

Hope PCA Sermon: April 7, 2024 “I Commend Joy” (*Ecclesiastes 8:10-17*)

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Returning to our occasional, about once a month, series in the book of Ecclesiastes, this morning we'll be looking at chapter 8 verses 10-17. And I think, again, in God's providence, here is a passage that fits quite well with things that we've been learning from 1 Peter. If you would, stand in honor of the reading of God's word. Again, we'll be looking at Ecclesiastes 8 verses 10-17, to the end of the chapter. This is God's very living Word.

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.

¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. ¹² Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

¹⁵ And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Thus far, the reading of God's holy, infallible, and inerrant Word. May it bear fruit as He causes it to go out from this place. Please be seated and let me pray briefly for us.

Our God, our Father, you speak these words to us through your servant, the writer of Ecclesiastes, the preacher. May we hear these words and may they bring understanding to our minds, gratitude to our hearts, and direct our steps as we seek to live our lives in service to you. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Two weeks ago, back in 1 Peter 4, we touched on the idea of joy in the midst of trials. Even the idea that when we suffer for our faith, for being Christians, for acting like Christians, this is evidence itself that our faith is genuine. And then that evidence can be the basis for true and real joy. Seems contradictory. I'm suffering. Oh, but that means I'm a Christian, because I'm suffering for being a Christian. Therefore I have joy. I am saved. And now here in Ecclesiastes we come to a passage where the preacher commends joy in the midst of an

evaluation of life under the sun that is vexing, to say the least. The wicked prosper and are even celebrated, while the righteous suffer. Yet as we heard, and we'll examine more in a little bit, the preacher commends joy. He recommends to us joy. Now for Peter, again, salvation is a gift from God. Suffering will come with it. That's inevitable as Peter teaches us. Why? Because Jesus suffered and the servant is not greater than the master. So if He suffered, so will we. And again, as we talked about a couple weeks ago, our suffering is evidence of true faith. Again, a gift from God, but also a cause, a real cause for joy.

Now for the preacher in Ecclesiastes, he's been telling us over and over again how life under the sun is vanity. That word that evokes the idea of a pointless life, a futile of all things. So while they don't say exactly the same thing (Peter and the preacher), they're nevertheless, I think, very much on the same page. There is good reason for joy, for true, genuine joy, even in the midst of suffering, even in the midst of vanity, because there's a God in heaven who takes care of His people. As Peter talks about suffering, he recognizes that this suffering is unjust. The preacher looks around a bit more empathetic with us. He expresses it more personally, more powerfully perhaps. But God has made promises, well, God has made promises to reward those who obey and to punish those who disobey. And yet, the preacher sees, and we see, for paying attention, those who disobey God's law and they prosper, and those who strive to obey God's law who suffer and struggle. So while there is human injustice that is indeed troublesome, what's even more frustrating is that God allows this to happen.

And so, again, it's more vexing, it's more discouraging than any human injustice could be. Because it seems like God is acting contrary to Himself, even to His own law. Why would God let the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? This is largely what the preacher is dealing with in these verses in Ecclesiastes 8. He explores it, and I want to explore it this morning by seeing the reality that he sees, telling us his reaction to it (and it's probably our reaction again as well), and then he recommends how believers should respond. So the reality of it, his reaction to it, and the response that he recommends to us, which of course you've heard, he commends joy.

Let's look at the reality. This skips around a little bit in the verses, but here's what the preacher sees and judges to be vanity, pointless. A wicked man lives a prolonged life, in verse 12. He's praised in the city, in verse 10. He goes in and out of the holy place as a worshipper, in verse 10. He receives reward that should go to the righteous, in verse 14. When he dies, he receives a regular, normal burial, just like anybody else. And afterwards again, his deeds are praised in the city. Now a quick note here, if you happen to have in front of you a King James, or a New King James, or a New American Standard translation, they say that his deeds are forgotten rather than praised. But those are based on older translations and translation traditions. The bulk of the manuscript evidence, the flow of the text, leans toward the translation being that their deeds are being praised. Slight little, it's like a typo in the text, where one letter of a word, depending on a little mark, could be a different letter and mean a different thing. It doesn't really make sense that it would be vanity for his deeds to be forgotten. That would be normal. The wicked's deeds should be forgotten. The wicked's deeds being praised, indeed, that is vanity. So these are the things that the preacher sees about the wicked.

And what we should note is that all of this goes against how we would naturally expect things to go. Wicked people shouldn't prosper. They're not supposed to do well. They're supposed

to be punished. They're supposed to receive the consequence of their sin as we read earlier, or we heard earlier in the Summons to Repentance. The first thing that the preacher tells us is that the wicked person is buried. Burial is for people who deserve it. It's an honor to be buried properly. It's a recognition of a life well lived, a good life well lived, of a person whose bones are worthy of being preserved. Wicked people are left to rot, or to be eaten by wild animals. But the preacher sees that the wicked are buried.

But there's more than that. Why are they buried? Why are they treated with this honor? For some reason, the evaluation of their life is just the opposite of what we'd expect. Here are people who regularly go in and out of the holy place, probably the temple. These are regular worshipers. They've kept the feasts. They performed the sacrifices. They've paid their tithes and their offerings. They've observed the Sabbaths. And for this the people praise them. Look how holy they are. Look how righteous they are. But the preacher says they're wicked. So this must be an outward display of holiness only. And for whatever reason the people don't see it. So they praised the wicked as being exactly the opposite of what they really are.

That's not old news. We see it today, don't we? Famous people, celebrities, leaders of various kinds who are wicked people, they do terrible things, but they make an outward profession of faith, they make some show of going to church or whatever, and we think, oh, holy people, we're so glad so-and-so claims to be a Christian, even though they still go about living their lives in utter disobedience and disregard for God and for His rules. But we don't like to condemn those people. Our society is terribly forgiving. Many people have noted that American people are tremendously forgiving. I know it goes back a ways, but I remember in the aftermath of Watergate, many, many people saying, you know, if Nixon had just apologized, he would have stayed president. If he would have just admitted what he did. He's too proud to, of course. You know, if someone says they're a believer, they must be. We have to take them at their word, despite behavior that says something completely contrary. Don't be judgmental, we're told. Don't be mean-spirited.

Of course, we also see other things that the preacher saw. The wicked receiving the rewards that the righteous should receive. So often the wicked are rich. They're healthy. They're famous. They have friends. They have good jobs. They have influence. They have fame. They're leaders. They live to a ripe old age. And at the same time, good people, God-fearing people, suffer through poverty or hunger or loss of their job, sickness, all sorts of trials and difficulties. Too often they die young. This is supposed to be the reward of the wicked, not of the righteous. What's going on here? It seems a terrible injustice to us. Because it is. Why, God? Why do you let this happen? In his search for wisdom, this is the reality that the preacher sees. But honestly, it's a reality that we see in this life as well. We know it to be true. We know it to be accurate because we see the same thing.

Years ago now, I heard a radio talk show host predict that if same-sex marriage were ever legalized, made normal in our society, humans marrying animals would be right down the road, not far behind. Seems far-fetched, doesn't it? Well, I went online and looked some things up. Wikipedia has a whole page on human-animal marriage and many, many examples of such being done. Included in their list is a website that claims to have performed at least 100 human-animal wedding ceremonies. Now that's an extreme example, but many others exist as well. If thievery, if theft is not punished, what happens? More stealing, more robbing, more theft. Seems to be more and more common across our country. Ask retailers how they're

doing in regard to theft. The old axiom that if broken windows are not fixed, more windows will be broken. Vandalism not punished leads to more vandalism.

Think about language. The language that's used in public might be in TV, videos, movies, public conversation. Not too long ago, there were words that just weren't used in polite public conversation. But the boundary kept getting pushed. It's just a word. It's just a word. It doesn't mean anything. So certain words become accepted, and then as the boundary keeps getting pushed out, harsher and harsher words and utter vulgarities, wicked and cruel words, become part of our normal speech. God's name taken in vain regularly around us, even among Christians. OMG, you know what that means. Don't hide behind it. Filthy language is common in our media, TV, movies, songs, on the internet and social media. I see, and this is not an isolated situation, I see this frequently. Christians who would never share or post an image of Jesus because they believe it violates the second commandment, yet frequently share or even engage in language that violates the third commandment.

So this is the reality. We too live in a world where far too often the wicked are not punished and so wickedness spreads. The wicked prosper, they die at a ripe old age, and the lack of punishment leads to more and more and more evil.

So how does the preacher react? Well, pretty much how I think we'd expect. In verses 10 and 14 he calls it vanity. This is the repeated evaluation of life under the sun by the preacher. Again, that word that has ideas of futility, pointlessness, emptiness, frustration. Another way to put it: it's just plain wrong. This isn't right. We don't like it. It offends our sense of what is right and what is wrong. Wicked people should get their just due. Good people should not have to suffer. There's nothing wrong with that reaction. It's biblical. It's the same reaction that the preacher has. We should react this way. Christianity is not a fatalistic religion. We don't just sit back and accept things the way they are, stoic about it, facing it with a stiff upper lip because, well, that's just the way life is. It's right to point out injustice. It's right to feel sorrow and anger over the injustice that exists in this life under the sun. It's there. We can't and we shouldn't ignore it. The preacher doesn't. He sees it for what it is. He calls it like it is.

What do we do? How do we respond? This leads us to the preacher's recommendation. And though I've told you what it is, still it might surprise you. In verse 15, he commends joy. What should we do about it? Joy. Eat and drink and be joyful. There's no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful. For this will go with him in his toil through all the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. Eat and drink and be joyful. This is where we get the phrase "eat, drink and be merry" used in a hedonistic, self-serving sort of way.

Not the response you'd necessarily expect, right? Maybe defend God and what he's doing and why. No, that happens in other parts of scripture. This is a very personal recommendation. Eat, drink, I commend to you joy. All the days of our life, whatever days, how many they are that God has given to us under the sun. This trouble that exists, this injustice, this situation where the wicked receive good while the righteous receive evil, is something that's going to continue through a man's life. It's the way it is. Again, that's not fatalistic, it's the way it is. Jesus said something similarly when he told those around him that the poor would always be with them. He's not saying it's right. but it is the way things are. This is the way of life under the sun. Under the sun is repeated twice in verse 15. It emphasizes that this is the realm of this unjust, evil, frustrating situation that we are rightly not happy with. Life under the sun.

Life without recognizing God who rules in heaven. This is life in a fallen, sinful world that our first parents brought upon us, and that we perpetuate in our own sin. This is life in a fallen world, and it is vanity.

But this is not the first time the preachers recommended this kind of response. Enjoy what God has given you. Enjoy the gifts that you have. Eat and drink and have a joyful heart. When we go back to chapter 2 verses 24 through 26, he says something similar that God has given to you however long it is in this life under the sun. His remedy is to turn our hearts away from what we see, not to ignore it, not to dismiss it, but to turn our attention from it and turn our attention to God in heaven — the God who rules, the God who reigns, the God who ordains everything such that there is a time and a purpose for everything under heaven. That is true, and he wants us to have confidence in that God, that God who gives good gifts, and every good gift is to be received with thanksgiving, as Paul tells Timothy. Again, it doesn't mean we shouldn't be upset or angry about injustice, about wrongs done in this world. It doesn't mean we can't take action to correct it. Sin is sin. It needs to be confronted. It needs to be dealt with and hopefully changed. But it does mean that that action isn't necessarily going to produce a great deal or maybe even any joy or contentment. Thanksgiving leads to joy and contentment.

This is what the preacher means by those he refers to as those who fear God in verse 12. They show God proper awe and respect. They do it in his presence before him, as it says in verse 12. It will be well for those who fear God, says the preacher. He knows this. Those who pay him proper respect. or in awe for who he is, who receive with joy and thanksgiving the things that he has given them, whatever they are, plenty, little, abundance, lack, joy or sorrow, sickness or health. Preacher doesn't see this. It's interesting what he says at the beginning: "I saw the wicked buried." All sorts of things he sees as he observes life under the sun. This he knows, he says in verse 12. I know this to be true. He's positive, he's sure, he's confident. It will go well for those who fear God, and he knows that it will not go well for the wicked, he says in verse 13. If not in this life, then when?

So the preacher must have some concept of eternity, of a God who judges. Thinking of life under heaven rather than life under the sun. Life in God's eternal purposes rather than this short time we live, this life under the sun. I think this is supported and even emphasized by what he says in verses 16 and 17. People can't sleep. It's a common occurrence for many of us. We can't sleep when something's troubling us or bothering us, when we can't fathom what's going on in the world around us, in this life under the sun. And however much we might try to tease it out, to understand it, even a very wise man, says the preacher, can't figure it out. He ends there in verse 17, even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. He doesn't know. that it will go well with those who fear God. And the opposite is true as well. It will not go well with the wicked. They are going to be judged. Judgment is coming. A time when God will judge those who are wicked and those who are righteous, those who fear God.

And of course we know what the preacher doesn't. The greatest gift that God can give to those who fear Him is His very own Son. You know, we can try on our own. We can try to gin it up from within ourselves. We can try techniques, meditations, practices of various kinds. We can try to create joy in ourselves, try to be a more thankful, joyful person, to be more appreciative of what we have, to be more content with our lot in life. But if you try to do that on your own, you will inevitably fail. It doesn't work. It's a question I always have every November when

Thanksgiving comes around. If you're not a Christian, to whom are you thankful? It's a pointless exercise. It's vanity. The only way to truly find joy and contentment is to find the gift that God has given His very own Son, Jesus Christ, to know Him, to realize and to know and to accept and receive all that He has done for His people, to finally admit, finally admit that you can't be righteous on your own, by your own strength, by your own efforts. You can't even be thankful and joyful and truly content on your own, because on your own you're just as wicked as the next person. And if you're honest, you know it.

The God who gives good things, even in the midst of all the vanities of life under the sun, is a God who is going to enact judgment on the wicked. And He does these things because He loves us. That might be hard to see in the midst of all this, but He loves us. Why? We know, again, what the preacher doesn't know. He gave His own Son, His own beloved Son, because He loves His people. Even while we were ungodly, Christ died for us, for my and for your wicked sins. He offers His righteous obedience in trade: you give me your sins, I'll give you my perfect obedience. It's a gift given by God's grace alone and received by faith. It pales in comparison. If you realize that, then you can be truly grateful. and truly content and truly joyful in this life under the sun, this vain, sinful life under the sun, knowing that in the end, knowing it will go well for you. Because in Jesus Christ, God has already made everything right. Because you're right with him, acceptable to him by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And that, my friends, is cause for rejoicing.

Let me pray for us.

O God, our Father, indeed may our hearts turn to you in gratitude, in thanksgiving, and in rejoicing. Many of us here gathered in this building or watching or listening or watching now or later. Lord, we're going through difficult, hard, tough times. Or we look at the world around us and think, What? What is going on? Why does such wickedness prosper? Why does it spread? Lord, turn our eyes to you. Turn our attention to you. Remind us of who you are. Remind us that you are the giver of all good things, and that whatever good we might have, abundant or little, is a precious and loving gift from you to us. Help us to be thankful. Help us to be content with what we have because we know that an inheritance beyond our ability to grasp or imagine is coming when it comes in Jesus Christ and all that goes with him and all that comes with him. The day of his returning. We long for that day. We hope for that day. This is the blessed hope of our faith. May it come quickly and in the meantime, may you use us to rescue those around us from the terrible consequences that are facing them if they do not come to Christ Jesus in repentance and faith. Guide us and lead us by your Word and by your Spirit. We thank you. Amen.