

Session 2

March 10, 2019

THE PROBLEM WITH PLEASURE

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Hedonism is the idea that the ultimate aim in life is pleasure. And the first rule of hedonism is the age-old adage, “If it feels good, do it.” But what sounds like such a liberating belief, is actually a trap! Take it from the wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon himself. Those things that look so full of promise, ultimately turn out to be empty.

The Empty Promise of Pleasure (vv. 1-3). Solomon’s search for fulfillment turns to the pursuit of what some would call life’s “simple pleasures.” The word for pleasure (v. 1) is actually the word for *mirth*; the impulsive chuckle at something funny. But we all know that real joy is much more than a series of funny little situations. For this reason, Solomon saw mirth as *futile*. The heartier, out-loud laughter of verse 2 he labels as *madness*; it makes people look foolish. Hence, those kinds of simple pleasures are amusing, but hardly fulfilling. Solomon then moves from simple pleasures to “personal pleasures.” Verse 3 is awkwardly worded, but basically has three parts. First, Solomon decided to experiment with wine as an aid to experiencing pleasure. Second, he was convinced he could do so in gentle moderation, so he might maintain his wisdom (and hence evaluate the results of his experiment). Third, he saw this as yet another avenue to explore in his search for a meaningful life. The lesson: laughter does not mean a joyful life, and personal indulgences (especially alcohol) don’t add to life but rather dull the senses to it.

The Empty Promise of Possessions (vv. 4-8). Since simple pleasures didn’t satisfy and the booze didn’t help, Solomon invested his considerable wealth in building for himself a palatial estate. Buildings were constructed, vineyards were started, orchards were planted, and irrigation systems installed (vv. 4-6). Servants were acquired and their children were raised on the property to tend it. The fields were soon filled with livestock; so many in fact that no previous king could compare (v. 7). All the while, he added to his stores of wealth. Silver and gold and treasures filled his vaults. And when the work was done and his leisure began, he brought in the best entertainment money could buy: male and female musicians (for his listening pleasure) and beautiful women (for his sensual pleasure). But when all was said and done, he was no more satisfied with his life than before (v. 11). The lesson: a sense of purpose and meaning isn’t found in amassing temporal things.

The Empty Promise of Position (vv. 9-11). If satisfaction is not to be found in the possessions themselves, perhaps it comes from their acquisition and the status that accompanies great wealth. In the world’s eyes, Solomon had it all. Because God had rewarded him with both wisdom and riches (see 1 Kings 3:1-15), his own kingdom was in awe of him (1 Kings 3:28), and the rulers of the world honored him (1 Kings 4:34). This he recalls in verse 9. Unlike anyone before him, Solomon had the ability to acquire virtually anything he wanted; so he did. He had the ability to participate in any kind of pleasure; so he did. And he readily admits his goal: search out pleasure, then enjoy it. After all, that’s what pleasure is for! (v. 10). The problem is revealed in verse 11: looking back on all of his efforts, neither his pursuit of pleasure, nor his wealth of possessions, nor his international acclaim as an envied king brought lasting fulfillment. Like the wind, it had an immediate effect, but ultimately blew through and disappeared, leaving Solomon quiet, alone, and feeling quite empty. The lesson: apart from a relationship with the God who created us, a life

spent pursuing temporary pleasures is a life of emptiness that simply cannot satisfy (see 1 John 2:17).