

October 6, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 7:1-12.

1. How does one maintain a good name?
2. Is the teaching that death is better than birth, the funeral home is better than a party, and sorrow better than laughing, just the musings of a disgruntled old man?
3. How can a sad face make a heart glad?
4. In all honesty, would you rather hear the rebuke of the wise or the song of a fool?
5. How much time do you spend reading or listening to Bible sermons, explanations, talk?
6. Why is wisdom advantageous?

### PROVERBS OF ECCLESIASTES Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

The title of this sermon is about as confusing as is the bulk of Ecclesiastes. We have contended that Solomon is the Qoheleth, the preacher, who recorded the results of his great experiment with life. But we are also sure that Solomon wrote most of the book we call Proverbs. What then are the proverbs of Ecclesiastes?

The book we call Proverbs is actually a collection of wisdom sayings. Sometimes, as in chapters five, six and seven, an obvious

theme emerges. Most of the time that is not the case. While much of the first nine chapters of the Proverbs can be arranged by theme, the last part of the book (with the exception of chapter 31) is simply a collection of disconnected wise sayings.

That is what happens at this point in Ecclesiastes. The last verse of chapter six left us with a rhetorical question: “*For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?*” (Ecclesiastes 6:12). Chapter seven attempts to answer that question with a smattering of wisdom statements that are somewhat loosely arranged. It is difficult to actually identify a theme or flow of thought in the verses of our text, though I have tried to present the theme of “wisdom.”

In the question in 6:12, “Who knows what is good?” the preacher used the common Hebrew word *tobe*. It speaks of that which is excellent, valuable, or appropriate. What is good brings happiness, joy, and a sense of satisfaction. Up to this point, Solomon has not found much of that in life. The question, “What is good?” is answered to some extent by the instruction in chapter seven where we find the repetition of the word *tobe* fourteen times, ten times in our text. Often the word is translated with the English word “better.”

### Some Things Seem Better.

According to Solomon, we can learn that some things are better than other things in life by going to a funeral. That really is the idea presented in the first four verses of this chapter. But, we begin with the truth that *A good name is better than precious ointment (v. 1a)*. In other words, the proposal here is that a good name is more valuable than wealth.

A good name is a person’s reputation. Reputation is not the same as character. Character is what we really are, but reputation is what people think we are. In time, character will be known, especially by the wise and discerning. It is always a good thing when the revealed character matches with the reputation. No one illustrates the idea that the “name” is simply an expression of the invisible character better than God does. Throughout Scripture, we find frequent references to the name of God and name of Jesus. Often the phrases “His name,” “the name,” or “that name” are substituted for God the Father or God the Son. That is okay because the title “name” is

sufficient to speak of God's character, God's reputation, the totality of God's person.

The preacher's argument is that having a good name is more valuable, more important than to possess precious ointment. Or as he put it in the collection of Proverbs, *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold (Proverbs 22:1).*

Precious ointment is the same as expensive perfume or fragrances. We run into the same picture in Song of Songs 1:3, where the lover says about his beloved, *"Your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you" (Song of Songs 1:3).* It also helps at this point to think of the twelve ounces of perfume worth about a year's wages that Mary poured on Jesus. That was quite valuable.

If something is valuable to you, you are willing to work at it. If your reputation is valuable, you will avoid those things that bring it into question. In fact, Solomon's teaching in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is that only a fool would be careless with his or her reputation.

Having established the importance of maintaining a good name or a good reputation, we might be surprised to read what appears to be a major shift to the topic of death. However, look more closely and discover that these two ideas are connected. Death is good because it seals the good reputation. Having a good reputation is better than having expensive perfume. *And the day of death is better than the day of birth (v.1b).*

We know from our experiences that the funeral or memorial service is where we are reminded about a person's good reputation. The funeral is also the point when the person cannot do anything to mar his reputation. At birth, a person has his or her entire life in which to build a good reputation or a questionable reputation or a rotten reputation. Therefore, the day of a person's home-going seals his or her reputation.

Also, a time of sadness is better than times of joy because sadness causes us to face realism. Or as the preacher put it: mourning is better than feasting. *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart (v.2).*

The fact is that everyone ends up at the "house of mourning." In modern terms, everyone ends up at "the funeral home." How could that possibly be better? In the preacher's experiment in life without God, he concluded that the end is better than the beginning. A couple times he has concluded that it is better never to have been born. How much more is it actually better for the Christian to arrive at the end because we are confident in eternal life? We come to the end with a mixture of sadness because of separation from family and friends, and joy at the prospect of being with Christ. Thomas Boston (author of *The Crook in the Lot* which we will talk about more next time) wrote regarding the Christian, "In the day of his birth he was born to die. In the day of his death he dies to live."

Therefore, Solomon challenges us to face the inevitable end realistically. Whether hopeful Christian or foolish unbeliever, it is good to be realistic about the end. Like it or not, fear it or not, death is inevitable. Only a fool will deny it. On the other hand, laying that realism to heart is valuable. The reality of death forces us to do honest self-analysis. The reality of death forces us to be prepared to meet our Creator after we have come to the end. The reality of death forces us to re-evaluate the pleasures, possessions, positions of life. The reality of death reminds us that the future belongs to those who prepare for it. Therefore, facing the reality of pending death is one of the good things.

In the same kind of argument, sorrow is better than laughter and sadness leads to gladness. *Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad (v.3).* Obviously, it is not good to be sorrowful all the time. We could call that depression, a condition that needs correcting. However, if laughter is an indication of frivolity and an unrealistic view of life, it is better to be thrust into sadness on occasion.

There is not much dealing with the facts of life at a birthday party, a frat party, a New Year's Eve party where the goal is fun and drunkenness. Often the purpose of drunkenness is to escape the reality of life and, worse, death. One night King Belshazzar decided to throw a drunken bash with a thousand of his important friends. It was one of those parties where God's name is taken in vain, jokes about God are rife, and, in this case, the people drank the mind deadening-alcohol from vessels that had been dedicated to God.

People don't think too seriously about God at parties like that. In the midst of their drunken foolishness, God showed up – or at least God's hand. God's hand wrote out the message of doom on the wall and the king's knees wobbled.

In the ideal "sadness" situation, the sinner is smitten by the guilt of his sin, confesses sin, and is forgiven. Forgiven hearts are glad hearts. Paul argued that it is good when Godly sorrow leads to repentance of sin (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Sadness is okay when it is a contrast between the wise person who mourns and the fool who laughs. *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth (v.4)*. This statement is not very unlike Jesus' counterintuitive teaching with the beatitudes. He didn't teach that the rich, powerful, smart, good-looking people are happy. That is what sinful human nature concludes. Rather Jesus taught that happy are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the spiritually hungry, and those who are persecuted for doing right (Matthew 5:1-10).

Likewise, the gift of wisdom causes us to see that happiness with the passing things and experience of the world should actually result in sadness (which it eventually does). At the same time, the sadness that results from learning that the passing world offers no satisfaction, leads to the wisdom that Jesus offers life eternal – which is a unique kind of life. Just the other day someone told me about an event held regularly in the Greenville area. According to this information, there is a spontaneous gathering of a few hundred so-called professing Christians. It appears to be a very happy, joyous time called "Hymns and Hops." The name explains the nature of the meeting well. These professing Christians get together to sing hymns and drink beer. Of course the beer does not make them drunk. If you doubt, just ask them. Sounds more like Belshazzar's party to me. In this case, the wiser heart would be found at the funeral home.

What a fine time for Solomon to propose that rebuke is better than frivolity. It is true that rebuke from the wise is better than foolish songs. *It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools (v.5)*. Human nature prefers to hear songs of the fools. There has never been a shortage of foolish songs. These are the songs that mean nothing, or glorify sin, or focus on that which is

passing away. In that sense, foolish songs make up pretty much the entire repertoire of our world.

But, more accurately, the contrast here is with the song that a fool sings. It is likely that he will sing a foolish song. But the idea here is who is listening to what. Do you prefer to listen to the pleasant, lilting, catchy melody of someone who is at odds with God, or do you prefer to hear rebuke? That decision is pretty easy to make, right? Let's pose the question in different terms. Does your "listening time" in life indicate that you spend more time listening to songs of people who are fixated on this passing world, or listening to podcasts about God's truth (i.e. sermons, audio books, monologues about the Bible)?

Rebuke is painful but it is also good. Rebuke is words that draw us up short as they admonition us about a weakness, failure, sin, or need to improve. By nature we want to avoid such admonition at all costs. That explains why a lot of people choose to attend a church that makes them feel good about themselves. In such cases, Solomon's other conclusion rings loud and clear: *Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you (Proverbs 9:8)*.

Along the same line of reasoning, the preacher warned that the fool's laughter is vanity. *For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity (v.6)*. The burning thorns make a pleasant sound. But because there is little substance to them, they do not burn long and provide nothing valuable. So, too, the laughing fool might be entertaining, but when you have just received a disheartening diagnosis from your doctor, that is not what you want to hear.

It is good also for us to stop for a moment and look at the God-desired balance for our lives. Earlier in this book Solomon wrote, *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4)*. We know that it is not good to be negatively contemplative all the time. Nor is it good to be frivolous and not serious all the time. God gives us reasons to be joyful and laugh, and He expects us to

laugh and express our joy. But God also calls us to serious contemplation of life. Thinking seriously about who are we, what are we, why are we here, what are we supposed to be doing, and where we will ultimately go will not make us laugh.

We ought to rejoice like the psalmist wrote. *May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you! May those who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!" (Psalm 70:4).* And at the same time, we also need times of somber introspection, like when we do what Paul commanded us. *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2 Corinthians 13:5).* And sometimes the Lord put both attitudes into the same statement: *"Blessed [happy] are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).*

### **Wisdom is Valuable (vv.7-12).**

These are proverbs, practical wisdom statements to help us live life for the good. The following verses encourage us that wisdom is to our advantage and wisdom protects us.

First, we learn that wisdom is advantageous (vv.7-11). How so? Solomon taught that wisdom is good when an inheritance is involved. *Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun (v.11).* An inheritance typically involves money (unless you inherit your crazy uncle George's orangutang). Having wisdom to manage and even enhance your inheritance is a good thing.

God commends using wisdom to manage passing things. We recently studied Jesus' story about the shrewd manager in which Jesus made this application to us His followers: *"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).* Wisdom in wealth management is advantageous to people whose lives are conducted within the limits of "under the sun" (i.e. passing life).

Also, wisdom gives endurance in time of trouble. *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart (v.7).* Unfairness and oppression in life are sad realities the preacher discovered in his experiments. This is probably a reference to a wise king who falls into the trap of oppressing his people. Eventually that lack of wisdom could drive the king into a mental state that would disqualify him from being the leader.

Likewise when a leader allows himself to be influenced by bribes, his heart will already be corrupted. You have heard the saying, "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely!" It came from a letter Lord Acton wrote to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 in which he expressed his opinion: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." We need no further proof of this being true in America than the nightly news.

In other ways, wisdom is advantageous because it gives patience. *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit (v.8).* *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools (v.9).* If we do a fair assessment of ourselves, we will likely conclude that we do live life striving for *the end of a thing*. Children long to be teens, teens long to be adults, adults long to retire, retirees long to be teens.

Whether it is a pleasant achievement or a painful trial, we chomp at the bit to reach the goal. The problem is that we become controlling to achieve the goal. A controlling spirit is a manifestation of pride, which believes that I know what is best, I know when it is best, and I know how best to achieve what I want. When someone gets in the way of the proud heart, anger often erupts. Anger is always present in a fool, just waiting for the opportunity to jump out and be noticed. Patience is the control of pride and anger.

Wisdom is also advantageous because it presents a fair assessment of life. *Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this (v.10).* This verse means, "Stop talking about 'The good old days.'" But they were GOOD old days, right? It might seem true that there was less oppression, less corruption, less bribery, less anger, and more patience in people. In fact, those things are true regarding our current

culture. I have to admit that I long for the “good old days” when there were six red lights between Saint Marks Road and downtown, and only twenty vehicles in sight at a time on Wade Hampton Blvd.

But the “good old days” had their share of problems also. Besides, no one can go back. Some people try to live in the past but it doesn’t work. Furthermore, we often fail to realize that the whole world is becoming worse and worse because we are heading into the day of “the Man of Sin,” the rule of Antichrist. Wisdom is advantageous in so many ways. Choose wisdom.

Finally, we should pursue wisdom because wisdom protects (v.12). The preacher contends that wisdom protects like money. *For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money (v.12a)*. As much as we hate to agree with his statement, we have to admit that money can buy a literal protection from thugs and robbers as we pay for alarm systems and monitoring of the alarms. Money can buy protection from financial loss through the purchase of insurance. Money buys us protection from liability for causing an accident.

But wisdom offers even more protection. Wisdom protects your reputation as it keeps you from chasing foolishness. Wisdom protects your investments. Ultimately, wisdom is eternal protection as it leads to salvation through Christ.

Wisdom not only protects, but it also preserves life. *The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it (v.12b)*. Knowledge and wisdom are intimately connected in the Bible. Knowledge is the gathering or amassing of information and experience. Wisdom is the ability to put all that knowledge to work in everyday circumstances of life.

Therefore, wisdom preserves physical, earthly life. Wisdom gives us motivation to eat right, exercise appropriately, and practice moderation. Wisdom also causes us to avoid potentially dangerous situations. Therefore, also, wisdom preserves life for eternity as we embrace Christ’s sacrifice for us by faith.

A study of the concept of wisdom in the Bible reveals that wisdom is the ability to live life for the glory of God. The Bible teaches that we get wisdom by request from God. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (James 1:5)*.

But God does not pour out wisdom on us miraculously or magically. God gives us wisdom through His Word. *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:1-7)*.

Foolishness is natural and expected. Wisdom is advantageous and protective. Pursue wisdom.