

# The Vanity of Self-indulgence

## Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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Imagine if you could sit at a table with Bill Gates, Robin Williams, Hugh Hefner, Michelangelo, and Frank Lloyd Wright. They represent the pinnacle of wealth, comedy, hedonism, art, and design. That would be an interesting conversation. Now imagine you took all their gifts and experiences and put them into one guy. That was Solomon. What if that one guy shared his pursuit of meaning in life? Would you listen to him? We get to through Ecclesiastes. Our text is 2:1-11. We will take it in parts.

*"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 2:1)

This verse is a summary of verses 1-11. He starts with his conclusion. Pleasure? This also is vanity. Remember, vanity means vapor. Vapor has an appearance of substance but it's so quickly gone that it doesn't amount to anything. Futility. Meaningless.

In case you are new today, we've emphasized that Ecclesiastes is written describing man's search for meaning apart from God. We were made for God but sin destroyed that relationship. Mankind is left to derive meaning from what this world has to offer. How does that go? How do we experience our godless existence? He says that it feels like nothing really matters. It feels like everything's vapor, hollow, empty.

In Solomon's case, this was not for a lack of trying. God gave Solomon an incredible intellect matched with wisdom about life. He was an intellectual and lover of pleasure all wrapped in one. Think of his books of the Bible. Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

So he decides to do an experiment to explore pleasure and self-indulgence to see if these things might give lasting happiness. (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, p. 46) Specifically, five things: laughter, alcohol, money, music, and sex. Those categories sound familiar?

*"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.'" (Verse 1)*

Solomon isn't testing pleasure; rather he is allowing pleasure to test him. His heart. And to see if any of these pleasures satisfy his longings.

### Laughter

*"I said of laughter, 'It is mad,' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?'" (Verse 2)*

I think we all know what laughter is—a temporary moment of happiness that elicits a certain verbal expression. Most of us like to laugh. It feels good. There is a whole cable TV channel committed to making you laugh. I sometimes see advertisements in our local paper for laughter therapy classes. Come to the class and laugh.

Laughter is good, isn't it? Solomon says, *"It's mad."* This is a moral evaluation. Much of laughter is morally perverse or done in an unloving way or at another person's expense.

Laughter is also fleeting. He will compare it in chapter 7 to the crackle sound of twigs in a fire.

Laughter very easily masks deep pain. Remember the class clown in school? He was desperate for attention and used a quick wit to get it. Someone can be hilarious and depressed at the same time. Know this guy?



The number one laugh guy in my lifetime is Robin Williams. He has quite a comedy resume. *Mork and Mindy*. *Aladdin*. *Patch Adams*. Yes, *Flubber*. *Night at the Museum*. *Happy Feet*. Robin Williams was Mr. Laughter. He laughed a lot. He made the world laugh. Incredible talent. Arguably the number one comedian of our lifetime.

He committed suicide on August 11, 2014.

### **Alcohol/Drugs**

*"I 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, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life."* (Verse 3)

This is still a popular choice around the world. Alcohol provides a certain kind of pleasure. An altered state. Narcotics are even more effective at this. I don't take this to mean that Solomon became a drunk in the streets or got stoned. You see that in the second clause, *"my heart still guiding me with wisdom."* Remember, Solomon is not completely giving himself over to any of these vices. He retains his wisdom and objectivity. He is evaluating them as he experiences them. "He wanted to know if rationally controlled indulgence in pleasure gave meaning to life." (Duane A. Garrett, *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, p. 291.)

While not condemning it, Solomon is well aware of the dangers of using a drug to alter your sense of reality. He writes in Proverbs,

*"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,  
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."* (Proverbs 20:1)

While technically a depressant, alcohol has a soothing and calming effect. Life apart from God is painful so something that can dull the pain can feel helpful. If it tastes good, all the better, right?

Our world is drowning in alcohol and drugs. There are many choices of things that you can drink, smoke, or shoot into your veins. They make you feel better. How can this be a bad thing? How can it be *vanity*?

If we could step back and look at the heroin epidemic or hot debates about legalizing marijuana or even walk through a grocery or liquor store, we should do it like a theologian. Like Solomon. How would you know if a society was really unhappy? How about the wild popularity of products that numb the pain?

Back to Genesis 3. The Fall. *Adam, from dust you were made and to dust you will return. Adam, get out of the garden. Get out of my presence.* The spiritual emptiness of human beings without God feeds the desire to dull the pain. Dull the emptiness. Dull the spiritual sense that something's missing. The drug addict may not see it that way. "I'm getting high because I really miss God." But spiritually, down in his soul, down in that image-bearer, if true joy and satisfaction in God was there, would he need the needle?

The vanity of a drink or a smoke is the easiest of all to see. What's the problem? It only lasts a few hours. Then, poof! The effect is gone. Back to real life.

Recognize these people?



I don't even have to give their names. They are famous the world over. What do they all have in common besides incredible fame and fortune? Their accidental or intentional deaths were all drug-related.

Marilyn Monroe on August 5, 1962. Elvis Presley on August 16, 1977. Michael Jackson on June 25, 2009.

### **Wealth and Possessions**

*"I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces." (Ecclesiastes 2:4-8)*

This isn't your average local rich guy talking here. This is Solomon. The wealth God gave him is staggering. Here are a few examples:

- "Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides that which came from the explorers and from the business of the merchants [25 tons of gold a year]." (2 Chronicles 9:13-14)
- "Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl." (1 Kings 4:22-23)

This was every day in Solomon's court. It is estimated it would take 35,000-40,000 people to eat this much food. "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth." (2 Chronicles 9:22) He had staggering wealth beyond calculation. If wealth would make you happy, Solomon should have been the happiest man to ever live.

He used his wealth to build aesthetically beautiful structures and gardens. To give you the scale, archaeologists have uncovered pools near Jerusalem that only someone of Solomon's wealth could have built. See their sizes below. (Walter Kaiser, *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*, p. 82)

Upper	380 x 236 x 25	17 Olympic Pools
Middle	423 x 250 x 39	31 Olympic Pools
Lower	582 x 207 x 50	44 Olympic Pools

These are serious pools. These are big numbers and hard to comprehend. But that is the point. He had wealth and possessions beyond measure. 2 Chronicles 9:25 says he had 12,000 horsemen. And silver was so common it was as valuable as the stones along the road (2 Chronicles 9:27).

He had mind-boggling wealth and homes and buildings. He built palaces that took years to construct. His greatest project was building the first ever temple to God and he lavished it with gold and precious materials.

Have I said enough? Solomon explores his happiness in all his wealth and buildings and the vast array of investments. His summary? "*It all is vanity.*" The later version of what he says is that money can't buy you what? Happiness. We all say that, don't we? We take comfort in that when we see other people with apparently more than we have. But don't we all sometimes dream a little? *If only I had this or that, then I would be happy.* Or we wonder, *what would it be like to be rich? Maybe I would be happy then?*

Years ago I was golfing with an older friend of mine. This guy is definitely in the 1%. He's in the .001%. Crazy rich type category. He has homes all over. Luxury vehicles. All the toys and things that you could ever want. I was in the golf cart with him and I asked him, "You've made more money than 100 men will make in their lifetime. Can I ask you, is it true that having all this doesn't make you happy?" He is a godly man and a wise man. He said to me, "Steve, that is one of the top ten lessons of my whole life." It meant something to me to hear him say that. A man with tremendous wealth saying, *it doesn't do for you what you think it will.* Solomon speaks to all the rest of us who wonder about it and says, *It's all vanity. It doesn't satisfy.*

You probably won't recognize this guy.



Adolf Merckle. German billionaire. In 2007 Forbes listed his wealth at \$12.8 billion (Forbes.com, August 3, 2007). On the night of January 5, 2009, near his home, he said goodbye to his wife, went to the railroad tracks near his home, laid across the track, and took his own life (Gordon Raynor, *The Daily Telegraph*, January 9, 2009).

### **Sensual Pleasures**

*"I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man."* (Ecclesiastes 2:8)

Solomon was a renaissance man. A man of art, music, and sensual pleasure. He filled his palace with full-time singers and musicians. We are so accustomed to having music in our houses via iTunes or Pandora, it's all around us all the time. We can't imagine the music-less world the ancients lived in. To hear music, you had to have your own personal symphony or band. Of course, Solomon had it.

It also says, "*many concubines.*" This is perhaps what Solomon is most famous for. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. These are astonishing numbers. But we have to realize that in the ancient world, wives and concubines were a sign of a king's wealth and power.

I remember being in Beijing and touring the Forbidden City. It's the ancient home of China's ancient kings. I stepped into the courtyard and lining the huge area were little rooms. I asked the guy with me, "What are all those?" He said, "Those were where the concubines lived." They stretched about as far as you could see.

Sex. Sexual pleasure. I don't have to explain this one much, do I? Just think of the beaches of Daytona and south Florida this week as college students head there for the annual orgy. Our society is as sexualized as it's ever been. The internet streams digital concubines by the thousands to anyone who wants to look. Sex is portrayed in pop culture as the one human experience that will satisfy every longing we have.

Yet for all the sensual pleasures available, what do promiscuous singles and married people eventually discover about the sexual experience? Vapor! Why? It doesn't last. The next morning always comes and with it the stress and problems of life. The lover leaves. The sense of intimacy quickly fades.



Wilt Chamberlain claimed in his biography to have slept with 20,000 different women in his life. He died October 12, 1999. He was found by paramedics in his Bel-Air mansion...alone.

### **Solomon's Conclusion about Pleasure as Meaning**

*"So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."* (Verses 9-11)

He arrived at his conclusion after an amazing accumulation of earthly possessions and pleasures. He says he considered all of it. *All was vanity and a striving after wind.*" The NLT translation says, *"There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere."* (Verse 11, NLT)

This is contrary to the whole value set of our culture where having lots of money, good times, beautiful music, and lovers is the goal of life. But as so many have found when they get to the top of that ladder, there isn't anything there.

Solomon says, there's nothing here. No lasting happiness. No satisfaction that matters. All the money, fame, and women lead to nowhere. There is no material answer to our spiritual problem.

Do you believe that? How does your life this week show that?

### **Jesus is Better Than Solomon**

There is one person in the Bible who eclipses the wealth of Solomon. Who? Satan. In his temptation of Jesus, he offered him all the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:8). There was one condition. He had to bow to Satan. Imagine the wealth and possessions of the entire world. What would you do if it were offered to you? Would you give in? Some of us compromise our principles for the insanely unlikely chance to win a few million in the lottery. Imagine a lottery of all the wealth of the world.

This was Satan's to give. As one writer says it, "Everything Solomon pursued, Jesus was tempted by, but resisted." (Mark Driscoll, as quoted by Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes, Why Everything Matters*, p. 52) Jesus didn't have to experience the world to know it was empty without God. His response to Satan was, *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"* (Matthew 4:10)

Jesus knew where real meaning and joy came from. From God and a right relationship with him.

## **Jesus is Better Than Earthly Pleasure**

It sounds crazy to the materialist or the hedonist to say that Jesus is better than earthly pleasure. How can Jesus be better than lots of money or lots of sex?

There are many reasons but one obvious one. God has built into every human pleasure what we call "diminishing returns." No matter what you experience, the next time it isn't the same. It requires a little more or a little different to give the same buzz or whatever. But Jesus transcends the pleasures of this world. Knowing him by faith and growing as a disciple is the real experience of spiritual pleasure that the hedonist tries to get from his material experience. But it never quite gets him there. It's always disappointing. Like chasing the wind.

But to know Jesus is a joy that doesn't diminish or blow away. Rather it grows. Imperfectly in this life. But these moments of spiritual joy in Jesus are a foretaste of ultimate and unending joy.

*"You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:11)*

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