



Central Peninsula Church

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Ecclesiastes 7:15-29
Mark Mitchell
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One Man Among a Thousand

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

Harvard professor Robert Coles won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. In that book he tells the story of a student of his named Marian. Marian had come to Harvard from the Midwest and was trying to work her way through college by cleaning the rooms of her fellow students. Again and again, she met classmates at Harvard who had forgotten the meaning of please or thank you, regardless of their SAT scores. They didn't hesitate to be both rude and crude to her. One day she was not so subtly propositioned by a young man she knew to be very bright. She was so disgusted she quit her job and was preparing to quit school. Full of anxiety and anger, she came to see Professor Coles. At one point she said to him, "I've been taking all these philosophy courses, and we talk about what's true, what's important, what's good. Well, how do you teach people to be good?"

In many ways that's the question of the ages. How do you teach people to be good? It would be nice if we could keep this question at a distance. It would be nice if we could sit in our philosophy classes and speculate about goodness and what it is. But the fact is, this is an issue that is far more personal. Because as we look into our own hearts most of us see what we know is not good. We've all grieved over stupid or selfish things that we have said or done. Even worse are some of the things we've thought. I've said before that if you could read my thoughts you wouldn't be sitting here listening to me. It's not enough just to say that nobody's perfect. Nobody's perfect means, "Get off my back; I'm not any worse than any one else." We know that the problem is far deeper than that. We know that the damage is too deep for that. So what do we do? How do we ourselves become good?

These are questions that the writer of Ecclesiastes was faced with as well. In chapters 5-7, he's been trying to evaluate life as he observes it "under the sun." He's seen that things aren't always as they seem. He's seen that what we would call blessing or prosperity is not necessarily good. And then he's observed that adversity, what we might call bad things or hardships, are not necessarily bad. He's also observed that life isn't always fair. He says in 7:15 that it seems to him that there are good people whose life is snuffed out before their time, and there are bad people who are blessed with a long life.

Starting in 7:16 he begins to evaluate humankind. And he sees that the people he thought were good might not be so good after all. As a matter of fact, he begins to wonder if there is even one truly good person on the face of the earth. The results of his study aren't very encouraging. He makes four discoveries about people.

I. What is the right assessment of man?

A. Instead of fearing God, people seek extremes: His first discovery is found in vv. 16-18.

"Do not be excessively righteous, and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city."

This is the favorite Scripture of many, because it seems to advocate moderation in both good and evil. The Teacher seems to be saying, "Do not be too righteous, and do not be too wicked either, but a little of both doesn't hurt." We've all heard people say, "Religion is all right in its place, but don't become a fanatic."

But that's not what he means. The second verse of verse 16, "**Do not be over wise,**" is the key to understanding the verse. In Hebrew grammar this is called a reflexive verb. What the Teacher is really saying is, "Do not be wise to yourself; do not be wise in your own eyes, don't be self-righteous."

Self-righteousness is the attitude of people who regard themselves as righteous because of external religious behavior. This is a deadly disease in many churches today. The New Testament calls this Pharisaism. In his confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus shows that wickedness is expressed not only by externals like murder, stealing and adultery, but also by internals like resentment, cold disdain, critical, judgmental attitudes, jealousy and lust. Jesus warned against cleaning the outside of the cup but neglecting the inside.

Not only is self-righteousness wrong, but the opposite extreme is too. The Teacher says that the casting off of all moral restraints, the abandoning of self discipline and just kind of letting go also is wrong. Unfortunately, there are Christians who fall into this trap as well. They think, "Well, God is a God of grace. I know he'll forgive me, and I certainly don't want to be like those uptight Christians. So I can drink as much as I want. I can watch whatever movies I want. I can date whoever I want. I'm free in Christ. I'm not under law. I can do whatever I want."

Notice he says that each of these lifestyles is self-destructive; they both result in the same thing: "Why should you destroy yourself?" he asks the self-righteous. I've seen people so intent on maintaining their own religious image that they destroy themselves in the process; at the very least they get an ulcer. To the self-indulgent, he asks, "Why should you die before your time?" Why should you die in a drunken brawl or a car accident?

The right way to live is described in v. 18. He says we should grasp one thing and not let go of the other. He's saying don't fall into self-righteousness, but don't go to the other extreme and think you can go out and do whatever you want to do. This is the true wisdom he speaks of in v. 19. This kind of wisdom "rocks the house."

How do we keep the balance? This may surprise you. He says, "The one who fears God come forth with both of them." We've seen this phrase, "The man who fears God," many times in this book. "To fear God" means not only to respect God and to obey his word, but also to acknowledge his presence in your life; to know that he sees all that you do. You can't be self-righteous because you know that he sees into your heart. You can't fool him, and he is the One you want to please. William Beveridge understood how deep sin ran in his heart when he wrote, "I cannot pray, except I sin. I can't preach, but I sin. I cannot administer, nor receive, Communion, but I sin. My very repentance needs to be repented of. And the tears I shed need washing in the blood of Christ."

The problem is, as far as the Teacher could see, instead of fearing God, men fell into one of those two extremes. As he looked around, he really couldn't find one wise and righteous person.

B. Instead of being righteous, people are universally sinful: His second discovery is found in v. 20-22.

"Indeed, there is not a righteous man on

earth who continually does good and who never sins. Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others."

Verse 20 is what you could call a blanket statement. It covers everyone on earth. It echoes what the Apostle Paul would say about humankind in Romans 3:10-12. **"As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.'"**

One of the important things to understand is that we're not just sinners by choice but we are sinners by nature. There are two doctrines that we don't talk about much any more, to our own peril. The doctrine of original sin. Original sin means that sin is an inherited moral disease that started with Adam and has been passed on to every human being born to man. From the very start, we didn't have a chance because we were bent towards sin and self. That's why no one can say in truth, "Well, I've always loved God. I've always been a Christian." That may be all you can remember, but you haven't always loved God. Your bent from the very start was to love yourself and to go your own way. That's original sin. The other doctrine that goes hand in hand with that is total depravity. Total depravity does not mean that we're all as sinful as we could possibly be. Rather it means that every part of our being is tainted with sin. Even the good things I do are tainted. Even my repenting needs to be repented of. If I take a glass of pure water and drop a pinch of salt in it the entire contents of the glass is tainted with salt. Could it be saltier? Of course. Could we be worse? Of course. But we're still not pure; every drop of us is tainted with sin.

In order to drive this point home, the Teacher provides an illustration with some advice. He says if you happen to overhear someone say something about you that's negative or critical; if you hear someone cursing you behind your back, don't overreact, don't take it all that seriously. Don't have such thin skin that you blow the whistle about every wrong ever said about you. Notice it's a servant that curses you here. That's usually the way it is, isn't it? It's those who are, in a sense, underneath us that will curse us the most. Some of that is that those who work for us see us as we really are, but some of it is that they resent our authority as well. But he says, if you hear someone like that talking behind your back, don't fire him, don't write him off. Why? Because you've said the same kinds of things about others a hundred times! Your servant is suffering from the same problem as you. In your own heart you do the same thing. Charles Spurgeon used to tell the future pastors he trained that to survive in the ministry

they would need to have one blind eye and one deaf ear. He said you can't stop people's tongues, and therefore the best thing to do is stop your own ears. It's not that we shouldn't ever listen to criticism, but don't overreact to it, and don't judge someone for doing the very same thing you've done a million times.

As far as the Teacher could see, instead of being righteous, all of us are sinful.

C. Instead of pleasing God, people succumb to temptation: And it's not just in what we say. In vv. 23-26 he describes another thing he discovered in his search.

"I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her."

He begins by saying that he went on a search. He was searching for wisdom and knowledge. He says he wanted an "explanation." He wanted to know the "why" of all things, the explanation that stands behind the world and all that happens in it. But he says he couldn't find it. He says, "wisdom is far from me. It's remote. It's exceedingly mysterious." He didn't find what he was looking for.

Instead he discovered something else, something very revealing. He says he discovered a woman more bitter than death, whose heart is a snare and whose hands are chains. In other words, as he tried to find out the mysteries of life, he got seduced. He thought he was so noble. What a quest! To understand the deep mystery of life. But then he discovers he can't even control his own zipper. He began to realize that the most difficult mystery to unravel was the mystery of his own soul. Most of us think 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 don't know it is you; you don't understand yourself. This is especially true when we try to understand why we sin. 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 Teacher faced.

So often it's in the arena of our own sexuality that

we discover our own weakness. Sexuality is about a lot more than just having sex and meeting our physical needs. We all have a deep yearning to love and to be loved, to truly connect with another human being, to be known in all of our nakedness and yet still be loved. But sex apart from the lifelong commitment of a loving marriage will compound, not solve, the emptiness and loneliness of our lives. The Teacher discovered that. He sought for meaning and satisfaction by connecting with this woman on a sexual level, but what he ended up with was bitterness and death. Many of us 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 didn't give him what he was looking for at all. He still felt the same empty loneliness as before.

By the way, I've come to believe this is where the rubber meets the road for a Christian, especially if you're single. Your love life is where your own profession of faith meets reality. It's where your ideals are put to the test, and the reality of your relationship with Christ is tested. He says the one who pleases God will escape from her.

But as the Teacher looked around, he didn't see much of that. Instead of pleasing God, he saw people succumbing to temptation.

D. Instead of being upright, people seek many devices. Finally, he makes one more discovery. Look at vv. 27-29.

"Behold, I have discovered this,' says the Preacher, 'adding one thing to another to find an explanation, which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.'"

He's still looking for an explanation behind the world and he still has come up empty-handed. Part of that search involved seeking for one upright man or woman. He says he found one man among a thousand but not one woman. What does he mean by that? It's certainly not a very politically correct thing to say. It's not a very biblical thing to say either. There are many virtuous women found right here in the OT Scripture. Deborah. Hannah. Miriam. The Hebrew midwives who refused to follow Pharaoh's edict. Ruth. Esther. The list

goes on. Sin isn't gender specific.

In order to understand this we need to remember that the Teacher is simply writing down observations that come out of his own experience. In his own search, which by the way was conducted with the lights down low, he found virtually no upright women. But this is hardly a reason for men to gloat. Out of a thousand men, he only found one. That's not a very good ratio. The point is clear. Finding a truly upright person is like finding a needle in a haystack.

Instead what he found was that even though God made people to be upright, we've sought our own devices. It's important to understand that God isn't to blame for our sin. He made us upright. He made us in his image. In his original design, man was really a glorious being. Sin and death wasn't even a part of the picture. But now, after sin and death infected the human race through Adam, we're just a shadow of what we were. What an interesting way to describe our sin - "we have sought out many devices." The NIV says, "we have gone in search of many schemes." The idea seems to be that we have devised our own ways to live our lives and find meaning and satisfaction. We figured we knew best. Some of our schemes are obvious, others are hidden behind a cloak of religious respectability. In the words of one writer, we're like a dead mackerel lying on the beach at moonlight - we simultaneously shine and stink. Our prayers need to be prayed for, our repentance need to be repented of, our tears need washing.

Instead of fearing God, we seek extremes. Instead of being righteous, we are all sinful. Instead of pleasing God, we succumb to temptation. Instead of being upright, we seek out many devices. How then do you teach people like us to be good?

II. What is the solution to man's problem?

What if we really could find one good man? I've been thinking about that phrase in v. 29, "**one man among a thousand.**" One man who feared God. One man who was truly righteous. One man who pleased God. One man who was upright. It seems to me there is only man who ever lived who fits that description.

Jesus Christ was not just one man among a thousand; he was one among the billions who have made up the entire human race. He was the only truly

righteous person to ever live. On one occasion he asked his enemies, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" No one could come up with anything. His closest friends, who lived with him day and night for three years, who saw him on his good days and his bad days, testified that he was without flaw. His closest companion, Peter, said of him, "He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth." Can you imagine living with someone for that long and not hearing one single word of deceit come from his mouth? Jesus's own self-consciousness was that he was without sin. He said, "I always do what is pleasing to my Father." This was spoken by one with the most acute sense of sin ever.

And he, Jesus Christ, as the only truly good person to ever live, is the only solution to our problem. You see, the moment humanity fell into sin, the moment the disease began, God put in motion a plan with his Son at the center. It was really a plan to begin a new race with his Son as the new Adam. He said, "At the right time, I will send my Son to earth. He will live a perfect life. He will show people what I am like and how I intended them to live from the start. But that's not all. These people need more than a teacher; they need a Savior. They have all been sentenced to death, but I will send my righteous Son to suffer and die in their place. And then three days later I will raise him up from the dead. This will become the way to a new beginning for them and for an entirely new humanity. Not through education, but through regeneration. Through the giving of a whole new life. When they put their trust in my Son, I will not only forgive them but I will make them new creatures. And then I will begin the process of transforming them from the inside out into the likeness of my righteous Son. I will do that by planting the Spirit of my Son in them. Through my Spirit, I will make them good. This is what the prophets foretold. Jeremiah wrote: 'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor...saying, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'"

That's how we become good. Not by education, but by becoming new creatures. As new creatures, he writes his law upon our hearts, he forgives our sin, and he transforms us into the image of the "one man among a thousand," Jesus Christ.

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