

**Ecclesiastes 2: 1-3; “I will Test you with Mirth”, Sermon # 5 in the series –
“Remember Your Creator”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on
September 13th, 2015, in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

If we were to look back at the first chapter, we would find that the Preacher, Solomon, having set his heart to “seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven”, concluded this: that even with all the great wisdom which God had given to him, he still could not find meaning and satisfaction in life, in all of his labor under the sun. He had come to realize that all he labored for could not last indefinitely. He found that even with all of his knowledge and wisdom, that he could not change things which God had providentially ordered to be crooked. He could not make them straight or make up what was lacking. He found that in much wisdom was much grief, and he who increased knowledge increased sorrow. So for a time, he thought that he should change his strategy somewhat, in order to find lasting satisfaction. He was going to continue his investigation of life; but he would use his wisdom in connection with earthly pleasures of various sorts.

This is what Chapter 2 is all about. The first of these pleasures that he sought to investigate was mirth. If you look up the word “mirth” in the Dictionary you will find that it says that it means, “Joy” or “Delight”. It can also mean “rejoicing, joyous gaiety, or festive jollity; merriment or hilarity; often humorous amusement, as something ludicrous, or laughter excited by it.” When he says, “Come now, I will test you with mirth”, he is speaking to himself, hoping to find something in his experience which would not be as sad and filled with grief as the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge had been. But instead, he wanted to find something that would bring him delight and joy in the journey of life. He was going to test himself with mirth, and he would attempt to do it skillfully. He would pursue the pleasure of mirth. And he tells us this, even before he tells us how he went about pursuing this pleasure. He tells us the conclusion of the matter. He says that it was madness. The proposition that Solomon brings to us in these verses is this: Laughter, in an earthly sense, without the joy of knowing God, without His works and His grace bringing us to the right kind of mirth, is all madness. And when he declares this, he is challenging all the mirth-makers in every generation to produce the lasting benefit of this mirth. “What does it accomplish?”, he asks. And so, this afternoon we want to see 1st of all, how Solomon vainly pursued earthly mirth. And then 2nd - We want to also see the value of holy mirth.

1st – Let’s see how Solomon vainly pursued earthly mirth. (Verse 3)

He says, “I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.” He begins this search of mirth by gratifying his flesh with wine. Now Solomon was not advocating drunkenness here. He was not saying that he was addicted to wine or that he was a wine-bibber as the old King James puts it. No, he was wiser than this. I want you to turn back with me a couple of pages in your Bible to Proverbs 31: 1. Here we find the words of King Lemuel, words which are by many attributed to Solomon. It appears that Lemuel was a pet name which Bathsheba had for her son Solomon. The name means, “One who is for God”, or “Devoted to God”. These are Solomon’s mother’s words to him when he was young. Verse 2 says, “What my son?” “And what, O son of my womb?” “And what O son of my vows?” “Do not give your strength to women, nor your ways to that which destroys kings.” “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted.” “Give strong drink to those who are perishing, and wine to those who are bitter of heart.” “Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.”

Solomon clearly had a gracious mother; a mother who had prayed often for him, and made vows concerning him, that he would rule his kingdom wisely. She also instructed him with this spirit of prophetic regard for him, and indeed for all kings who would rule righteously. So Solomon had been taught, and he knew full well that it was utter folly to pursue wine to the point of intoxication. He knew, as it says in Hosea 4: 11, that “harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the spirit.” They enslave the heart. He knew this before he began his pursuit of pleasure. He did not intend to pervert justice and forget the law of God. But what he was wondering was if he could mix the pleasures of wisdom with the pleasures of sense, and come off the better for it? Would this be the ultimate and lasting satisfaction to be found in life? He would “guide his heart with wisdom”; he would gratify his flesh with just a certain amount of wine, and perhaps that would do the trick. In this way, he thought that he would be able to “lay hold on folly”. Folly, according to the Dictionary means, “The state or quality of being foolish.” Folly is moral foolishness and stupidity.

Turn with me over to Proverbs 5: 21. Speaking here of the consequences to a man who falls to the seductions of an adulteress, it says, “For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He ponders all his paths.” “His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin.” “He shall die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray.” Solomon sought the Lord for grace to be kept from this sin. And he would exhort all young men everywhere, that if they valued their life, they would abstain from immorality. It is folly. It is lacking good sense. He is attempting to show all young men everywhere that this sin of adultery would have great consequences if they did commit it, and if they did not repent of it. It would bring with it great regret and eternal pain when the person committing it fell under the judgment of God for it. Solomon would have young men everywhere lay hold of wisdom, to prevent folly from destroying their lives, and taking them down to hell. He would have them to understand there would be no mirth in that dreadful place.

Turn with me now over to Proverbs 14, verse 8. “The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is deceit.” Solomon wanted to understand his own way. He wanted everyone everywhere to do the same. This is something that many people do not sufficiently consider; the knowledge of themselves and the way they are in their heart. A wise and prudent person will look deeply and carefully into their own heart to see where they may be being deceived by sins of various sorts. They will run down the list of the 10 commandments and ask themselves if they understand what is going on in their own heart, and whether they understand where their life is leading. A wise person will inquire into the way that they are living, in relation to God’s commandments. They will seek to understand the spirituality of the law and not just the outward keeping of the letter of the law. They will search their own heart and try to understand whether they are a modern-day idolater; or whether they are cultivating the love of other things in their heart more than God Himself. They will ask themselves whether they worship God in the way that is acceptable to Him. They will ask themselves whether they are praying and calling upon the name of the Lord in a sincere way, or whether they are doing so in vain, honoring Him with their lips, and yet their heart is far from Him. They will ask themselves whether their present observance of the Lord’s Day is acceptable to God, or whether they really are really giving parts of the day to the cultivation of their own pleasures.

They will ask themselves whether they are honoring and submitting to the spiritual authorities in their life; their parents, their pastors, and whether they are studying to learn the way of the Lord. They will ask themselves whether they are honoring and submitting to the authorities in the civil government who God has placed there “for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.” (1 Peter 2: 14) They will also ask themselves whether they would be tempted to cave in to peer pressure in relation to calling evil good, and good evil;

whether they would go along with unrighteous measures taken by authorities who are willing to compromise or abandon the truth. They will ask themselves whether they are angry or resentful toward people who have tried to tell them of their faults, and whether they are holding a grudge against anyone. They will ask themselves whether they are envious or jealous of anyone; whether they are thinking good thoughts towards others around them. They will ask themselves whether they have secretly stolen something from someone else or defrauded them; not really told them the truth about a business deal. They will ask themselves whether they are speaking the truth to their neighbor; or could it be that they were only telling a part of the truth to cover themselves from being seen as a wrong-doer. They will ask themselves whether they have secretly wanted to have the things which belong to their neighbor. And all of this regular self-examination is only the negative side of the coin that they are considering. They will at the same time be asking themselves how they are actively loving their neighbor as themselves, and God as their Maker, Redeemer and friend. This is what Solomon found that he could not do by “gratifying his flesh with wine”. He could not lay hold entirely upon folly. And he ultimately found that no matter what it was that he pursued, it was not going to satisfy him in a lasting sense.

Now 2ndly - We want to see the value of holy mirth.

It is good for us to remember that even though Solomon could not find satisfaction and meaning in everything under the sun, that he was not saying that there was no such thing as holy mirth. Is laughter wrong for the Christian? The answer to that question is that it depends upon the reasons for your laughing and how much you engage in it. Laughter becomes madness when you seek laughter as its own end. You probably have listened to a good many comedy shows on television where laughter is its own end. There are shows on television where there is canned laughter in the background to get you to laughing, and so that you will know when to laugh. This kind of laughing is for the most part not profitable. Turn with me over to Ecclesiastes 7: 3. “Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better.” “The heart of the wise in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools in the house of mirth.” If you cannot see this truth you are probably not a believer. “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted,” Jesus says. If you are able to see your own sinfulness, and to mourn over it, and to turn from it, and to put it to death by the power of the Spirit, you shall surely live forever.

In Luke 6: 21 Jesus says, “Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh.” And in verse 25 he says, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” He is not saying that all laughter is sinful as some of the Anabaptists did in the time of John Calvin. He is saying that we need to come to terms with our sinfulness, at this time in our life now, so that we will find true happiness and satisfaction in holy laughter, both in this life and in the life to come. Holy joy and laughter come from the realization of what Christ has done in His life and in His death for me a sinner. This is how our sinful laughter can be put away. On the cross Jesus said to himself and to us prophetically in Psalm 22: 7, “All who see me laugh me to scorn.” But God knows how to laugh in a holy way at those who sinfully laugh. In Psalm 2, verse 4 it says, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision.” He would set the Lord Jesus up on high at His right hand and give Him all power and authority to save men from their sins and to fill their mouths with holy laughter. This is the joyful laughter of knowing that we are no longer captives to sin and shame.

For Psalm 126 says, “When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.” “Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.” This is what happened literally with those Old Testament people of God for whom the Lord had done the great things of freeing them from their captivity in Babylon. But the same is true of those who have come to know and understand what great and good things that Christ has done for them in His life and death. When we trust in Him, He will release us from our captivity in sin

and bring us back to happy and useful service to God. Let me close by giving you a few verses related to holy mirth and laughter. Turn with me to Proverbs 15, verse 13. “A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of the heart, the spirit is broken.” Truly it is a good thing for a believing Christian to study his own heart and countenance and see whether he allowing too much sorrow to reign there. The fruit of the Spirit is joy. The joy of the Lord is your strength. We are to “rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”

Do you have a merry heart? How do you get one? You obtain a merry heart by continually feasting upon the grace and mercy of God to you in giving you a Savior who is continually supplying you with grace. The Lord Jesus is continually supplying you with grace, if you are trusting in Him. And if you are truly thankful for that grace, you will not always be sad because you will have a merry heart. If you look over at verse 15 of Proverbs chapter 15, it says this: “All the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast.” None of us likes afflictions because of the pain and difficulty which attend them. But they can be faced, and they can be born with, by the power and presence of the Lord who is for us, the Lord who is with us. There is a continual feast of good things to meditate upon in His Word and bring into our hearts as soul-satisfying food.

And finally, turn over me to Proverbs 17: 22. “A merry heart does good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.” Do you see the importance of a merry heart. It acts a medicine to your soul. A heart can only be merry because it knows grace is at work there, bringing the satisfaction and happiness which that person sought for in vain, in their life under the sun. Eventually Solomon would learn the lessons that he needed to. The question is, “When will we?” Christ is our food, Christ’s grace is the medicine that heals our sin-sick souls, and Christ is He who lifts up the downcast and takes away their sorrows and replaces them with joy. Will you not come to Him to seek Him for every good thing even now? Let these truths have their free course with you every day, and in the days to come.