

July 7, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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## LIFE'S PLEASURES OFFER NO SATISFACTION Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Edward Curtis, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, reminds us of how well the classic movie *Citizen Kane* pictures the conclusions at which Solomon arrived according to our text.

“This classic movie (1941) shows a man, Charles Foster Kane, rising from humble beginnings to a position of immense power and wealth, enabling him to acquire anything he desires. He builds a huge mansion on top of a hill to house his possessions, rivaling those of kings. Still, he finds little fulfillment in life and is angry and frustrated because of what his money and power cannot accomplish. His obsession with wealth and power drives his family and friends away, and he dies miserable and all alone, surrounded by his things. His reflection on life as he nears death reveals that the closest he ever came to satisfaction and fulfillment was in childhood when he was poor and with his family. The movie’s final scenes show workers in the basement of Kane’s house throwing his things into the furnace. The camera slowly pulls away from the dwelling sitting high above the valley, black smoke rising from the chimney. It is hard to imagine a more graphic way of declaring that the life of Charles Kane was *hebel*.” (Edward M. Curtis, *Teach the Text Commentary*, “Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs,” Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, 19).

Ever since the moment Eve and Adam expressed dissatisfaction with all that God gave them, and reached out for more at Satan’s temptation, humanity has been plagued with the insatiable desire to have more. And throughout human history that quest for more and more has always ended in futility, frustration, and ultimately *hebel*, emptiness and lack of satisfaction.

Solomon’s great experiment in life proved that this is the inescapable condition of humanity. We naturally keep grasping for things, experiences, ideas, with the hope that those things will provide what God alone is able to provide for us when we are rightly related to Him. Our whole being craves fellowship with God. But in our sinful condition we do not rightly assess that desire. Therefore, like Solomon we burn out chasing everything, anything, and anyone, trying to fill the void that is God-shaped.

The important lesson to learn after we have wasted so much of our lives, so much energy, so much money, is that passing people, passing experiences, and passing stuff will end in *hebel*, vanity, wind, a handful of nothingness. God created us to glorify Him. Only when we are in that kind of relationship will we experience true pleasure. All other pursuits will prove that pleasure is elusive. How long will it be before we learn this important lesson?

### Searching for Pleasure in Pleasure (vv.1-3).

Where did Solomon search to find answers? Consider the avenues of searching defined in our text. Solomon looked down the road of pleasure only to discover that there is no pleasure in pleasure. *I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity (v.1).*

This is the record of the musings and questions of a man’s heart. That part of the story is good and right. We need to argue, debate, question in our hearts, with ourselves. Our heart is the eternal part of us that shapes and expresses our character. The heart is where we think things through, debate with ourselves, come to conclusions based on evidence. In our hearts we cast our decisions. Out of our hearts flow our emotions.

Because that is so, we can rightly draw conclusions about others as we observe what comes from their heart. We can clearly observe negative traits about a person like pride, arrogance, non-thinking, unfair, unwise, ungodly, vicious, jealous, envious. Those are all the characteristics of the flesh that flow out of the heart. It is as Jesus taught, “*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander*” (Matthew 15:19). At the same time, we are able to observe positive traits as they are

displayed from the heart. We can see when people are Christlike and evidence wisdom, love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

As we argue and debate in our hearts, we will make our decisions based on the evidence we have gathered in our hearts. If we feed on natural fleshly thoughts, we will respond naturally and characteristic of the flesh. If we feed on the wisdom and truths of Christ, we will respond according to His character. But even then, circumstances can be such that we can make wrong choices even though we have accurate information. Therefore, Solomon was searching for answers to very difficult questions like: “What is the meaning of life?” “Why does it seem so futile?”

Searching for answers the wise man turned to pleasure. “*Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.*” Solomon proposed a test. The Hebrew word speaks of testing something to prove its worth, value, or character as when David refused Saul’s armor because he had not tested it. It can mean to attempt something as when God asked His people, “Has a god ever attempted to deliver his people through signs and wonders?” (Deut. 4:34). It can refer to the prohibition against putting God to the test by arguing against His words, works, or character. Here the word means to investigate, experiment, attempt to ferret out truth or reality.

Solomon was investigating the purpose and meaning of life and chose to pursue the channel of pleasure. There are two Hebrew words in this statement that similarly speak of joy or enjoyment. Literally Solomon said something like this to life: “I will probe you in rejoicing and observe you in good.” The word for *pleasure* speaks of gladness, joy, merry-making. God actually commended this emotion for His people when they met together at the feasts. In fact, God expects His people to find pleasure in His blessings and benefits. And yet the same word is used negatively to describe how God’s enemies rejoice when they defeat God’s people in battle.

The phrase *enjoy yourself* is built on two Hebrew words that mean to inspect or observe, that which is good and pleasant. Surely God desires for us to conclude what is good and pleasant and to enjoy it. The problem is that the sinful flesh finds pleasure in what God does not call good. Thus we twist God’s truth.

Solomon investigated, tested what God calls good for rejoicing, and what the flesh calls pleasurable and came to a discouraging conclusion, *But behold, this also was vanity (v.1)*. Even the pursuit of what God commends results in *hebel*, emptiness and frustration. That is because finding merriment in what God gives, apart from recognizing the Giver of the gift, should result in emptiness. All the blessings of God are pointless if we don’t have God. God Himself gives fulfillment.

While Solomon poked and prodded in the realm of pleasure, he discovered that there is no pleasure in laughter. *I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” (v.2)*. Solomon considered, investigated laughter along with mirth and merriment. God commends laughing when we rejoice in His works (Psalm 126:2). But Solomon concluded that it is empty and useless. Who was right, God or Solomon? The answer to that question is self-evident.

Solomon’s conclusion that laughter is mad means that it is like a brilliant shining light that has no purpose, it being superficial. That is because laughter and pleasure can be superficial when a fool laughs at the wise man (Prov. 29:9). Or as when laughter is actually a cover for deep hurt (Prov. 14:13). Human wisdom commends laughter, and yet the object of or reason for laughter is often very shallow. This is how I feel about most comedians and even some so called Christian comedians. Sometimes they make me laugh. But too often, especially with secular comedians they conclude that sin is a matter of jest, that it is good to mock and laugh at truth. It is all empty and pointless to me who likes to laugh.

And, also while he was investigating, Solomon learned that there is no pleasure in alcohol. He confessed, *I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine--my heart still guiding me with wisdom--and how to lay hold on folly (v.3)*. The sinful flesh will naturally turn to something, anything, to stop the pain of real life. Wine can do that. On one hand God commended wine to His people in association with them rejoicing for His blessings. Wine was to be part of the merry-making at special occasions (like weddings) and at the feast that focused on God’s blessings.

But God’s wisdom also warns about the danger of wine and strong drink. This same Solomon concluded, *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise”*

(Proverbs 20:1). Notice that there are two words used for alcoholic beverages in this conclusion. The word translated *wine* is the Hebrew word *yayin*. That Hebrew word is translated in the New Testament with the very common Greek word *oinos*. In both the Old and New Testaments these are the very common words for wine in the Bible. It describes the most commonly used form of wine that was typically diluted 2/1 or 3/1 while it was used for ordinary meals if the people could afford it. This is the “wine” with which Solomon was experimenting.

The second word Solomon used when warning about wine is translated *strong drink*. This is the Hebrew word *shey-kawr'*. (Greek *sikera*). It is a less common description of alcohol, found only 60 times in the Old Testament. Five times this word is used in a somewhat positive light. For example, it describes the drink offering the petitioner poured out before the altar, (Num. 28:7). It could have been part of the tithe the person gave at the tabernacle, (Deut 14:26). Or the word describes alcohol that was given as a kind of anesthesia or sedative to the person who was suffering hopelessly, (Prov. 31:6). All the other uses of this word speak of debauchery, drunkenness, or shameful actions from the effects of the beverage.

At the point we do well to remember that the maximum alcoholic content possible with natural fermentation was 10%. Natural fermentation was the only method known in the Bible for making alcoholic beverages. Distillation, the means of fortifying alcohol in a drink was not discovered until around A.D. 650. Therefore, even the strong drink that Solomon warns against was a far cry from 20% alcohol content of whiskey that is common in our day. Solomon didn't experiment with that stuff.

Your culture spends over \$50 billion per year on stuff way stronger than the strongest drink mentioned in the Bible. Solomon was not experimenting with drunkenness. He was probably getting a buzz . . . the sort of thing that might cause him to lose his chariot license if he got pulled over. Let's draw an honest conclusion on the basis of what Solomon was doing here. He was trying to see if pleasure brought meaning to life. Like this experiment, the use of alcohol is quite selfish because it is all about me achieving pleasure. No one ever purchased a \$12 drink at the restaurant and concluded, “The only reason I am doing this is because I want to help provide for

the man who owns the distillery.” The truth is more like, “The only reason I pay such a high price for one drink is because I like it.”

What was Solomon's reason for this testing, this searching? He probed and poked *till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life (v.3b)*. What is good to do? This is the question of life. What constitutes good? Humanity has an opinion and each individual has an opinion. But the truth is that God is what makes me happy, brings me pleasure, results in satisfaction and fulfillment for me. In the process, “doing good” I might even benefit others while I achieve satisfaction. But Solomon wondered what would constitute good during the few days of life. Or “What is the meaning of life?” What is our purpose during these few days?

Solomon's discouraging conclusion was that whatever seems to be good is futile. Really. Maybe. Stop to consider what we think is a good thing for us to do in life. Is it good to make money so we can buy pleasures? Is it good to pursue what our peers have concluded is pleasurable? Is it good to do something that can leave a legacy whether it be financial or educational or scientific? Is it good to build things that last long after we are gone? Solomon concluded that ultimately all that “good” is useless. It results in *hebel*.

### Searching for Pleasure in Stuff (vv.4-9).

Maybe we can find meaning and purpose in life by creating and owning stuff. Solomon wondered that and went about building a whole bunch of tangible stuff. Why? Essentially, it was to please himself. Remember he was probing pleasure. So he confessed, *I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself (v.4)*. Solomon expanded his works, built more houses than he needed and planted an abundance of vineyards for one reason. He didn't give the houses to Habitat for Humanity. As far as we know, he didn't open the vineyards to the orphans, widows, and immigrants.

Let's once again count the personal references in verses 4-7 and 9. 4 “**I** made great works. **I** built houses and planted vineyards for **myself**. 5 **I** made **myself** gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 **I** made **myself** pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 **I** bought male and female slaves, and had

slaves who were born in **my** house. **I** had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before **me** in Jerusalem. So **I** became great and surpassed all who were before **me** in Jerusalem. Also **my** wisdom remained with **me**.” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-7,9). Solomon’s much building was all about him.

But he also built to display beauty. *I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees (v.5)*. He made places and things look better. When he completed a project, He could stand back and view his accomplishments with satisfaction. That is good, isn’t it? He even built things to serve useful purposes. *I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees (v.6)*. It is true that Solomon derived satisfaction for himself through his construction projects. But these projects almost certainly benefitted other people.

Oh, but along the road to personal pleasure, Solomon even experimented with the very common pleasure of controlling people. *I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house (v.7a)*. Owning slaves was a symbol of wealth in his day. But, owning slaves also had to offer a sense of controlling others. There are various attitudes and activities that our world identifies as emotional disorders which are displayed by trying to control others. You don’t have to own people in order to try to manipulate them and control them. And all of them come to the same conclusion: There is no lasting pleasure in controlling people.

Solomon achieved greatness according to all measure of human opinion. He achieved comparative greatness having exceeded his peers. He owned more of what kings called important than the previous kings owned. *I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem (7b)*. In every way Solomon was greater than his predecessors. *So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem (v.9a)*.

Solomon was incredibly wealthy. He admitted, *I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces (v.8a)*. Israel’s historian gave us a little insight into Solomon’s wealth. Among other things, he recorded, *Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides that which came from the explorers and from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of the west and from the governors*

*of the land (1 Kings 10:14-15)*. All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon (1 Kings 10:21).

Solomon collected all that humanity considers delightful. *I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man (v.8b)*. He fulfilled the goals of human wisdom. *Also my wisdom remained with me (v.9b)*. A couple of times, Solomon was sure to point out that he still had his wits about him. But this is obviously a reference to human wisdom apart from God. God’s wisdom begins with God, is focused on God, and concludes all things in God.

### **Searching for Pleasure in Work (vv.10-11).**

Now we come to the synopsis of the wise man’s search. He assures us that no pleasure was overlooked in his quest. *And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure (v.10a)*. Solomon undertook anything and everything that might possibly bring joy and mirth. But through it all, we must remember that his personal pleasure was his single focus during this part of his investigation. Such pleasure is the American idol as it was in Rome.

Ultimately, it came down to Solomon finding pleasure in his work. *For my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil (v.10b)*. “How could anyone find pleasure in work?” the modern American asks. Actually, there is pleasure in work because God ordained work even before sin entered the world. *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it (Genesis 2:15)*. Work is not a curse associated with sin. Futile, endless, repeated work is the curse.

But consider the working, wise man’s conclusion. He took an overview of all his efforts. *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it (v.11a)*. This means that he viewed it all or reviewed what he had accomplished. We would think that he, of all people, should have found much satisfaction. The sad reality is that he did not. Instead the wise man concluded, *and*

*behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (v.11b).*

Such is life. I know what Solomon experienced in much of his searching and testing. Many of you do also. I love to remodel. I love to build things. I love to make things look better. But, I am able to face the sad reality. I have put years of time, energy, and money into remodeling our house. We build and decorate our house the way we like it. But sometimes Pat and I will watch shows on HGTV in which a couple will walk into a house, consider all that the previous owner had done for their own pleasure, and say, “Rip it out because it is ugly.” I know that one day someone is going to have that opinion of all our work. Again, such is life.

I close with two verses from God’s word. Solomon said, “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Jesus said, “*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*” (Matthew 6:33). The good news, as we read it at the end of this book, is that Solomon came to agree with Jesus.