

Date: August 19, 2018

Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-20

Title: A GRATEFUL HEART

Many people today spend their lives in a desperate search for happiness, for pleasure, for fun. Many people in our society are simply bored. They mope around, fantasizing about some secret joy that lies out there.

A young man said to his father as he was leaving home, “I’m looking for adventure, excitement, and beautiful women, don’t try to stop me!” The father said, “Who wants to stop you? I’m going with you!”

The ironic thing about seeking such pleasure, is how little joy it really brings. In fact, those who seek it the hardest, are often among the unhappiest of people.

For an example of this, turn to the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. In these chapters Solomon, a man celebrated for his wisdom, tells of his search to find happiness. The first words we encounter when we open his book are these: The teacher says, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Solomon was the wisest man of his time, and yet, he couldn’t make sense of his life. He wasn’t a happy man, though, he diligently sought happiness.

He thought, the road to happiness would be found in intellectual pursuits. There’s a certain nobility, in seeking knowledge. We salute people who are the brightest in their field. But that doesn’t mean they’re happy, or content. Certainly Solomon wasn’t. He writes: “I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me . . . but I learned that this . . . is only a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.” That’s interesting! “The more knowledge, the more grief.”

When knowledge and wisdom didn’t bring him any happiness, Solomon followed an entirely different path, sensual pleasure. He said to himself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure, to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. He says cynically, “Laughter, is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?”

Then he tried the path of alcohol. He writes, “I tried cheering myself with wine . . . But this also produced frustration, as he notes in the Proverbs 1, verse 20: “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them, is not wise.”

Then he turned to more constructive activities. He says: “I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.” Still Solomon didn’t find the satisfaction for which his heart hungered.

From that, Solomon turned to the accumulation of wealth: “I bought male and female slaves . . . I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces . . .” Still he didn’t find what he was seeking.

Then he tried sex: “I acquired male and female singers, and a harem, as well delights of a man’s heart.” A thousand wives and concubines still left him unfulfilled.

Solomon lived life larger than anyone who came before him: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.” His pleasure-seeking experiments, were all eventually summed up in these words: “Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them: I kept my heart from no pleasure . . . My heart took delight in all my labor . . . Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done . . . and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

He even reached the point where he wrote later in this same chapter: “So I hated life . . . All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun . . .” (17-18).

What a sad, miserable man. He had everything that life in his time could offer. And he counted it all vanity. Solomon had everything the human heart could desire, except one. As I read his litany of despair, I couldn’t help but see many people today who are chasing happiness in a similar fashion, knowledge, alcohol, sensual pleasure, work, accumulation of wealth, and sex.

Paul saw the same emptiness in many of the people in his time, even among early Christian believers. And so he wrote: “Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Don’t get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are two keys, Paul gives to us, that lead to lasting happiness. **First, be smart with your life.** He writes, “Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Don’t get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery . . .”

Today, alcohol abuse is still a problem in our society, especially on college campuses, and on our highways. It’s also the primary cause in many tragic cases of domestic abuse. Today, it’s not only alcohol that’s destructive to many lives, but also opioids and many other forms of addiction. Paul says, “Be very careful . . . how you live . . .”

That’s simply good advice. It can be applied to substances that we put into our bodies or a host of other unwise situations, in which we might place ourselves. In other words, don’t be stupid! There are many people today involved in risky behaviors, that are dangerous to their health, dangerous to their marriages, dangerous to their reputation in the community. Some are dangerous to their immortal soul.

It’s said that John Morley once traveled from England to Canada to address the graduating class of a university. He began his speech by saying, “I have traveled 4,000 miles to tell you, that there’s a difference between right and wrong.”

Every sensible person knows it's true. If it's in any way hurtful to you or someone else, it's wrong. If it keeps you from fulfilling your potential as a follower of Jesus Christ, keep your distance. If it causes you to feel ashamed as you look in the mirror, stay away. Don't do anything dumb. All of us know, there's something within our very nature, that makes us prone to doing that which is wrong.

We don't use the word sin very much anymore, and yet our basic nature hasn't changed since the time of Adam. Just, "Don't do anything stupid." If something smells wrong, it usually is. Paul writes, "Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Don't get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery . . ."

Then he writes, "Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Can you imagine a more wholesome approach to life than the one Paul pictures for us here? I love watching musicians who love what they're doing. I love watching children, when they sing a song of faith. **Paul is describing people who are joyfully singing from their hearts, because they're filled with a sense of gratitude for all the blessings of God.**

Some of you at Christmas time will go to Netflix and pull up the classic heartwarming movie starring Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye, *White Christmas*. In that delightful motion picture, Bing Crosby introduced another Irving Berlin song, besides *White Christmas*, that has touched many people over the years. It goes something like this: "When I am troubled and cannot sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep, and I fall asleep counting my blessings."

That's still the best formula I know of for a good night's sleep. It sounds trite! But the happiest people I know, are people who are filled with gratitude. It doesn't mean, they're materially blessed, or their health is exceptional, or that their children are straight "A" students. It simply means, that they have learned to count the blessings, they do have, and have learned to say, "Thank you."

In 2008, a young Australian mother of three named Hailey Bartholomew was feeling really down. She had an envious life, including beautiful kids and a loving husband. But yet, she felt disappointed with her life. She finally decided to do something about her condition. She consulted with a nun, who counseled her, to make time every day, looking around her, finding something that makes her grateful for the gift of life. Hailey started a project called, "365grateful," taking pictures of the things which made her feel grateful every day.

It didn't take long for her outlook on life to be transformed. Before she initiated this practice, she had convinced herself, that her husband wasn't very romantic. But this view changed, the day she took photographs of him serving dinner. For the first time,

since they got married, Hailey noticed that her husband served her the largest piece of pie. It was his gentle way of showing his affection for her.

Then, there were her kids. The joy and happiness she saw on their faces, while they played, made her grateful for her job as a mother. Before, she thought of mothering as boring, but now, as she took photos of her children holding out their hands to her as they playfully explored their world, she discovered how much joy and wonder there was in her world. Through the art of gratitude, Hailey found herself lifted out of her rut and celebrating life.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote: “The test of all happiness is gratitude.” He’s right! Now let’s go back to Solomon who experienced every earthly pleasure, yet something was missing from his life. He was a miserable man. Have you guessed what it was that was missing from his life? He had never learned to say, “Thank you.” Even though he had a mountain, of what other people would count as blessings, he didn’t have what he really needed most, a grateful heart. I hope you’re not making the same mistake.

Paul writes, “Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Don’t get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Trust, Believe and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.