

The Pursuit of Pleasure

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on September 2, 2018

This morning we are turning to the second sermon in our ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, who was known for his wisdom and wealth, Ecclesiastes is the reflection of a king of Israel near the end of his days where he ponders the meaning of life.

Over the course of twelve chapters, Solomon develops his position by commenting on the common areas where human beings seek to find meaning in life. Using his personal experience in these matters as the foundation for his analysis, Solomon discusses the pursuit of pleasure, the attainment of wisdom, investing in our work, seeking status, gaining riches, and advancing our knowledge.

As we noted in last week's sermon, the general tone of Ecclesiastes is very negative. In chapter one, Solomon begins his book with the words, "‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’" This refrain is heard throughout Ecclesiastes as Solomon discusses the end result of his pursuits in life.

Thus, it will come as no surprise when we discover that interspersed between his commentary on the paths we commonly take in the quest to find meaning, Solomon observes that people are corrupt, that injustice reigns, that life is governed by seasons, and at the end of the day death is our common destiny.

These dark thoughts, ironically penned by a man whose name means "peace," are in my opinion, the product of a divided heart. On the one hand, the Bible tells us that Solomon was a great man of God, an ancestor of Christ, who built the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and who witnessed the glory of God fill the Temple on its dedication day. On the other hand the Bible also tells us that Solomon engaged in many political marriages, which were against God's laws, and that through these marriages, the worship of foreign gods was introduced into the land of Israel to such a degree that the kingdom was divided at the end of Solomon's reign, and the rift never healed.

This means that when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, his heart was well advanced in its journey away from God. And yet, even though his heart had hardened through the years, there was still a soft spot that still belonged to God, and this part of his heart still informed his writing and ultimately produced his final verdict on the matter of the meaning of life.

And now, having considered some of the pertinent background information, let us look at today's Bible lesson. We will be reading from Ecclesiastes, chapter two, verses one through eleven.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

2 I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But again, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 3 I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine - my mind still guiding me with wisdom - and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. 10 Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

In the Western world, it could be argued, that consumerism is the great religion at the heart of our economy and culture. This religion teaches us that the deepest needs of our soul will be met by a material product. And the disciple of the consumer religion is called to devote their life to the acquisition of stuff to fill their lives with happiness and meaning.

When stated so bluntly, almost everyone would agree that at an intellectual level, the consumer religion is quite silly. And yet, as silly as it sounds, most of us buy into it. Or at least partially. If that were not true, why do so many people buy lottery tickets, or rack up credit card debt, or buy houses that they can't afford, or cars that they simply do not need. Why do we throw out closets full of perfectly good clothes that have been hardly used, only to fill them up with the latest fashions? Why are we a people so prone to addiction: to food, alcohol, drugs, shopping, sex; you name it?

In today's Scripture reading, we find a man of God, who was a key player in God's redemptive plans for Israel and for the world being seduced into the alluring world of consumer pleasure. This should serve as a warning to remind us how easy it is for any of us to fall prey to the temptations of pleasure. Even a saint can be seduced by sin.

As Solomon tells us, in Ecclesiastes chapter two, there was a time in his life when he gave himself over to the pursuit of pleasure. In those days he indulged in wine. He filled his life with laughter. He acquired every toy he could get his hands on. He lived in luxury. He was waited upon hand and foot. He ate the best foods all the time. He was entertained with the best live entertainment that money could buy. He wore the finest clothes that could be made.

He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and he availed himself of their company.

In verse ten, Solomon says, “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.” Then in verse eleven, when reflecting on all the pleasure he had experienced over his lifetime, Solomon writes, “everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

A couple of years ago, I met a businessman who told me that he earns seven million dollars a year. This means that when he goes to work tomorrow morning, he will have earned my whole year’s wage by the time he reaches lunch hour. In other words, in his world, money is not an issue, and he has lived the life.

But, as he explained to me, there are only so many steak dinners you can have before it starts to get old. There are only so many exotic vacations you can take before it starts to get stale. There are only so many luxury items that you can own before it all starts to lose its glamour. Being rich, being immersed in luxury, and having the capacity to indulge in endless amounts of pleasure is not all it is cracked up to be. For most rich people, he told me, their lives are filled with anxiety and they are cut off from the world and they live in loneliness.

This is the plight of those who have it all. While there is an initial high that comes in the early days, when their senses are overwhelmed with pleasure; the high quickly wears off and is replaced with a feeling of emptiness. After all, once you have discovered that having it all doesn’t make you happy what hope do you have for the future? Furthermore, in those moments when the rich realize how much their success depends on luck, or in those moments of sobriety when they remember those they may have exploited, or how they may have been willing to sell their souls to get ahead, it is no wonder that anxious thoughts commonly arise.

All this to say, the pursuit of pleasure has a cost. And often times the cost is much greater than the money that was paid to attain it. For when we are driven by the desire to seek pleasure as our highest aim in life, we may end up harming our health, we may end up destroying our family, we may end up losing our reputations, we may end up losing it all.

In Solomon’s case, his pursuit of pleasure had grave consequences for himself and for the nation he was called to govern. For example, the Bible clearly identifies the sins of Solomon as being responsible for the disintegration of the nation of Israel following his death. Because of his sins Israel became embroiled in a lengthy civil war that brought misery to masses.

Furthermore, while the Bible doesn’t specify the troubles Solomon may have endured during his lifetime as a result of his sin, I am sure they were present. But, even if his life was smooth sailing, he will he still have to give an account to God for his stewardship of the

nation of Israel on the final judgement day. When viewed in this light, his decision to make the pursuit of pleasure the focus of his life for a lengthy season was a huge mistake.

So, what should he have done? And what should we do in light of these observations. The best answer that comes to mind can be found in the story of Solomon building and dedicating the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. As we noted in our previous sermon series, The Temple of the Lord was dedicated on the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

This feast, which was the final feast of the seven Old Testament feasts that God instituted for the nation of Israel represented the ultimate aim that God has for humanity. In that feast, the people of God were called to assemble together in the presence of the Lord, surrounded by the glory of God, on the mountain of the Lord.

And this, in a nutshell, is what life is all about. It is about pursuing the presence of God, and abiding in His presence, and delighting in His company, together with the people of God. Simply stated, this is the goal we should all spend our lives pursuing.

In other words, the Christian life is not about trying to abstain from a lengthy list of ungodly pleasures. Rather, it is about being filled with the only pleasure that truly satisfies the soul. As King David writes in Psalm thirty seven, “delight yourself in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.”

At the end of the day, this is the only way to stay on the straight and narrow path. For when our hearts are filled by a greater delight, we will simply have no attraction for lesser pleasures. When our hearts are filled with the love of the Lord, there is no room for anything else.

This is the place that God desires to bring us. And this is why He set the nation of Israel apart. This is why He instituted the sacrificial system and the five sacrifices of reparation, purification, burnt, grain and peace. This is why God instituted the seven feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. This is why God sent Jesus to be the fulfillment of the five sacrifices and the seven feasts. So that we may dwell together, in holy communion, with the people of God, surrounded by the glory of God on the mountain of the Lord.

As we continue our journey through Ecclesiastes in pursuit of the meaning of life, may God lead us to this conclusion. May God grant us to experience the ultimate pleasure, which is the undiluted presence of God Himself. May this be our hearts desire. And may God grant us the desires of our hearts.