

# Ecclesiastes: Play and Obey

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

*Let's hear God's Word from:*

### Scripture: Ecclesiastes 5:13-20 ([The Voice](#))

I have witnessed a grave evil *pervading our world*, one that has been with us since the first sunrise: harm comes to all who hoard their riches. Such riches can easily vanish through some misfortune, so that the rich have nothing left to pass along to their children. We all came naked from our mother's womb, and we will leave this world as we came, taking nothing of the wealth for which we have toiled. Here, too, is another grave evil: all of us, *no matter who we are*, will depart this world exactly the same way as we came into it. So what good does it do to continue to toil after the wind? So all our days we eat in darkness, with mounting frustration, suffering, and anger.

Then it dawned on me that this is good and proper: to eat and drink and find the good in all the toil that we undertake under the sun during the few days God has given, for this is our lot *in life*.

Also, God gives wealth, possessions, and power to enjoy those things, and He allows them to accept their lot *in life* and to enjoy hard work. This is God's gift. For people like this have no time to despair over life because God keeps them so busy with a deep-seated joy.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

### SERMON – Ecclesiastes: Play and Obey

[Robert Herrick](#), not only had a great perm and moustache, but was a poet and priest in the 1600s who wrote the poem *To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time*, with these famous first lines:

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.*

Ecclesiastes influenced Herrick's poem. This isn't a secular or atheistic poem—it's rooted in our Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Scripture reading we just heard is known as one of the five or so "carpe diem passages" in Ecclesiastes where we're encouraged to seize the day and live life with gusto. And so I'd like to introduce to you this morning our guide who will teach us more about the fine art of seizing the day.

The name of the main character in the book of Ecclesiastes is *Qohelet*—which in Hebrew can be translated several ways:

- "Gatherer" of Wisdom and Experience
- "Teacher" or "Preacher" of the Assembly

The Teacher is a bit of a renaissance man, so he's also a king: either King Solomon or a King Solomon-esque persona who has made it to the top. Like an aging rock star, the world-weary Teacher ambles at his own leisurely pace through his favorite topics of discussion. He states his ideas, repeats them, amends them, contradicts them, and then sums them up again. He's also very philosophical—having studied at the best Olive League schools out in the *Middle East*.

You could even say he's the first Existentialist. Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus are all indebted to the Teacher. Growing up in the palace courts, The Teacher's known no limits or boundaries in life:

- His walk-in closet is filled with Armani robes and Louis Vuitton sandals.
- He's daily chauffeured in a Tesla chariot to the palace, as he drinks his \$50,000 bottle of Dom Perignon Rose Gold Methuselah champagne from his goblet.

Robin Leach interviewed the Teacher on "*Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*"—

- He's amassed countless possessions and partook of all manner of pleasure.

But we also learn that he's no mere socialite:

- The Teacher has undertaken great building projects, constructing palaces and ponds.
- He's *seen it all* and *done it all*.

Despite having reached the pinnacle, the Teacher finds no ultimate satisfaction in all his accrued wisdom and wealth. And he reports to us on his conclusions:

*Vanity of vanities," he says. "Utter futility—all of it."  
Generations come ... and generations go.  
The sun rises ... and the sun sets.  
There's nothing new under the sun.*

...

Thirty-eight times the Teacher says this brief life of ours is but a “chasing after the wind.”

We need to heed the Teacher’s advice in our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives:

- Money, sex, success, status, knowledge, work, pleasure, you name it—*it’s all vapor*.
- Whether you have none, a little, or a lot. It’s all just a mist.
- Don’t spend all your time and energy chasing the wind. The only thing you’ll be is *winded* chasing after the wind.
- Try as you may, you’re never going to be able to capture it, collect it, or control it.
- Wind down and breathe deep and let this sink in:

One thing I know for certain is that everything is uncertain—*I think*.

The Teacher even talks about the wisdom of *not having too much wisdom*—because you can’t even count on wisdom. That can be a chasing after the wind too.

Interpreters and believers through the centuries haven’t quite known what to make of this edgy and at times jaded Teacher.

- *Are his words coherent or incoherent?*
- *Is he a realist or a nihilist?*
- *Is he an optimist or pessimist?*
- *Should we try to be like him or not be like him?*

What do I think? God put Ecclesiastes in the Bible for a reason. We need healthy doses of Ecclesiastes. America needs the book of Ecclesiastes.

For example, we’re reminded of some important truths about money:

- Don’t worship it. Don’t love it. Don’t live for it.
- No one who loves money ever has enough.
- Money will let you down.
- Money will keep you up at night.
- Don’t let your life be consumed with hoarding money or spending money—you will never be satisfied.
- Remember, the wages of spend is debt ...

The Teacher reminds us that money is important, but money cannot secure life or happiness. Enjoy it yes, but money will never fully deliver what your soul craves.

Wealth is uncertain. You can lose it in an unlucky business venture, in a bad economy, or have it squandered away by those who have inherited it. It can be stolen or eaten by moth and rust.

Jesus later talks about this:

“Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ([Luke 12:15](#))

The Teacher reminds us to keep it all in perspective:

God is limitless and we human beings are limited.

We all came into this life empty-handed and we will all leave empty-handed. The same is true if you're rich or poor.

All of us are born with a silent companion that follows us everywhere we go, since our day of birth. We take the lead and our quiet companion faithfully accompanies wherever we want to go. Some of us will become more acquainted with him earlier in our lives, others of us can delay this encounter for quite a long time. But there will come a time, for all of us, when this quiet companion will take the lead and take us by the arm and we will follow. His name is death.

This is true, but not the end of the story. As Christians, we can say to the Teacher, "Yes, you're right ... there's nothing new under the sun. But there's a new son that's appeared. The risen Son of God who makes all things new. We are a new creation under the Son that shines upon us in the darkness.

Ecclesiastes prepares us for Christ—stripping us of all comforts, distractions, and idols. And all that's left is God. The Son's death and the Son's resurrection, gives us meaning in the meaninglessness and hope in the hopelessness. No matter what we're going through, we have the promise of everlasting and abundant life—on this side of heaven and on the other side of heaven. Jesus, the Light of the World, has brought about the death of death and the victory of life eternal.

What I love about Ecclesiastes is that it keeps us and our reading of Scripture *honest*. God isn't interested in us wearing masks or maintaining our well-scripted roles or looking like we have it all together. Ecclesiastes shows us how it's done.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is that it doesn't contradict or cancel wisdom—it just expands our understanding of it and how to appropriately and humbly apply wisdom to new life situations we find ourselves in today.

But when it's all said and done, the Teacher gives two commands for everyone in this life:

- One: Fear God and obey his commandments.
- Two: Enjoy the simple pleasures in life.

In other words, if The Teacher were a hymn writer, he wouldn't have written the lyrics,

*Trust and obey for there is no other way.*

He would have changed it to:

*Play and obey, for there is no other way.*

To use a poker analogy: Accept the hand of cards God has dealt you in life. The Teacher calls it your "lot" in life. But be sure to have some fun playing the cards God has dealt you. Play with your friends—don't only play solitaire. Play your cards well. Improvise. Bluff. But don't cheat. Play by the rules—we will all be held accountable by God at the end of the game.

When we accept the transience of life, we can put things in their proper perspective. We're freed as the Teacher says to, "banish vexation from our minds and shake off the troubles from our bodies."

*We can seize the day and have a Carpe Diem faith.*

Immanuel, life is short—*play hard*. Throw yourself into work and play. Or as St. Augustine said, "love God—and do what you will." Laugh at yourself. Laugh *with* others—not *at* them. Hold your agendas lightly. Extend forgiveness. Enjoy the good times while you have them for what they are—because there will also be times of sorrow and tears in this life. Watch movies, go on walks, enjoy a delicious meal and a glass of wine, a good conversation, smell a flower, horse around, read a novel, write a poem, go skydiving . . .

Enjoy your toil—your studies, your work, your yard work, your hobbies, helping someone in need.

Celebrate! Find out what's good and gives you pleasure.

This is a gift—to enjoy what you have. AND remember your Creator.

- Let your life be a Passion Play.
- Schedule in play time—Sabbath rest.
- Recreation is re-creation.

Church isn't only our prayer-ground, it's our playground.

- And when life throws a recession at you: go and take a recess from your recession.

Because Jesus tells us:

"we have an unfailing treasure in heaven." ([Luke 12:33](#))

Let's enjoy each lap around the sun we get.

YOLO Immanuel—You only live once.

Play and obey. For there is no other way.

Carpe diem, Immanuel!

Amen.

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