

The Conclusion—No Holiness, No Happiness

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Romans 8:15

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If you had to summarize what it is that brings true happiness and joy in this life, what would it be? Many, no doubt, would include good health, riches, love, success, fame, beauty, power, or pleasure. This is the world's view of what makes one truly happy, and this message is seen and heard in music, movies, and advertisements. The sad but conclusive end of all who search for true happiness and joy in these earthly pursuits is that no matter how healthy, wealthy, successful, or powerful one becomes, you can't buy happiness. No one is so rich or so powerful that he/she can hold that which is earthly within one's grasp, so as never to lose it—for all earthly things will be lost at death, if not before. Solomon, the wisest mere man that ever lived, had it all, and he tried it all, but he found that true happiness and joy is found in Him who is from everlasting to everlasting, in Him who is the Creator rather than the creature, in Him who saves you from your sin and who becomes your very reason for living and dying.

Dear ones, you have been brainwashed to think that you are unhappy because you don't have enough comfort, security, love, and pleasure in this life. If only you had good health, greater financial resources, a job that was fun and paid well, a home in the country, a loving spouse, children, or parents that appreciated you, and more opportunities to do what you want to do, THEN you would be happy (or so you are trained to think by this present evil world).

Let me say it as plainly and simply as I possibly can: True happiness and joy come as a free gift from the Lord. True happiness and joy come to you from God, not as you seek to please yourself, but as you seek to please and enjoy your Savior. In fact, where there is no holiness, there will be no real happiness that truly satisfies to the very core of your being and endures the trials and afflictions in life. True happiness and joy do not depend upon what you have or don't have by way of what this world has to offer. True happiness and joy depend upon what you have in Christ. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). There is only a true and satisfying joy found in pleasing God from a heart of love and thankfulness for His many tender mercies shown to you. If you would be truly happy, you must be growing in holiness. That is, in fact, what makes heaven the place of greatest joy and happiness—there is no sin and therefore no sorrow. There is only holiness and therefore happiness. Sin brings misery as you see in the pages of Scripture and have learned countless times over in your own experience and in the experience of others. However, the more that you grow in trusting, loving, and obeying Christ, the more you find sin subdued in your life and the joy of the Lord springing up within, even in the most dire and difficult circumstances. Let us heed today the conclusion which Solomon, the Preacher, leaves with us from his inspired sermon in Ecclesiastes. The two main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Path to True Happiness (Ecclesiastes 12:13); and (2) A Strong Incentive to Walk That Path (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

I. The Path to True Happiness (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

A. Have you ever found yourself flipping to the end of a book or the end of a letter to read the conclusion before reading all of the information leading up to the conclusion? Most of the time, you find the author summarizing that which is most important to leave with the reader. This is precisely what Solomon (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) does at the end of Ecclesiastes. In his conclusion, he gives what he considers to be the most concise and most clear path to realizing a true and abiding happiness in your life. That has been Solomon's great pursuit as he has worked through this sermon. From all of his study, all of his research, and all of his experience, the wisest mere man that ever lived has demonstrated that the things of this world are

vanity (are a mere vapor) without Christ in bringing to you happiness, joy, satisfaction, and contentment. You may look to your husband, wife, children, or friends to make you happy, only to find that you are disappointed—there is still something missing. You may look to your accomplishments, your education, your goals, or your possessions to make you happy, only to find that after a while all those things are tasteless like the white of an egg. You see, dear ones, the enemy of your soul wants to direct you to anything (other than to God) as the source of your happiness. You have heard Solomon say so many times through this study of Ecclesiastes that God wants you to enjoy the fruit of your labor with which He blesses you (Ecclesiastes 2:12; Ecclesiastes 3:12-14; Ecclesiastes 5:18; Ecclesiastes 8:15; 1 Timothy 6:17). But He wants you to enjoy the fruit of your labor as that which comes from Him, the everlasting God, who is most wise, most holy, most powerful, and most good. Here in the conclusion of his study, Solomon leaves with you two brief statements of the path to a heavenly happiness and joy regardless of your circumstances in life (whether poverty or prosperity, whether poor health or good health, whether feeling unloved or loved by others, whether missing your goals or reaching your goals in this life): Fear God and keep God’s commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Both of these are commandments not suggestions or options (they are both in the Hebrew imperative mood). These two commands form a summary of the whole duty of man: “for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Actually, the word “duty” is omitted in the Hebrew text and is supplied by our English translators: “for this is the whole of man.” The whole what of man? Certainly, the whole duty of man, but also the whole happiness and joy of man is found in the path of fearing God and keeping His commandments since that is what Solomon has been seeking to reveal in this inspired sermon. Let us briefly consider this path to a true and everlasting happiness.

B. The path to happiness is first one of fearing God.

1. Now lest we be carried away into thinking that this sounds very much like a path that is built upon a Covenant of Works (“Do this and live”) rather than upon a Covenant of Grace (“Freely receive what has been done for you and live”), let us not forget that the fear of God is a grace (like faith, hope, or love) freely given by God’s Spirit to all God’s elect for whom Christ died. The fear of God is not a work which we earn or deserve, but a beautiful grace which has been purchased for us by the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross. The fear of God is an inward disposition that entirely changes the way you understand and view God and man, life and death, heaven and hell, and all the circumstances in this world. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” says Solomon in Proverbs 1:7. The grace to know Christ and to understand with faith the offer of salvation made to you presuppose the fear of God having been graciously imparted to you in your regeneration along with faith in Christ (Psalm 103:8-18). For dear ones, the fear of God is the grace to take God seriously in His promises made to you in the Covenant of Grace and the grace to take God seriously in His warnings made to you in His commandments. Why do you not consider (like many) the Scripture to be full of myths and errors? Because of the fear of God that has been graciously implanted in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Why do you not consider the promises of God to be mere fantasies? Because of the fear of God graciously bestowed upon you. Why do you do more than simply hear with your physical ears the preached Word, but also embrace it by faith, love it, cherish it, and endeavor to obey it? Because of the holy grace to fear the Lord your God that has been freely given to unworthy sinners (like you and me) that hated Christ and His Word and had no interest in the promises of God or the commandments of God.

2. Dear ones, the fear of God is not a slavish fear that leads to torment (Romans 8:15). Slavish fear paralyzes you and smothers you. Slavish fear is like a plague in your soul, so that people, or circumstances in life, or death, or hell seem like mighty giants ready to destroy you (1 John 4:18). The Apostle John speaks here of slavish fear—not the blessed and holy grace given to you by God to fear Him. God does not give you a slavish fear (2 Timothy 1:7). Whenever you are commanded by God not to fear, it is this slavish fear that you are commanded not to allow to hold sway over you. Consider Exodus 20:20, where God’s people are first told not to fear, but then told they are to keep the fear of God before their eyes (that is to hold the

living God with the utmost reverence, awe and wonder for who He is and what He has done and shall do). Why are you afraid to stand before certain people who intimidate you or are tempted to run from certain circumstances that you face? It is because you are overcome by a slavish fear rather than being overcome by a holy fear of God. For, dear ones, the fear of man or the fear of circumstances cannot paralyze you or send you running when you are overwhelmed by the greatness, power, majesty, wisdom, holiness, and mercy of our Triune God. That slavish fear that controls you at times must flee in the face of the fear of God. For when you take God seriously and know that there is nothing impossible with God, that He is your strength and your salvation, that He is your health and your life, that all of life is wisely ordained by Him for His glory and for your good, no one and nothing can bind you with the chains of slavish fear. Like a child you will take your Heavenly Father seriously in His commandments, but you will also take Him seriously in His promises of grace, mercy and love, so that you with confidence run to Him in the midst of your trials, afflictions, worries and fears crying out, “Abba, Father.” Thus, Solomon says the whole duty of man or the whole joy of man first depends upon the grace of fearing God. Where there is no fear of God there will be no joy in the Lord or true happiness in life or in eternity. Dear ones, are you earnestly pleading with the Lord to grow you in His holy fear every day? Are you repenting and seeking God’s forgiveness for having been overwhelmed with the fear of man rather than the fear of God? That which you most fear in life becomes that which preoccupies your thoughts and moves you to make the decisions you make (whether wise or foolish). Who do you fear—God or man?

C. Solomon next summarizes the whole duty or happiness of man to be found in keeping God’s commandments (“Fear God and KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS” Ecclesiastes 12:13).

1. I remind you that Solomon is not speaking of keeping God’s commandments in order to merit or earn favor from God. We are sinners (through our sin in Adam and through our own personal sins), and we cannot possibly keep God’s commandments completely and perfectly as is necessary if we would be justified before God on the basis of our own law-keeping or works of righteousness (Galatians 3:10). The only way to remove the just curse and holy condemnation of God that each of us deserves for the countless sins we have committed against God and our neighbor is to receive by faith alone Christ alone, who became a curse for all who will trust Him (Galatians 3:13). God’s commandments reveal you to be an undeserving sinner in need of the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus. God’s commandments send you from trusting in yourself to trusting in Christ as your only hope of salvation. But dear ones, God’s commandments not only send you to Christ for justification, they also send you to Christ for sanctification in being conformed to Him in the beauty of His holiness.

2. Therefore, God’s moral commandments are not finished with you as Christians once you have been justified by faith alone. You are to love God’s commandments as they express to you God’s holiness, God’s truth, God’s justice, and even God’s love. God’s commandments go against your sinful natural grain, but they are given to you because they are good for you—in fact, best for you (Deuteronomy 6:24). You show your love for Christ by keeping His commandments (John 14:15). Do you not as parents seek to impress the same truth upon your children (namely, that they show you that they love you by doing what you tell them to do)? Does not love for your husband or wife lead you to serve him or her? The natural response of love is to want to please the one who is loved. And when you set out to please the one who is loved, the result is that you yourself are filled with joy and happiness. Thus, Solomon again hits the nail on the head when he states that the path to a true and lasting joy in this life is not in serving yourself, but in serving and obeying God who made you and saved you for His holy pleasure. Dear ones, has life become so busy and so filled with work that you have forgotten that which is most important—trusting, loving, and obeying Christ? You may even be very busy in doing that which is good and helpful to others—like Martha. However, if you are doing so instead of sitting at the feet of Christ and enjoying Him (like Mary), growing in your love for Him, communing with Him, being broken in your heart over your sins against Him, and consciously seeking to serve Him in your

work and play, you will find that you do not find joy in your labor, in your family, in your possessions, or even in your worship. Obedience, dear ones, is not performed in a vacuum, any more than is thanksgiving. You are not to obey abstractly, but concretely. You are not to be thankful abstractly, but concretely. To simply say, "I am so thankful", is atheistic for it does not tell anyone to whom the thanks is freely offered. Likewise, to simply obey with no conscious reason for your obedience is atheistic. The reason and object of your obedience is Christ. You obey God's commandments because God in all of His authority requires you to do so, but you also obey God's commandments because you desire to express your love and thanksgiving to Him for His undeserving love and mercy shown to you as your Creator, Preserver, and Savior through Christ Jesus. Never forget that disobedience to God's commands leads to your misery, while loving obedience to God's commands leads to your joy.

II. A Strong Incentive to Walk That Path (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

A. Finally, Solomon leaves us with a strong incentive to fear God and to keep His commandments: we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ where every secret thing will be exposed by the Lord's all-seeing eye. Solomon had brought this final judgment before your attention earlier as you may recall in Ecclesiastes 11:9. If you fear God and take Him seriously, you will also take seriously the fact that you will all appear before Him on that Last Day, after you are raised from the dead. You cannot fear God and take Him seriously if you do not take the final judgment seriously. You cannot take God seriously if you act as though there will be no final accounting of all that you have done in the flesh. This final judgment is intended by the Holy Spirit to move you to flee your sinful and foolish ways and to pursue the path of God's fear and loving obedience to His commandments.

B. Now though all your works are examined by Christ on that final day, it is not to say that you are saved or justified by your works, for none of your works will be acceptable before God through your own mere effort. All your works in seeking to keep the commandments of God will only be acceptable before God because of the work of Christ in fulfilling all righteousness and in imputing to you by faith alone His perfect obedience to God's law. There will be no boasting on the part of any person. The sin of every man will show that none deserves heaven, but rather all deserve hell. And even the good works for which Christians will be rewarded is not due to their own intrinsic worth or merit, but due to Christ's righteousness and Christ's intercession for them. All glory, honor, and power shall be cast before Christ as the crowns of reward are cast at His feet (Revelation 4:10).

C. Dear ones, in light of that final judgment that none of us will miss or for which none of us will be late, ought you not to be moved to grow in the fear of the Lord and in loving obedience to His commandments? Does not the fear of God and the certainty of appearing before Him on that last day show the absurdity of hiding anything from the Lord or acting in public one way and in private a different way? Does not this reveal to you that all of life is to be lived in the very presence of God and to His glory and praise? Here then, dear ones, is the path to happiness: fear God and keep His commandments, for without holiness there is no happiness.

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