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The vaporousness of riches. John's letter to the elect lady.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 5. 1. Vow a vow to God. Do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. 2. Pay what you vow.

It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay. 3. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. 4. Why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands? 5. For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity.

6. But God is the one you must fear. If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter. For the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

But this is gain for a land in every way a king committed to cultivated fields. He who

loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is vanity.

When goods increase, they increase who eat them. And what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun.

Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb, he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

This also is a grievous evil. Just as he came, so shall he go. And what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and anger.

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him. For this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions, and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God.

For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. In Ecclesiastes chapter 4, the preacher focused upon the vaporousness of human society and its dynamics, our horizontal relationships. Now at the beginning of chapter 5, he turns to our relationship with God, our vertical relationship as it were.

We can observe a parallel between verses 1 to 3 and verses 4 to 7. They are two sets of teaching concerning cultic actions that need to be taken mindfully, sacrificing and making a vow. Both of these teachings are followed by a strange proverb concerning dreams. Dreams that don't give birth to actions suffice.

The teaching here is similar to teaching we find elsewhere in scripture, in James chapter 1 verses 19 to 20 for instance. Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Guarding the tongue and ruling one's spirit are chief among the hallmarks of wisdom.

Circumspection in our approach to worship is particularly singled out by the preacher as a crucial occasion for the expression of these traits. When we enter into the house of the Lord or join with his people for our sacrifice of praise, we are entering into his intentional presence by which he is with us to judge and to bless. Consequently, we must be very

cautious and not rashly draw near to our own judgment and destruction.

The preacher's warning here anticipates the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 27 to 31. Warnings about inappropriate and reckless worship are common in the scriptures and also elsewhere in the wisdom literature. For instance in Proverbs chapter 15 verse 8. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.

And a similar verse in chapter 21 verse 27. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. How much more when he brings it with evil intent? That the preacher especially focuses upon the tongue and our need to be guarded in speech in worship is noteworthy.

Worship can so often be filled with our own words, words that come rather too easily to our mouths. For the preacher, however, worship should be a place of mindful listening first and foremost, of guarded speech and weighty utterance. When we speak in worship we should not speak lightly, but ought to speak as those who will be judged by and held to what we declare.

A particular case of our need to guard our speech is seen in the case of the vow. The danger of rash vows is well illustrated by the story of Jephthah and his daughter. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 21 to 23 also cautions against taking vows without recognizing their weight.

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

As in the teaching of verses 1 to 2, the warning makes clear that the Lord does not suffer fools. If you are entering into his presence, you must be in earnest. There is no requirement that you must take a vow, as Deuteronomy points out, so don't be hasty to make one.

If you make a vow you haven't sinned, indeed you might have done something very good. However, it places a heavy responsibility upon you to fulfill what you have declared that you will do. The person who vows rashly will bring judgment upon himself.

The cryptic proverbs concerning dreams of verses 3 and 7 punctuate these two sections of teaching. The meaning of these two statements is difficult to determine. Verse 3 might refer to the way in which people can imagine great deeds that they might perform, when they would never put in the effort required to make those dreams materialize, meaning that the dream remains a dream.

The fool's speech is like this. He is full of empty words that never come into reality. Verse

7 makes a similar point.

The more that people are given over to an imagination divorced from action, the more their words will multiply. Words come easily for such dreamers, because their words are hollow and light. However, the wise man weighs his words and speaks prudently, when he isn't carefully holding his tongue.

This is all a result of the fear of the Lord. It's the awareness of the Lord's presence that causes us to be careful about what we say, and not to speak rashly or thoughtlessly. At the beginning of the previous chapter, which Daniel Frederick suggests forms a unit with verses 1-9 of chapter 5, the issue of oppression was raised.

Here in verses 8-9 we return to this theme. Oppression is not something to be astonished at. However, there are limits upon oppression.

The preacher particularly draws attention to the fact that oppressors are often under others, who watch over them, and may perhaps remove them from their office, or punish them for their injustice. And even if no human judge will establish justice in such situations, ultimately the Lord watches over all, and he will bring all deeds to account. The king committed to cultivated fields might be a way of speaking of the king who manages his realm well, removing the weeds of unjust judges from it, and planting faithful rulers in their place.

Frederick notes the structural parallels between verses 10-12 and 12-20, which he argues belong with verses 1-9 of chapter 6, three sections dealing with the temporary character of wealth. He also, however, offers an alternative structure, which presents verses 10-12 as the introduction, and verses 13-20 are paralleled with chapter 6 verses 1-9. The common structure can be seen as follows.

There is an evil, followed by riches possessed and riches lost. Second, begetting, having nothing and then coming and going. Third, what advantage from toil, no satisfaction, and then the theme of contentment, with which the section ends.

The person who is a lover of money will not ultimately find it satisfying. Greater wealth increases responsibilities, it increases hangers-on, fair-weather friends, and the expectations and demands of others. Besides all of this, wealth provokes others' envy, and their desire to take advantage of the wealthy man, to defraud him, to steal from him, or otherwise depart him from his wealth.

The wealthy man may well struggle to enjoy untroubled sleep. By contrast, the laboring man, who makes a subsistence living, may sleep with few worries and enjoy contentment. The apostle Paul seems to allude to this passage in 1 Timothy 6 verses 6-10, where he explores the same points.

Verses 13-17 present us with a specific instance of the vaporous character of wealth. We

might think here of Jesus' parable concerning the rich fool and the danger of covetousness in Luke chapter 12. It is death especially that exposes the emptiness of such pursuit of wealth.

The soul of the rich man was required of him by God, and all of his wealth was of no use to him at that point. Similar warnings about laying up treasure on earth, where it can be lost to thieves and corruption, or to failed ventures, are given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Verses 18-20, with which the chapter concludes, are like chapter 6 verse 9, which concludes the parallel section in counselling contentment.

By pursuing contentment in God's good gifts in the midst of our labours, we will know peace and joy in our work, enjoying our lot, rather than constantly fretting to change it in a way that will never really bring true satisfaction. The person who cannot find satisfaction and contentment in a small sufficiency will struggle to find it in much wealth. A question to consider.

What is money? What does it stand for? Why do we so pursue it? What are some of the ways that the Bible demythologises money, helping us to think about it more accurately? 2 John The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, are not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us, and will be with us for ever. Grace, mercy and peace be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.

And now I ask you, dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister greet you.

2 John covers much of the same ground as the first epistle of John, and clearly comes

from the same hand, as 2 John and 3 John are the two shortest books in the scriptures, and don't address much that isn't already addressed in the book of 1 John. Some might wonder why they were included in the New Testament at all. Luke Timothy Johnson advances the intriguing possibility that all three letters were sent at the same time by the hand of Demetrius.

3 John recommends Demetrius to Gaius, and 2 John was intended to be publicly read in Gaius' church. 1 John is less of a letter than a homily, exhorting the members of the church. In contrast to his first epistle, something possibly explained by the fact that 1 John was not intended to be a letter, 2 John begins with his self-identification and his addressees.

John here speaks of himself as the elder. Elders were overseers of congregations, and as a shepherd of the flock, even though an apostle, it was appropriate for John to term himself an elder. Peter does the same in 1 Peter 5, verses 1-3, where he gives us a sense of what being an elder meant.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. The letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children. Some have suggested that the elect lady is a female individual of status.

More recently, others have suggested that the figure might have been a woman who pastored a particular congregation. These readings are weak ones, however. As we go through the letter, we will see an alternation between a singular addressee and multiple addressees that suggests that the woman is a way of referring to a congregation.

In 1 Peter 5, verse 13, we see another example of a particular congregation being personified as a woman, once again being referred to as chosen. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings. This brief letter also ends by speaking of the elect lady's sister's children, who send greetings.

The fact that the children of the elect sister send greetings, but nothing is mentioned about the elect sister herself sending greetings, supports the idea that the elect sister is a personification of the congregation. The personification of the church as a woman is something that we find elsewhere in the New Testament, with the description of the church as the bride of Christ. Christ is the divine husband who takes his chosen people to himself.

John's use of the term elect, or chosen to refer to the woman here, might make us think of the way that we have been set apart for Christ as his bride. We might also identify the

application of bridal imagery and the personification of a single church as a woman in 2 Corinthians 11, verse 2. The image of the church as the bride of Christ underlines its continual and necessary relationship to Christ as its divine husband, from whose loving choice it derives its life and identity. Perhaps a less likely, but nonetheless intriguing possibility, is that the term lady here doesn't actually mean lady at all, but means congregation.

Robert Yarborough notes that the same Greek word is used elsewhere in ancient sources to refer to a civic organisation comprised of multiple assemblies. If this is the case, it would be the only place where we see the word so used in the New Testament. In 1 John, John has addressed the hearers of the epistle as children on several occasions.

He speaks of his children again in 3 John, verse 4. In 1 John, John had maintained that love for the brothers was a hallmark of those who loved God and the truth. The way that he describes believers' relationship with the truth here gives weight to the idea that he regards truth as situated in the person of Jesus Christ. It isn't a lifeless truth, it's a living one that abides with us and will endure forever.

This truth is personally known in Jesus Christ. He doesn't just wish them grace, mercy and peace, as we might see in one of Paul's letters, but claims that grace, mercy and peace will be with us. These things come to us from God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, in truth and in love.

Yarborough writes, In truth and love reflects John's conviction that there is a theological norm, truth, grounded in God's wisdom suffused with an agapic quality, love, innate to God's being. The truth and love of Father and Son establish a framework within which, John is certain, God's grace, mercy and peace will be at work among Christ's followers. In a manner that might remind us of Paul's responses to seeing the progress of the churches to which he had ministered, John greatly rejoices to hear about the progress of the members of the churches to whom he is writing in the faith.

Perhaps he had met these members of the congregation in the course of his travels, or perhaps they had visited the church of which he was an overseer. Now he addresses their congregation, just as he does throughout the first epistle, which might well have accompanied this letter, he asks them to love each other. This is not some new teaching or instruction that he is giving them, but the fundamental teaching that has been given to the congregation and to the church more broadly from the beginning.

The statement here is similar to that found in 1 John 2, 7-8. Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard.

At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

The commandment to love is the unity of the white light that is refracted in the prism of the law, to reveal the full spectrum of the commandments. Once again, John helps us to recognise both the singularity and the plurality of the law of God.

The commandment to love does not involve the reduction of the commandments of God, as if removing all the excess to reveal a simple, streamlined and more feasible version. No, the commandment to love is the commandment that gathers in itself all of the other commandments, holding them in unity. The heart of the epistle of 2 John is the warning concerning the deceivers, John had previously described these persons in 1 John 2, 18-23.

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many Antichrists have come, therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.

No one who denies the Son has the Father, whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. He had called his hearers to test the spirits, in 1 John 4, 1-3. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming, and now is in the world already.

All of this is according to the warning that Jesus had given in the Olivet Discourse concerning false teachers that would come. The mark of these false teachers is their failure to confess a central claim of the faith, that Christ came in the flesh. Speaking of his coming implies his divine origin, the fact that he comes from heaven.

The confession of his coming in the flesh insists upon the truth of his humanity. The danger is that, having struggled and laboured for the faith, people adopting this error might be in danger of losing out, holding to some lesser Jesus and not the true one. They must be vigilant, watching themselves, lest anyone fall short as their faith is shaken.

This teaching concerning Christ is a touchstone of truth. John warns about innovators, those who go on ahead, rather than abiding in the truth of Christ. Such false teachers are developing new theological frameworks, systems and syntheses that, rather than

upholding the faith once for all delivered to the people of God, lop off elements of it that are not philosophically or theologically convenient to them.

Their concern must be to abide in the teaching of Christ, because in the truth of that teaching they will enjoy fellowship with the Father and with the Son. In a situation of error spreading through the Church, and in a situation of such high spiritual stakes, it is absolutely imperative that the lines are kept very clear. The habits of politeness and the customs of hospitality must be resisted in the case of these false teachers, lest they be supported in the deadly teaching that they are spreading, and lest the impression be given that, in showing hospitality to them, their teaching is being judged to be within the pale.

It most definitely is not. For the sake of people's spiritual well-being, no signs of friendship or support should be given to them. The endings of 2 John and 3 John are very similar.

In both of them, the desire for face-to-face meeting over written correspondence is expressed. The result of this will be the fulfilment of the joy of both parties. As Christians we find joy in God, but also in our fellowship with each other.

If joy is an expression of love that achieves its end of communion, there should, according to the logic of John's theology, be a joy characteristic not only of our relationship with God, but also of our relationship to our brothers and sisters. The final words of the epistle communicate the greetings of John's congregation to the congregation to whom he is writing, likely the congregation of which Gaius is the elder. If a particular congregation is like a chosen woman, that congregation relates to other congregations as to sisters.

As in his first epistle, John's employment of familial language here is important. It fits neatly with his emphasis upon being born of God and loving each other as brothers and sisters. A question to consider.

What are some ways in which we should guard ourselves against giving aid to false teachers, following John's warnings in his second epistle?