

# WHOEVER SAID LIFE WAS FAIR?

by Ray C. Stedman

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The book of Ecclesiastes is the most exhaustive investigation ever made as to the value and profit of various lifestyles. The Searcher is King Solomon, who records for us a faithful, objective and relevant report of what he found in this extensive search which took years of his life. By the middle of the seventh chapter, to which we come today, he can say, "I have seen everything." In fact, he opens this section with those very words. Chapter 7:15:

**In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing. {Eccl 7:15 RSV}**

This central section of Ecclesiastes deals with how to properly and realistically evaluate life. We have seen already that prosperity is not always good; to be wealthy and materially well off is by no means the answer to the hunger of the human heart. We have also seen the corollary truth, that adversity is not always bad. Some of our best times are those times when we do not have much, when things are tough. In this section, beginning with Verse 15, we learn still another accompanying truth, and that is that the righteous are not always righteous. In fact, this section declares two great truths: first, that in the real world there is a lot of phony righteousness; and secondly, that true wisdom, therefore, is hard to find.

In Verse 15, the Searcher says that one cannot tell the righteous by whether they live a long time or not. In other words, as the proverb has it, "The good often die young." But the wicked can live to a ripe old age. There is such a thing as a dirty old man! He does exist, and the bumper sticker tells us that he needs love like the rest of us.

Verses 16-19, where this truth is developed, is a greatly misunderstood passage. The Searcher says:

**Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself? Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city. {Eccl 7:16-19 RSV}**

That must be the favorite Scripture of many, because it seems to advocate moderation in both good and evil. The Searcher seems to be saying, "Do not be too righteous, and do not be too wicked either, but a little of both does not hurt." We have all heard somebody say, "Religion is all right in its place, but don't let it interfere with your pleasure." Moderation in all things, in other words.

In trying to understand this, however, we must notice very carefully what the Searcher is saying. The second verb of Verse 16, "Do not make yourself overwise," is the key to understanding the verse. In grammar this is called a reflexive verb; that is why the word yourself is included there. What the Searcher is really saying is, "Do not be wise to yourself; do not be wise in your own eyes, in regard to your righteousness."

This is a warning against self-righteousness, and properly so. Self-righteousness is the attitude of people who regard themselves as righteous because of the things they do not do. That is, in my judgment, the curse of the church today. The New Testament calls this Pharisaism; the Searcher rightly labels it wickedness. In our studies in the book of Job we learned that wickedness is expressed not only by murder, thievery and sexual misconduct, but also by bigotry, racism, pompousness, cold disdain; by critical, judgmental attitudes, by harsh, sarcastic words, by vengeful and vindictive actions. The evangelical prig, male or female, is a wicked person!

Not only is self-righteousness wicked, but the opposite extreme is wicked too, the Searcher goes on to say. The foolish casting off of all moral restraints, the abandoning of one's self discipline and going in for wild and riotous living also is wickedness.

Furthermore, each of these lifestyles is mutual self-destructive; they both result in the same thing: "Why should you destroy yourself?" he asks the self-righteous; "Why should you die before your time?" he says to the self-indulgent. In either case they destroy something of their humanity. This may be true even physically. The self-indulgent may die in a drunken brawl, or a car accident, while the self-righteous will probably die of ulcers, or a heart attack, or as a result of soft, indulgent living.

The proper attitude toward life is found in Verse 18:

**It is good that you should take hold of this [true righteousness] and from that [the wicked world in**

which we live] withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all.  
{Ecc1 7:18 RSV}

That is the consistent position of the Scripture, Old and New Testament alike. We are not to withdraw from the world in an attempt to escape its evil; we are not to gather our robes of righteousness about ourselves and look down our noses with disdain at those who live morally unrighteous lives. It is good to take hold of true righteousness, but it is also good to not withhold oneself from the world. Be out in it, live in it, be in touch with it. Do not seek to avoid it, to hide in a spiritual cocoon, but do not go along with its unrighteous and hurtful attitudes and practices.

The godly way to live, of course, is "He who fears God shall come forth from them all." We have seen this phrase, "The man who fears God," many times in this book. "To fear God" is a full-orbed truth. It means not only to respect God, but to acknowledge his presence in your life; not merely at the end of your life someday, but now. To fear God is to know that he sees all that you do, and that it is his hand that sends circumstances into your life. The knowledge of God's power, wisdom and love, his willingness to accept you, to change you, to forgive you, to restore you and to stand by you, are all part of fearing God. "To fear God" is to know how to live in the midst of the world and yet not be self-righteous, priggish, smug and complacent. That kind of wisdom "gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city." It is better to learn to live that way than to have ten influential friends in high places who can bail you out!

This past week the media have daily been giving us information about DeLorean, the automobile magnate who has gotten into trouble trafficking in drugs. Here is one of the wealthiest men in the world at one time, with influential friends all over the country, spending his days in jail because no one would go the amount to bail him out. That is a commentary on what the Searcher found. The man or woman who learns to fear God in the full-orbed sense we have been talking about is much better off than one who has a passel of influential friends.

Solomon now sets forth the truth that we live in a fallen world. There is no righteousness, apart from the gift of God. All have been infected by the virus of evil, he declares in Verses 20-22:

**Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. {Ecc1 7:20 RSV}**

Do not add "except me" to that statement. The Scripture says this over and over. The Searcher goes on to tell us how we will know the truth of this:

**Do not give heed to all the things that men say, lest you hear your servant cursing you; your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others. {Ecc1 7:21-22 RSV}**

The unchanging position of Scripture is, as Paul declares in Romans 3, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," {Rom 3:23 KJV}. Isaiah puts it this way, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way," {Isa 53:6}. In the honesty of our hearts we know that. We can hear it if we listen to what people say, especially when they are angry, frustrated or upset about something. Listen to what Christians mutter under their breath when they are caught in traffic! That is why the Searcher says, "Don't take it too seriously."

This is a revelation of the fact that all of us live in a fallen world; we all struggle with a fallen nature which will manifest itself at any possible moment of weakness, frustration or anger. That is why, if you hear your servant cursing you, realize that he is suffering from the same problem as you. Do not take it so seriously that you get all upset and threaten to fire him, but remember that you are in the same boat. In fact, the Searcher invites you to remember that in your own heart you have done the same thing many times. How refreshingly honest the Scriptures are! They confront us with reality about life.

For the very reason that there is none righteous on the earth, the Searcher concludes in the latter half of this chapter, that true, godly wisdom is very hard indeed to find. He looked for it:

**All this I have tested by wisdom; I have said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness. {Ecc17:23-25 RSV}**

We have seen before how he described the search, the earnest, long search that he undertook to investigate all philosophies, seeking to discover the secret of life. He says that he had sought it in himself first of all. Remember that this was written by King Solomon, who was noted in his own time as the wisest man in the world. With that reputation for wisdom he sought in his own life to find the secret. As he puts it here, "I said, 'I will be wise', but it was far from me." What an honest confession! He found himself short-changed, unable to understand himself.

There is probably no one thing that we are more confident of than this notion that we know ourselves. How many times have you heard someone say, "No one understands me"? The clear implication is, "I alone understand me." The revelation of Scripture,

however, is that if there is one person in this world you do not know it is you; you do not understand yourself. We will be puzzled and confused if we try to solve the riddles of life by thinking we understand ourselves. "That which is far off and deep, very deep, who can find it out?" asks Solomon. He realizes that the issue lies deep within himself. To try to understand yourself is very difficult. It is like a man trying to look at his own face without using a mirror. The Searcher found it impossible to solve the riddles of his own feelings because he did not understand himself.

He goes on to tell us that as he sought he realized that what he was looking for was the secret of the mystery of evil. Have you ever wrestled with that? Have you ever said to yourself after you had done something, "Why did I do that? I knew it was wrong, I knew it would hurt somebody, why did I say that?" You were wrestling with the same problem the Searcher faced, that great question, the mystery of evil. The Searcher says he did not find the answer by wisdom, by trying to reason it out. What he did find was very revealing. The first thing he discovered was what most of us find when we seek the key to our life apart from God -- bitterness and death:

**And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the Searcher, adding one thing to another to find the sum, which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices. {Eccl 7:26-29 RSV}**

This is a remarkable revelation of what a keenly intelligent and very resourceful man found out about life. We must remember, Solomon is honestly recording his own experience.

He found two things: first, he found that he was trapped by sexual seductions. He went looking for love. Many a man or woman here this morning can echo what he is saying. He went looking for love, and thought he would find it in a relationship with a woman. He went looking for that which would support him, strengthen him and make him feel life was worth the living, but what he found was nothing but a fleeting sexual thrill. He found himself involved with a woman who did not give him what he was looking for at all; he still felt the same empty loneliness as before.

I read an article by a young woman who told about how she sought the answer to the hungers of her life in one relationship after another with men. She said she woke up one morning lying in bed with a man she had met just the night before. As she looked at this male sleeping beside her, she said she felt the most intense loneliness she had ever experienced. She realized then that sex was compounding, not solving, the emptiness and loneliness of her life. She went on to talk about how she found a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus and became a Christian, and testified to the fullness she found in that relationship. What a confirmation her record is of what we have here in this passage.

The Searcher also honestly records the way of escape: "He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her." We must remember that this is the man who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines; he was involved sexually with one thousand women. In all that experience, sexual athlete that he was, he found nothing to satisfy the searchings of his heart. But, he says, he did come to realize that the man who fears God, who understands God, whose eyes are opened and whose heart is taught by the word of God, will escape this. In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, which Solomon also wrote, he passes on his experience along this line to young men to show them how to escape this kind of empty experience in their lives.

Not only did he find himself trapped by sexual seductiveness, but he says he was also puzzled by a strange enigma, recorded in Verses 27-28: "One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found." We must read this carefully. As he went through life he occasionally found a loyal, trustworthy, godly, wise man who could be a true friend, a man of integrity, but he never found a woman like that; out of the thousand women he was involved with, he never found one whom he could trust. Why? Surely it was not because Solomon was a male chauvinist pig, as some of you may perhaps be tempted to think. In Chapter 8 of Proverbs he uses a woman to symbolize true, godly wisdom, and in the 31st chapter of Proverbs he holds up a woman as the supreme example of one who lives a life pleasing to God; that chapter is known around the earth for its exaltation of godly womanhood. Solomon was not a woman hater; that was not his problem.

We can understand why he says what he honestly records here because of what was going in his search. His problem was that when he sought to relate to a woman he was stymied by the fact of immediate sexual involvement, and that canceled out discovering who the woman really was. That is the explanation for his words here. Solomon had no such problem with men. He was not gay. When he sought to relate to a man he could understand him, hear him and realize what was going on inside, unhindered by any sexual detours, but not so with a woman.

One of the most important lessons we must learn about life is that sex outside of marriage arrests the mutual process of discovery. You cannot discover who you are or who another person is when you are involved together in wrongful sex. I have seen this happen many times with young couples in this congregation who were obviously growing in the Lord, who began to know one another, to love one another, to discover things they liked and disliked, and then suddenly the relationship soured, a

weirdness set in, things went wrong, and they began to quarrel and fight. Invariably it turned out that they gave way to their temptations and had gone into sexual experiences together, absolutely canceling out every attempt to discover who the other one was. The Scriptures warn us carefully about pre-marital sex. This is why the Searcher has to record, "I could find a real man among a thousand, but I never found a woman like that." I am sure there were women like that among those he knew, but he could never find one.

Finally, he sums this all up in Verse 29:

**Behold, this alone I found, that God made man [that is, both male and female] upright ,but they have sought out many devices. {Ecc 7:29 RSV}**

The trouble of this world is not with God, but with man. Because we will not heed the wisdom of God and the word of God, we seek to find ways to circumvent what he is telling us, to find the richness of life despite, or apart from, the rules of life that he has set forth. It cannot be done. The inevitable discovery of an honest search is that life can never be found except where God says it is found -- in a relationship with him.

So the Searcher concludes this section, in Verse 1 of Chapter 8, with a description of the value of true, godly wisdom. Here is another of those misplaced chapter divisions. We ought to read this as the closing part of Chapter 7:

**Who is like the wise man?  
And who knows the interpretation of a thing:  
A man's wisdom makes his face shine,  
and the hardness of his countenance is changed. {Ecc 8:1 RSV}**

There is a marvelous, fourfold description of what happens to one who discovers the true wisdom of righteousness as a gift from God, one who walks with God, in the fear of God.

First, it will make that person a unique human being: "Who is like the wise man?" One of the follies of life is to try to imitate somebody else. The media constantly bombard us with subtle invitations to look like, dress or talk like some popular idol. If you succeed in that, of course, you will be nothing but a cheap imitation of another person. The glory of the good news is that when you become a new creature in Jesus Christ you will be unique. There will be no one like you. You will become more and more like Christ, but unlike everyone else, in personality. You will be uniquely yourself. You will not be a copy, a cheap imitation, but an original from the Spirit of God. That is the first and most wonderful thing about salvation.

Secondly, the Searcher says, godly wisdom will give you a secret knowledge: "Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" The implication of that question is that the wise man knows. This is what Paul declares in First Corinthians 2: "The spiritual man judges all things," {1 Cor 2:15a RSV}. The spiritual man is in a position to pass moral judgment on the value of everything, not because he is so smart, but because the God who teaches him is wise.

Thirdly, such a man will experience a visible joy: "A man's wisdom makes his face shine." Grace is what makes the face shine, not grease. Grease is what they put in cosmetics to make the face shine or to take away the shine, as the case may be, but it is grace that does it from within; grace makes the face shine because it is joy visibly expressed on the human face.

Finally, it changes the very inner disposition of a person: "The hardness of his countenance is changed." Have you ever watched somebody under the impact of the Spirit of God in his life soften, mellow and grow easier to live with? That is the work of the Spirit of God.

We could illustrate that truth with a thousand people here this morning, but I choose to close this with a famous Christian of some generations ago. All of us, whether we know it or not, have sung the hymns of John Newton. One of our favorite hymns was written by him, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound -- that saved a wretch like me!" That is John Newton's story. He was raised by a godly mother, who prayed for him all his life. As soon as he came of age, he joined the slave trade, running slaves from Africa to England. He fell into wild, riotous living, involving himself in drunken brawls. He ended up at last, as he himself confesses, "a slave of slaves," actually serving some of the escaped slaves on the African coast, wretched, miserable and hardly even alive. Then he found voyage on a ship back to England. In the midst of a terrible storm in the Atlantic when he feared for his life, he was converted; he remembered his mother's prayers, and he came to Christ. One of his famous hymns is his own testimony:

In evil long I took delight, unawed by shame or fear,  
Until a new object met my sight, and stopped my wild career.  
I saw One hanging on a tree in agony and blood,  
Who fixed his languid eyes on me as near his cross I stood.  
Sure, never till my latest breath shall I forget that look.  
It seemed to charge me with his death, though not a word he spoke.

A second look he gave, which said, "I freely all forgive;  
My blood was for thy ransom paid, I died that thou mayest live."

And live he did! He became one of the great Christians of England, author of many, many hymns in which he sought to set forth the joy, the radiance, the gladness of his life as he found it in Jesus Christ.

I hope this passage will help us understand afresh that what we regard oftentimes as the restrictions and limitations of life which God sets before us are not designed to keep us from joy. Joy is God's purpose for us. These apparent restrictions are designed to guard it so that we find it in the right way and at the right time, and then life will start to unfold in fullness and gladness before us.

Here the Searcher has clearly declared what he emphasizes throughout the whole book of Ecclesiastes: That it is the man or woman who finds the Living God who discovers the answer to the riddles of life.

**Prayer:**

Our Father, how grateful we are for the honesty of your Word, for its clear and careful warnings about devious paths that many of us are tempted to go down, and yet without rancor or threat these words come to us offering a way of escape, a way of life that will indeed satisfy. Though it may bring pain and hardship at times, it will be from a Father's loving hand. Grant to us that we will take these words very seriously and begin to find them fulfilled in our own experience. We ask in the name of Jesus our Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us that we might find life in his name, Amen.

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