

September 22, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 6.

1. What must happen in order for us to be satisfied with material blessings?
2. What is the source for all the “stuff” sinners in the world enjoy?
3. What is the evil in life Solomon referred to in verses 2-3?
4. What did Solomon mean to teach by this statement: *Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite* (6:9)?
5. *Who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow* (6:12)?
6. How do you keep your focus on God daily?

PAIN WITHOUT GAIN **Ecclesiastes 6**

How well do you enjoy working with, being related to a person who lives in denial? Granted, that is a rather presumptuous question. However, if you work or live with this kind of person, you know how serious the question is. There are people who try to put a positive spin on everything in life. And some of you are a bit uneasy that I appear to be opposed to that kind of positive thinking.

Even as a young man, I never, ever trusted people like Norman Vincent Peale who published the best selling book *The Power of*

Positive Thinking and spearheaded the publishing of *The Guidepost* magazine. Nor did I ever trust Napoleon Hill’s book *Think and Grow Rich*. Nor did I trust Robert Shuller and his very popular *Hour of Power* television show broadcast from his famous Crystal Cathedral that was supposed to be a testimony to the glorious results of positive thinking. Now it appears Joel Osteen has taken up where these past gurus left off, and I don’t trust him either.

It just seems to me that these preachers of positive thinking never listened to the news or, if they did, they pretended that bad things never happened in spite of what the news reported. Does this sound incredibly negative? Do you think I have been spending too much time studying Ecclesiastes?

Let’s try to put things in perspective. The preacher, Solomon, set out to discover the source of joy and satisfaction in life. In light of the fact that he was the richest man in his age and possibly the wisest man in the history of humanity next to Jesus, we must conclude that he had all the resources at his disposal to allow him to arrive at accurate conclusions. Solomon testifies in this writing that he used every resource, every avenue imaginable to learn about life. In a word, his conclusion was the Hebrew word *hebel*. He decided that everything about typical life on earth is empty, futile, a chasing after the wind. Over and over Solomon concluded that life is a dirt sandwich—every day another bite.

Most people have either never read Ecclesiastes or have read it and disagreed with it. Following the mind set of Peale, Shuller, and Osteen, they put down the book and conclude, “Let’s pretend that life is full of blessings.” Which is to conclude, “Let’s be unrealistic.”

Actually, there are places in this book where Solomon does admit that we should enjoy the good things in life. He taught us that we ought to find happiness in eating the fruits of our labors. We should be satisfied to enjoy God’s blessings. That is the whole point of the book.

Very clearly in this writing, we see the distinction between trying to be satisfied with a life that consists of only the passing things this world offers, versus a life that focuses on God and enjoys the blessings God gives. The mind that is focused on God must acknowledge that the effects of sin in life really make life rotten. But the mind that is focused on God is also delighted to recall that God is

in control and, against the backdrop of the effects of sin, God gives His people reasons to be satisfied with Him alone.

There is Evil in Life (vv.1-6).

A great evil in life is the existence of God's blessing without accompanying satisfaction. Verse two states a frustrating reality. Hypothetically, there is *a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them (v.2a).*

We who know and trust God know that God gives blessings. Solomon presents us with the hypothetical person to whom God has given wealth, possessions, and honor. In other words, this person has all that his heart could desire. Comparatively, that is the character of a lot of Americans. How many people in third-world countries (which is the majority of the world) crave to have half of what you and I have? God has blessed us mightily. Most of us are the hypothetical people of Solomon's argument.

But what if God does not give power to enjoy blessings? A few weeks ago, we studied the direct contrast to the person presented in our text. In 5:18-19, we saw the contrast to this person. *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil – this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 5:18-19).*

An important truth that the people of our world seldom grasp is that the power or ability to enjoy God's benefits is also a gift from God. The word translated *power* in that passage speaks of authority or mastery. God gives the material blessing. But what if God does not give the authority, the mastery to enjoy what He gives? This is the problem of life Solomon is describing. In reality, the very blessings God gives like wealth, possessions, and honor often have authority over us. The passing things have mastery over us and, therefore, we cannot be satisfied.

The sad reality is that desire is always stronger than satisfaction. Jonathan Clements wrote, "We may have life and liberty, but the pursuit of happiness isn't going so well . . . We constantly hanker after fancier cars and fatter paychecks—and initially, such things boost our happiness. But the glow of satisfaction quickly fades and soon we're yearning for something else." (Jonathan Clements, "No Satisfaction: Why What You Have Is Never Enough." *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2007, Quoted by Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, p.139).

Okay, if enjoyment depends on God, how does God give the power to enjoy His blessing? He gives the authority through grace by which He helps us rivet our attention on Him. God cannot be our focus in life apart from His grace. We enjoy what He gives through the channel of Himself. We will delve into that truth more thoroughly at the end of the sermon.

The preacher concluded that having the material blessings of life without the power to enjoy them is evil and futility. *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind (v.1) This is vanity; it is a grievous evil (v.2b).* In verse one, the statement, *under the sun* focuses our attention on the problem right away. It speaks of the limitations of life. "Under the sun" is life swept up in the temporal, the passing.

Life relegated to the earth which is plagued by sin and shows sin's effects is evil. Yes, an accurate view of life infected by sin is not positive in any way. Having stuff, with no ability or opportunity to enjoy it, is a grievous evil. Solomon reminds us that it is vanity (*hebel*), a grabbing at handfuls of wind. It is the ultimate and essential character of the age. Sure people immersed in passing stuff will say they are having fun, pretend to enjoy life, but what do they think when they are alone with their thoughts? If satisfaction is truly found in passing things, why is change always necessary? Why is "new and improved" the ceaseless mantra if satisfaction with stuff is actually experienced?

There is no satisfaction in the material things of life. Solomon illustrated that grim reality with a gruesome, but true, illustration (vv.3-6). He reminded us that there is no satisfaction even with the good things. Here is another one of the preacher's comparisons when he concluded that it is "better never to be born than to live 2,000 years and have no satisfaction in life."

Again there is a hypothetical person. *If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial (v.3a).* This hypothetical man had it all. He lives 2,000 years. *Even though he should live a thousand years twice over (v.6).* Many people think that is a horrible proposition in itself. People who are looking forward to eternity outside a world of sin and in a world of perfect peace in God's presence are not interested in living 2,000 years here.

Not only does the hypothetical man live 2,000 years, but he fathers 100 children, which again in ancient culture was considered a blessing. He has all of life's good things. A repeated word or idea in this chapter is the word "good" (6:3,6,9,12). It is the Hebrew word *towb*, which means, good practically or economically good. It is abstract goodness such as desirability, pleasantness, and beauty. It speaks of quality or expense. It is moral goodness. It even speaks of technical philosophical goodness. The word shows up extensively in chapter 7 (11 times).

Based on the meaning of the word good and Solomon's description of the man's life, it would appear that this hypothetical man lived the "good life" to the extreme. What more could a man ask for? Well actually, he experienced every good thing except satisfaction. He has all that life has to offer, *but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial (v.3b).*

Satisfaction is lacking in the man's soul. This is the root problem with humanity. This is a major problem in America. This is why people, even religious people, can't find satisfaction. Only God is able to satisfy the eternal longing that He has placed in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Obviously then, the man's problem is a spiritual problem. Like most people, the man was trying to fill the God-shaped void in his soul with material stuff or human relationships. God made us in His image to enjoy fellowship with Him. God is the only one, the only thing that can bring ultimate satisfaction.

And so without God we cannot enjoy all the good He gives through common grace. We have it all, *yet enjoy no good – do not all go to the one place (v.6b)?* We cannot ignore the reality that, ultimately, the life consumed with passing stuff also passes and goes

to the one common place—the grave. What is the answer to the dilemma?

Solomon sounds fatalistic at this point, totally pessimistic. He concluded that non-existence is better than dissatisfaction. *I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he (vv.3b-5).* As he argued in 4:3, here Solomon decided it is better to have never been born. If a child is born, he is born into vanity, the life of futility. But the stillborn is covered in darkness, never having seen the light of day. Yes, but at least he has rest.

This is not a new argument in ancient wisdom literature. On one hand, the psalmist used the agony of a stillborn child as the worst kind of curse on his enemy. Extremely harsh and painful words: *O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun (Psalm 58:6-8).* On the other hand, the preacher concludes it is better to be the stillborn child than to have blessings of God without God-given satisfaction. At verse seven we find an obvious break. Some commentators believe it marks a major division in the book. And yet there is still an obvious connection with the foregoing arguments about seeking satisfaction in life and not finding it.

Vanity of the Mouth (vv.7-12).

Continuing the argument about dissatisfaction, Solomon admitted that we eat but are not satisfied (vv.7-10). Here he presents some difficult questions. In light of dissatisfaction, what difference does it make whether we are wise or foolish? *All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage has the wise man over the fool (vv.7-8a)?*

By using the word *mouth* in this passage, Solomon gave us an example of natural, fleshly desires. The preacher argues that the only reason a person works is to satisfy natural cravings. One of the most natural cravings is hunger, physical appetite. We feed the desire, it is satisfied for a few hours, and then it is back. Our appetites are never

fully satisfied by the stuff of our world. It doesn't matter whether we are wise or foolish, the same law applies to all – physical appetites are satisfied temporarily.

Sadly, exercising wisdom still does not offer an advantage for satisfying natural appetites. *And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living (v.8b)?* Ancient wisdom literature taught that living according to wisdom would result in health and prosperity. We see that general rule in several of the Proverbs. It is similar to Benjamin Franklin's wisdom saying: "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." But we also know that is not always the case. Such is the true nature of wisdom literature. Solomon argued that a man might exercise wisdom to conduct himself appropriately, but still be poor, and still not be able to satisfy his natural appetites. There is no advantage for the wise or fool alike.

That there is no advantage leads to frustrating conclusions. An insatiable appetite results in futility and dissatisfaction. *Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind (v.9).* Here is another one of those "better than" comparisons. It sounds like, "A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush." The preacher argues that what you have (can see with your eyes) is better than what you wish you had (wandering appetite or desires). Or we might say that the grass is really not greener on the other side of the fence. Instead of always wanting something new, something different, something better, rest in God's will.

Why should we rest in God's will? Because ultimately God has determined the end. *Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is (v.10a).* God created all things and named them (i.e. He called the darkness "night," Genesis 1:5). God sent all the animals to Adam to be named. *So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name (Genesis 2:19).* The principle established at creation is that naming the thing demonstrates authority over the thing. God demonstrates His authority over all things and humanity.

So stop fighting with God. If you are not in charge, you are *not able to dispute with one stronger than he (v.10b)*. That is why we rest in God.

Most people will not give up the fight so easily. We propose theories, argue, and converse about how to work around God's law. We speak but have no vital answer. In verses eleven and twelve, we run into three unanswered questions. First, "What is the advantage of multiplied words?" *The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man (v.11)?* It is true that we talk and talk but never solve the problem. Thus the size of the Internet in 2012 was calculated to be 2800 Zettabytes or 2.8 exabytes. This number of exabytes are 2.8 billion terabytes. To store this amount of data you would need 700 million 4TB hard drives. In 2013 the amount of information on the Internet was 3.7 Zettabytes. In 2016 the amount of data passing through the Internet grew to about 26,500 gigabytes per second. A growth of traffic is forecast by 20% annually so that in the year 2020, the amount of data is expected to enlarge to 40 zettabytes. It is estimated that by then 50 billion devices will be connected to the Internet. It is virtually impossible to calculate how many books would be required to contain that much information. All that talking and still we are dissatisfied.

The second question is, "What is good for man?" *For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow (v.12a)?* Almost everyone has an opinion about what constitutes "good." Good is supposed to satisfy, make us happy. That might be why Americans are obsessed with happy endings.

Even in the face of seriously negative circumstances, there are those who prefer to be a Pollyanna, an excessively cheerful or optimistic person, and pretend that everything is coming up roses. British author Carl Trueman in his book *Fools Rush In Where Monkeys Fear to Tread* wrote: "I remember my jaw hitting the floor some years ago when I watched a Disney version of *Notre Dame de Paris* where the Hunchback does not die but lives happily ever after . . . The point of the story of Quasimodo is that the guy with the hump dies at the end and it's all terribly sad. My wife is meant to cry, and I am meant to feel angry at the raw deal Quasimodo has been dealt in

the poker game of life.” (Quoted by Douglas O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, p.135)

Maybe we should listen to God’s opinion of what is good for man. Most people disagree with Jesus’ (God the Son) teaching about what is good. It is highly unlikely that those who disagree would admit it though. Consider how Jesus described what is good for us in the Beatitudes. He taught, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*” (Matthew 5:3-6). God the Son taught, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*” (Matthew 5:10-11).

None of those things sound good to the human nature. Good is being acceptable, liked, received, listened to. Apparently God does not intend for us, does not desire for us to find happiness in the circumstances and relationships of life alone! No. Read on after the Beatitudes and learn why pain, sorrow, and struggling in this life is good. “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*” (Matthew 5:12). It is the difference between enjoying passing life or preparing to enjoy eternal life. Maybe we are not satisfied because we are not willing to admit what is truly good for us.

The third question is, “What comes next?” *For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun (v.12b)?* No one on earth really knows what is next for any individual. But God does know. This is why we find satisfaction when we rest in God’s wisdom, God’s will, God’s plan for our lives.

The Important Answers to the Questions.

The answer to the first question, “What is the advantage of multiplied words?” is that God created us for His glory. Listen to the psalmist, *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts (Psalm 96:8)!* What did Moses and his friends conclude as they gawked at the drowned Egyptian

army? *Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders (Exodus 15:11)?* Instead of offering our silly opinions on why we ought to find satisfaction in passing things, we need to stop talking and listen to God. *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).* God created us for His glory.

The answer to the second question, “What is good for man?” is, that God sustains us for His glory. God promised, “*When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars*” (Psalm 75:3). What is good is for me to remember that the Creator is still in control. *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:13-17).* To trust God, to rest in God is good for man.

The answer to the third question, “What comes next?” is that it really doesn’t matter because life is about God, not me. Whatever is next on our agenda must be characterized by this principle: *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).* Whatever is next must be, *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men (Colossians 3:23).* That is a possible response only when we are leaning on God for His glory. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).*

Rather than adopt the attitude of, “If it is pessimistic, I don’t want to know the truth,” the child of God says, “Tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” We respond that way because we know that the truth is, God is truth, God is in control, God invites us to depend on Him in faith, and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.