

Pleasure: Why Not?

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[0 : 00] The title of this sermon is Pleasure, Why Not?

It's worth asking. It's a real question. If you want to know, as a Christian, what the biblical worldview is, biblical worldview 101, where do you go?

Well, you turn to Genesis. You turn to the first few pages of Genesis. That's where it all begins. If you want to know what we're on the earth for, what it all means, and how to live well, that's a great place to start.

And the preacher of Ecclesiastes, he must have had Genesis 1-3 open. The scroll laid out before him on his writing desk as he was writing the book of Ecclesiastes.

The language of Ecclesiastes is dense with Eden. So Adam and Eve were put in a garden in the midst of a good creation, a world created good.

[1 : 10] And some of that creation was given to them as a gift. Some was off limits. And death entered the world when Eve looked at what was off limits, and she saw with her eyes that it was pleasant.

She saw that it was good, and she desired it. And she did not deny herself what her eyes saw and delighted in.

She took day eight, and we died. The preacher of Ecclesiastes tries the same tactic. Look at verse 10, 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 my toil. So he basically said, I've worked hard.

I deserve that. He was trying out this nihilistic creed of eat, drink, and be merry for this is all there is, life under the sun.

[2 : 15] And he applied three tests to his heart. Verse one, I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself.

He tests his heart with wine, with possessions, with sex. And he says, will this gladden my heart? Will this make me matter?

Will this satisfy me finally? In other words, the preacher wants to know how he can gain, how he can profit. And in chapter one, the first sermon in this series, we talked about this question.

He says, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? When all is said and done, what will add to us?

What will we have to show for it? What can fill this emptiness? What can ultimately satisfy? So he says, let's turn to pleasure and give it a go.

[3 : 18] We'll see what comes of it. So he tests his heart with wine, possessions, and sex, like a clinically depressed man testing out a new medication. You take the new medication and you think, let's see how this makes me feel.

What will its side effects be? Will I feel happier but lose sleep? Or will I just sleep constantly and feel sadder than ever?

And what does he find? So look at verses one to two. I said in my heart, come now, I'll test you with pleasure, enjoy yourself, but behold, this also was vanity.

I said of laughter, it is mad, and of pleasure, what use is it? So pleasure, like the rest of life, is vapor. What's the point?

Robert Burns actually came to the same conclusion. He wrote, but pleasures are like poppies spread. You seize the flower, the bloom is shed.

[4 : 21] Or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white then melts forever. Or like the rainbows' lovely form vanishing amid the storm.

It's heavell. Pleasure too is fleeting and vapor. Now what does Christianity have to do with pleasure anyway?

Many will think nothing. Christianity has nothing at all to do with pleasure. In fact, isn't Christianity about denying yourself pleasure, about abstaining from things that bring some sort of worldly pleasure?

Well, actually our catechisms say otherwise. And from Scripture they say, they come to this conclusion. When we ask what is the chief end of man, it's to glorify God and what? To enjoy him forever.

So joy and pleasure are eternal realities of the Christian. In other words, if you love, trust and follow Jesus, eternal pleasure is your destiny.

[5 : 30] It's your future. The pleasure to which all pleasures point. And so the shadows cast by the glory of the real thing.

Now the preacher of Ecclesiastes probably knew this, but he still wanted to know, okay, but how does that affect my life here and now? How does that actually change the way that I live moment to moment? And how can that, you know, maybe I'll feel satisfied down the road, but I want to feel satisfied now.

So he tested his heart with pleasures. And so do we. There's really nothing new under the sun. Let's think about those three tests together.

Wine possessions and sex. And it'll just be a time of real talk. Let's be candid with ourselves. So he starts with wine, test number one.

He says, will this gladden my heart? Wine can gladden the heart. It can depress the heart too. After all, alcohol is technically a depressant.

[6 : 33] That's the general effect it has on us physiologically. So it doesn't sharpen us. It dulls us. It doesn't make us feel alive. It makes us feel drowsy.

So he discovered what so many of us have discovered. That if we turn to alcohol to fill the emptiness, it won't just leave us empty.

It'll make us slaves. Now, you do feel pleasure. You get a tingle. You get a buzz, but it's over in an hour. And if you chase that feeling, looking for more satisfaction from it, you'll wake up with a stomach ache tomorrow.

And then you'll go back for more and more and more. And it'll always leave you empty. Now, the preacher isn't making a case that wine is good or that wine is bad.

It's not a case that wine is vapor. It's heavily. It's fleeting. It's vanity. It's pleasures will always evade your grasp, like chasing after the wind.

[7 : 42] So much for wine. So let's look at test number two, possessions. Let's read the verses four to seven again. 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 come before me in Jerusalem. So he's making a list here of everything that in his day, so many thousands of years ago, would be the mark of class and luxury.

So a modern list would look different, wouldn't it? It might be something like, I acquired every video subscription service under the sun, Netflix and Disney Plus and Hulu and all of it.

I have holidays abroad. I have a thriving nightlife with beautiful people. I'm an Instagram influencer with 20,000 followers.

[8 : 52] I have a winter home and a tropical climate. We have our own lists. Now he worked hard. He toiled to attain that list.

But look at verse 11, 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.

In other words, it didn't come out in the balance. The amount of work he put into it wasn't worth the amount of pleasure he got out of it.

You can work a high-demand, high-paid job to attain a lifestyle, to afford a certain lifestyle for you or for your family, and that job will demand your everything so that you never actually get to enjoy the pleasures it affords.

So much for possessions. Now the third test is sex. Look at the end of verse 8. The preacher says that many concubines are the delight of the sons of men.

[10 : 00] Surely this is the pinnacle of pleasure. Why would he deny himself such exquisite pleasures as all that? This is a generation, ours today, obsessed with sexual freedom.

Love is love. Why be trapped in the restricting bounds of a monogamous heterosexual relationship, let alone marriage?

Two things I want to say here. First of all, freedom is not a lack of restrictions.

Is the fish more free when it's restricted to water or when it's liberated from those restrictions and set on the grass?

Freedom is not a lack of restrictions. Freedom is finding the restrictions which suit our design and help us flourish. And human flourishing by God's design is for committed, monogamous sexual intimacy in the bounds of marriage between one man and one woman.

[11 : 16] That's the water that we were designed to swim in. And any other sexual pursuit, whether it's same-sex relationships, sexual promiscuity, or pornography, is destructive, like freeing a fish to the grass.

The second thing I want to say about this is that, like all other pleasures, sex will not fill the emptiness. We all pursue some pleasures for ultimate satisfaction.

We all do it, even if it's the pleasure of saying no to pleasures, that self-righteous pleasure. We have no right, therefore, to look down on others with a different sexual ethic, and we have no right to regard anyone else as second-rate, because we are all sexual sinners, friends, all of us.

Even sex in a Christian marriage, in the boundaries that God has set, if done for its own purpose, for our own ultimate satisfaction, even that will leave us empty.

So much for pleasure. Now, after testing these three new medications to his heart, the preacher says, I hate life.

[12 : 42] Look at verse 17. So I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Grasping after pleasures of any kind to fill you is like grasping after smoke or vapor. It will always elude your grasp, and it will always leave you empty.

Now, there's an ancient story about a woman who lived in a town called Sychar about 2,000 years ago, the empty woman of Sychar. She felt deeply empty inside, and to fill that void, she chased after men, relationships, and she had partner after partner after partner.

And what did she get for it? Well, shame, social stigma, a lack of stability, lots of bad things but no satisfaction.

She felt deeply empty. And one day at noon, when she knew no one else would be at the well, she went to draw some water, and she ran into a man from Nazareth.

[14 : 04] And this man promised her that he could give her water, which if she had a drink would satisfy her thirst forever.

She'd never thirst again. And he wasn't just talking about water and thirst. He said, Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. She said, Sir, give me this water.

Of course, that's the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John chapter 4. And it shows us that every ounce of longing in your heart, every inch of emptiness, exists to be filled by Jesus.

G.K. Chesterton once said, Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is really looking for God. The desire below our desires, the hole that lays below our longings, is too big to be filled by anything in this world, short of Christ.

[15 : 24] When Jesus met the woman from Sychar, he was hungry. And so he'd sent his disciples off to get something to fill his empty stomach. Then he encountered this woman.

And his disciples returned, bringing food, and they urged him to eat. And he said, I'm all right. I have food you don't know about. So of course, they were very confused, and they thought maybe he'd stashed a bag of crisps in his cloak somewhere.

And he said, My food is to do the will of my Father. Derek showed us a couple of weeks ago that the end of the matter, the end of the matter is a key to understanding Ecclesiastes, really.

At the end of the book, the preacher says, The end of the matter all has been heard. Fear God. And keep his commandments. For this is the whole duty of man.

Jesus knew that to be true. He knew that if anything would physically, emotionally, and spiritually satisfy him, it was to do the will of God, to fear God.

[16 : 33] Look back with me at Ecclesiastes 2, verses 24 to 26 again. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

To the one who pleases him. How do we please God? Two ways, we fear and obey him, like Jesus said, to do the will of my Father.

And two, to receive from the hand of God the good gifts of this life and enjoy them.

The atheist is forced to say, Eat, drink, and be merry, for that is all there is. The preacher is teaching us to say, Eat, drink, and be merry, for that is what there is.

[17 : 38] Do you see the difference? The pleasures of this life really are to be enjoyed. But as gifts, not as ends of themselves, they will never fill you.

But they're from the hand of God who can fill you. He can satisfy the longings. He can fill the emptiness.

So these pleasures, they're good things and they are from God, but your insatiability is from God too. Appetite for pleasures is a gift.

He made you this way on purpose. The preacher says later in the book that God has put eternity into the heart of man. He's given us longings that only the eternal can fill, so that every bit of longing and emptiness would point us to the only one who can ultimately satisfy us.

Jesus is the one thing. Listen, this changed my life. Jesus is the one thing in the world you can go to for pleasure again and again and again without doing yourself and others harm.

[19 : 00] Do you ever think about that? You can always go back for a second helping with Jesus. Our seemingly endless appetites were made for him.

What broken cisterns? What cheap wells are you going to be filled? Go to Jesus. That's so much better.

Earthly pleasures just won't fill us because they were never meant to. See, as Lewis said, all joy reminds. It is never a possession.

Every pleasure is actually meant, every pleasure that we experience here and now, a good meal or whatever it is, is actually meant to set our hearts singing for Jesus, to point us beyond the thing to Christ, to point us beyond the temporal to the eternal.

Every phenomenal meal, every good glass of wine should set our hearts singing for the marriage feast of the Lamb with Christ in eternity.

[20 : 16] My wife and I took a walk with the kids this morning. The leaves were stunning. The colors were beautiful. Every beautiful autumn leaf should set our hearts singing for something eternal, for the leaves of the tree of life and eternity whose leaves are for eternal healing.

Every moment of intimacy and pleasure should point us to the reality of being fully known and fully loved by the most beautiful person in the universe and the union that we have with him through his spirit.

What a gift. So we return then to the preacher's big question, what can man gain? And we answer Christ. That is our gain. Jesus is our eternal possession. Jesus is our lasting treasure.

He is our inheritance. And that is where ultimate pleasure is to be found. Psalm 16 says, in your presence there is fullness of joy, not partial joy, not fleeting pleasure, not fleeting joy.

Fulness of joy at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 36, how precious is your steadfast love, O God, the children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

[21 : 46] They feast on the abundance of your house and you give them drink from the river of your delights. What gain? What a gift. It is a free gift, but it is not a cheap gift.

We have all died in Adam. We've all reached out and plucked that fruit, deciding for ourselves how to live, haven't we? We've sinned by calling death freedom and by living for the gift rather than the giver.

And for all that, Jesus paid the price with his own precious blood. His loss was our gain, and he purchased for us pleasures forevermore.

Eternal life with God. That doesn't always feel like our reality. Our experience and our emotions do not always line up, do they?

And so temptations come. Temptations to chase pleasure, to seek our satisfaction in something other than Christ. So what do we do then? Well, I want to give you a tool for temptation in regards to pleasure.

[23 : 09] And this is personal. This has helped me. When faced with something that you suspect may be a temptation, ask yourself, not hypothetically, really ask yourself, what is the gain?

Often an honest answer is momentary pleasure and then lasting shame, or physical discomfort, or relational distance, or a sense of separation between me and God, a darkening of the clouds over the sun.

Conversely, ask yourself, if I don't do this, if I instead seek Christ, what is the gain? The pleasure of God's pleasure to be fully alive to God by the power of the Spirit.

So the fear of God and the delight in Christ is not just the key to ecclesiasties, it's the key to the life of holiness and joy.

Adam and Eve in the garden chose the fleeting pleasure at the expense of the eternal pleasure of God. And what did they gain?

[24 : 29] Let me close with the words of a hymn from Francis Bevan. I sighed for rest and happiness, I yearned for them, not thee. But while I passed my Savior by, his love laid hold on me.

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but the waters failed. Even as I stooped to drink, they fled and mocked me as I wailed. Now none but Christ can satisfy, no other name for me.

There is love and life and lasting joy, Lord Jesus found in thee. So go, eat, drink and be merry, and think of feasting with Christ in the new heavens and new earth, and raise a glass to the King.

He gives such good gifts. Amen.