

Pleasure: Why Not?

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I really like the book of Ecclesiastes. Like I said, it's a weird book. I think this morning's sermon kind of touched on some of the strangeness, but it's a real book. And frankly, I resonate with it. I resonate with the teacher because like him, I'm a man of appetites. I like the good things of life. I like experiences. I like experiencing things for their fullness.

You know, back in Nashville where we're from, I roast my own coffee and then I hand grind my coffee and I have, you know, a whole pour over Chemex contraption. It's very nerdy, but I really like it. I'm a man of appetites. And so was he in his own way. But as a person of appetites, I know something also of emptiness and insatiability.

The emptiness of not knowing, of thinking this will never fill me. I don't want that. And I don't want that either. Nothing will really make me happy. I know that feeling. Maybe you do.

And the insatiability of knowing, you know, I might, it's never enough. It's never enough, is it, for people of an appetite. No matter the good thing, I usually want more of it.

Emptiness and insatiability. In our own ways, we all know something about those two things. And that's what the teacher, this pundit who wrote Ecclesiastes, is talking about in this section.

[1 : 3 9] So what I want to do in this sermon, since I promised you a slightly more cheery sermon in the evening, is I want to show you from the Bible that pleasure is a particularly Christian endeavor. And that to get there, we have to actually let go of all the pleasures of life and learn to take pleasure in Jesus.

And that's the way that we actually get those pleasures that we let go of back, so that we can really enjoy them for what they are, instead of trying to make, make them something they're not.

And I hope as we go on, that will begin to make sense. In verse 10, he says, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

That is a man of appetites. He never said no to himself. If he looked at something and it looked good, he took it. Like Eve and Adam in the garden, seeing that fruit, and she said, looks good to me, I'll take it.

Whether or not God said it's good. He says, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. The teacher is the sort of guy who says, you know, I worked hard.

[2 : 5 6] I deserve this. I really have this coming, in a good way, not in a bad way. I deserve this treat, this pleasure. And he tried out what we would call the nihilistic creed.

Eat, drink, and be merry. For this is all there is. What else is there? Might as well enjoy it while you're here. So the teacher applied three tests to his heart.

Verse 1, he says, I said to myself, come now, I will test you with pleasure. He's talking to himself, his heart. Come now, self, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

Enjoy yourself. Let's see how this goes down. So he tests himself with three things. With wine, with possessions, and with sex.

He says, will this make me happy? Will this make me matter? Will this satisfy me? Satisfy is a big word. We use it cheaply.

[4 : 0 6] It means to fill that emptiness, the hole inside, as it were. In other words, the preacher wants to see, like we talked about this morning, what's the gain?

How can I gain in life? How can I come out ahead? What's the profit? So how can we fill the emptiness and satisfy the insatiability?

Let's turn to pleasure with him and find out. He tests his heart with wine, possessions, and sex, kind of like a clinically depressed man would test out different medications.

Right? Maybe some of you know what this is like if you have some sort of an ailment and you need to take chronic, you know, you need to perpetually take medications. You try one for a while and

say, how does it make me feel?

Does it cure the thing that's wrong with me? And what are its side effects? Maybe this one makes me really sleepy. Maybe this one makes me feel really awake all the time and I can't sleep.

[5 : 07] That's what he's doing with pleasure. He's testing out medications. And what does he find? Well, he gives us the answer right off the bat.

Right? Chapter 2, verse 1 and 2. Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be what? Meaningless.

Vapor. Hevil, that word from this morning. It's vapor. There's nothing to it. It's ingraspable. Pleasure is like the rest of life.

It's vapor. Robert Burns came to the same conclusion. I've lived here long enough now that I believe I can quote Robert Burns legitimately. He said, but pleasures are like poppies spread. You seize the flower, the bloom is shed. Or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white that melts forever. Or like the rainbow's lovely form vanishing amid the storm.

[6 : 15] Pleasure is vapor. Now you might say, what does Christianity have to do with pleasure anyway? Right? I mean, many think nothing. Isn't Christianity about denying yourself all these pleasures and doing the hard thing instead of the fun thing?

Isn't that what it's all about? Well, actually, our catechisms teach us otherwise. Distilling the truths of scripture for us. The Heidelberg Catechism, question one.

What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

So, eternal pleasure is your destiny in Christ. Do you ever think of it that way? And I hope that your vision of eternity isn't, you know, kind of floating around in the clouds playing harps and wearing white robes.

Whatever joys and pleasures we've experienced in this life are just the smallest foretaste of eternity. They're just shadows compared to the realities.

[7 : 26] It's far more earthy than earth is. It's tangible. It's real. It's going to be amazing. The Christian destiny is eternal pleasure.

But the preacher wanted to know, how does that actually, you know, affect my life here and now under the sun? So he does his tests.

He tests his heart with pleasure and so do we. We test our hearts with pleasure too. Asking the same questions. There is nothing new under the sun. So let's think about these three tests.

Wine, possessions, and sex. We're going to be just honest and candid with each other tonight. He starts with wine and he says, will wine gladden my heart? Will this lift my spirits?

Will wine can gladden the heart? Or depress it? Alcohol is a depressant technically, right? So its general effect on us is not to make us sharp and witty, but to make us dull and fuzzy.

[8 : 33] That's what alcohol tends to do for us. Not to make us fully alive. And if you turn to alcohol to fill the emptiness, you'll find it makes you its slave.

You do feel pleasure. It is pleasurable. It can be delightful. You feel a tingle. Maybe you get a buzz. It's over in an hour or less.

You chase that feeling. It'll betray you. It'll leave you with a stomach ache at least the next day. And then you'll go back for more and more and more.

and it will always leave you empty. That's what it does. Not because it's bad, but because that's not the thing God made to fill and satisfy you.

Now, this teacher in Ecclesiastes, he's not making a case for drinking and he's not making a case for teetotaling. That's not the point. He's not saying good or bad. He's saying it's vapor.

[9 : 41] It's pleasures will always evade your grasp. It's just chasing the wind. So then he turns to possessions. Let's look again from verses 4 to 7.

He says, I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself. I planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks. Planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In other words, he didn't say no to anything that was the mark of class and luxury in his day.

This list that he just did in these three verses would look totally different ported into kind of a modern context. You know, it might include not to be, you know, ridiculous.

We all have our own lists but, you know, maybe somebody has every streaming service possible. You've got Disney Plus and Netflix and Amazon and Hulu and all the things. You've got holidays abroad. You've got a winter home somewhere warm and tropical.

[10 : 49] You know, a thriving nightlife with beautiful people or 10,000 Instagram followers. Whatever the thing is, we all have our lists that we would like that would make us feel important, classy, luxurious.

Those things cost money so he worked hard. He toiled to get all these pleasures. Look at verse 11. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless.

A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. It didn't come out in the balance. The amount of work he put into it wasn't worth the amount of pleasure he got out of it.

In other words, you know, if you say work a high demand job so that you can afford the sort of lifestyle that you and your family really want to live, the end of the day, the end of your life, you will probably look back and say, that job demanded everything from me like a master and it left me nothing with which to enjoy the life that it earned me.

It's vapor. So then he turns his attention to sex. Look at the end of verse 8. The teacher says that many concubines are the delight of the sons of men or the delights of a man's heart is this harem of his.

[12 : 29] In other words, he's saying surely sex is the pinnacle of pleasure, is it not? Why deny myself there too? Just say go for it. Now, this generation, this moment in time right now has an insanely high value on what I, so-called sexual freedom.

love is love. Why be trapped in the restricting bounds of a committed monogamous heterosexual relationship? This is common today.

You know that. There's two things I want to say about that. First of all, freedom is not a lack of restrictions. Okay?

We think freedom means no rules, no boundaries, no restrictions. Freedom is not a lack of restrictions. Is a fish more free when it's restricted to water or when it's freed to the land?

Freedom is not a lack of restrictions. Freedom is finding the restrictions that suit our design and free us to flourish.

[13 : 49] Human flourishing, human sexual flourishing by God's design is for committed monogamous sexual intimacy in the bounds of marriage between one man and one woman and any other sexual pursuit.

Whether it's same-sex attraction, sexual promiscuity, or pornography is destructive. It's not just bad. It's not just a bad idea. It's destructive and wicked.

wicked. It'll kill you in the end. It's like freeing a fish to the grass. That's the first thing I want to say about that.

The second is that, like all pleasures, sex just won't fill the emptiness. It just won't do it. We all pursue these sort of pleasures for satisfaction. We're all sexual sinners in some way.

We all are. So we have no right to look down on others with a sexual ethic. We can disagree with them firmly and from scripture. We don't get to regard anyone else as second rate.

[14 : 57] In fact, even sex in a Christian marriage, if pursued for its own end, will leave us empty. It can become an idol, too.

Well, so much for pleasure. These are the tests of Ecclesiastes. So after testing out these new medicines of pleasure on his heart, he says what?

Look at verse 17. So I hated life. That's what saying yes to everything you desire with your eyes will do for you.

You'll hate life. So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Grasping after pleasure to fill you is like chasing after smoke. It will elude your grasp, and it will always leave you empty. Now there's an ancient story of a woman who lived in a town called Sychar about 2,000 years ago.

[16 : 14] The empty woman of Sychar. She had kind of an insatiable thirst in her life, a need, and to fill that need, to satisfy her, she chased partner after partner after partner.

She just needed to be significant. And so she turned to men. And one day she met a man, a man from Nazareth, while she was drawing water from a well at noon.

And that man promised her that he could give her water that if she drank it, she would never thirst again. He said, whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. And she said, sir, give me this water. Every ounce of longing, every square inch of emptiness exists to be filled by Jesus.

Jesus. we are all the woman at the well from John chapter four. We come to Jesus. We meet Jesus in scripture with just the same sort of insatiability that the empty woman of Sychar had.

[17 : 48] I wonder what you turn to. And Jesus says, if you turn to me, that's what your insatiability was made for.

You'll never thirst again. Now, when Jesus met the woman from Sychar, he was hungry. Do you remember the story? It's in John chapter four. Jesus was hungry.

He sent the disciples away to find some food, and then he meets the woman at the well. He was hungry. His stomach was empty, so he'd sent the disciples on. They returned with food, and they're like, here you go, Jesus, you can eat now.

And he said, no, I'm all right, thanks. Remember, he said, I have food that you don't know about.

And so they probably thought that he had stashed a sandwich under his cloak or something, but he said, my food is to do the will of my father.

In other words, Jesus feared and obeyed God. He did the will of God, and then he said, I am satisfied to the point of not even being hungry anymore for food.

[19 : 09] In Ecclesiastes 12, at the end of the book, verse 13, this is how he closes the book off. He says, now all has been heard.

Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. Jesus knew that to be true.

Jesus knows that if anything was going to emotionally and physically satisfy him, fill the insatiability that is to be human, it was to do the will of God.

At the end of Ecclesiastes 2, he writes this in verse 24, a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness.

[20 : 21] But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. To the one who pleases him. How do we please God?

We fear and obey him. We put him first. We do what he says to do, and we receive, we receive from his hands all the good gifts of life, and we enjoy them.

Do you see, in Ecclesiastes, the teacher is not saying, pleasure is worthless and not worthwhile, don't bother. He says, pleasure is vapor.

It's another gift. It's not the giver. Pleasure is not the thing meant to satisfy you. It's meant to be received as a gift from the hands of the one who satisfies you.

So the atheist is forced to say, eat, drink, and be merry, for that is all there is. But the teacher in Ecclesiastes is teaching us, eat, drink, and be merry, for that is what there is.

[21 : 25] Do you see the difference? The pleasures of this life really are to be enjoyed, but as gifts, not as ends of themselves, because they won't fill you.

Only the God who gave them can fill you. He can satisfy the longings, fill the emptiness. So all the pleasures that you enjoy in life are from God.

The way that you have been wired to like certain things is from God. but here's the thing that turned this upside down for me. Your insatiability is from God too.

Your appetites are from God. The desire for more and more, if you know that feeling, is from God as a gift.

Appetite for pleasures is a gift. God gave eternity into the hearts of man.

[22 : 28] He's given us longings that only the eternal can fill so that every longing, every bit of emptiness would point us to the only one who can actually ultimately satisfy us.

in other words, you can, there's only one thing in existence that you can go back to again and again and again and again for pleasure, and that's Jesus.

Everything else will harm you. Everything else, if you treat it like that, will betray you, but you can have as much Jesus as you want. That's amazing.

C.S. Lewis says, all joy reminds, it is never a possession.

Every pleasure in life is meant to set our hearts singing for Jesus. Everyone, when you eat a phenomenal meal, you drink an amazing glass of wine, just sends your palate to heaven. [23 : 43] It sends your heart, should send your heart, to that marriage feast of the lamb that you'll get to partake of one day if you love Jesus. All pleasure reminds. When you see the beautiful weather or the autumn leaves, it should set our hearts singing about the glory of Christ, the beauty of Christ, the tree of life in eternity.

joy, if you're enjoying intimacy in a relationship, it should remind us and set our hearts singing about the fact that in Christ we are fully known and fully loved by the most glorious being in the universe. All joy reminds. It's never a possession. It's never a means to itself. It's never its own end. So we return to the teacher's burning question at chapter 1 from this morning.

What can man gain? And we answer Christ. Jesus is our inheritance, our treasure, our eternal possession.

Psalms 1611 says, In your presence there is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures evermore. Psalm 36, how precious is your steadfast love, O God.

[25 : 01] The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

Whoa. That's pleasure. What a gift. And it is a gift. It's a free gift, but it is not a cheap gift. gift. We've all died in Adam, just like Adam and Eve. We've reached out our hands and plucked that fruit. We have decided for ourselves how to live.

We decide for ourselves what's good. We've sinned by calling death freedom and living for the gifts instead of the giver. But Jesus, he paid the price for those sins with his own blood.

His loss is our gain. He purchased for us eternal pleasures, eternal life with God.

[26 : 04] But that doesn't always feel like our reality. Our experience and our emotions don't always line up with that truth. So temptations come. And we're tempted to treat pleasures like something more ultimate than they are.

So what do we do? Well, I want to give you just a quick tool. It's personal. It's helped me. And I think it's biblical. When I face temptations, I often ask myself, what's the gain?

And I think of Ecclesiastes every time. What's the gain? What will I gain? You have to really answer it. It's not a rhetorical question. You have to ask yourself, if I do this thing that I'm tempted to do, what will I get from it?

Usually, the only gain is shame or a sense of distance from God or relational discomfort or physical discomfort.

Conversely, then, what's the gain if I obey in this moment, if I do the hard thing that at the moment I don't really want to? And it's the pleasure of God's pleasure. pleasure. It's the fruit of the Spirit.

[27 : 22] It's intimacy with God, feeling fully alive to God. The fear of God and delight in Christ is the key, not just to Ecclesiastes, but to a life of holiness.

It's the good life. Adam and Eve in the garden chose the fleeting pleasure at the expense of it eternal pleasure of God.

And what did they gain? Let me close with the words of a hymn from Francis Bevan. I sighed for rest and happiness. I yearned for them, not thee.

But while I passed my Savior by, his love laid hold on me. I tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but ah, the waters failed. Even as I stooped to drink, they fled and mocked me as I wailed.

Now, none but Christ can satisfy. None other name for me. There's love and life and lasting joy, Lord Jesus found in thee.

[28 : 33] It's true. So, go, eat, drink, and be merry. And think as you do of the coming feast with Jesus in the new heavens and the new earth.

and raise a glass to the king, because he's given us good gifts to enjoy. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, there's love and life and lasting joy, Lord Jesus found in thee.

We believe that. Help us to believe that. we are people of appetite. We confess that. We are people whose hearts have been broken by sin, and we desire things that are bad for us, or we desire things that are good for us to be ultimate things, which makes them bad for us.

And so often we don't want you, and we're sorry, and we need your help. And so we put our feet down on the truth that you've told us tonight in your word, that at your right hand are pleasures evermore.

The truth that you're better, that you're lovelier, more desirable, more beautiful, more glorious. and we're asking your help right now to live like that's true.
[30 : 03] For the glory of Christ. Amen.