

Ecclesiastes 5:13-17

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-5/ecclesiastes-513-17/>

The self-destruction that stems from hoarding is lamented. Hoarders refuse to face the reality of death. This evil harms not only the hoarder, but also succeeding generations.

This new section begins with what Solomon calls a *grievous evil*, literally a “sick” *evil*. He uses the phrase *under the sun* as a recurring description of life on earth. This wounded wickedness is *riches being hoarded by their owner to his own hurt*. Someone is amassing riches and the riches lead to self-destruction. In this case, the self-destruction comes about through hoarding. The word for *hurt* is “*ra*,” the same word used for *evil* earlier in the verse.

Hoarded riches is typically a symptom of a warped perspective that we can control circumstances. Believing that having a pile of money or possessions makes us safe or happy. All the while declining to actually enjoy the wealth or do any good with it. It is noteworthy that Solomon declares hoarding to lead to our *own hurt*.

The Bible is neutral toward *riches*. It is our attitude toward riches and the way in which they are used that is celebrated or condemned. [1 Timothy 6:17-19](#) says:

“Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”

There is no requirement for the rich to divest themselves of wealth. In fact, the wealthy are instructed to *enjoy* their possessions. But they are also instructed to do good with it, sharing and helping others. The opposite of hoarding. By doing so they are making an eternal investment, laying up treasure in heaven.

How does this reconcile with Jesus’ instruction to the rich young ruler, whom He told to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor? In that

young man's case, he asked Jesus what he might do to inherit "aionios zoe", usually interpreted as "eternal life." "Aionios" speaks of time that spans an entire age. "Zoe" speaks of a quality of life. So the phrase could be interpreted "the highest quality life possible."

In the New Testament, the Bible speaks of the "highest quality life possible" in two ways: relationship and reward. Relationship comes by gift. By believing in Jesus, we become children of God. God is our inheritance unconditionally ([Romans 8:17a](#)). This is based solely on belief. Jesus is clear that inheriting the gift of eternal life comes only through faith.

The reward of high quality life comes through God's favor based on what we do. It is often the consequence that comes from obedience, but also includes rewards in the next life. The rich young ruler asked what he might "do" to inherit the highest quality life. Because Jesus answers the "What must I do" question with things to do, this must apply to inheriting the reward or experience of the best life possible. In this young man's case, Jesus first told him to walk in obedience to God's commands. The young man answered that he already did this and asked if there was more he could do.

[Mark 10:21](#) says, "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, 'One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'" Note that Jesus "felt a love" for the young rich man. Jesus did not contest that he followed God's commands. He just answered the rich young man's question whether there was an even greater reward of life available.

Applying the New Testament principles to Solomon's instruction, it seems the path of wisdom is to enjoy and share wealth, but also to hold it with an open hand. To recognize "It is not ours" and be willing to give or lose our possessions at any time. Every possession we have is or will eventually pass through our hands. We are merely a steward for a time.

Solomon observes, in his example, that the *hoarded riches* end up being *lost* through a *bad investment*. So now there is *nothing to support* the *son* of the hoarder. This translation makes it sound as if the man lost his riches on an unwise business venture and no longer can support his son. But if the intent is to say he lost his money, it seems odd that only the son is mentioned, not the rest of the family. Further, the rich man is said to have been hoarding his riches, guarding them into *himself*. Hoarders of money don't make investments.

It seems inconsistent for the man to be hoarding while also investing foolishly. The translation for *bad investment* is from the Hebrew “ra’ inyan,” both words we have looked at before (see notes on [Ecclesiastes 1:12-15](#) for “inyan”). “Ra” means *evil* and “inyan” means *work* as in a job or occupation.

So, it is not “business” as a verb but as a noun. This is probably better translated to say the *hoarding* is an “evil occupation” rather than a *bad investment*. It is mentioned there is nothing for the *son* because he is the heir that gains no benefit from the hoarding. So there is *nothing to support* the son. The word translated *support* is “yad,” which literally means “hand” and connotes power and guidance. So it seems this may be saying that the missing *support* from the father is guidance in showing the son how to be a good steward. Hoarding is the opposite of stewardship. It is a claim that “This is mine,” while stewardship is a recognition that we are only caretakers for a time. It makes sense that someone who claims “This is mine” would pay no attention to mentoring their heir. Mentoring an heir requires an admission that “I won’t always have my possessions.”

The next verse, v. 15, speaks of the true perspective of material possessions, and the futility of hoarding: *As he had come naked from his mother’s womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand.* Hand here is also a translation as “yad”, this time translated in the literal sense as *hand* rather than *support*, as it was in the prior verse. It seems the *son* has an empty *hand* from lack of fatherly guidance as well as suffering the fate of all who live on earth: we all leave every possession behind.

The context allows two interpretations of *he* in verse 15. It can refer to the hoarding father as well as the unsupported son. Perhaps the description applies to both. “*He*” comes naked from his mother’s belly and will return as “*he*” came. “*He*” will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand (“yad”). Although the father tries to guard his *hoarded riches*, he can’t take it with him. The son comes into the world with nothing and is not aided by the *bad investment* of his father. Both experience the same fate. Neither gains benefit from the wealth and both will leave it behind.

In verse 16, Solomon adds an additional comment about the father’s hoarding: *This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die.* Based on reason and experience, a life built around accumulating treasure is futile. This is true for everyone. Every single person has to leave all their treasure behind. This is a brutal reality for a hoarder. The hoarder

therefore *toils for the wind*. His life is full of seeking *advantage* for himself, but there will be none.

Of course Solomon has already provided the answer to hoarding, a lesson he will soon repeat. True fulfillment comes through faith rather than accumulation. But Solomon's writing reflects the cycles of life he has observed, and he continues to cycle through the lesson he has learned, while expanding its application.

Solomon comments further on the man who *toils for the wind*, accumulating treasure he will leave behind, saying: *Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger*. This thought could refer to the nature of a hoarding man leading to isolation. A hoarder must be suspicious of anyone who poses a threat to his possessions. This could lead to a life where the hoarder *eats in darkness*, alone.

The word *eats* is 'akal. Other usages for 'akal include "burn up," "consume," and "devour." This phrase could also apply to the hoarder "consuming" his time on earth in the *darkness* of a lack of understanding. He could be living a life focused on accumulation and possession of material wealth, blind to the reality that he will die and leave it all behind. Reality is all around him—it is self-evident that he can't take it with him. Which could naturally lead to *great vexation, sickness, and anger*. *Vexation* that his commitment to accumulating treasure is *toiling for the wind*. The *sickness* could be seeking control over things God did not grant us to control. Which would naturally lead to *anger* about our mortality and inability to function independent of a sovereign Creator.

Biblical Text:

¹³ There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.¹⁴ When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was *nothing* to support him.¹⁵ As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand.¹⁶ This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? ¹⁷ Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.