
Chasing the Wind: Pleasure

DAVE BAST

Qoheleth, the Preacher, is the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, and the Preacher's characteristic refrain is, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." He is reminding us that all worldly, human ambition is really a dead end. So, maybe the best thing to do, the wisest thing, is to live for pure pleasure. Not so fast, says the Preacher, because living for pleasure is equally pointless.

DUANE KELDERMAN

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Duane, welcome back to this series of programs for the new year that we are doing on the book of Ecclesiastes; this very remarkable little book. It seems so bleak and gloomy in some ways, and yet full of real, practical wisdom as well.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and I think we have seen in our study of the book so far that, indeed, there are different emphases, ranging from vanity of vanities, all is vanity...

DAVE BAST

Empty; it is all meaningless. It is pointless. Anything you do is futile.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Two: Enjoy life; and at first, those might not seem very congruous, but I think we have seen how one leads to the other. Do not try to be more than you are. Do not try to be God. Remain human and live within those limits. Enjoy life as God has given it to you.

DAVE BAST

You know, there are a number of people outside the Bible – not even believers – who have recognized this basic truth that Ecclesiastes tries to drive home; that if you really dig deep and look long and hard and honestly, life can seem rather pointless; and all of the different things that you may give yourself to do, or that you may devote your life to, end up as a chasing after the wind. One great example that I often think of is the great writer, Mark Twain, and I have sometimes described Mark Twain as a one-point Calvinist because he clearly saw the depravity of human nature; the sinfulness and fallenness of the world; but he could not believe in grace, he could not believe in redemption, and so he just thought it was all kind of pointless in the end.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. So, last time we saw how knowledge ultimately is futile. In and of itself it is not, but when we try to make too much out of knowledge, and try to make knowledge carry all of the meaning of life – the more you have, the more sorrow you have, we saw last time. And now, as you already said, we are going to focus today on pleasure: *Carpe diem* – seize the day – eat, drink, and be merry today, for tomorrow we die. That motto about life is not just American,

DAVE BAST

Right; it is universal. It is another conclusion that a person might reasonably make. If our life is so limited, if we only have this short time, well, maybe the best thing to do is just to try to make yourself happy. So, you mentioned that Latin phrase. It goes all the way back to ancient Rome: *Carpe diem* – and it has become popular again in our time – seize the day – make hay while the sun shines – gather rosebuds while ye may. Your best alternative is not to strive for too much or try to achieve too much; just be happy: Don't worry, be happy. Feed yourself with pleasure, and Ecclesiastes says: Okay, let's check that out. I have tried it.

DUANE KELDERMAN

I think it would be great to just hear some of the verses from Ecclesiastes that set forth some of the specific things that Ecclesiastes saw as giving pleasure, and the things that he was tempted with, and I think we will be amazed at the similarity between the things that he was tempted with and the things that we are tempted with.

I am reading now from Chapter 2, and beginning at verse 1,

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself," but behold, this also was vanity. ²I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" ³I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly until I might see what was good for the children of man to do onto the heaven during the few days of their lives. Then he talks about all of these things that he did: I made great works. I built houses. I planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I had male and female slaves. He had herds and flocks, silver and gold, singers, both men and women; all kinds of things to try to give him pleasure.

DAVE BAST

He did it all. This is the voice of somebody who through his great wealth and his great and important position was able to indulge every pleasure the mind could imagine, and his conclusion is,

¹¹I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it, ¹²and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."

So, let's explore that. Why doesn't pleasure work as a principle – the pleasure principle for life. We will do that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DUANE KELDERMAN

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Duane, as you know, on the day that we happened to be making this program, the lottery has hit five hundred fifty million dollars. It is all over the news everywhere. There is going to be a drawing. The big question is: What would you do if you instantly had five hundred fifty million dollars? Well, Solomon, in Ecclesiastes is somebody in that very position, really, in equivalent terms. He has more money than anybody else. He can do anything that he wants. He has devoted his life, at least for a season, to wine, women and song, entertainment, sex, possessions, accumulation, consumption; and he says: It just does not satisfy.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. In many ways, you are exactly right. It is a curse to actually get what you want. A lot of people live their whole lives thinking, "If I just had this, if I just had this," and they do not get it, and that is almost easier not getting it than actually getting it because when you actually do get it, as you have said about Solomon, and as we know with great data about lottery winners, in fact, it does not give us what we think it will give us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is easy to play sour grapes and say: Yes, well, let me try myself, and I will tell you whether I think pleasure satisfies. But, this again is wisdom literature, and it is the voice of experience, and we would do well to listen to this and take it to heart. What is the old line about experience is the hard teacher; the school of hard knocks; you are much wiser if you can learn from other people's experience rather than having to go through it yourself. Think of all of the lives that we see around us that have been ruined by the mindless pursuit of pleasure. You know, celebrities and drugs, and the whole thing.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and there are a lot of different dimensions to pleasure, but I think that one of the really important dimensions, especially in this culture are the appetites. We talk about the appetites as particularly those cravings that we have – and we usually associate that with body – and a lot of our appetites are related to our bodies; craving for eating, craving for drinking, craving for pleasure; unbridled, unbounded – no moral boundaries, just do whatever we want. That perpetual spring break.

DAVE BAST

If it feels good, do it!

DUANE KELDERMAN

That is right. Let's go on spring break, and all of life is a spring break. Even in terms of our physical bodies, it is so obvious that we simply are not made to live without self control, without constraints. Pleasure gone wrong is when our appetites have wiped out all sense of restraint and proportion.

DAVE BAST

Yes. I also think it is important to realize that everybody can have this issue, or does have this issue, in their lives. It is not just the super rich; it is not just the addicts or alcoholics or gluttons, or however you want to define it. The obvious cases of people who have overindulged or who are crazy in their consumption – conspicuous consumption, we say; but, the principle can be the same if you are very humble, if you are living on Social Security, even. It is, what are you living for? And your tastes may run to the Metropolitan Opera on the one hand, or they may run to the Grand Ole Opry on the other; but if it is all about satisfying and pleasing your appetites - your sensual desires – that is when we find this kind of lifestyle that Solomon is talking about.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Absolutely; it cuts across all socioeconomic lines, ethnic lines, whatever. I think that when we talk in the way that we are talking here, we cannot help but trip into the whole subject of addiction; and there have been a lot of people who have thought deeply about this, and there is something about North American culture that is highly addictive. Jean Kilbourne has written a great book named: *Can't Buy My Love*; and it is really an analysis of North American advertising and its effect on people; but the interesting thing about the analysis for our purposes here is, Jean Kilbourne says that there is something so addictive about our culture. There is something that cuts across all kinds of activities. It is not just alcohol and smoking. It is work, it is sex, pleasure pursuits; it can be so many things; and she frames it all as the struggle between emptiness and fullness, and there is something about North American advertising in particular, and materialism that promises that it will fill us; we are empty and it will fill us; and I think that is a helpful way to understand addiction, or even addictive tendencies. There is a difference between clinical addiction – even physiological differences – and addictive qualities to our society; and Jean is talking more at that point about the addictive dynamics of our society. You are empty, but if you buy that Chevrolet or the Buick or the Lexus, you will be full.

DAVE BAST

Let's explore that a little bit more because another of the themes that we are discovering here in Ecclesiastes is, you need to enjoy life. You need to take pleasure in the good things that God has made; so, where do we

draw the line? When does ordinary, healthy, live life to the fullest because that is the wise thing to do under God – when does that cross the line into the kind of pursuit of pleasure that Solomon says is chasing after the wind, that becomes empty and even destructive?

DUANE KELDERMAN

You had one little phrase in what you just said, “before God,” and I think that Solomon – Ecclesiastes – always frames this, everything he says, under this, “fear God and keep his commandments.” There are different answers to your question, I think, but one of them certainly is, enjoyment of life that takes us beyond God’s moral will for our lives, that is where one line is. God created us with bodies that are amazingly resilient, but our bodies are also very sensitive to when we abuse them; from blowing out our liver with alcohol or our lungs with smoke...

DAVE BAST

Obesity.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; sexually transmitted diseases; there are all kinds of ways that when we cross that line...

DAVE BAST

Sort of warning signals, yes.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Our bodies cry out and say, “No, you cannot do that to me.”

DAVE BAST

I liked, too, what you said earlier about limits and a sense of self control. Self control is one of the fruits of the Spirit, as mentioned in Galatians 5: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. When I pray for those things, I always end with self control, which is probably my biggest lack; but another thing that our culture says to us – I think it is so difficult not to kind of give ourselves to this kind of pleasure and consumption, again because of the advertising, because of the messages of the culture – but our culture says to us: You should never have to be hungry. You should never have to say no to yourself. You think of the diets that promise: Hey, follow our special diet, you will not ever be hungry. Well, that is just not true. If you need to lose weight, you are going to have to be hungry sometimes because you will not be able to eat as much as you want; and maybe part of the secret is that we learn to do without even in terms of satisfying our own desires and appetites, and then pleasures can be lawfully enjoyed in their due season and in their due proportion, as opposed to just piling on and piling in more and more.

DUANE KELDERMAN

It is interesting, the number of people today who fast. Now, I am not a faster, let me be clear; but it is interesting how many people I know who enter into seasons of prayer and fasting, and I think that is in line with what you are saying here.

DAVE BAST

Sure.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And it seems to me – is it just my perception or is that something that people do more today than in the past, and I wonder whether that is some kind of a reaction to the lack of it; to the excess.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is the ancient wisdom of the Church. It is not just an individual thing, but there was a time when the Church said we all need to fast, and we need seasonal fasts; so, before you celebrate Christmas, you fast during Advent. That is the way it used to be. Before you have Easter, you fast during Lent; and in that way,

not only is self control heightened, but the pleasure of the feast is also made greater by what has gone before. So, yes, there is something to that ancient wisdom – and speaking of ancient wisdom, Solomon also will tell us why simply living for pleasure does not work, and we will look at that next.

Segment 3

DUANE KELDERMAN

I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking today about the book of Ecclesiastes; specifically, the first section of Ecclesiastes Chapter 2, where the writer, Qoheleth, the Preacher, Solomon, talks about how one of the things he has tried to find meaning and purpose in life is the pursuit of pleasure, and yet, he discovers that it does not work in the end despite all of his wealth, despite all of his property and possessions and maybe some of us would say, “Well, I would like to try that, too, for a while. I would like to win the lottery and then indulge my every whim and desire,” but if we have wisdom to hear – the wisdom that Solomon shares – the answer is no, it does not work; but the question is why?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; the answer that he has been giving us is, we simply were not created to live a life that was totally without limits; and in fact, we were created to live for a higher purpose for God, and I love the way that Paul talks about in Philippians how our god is not our belly, but in fact, he says, our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. The answer, I think, for getting our appetites under control is not just to think about our appetites all the time. I think we get our appetites under control by thinking about something totally different, and something bigger, and something that is grander than our appetites, and we seek first the kingdom of God, and then it puts all of these other things into some kind of perspective.

DAVE BAST

Yes, as you say, the answer does not lie in denying whatsoever any and all pleasure. It does not mean we try to torture ourselves or beat ourselves or whip ourselves into shape. It does not mean we try to live on bread and water. Calvin once said this whole exercise in self denial – self deprivation – there is no end to it because even if you live on bread and water, you can always change to stale bread and dirty water. There is always another step to take, which again can be an addiction. We were talking about addictions in the second part of the program; well, exercise can become an addiction. Dieting can become an addiction. Look at the terrible examples of the illness that comes from that.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

The answer is to desire the true pleasure that God has created us for, which is to know and experience him in Jesus Christ.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. I love the book of James for a lot of reasons, but in that third chapter of James, James talks about the power that comes to people who can control simple things like their tongue; and I think that it should be encouraging to us that when we focus on just these little things, focus on making God the big part of our lives, and then introducing some practices into our lives, it brings some self control. Focusing on those little things can have great dividends. James says if you can control your tongue, you can control the whole world – you rule the whole world. And I think if we can get that bigger perspective of God’s kingdom, and then make little steps of progress along the lines of self control, I think there can be great encouragement and we can find tremendous alignment in our lives with God’s purposes; because you are right, we do not want to

make these efforts at self control yet another project of works righteousness. We do not want to do that; and yet, there is a long obedience here.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. It is sort of both/and, isn't it? I mean, we start by recognizing that we were made for more than pure physical pleasure or sensual gratification. We were made for God, and as St. Augustine famously said: Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord. You have made us for yourself and we cannot be satisfied with anything less than knowing you and having you. So, the key thing is to make sure your desiring the right thing because that is where true pleasure lies. The only pleasure that will satisfy forever and finally is a relationship with God; but then, in the meantime, there are practical, obedient kinds of steps we can take to bring our bodies under control and under the control of the Spirit. God gives us that help and that strength, and as you say, obedience pays dividends in the long run.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I do not think that we can accomplish this all by ourselves. This culture is so powerful when it comes to indulging our appetites, and we have whole markets that are built around trying to get us to buy things. I do not think that we can win this battle by ourselves, and I think being a part of a worshiping community where, for an hour or so each week, we are presented with an alternative vision of life. A whole different picture, because all week long I am living with a totally different picture.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is counter to the propaganda of the world...

DUANE KELDERMAN

It is.

DAVE BAST

I just thought now, as you were talking, of John Piper and what he calls his ministry: Desiring God Ministries. That is, to me, the crucial thing. Can we set God in the center as our chief desire; and if we do, we will find, as the psalmist said, that in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. That is the place where our ultimate pleasure will be found.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Amen.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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