

Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 | “Popularity & Power”

Preached on May 24, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn to Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 this morning, as we continue our study through the book of Ecclesiastes. *[pauseeee]*

The writer has been looking out at the world around him and noting what he sees. *[pause]*

He saw a lot of not-so-good things like: injustice, oppression, death, envy, and individualism.

But with that, he has also shown us that there are “better” ways to live than others. *[pause]*

Our passage this morning continues that line of thinking, as the next thing he sees is the drive for popularity and power. *[pause]*

I’ll READ the passage for you. *[READ 13–16]*

Many people try to find meaning and purpose in popularity or power—they are driven by it. *[pause]*

The reason why we want these things is because the popular and powerful are the ones who usually get the attention, the money, the recognition, and the control. *[pause]*

We naturally want that because we would rather be considered “high up” than “lowly.”

We would rather be in control than be told what to do. *[pauseeee]*

A survey of Gen Z’ers, who are around 13–29 years old, found that 57% of them wanted their career to be an influencer.¹ *[pauseee]*

An internet or social media influencer is someone who has accumulated a large following online, and so influences people in the way they think, what they buy, or what they do. *[pause]*

Influencers have a great amount of popularity and power, and this is what people want.

But the truth is that this is no mere modern-day phenomenon, for people have wanted these things for ages. *[pause]*

It’s said that the famous military commander, Napoleon Bonaparte, who became the emperor of France, once claimed, “Power is my mistress.”

He then went on to talk about how he worked so hard for her, so he wouldn’t let anyone take her away from him.² *[pause]*

As you can see, this is no new thing, but has been going on for ages. *[pauseeee]*

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/09/14/more-than-half-of-gen-z-want-to-be-influencers-but-its-constant.html>.

² https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/napoleon_bonaparte_165317.

These desires for popularity and power are not only found “out there,” but can be found in our hearts, too. *[pause]*

They may not be seen in our climb up the corporate ladder, our political ambitions, or our online presence, but they can still be present. *[pause]*

Have you ever found yourself thinking, “I want everyone to like me,” and get *crushed* when someone doesn’t? *[pause]*

Have you ever found yourself yearning for more control over decisions?

You think, “If only *I* were president...if only *I* was the boss...if only *I* was in charge.” *[pauseeee]*

Popularity and power are common, strong desires, so no wonder the writer of Ecclesiastes talks about them, as he looks around.

But what does God’s Word say about these things, and is there a better way forward? *[pause]*

Certainly, for we see first that we should...

I. Value wisdom over popularity and power. (13–14)

Have you ever played that game where you have to choose between two options, and it’s hard to pick between them? *[pause]*

Usually the question is, “Which would you choose?”

So, “Which would you choose? Cold weather all year or hot weather all year?” *[pause]*

Kind of a hard decision for most of us. *[pauseee]*

Here’s another one, “Which would you choose? Always doing the dishes or always doing the laundry?” *[pause]*

For some of you, that’s an easy decision because you can’t stand one or the other.

Well I want to ask you this morning, “Which would you choose? To be poor and wise, or to be rich and powerful, yet foolish?” *[pause]*

Really dwell upon that question, which would you choose? *[pauseeee]*

For some people, they would pick the rich and powerful one...

They would say, “Think about all of the things I could get with that money!”

Or, “Think of all that I could do with that power—I would have such influence and control, and people would look up to me.” *[pause]*

But is that really the best choice? *[pauseeee]*

What's the writer of Ecclesiastes' answer to this question?

He says in verse 13, "Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice." *[pause]*

Most people would lift up the foolish king as having the better life than the poor, wise man.

Our culture's magazines are plastered with the faces of the rich and famous.

The news revolves around what some "big name" person said or did. *[pause]*

Some of the most liked and followed people on social media are those with the lavish lifestyle. *[pauseee]*

The foolish decisions they make like wasting their money on something, or divorcing their spouse after a year, is often overlooked due to the fact that they're rich and powerful. *[pauseee]*

So much of what we see is the world saying, "To be rich, famous, and powerful are the key to the 'better life,'" but the Bible flips it.

It's saying, "That poor and wise guy is in a much better state than the foolish and powerful king." *[pauseee]*

This reminds us that the world's values are not often God's values—so let me ask you: do you value wisdom over popularity and power? *[pauseee]*

Here's a question to consider...

How often do you think, "I need more money," or, "I need more power," or, "I need to be more liked," compared with how often you think, "I need more wisdom, Lord." *[pauseeee]*

It was Solomon, who could have asked God for anything, and he asked God for wisdom, and God was pleased with it³—now that's a wise king. *[pause]*

Value wisdom over popularity and power. *[pauseeee]*

Now let's look closer at this foolish king, for he shows us some very important things about wisdom and folly...

First, *age doesn't automatically equal more wisdom.* *[pause]*

Generally, the older you are, the more wisdom you will have.

So compare the wisdom of an 80 year old and the wisdom and an 8 year old, and there's often a big difference. *[pause]*

³ A reference to 1 Kings 3:3–14.

That's why Job 12:12 says, "Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days."
[pause]

As a person ages, typically they accumulate wisdom from years of gaining knowledge and experiencing life, but the truth is that this isn't always the case.

For even Psalm 119 says, "I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts."⁴ [pause]

True wisdom comes from God and His Word, so if someone hears and heeds God's Word, they are going to be wiser than someone who doesn't. [pauseeee]

The sad picture is that here is this older king, who is more foolish than a poor, young man—age didn't equal wisdom for him. [pauseee]

This reminds us that we cannot simply *assume* that we will just automatically become wiser as we get older—it doesn't work like that.

We must humbly look to God and His Word. [pauseeee]

This passage also demonstrates that *those who are rich, powerful, and popular aren't always the most wise*. [pauseee]

This king had the highest position in the land, yet he was more foolish than a poor, young man in his kingdom. [pauseee]

Isn't it interesting that the people with the most wealth or highest positions are often seen as the wise ones? [pause]

They are seen as holding lots of wisdom to pass on to us, so they put out books and do interviews that give us their quote-on-quote "wise" tips to success.

Yet the Bible is showing us that to be rich, powerful, or popular doesn't necessarily mean you're wiser. [pauseeee]

What's interesting is that churches can be duped by this kind of thinking, too.

Some churches think that just because a guy is a successful businessman that he must be a good elder or deacon. [pause]

By doing this, they are revealing that they think that those who are successful in an earthly sense are wiser.

That's not always the case! [pause]

There are young, poor, yet godly people who are way wiser than some people who are constantly looked up to in our world. [pause]

⁴ Psalm 119:100.

In God's eyes, wisdom is NOT displayed by human accolades or human praise, but by knees on the ground in trust. *[pauseee]*

Something else that we see about wisdom and folly is that *past wisdom doesn't always equal present wisdom*. *[pause]*

Here was a king, who must have had some wisdom in the past.

It says that he “no longer” knew how to take advice, so it means that he once did. *[pause]*

He used to reign wisely, yet this king's prior wisdom and success didn't mean he had it now. *[pauseee]*

Some of you have had prior success in using wisdom in your life, but do not count on that today. *[pause]*

You may have made wise decisions years ago, but the question that you are faced with is, will you make wise decisions *today*? *[pauseee]*

You cannot ride the coattails of past choices, but you must hold on to God's Word each and every day.

Every morning, wake up and plead, “Lord, please give me wisdom today.” *[pauseee]*

In this king's example, we also see that *folly is displayed in not being willing to take advice*. *[pause]*

This king was foolish because he no longer took being corrected, admonished, warned, or instructed.

He couldn't handle it when another person called him out on a decision or suggested a better plan. *[pauseee]*

Most likely, his power and success got to his head—now he thought he was “big stuff.” *[pause]*

While he used to be willing to listen, now he was inflexible and stubborn, and so his new motto was, “My way or the highway.” *[pause]*

Essentially, this king became “wise in his own eyes,”⁵ and therefore unteachable. *[pauseee]*

What happens is that the more power, success, riches, or popularity someone has, the more they are tempted to start thinking, “I know it all, just look at how everyone looks to me.” *[pause]*

“Look at all of my past great decisions, I know what I'm doing,” or, “Who are they to go against what I think, don't they know who I am?!” *[pauseee]*

⁵ A reference to Proverbs 26:12.

But what true wisdom says is, “I don’t know everything.” [pause]

True wisdom says, “Lord, I need help.” [pauseeee]

A wise person is a *teachable* person.

It’s not the person who has all the answers, but the person who knows that they don’t. [pause]

It’s not the person who exudes self-assurance, but the person who is assured of their need for God and others. [pauseeee]

Do people feel like they can approach you with constructive criticism, or are they nervous that you’ll bite their head off for saying something? [pause]

Do people feel like you listen to the opinions of others, or do they think you’ll belittle them? [pauseee]

Value wisdom over popularity and power, but why?...

Because wisdom helps you rise up, but folly brings you down. [pauseeee]

Wisdom led this poor youth to rise up, just listen to verse 14, “For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.” [pauseee]

This man didn’t merely moan and groan in his poor state, but used his wisdom to make good decisions that led him from prison to the throneroom.

Talk about a rags-to-riches story! [pauseee]

Know that this isn’t *promising* that just because you are wise, then you will become the ruler, but it’s showing us that wisdom *can* lead to this sort of thing. [pause]

We all know foolish people who somehow got that manager position, but we also know that if someone makes wise decisions, it can lead them to great places. [pauseee]

This young, wise man rose the ranks because he was teachable—he listened to advice, unlike the foolish king.

He could wisely see the opportunities in front of him, heed the warnings of danger, and make good decisions. [pauseeee]

Listen up, even if your wise, right choices don’t mean high-up positions, know that they are right choices, nonetheless. [pause]

Living by wisdom, no matter the outcome, is always “better” than a life of folly. [pauseeee]

So wisdom helps you rise up, but folly can bring you down. [pause]

The king's folly led him to a place of making foolish choices, and his kingship and the kingdom would suffer because of this. *[pause]*

In that way, he would be brought down more and more by his folly, and now the throne was primed for change. *[pauseee]*

Value wisdom over popularity and power because secondly....

II. Popularity and power are fleeting! (15–16)

Well-known people deep down know that their popularity and power can be gone in an instant. *[pauseee]*

There are singers who had that one hit song, but after that, you never heard about them anymore. *[pause]*

There are celebrities who have been “canceled” by the culture, and now they are nowhere to be seen. *[pause]*

Politicians who were at the height of popularity and power decades ago are now not even known among younger generations.

And yet so many are seeking these things, as if they were the key to joy, meaning, and satisfaction—but what a foolish thing to do! *[pauseee]*

Verses 15–16 show us how fleeting these things really are.

In verse 15, we find this young man at the height of popularity. *[pause]*

I want to read out of the NASB version, as I believe it translates this verse better...

It says, “I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him.”⁶ *[pauseee]*

The idea is that the foolish king is replaced by the young, wise man who rose up the ranks. *[pause]*

He has vast amounts of popularity and power now.

Notice how it's translated in this version. “All the living under the sun *throng* to the side of the second lad.” *[pause]*

Talk about popularity, everyone goes with this man—now he's the guy. *[pause]*

They look up to him, want him to rule, and admire the decisions he makes. *[pause]*

⁶ NASB (1995 version). Many other solid translations likewise translate it this way: see the CSB, LSB, & NIV.

If he lived today, he'd probably have a huge social media following and be in all the headlines.
[pause]

This kind of popularity is what many people long for. [pause]

The people with the most likes or followers online are the ones who are idolized. [pause]

Many want everyone to like them and some desire to be famous. [pause]

Even if this isn't you to that extreme, consider how it can show up in your heart, though...

Do you want everyone to like you, and if someone doesn't, it shatters you? [pause]

Do you want people to notice how good you are at something, and you thrive on that recognition, but are downcast, if you don't get it? [pauseee]

This young man was at the height of popularity and power in verse 15, but look at what happens when you get into verse 16...

"There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him." [pause]

Talk about a plot twist.

He was loved and followed by everyone at one point, but a new generation comes along and they don't like him anymore. [pause]

They don't support him—his approval rating has plummeted. [pause]

All of the previous enthusiasm has dwindled, as they are unhappy under his reign. [pause]

Commentator Derek Kidner said, "He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements."⁷ [pauseee]

Popularity and power are fleeting. [pauseee]

I want you to imagine a man who builds a sandcastle on the beach. [pause]

He crafts it perfectly, taking the time and effort to make it just right. [pause]

When he's done, he stands back to take a look at his creation, and he's proud of it. [pause]

You go up to talk to him about his sandcastle, and he says...

"This is the most valuable thing that I have. I can't wait to come back everyday and enjoy this sandcastle.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, ed. J. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 52.

I may even quit my job and sell everything I have, so that I can spend more time enjoying this castle.” *[pausee]*

What would you think? What would you say? *[pausee]*

This is a silly illustration because we all know that we shouldn’t value sandcastles that much because sandcastles are *fleeting*. *[pause]*

His sandcastle may be very nice, but it could easily be gone later when the tide comes in or a storm rolls through.

So also, those who put great value in popularity and power are like that man with the sandcastle—they are putting too much value in something fleeting and it’s foolish. *[pauseee]*

If you live for popularity and power, you will be crushed someday with utter disappointment. *[pause]*

Do not put your hopes in them, for they don’t satisfy! *[pauseee]*

Jim Carrey, the successful actor and comedian, once said, “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”⁸
[pause]

This is why the writer of Ecclesiastes said at the end of all of this, “Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.” *[pausee]*

This passage shows us that...

Wisdom is better than popularity and power, which are fleeting.

This passage pushes us away from fleeting popularity and power to the firm and lasting wisdom of God. *[pausee]*

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us, “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”⁹ *[pausee]*

We weren’t the popular and the powerful, but that’s not what matters, for through the cross, God flipped the world’s values on their head. *[pause]*

⁸<https://quotefancy.com/quote/1123480/Jim-Carrey-I-think-everybody-should-get-rich-and-famous-and-do-everything-they-ever>.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:26–27.

Through the lowliness of the cross, God chose to redeem us who were lowly and lift us up to be seated with Christ in the heavenly places.¹⁰ *[pauseee]*

In God's matchless wisdom, He sent Christ to come to this earth, die for our sins, and then rise again.

And now anyone who puts their faith in Him is saved, and no longer under condemnation for their sins. *[pause]*

This message of the cross is folly to the world, but to us, it is the power of God!¹¹ *[pause]*

Now as we seek to follow Christ, we can be filled with wisdom to live for Him.¹² *[pauseee]*

Like the poor, wise man, but better, Jesus came into this world lowly and poor, yet rose up on the cross, rose up from the grave, and then rose up to Heaven to be on the throne. *[pause]*

Now He has been highly exalted, as the King of kings, who will someday have a great multitude that no one can number, crying out...

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”¹³ *[pause]*

His kingship will not diminish, nor will he be replaced, for “he shall reign forever and ever.”¹⁴ *[pauseee]*

Value wisdom, that is, Christ, the wisdom of God,¹⁵ over any popularity and power that this world could offer.

In Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”¹⁶ *[pauseee]*

Knowing Him and being known by Him are better than any fleeting popularity and power of this world, for he saves and satisfies. *[pause]*

He brings us eternal life and eternal hope.

He gives meaning to our lives, lasting forgiveness, and right standing with God. *[pauseee]*

It's truly better to be poor in this world, yet rich in Christ than have worldly wealth, but no hope. *[pause]*

It's better to be lowly in this world and raised with Christ than to be raised to the highest earthly throne, but be brought low someday by God. *[pause]*

¹⁰ A reference to Ephesians 2:6.

¹¹ A reference to 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹² A reference to Colossians 1:9–10.

¹³ Revelation 7:9–10.

¹⁴ Revelation 11:15.

¹⁵ A reference to 1 Corinthians 1:24.

¹⁶ Colossians 2:3.

It's better to be unknown in this world, and yet known by the Lord of the universe than all the popularity that one could gain, which could be gone in an instant. *[pauseeee]*

I think of that hymn called, "I'd Rather Have Jesus."¹⁷ *[pause]*

Do you remember some of the lines? One says, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold." *[pause]*

Another verse says, "I'd rather have Jesus than man's applause," and even mentions "world-wide fame." *[pause]*

And the chorus goes, "Than to be the *king* of a vast domain or be held in sin's dread sway. I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today." *[pauseeee]*

Who do you look to? What do you value above all?

¹⁷ "I'd Rather Have Jesus," by Rhea F. Miller (1922) [italics added by me].