

The Discipline of Wisdom
Ecclesiastes 7:23-29; 1 Timothy 4:7
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Bondage to sin brings misery. Liberty from sin brings joy.

One important theme that we find again and again taught by the Spirit of God in the pages of Scripture is that you who trust in Christ alone for your eternal salvation have been set free from the penalty due to the guilt of your sin (for you are forgiven all your trespasses), set free from the curse for your innumerable violations of the Moral Law of God (for Christ became a curse for you in suffering the curse you deserved), set free from this present evil world (for you have a new home in heaven), set free from Satan (for Christ is your beloved Master), set free from the dominion of sin (for the grace of God lives within you so that you now desire to obey Christ and His commandments), set free from the evil of afflictions (for God causes everything to work together for your good), set free from the sting of death (for you have a sure and certain hope in heaven that cannot fade away), set free from the power of the grave (for Christ was victoriously raised from the dead as the first fruit of your own glorious resurrection), and set free from everlasting damnation (for Christ, your salvation, has ascended to heaven wherein His sacrifice is accepted by the Father, and His intercession in pleading His merit for you is forever effectual).

That aspect of your freedom in Christ (upon which Solomon focuses his attention today) is that you have been set free from the dominion and power of sin in your life. You are not bound to obey the lusts and passions of the flesh. Yes, those lusts and passions yet remain within you and yet tempt you to follow them, but the glorious truth from God's Word to you today is that you are no longer enslaved to them. They can call you. They can entice you. They can tempt you. But dear ones, you do not have to follow them as if they were your master. Your Master is Christ (according to 1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Dear ones, what sin is it in your life that you would like to see brought under the control and discipline of the Holy Spirit of God? We all have those sins that we seem to fall into more easily than other sins. It is concerning those sins that you seem to spend more time in prayer, pleading with the Lord to overcome. Solomon had such sins as well, and he uses the sin of sexual immorality as one sin that ensnared him in his earlier years. He addresses the snare of this sin and the deliverance that is only available through the grace and power of God. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are these: (1) The Humility of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:23-25); and (2) The Discipline of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:26-29).

I. The Humility of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:23-25).

A. Solomon has in the latter part of this chapter extolled the greatness of wisdom in dealing with temptations that come your way, wherein you may think yourself more just, more wise, or more loving than God, when you observe the adversity of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Solomon now confesses how far short he himself came to realizing in his own life the wisdom that he sought. Here Solomon, the Preacher, the wisest mere man who ever lived, humbles himself before God and His people to confess his lack of wisdom and a particular case wherein that lack of wisdom was manifested: namely, sexual immorality.

B. Solomon begins this section by saying, "All this I have proved by wisdom" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). Solomon gives his personal testimony in the passage before you. As he now writes to you, he can say he proved and tested the truthfulness of what he has said by the wisdom God gave to him, and the wisdom he has applied to these matters. Solomon declared his intention to be wise in how he lived his life and ruled his kingdom, "I said, I will be wise" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). Here was a holy and godly desire and goal. And yet, he

recounts how far short he fell of that wisdom he initially desired when he states, “but it was far from me” (Ecclesiastes 7:23). Wisdom was far from Solomon in two ways.

1. Wisdom was far from him in one sense, because he turned his back on Christ and failed to use the wisdom God so graciously granted to him. He fell into sin and lived foolishly for a period in his life, so that despite his resolution to be wise, the temptation to find joy in wealth, honor, and pleasure led him in the opposite direction of wisdom. As has been noted in previous sermons, yesterday’s honors and victories in the Cause of Christ do not necessarily guarantee today’s or tomorrow’s successes and accomplishments in the Cause of Christ. If Solomon was vulnerable to pride, to idolatry, to sexual immorality, and to foolishness (though exalted in the eyes of the world for his great wisdom), then you and I are also vulnerable to the same kind of fall into sin. You must never forget that though you are forgiven all your sin through faith in Jesus Christ, you are, nevertheless, sinners who stand in continual need of God’s restraining and sustaining grace to keep you from falling into sin. If you do not remember the sins of the past, so as to remind you of how vulnerable you are, you will be much more likely to repeat those same sins. For your pride blinds you to how susceptible you really are to the power of sin. Let not your heads be swollen with blind pride, so that you do not even see where temptation is leading you. It is the hindsight of wisdom that reminds you of the sin from which God has rescued you, so that you never forget the heinousness of your sin and the grace of Christ that delivered you from that sin; and it is the foresight of wisdom that lets you see into the future, so that you see the guilt and misery into which that sin will lead you, if you are ensnared by that temptation.

2. Wisdom was also far from Solomon in another sense, because no matter how much of it one gains, there is always an infinite supply that yet remains to be discovered and used. In fact, the more wise one becomes, the more humbled one is at how little one has of wisdom in comparison to the vast and deep stores of it that have yet been untapped by man (“That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out” Ecclesiastes 7:24). Dear ones, if he who had more of the wisdom of God than any other mere mortal can say that he fell far short of that which he sought, how much more ought you to be humbled at your lack of wisdom. And yet to see your lack of wisdom is good, because that insight causes you as Christians to seek it, to desire it, to pray for it, and to apply your hearts to it all the more. For if you conclude that you are quite wise, you will not seek it and pursue it with all of your heart. Ironically, those who see their need of wisdom are actually wiser than those who do not see their need of wisdom. Those who think themselves the wisest are the most foolish. Here we clearly see in Solomon what effect wisdom has in the heart and life of one who possesses it to a high degree. A biblical wisdom humbles you. A biblical wisdom causes you to see your lack of wisdom, and to see your sin more clearly. A biblical wisdom brings you to confess your sin and to repent of your sin to God and to others.

C. Wisdom (as has been noted in previous sermons) is the application of truth to all areas of life. Heavenly wisdom is not only knowing the truth, but living and applying the truth that one knows. Heavenly wisdom is not being a forgetful hearer of the Word of God, but an effectual doer of it (James 1:22). That is why Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:25, “I applied my heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:25). Wisdom (as is true of all graces God gives to us) grows by doing what we know to do (by starting with one area of your life in which you struggle with sin) and applying the truth of Christ to that area of life. You may be asking for wisdom as is taught in James 1:5, but dear ones, if you are not applying the truth you already know to your life by loving obedience to Christ and to His law, all the asking in the world will not increase your wisdom. The Lord Jesus (you will recall) taught us how to increase the grace of understanding the truth, so as to be able to determine whether a doctrine is from God or is from man in John 7:17: “If any man will DO (not merely hear, not merely memorize, not merely confess with his mouth, but DO) his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” Just as you will be hindered from knowing the truth if you do not apply it, so you will be hindered from growing in wisdom if you do not apply the truth that you already know. Why should the Lord increase your knowledge of His will or increase your wisdom, if you are not obeying Him in

that which you already know and understand? If you are faithful in little, you will be faithful in much. Solomon says he applied his heart to wisdom, and so must you, if you would have wisdom in your life.

II. The Discipline of Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:26-29).

A. Solomon presents to you now a specific case in which wisdom must be applied: sexual immorality (Ecclesiastes 7:26). I would suggest Solomon uses this particular sin because it was one which ensnared and entrapped him (just as it did his father, David). For we read of Solomon's sin in 1 Kings 11:1-3. His sexual immorality may have been cloaked in polygamous marriages, but it was his sexual desires that led him into these sinful and unlawful relationships. Solomon seems to speak from his own experience for he says, "And I FIND more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands" (Ecclesiastes 7:26). Solomon says that there is more bitterness in falling under the power of sexual temptation than there is in succumbing to death. How that truth ought to be indelibly written upon your hearts and minds. When sexual temptation comes your way, learn from the wisest of mere mortals that sexual immorality is in some sense filled with more bitterness, anguish, heartache, and pain than death itself. If you would but view the temptations to sexual sins to be like signing your own death certificate in some sense, you would like Joseph be more likely to flee these temptations, rather than playing with this fire that will burn in the heart until it consumes your thoughts, dreams, and lives.

1. Temptations are like traps that the enemy sets for you, that you might be pulled under the power of sin. Wisdom is a grace that foresees the temptation and knows the power, guilt, and misery of sin, and flees from that temptation rather than playing with it and flirting with it ("A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished" Proverbs 22:3). Having grown up in Southern California, I remember how tempting it was to venture out into the ocean as a child; the waves almost tempting you to go out, just a little farther with each step. Disregarding the warning of parents and even lifeguards, I wanted to see how far I could go out into the ocean—at least until that big wave came out of nowhere and crushed me, so that I was swept off my feet, spinning and turning under water, and completely under its power. I was at the complete mercy of the power of that wave. So, likewise, are you helpless in yourself to break free from sexual temptations once they have swept you off your feet. They will control you. They will lead you from one temptation to another. They will eventually destroy you, apart from the grace and mercy of Christ.

2. Solomon in these verses speaks of a woman as setting a snare and net for him, but Solomon does not mean to communicate that men cannot set the same sexual traps as well. Sexual temptations are here presented as "snares", which is simply a trap that a hunter would set in order to catch a bird or some other animal, or sexual temptations are presented as "nets" in which fish are caught. This is the heavenly perspective of wisdom. Sexual temptation does not lead to freedom. Sexual temptation leads to bondage. Thus, to flirt with sexual temptation, to enjoy sexual temptation, to be entertained by sexual temptation, may flatter your lust, pride, and ego, but you are simply being lured ever so slowly by the bait until you are hooked and jerked like a fish on the end of a line in whatever direction that temptation will yank you. And we are the greatest of fools if we think it can't happen to us because we are Christians, or Elders, or Covenanters, or because we practice courtship rather than dating. Solomon not only says that sexual temptation is like a "snare" and a "net", but also that it is like "bands" (that is, like chains from which you cannot easily escape). The temptation may seem so enjoyable, so inviting, but once it has you in its grasp, you will find that you are not so easily set free from it. This is the picture of sexual temptation that a heavenly wisdom keeps ever before your eyes. With that picture staring you in the face, you will be far less likely to flirt with sexual temptations.

3. Sexual sins can certainly dominate and control your life and mine, but so can other sins as well (whether anger, drunkenness, fear, doubt, covetousness, laziness, procrastination, defensiveness,

jealousy, unforgiveness, rudeness, pride, or selfishness). What are some general characteristics of sins that may control your life at the present time?

- a. This sin has become a habit that you have tried repeatedly to break.
- b. You blame others or blame various circumstances for this sin, rather than accepting responsibility for it.
- c. You may even deny that this habit is a sin.
- d. You have convinced yourself that you can stop it any time that you want—you just don't want to (at least at the present time).
- e. You continue in this sin, even though you have already been burned by it on various occasions.
- f. You practice this sin secretly when no one sees you, but you would not think of doing so in front of others.
- g. You continue in this sin, even though you know that God's Word and God's Spirit convict you that it is wrong.

4. Dear ones, what sins in your life are exercising a control over you presently? You will never know the power of Christ in your life, if you do not honestly confess that you are sinfully sick in that area. Sins that have ensnared you and chained you will not simply go away, if you pretend as if they don't exist (any more than a cancer will stop growing, if you tell yourself you don't have cancer). Honesty with God (and with yourself) is absolutely necessary to overcome any sin in your life (and by that I do not mean sinless perfection, but saying more and more (by the power of God), "NO" to that temptation and sin).

B. You have heard from Solomon concerning the danger of sexual sins (and by implication any sin that tempts you), but he now gives you hope that you can escape these besetting sins when he says, "whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her" (Ecclesiastes 7:26).

1. Dear ones, you must infer from that verse that it is God that delivers His people from the bondage to sin. It is not your mere determination to overcome that sin, your mere sincerity to overcome sin, or any mere work on your part to overcome sin that frees you from bondage to sin. It is the work of God through Jesus Christ that sets you free from sin. That is not to say there is not hard work needed on your part to overcome those habitual sins you fall into time and time again (to the contrary, overcoming sin in your life is hard work). It is simply to say you must recognize that all of the work you may do in your own strength or all of the Twelve Step Programs in the world cannot set a sinner free from his/her sin. Freedom from the guilt, power, and condemnation of sin is the gift of God, purchased for you by the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:6,14). You are not bound to obey the lusts of the flesh, because Christ has set you free. If that is not true, there is no hope for any of us. Because it is true, you must receive that truth by faith, and you must apply it in loving obedience to Christ every day. You are not slaves to sin, no matter how much you may feel pulled in the direction of sin. Satan would have you to deny that truth, because you see this battle raging in your soul between sin and righteousness and because you see yourself succumbing to the temptation to sin. The Apostle Paul saw the same battle warring in his life. In fact, it would appear that he too wrestled with the sin of lust and sexual temptation (as we see in Romans 7:7-8,18-23). You must never excuse your sin. You must never continue in it without a battle. But if you do not see and understand that the battle over sin in your life has already been won through the death and resurrection of Christ, you will lose hope, you will give up, and you will continue in that sin. The only hope of success in overcoming the power of sin in your life is the victory of Christ over sin and over all of your enemies.

2. Next, we must infer from Ecclesiastes 7:26 ("whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her"), that it is not only the work of God, but that it requires your faith, your repentance, your holy desires, your use of God's means of grace, and your work as well. More literally, Solomon says, "the good before God escapeth from her." In other words, those who are good in God's sight are set free from these enslaving sins.

Those who are good by virtue of God's good work of grace through Christ and by virtue of the good work they do. Note how Paul includes the work of God and the work of man in your deliverance from sin (Philippians 2:12-13). Let no one think that simply because God assures the Christian that sin shall not have dominion over him/her, that the work in overcoming sin is easy, simple, and comfortable. Jesus figuratively described it as painful as the pain involved in plucking out an eye or in cutting off a hand or a leg (Mark 9:43-47). Overcoming those sins (into which we seem to fall time and time again) will not be accomplished without the grace of self-discipline and hard work, even to the point of spiritual exhaustion at times. You are commanded by God to "exercise" yourself unto godliness (1 Timothy 4:7). The verb, "exercise" (*gumnazo*), is the word from which we get our word "gymnasium". Just as gymnasts perform amazing feats of strength and coordination from spending hours of hard work each day in the gymnasium, so must you likewise spend hours of hard work each day exercising your faith in the promises of Christ, using the means of grace (such the Word of God and prayer), and using loving obedience to overcome those besetting sins in your life. Little effort in overcoming sin will produce little success. It doesn't take any effort at all to become lazy, weak, and overweight. All you have to do is to do nothing, but sit around. However, it takes hard work and exercise to be strong and fit to play a game of basketball or to run around the bases of baseball diamond. I dare say, you can tell how seriously you take your sin and how seriously you desire to overcome your sin by what you are willing to do to overcome it. What inconveniences and discomforts are you willing to endure in overcoming sin? What sacrifices are you willing to make in order to see sin subdued in your life? Let me suggest the following spiritual exercises in overcoming sin.

- a. Exercise yourself in seeing the beauty of holiness (Psalm 96:9). You will never hate sin as you should until you love the righteousness of God as you should. The way to grow in your hatred for sin is to grow in your love for the beauty of Christ's holiness.
- b. Exercise yourself in being brutally honest about your sin (Psalm 139:23-24). You cannot hide your sin from God. He chose you in love to be redeemed by Christ, knowing the worst about you. If you are not honest with God, you will never be honest with yourself or with others. You will lead a life of lies and deception.
- c. Exercise yourself in seeing Christ as your only hope of salvation and deliverance from the power of sin (even as He is your only hope from the guilt and condemnation of sin). Look to Christ as your strength, as your righteousness, as your sanctification, and as your hope (Galatians 2:20).
- d. Exercise yourself to use the Word of God and prayer in daily secret worship, daily family worship, and weekly corporate worship (Ephesians 6:17-18).
- e. Exercise yourself to foresee the occasions in which you will be tempted, and avoid those occasions if possible, and if it is not possible to avoid the occasion, then prepare yourself so that you are ready to face the temptation (Matthew 26:41).
- f. Exercise yourself to reflect upon where that sin has led you in the past and where it will lead you in the future.
- g. Exercise yourself to be thankful to Christ for every step of improvement and encouragement.
- h. Exercise yourself to persevere and never to give up. For where you are yet struggling and fighting with sin, you are not overcome by sin. Whatever the amount of daily struggle you have with certain sins, it will be worth it all when you stand in the presence of Christ, perfected and in blessed rest for all eternity from the power of sin.
- i. Exercise yourself to be accountable to someone you trust, who will pray for you, encourage you, and exhort you in that area of temptation.

C. Solomon shares his observations from his own personal experience (in Ecclesiastes 7:27-28) when he says, "Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher." What had he observed?

1. He sought to recount, one by one, from his own personal experience, how many of those who had become slaves to sexual sins were delivered from them once they were entangled in them apart from the grace of God (Ecclesiastes 7:27-28).

2. His tally is that one man among a thousand and no women among a thousand were so delivered. That is a very grim picture, dear ones. What despair there would be, if we did not have the promise of God just stated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:26: "whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her."

D. Dear ones, you can never blame the Lord for your sins, for "God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). God made man righteous, but man rebelled against the Lord, and so man has been doing ever since. Your struggles with sin are not the fault of God, but your own. However, the remedy to sin is found in Jesus Christ our Savior. Jesus Christ is the friend of all sinners, who come to Him beating their chest and crying out, "God be merciful to me a sinner." That is the one whom God will justify, forgive, and grant the power needed to subdue those besetting sins in his/her life.

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