

“Excessive Righteousness”
Ecclesiastes 7:15-18
(Preached at Trinity, October 1, 2023)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As I’ve pointed out, **Chapter 7** stands at about the halfway point of Ecclesiastes. Solomon pauses to give counsel on how to counter some of his examples of vain living. He describes the great value of wisdom. But he does so using words that can be difficult to comprehend.
2. The first part of **Chapter 7** sounds a lot like the Book of Proverbs. We’ve covered the significance of each section.
Now we are dealing with the second half of the chapter.
Most agree that **Chapter 7** is the most difficult chapter in this difficult Book of Ecclesiastes. As we move into this second half of the chapter this becomes abundantly clear. It is a challenge for us to grasp and understand what Solomon is trying to teach us.
3. **Verses 16-17** are among those very difficult verses.
 - A. Is Solomon telling us in **Verse 16** to limit our righteousness? To be just a little righteous? Just don’t overdo it.
 - B. Is he telling us in **Verse 17** it’s OK to be a little wicked? Just don’t overdo it.
There is no doubt there are degrees of wickedness. Most of the murders in our city are from the hands of lawless individuals killing one another.
Ecclesiastes 7:17 NAU - "Why should you die before your time?"
“before your time” meaning, before the process of old age.
The wicked must not think there will be no consequences to their sin.
4. It is a difficult passage, but Solomon seems to be pushing us to apply wisdom in order to properly discern righteousness. Righteousness is a good thing. In fact, the Law demands perfect righteousness. But all acts of righteousness are not the same.
There are so many ways righteousness can be misunderstood and misapplied. It is a matter of eternal significance. There are many dangers.
 - I. First of all, there is the danger of assuming that God’s blessings are a sure indication of His favor. Blessings are God’s payment for righteousness.
 - A. If a person is facing adversity it must be because he has sinned.
 1. This is often the presumption. Our Lord’s disciples had this belief.
John 9:1-2 NAU - "As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"

2. It was the presumption of Job's friends. Job's suffering must be the result of his sin.
Job 8:4 NAU - "If your sons sinned against Him, Then He delivered them into the power of their transgression."
Job 11:14 NAU - "If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, And do not let wickedness dwell in your tents;"
 3. Sometimes, the Christian community makes these conclusions. If there is suffering it must be the result of sin. And blessings must be a sign of God's favor.
- B. There are times when it all seems upside-down. The righteous suffer while the wicked prosper. It seems unfair. The righteous deserve to prosper. The wicked deserve to suffer. But we often see the opposite.
Ecclesiastes 7:15 NAU - "I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness."
1. This has been a reality in every generation, and it is still a reality today. The wicked often seem to do quite well upon the earth.
 2. We see musicians, actors, and athletes living in mansions and driving expensive cars.
 3. Some openly blaspheme God and appear to get away with it. In the 1960's the Beatles were unsurpassed in popularity. In a well-known interview on the lifestyle of the Beatles in 1966, John Lennon made his infamous quote: "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now."
Sometimes they go on mocking God while living in prosperity.
Sometimes it doesn't end so well.
On the evening of Dec. 8, 1980, outside Lennon's apartment, Mark David Chapman fired five shots, hitting Lennon four times. He was pronounced dead at the hospital.
But often, they appear to go unpunished for their arrogant blaspheme.
 4. Spurgeon: "From their youth up these men, who deserve perdition, revel in prosperity. They deserve to be hung in chains, and chains are hung about their necks; they are worthy to be chased from the world, and yet the world becomes all their own."
 5. We can't judge the eternal state of a man by his earthly condition.
- C. This is the error of the prosperity Gospel.
1. The presumption is that ease and prosperity are tokens of God's favor.
 2. The expectation is righteousness deserves God's blessings and Jesus promises a happy ending through all of life's trials.
 3. The problem with this theology is there are none who are truly righteous. No one deserves blessing of perpetual prosperity. The Gospel doesn't promise us temporal blessings of success, where our needs are always provided, where relationships are always restored, where storms are quickly replaced by sunshine.
Rather, Jesus promises us deliverance from sin and His abiding presence even as we go through the fiery trials of this life.

- II. There is a fatal danger of self-righteousness – creating our own standard.
- A. Most people think they are doing the right thing.
1. This was the problem of Israel during the time of the Judges.
Judges 21:25 NAU - "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."
 2. Most people sincerely think they are good people.
It's as if Solomon is saying, think again.
 3. Religious people make their own rules.
In a fallen world, God's standards are replaced by human standards.
The belief is everyone has the right to decide for themselves what is good.
 - a. Two men getting married are convinced they are doing the right thing. And politicians sincerely believe it is a virtuous lifestyle deserving of protection.
 - b. Ladies sincerely believe they are behaving righteously when they kill the baby in their womb. Since the baby is interfering with their happiness they are just in their abortion.
 - c. Solomon warns about excessive righteousness.
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?"
When is righteousness excessive? When it is perverted righteousness. It will lead to ruin.
- B. Self-righteousness is a danger for us all. We tend to have exaggerated opinions of ourselves.
John Currid writes of the danger: "It leads to self-centeredness and self-righteousness. It promotes pride, individualism, and self-absorption. It leads to idolatry in which one worships self to one's own destruction."¹
1. We can be judgmental and censorious. We can be critical of others.
 2. Solomon gives the solution:
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise."
 3. It can lead to a disastrous outcome. Those who have a condemning heart will find themselves condemned.
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Why should you ruin yourself?"
 4. Jesus warned against self-righteous judgmentalism.
Matthew 7:1-2 NAU - "Do not judge so that you will not be judged.
² "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you."
 - a. This verse forbids a judgmental, hypercritical hateful spirit
 - b. It flows from self-righteousness - a feeling of superiority
It is a spirit which looks for faults and blemishes and really hopes to find them.
 - c. It's the heart that feels a sense of joy or happiness when someone of whom we are jealous or envious has made a mistake.

¹ John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning: Ecclesiastes Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 98.

- III. There is a fatal danger if our righteousness is legalism – seeking to gain God’s approval by our actions.
- A. Solomon is not making a case for partial righteousness.
1. He is not saying we can become too righteous.
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Do not be excessively righteous"
 2. He is warning against eyeing our righteousness as a means of gaining God’s favor.
 3. Solomon is making the case that our righteousness is no guarantee of a life free from adversity.
Both the righteous man and partially righteous face times of adversity.
Ecclesiastes 7:15 NAU - "I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness."
- B. Solomon is warning that our self-righteousness will not gain merit from God
1. This is the worst type of legalism. It is the belief that God’s favor can be won by our good works. That God’s favor can be purchased.
 2. This kind of legalism says if we are good enough, we will gain eternal life. Great energy is directed towards our good works as a commodity.
 3. Solomon is saying that if you are trying to gain God’s favor through your self-effort, don’t waste your time.
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Why should you ruin yourself?"
It will only lead to your destruction or ruin.
- IV. It is a fatal flaw when our righteousness is vain fanaticism.
- A. Solomon is warning against a blind zeal
1. In this sense Solomon warns: "Do not be excessively righteous"
 2. Solomon is not speaking of true righteousness but a false zeal.
Paul thought he was righteous by persecuting Christians.
Acts 8:3 NAU - "Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."
Acts 22:3-4 NAU - "being zealous for God just as you all are today. "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,"
Philippians 3:6 NAU - "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church"
- B. Some suffer due to their misdirected zeal.
1. Matthew Henry: “A *just man may perish in his righteousness*, but let him not, by his own imprudence and rash zeal, pull trouble upon his own head, and then reflect upon Providence as dealing hardly with him.”²
 2. Some unwisely bring persecution upon themselves through their fanaticism.
 - The man who lost his job because he insisted on using company time to pass out tracts.

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1044.

- The harsh, judgmental demeanor that is detrimental to the advance of the Gospel. We should seek to be winsome to those who are perishing.
 - The pastor who lacks the wisdom to patiently lead his church through reformation and the church fragments. He preaches right doctrine but without discretion.
3. True zeal is essential to Christianity.
 - a. William Hendriksen – “Religion without enthusiasm can hardly be called religion.”
 - b. William Plumer – “He who has no zeal has no love for God”
 3. Untrained zeal without knowledge is dangerous.
 - a. Zeal without Christ is a worthless zeal.
Ecclesiastes 7:16 NAU - "Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?"
Matthew 7:22-23 NAU - "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"
 - b. John Calvin – “Zeal without doctrine is like a sword in the hand of a mad man.”

Conclusion:

1. What is the solution for both wickedness as well as false righteousness? The solution is only found in the Gospel. Laying hold of Christ and his righteousness alone.
Ecclesiastes 7:18 NAU - "It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them."
 - A. The “one thing” is God. We don’t let go of righteousness, but God is the source of it all.
 - B. This is the sum of true success. In Christ we have all in all.
 God told Joshua:
Joshua 1:8 NAU - "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."
2. True righteousness is found only in Christ. In Him we have true success – the success of resting in Him. We are protected from false righteousness.