:10–12), the Preacher now names something even more severe: wealth that is not merely unsatisfying but actively harmful—'*riches kept for their owner to his hurt.*'

This is not wealth lost through generosity or given away in worship. This is wealth hoarded, guarded, and clutched. The clutching itself becomes the wound.

'Those riches perish through misfortune.'

A bad investment, a collapsed venture, a single reversal of fortune, and the treasure a man built his identity around is gone. Worse, it is gone before it could even do the one thing wealth is supposed to do within a family:

'When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand' to pass on.

The very purpose for which the hoarding was justified that security for the next generation fails.

Then comes one of the most piercing lines in the whole book:

'As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came.'

Job 1:21, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."*

Job spoke this sentence on the day he lost everything, and he spoke it as worship.

The Preacher uses the identical image nakedness at birth and nakedness at death not to produce worship but to expose the folly of a life spent accumulating what cannot, in the end, be kept.

- Job's nakedness led him to bless the Lord.
- The hoarder's nakedness, by contrast, leads only to grief, because nothing was ever surrendered to God in the first place.

Psalm 49:16–17, *"Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, When the glory of his house is increased; ¹⁷ For when he dies he shall carry nothing away; His glory shall not descend after him."*

The Psalmist supplies the pastoral application the Preacher assumes: do not be intimidated by another person's increasing wealth. It travels with him no further than the grave.

The chapter's final diagnosis is almost clinical in its bluntness:

'All his days he also eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger.'

Luke 12:20–21, *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' ²¹ "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

Jesus' parable of the rich fool is the New Testament's exact commentary on **Ecclesiastes 5:13–17**.

The barns are full, the future feels secured, and then the demand comes that no barn can answer. *'So shall he go'* Ecclesiastes and Jesus reach the identical verdict from opposite ends of the canon.

IV. The Divine Gift — The Power to Enjoy Your Portion.

Ecclesiastes 5:18–20, *"Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. ¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labour—this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart."*

After the severe evil of **5:13–17**, the Preacher turns deliberately to the opposite picture.

'Here is what I have seen' echoes the very phrase that introduced the tragedy two verses earlier, but this time what he has seen is 'good and fitting.'

Notice how modest the prescription is: to eat, to drink, to enjoy the good of one's labour.

No command to acquire more.

No strategy for greater accumulation.

Just the ordinary gifts of an ordinary day, received rather than resented.

'For it is his heritage.'

The Hebrew idea of heritage (or lot/portion) reframes the whole discussion. A worker's days, labour, and modest enjoyment of it are not a consolation prize for those who never became rich. They are the assigned portion God gives every person a heritage, not a leftover.

Then the Preacher makes the single most important theological move in this entire section:

'And given him power to eat of it—this is the gift of God.'

Wealth is one gift. The power to enjoy wealth is a separate, second gift.

Chapter 6 will shortly describe a man who receives the first without the second (6:1–2) riches without the capacity to enjoy them, a curse dressed as a blessing.

Here, the Preacher describes the reverse: a person who receives both, and calls that combination, plainly, 'the gift of God.'

Ecclesiastes 2:24–25, *"Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labour. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. ²⁵For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?"*

This is not a new idea for the Preacher he said the same thing earlier in the book. The repetition is the point.

Across many chapters and many experiments with pleasure, wealth, and toil, this is the one conclusion he keeps arriving at from every direction.

Enjoyment is a gift received from God's hand, not a prize won by human effort.

1 Timothy 6:17, *"Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy."*

Paul's charge to Timothy is the New Testament's confirmation of **Ecclesiastes 5:19**.

God is not a reluctant giver who begrudges enjoyment. He is the God *'who gives us richly all things to enjoy'* the same generous hand behind both the wealth and the capacity to receive it with joy.

The verse ends with a beautiful, almost tender observation. *'He will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.'*

The contented man is not oblivious to life's brevity Ecclesiastes never lets anyone forget that. But he is not paralysed by it either.

God occupies his attention with present joy rather than anxious arithmetic about the days remaining. This is the exact opposite of the sleepless, complexity-assembling rich man of 5:12, and it is the doorway to the warning that follows in 6:1–2 because not everyone who receives riches also receives this gift.

V. When the Blessings becomes Curse.

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2, *"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: ²A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction."*

Chapter 6 deepens the analysis.

It is possible to have all the material blessings and lack the spiritual capacity to receive them.

God can give wealth and withhold the capacity for joy. This is not a contradiction of God's character. It is the logical consequence of receiving the gift while refusing the Giver.

The person who receives wealth from God's hand with gratitude and uses it as a steward under God has 'the power to eat of it'

The capacity for genuine enjoyment.

The person who receives wealth as an entitlement, without reference to God, finds that the blessing has become a burden.

The field is full, but the table is empty.

Luke 12:15, *"And He said to them, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.'"*

The most devastating insight in Ecclesiastes 5–6 is this: you can have everything and experience nothing.

The capacity for joy is not a function of the quantity of what you possess. It is a function of the orientation of your heart toward the God who gives it.

The person rich in relationship with God, who receives the smallest gift with full gratitude, has more joy than the billionaire who receives billions with a restless heart.

Contentment is not the absence of desire but it is the presence of God in the midst of desire.

VI. The Ultimate Paradox — A Long Life That Never Tastes Good.

Ecclesiastes 6:3–6, *"If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he—⁴ for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness.⁵ Though it has not seen the sun or known anything, this has more rest than that man,⁶ even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?"*

The Preacher now pushes his argument on unsatisfied wealth to its most extreme, uncomfortable case.

Picture a man who has everything the ancient world counted as blessing—a hundred children, an unusually long life, the wealth already implied by the surrounding context of chapter 6. Yet his soul is not satisfied with goodness, and he does not even receive a proper burial, a mark of deep dishonour in Israel.

The Preacher's verdict is deliberately shocking:

'I say that a stillborn child is better than he.'

This is not a literal ranking of the value of lives. It is rhetorical shock therapy, designed to make one truth impossible to ignore: ***An unsatisfied life, however long and however outwardly blessed, is worse than never having lived at all.***

The stillborn child *'has not seen the sun'*—but neither has it tasted futility, grief, or the ache of never having enough.

The old man may have *'seen the sun'* for the equivalent of two thousand years yet the text says plainly, he *'has not seen goodness.'*

Years of life and satisfaction of soul are not the same currency. You cannot purchase the second with the first.

Job 3:16–17, *"Or why was I not hidden like a stillborn child, Like infants who never saw light? ¹⁷ There the wicked cease from troubling, And there the weary are at rest."*

Job's lament in his darkest hour is the closest literary parallel in the Old Testament to **Ecclesiastes 6:3**.

Job, in unbearable suffering, wished for the very thing the Preacher now uses as his measuring stick: the rest of one who never lived long enough to feel life's weight.

The Preacher and Job are not glorifying death.

They are exposing, from opposite directions, the same devastating truth: a soul that cannot rest is worse off than a soul that never had to.

Ecclesiastes closes this point with its most repeated refrain in the whole book:

'Do not all go to one place?'

Death is the great leveller.

A hundred children, a thousand years twice over, and an unopened grave cannot buy exemption from it.

Whatever is not resolved in the soul before that place will not be resolved by adding more years or more possessions.

VII. The Insatiable Mouth — And the Better Path of Presence.

Ecclesiastes 6:7–9, *"All the labour of man is for his mouth, And yet the soul is not satisfied. ⁸ For what more has the wise man than the fool? What does the poor man have, Who knows how to walk before the living? ⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind."*

'All the labour of man is for his mouth'—the endless cycle of working to acquire, consuming what is acquired, and returning to work to acquire again.

'Yet the soul is not satisfied.'

This is Paradox 1 (**5:10**) returned in its most universal form. It is no longer only the wealthy man's appetite that escalates beyond satisfaction—it is every man's, rich or poor, wise or foolish.

What more has the wise man than the fool? (6:8a)

What does the poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself rightly among the living? (6:8b)

These are not throwaway questions. They are the Preacher's characteristic levelling technique.

Wisdom without contentment offers no ultimate advantage over folly, because both wise and foolish appetites chase the same insatiable target.

Even practical social wisdom—'*knowing how to walk before the living*'—gains nothing extra if the soul beneath it, like every other soul, is not satisfied.

Then comes the proverb that answers everything said so far in chapters 5–6:

'Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire.'

'The sight of the eyes' is what is actually, presently in front of you—the meal on the table, the family in the room, the work in your hands today.

'The wandering of desire' is the restless mental journey toward what you do not have, cannot have, or have not yet acquired.

This is Paradox 2 (5:11) in proverb form: The billionaire who mentally possesses five hundred homes but genuinely enjoys none of them is a case study in 'the wandering of desire.'

The person who fully receives one ordinary meal with gratitude is practising 'the sight of the eyes.'

Philippians 4:11–12, *"Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."*

Hebrews 13:5, *"Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"*

Paul's contentment was not naturally occurring, but he says plainly, *'I have learned' it.*

Contentment is a discipline, trained over time, not a personality trait some people happen to have.

The writer of Hebrews grounds that same contentment not in circumstance but in a promise that the presence of God

Himself is the only sufficient answer to the wandering of desire.

The chapter's final verdict lands with characteristic honesty.
'This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.'

Even the wisdom just given—as true as it is—cannot by itself install contentment in a human heart. It can only describe the path. Only the fear of God, and the gospel that fulfils it, can walk a person down it.

The Preacher has now completed his anatomy of the never-enough trap:

Its political root in a system of oppression (5:8–9),

Its threefold internal paradox (5:10–12),

Its power to turn blessing into curse when the soul lacks the capacity to receive it (6:1–2),

Its ability to make even a long, full life taste of nothing (6:3–6), and

Its final, universal verdict that appetite alone can never be satisfied (6:7–9).

Only one door leads out.

Conclusion.

♦ The Man Who Gave It Away — R.G. LeTourneau

R.G. LeTourneau invented the earth-moving equipment that built America's highways and airports and won **World War II**.

At one point he held **299 patents** and had personally designed **70% of all heavy earth-moving equipment** used by the Allied forces.

He also gave away **90% of his income** — every year — for the last four decades of his life and lived on 10%.

He said repeatedly in speeches: 'The question is not how much of my money I give to God. The question is how much of God's money I keep for myself.'

He did not sleep poorly.

He was not anxious about his balance sheet.

He slept like the labouring man of **Ecclesiastes 5:12** — sweetly, because the burden of ownership was not his to carry.

LeTourneau had discovered the secret of **Ecclesiastes 5:18–19**: he had received wealth from God's hand with gratitude, and God had given him 'the power to eat of it.'

Not because he gave it away but because giving it away was the outward expression of the heart posture that made genuine enjoyment possible: **I am a steward, not an owner. It is His, not mine.**

The never-enough trap is escaped not by having less, but by receiving what you have as gift rather than entitlement.

Question	Discussion Focus
Apply the yitron (net gain) calculation to your financial life: after subtracting the costs of anxiety, lost sleep, strained relationships, and missed ordinary moments, what is the net gain from your current economic ambition?	Honest accounting — the real cost of wealth-seeking.
Paul says ' <i>godliness with contentment is great gain</i> ' (1 Timothy 6:6). What is the difference between contentment as spiritual discipline and contentment as laziness?	Contentment vs. passivity — the active reception of God's gifts.
The person who lacks ' <i>the power to eat</i> ' from their blessings (6:2) receives the gift but cannot enjoy it. Where in your own life are you experiencing this —	Personal diagnosis of ingratitude and the mis reception of gifts.

Question	Discussion Focus
possessing something but not genuinely receiving it?	
LeTourneau gave 90% away and found freedom. Is there a relationship between generosity and joy in your own experience? What does that tell you?	Testimonial and application — generosity as the practical antidote to greed.
James says the wages withheld from workers <i>'cry out to the Lord of Sabaoth'</i> (5:4). How does the awareness that God hears the cry of the exploited change your economic decision-making?	Social justice and the fear of God in economic life.
The Preacher says a stillborn child is better off than a man who lives long but never sees <i>'goodness'</i> (6:3). What does this shocking image reveal about the difference between length of life and quality of soul?	Confronting the illusion that more years or more experiences guarantee satisfaction.

Question	Discussion Focus
<i>'Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire' (6:9).</i> Where in your life is desire currently wandering toward something you don't have, instead of resting in what is actually in front of you?	Practising present-tense gratitude as a spiritual discipline.