

Living a Meaningful Life

How to Act in a Paradoxical World

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

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How to Act in a Paradoxical World

Scripture

One Bible commentator says of our text for today, “This is one of those passages that sets preachers to pacing in their studies, wringing their hands: What does it mean? How do we preach it?”¹

Another commentator says of the first part of today’s text (7:15-24), “It is hard to be satisfied with any commentary on this section; it is very difficult to understand.”² And of the second part of today’s text (7:25-29) he says, “This is one of the more difficult and perhaps one of the more notorious passages in Ecclesiastes.”³

And yet, even though our text for today is difficult to understand, it is nevertheless an extremely relevant passage that deals with some of the most perplexing questions we have: Why do some good people die young while some evil people live to a ripe old age?

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of how to act in a paradoxical world.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 7:15-29:

¹⁵ In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. ¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

¹⁹ Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten

¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 178.

² Roland Edmund Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishers, 1992), 72.

³ Roland Edmund Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishers, 1992), 77.

rulers who are in a city.

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

²¹ Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. ²² Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.

²³ All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. ²⁴ That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

²⁵ I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. ²⁶ And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷ Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— ²⁸ which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. ²⁹ See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. (Ecclesiastes 7:15-29)

Introduction

My favorite movie is *Chariots of Fire*. It is the story of Eric Liddell, who won a gold medal in the 400-meter race at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, France.

After the Olympics he became a missionary to China. He was a wonderful and godly man. He was also much loved, so much so that the Chinese erected a monument to him after his death. (And I also understand that the Chinese are currently producing a movie as a tribute to his life and service to them.) Eric Liddell was so popular in his day that when he left Edinburgh for China in 1925, thousands of people went to the port just to get a glimpse of him boarding the ship so that they could wish him farewell.

But, do you know the rest of the story? During World War II he was taken prisoner and was among the two thousand people

who were crowded into a Japanese internment camp in China. Before his arrest, Liddell managed to get his wife, Florence, and two children to safety in Canada. (She was pregnant at the time with their third daughter, whom Eric would never see.)

Unfortunately, however, just before the end of World War II, Eric Liddell developed a brain tumor. Because of the war he was not able to get appropriate medical attention, and he died several weeks later. He was just forty-two years old when he died.

How could that possibly be? Eric Liddell was a godly man who lived for the glory of Christ. He was a tremendous testimony to the grace of God. He was able to influence thousands of people to consider the claims of the gospel. Why should a young man who was making a difference for Christ die at such a young age? Why not have ungodly, wicked men have brain tumors die at forty-two?

The Preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes recognized that he lived in a time when some of the good die young and some of the wicked die old. People did not understand why bad things happen to some good people while some wicked people seem to prosper. It was difficult to make sense of how things worked in the world.

Lesson

It is against this background that the Preacher encouraged people to trust God even though they cannot make sense of this paradoxical world.

And so in today's lesson we are encouraged to trust God even when things don't add up.

I. The Observation (7:15)

The Preacher begins with an observation in verse 15, **“In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.”**

This is the story of Eric Liddell. He **“is a righteous man**

who perishes in his righteousness.”

And this is the story of many righteous young people. They know God, they love God, and they want to serve God their entire lives. But, then, tragedy strikes. And they are struck down in their youth.

On the other hand, there are wicked and sinful people. They don't care about God and the things of God. They care only about themselves. And they grow old and comfortable and prosperous.

Why? Why do the good die young? And why do the bad die old? It seems so paradoxical. It seems so backward.

How does one make sense of this?

II. The Guidelines (7:16-18)

The Preacher sets down three guidelines for making sense of our paradoxical world.

A. Don't Deceive Yourself (7:16)

First, don't deceive yourself. The Preacher says in verse 16, **“Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?”**

The language that the Preacher is using here is ironic. He is talking about a person who thinks he is far more righteous and wise than he actually is. The Preacher is talking about Pharisaical righteousness and wisdom.

The first extreme to avoid in making sense of our paradoxical world is self-righteousness.

B. Don't Indulge Yourself (7:17)

Second, don't indulge yourself. The Preacher says in verse 17, **“Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?”**

This guideline is somewhat surprising. The Preacher seems to

suggest that it is okay to be a *little* wicked, just don't be *overly wicked*. Is that really what he is saying?

We know from Scripture that God will not look upon sin, and that to be guilty of breaking *one* point of his law is just as bad as breaking *all* of his law (cf. Habakkuk 1:13; James 2:10). And so, *any* wickedness is *overwickedness* with God.

So, what is the Preacher saying?

He is saying that you must not give yourself to wickedness. All people are sinners. There is no one on this earth who is not a sinner. However, indulging yourself wholeheartedly in sin is not the answer to living a meaningful life. Oh, it might give satisfaction for a short time. Sin is always pleasant. That is why we do it. But, it is a violation of God's law. And one day we will have to stand before the Judge of all the earth and give an account for our sin.

So, if neither self-righteousness nor self-indulgence help us make sense of our paradoxical world, what does?

C. *Trust God (7:18)*

And third, trust God. The Preacher says in verse 18, **“It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.”**

The Preacher wants us to understand and take hold of the truths that neither self-righteousness nor self-indulgence help us make sense of our paradoxical world. In fact, they both lead to destruction and death.

But **the one who fears God**, that is, the one who trusts God, **shall come out**, or escape, **from both of them**.

The only way to live and act in a paradoxical world is to trust God. When the righteous die young, you must trust God. When the economy does not work as expected, you must trust God. When the elections don't give us the right politicians, you must trust God. When your children turn their backs on the faith, you must trust

God. When your spouse walks out on you, you must trust God. When the world doesn't make sense, you must trust God.

III. The Appraisal (7:19-22)

Now, in order to trust God, we must have an honest appraisal of ourselves.

A. We Must Recognize the Real Strength of Wisdom (7:19)

First, we must recognize the real strength of wisdom. The Preacher says in verse 19, **“Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.”**

Our wisdom is puny compared to the wisdom of God. Even the wisdom of the ten best rulers is puny compared to the wisdom of God. But the wisdom that God gives is far superior to anything in this world.

Someone said that a man with Bible could stay in a cave for a year, and at the end of that time, he could know (from the reading of his Bible) what was going on with people in this world.⁴

B. We Must Recognize Our Need for Wisdom (7:20)

Second, we must recognize our need for wisdom. The Preacher says in verse 20, **“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”**

Even the best people are flawed. Everyone sins. The Preacher is recalling the Psalmist's words when he said in Psalm 14:3b, “There is none who does good, not even one.” The Apostle Paul reiterated this in his letter to the Romans in Romans 3:10-11, “As it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.’”

Since we are not righteous, we need the wisdom of God.

⁴ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 115.

C. *We Must Admit Our Personal Weakness and, by Implication, Act Generously with Respect to the Faults of Others (7:21-22)*

And third, we must admit our personal weakness and, by implication, act generously with respect to the faults of others. The Preacher says in verses 21-22, **“Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.”**

Someone has said that great men are never great to their valets.⁵ Servants always know the worst side of their masters. We tend to treat people according to how we sub-consciously rank them. Those we think are above us are treated better than those we think are below us. The fact is that what we criticize in others is often something we are guilty of ourselves.

And so we should admit our personal weakness and deal generously with others.

IV. **The Quest (7:23-29)**

Now, as the Preacher comes to the end of this section, he wants us to grow in our understanding of how to live a meaningful life. He suggests that we need to seek understanding in four areas in order to know how to act in a paradoxical world.

A. *We Need to Understand Our Own Limitations (7:23-24)*

First, we need to understand our own limitations. The Preacher says verses 23-24, **“All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?”**

⁵ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 117.

The Preacher's quest was to discover how to live a meaningful life. He had tried all kinds of ways to search out how to live a meaningful life. But there is a sense in which the more he learned the less he knew.

Bible commentator Charles Bridges said that "our highest knowledge is but a mere atom, when compared with the unsearchable extent of our ignorance. The more we know of God—his nature (Job 9:7)—his works (Psalm 92:5)—his dispensations (Romans 11:33), the more we are humbled in the sense of our ignorance."⁶

We need to understand our own limitations in terms of what we know and even of what we can know. Recognizing our limitations should produce a humble trust and reliance upon what God has revealed to us in his Word.

B. We Need to Understand the Human Problem (7:25)

Second, we need to understand the human problem. The Preacher says in verse 25, **"I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness."**

The Preacher is demonstrating great intensity as he tries to make sense of the paradoxical world in which we live. The stark contrasts in the world are a great puzzle to the Preacher. As one commentator put it, "How can rational man be so irrational? Why does the image bearer of God sometimes stoop to the most brutalizing and dehumanizing excesses? Why is a world so full of life disfigured by so much misery and death? And why, more personally, have I found this out not just by reading the newspapers and keeping my eyes open, but by doing it myself—by experimenting with foolishness and self-destructive wickedness?"⁷

⁶ Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981 [1860]), 173.

⁷ Gordon J Keddie, *Looking for the Good Life: The Search for Fulfillment in the Light of Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1991), 98.

And the answer that we must come to is that we need to understand the human problem. And the human problem is of course sin. Sin is a barrier between ourselves and God. And the only way to deal with our sin is to come to God in humility and trust in the provision that he has made to deal with our sin, which is in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

C. We Need to Understand Relationships (7:26-28)

Third, we need to understand relationships. The Preacher says in verses 26-28, **“And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.”**

These words are often misunderstood! The Preacher is speaking from his own, male perspective. He is no misogynist (i.e., woman hater). He is speaking hyperbolically. As one commentator says, “In assessing men and women in general, he finds very little to encourage him. His poetic statistics for the relative uprightness of men and women cannot be meant to draw any serious comparison between the two. To suggest, as he does, that men are one-tenth of one percent better than women is to deride the very idea! It is the equivalent of saying, with the Psalmist, ‘There is no one who does good, not even one’ (Psalm 14:3; cf. Romans 3:10ff).”⁸

D. We Need to Understand God’s Plan for Mankind (7:29)

And fourth, we need to understand God’s plan for mankind. The Preacher says in verse 29, **“See, this alone I found, that God**

⁸ Gordon J Keddie, *Looking for the Good Life: The Search for Fulfillment in the Light of Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1991), 99.

made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

The Preacher knows God’s original purpose: **God made man upright**. And he also understands that mankind only has itself to blame for its predicament because **they have sought out many schemes**.

In giving us this statement the Preacher is almost cryptically letting us know that God still has a redemptive plan for mankind. Even though sin has entered the world so that mankind has sought out many schemes, God will reverse what has taken place.

There is hope! And it is rooted in God’s plan for fallen men and women. It is found in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. He is the Second Person of the Trinity who lived and died and rose again from the dead to save sinners such as ourselves.

We can know how to act in a paradoxical world when we trust God, and particularly when we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

It has been said that faith is like a leap off a cliff into the dark below, hoping that someone will catch you.

Frankly, I don’t think that is a proper understanding of faith at all. Faith is a step into the light, seeing for the very first time the One who is able to deliver you from coming Judgment.

We live in a world that is often very difficult to understand. Things happen and things go wrong, and we often don’t understand it.

And yet, in the midst of the paradoxical world I can trust in Jesus, knowing that he is in sovereign control of all things. I can believe that nothing happens apart from his sovereign will. I can believe that he will work all things for his glory and my good—even though I do not understand it at the present time.

So, put your trust in God—even when things don’t seem to add up in this world. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

We live in a paradoxical world. We live in a world in which things often don't make sense.

Oh Father, enable us to trust in you and in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Enable us to believe that you are at work—even when we don't see it.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.