

How Man Is Like and Unlike an Animal

Ecclesiastes 3:18-22; Hebrews 9:27

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The realization of a joy that surpasses all understanding in your life and mine is directly proportionate to our conscious choice everyday to look in faith and hope beyond this earthly life with all of its pleasures, with all of its afflictions and trials, with all of its changing people and circumstances, and with all of its injustice to our Savior and God who is unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. When that secret place of the almighty is a place wherein we daily rest from our worries, cares, anxieties, burdens, and even pleasures, when prayer is no longer a great burden to us, but one of our greatest delights, then joy in the Lord will find fertile soil in which to grow and deepen its roots in our lives so that the strongest winds of trial and affliction will not be able to uproot it.

Often, we are so chained to this world by way of our desires and affections that we act no different than the cows that graze in the pasture, the squirrels that run here and there, or the dogs that fight one with another. We have all likely heard the expression, "He has gone to the dogs." Well that expression is sadly true of us all in varying respects. We've all gone to the dogs. We have revealed at times more of an animal nature and appetite than a nature and appetite of a child of the living God. Dear ones, we can so easily see how others have treated us like an animal they seek to devour, but we are so blind to how we have treated others in a similar manner. This is a time for the Holy Spirit to reveal to us our own animal appetite. For there will be no change in our families or in our church if we do not begin with ourselves.

From our text this Lord's Day, Solomon would have us to see the similarity between men and animals so as to humble us, before showing us the dissimilarity between men and animals so as to instruct us. The two main points from our text this Lord's Day are these: (1) How We Are Like Animals (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20)? (2) How We Are Unlike Animals (Ecclesiastes 3:21-22)?

I. How We Are Like Animals (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20)?

A. In Ecclesiastes 3:16-17, Solomon raised the issue of injustice (on the part of the magistrate) as another obstacle to men/women finding a lasting joy and happiness, if they expect to find it in the people or circumstances of this life alone. This injustice of the civil magistrate even has a greater impact in your life and mine because the injustice of the civil magistrate tears down the very social fabric within entire communities and nations. When the magistrate enacts unjust laws and defends that which is immoral, it is only a matter of time before Christians will be persecuted over that very issue. Solomon, however, leaves us with a most firm hope and a most necessary foundation to a lasting joy: all wrongs will one day be made right in God's time. For there is coming a day of reckoning—whether in this life or at the Last Day, when the Lord will righteously judge all people in regard to the things done in the body (whether good or evil). Justice may not be served in this life, but it will be served on that final day. Dear ones, our joy in the Lord is absolutely dependent on being able to commend our cause (when we have done all that we can lawfully do to bring justice) to Him who judges righteously, as did the Lord Jesus Christ in His unjust trial before Pilate and the Sanhedrin.

B. King Solomon continues with the same train of thought in Ecclesiastes 3:18, but begins to expand and broaden it to some degree.

1. Solomon states, "I said in mine heart." Solomon seriously reflected and thought about this matter of injustice and how it relates to a lasting joy. For we all know from our own sad experience (as did Solomon) just how hard it is for each of us to find peace and satisfaction in this life, when we believe we have

been treated unfairly. This occupied Solomon's meditation.

2. About what did Solomon meditate in his heart? Solomon says his thoughts shifted from the civil magistrate (or the place of judgment in Ecclesiastes 3:16) to a more broad consideration of injustice among "the sons of men" in Ecclesiastes 3:18. Not only do we see injustice in the heart of the magistrate (and those in high places), but we see injustice in our very own hearts. Injustice is not simply a problem those in authority have, but rather it is a problem we all have.

a. Dear ones, we treat one another unfairly. We're all guilty of doing this (to varying degrees). From spreading an evil report about others to judging others before judging ourselves, from minimizing our own sin to exaggerating the sin of others, from being rash in what we say in one instance to being silent in a righteous cause in another instance, from prejudicing our treatment of others because we don't like them to making judgments about others while not understanding or caring about the unique circumstances in the life of others, from putting the worst construction upon what a brother/sister says to consuming one another by our unkind and angry words, we have all been unfair and unjust in our treatment of others. God have mercy upon us all.

b. For even if we have kept silent and not uttered what is in our heart toward others (which is definitely a step in the right direction), our hearts have yet become bitter and vindictive toward others, which is yet an injustice. It is an important first step to put our hands over our mouths or over our keyboards, but the root problem, dear ones, is in our heart. And if we justify the injustice in our own hearts, we will never treat one another fairly.

3. There are two reasons Solomon mentions here in Ecclesiastes 3:18 as to why God ordains injustice in your life and mine: (a) That He might manifest (or test) the sons of men; and (b) That He might humble the sons of men—demonstrating to them that they are beasts by nature that consume one another.

a. The first reason that God brings us into various circumstances where we face injustice is to "manifest" us (i.e. to test us) according to Ecclesiastes 3:18. The Hebrew word used here for "manifest", literally means "purify". To purify an object (at the time in which Solomon penned these words) was most often accomplished by applying fire to it. Thus, the idea that developed from this word was to test or to try the quality of an object. Dear ones, times of injustice are times when we are tried by fire. We really find out who we are deep down inside when we believe we have been treated unfairly by others. And sadly what we see is not very encouraging at all. What do we see in ourselves at such times? Do we see unrighteous anger, rash speech, immoderate language, and vindictive attacks? Do we also see how we tend to become a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution? Do we see how we want to attack others in the same way we believe we have been attacked? How in the name of God can the joy of the Lord live and thrive in us when injustice from others and from within our own hearts turns our world so upside down and inside out? We are not acting like a thermostat (seeking to control and moderate the temperature all around us), but rather acting more like a thermometer (simply reflecting the temperature all around us). What should we do when we believe we have been unjustly attacked or unfairly treated?

(1) We should not speak quickly or rashly (James 1:19).

(2) We should earnestly pray that God would grant us wisdom and patience toward one another (James 1:5-6; James 3:13-17).

(3) We should not act vindictively, but rather charitably (Ephesians 5:2).

(4) We should remember that God has ordained this trial by fire for His glory and for our good to test the quality of our faith, of our love, and of our joy in the Lord (Romans 8:28).

(5) The words of that faithful witness and martyr for the Cause of Christ in Scotland, James Renwick, who knew what it was to be treated unjustly and to be attacked unfairly are so faithful and true:

Rejoice in your light affliction which is but for a moment. COUNT YOUR ANTAGONISTS YOUR GREATEST FRIENDS, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general [the Lord Jesus Christ--GLP] upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot their fill (*The Life And Letters Of James Renwick*, p. 170).

(6) Now that is a way to see the bigger picture of what God is doing in our lives when injustice comes our way from others. God is testing the quality of our joy in the Lord. Just how deeply is our joy rooted in the good providence and love of God? Ought we not to view our antagonists who treat us unjustly as being the very means by which God tests us, proves us, and sanctifies us? Ought we not to be thankful that Christ uses even our antagonists to provide the very occasion by which we might grow in grace and add to our crown in heaven? Now that is turning injustice into an occasion to rejoice. How can we lose with that perspective? Of course, that is not to say that we ought not to take lawful steps to seek (by God's grace) to make right what is wrong (2 Corinthians 11:20). However, it is to say that unless we have this heavenly perspective on injustice, the fruit of the Spirit (i.e. the joy of the Lord and a peace that surpasses all understanding) will die even before it can be enjoyed.

b. The second reason that God brings us into various circumstances where we face injustice is to humble us by showing to us that we are beasts at heart.

(1) For we devour one another like dogs or cats in a fight. The beast within (which is that sinful nature inherited from Adam) is truly set off when we treat one another unjustly or unfairly. Whether it be the magistrate or the citizen that act like beasts, whether it be the officers of the church or the members of the church that act like beasts, whether it be employers or employees that like beasts, whether it be husbands or wives that act like beasts, whether it be parents or children that act like beasts, or whether it be fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that act like beasts toward one another (Galatians 5:15,20). Dear ones, that beast of injustice is in us all. It is just watching and waiting to consume and devour others when given the opportunity. That is why we must diligently set a guard about that beast. That is why we must watch and pray that we enter not into temptation. That is why we must take our union with Christ in His death and account that beast to be put to death 100 times a day if necessary. For, dear ones, there is no hope of overcoming that beast within us apart from the death and resurrection of Christ. Do you not see that when we devour one another in our marriage, we devour ourselves individually? For, you see, we are one flesh. When we devour one another in the church, we likewise devour ourselves individually. For, you see, we are one body. In so doing, we are not simply cannibals in devouring others (which is bad enough). We are cannibals in eating ourselves and in devouring our own flesh. Would you not be made utterly sick to see a person eating his own hand, his own arm, his own leg, his own eye, or his own ear? Would you not think a person cannot become much more bestial than to satisfy his appetite with his own body or with his own flesh? And yet that is what we do when we feed upon one another by way of our injustice toward one another. May God humble us and show to us that we are beasts in our unjust treatment of one another.

(2) We also manifest our sinful bestial nature and animal appetite when all that we really seem to care about are the bodily comforts of this life. When we are more concerned for our time, our treasures, and our talents in this world than we are for our own eternal soul, we likewise act like the cows that seem to have no other care in the world than the grass upon which they graze. We are just like animals when nothing concerns us but that which we can see, feel, taste, smell, and hear. Obviously, we have God-given duties to perform while we yet live here upon the earth. For, beloved, we are not only to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, but we are also to love our neighbor as ourselves. And though that is the case, what does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world and yet lose his own soul? If we only or chiefly make preparation for our present life, we are acting just like the animals all around us who do

the same. God grant that we may turn in sorrow and tears from all of the ways in which we have acted more like beasts than like the children of the living God.

C. King Solomon now turns to one very significant way in which we are like animals. This is likewise given so as to humble us and to put us (as it were) into our place as those who rule, or as those who are ruled, or as among equals. Like animals, we will die (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20). We like animals, have one breath, and we breathe the same air, and one day we will breathe our last breath, just like the animals all around us. In this sense, Solomon says that a man has no preeminence over an animal. Both man and beast are subject to the curse of Adams's sin. For, you see, the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). God says through King Solomon by inspiration of the Holy Spirit that just as the animal will one day die and return to the dust from which it came, so will the same thing occur to us and to our loved ones (Ecclesiastes 3:20). Thus, if one is looking for joy and happiness in the circumstances of this life or in the people of this world (and his search for joy is limited to that which is "under the sun" rather than to that which is "above the sun"), it is vanity, it is futility, it is without meaning and purpose, it is emptiness. The search for a lasting joy and enduring happiness will be an endless search. For that search can only find the treasure of true joy and happiness in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to rescue sinful man from his misery and to grant to him joy, peace, and life and that more abundantly. There is only meaning and purpose in life when we look in faith alone to Christ as our only Savior, as our only hope, as our only righteousness, and as our only life. And you can find that meaning and purpose in life right now as you embrace the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone.

II. How We Are Unlike Animals (Ecclesiastes 3:21-22).

A. Solomon certainly does not leave us thinking we are like animals in every respect (as the animal activists would have us to think we are). He gives a most important distinction between men and animals: mankind has an immortal spirit that cannot perish, whereas animals have a spirit or mere breath that perishes with the body. Human beings have not evolved from animals over millions of years. God says in Genesis 2:7 that man was not living in any sense until he was animated by the immortal spirit which was breathed into him by God. It is not as though God took an animal that was already living and breathing and gave it an immortal spirit. That is entirely contrary to what is taught in Genesis 2:7.

B. The question in Ecclesiastes 3:21 is not intended to convey any uncertainty about the immortal soul of a man, but is rather intended to convey how few people truly live in light of this truth. Most people live as though they were mere animals, just waiting to breathe their last breath, as if there were nothing else to come beyond the grave. But Solomon says that such is not the case. For when the body returns to the dust of the ground from which it came, the spirit of man will leave that body and ascend to God in order to receive from God either comfort in heaven or torment in hell. This expression of going "upward" is simply used to distinguish it from the perishable nature of the spirit (or breath) of an animal that goes "downward" (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In the fullest sense, it is only the spirit of the Christian that will return and remain in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ to rejoice forever at the love, mercy, and justice of Him who loved us and gave His life for us even while we were yet ungodly sinners and profane enemies of God.

C. Thus, we must prepare for our death since we will survive it. We must not live as though there is nothing of consequence beyond the grave. For the Scripture say, "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Either heaven or hell lies beyond the grave for each of us. That is not true for animals, whose spirit is a perishable breath that goes downward to the grave (along with the body). So when you face injustice in this world, remember there is a place of justice beyond the grave. If you cannot find justice in the people of this world, you will find justice in the living God in the world to come. Let us not

live like animals that have no hope beyond the grave. Our joy and our hope are reserved in heaven for us. Let us learn to live even now beyond the grave, dear ones, in order that our joy may be full.

D. So as we wait for that day in which our bodies will perish and lie in the grave, awaiting the resurrection of the dead, and our spirits will return to God, what should we do? We must find joy in doing good (Ecclesiastes 3:22). We ought not to sit around just waiting to die and for our spirits to ascend to God. We have work to do for the Lord while we are here upon the earth. So we need to get busy and keep busy in serving the Lord. For in so doing we will find our joy. Joy is not so much the fruit of seeking it as much as it is the fruit of obeying God from a heart of love and gratitude for all that He has done for us. The answer to injustice, dear ones, is doing what is good. Not retaliating. But doing good and rejoicing in the good the Lord by His grace allows you to do. The fruit of loving and thankful obedience in your work will be the joy of the Lord. And in so doing, you will practice what you are in truth—not animals, but the children of the living God.

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