

Vital Supplement for Spiritual Vitality

THE VANITY OF PLEASURES: ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11

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Part 4b

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Last time: In our study of Proverbs 5 we discovered that there are two types of pleasures: true pleasures & false pleasures. True pleasures are desires, inclinations, & preferences that are in keeping with God's intended purposes. On the other hand, false pleasures are desires, inclinations, & preferences that go outside of God's purposes. We learned that if you pursue false pleasures, not only will the best parts of your life be taken from you, but you may become so compromised, so distorted, & so seared in your thinking that you fail to recognize how unstable your life has become. You will not only be ensnared by your own sins, but your pursuit of false pleasures could lead to you to great shame and quite possibly premature death. But whatever choices each of us make, God sees & examines everything.

This time: I want to introduce you to two more types of pleasures: earthly pleasures & spiritual pleasures. Earthly pleasures are temporal pleasures. The car you drive, the home you possess, & the resources you have acquired or received are examples of earthly pleasures. Here is the most important thing to know about earthly pleasures: *they are not designed to last*. On the contrary, spiritual pleasures are satisfactory because they promote intimacy with God & allow you to be used by Him in ways you have never thought possible—all for His glory. What I mean by spiritual pleasures are those desires, inclinations & preferences that bring God honor and glory! Once we understand the simple truth that there are not only false pleasures & true pleasures, but earthly pleasures & spiritual pleasures, then perhaps we will grow in our ability to better see things from God's perspective & whole heartily pursue what He matters most to Him with the time he has given us on this earth.

One man who discovered this truth was Solomon. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon takes us on a tour of all of life in order to discover true meaning. He stops at many ports: nature, wealth, wisdom, & business. But here in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 he recounts his experiment with pleasure (2:1).

Solomon experiments in order to discover if pleasures will provide an adequate justification for human existence (vs. 1). In a dialogue with his heart, he says, "*Come now, I will test you with pleasure.*" Now that word "*test*" refers to learning the true nature of something. So, here Solomon decides to "*test*" his heart, the control center of his personality, with all sorts of pleasures, in order to determine if pleasure is meaningful. The Hebrew word for "pleasure" in verse one is often used to refer to a "*feeling or attitude of joyful happiness and cheerfulness.*" In some contexts it can even be used to refer to a response to or manifestation of worship to God. But in this case, as often used in wisdom literature, this particular nuance of "*pleasure*" refers to the gratification of the senses. His conclusion from his testing of all sorts of pleasures is that they all proved to be meaningless, that is, vaporous. Like steam rising from a hot cup of coffee, he is stating that pleasure is vaporous.

But what sorts of pleasures did he test? In verses 2-10, we discover that every pleasure he examines is "*earthly.*" For example, after experimenting with the lighter side of pleasure, namely, laughter, he turns to weightier pleasures such as wine, significant land projects (e.g., houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, orchards, & water reservoirs), slave ownership, herds & flocks, gold, silver, treasures of kings, & provinces. He also experimented with entertainment (a co-ed choir) & even had a harem. He then turned to success itself. In the whole history of his people, he was more successful than anyone else. In fact, amassed so much wealth that in verse 10 he states that he "*denied himself nothing his eyes desired; he refused his heart no pleasure.*" Lastly, Solomon declared that he took delight in all his work; it was the reward for all his labor.

His conclusion from his investigation into these physical pleasures is that they were all vaporous (verse 11): "*Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.*" Like warm breath on a cold winter day, earthly pleasures are here for only a moment. To be sure, he is not making a moral judgment about them (though one could be made with reference to both slavery and a harem). But what he is declaring is that these physical, earthly pleasures are temporal.

Consider: why is it then that we find ourselves investing more into earthly pleasures than spiritual pleasures? Is it because the world is more "real" to us than God? Do we really believe that earth's pleasures are more satisfying than God's pleasures? Is it because we often grab what is most near us. Is it because of our impatience, insecurities, thirst for materialism,

our impulsive tendencies, or a competitive spirit? Is it because we have allowed the “*world*” with all of its frivolities, delights, & wonders to captivate our hearts & win our affections? Have we allowed ourselves to become so manipulated by media & marketing schemes that we have to purchase the latest, the fastest, and the coolest? Where is the careful deliberation? Have we so blurred our “*real needs*” with our “*desires*” that we are no longer able to discern what is truly valuable & important to the advancement of our well-being.

I find it interesting that in both verses 3 & 9, Solomon claims that he retained his wisdom throughout all his experiments! In other words, he did not go berserk in his quest for luxury & pleasure; he showed self-restraint. In fact, he asserts that any attempt to find a rationale for existence in pleasure & wealth will inevitably fail *even if* it moderated by self-control.

What’s the bottom line? After giving himself to the accumulation of vast wealth & possessions, Solomon came to the conclusion that earthly pleasures did not fulfill the deepest longings of his heart.

Are you empty? If you were to be brutally honest, have you tried to find lasting meaningfulness in affluence? Ray Stedman once said, “‘Live for today’ may seem like a great motto, until tomorrow comes.” It may be good & wonderful earthly pleasures, but do they really satisfy your deep human longings?

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, Solomon contends that there is only one thing that speaks to our deepest human longings:

¹³ Now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter; Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

If you look carefully at your own translation of verse 13 you might notice the word “duty” is supplied by the translator. But if you look at my translation you see that I did not supply the word “duty.” Why? I believe the translator missed Solomon’s point when he supplied the word “duty.”

In essence, Solomon is not saying that fearing & obeying God is our “duty.” Instead, he is saying that “*this is the whole of man.*” This is for what we are made; this is our purpose in life! In other words, fearing & obeying God are spiritual pleasures. If we fear God and keep His commandments, because it is in obedience to him in inward conformity & outward obedience that we walk in intimacy with Him (Psalm 19; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Gal. 5:16-26). When we follow hard after God

by conforming ourselves to His commandments, precepts, & principles, then life becomes vibrant & exciting. Intimacy is the kind of pleasure that we are meant to build our lives upon! Therefore, outward obedience & inward conformity to His Word by means of the Holy Spirit should not be drudgery, but life-changing, rewarding, & ever-enlightening. Therefore, once we get it into our minds that fellowship is what we were originally designed to do, then our lives become an adventure because we are focused on glorifying Him by fearing Him & keeping His commandments. Sure, it might be costly in view of the adversities of the flesh, world, & devil, but sweet & satisfying our souls will be.

Therefore, enjoy those earthly pleasures that are good & honorable, but hold onto them loosely. They will evaporate, vanish, fall apart, & could even be taken away from you. But not only learn how to let go of your earthly pleasures, but be sure to accumulate carefully. In other words, enjoy earthly pleasures that will promote or advance God’s priorities, not your own. Repeatedly ask yourself what earthly pleasures will promote spiritual pleasures? Whatever does not, I would encourage you to give them up. To be sure, earthly pleasures can contribute to spiritual pleasures when they are used to fulfill God’s purposes. For example, the earthly pleasures you possess, such as your home, vehicle, & other resources, should be used for God’s glory, promoting his interests, & objects such as those can do just that. If you have a pantry loaded with food, then how can you fulfill your purpose of life with it? In fact, whatever earthly pleasures you have in abundance, I invite you to ask God to see how you may use it creatively for His glory. Love your neighbor by meeting their practical needs. Lastly, meditate, ponder, & focus every day on what is eternal: God, the Bible, the souls of people.

In conclusion, do you find life unsatisfying? Have you tried to fill it with earthly pleasures only to discover that the emptiness in your soul remains? Do you find yourself going from one earthly pleasure to another in an effort to satisfy your deepest human longings? Look to Jesus Christ. If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then I would invite you to examine His person & his work. He can handle your scrutiny. I have discovered in my own experience that He has satisfied my deepest longings because He is the physical image of the invisible God. He is God & He came to earth to die as a substitute for our sins so that we might have an eternal & intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe (Philippians 2:5-11). But if you do know Jesus Christ, keep your focus on Him! Do not allow yourself to become distracted by the tantalizing offers & allurements of earthly pleasures: they are vaporous—here today, gone tomorrow. **Enjoy**

the blessings God has given you, but build your life upon spiritual pleasures.

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