

Ecclesiastes: Chasing Meaning
The Myth of the Good Person
Ecclesiastes 7:15-29
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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- Ecclesiastes 7:15-29, ESV

Why do the wicked prosper, while bad things happen to good people?

Solomon opens today's passage with an observation: "*In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.*" This is an honest observation of how things often appear in this world, and yet it is also an observation that Solomon himself is in the midst of dismantling for us, so we can see the eternal and true perspective.

In our fleeting lives under the sun, this is something we often see, often enough to really challenge our faith in God's eternal wisdom and goodness. Right now, little 4-year-old Audrina Smith is clinging to life at Johns Hopkins, having suffered multiple brain bleeds, having had a large tumor and part of her skull removed in emergency surgery last week, and having suffered severe brain damage. She is in a medically induced coma, and no one but the Lord knows what the future hold for her.

In 2008, a good friend of ours, Martha Abshire, lost her husband, Chris, to aggressive lung cancer. Chris loved the Lord and lived a life of faith and faithfulness, and he was suddenly taken from this world in the prime of his life.

And then, on the other hand, we see men like Adolf Hitler survive four assassination attempts, and men like Josef Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people, live to old age.

This is not right, is it? Realities like this put the truth of verse 13 into a stark light: "*Consider the work of God: Who can make straight what He has made crooked?*" God has, for His own purposes, made certain things in this world crooked. And that reality can be hard.

Logically, we can analyze the world we live in and realize we have only four real possibilities for how to explain what we see:

1. **There is no God.** In this case, the crooked things are crooked just because they're the way they are. There are no answers, no meaning, and no hope. The world is as it is, so we'd better just accept it. Natural selection, Survival of the fittest. Circle of life. All that basically empty and hopeless drivel is true, so that's that.
2. **God exists, and He is good, but He's not in control of the world.** It's not His fault in any way that things are broken and crooked. He has nothing to do with it. He's just as broken-hearted and dismayed as we are. He could give us a shoulder to cry on and He could sympathize with us in our sorrow, but He offers no real help, because He's a victim, too.
3. **God exists, and He's in control, but He's not good.** Instead, He's a blend of what we call good and evil that somehow transcends both. He is an absolute beyond good and evil. This kind of conclusion says that we can't have good without evil, because things always have to stay balanced. So, you take the good, you take the bad, you take them both, and there you have . . . God, such as He is. This leaves us without hope and without any assurance that suffering serves any greater purpose or that good will ever win in the end.
4. **God exists, He is good, and He is in control, but we cannot understand His ways and purposes.** This is the answer of Ecclesiastes and the rest of Scripture. On a purely human level, this is perhaps the hardest to accept, because it requires that we do two things that rub against our nature: We must acknowledge our limitations and trust God, even when we have absolutely no idea what He's doing or why. And yet, this is the only option of the four that gives us any real hope or meaning amid the crooked we see in the world.

The real reason why we're called to believe in option 4 is not because it's the best available option, the only one that gives us meaning and hope in a crooked world, but because it's TRUE. But just because it's true doesn't mean it's easy.

So, if we accept this reality, and we seek to live according to it, what we do with Solomon's observation: "*There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.*"?

Well, last week, we looked at chapter 6, and we saw there that the long life and prosperity that the wicked receive are not necessarily really as good as they seem. If the ambition of man gets him wealth and honor and many children and a really long life, and yet he does not have the blessing of God on his life, what good is any of it? In fact, it is a curse of God to be given long life and much wealth and not be given the ability to enjoy it, as we saw with our examples of Henry VIII and Howard Hughes. So, the wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing is not really gaining anything worthwhile for himself, either in this life or, most certainly, in the life to come.

Then, in the first part of chapter 7, Solomon has told us how a good name is better than earthly riches, and he's told us some of the things God sends us to help us cultivate a good name – that is, good and godly character – as well as the pitfalls we need to avoid in order to cultivate a good name. Today, as we continue to walk through Ecclesiastes 7, we see that Solomon is going to warn us against another great pitfall in developing the better blessing of a good name – thinking we have actually succeeded!

A. The Tricky Realities of Righteousness & Wisdom, vv. 16-24

¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

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I. Overly Righteous and Too Wise? - vv. 16-19

How can Solomon tell us not to be overly righteous or too wise? Is such a thing even possible? Well, in the ultimate and real sense of righteousness and wisdom, no. And yet, on a human level, we see this kind of thing happen all the time. People become overly righteous and too wise in their own estimation of themselves.

On Friday, in my Bible reading, I read Luke 15, which opens with the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus closes this story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go and find the 1 lost sheep by saying, *“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”* I used to think that this parable was telling us that God cares a lot more about the lost person out in the world who needs the Gospel than He does about all of us in the church who have already received the good news of the Gospel and received salvation. But that’s not what Jesus says, really. Think about it: 99 righteous persons who need no repentance? Who are these people? Where could we possibly find 99 righteous persons who need no repentance?

Well, Jesus Himself gives us a portrait of one later in Luke 15 with the story of the Prodigal Son. After the Prodigal Son comes home, everyone is happy and rejoices, except for the older brother: *“he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’* (Luke 15:28-30, ESV)

The older brother is a righteous person who needs to repentance – at least, in his mind. Now, it does seem that he really does represent a child of God, for the father says to him in the end, *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”* (vv. 29-30, ESV)

Those who are overly righteous or who make themselves too wise are those with an overly inflated view of their own righteousness or wisdom. They may be true believers or hypocrites just posing as believers, and I think we have all seen examples of both of these kinds. Perhaps sometimes we see the example of the latter kind when we look in the mirror. It’s easy enough to think that, if you’ve stopped doing all of the really bad things other people do, or if you never started doing them because you were raised as a Christian in a good Christian home, then you are pretty righteous compared to the rest of the world. But such a view sees righteousness almost entirely in negative terms – NOT doing the really bad things that really bad people do. But did the older brother ever really LOVE his father? Did he TRUST his father? Did he really HONOR his father? Or, was he, like his younger brother, just waiting for his father to die, so he could get the stuff he wanted?

Sometimes when we ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” we do so with a broken heart for others, like little Audri Smith and her family. We weep for the hard, crooked realities of a fallen and broken world and we struggle to trust God’s goodness and wisdom. But at other times – if we’re honest – we’re asking, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” meaning “Why is this bad thing happening to me, a good person?” That’s when we need to be careful, careful that we’re not falling into a self-righteous entitlement trap that assumes that if we’re basically “good people” who don’t do any of the really bad stuff in life, and if we even go to church and give money to the church and to charity and treat others with basic decency, then we must be somehow entitled to a life of good things and relative comfort and ease. Maybe our theology is too good for us to say this out loud, but we think it in our hearts sometimes, don’t we?

Or, at other times, we might get our self-righteous hackles up when people treat us in a way that is unkind or unfair. We need to be careful here, too . . .

2. Wisdom and Words, vv. 20-22 – You’re Not that Righteous

Solomon makes an absolute clarifying declaration in verse 20, and then he illustrates the truth of it in a specific life application context in verses 21-22:

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

²¹ Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. ²² Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.

Where are the 99 righteous who need no repentance? What is God’s assessment of the older brother? “*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*”

When are we tempted to feel self-righteous? Have you ever heard anyone gossiping about you or slandering you behind your back? Or have you ever suspected someone of doing that? How does it feel?

One time, someone in my church in South Carolina was talking to me about someone else, someone we both knew, and saying unkind things about this person. I responded with, “I don’t know. That doesn’t sound very fair to say that about him.” And they said something like, “Well, you just don’t know him as well as I do, You’ll see.” After he left, my secretary, who had heard the conversation, came in and said, “It’s funny, because those are the same things he says about you when you’re not around.” Ouch!

Solomon says, don’t take this to heart. In other words, don’t feel so sorry for yourself. “*Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.*” Many times. Sins of the tongue are the most common and often the most telling of all sins. As James says in James 3, “*For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. . . the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*”

Why is our tongue such a restless evil, full of deadly poison? Why is it a fire, a world of unrighteousness? Is the problem just with our tongues? Would we be better off if we all took a monkish vow of silence? Jesus said, “*out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*” (Matt. 12:34, ESV)

Our tongues are but the fruit; they reveal the root, the heart. Our tongues show unmistakably that we are not righteous, not nearly as righteous as we like to think we are.

3. Wisdom and Limitations, vv. 19, 23-24 – Don’t Think You’re Really Wise

Nor are we nearly as wise as we like to think we are:

In verse 19, Solomon tells us, “*Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.*”

But then, in verses 23-24:

All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

Solomon was the wisest man who had ever lived. The only wiser man to come after him was Jesus Himself. He studied everything – biology, astronomy, architecture, construction, engineering, politics, sociology, philosophy, poetry, music – and he excelled at everything he studied, so that people came from far and wide to hear him and consult with him.

Yet Solomon knew his wisdom was nothing. True wisdom remained far from him. Who can really find out the mysteries of the universe, even to understand the deep reality of what has already been? Only GOD.

People who are convinced they are wise are unteachable. They think they see through all the pretense and have a kind of jaded, cynical outlook on things and they lack humility and a teachable spirit. Thus, they're kept from true wisdom and knowledge.

So, we are not as righteous as we think we are, and we are not as wise as we think we are.

B. Folly and Temptation, vv. 17 & 25-26

There's another side to this exploration of life's realities: Some people realize you can never be righteous or wise and so they give up on it and just decide to embrace folly and madness instead. Solomon has been down that road, and he addresses that option, too:

First, verse 17: *Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?*

Then, verses 25-26: *I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.* This is not a depiction of a particular woman but is a personification of Folly.

If there's anything worse than trying to be too righteous and thinking you're achieved real righteousness and wisdom so that you end up a self-righteous older brother Pharisee type or an unteachable cynical know-it-all, it's someone who has abandoned themselves to pleasure, folly, and madness. If self-righteousness keeps you from loving others or truly repenting in humility before the Lord and a pretense of wisdom keeps you from learning humbly from others, giving into wickedness and foolishness is a short-cut to death.

Janis Joplin. Jimmy Hendrix. Jim Morrison. Kurt Cobain. Amy Winehouse. These are the famous and celebrated members of the 27 club – all musicians who died drug-related deaths at the age of 27. Our culture celebrates them, as though they achieved some status of greatness or proved their transcendence by dying young from drug abuse. I'm not saying I'm better than any of them, because I'm really not, and there but for the grace of God go I. Yet why would we celebrate and revere self-destructive madness? Why would we look to them as role-models or sources of great wisdom or think somehow they are better than others?

If self-righteousness and self-wisdom are a sham, self-destruction in folly and madness are surely no better. That cannot be the answer either.

C. The Rarity of Righteousness & Wisdom, vv. 27-28

So, where can we find a decent, upright person, someone who has real integrity and who isn't self-righteous, puffed up with pride over their own wisdom, and who is also not given to folly and madness? Solomon says such people are exceedingly rare. He searched for them, and this is what he found:

Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

When looking for a decent, upright, level-headed person in the sea of the self-righteous and the self-destructive, Solomon says he found “one man among a thousand, but a woman among all these I have not found.” Some have taken this

as a sexist statement from Solomon – He was able to find rare good, upright men, but he wasn't able to find any such women.

Well, to begin with, verse 28 doesn't nullify the truth of verse 20: *"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."* Whoever this one man in a thousand is, I don't think he is a sinlessly righteous man.

If I assembled a group of 1,000 men and 1,000 women, and I carefully examined them all, and I concluded that only one of the men was decent and upright, while none of them women were, would that make me a sexist, or would that just show how rare it is to find such a person in this world, male or female? And think also of the context of Solomon's search: He's dealing with the royal court in Jerusalem – his servants, officials, wives and concubines. He's in a situation where it's very hard to trust anyone, because you don't know if people are ever telling you the truth or just telling you what you want to hear. All of Solomon's wives and concubines (1,000 total – 700 wives and 300 concubines) probably had political reasons for their relationship to Solomon – so, did they really love him? It's a sad statement, really, but not a sexist one. In Proverbs, Solomon personifies wisdom as a woman and celebrates the treasure that a good and faithful wife is. He wasn't a sexist. Was he a bit of a cynic who had been repeatedly burned by the realities of life? Yes, that's probably fair, but that doesn't mean he was wrong. But was he a sexist? Not really.

D. The Source of the Problem, v. 29

Okay, so what is the source of the problem? Why is a decent, upright person so rare and a sinless person absolutely nowhere to be found? We can't make the crooked straight, but why is it all so crooked to begin with? Did God make the world this way? No. Not originally. Although He rules over the world and has good purposes for the way He orders things, that doesn't change the fact that this world has fallen from God's original intentions, from His creation design. As verse 29 concludes this section: *"See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."*

When God made man, He made him in His image and gave him His good purpose for life: Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and do so for the glory of God as God's image-bearer. We were made to flourish under God's hand for God's glory. But we immediately began seeking out many schemes. We have been and remain relentless schemers, seeking to twist whatever God gives us to serve our purposes instead of His, to give us glory instead of Him.

We own a beautiful, healthy, and sizable ball python. If you ever own a snake, you need to know some things about them: Snakes are really stupid, they don't see very well, they are pure instinct, and they are always looking for a way to escape. You must always secure your snake, because it is always looking for a way to get away – even though if it got away, it would almost certainly die.

Escaping from God is death to us, and yet we are relentlessly seeking ways to do so. We'll do so by being good enough to get God off our backs, or we'll do so by running away from Him into folly and madness – even if it leads to an early death.

So, if this is the root of the problem, what's the solution? It's found right at the end of verse 18:

"The one who fears God shall come out from both of them"

The only thing that keeps us from schemes of self-righteousness or schemes of self-indulgent wickedness, from self-centered so-called wisdom or from self-destructive madness and folly is the fear of the LORD.

What does the fear of the LORD look like? It looks like turning from ourselves and our schemes and turning to Him in humility and faith. The Westminster Shorter Catechism helps us understand what saving faith and repentance unto life

look like, and I think these two things taken together – and repentance and faith are like two sides of the same coin – are what it means to fear the LORD –

Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?

Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace by which we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is freely offered to us in the gospel.

Q. 87. What is repentance unto life?

Repentance leading to life is a saving grace, by which a sinner having truly realized his sin and grasped the mercy of God in Christ, turns from his sin with grief and hatred and turns to God with full resolve and effort after new obedience.

This is a turning, receiving and resting. And this turning, receiving, and resting – which we do over and over again – is what it looks like to walk in the fear of the Lord. So, will you today receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation, as He is freely offered in the Gospel, and will you grieve over your sin and hate your sin and turn to God, grasping His mercy in Christ, and pleading with Him for the grace to be fully resolved to obey Him anew – not to prove what a righteous person you are but to prove what a good and gracious God HE IS!