

## **AVOIDING THE NET | Ecclesiastes 7.15-29**

We are going to continue on through this book of wisdom told through the voice of a pessimist. Last week, we worked on answering the pundit's question from the middle of chapter 6:

*[8] For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?*

What this question is really getting at is: what is the benefit of following God at all? What advantage is there to being a Christian? So we looked at the first 14 verses of chapter 7 where the pundit lays out the advantages; the distinction between those who follow Jesus and those who do not.

That's only part of the story. There is a tendency in Christianity, in the church, to read everything through the lens of difference. To speak of everything and everyone in us vs. them terms. To be fair, this combative perspective of others is not limited to the Christian realm; read any editorial and you will find that there is always my view and 'those who don't agree.' We are predisposed to thinking of people who do not see the world the same as we do as opposition. For those in the church we have a way to overcome this; something to combat how we feel, or how we naturally see things: theology. How we understand God and His purpose for the world drives how we interact with others.

Today we get to balance out last week, moving from a view of us VS. them to looking at the shared experience of humanness. And we get to answer a question: how do we live this life in a way that celebrates similarities, not just the differences? How are we called to interact with those around us? Let's get into it, Ecclesiastes 7.15:

### **Righteousness is not Cause and Effect**

*[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.*

The pundit is struggling with something here that many Christians do: why do the righteous suffer and the wicked thrive? If the previous 14 verses are true (not to mention the book of Proverbs) shouldn't Christians be getting the most out of this life...shouldn't we be making bling and living the easy life?

This is where the Health and Wealth gospel comes from. It says that because God is in control of all things, and He is a God of love and blessing, that if you trust Him your life will go well. In extreme cases this means Rolexes, fancy cars and even jets, but in the more acceptable form it means a job, spouse, family, a house, the American dream. It is easy to read the Bible and to imagine that what God promises is material. The biggest problem with this, as the pundit clearly points out, is observation. Horrible things happen to faithful people.

The Bible gives us an answer for this: SIN; Once sin is released it is not selective. Every person suffers the results of sin: both their own and that of others. We are connected so that the sin of individuals has affects outside of that person. My sin affects others and other people's sin affects me. This causes a situation where even if someone lived perfectly righteous, they would

not escape the affects of sin (we know this because Jesus was perfect and it led Him to be killed). When God promises 'goodness' to the Christian, it is not a goodness that equates in human measurement; it is more a means to deal with the disappointment of this life. The gospel is our hope when we come to the end of ourselves. This is only half of the issue.

The other major struggle for a lot of Christians is why so many fools seem to have a good life. The struggle of this life makes sense due to sin, but what are we supposed to do with the fact that many people who sin relentlessly seem to have it figured out? The answer is Common Grace. The term common grace refers to the grace that God bestows on all people, whether they are His or not. At its base level, LIFE is common grace; the fact that anyone exists and gets to enjoy the world God has created is by His grace. It moves on from here into talents, body shape, place you live; these things, this grace is not divvied out equally. Some people are smarter than others, more creative, better businessmen/women...all of these things affect this life.

So it isn't that the wicked thrive and the righteous suffer, as much as it is some of the righteous have it hard, some of the wicked get more out of this life. If we accept that these things are true because of the unequal distribution of common grace, then there really isn't much we can do to overcome it. This isn't a battle to be fought, but a truth to be included in how we live this life. SIN and GRACE are true for all people.

This seems to make sense with what we see in the world but conflict with much of the teachings of the wisdom Literature (where the wise and the fool are placed at odds). What is our responsibility in all of this? What does knowing this do for us? well, knowing IS half the battle, but the other half is knowing what to do with it...the pundit helps us out with this, v.16:

### **Extremes are heresy**

*[16] Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? [17] Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? [18] It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.*

In response to sin and common grace, the pundits advice is: don't be too righteous, don't be too wise, don't be too wicked, don't be too foolish. well OK...but what does that mean?

Some take this to mean 'stay balanced.' never become too extreme. If this is what the pundit is saying, if this is what God calls us to, then the best we can do in this life is to become dull. Dull to the pain and the deep suffering that comes with it. Dull to the joy of throwing yourself into something and experiencing accomplishment. Dull the depth of your sin and the extreme goodness of grace...you can see I don't agree with that assessment (though I used to). What I have seen is making balance the goal of your life leads to the lukewarm Christianity that we are warned of in Revelation, where there is not a desperate need for the gospel and an accompanying relief that comes from God's love. As Christians I believe we should be able to feel deeply.

We just need to make sure we don't stay there; by there I mean in the emotions that overwhelm us. The depth of feelings God has given us are there to press us toward Him. It is easy to let feelings or beliefs become the what drives us...to be controlled by the ideology we build out of

how we feel...and when we do we allow true things to press us over the line into something false. As CS Lewis said it:

*Heresy is truth taken too far.*

The greatest battle we all have to fight in our own lives is not against bad things, but against good things applied in the wrong way. There are things we decide are RIGHT no matter what the situation; we use these beliefs to build positions that form how we see other people and interact with them. These are the absolute positions that the pundit attacks here:

**1. Do not be too righteous** | the position that he is pushing back against is the belief that the purpose of the church is to condemn culture. As the church, we have the truth, the culture does not, and so we must go into the world calling out sin and unrighteousness. Our role is to become righteous and uphold God's righteousness in the world. Verses like 1 Timothy 3.15 support this:

*[15] if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.* AND an example from Jesus...remember when he flipped over all of the tables in the temple?

We have the responsibility to stand up for and support God's truth, because if we won't who will...to this the pundit says: *Be not overly righteous.*

Isn't this what the Christian life is about, sanctification...the pursuit of righteousness? Well, righteousness means that you are morally upright (without sin); part of sanctification is absolutely uprooting the sin within you. Working with the Holy Spirit to find the sin in your life and to act against it. The interesting thing about this process is that it requires humility, a recognition of weakness, and a love of others. It is not something you achieve in isolation. The only way to grow in your faith is to find ways to love people you previously couldn't. The drawback of condemning culture position is that it turns those you are supposed to love into hindrance to the goal. To have relationships with real people means interacting with them and their sin...

If righteousness is the ultimate goal: you will be unable to put up with the failings of others and will become defensive about your own sin. Your life will be consumed with cutting out anything and anyone who may taint your perfection. In pursuing righteousness, you will lose your ability to love. The pundit warns: *Be not overly righteous.*

**2. Do not be too wise** | the position that the pundit is pushing back against is the belief that the purpose of the church is to critique culture. As the church, our role is to be the discerning voice; using the wisdom of God to cut through the lies and finding the truth that exists in our culture. Usually this means feeling the need to speak into every cultural phenomenon, explaining how the things that culture says are wonderful are not so wonderful and how the people it discounts actually have value. This is an interaction with culture based on careful argument and nuance, attempting to win people by convincing them...and some verses support this, including Romans 12.2:

*[2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* AND

an example from Jesus: how often was he engaged in debates with the Pharisees, critiquing their incorrect view of the OT?

We have the responsibility to be carefully dissect the motives and trajectory of the culture, warning people of the danger of following blindly...to this the pundit says: *do not make yourself too wise*.

Again, this causes us to recoil a bit: isn't this what we are supposed to be doing, learning to see the world through God's eyes so that we can cut through all of the crap. In some ways. A funny thing happens when you take the position of critique: you begin to see yourself as above the situations you are critiquing. You begin to see culture as something to be studied and dissected rather than something that you are part of. You will find yourself interacting with everything and everyone through well-constructed arguments, refusing anything that isn't articulated well. You become distant, some may say uncaring, because your interaction with the world becomes trapped between your ears. In pursuing wisdom, you will lose compassion. So the pundit warns: *do not make yourself too wise*.

**3. Do not allow wickedness to run its course unhindered** | the position that he is pushing back against is the belief that the purpose of the church is to copy culture. As the church, our main goal is to reach people and the best way to do that is to reach them where they are. There is no reason to put unnecessary roadblocks between people and the gospel, so our style, our clothes, our way of talking should follow the culture. Rather than the church changing the culture, the culture is brought in as a way to inform the church. The verse that is used to promote this is Paul's declaration to the Corinthian church:

*[22] To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. | 1 Corinthians 9.22*

AND an example from Jesus: he came to earth...He took on human flesh. He became like the people He came to save.

We have the responsibility to win as many people as possible and the best way to do this is to speak the language of the people we wish to reach...to this the pundit says: *Be not overly wicked*.

Following culture does not equal wickedness...the problem is that once we define our goal there are certain compromises that creep in. If you decide that reflecting the concerns of the culture is necessary to winning them to Christ, then you will not be able to stop at skinny jeans and fauxhawks; eventually there will be moral aspects of the gospel that conflict. There will be things that the culture finds morally reprehensible that the Bible teaches (like sex actually has a purpose and with that some 'rules'). Wickedness is a byproduct of apathy; you don't have to pursue it, it is what we are naturally attracted to.

We are good creations of God, tainted by sin; our hearts a constant battle between common grace, the lure of sin, and the wisdom of God. Left unfought, our default is toward the lure of sin. We don't naturally become better people, we naturally become selfish. By copying the culture, God's truth will be drowned out. The pundit warns: *Be not overly wicked*.

**4. Do not celebrate foolishness** | the position that he is pushing back against is the belief that the purpose of the church is to consume culture. As the church, our main goal is to be free. The gospel released us from the burden of lists and rules and we are now free to engage with the culture in whatever ways our conscience says is okay. Do whatever you want (you can handle it) and look down on anyone who say that Game of Thrones may not be helpful to your soul, or that you may be drinking too much, or that your chosen group of friends may not be good for your appreciation of God. Even better than looking down on them, accuse anyone who attempts to set any limits as shaming you. You can even use a verse, Galatians 5.1:

*[1] For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* OR another good one from 1 Corinthians 4.3:

*[3] But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.*

And an example from Jesus: he was known for hanging out with prostitutes and tax collectors. He was called a drunk and a party animal.

Our responsibility in this life is to model a life of freedom given by Jesus...to show what it means to live unbound by all of the concerns of judgment and expectations. To this the pundit says: *do not be a fool.*

While freedom is a big part of what it means to belong to Jesus, it is not a freedom that should drive us to 'doing whatever we want.' This freedom is supposed to be paired with a change in our desire so that we have nothing holding us back from the work of Jesus. Freedom is a tool to bring us to Jesus; it is not the goal. If we pursue the means as an end, we will end up losing both. DO NOT BE A FOOL.

We get to this point, having looked at various ways of interacting with culture; they all seem to have some truth in them (even though they also have their problems). While we shouldn't put all of our eggs in any one of these baskets, we also need to make sure we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater (I just used 2 cliches in one sentence, which is not as easy you may think). The pundit buffers his bold comments with some quick proverbs that help us keep our footing as we attempt to create a model of engagement with the world, we are going to fly through these so we can get to the end, v.19:

1. Wisdom is not a waste of time | *[19] Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.*

To say do not be overly wise is not meant to downplay the importance of wisdom.

2. All people are wicked | *[20] Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*

All people, including you, are tainted by sin. While your position may seem so obviously right to you, your sin should leave room for humility.

3. People mess up | *[21] Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. [22] Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.*

Our interactions with people, relationships, are always going to be messy. There isn't this simple system to fit everyone into. People you attempt to love will get frustrated with you, and you will get frustrated with them...this doesn't negate all of the good.

4. Wisdom is not achievable | *[23] All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. [24] That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?*

The idea of reaching an ultimate, absolute wisdom where you understand everything fully and completely is not going to happen in this life. If this is true, wisdom is really more of a journey than a destination. It is the application of the right part of God's truth at the right time, what I will call 'situational wisdom.' This is where the pundit ends, v.25 (we are just going to read 25 and 29, verses 26-28 are an aside which I will write about this week):

### **The trap of SCHEMES**

*[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. ... [29] See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*

Our problem when it comes to wisdom is that we try to find what the pundit calls a scheme, I usually call it a system. The things we looked at above:

condemning culture, critiquing culture, copying culture, consuming culture...

these are all systems to apply. They are ways that we simplify the world down to a single appropriate response. As we looked at the positive and negatives of each of these, I hope that you can see that CHOOSING any one of these leads to distortion of what we are called to as Christians. The automatic response to that is to try to create a hybrid system, one that incorporates the truth of all of these systems while avoiding the downfalls. The problem is that they are opposites that can not be reconciled.

righteousness and wickedness can not be held together. Wisdom and foolishness destroy one another. You can't condemn and copy culture at the same time...neither can you critique and consume culture simultaneously. This is why the pundit refers to the attempt to simplify this into a scheme as madness. The paradoxes of this life cannot be flattened out and being a Christian in this world is not as simple as building a plan and living it out. This life is not about balance, but 'situational wisdom.'

The best description of this that I have found comes from the book *Culture Makers* by Andy Crouch (from which I also stole the terms: condemning, critiquing, copying, and consuming culture). The way that he describes 'situational wisdom' is to use the illustration of postures and gestures. Postures are our natural position; our default. I stand with a bit of a slouch, I don't have to think to do that, it developed over time and through the course of how I held myself, I developed a posture. Postures are the way we hold ourselves developed over time.

Gestures on the other hand are positions that we take on for a moment in a particular situation. when I talk to my kids, I bend down to them, partially because I can't hear them from way up here, but also because I want to come down to them...I want them to know that I am listening. I don't do that when I talk to an adult (some of you are wishing I would), but this gesture is situational appropriate. Same can be said for other gestures: embracing my wife, standing up firm against someone who is a threat, reaching up on tiptoes to grab something off the top shelf...there is a right time for each of these, but in other situations they would be inappropriate.

The problem for Christians engaging culture is that gestures turn into postures. Crouch says this:

*The problem is not with any one of these gestures - condemning, critiquing, copying, consuming. All of them can be appropriate responses to particular cultural goods. Indeed, each of them may be the only appropriate response to a particular cultural good. But the problem comes when these gestures become too familiar, become the only what we know how to respond to culture, become etched into our unconscious stance toward the world and become postures.*

There is a time to be a warrior for Jesus, but in other situations this harms the innocent. There is a time to critique, but other times when you miss out on good because you are so busy trying to figure out what could make something better. There are times to copy, but it can lead you into apathy toward holiness, and there is a place to consume culture, to enjoy the common grace poured out by God on to creation, but it needs to be measured, lest we end up worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. This isn't about balance, as much as it is about being varied. Knowing how to be fully present in the moment, practicing the gesture that best fits.

The example we have for this is Jesus. As we have seen He used each of these gestures at some point in His ministry. When He met the woman at the well, he didn't have a theological debate with her, He called her to righteousness through grace (He was very pointed in His theological discussions with the scribes). When the wine ran out at a wedding, He made sure they could keep the celebration going. When he approached Zaccheus in the tree, He didn't condemn him for all of his failures, He showed care, He asked if He could dine at his house. To do this, we have to see those around as people struggling through the same things we are: trying to pay the bills, raise their kids, find meaning in this life. All of the people around us are human beings, created in the image of God, with all of the complicated beauty and value that that entails.

Knowing people better than anyone else, He made one last gesture at the end of His life. This was to go quietly to death, to allow Himself to be murdered so that He could stand in place of you and I, so that He could receive the punishment our sin earned. This sacrifice was not made simply because He had to; Jesus did this because He knew it was the appropriate gesture for the situation. That if He didn't act, people would suffer and die due to their sin. It is this gesture that separates Christians from others; To be a Christian means recognizing what Jesus did for us and using that to fuel what we decide to do in this life. It should make us more gracious, more loving, willing to put up with the failings of people so that we can reveal to them the goodness we have been given in Christ. As you come to the table today, ask Jesus to loosen your postures to make your gestures genuine. Ask Him to help you be more like Him.