

Seven Realities of (Un)righteousness in Our Absurd World

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

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Seven Realities of (Un)Righteousness in Our Absurd World. Cool title, don't you think? What does it mean? It means our series in Ecclesiastes is in a section where Solomon rages against the machine. While he can't change it, he laments the injustice and unrighteousness all around him. Much of the Bible laments what the world should be. This section cries out against the absurd world as it is.

He is going to talk about "righteousness." Righteousness can be used in different ways. It can describe an upright, moral person. Joseph is called a righteous man who didn't want to disgrace Mary. But in its ultimate sense, righteousness means right standing before a holy God. It is moral perfection that allows a divine relationship. God is righteous and is the standard for it. Unrighteousness is sin or godlessness that has no standing before God.

The Wrong People Die and the Wrong People Live (Verse 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 evildoing." (Ecclesiastes 7:15 ESV) There's his favorite word again, "In my vain life." Futile. Meaningless. It's a key word in Ecclesiastes. "I have seen everything." We say, *I've seen it all*. He's been around the block a few times and seen everything. What has he seen? The unjust reality that sometimes the righteous die young and the wicked may live a very long time. That doesn't seem fair.

Scripture tells about Naboths who die young and Jezebels who keep ticking. Life doesn't happen the way you think it should. In this life, too often the wicked do really, really well. Every year they post Charles Manson's denial for parole. He was a notorious murderer and crazy man. Tattooed-a-swastika-on-his-forehead crazy. He's 81 years old. Why is he getting to live 81 years when our dear friend, brother, and deacon in our church Kent Eloie died a few years ago at age 38? He was truly one of the good guys in our church's history. Manson lives 81 years. Eloie lives 38. Does that seem fair? No. Solomon laments the injustice of the wrong people living and dying.

Self-righteousness is No Better Than Unrighteousness (Verse 16)

"Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?" (Verses 16-17) Reading this superficially, these could be your favorite verses in the Bible. *Don't try to be too righteous. Don't be too wicked.* Perfect. Just a little sin to keep from being too righteous and just a little religion to keep me out of prison. It sounds like Scripture is giving us wiggle room to be a little naughty and a little nice.

While many people haven't read this verse, many people live that way instinctively. They think, *I want my life to be right there in the middle*. Not too goody-two-shoes where I seem holier than thou. Not too bad that I have to worry about going to hell. As long as I am in the middle of the pack, I must be OK with God.

Self-righteousness is no better than unrighteousness because both lead you to hell. The gospel is not that God grades on a curve or as long as I am morally a 'C' or better, I must be OK. The gospel says we are all getting 'F's. It's pass/fail and we all fail. So what does this mean?

Solomon is warning against two self-destructive lifestyles. On the one hand is the person who tries very hard to be overtly righteous. Not actually righteous or godly but trying really hard to appear to be so. This is the self-righteous Christian. Or as Doug Wilson describes him,

"Nice Christian. Priggish Christian. Sanctimonious Christian...Pursed lips Christian. Doctrinally correct Christian. Know-it-all Christian. Ostentatious Christian. Quiet-time-every-day-or-I'll-go-to-hell-Christian. Conceited Christian. Orthodox Christian. UnChristian Christian." (Doug Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether*, p. 76.)

In the fundamentalist circles I grew up in, these people were everywhere. I should know. I was one of them. We tried very hard to be externally righteous. We measured ourselves as morally superior to the morally mediocre around us.

The opposite is to throw off all constraint and allow our sinful natures to take over. To be overtly wicked. This is the fool and leads to self-destruction and there are many stories to tell of the tragic results of a life lived without constraints.

Self-righteousness is destructive too. The strict rules-oriented, graceless, professing Christian is eventually confronted with his or her own sin nature. Or life forces him to apply grace toward others which he doesn't have in his heart. He can't forgive others for failing his rules—even his children. He self-destructs because the self-righteous charade eventually catches up with him.

Better than denying we sin (self-righteous) or reveling in sin (unrighteous), is acknowledging our sin (verse 20).

There is No Real Righteousness Anywhere (Verse 20)

"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." (Verse 20)

Solomon's observation is not only great insight, it is also pure biblical doctrine.

- *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9)
- *"As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one...For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:10-12, 23)

Theologians summarize this as *the depravity of man*. Because of Adam's sin and our inheritance of that corruption as a sin nature, while we may do good things and not do bad things, all of it is stained with sin because our hearts are sinful by nature and motivation. *"For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."* (Romans 8:7-8)

The depravity of man is violently opposed to our culture where the doctrine is NOT that we are born evil but that we are born good. Our culture believes man is inherently good, and when properly nurtured and instructed, will grow up to be a positive influence on society. If that doesn't happen, it's not the fault of the person, it's the fault of society.

History shows how ridiculous this is. The terrible wars of the 20th century muted some of this. But in our day it is preached from every secular pulpit, government agency, educational institution, and media outlet. This isn't some ethereal debate, it has real consequences for our society and families.

John MacArthur gives five consequences of denying depravity and affirming that everyone is good. (John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, p. 102.)

- 1. The attribution of all evil to causes outside of people**
Since people are basically good, the bad that they do must be caused by some external force.
- 2. Evil is denied**
If good is natural, bad must be unnatural, or "sick."
- 3. Neither parents nor schools take the need to teach children goodness seriously**
Why teach what comes naturally?
- 4. Ceasing to try to change people's values and instead concentrating on changing outside forces**
- 5. Denial of the need to be accountable to God**

Imagine the shock that modern man has one second after he dies and stands before the burning holiness and wrath of God against sin and sinners. Accountability is coming. All have fallen short. We are all unrighteous.

Unrighteous People Treat Each Other Unrighteously (Verses 21-22)

"Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others." (Ecclesiastes 7:21-22)
Put people together in any context and it isn't long before somebody is saying something negative about somebody else, normally behind their back.

Why does Solomon pick the example of slander? It works. Who has had somebody say something negative about you behind your back? Who has never ever said anything negative about anybody behind their back? Slander and gossip are an unrighteous reality of this world. Solomon's advice is to neither listen too much nor be surprised too much. All we have to do is listen to our own words. You may say, *I can't let them get away with saying that!* Yet, we all let ourselves get away with it all the time, don't we? Do not be too appalled when other people treat us the way we all too often treat other people.

Sexual Unrighteousness is Really, Really Painful (Verse 25)

"I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something 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." (Ecclesiastes 7:25-26)

Solomon speaks to this from a unique vantage point. Don't forget who his dad was, David. His mom was Bathsheba. You may know that story. Also, remember Solomon's own story of women and marriage. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

I'm thinking if anyone knew about the danger of women whose hearts are nets and whose hands are like grappling hooks, it's Solomon. With 1,000 women in his house and care, imagine the drama he dealt with.

Hear his words, getting snared by a grappling hook woman is *"more bitter than death."* In Proverbs 7 Solomon describes watching a simple man be seduced by the wayward woman. He sees him fall into her net, *"as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast."* (Proverbs 7:22) She's got you in her snare and you can't get out.

In Proverbs 5-7 he warns his sons about the destructive pain of sexual sin. Here are a few highlights:

- *"For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey...but in the end she is bitter as wormwood."* (Proverbs 5:3, 4)
- *"So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; none who touches her will go unpunished."* (Proverbs 6:29)
- *"He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself."* (Proverbs 6:32)

This isn't a message on sexual sin per se, but when we talk about the pain of unrighteousness, few, if any, don't carry the long-term damage of sexual sin. It whispers that we can get away with it, it won't hurt anybody, nobody will find out. Beware dear church, sexual unrighteousness is more bitter than death.

Male or Female Makes No Real Righteous Difference (Verse 27)

"Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul 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." (Ecclesiastes 7:27-28)

On the surface this sounds a bit biased or sexist but taking Solomon's teachings as a whole, he isn't. Notice he is speaking experientially. In his experience, he found one man that to his eye was upright out of the thousands he knew and employed in his vast kingdom. He clearly doesn't mean to infer this man was totally righteous because he just said in verse 20 nobody is. 1 out of a 1,000.

He says he hasn't found an upright woman anywhere. Remember the women Solomon filled his home with. He unwisely married the idolatrous daughters of the godless kings around him. Marry idolatrous women and don't be surprised when your wife isn't humming *Amazing Grace* in the morning—and doesn't have much grace for you either.

Marry a thousand idolatrous women and you'll get very cynical about women. When you are blessed to meet a godly woman, don't take that for granted either. In this unrighteous world, a godly woman is a treasure. Honor her. You've met one in a million.

We are to Blame For All This Unrighteousness (Verse 29)

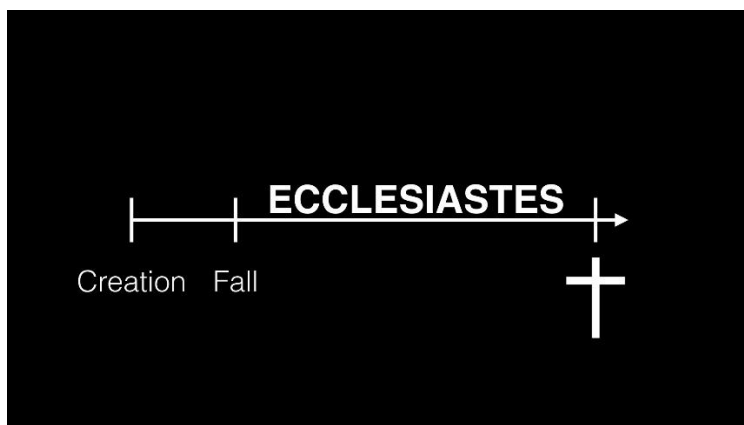
"See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." (Verse 29) The chapter ends by silencing any debate as to whether men or women are more unrighteous. The real story is that God made mankind originally totally righteous. "Made man upright." This was Adam and Eve before the Fall. Eve's hands weren't like shackles and Adam's heart had no evil schemes. They were morally innocent. Adam didn't talk behind Eve's back and Eve didn't complain about her husband to her friends. The young and righteous didn't die because nobody died. There was no death. The world God made was perfect and Adam and Eve were perfectly righteous in it. Everything he laments in this section was not part of the world. It was an upright, perfect world.

What changed? Where did all this evil come from? "But they have sought out many schemes." (Verse 29)

"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:18-19)

The one trespass was Adam's sin in the garden of Eden. This act shattered mankind's righteous standing before God. The shards of the glass cut everywhere it went. All the unrighteousness and injustices and absurdities Solomon describes in chapter 7 are the result of sin. It's not just sin out there, it's in the heart. Man's heart was fatally corrupted. Ecclesiastes 7:29 describes man's state in creation (upright) and man's condition after the fall (seeking out many schemes). Creation and the Fall. Ecclesiastes sits between the cause of this mess and God's saving initiative in Jesus.

Romans describes it as one act of righteousness that leads to justification and life for all men. That one act was Jesus' death on the cross. He suffered for our sin as our substitute. He died in our place. He bore our guilt. He died a sinner's death in the place of sinners so that his one act of righteousness might bring a restored righteousness (justification) for all who believe in him.



So here is where Solomon wasn't wrong, he was just in a chapter of the story before Jesus. No wonder he sounds so bleak and hopeless. The injustices and unrighteousness in this world without Jesus are miserable. But Jesus has come. He lived a perfect, righteous life and died in our place. Now sinners can be declared righteous before God through faith in his Son.

So our two options aren't merely unrighteousness or self-righteousness, now we can have God's righteousness through faith in his Son, Jesus. God grants it to us as a gift and we forever enjoy right standing before God as God promises to see us forever as completely righteous (justification).

Our problem is our hearts. "Once G. K. Chesterton was asked to contribute to a series in the *London Times* on the question "What is the problem in the universe?" He answered. "I am. Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton." (Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons: The Search to Satisfy Our Deepest Longings*, p. 25) Our problem is our unrighteousness. But if we place our trust in Jesus, God gives us the righteousness we need to have a right standing before him. Not just now, but forever in eternal life. Yes, the world is still unrighteous, but by faith in Jesus we can once again be righteous with a full and right standing before a holy God.

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- 2. Self-righteousness is no better than unrighteousness**
- 3. There is no real righteousness anywhere**
- 4. Unrighteous people treat each other unrighteously**
- 5. Sexual unrighteousness is really, really painful**
- 6. Male or female makes no righteous difference**
- 7. We are to blame for unrighteousness**

But Jesus is to blame for righteousness, forgiveness and eternal life.

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