
LESSONS IN LIVING

Taste

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading, Ecclesiastes 6:7-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Ecclesiastes is a strange book, and it is one where we have to do a lot of re-framing to understand the type of literature we're talking about. When Ecclesiastes talks about being "under the sun," that's the world that seems like random – chance, and he may or may not be saying the world is really like that, but he's saying that's what it looks like sometimes...where everything you do is futile, that you can't get a handle on your life, you don't know what gift you have to give the world, and it feels like you're chasing after wind. So that's the context in which he's speaking.

Whenever I read this section on desire, I always think of having had poison ivy. If you've ever had poison ivy, it's not a lot of fun, and the more you scratch, the more it itches. I don't know who invented Calamine Lotion – it's the most inert substance on the face of the planet. I've never felt any relief from Calamine, but that's not what I came to speak about today. The point that the author is making – whoever wrote Ecclesiastes – is that desire can be like that. We can get a kind of thirstiness, a kind of itch, where the more we scratch it the worse it gets. And when you are in a culture that is designed around making you itch for certain things that you don't need, it's very hard to get a handle on that. And so, he's really jolting us, he's hitting us from a side that we're really not ready for. The point is not to feel bad. The point is not for you to feel guilty that you were born in this culture, that you have desires as a human being, it's to help all of us find a handle on our lives, and to find a peace that we're not going to get as long as we're captives of this culture. What the author is trying to do is to get us to separate what we want from what we need. Because we can lose the difference there, and when I think that something I'm wanting is something I need, I cannot get satisfaction. It's been said, "You can never get enough of that which you don't really need." So, if you're eating because you're lonely, you're drinking because you've made mistakes, you're working because you don't feel important, if you're trying to do one thing to meet what you think is a need, but it's really not a need, you can never get enough of that.

So what Ecclesiastes is trying to do is to call us back to kind of a basic sanity. And he's not criticizing us for having desires, but instead of being captive of desires, to realize that as a first step towards a more mature love. That when we desire something or someone, that's not always loving, but it can be the first step towards being loving. Let me describe what I'm talking about.

Paul said when we desire something, we always see in part. Have you ever talked to somebody who thinks they are in love but they're really in lust? They talk about their partner, and they describe the parts (rather than the entire person). It kind of freaks you out. Desire can do that and particularly in this culture where there's this kind of "locking on" experience. I went to a restaurant the other day, and the menu freaked me out. The pictures of the food were so big and so colorful. It was like a Playboy layout. It was like "food porn." The focus on the food was really creepy in a way. And I also

heard about a new food item at a carnival where they took a ½ pound of beef, put cheese on it, and put two Krispy Kreme doughnuts as the bun. It was strange, but I think we've all had our own version of that where we keep following that itch, trying to stop it, and we wind up getting something, and the worst thing that can happen is we get what we want, because we only want part of it. It's like someone who finds the perfect woman and is thinking about her all the time, and the one detail they're leaving out is that she is a nun. Desire focuses on the good parts and doesn't see the bad parts. When you get married to that person, they're both going to show up. What we don't realize is that often times our desires are contradictory in and of themselves. Sometimes we want two things that contradict one another, or we want one thing in two contradictory ways. When I was interviewing to be a minister in the first place, it really scared me to read the job forms, because what people wanted no human being could do. They had things like "we want somebody who's 35 years old with 50 years of experience." "We want somebody who will visit everyone in the congregation and always be in their office all the time if we need them." "We want somebody who puts their family first, but is at all church functions." "Now, if you look at that kind of desire carefully, you realize you're not going to be happy with that.

Now here's why Ecclesiastes is writing: he's not just writing to bum us out. It's to realize that often times when we're unhappy and the world seems like a desert, the problem is in here (points to heart) with contradictory and immature desires. If I think that my unhappiness is coming from outside of me, and if I think other people and other jobs keep disappointing me time after time, at some point, if I don't realize there is something in me that I must deal with, I'll repeat that same sad story for my whole lifetime and that will be my story. So Ecclesiastes is trying to jolt us to look at our desires more carefully.

The first thing he points out, I think, if you look at the whole book, is how we focus on parts of things. The other is that we focus on the surface of things, and in this culture, it's really impossible not to do that. Earlier, in our puppet show, Pete was talking about the virtual world – the promise of technology, the computer, the internet. This is from John Zirzan:

It promised that it would empower us, and yet people feel more vulnerable right now more than any time in history. We have more power, but we feel more threatened.

It would enrich and diversify our environment, but our environment is getting more and more generic.

That we would be interconnected in a way that we had never been before, and in one sense, that has happened, but it's so superficial that many people feel more alone than they've ever felt in their life.

There was a study that was done over a 19-year period where it said that most Americans 20 years ago had twice as many friends as they have now...because we're in front of the computer all the time. We twitter and we call each other on the phone, and we have these superficial relationships, but the number of people that most Americans confide in has been cut in half. And the number of people that said that they have nobody that they are close to has tripled in the last 19 years. Now that's not a problem with the individuals, it's a problem with the culture, the economy – the type of economy that we have. I know you may get tired of hearing that, but the forbidden topics in this culture are nationalism and capitalism, and if we don't look at those issues, we cannot get a sense of our problem. We just feel futile. We feel like it's hopeless. If for one second you would step outside of those two paradigms you would know exactly what to do for the rest of your life. Instead of being an American you would be a world citizen – a member of the human family, and you would realize that people are more valuable than things.

But to do that, we have to have a different kind of love, and what Wisdom teachings say is the more we love other people, the less love we need back. Now think about that. Any of you that have been a parent have experienced this. When you are thinking about having children you're thinking with desire and you're having all these images of conversations and trips and all these kinds of things. And then you get a kid, and you think, "You know, this kid's really immature. This is not the buddy I thought it was going to be. It's a kid!" And the way you work through that is to love the child more. You love them in a way that you don't need as much back, and you rejoice in their happiness. That type of joy is greater than anything you would get back by other means, and you realize that. What Jesus was saying, and Buddha was saying, and Ecclesiastes is saying is when we love humanity like that, we get that same incredible experience.

The third thing that desire does is love others as objects. We love somebody as somebody we want to possess, or something that we've got to have, and we lose the parameters around it. In this culture we've all been turned into objects. Almost every one of us, in some ways, feels like an object and our worth comes from how we succeed, how much money we have. I remember there was a banner in the old Malcolm X movie. The banner said, "Women are our most precious possessions," and it was meant as a compliment. When Obama gave the speech this week and said that education is the most important part of the economy. That was intended as a compliment. But think how sick a culture is where you have to say to parents "You really need to educate and feed your children because someday they'll be consumers. They have worth, so feed them, clothe them, get them medical care because someday they're going to make money for us. Children are not our prized possession and they're not a part of the economy.

A couple of weeks ago there was a wonderful press story that billionaires were giving half of their money back – thirty-four billionaires – and this was seen as this great step towards redistribution. But I want to ask you a question: what if the Somali pirates gave half of their booty back. What if, every year, the Somali pirates, in a huge act of generosity, gave back half of what they stole? See, the system -when you think of it systemically - it's a different issue, but you've been taught not to think of it like that. In America, the pirates get to write the laws, so they're not considered pirates.

I saw a report where a CEO of United Health Group retired...now, think about the health situation across the country...his retirement bonus was 125 million dollars, his yearly pension is 5 million dollars, and the stock options, when added together, look something like 1.1 billion dollars...in a world where something like 45,000 Americans died last year for inadequate health care.

You have been taught that rich people are the models of humankind. When you pick up the paper, it tells you what a rich person thinks or what they're doing, so you've been taught to try to go after that. What Ecclesiastes says is, "it's like chasing after the wind."

I'm on AOL, and when the hundred-mile ice shelf broke off of Greenland and started drifting, the way that was announced on AOL, that very good news service, it said, "Ice shelf breaks off, threatens oil, shipping. Oh, my God, this could affect oil, it could affect trade. Now, that's a species that doesn't have a real great shot of survival. When you look at the current environmental issue within the economy – what it means to the economy - there's no way out! We have to start looking at the economy in terms of the environment, and we have to start looking at the nation in terms of all of humankind.

If you've been feeling in despair, if you are the kind of person Ecclesiastes is describing where you're just chasing after wind with your life, and you feel like you have poison ivy and you scratch, and it just gets worse and worse.

What's being said here is to not underestimate what it means to step out of that. To break your addiction to things is a revolutionary act in this culture and it is not without gravity. And to realize that when you model and demonstrate that what is important about you is your humanity and not your job, you're changing the world. Now, it may not happen quickly, it probably won't. But you're planting seeds. You're giving people direction. It's not your fault that you were born into this craziness. It's not your fault that you have desires or that the propaganda has worked in our life, but that doesn't have to be your story. You can be one of those brave citizens of the whole world who steps out of the economy – not completely, but somewhat – one foot in, one foot out perhaps, and just models that you are a human being.

Let your desire deepen and broaden. Don't criticize yourself for having human feelings, but let your desire be the first step in a different life. Let it grow and deepen until it becomes love.

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