

A Happy Person Is a God-Fearing Person

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18; Proverbs 9:10

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It used to be that one could define a Christian man as a God-fearing man. That meant that a man took God seriously. He took the Law of God seriously, and he took the Gospel of Jesus Christ seriously. He took the warnings of God seriously, and he took the promises of God seriously. A God-fearing man, woman, or child stood in awe and wonder of the infinite greatness, power, wisdom, holiness, and love of God. A God-fearing person did not have a slavish fear of God, but rather had a child-like reverence for his/her Heavenly Father.

Dear ones, the holy fear of God when rightly understood does not (on the one hand) drive one into torment, waiting for the mighty hand of God to smash him at any moment, nor (on the other hand) does the holy fear of God when rightly understood send one into lawlessness, thinking a holy life is unimportant. Taking God seriously gives you meaning and purpose in life, for you realize that God is in charge, and He controls all that occurs in your life and in this world. Taking God seriously gives you hope and dispels the fear of man, the fear of circumstances, and the fear of death; for God will make all things beautiful in His own time. Be not ashamed to use or to receive such a badge of honor as to call or to be called a God-fearing man, a God-fearing woman, or even a God-fearing child. May God multiply the generation of God-fearing people.

This Lord's Day the Holy Spirit of God through His servant, Solomon, gives us two sins to avoid if we would manifest the fear of God in our lives: (1) Don't Think, Speak, Or Act As If You Are More Righteous Than God (Ecclesiastes 7:15-16); and (2) Don't Think, Speak, Or Act As If Sin Has No Consequences (Ecclesiastes 7:17-18).

I. Don't Think, Speak, Or Act As If You Are More Righteous Than God (Ecclesiastes 7:15-16).

A. In the previous section of Ecclesiastes (7:11-14), Solomon had extolled the value of a heavenly wisdom in promoting your joy and happiness and in being one of those jewels to be found in the crown of a good name. He now continues to expound upon this heavenly wisdom by giving the very foundation upon which it is built: the fear of God ("for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all" Ecclesiastes 7:18). Solomon declares in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Where there is no fear of God, there is no heavenly wisdom. And where there is the fear of God, there will be heavenly wisdom.

B. Solomon again calls attention to the fact that what he is about to say, he has learned from his own experience ("All things have I seen in the days of my vanity" Ecclesiastes 7:15). Solomon says he has seen all kinds of events and circumstances (both good and bad) during the days in which he rebelled against God.

1. You have all come to the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ by various roads and paths. Some of you were raised in a home where Christ and His pure doctrine were taught to you from your infancy. You have embraced the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone, and like Timothy, you have been restrained by the grace of God from straying. Others of you (though raised in a Christian home) left that safe haven, and went to sow your wild oats. Like the prodigal son, you experienced the world, and found it to be empty in bringing a lasting peace and joy. Still others of you were raised in a home where Christ was never mentioned (except perhaps as a name that punctuated sentences when one was angry). Like Rahab, the Lord opened your eyes to behold by faith the Christ that you had been cursing.

2. Dear ones, your spiritual pilgrimage to Christ has been traveled in many different ways according to God's eternal plan. Nevertheless, God has taught you through many different experiences that nothing in the world can satisfy the guilt that you are under, can quench the thirst for everlasting life, can fill your heart with a hope that does not pass away. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can bring such beauty into your life. Solomon had been taught the truth of Christ from infancy, but when he became old, powerful, rich, and

comfortable, he fell away from Christ. The wisest mere man that ever lived fell away from Christ. If Solomon could fall away, does that not tell you how vulnerable you are as well? There is no place for self-righteousness in the Christian life, or a place for thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, for the Lord reminds us all through Solomon and his experience: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

C. There are two particular instances in the experience of Solomon that had led men away from the wisdom of the Lord, away from the fear of the Lord, and away from the joy of the Lord. When men and women look at these two situations that Solomon cites and that God brings about in His most wise and holy providence, they often find themselves tripping and falling into sin. What are these two instances?

1. The first instance is that of a just man who dies prematurely, or dies in great agony, or dies at the hands of his adversaries (“there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness” Ecclesiastes 7:15). Here is a godly Christian man, who trusts Christ, who loves Christ and his fellow man, who stands for Christ and His truth, and yet leaves this world suffering from the devastating effects of cancer, leaves this world a young man with many years yet before him, and leaves a wife and several small children in sorrow at his loss and in grief over how they are to provide for themselves. How many of you have been beside the death bed or at the grave of a God-fearing man or woman, who had so much of life yet to live? From my experience, it is at that point that we come face to face with the trial of our faith in submitting to the most wise, most holy, most good, and most powerful providential will of God. As you look at the sorrow in the sobs of that wife and the tears of those children, the question may come into your mind: “Is this the work of a loving God?” You talk about not simply breaking your heart, but ripping your heart out—such a situation will do it. Sometimes all you can do is just put your arms around them and weep with them, because you don’t know what to say. During times of persecution (as in Scotland during the reign of Charles II and James II), how many thousands upon thousands of faithful wives lost husbands, faithful husbands lost wives, faithful children lost parents, and faithful parents lost children? Dear ones, if at such times you do not fear the Lord your God and take seriously His wisdom, love, righteousness, and power, you will fall away from the Lord.

2. The second instance in God’s providence that likewise tries you to the very core of your being only tends to intensify the first instance. For on the one hand you look at the great sorrow of the mother and children who have lost a godly husband and father, but on the other hand you look at the great prosperity and long life of a vile, immoral, blasphemous movie star or sports star who seems to lack nothing of the pleasures of this life (“and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness” Ecclesiastes 7:15). Perhaps you can avoid the tension in your soul to some degree over these matters if you consider the suffering of the godly in isolation from the prospering of the wicked. But dear ones, when these two instances are brought by God’s providence into your life so that they relate to people you actually know, that is where the struggles are likely to hit you. These aren’t just people you read about in the newspaper or see on TV. These are people you know—either people you love and respect for their godliness or people you turn your heads from for their wickedness. The Psalmist, like Solomon his son, struggled with this same dilemma in Psalm 73:3-12 (read it). Dear ones, have you not looked at that prosperity of the wicked (and even the many adversities that you face in your own life) and grappled with the justice of God, the love of God, the goodness of God, the power of God, or the wisdom of God? So did Solomon, the wisest mere man who ever lived. And he (by God’s Spirit) gives us direction for these trials of your faith, as you shall now see.

D. The first temptation that you face as you observe the adversity of those who fear God and the prosperity of those who despise God is to think, speak, or act as though you were more righteous and more wise than God Himself (“Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise” Ecclesiastes 7:16).

1. Now obviously you can’t in the biblical sense of righteousness and wisdom have too much of either of these graces. Can God be too righteous or too wise? Well, if anyone could be said to have

too much righteousness or wisdom, it would be God, for He is infinite in righteousness and wisdom (there are no boundaries or limitations to His righteousness and wisdom). Thus, what is condemned here is not obeying the Lord (even in the jots and tittles of His law or of His doctrine). If that were the case, then Christ who perfectly kept the law and doctrine of God would have fallen under the censure of Solomon in being too righteous or “righteous over much.” Nor is it being too wise or “over wise” to be growing in the knowledge and application of God’s truth in your life, as if it is far preferable to be uninformed and ignorant of God’s truth. Again, if that was the case, our blessed Savior would have fallen under Solomon’s censure. And yet, we read concerning Christ: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

2. Dear ones, what is condemned here by Solomon is a perversion of righteousness and wisdom. It is a proud self-righteousness that is condemned and a proud self-wisdom. It is being puffed up with your own righteousness or wisdom in thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. It is inwardly taking credit and glory for the righteousness or wisdom in your life. It is placing yourself upon a pedestal with a spotlight beaming upon you, as if you were the example of righteousness and wisdom that all were to follow. It is placing your trust and confidence in your own righteousness and wisdom as the basis for your acceptance before God. Dear ones, Christ did not come to save those who consider themselves good, righteous, and godly. He came to save those who know themselves to be ungodly sinners, and even the chief of sinners. He came not to save those who think they are well, but those who know they are sick and dying from sin. He came not to save those who believe they are found, but those who know that apart from Christ they are lost. He came not to save those who think God ought to be pleased in having them on His team, but those who beat their chest over their sins and cry out to God, “Be merciful to me a sinner.”

3. Dear ones, if you don’t begin with beating your chest over your pride and over your self-righteousness, you will fall into the temptation to be “righteous over much” and “over wise.” You will look at the adversity of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, and will think you could do a better job than God Himself in ordering your own life and the lives of loved ones and friends. You will presume to judge God as being unwise, unjust, unloving, or powerless to intervene in rescuing the righteous from his suffering or in judging the wicked for his immorality, idolatry, and blasphemy. So often you may not even realize that you are judging the Lord, as if you were more righteous and more wise than He. But beloved, you do so whenever you become frustrated, angry, or bitter about the various circumstances in your life. When you throw a temper tantrum over something that has gone wrong in your life, do you not consider that you are angry with the God who ordained that event from all eternity? Do you not see that ultimately your “beef” is with Him, who works all things after the counsel of His own will?

4. How many people have left the Christian faith they were taught as a child, because they could not see with their finite understanding the infinite justice of God, or the infinite goodness of God, or the infinite wisdom of God worked out in various situations in life? Some of our own covenant children (who have walked away from the Lord) have expressed these very thoughts. The temptation of the devil begins here: “Yea, hath God said?” The seeds of doubt, unbelief, and skepticism are sown into the hearts of all those who embrace that first question: “Yea, hath God said?” How many atheists focus their debates with Christians around such arguments, pulling the emotional heartstrings of the audience and hoping the audience has likewise observed the suffering of the godly and the prospering of the wicked? “It’s not fair” becomes the rally cry of pride and unbelief. Dear ones, if God was to give us what was truly fair and what we actually deserve, we would be suffering every moment in great anguish for our rebellion against Him (now and forever), never having a moment of rest from bodily pain or from mental torment (which unbelievers will suffer in hell).

5. Solomon says that if you take this path of thinking, speaking, or acting (as if you were more righteous or more wise than God Himself), you will set yourself on the course to destruction (“why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” Ecclesiastes 7:16). Dear ones, it is neither righteous nor wise to act as if you have to place a safety net around your loved ones or your possessions, lest God take them all from you. To live

in such fear is to think you are more loving than God or that you are more good than God. To act vindictively toward others who have offended you is to act as though you are more just than God, or as if God will not defend and vindicate His own children or His own cause. To walk this path of thinking, speaking, or acting as if you were more just, more loving, or more wise than God is to destroy yourselves by continual discontentment, continual dissatisfaction, continual anger, continual frustration, and continual inner war because you cannot rest in the most wise, most good, and most powerful providence of God. In such a case, you are in a constant battle with the Lord over how He has ordered your life. You are choosing to go toe to toe with the living God. That is a battle you cannot win. If that is not destructive, dear ones, I don't know what is. And yet, we all fall into that sin to varying degrees.

6. The fear of the Lord in taking God seriously is manifested in your life in being able (by God's grace) to humbly rest in His plan for your life (even when it means you suffer and the wicked prosper). For God's plan is not fully manifested to you at the present time. You only see a slice of life or only one float in the parade of events that pass before you. God knows the beginning from the end, and He has ordained all things for His glory and for your good. The Psalmist in Psalm 73:13-14 declares in utter frustration (as he looks upon the prosperity of the wicked): Read it. In other words, what profit is there to my living a godly life, when I suffer so much upon the earth and the wicked prosper so much upon the earth? This was so painful to him that he says it was not until he went into the sanctuary that he understood (by God's grace) the wisdom and righteousness of God in these acts of providence: Read Psalm 73:17-20. The Psalmist realized his sin in speaking as though he were more righteous or more just than God: Read Psalm 73:21-28. Here is the heart of one who realized his foolishness in presuming to judge the everlasting God, who is infinite in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. May you likewise fall upon your face, keeping the eye of faith upon Christ rather than upon yourself (like Peter you will sink into a sea of despair, if you do not keep the eye of faith upon the Lord).

II. Don't Think, Speak, Or Act As If Sin Has No Consequences (Ecclesiastes 7:17-18).

A. Solomon now moves from one temptation that you face when the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (which is to judge God, as if you were more righteous or wise than He) to another temptation that you face in that same situation (which is to join the wicked in their sin, as if there will be no consequences for your sin). Remember Solomon speaks here from personal experience. He knew what it was to judge the Lord out of a proud heart and what it was to join the wicked out of a hopeless heart. For many times when you look at the providence of God and become so frustrated at the suffering of the righteous and the success of the wicked, you are tempted to simply give up and throw in the towel in hopelessness. At that point, life loses meaning because the eye of faith is not on Christ, but rather on man. You fall into such apathy and despair, thinking nothing matters. "I might as well join the wicked or join the world, rather than beating my head against the wall of God's providence. After all, if I can't beat them, I might as well join them."

1. That seems to be what Solomon is saying in Ecclesiastes 7:17: "Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish."

a. The Lord (speaking through Solomon) is obviously not saying, "Just be a little wicked, but not too much wicked." This is not a loophole for those who are looking for an excuse to break God's commandments, "I wasn't telling a big lie, I was only telling a little white lie." This is not an excuse for any who would say that in the age of the New Covenant, you are not under the law, but under grace (as if now you are not bound by God's law to be obedient to Christ and you can get away with more sin than they could in the Old Testament). It is true that you are not under the law as a Covenant of Works, whereby you are justified on the basis of your obedience to the law. It is also true that you are under a Covenant of Grace, whereby you are justified on the basis of Christ's obedience to the law. It is His obedience to which you cling by faith, not your own in order to have forgiveness and life. However, that same moral law that sends you to

Christ to be justified by faith is now placed in the hand of your Savior, as God's loving and righteous will for your life, in order to teach you the path of holiness and joy in the Lord. If you are to be like, then you must love Him and keep His commandments, as an act of thanksgiving, for all that He has so graciously and freely given to you.

b. What the Lord is saying through Solomon is that when you see the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, don't give up and join the cause of the wicked in becoming much wicked and foolish yourself. It is true that you may not be able to alter or change your own circumstances if you are dying with cancer, if your spouse does not make the changes you believe he/she should make in his/her life, if your boss despises you because you are a Christian, if a hurricane or a tornado blows your house off its foundation, or if the wicked grow and prosper in power and in bringing their wickedness more and more to bear in your life. But Solomon says (in effect), do not fall into hopelessness or apathy in giving up and in dealing with your dilemma by looking at the wicked and concluding, "They seem to have it so easy. I am tired of all the struggles in living a Christian life. I think I will join the wicked and enjoy life for a little while." At some time or another, most of us feel like giving up. We will fall into self-pity and feel so sorry for ourselves, like Elijah who "requested for himself that he might die" (1 Kings 19:5). In such a circumstance, we will either give up by wanting to die, or we will give up by joining the wicked. Dear ones, you cannot give up if you belong to the Lord, because He will not let you give up. He gives to you the grace of perseverance, as He did to Peter in Luke 22:31-32 ("and WHEN thou art converted", not "and IF thou art converted"). That is not an excuse for anyone to continue in sin, in fact, it is a reason to depart from sin. There is hope in Christ, whatever the struggle you face. No matter how difficult the trial, there is hope in Christ (Isaiah 26:3-4). I know this because of the many promises I find in God's Word, and because I have seen God work in amazing ways in people's lives, and because the grave is empty—Jesus is not dead—He is alive and is reigning in heaven at God's right hand. Therefore, there is hope, whatever you are facing, dear one.

2. Solomon says there are consequences to your sin, regardless of the seeming prosperity of the wicked: "why shouldst thou die before thy time" (Ecclesiastes 7:17). In other words, if you give up and follow the wicked in their paths, you will know the judgment of God in dying before the world would have expected you to die. Solomon is simply saying what Paul says, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:17). Oh, the painful consequences of sin in taking that path of giving up and sowing the seeds of sin (even for a short time). Oh, the many regrets of those who have not listened to godly parents, godly brothers or sisters, or godly ministers, and who have chosen to give up and to join an unfaithful church, because being faithful to Christ and His Word is just too uncomfortable or too hard in their present circumstances. Dear ones, never forget that the trials you face are not absolutely unique, nor is the hope that God gives to persevere absolutely unique (1 Corinthians 10:13).

B. Finally, Solomon states that these truths just mentioned in the previous verses need to be embraced by us and practiced by us, not simply heard and then forgotten by us ("It is good that thou shouldst take hold of this; yea also from this withdraw not thine hand" Ecclesiastes 7:18). Don't be forgetful hearers, but rather be effectual doers is what Solomon is saying. But then comes forth the key grace that will keep you from thinking too highly of yourself and from hopelessly joining the enemy in sin: the fear of God ("for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all" Ecclesiastes 7:18). Solomon declares that those who stand in awe and wonder of the infinite greatness, power, majesty, goodness, wisdom, love, mercy, faithfulness, and righteousness of their God and those who take God seriously in all areas of their life, these are the ones that will come forth out of these trials of faith, when beholding the suffering of the righteous and the prospering of the wicked. The godly fear of the Lord will deliver you, dear ones, for you will know with confidence that your help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

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