

## **Reframing the Good Life**

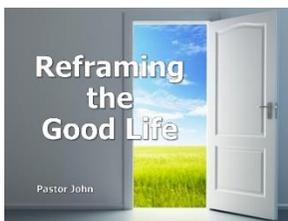
April 23, 2017

### Ecclesiastes 2: 1-11

*<sup>1</sup>I said to myself, "Have fun and enjoy yourself!" But this didn't make sense. <sup>2</sup> Laughing and having fun is crazy. What good does it do? <sup>3</sup> I wanted to find out what was best for us during the short time we have on this earth. So, I decided to make myself happy with wine and find out what it means to be foolish, without really being foolish myself.*

*<sup>4</sup> I did some great things. I built houses and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I had flower gardens and orchards full of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> And I had pools where I could get water for the trees. <sup>7</sup> I owned slaves, and their sons and daughters became my slaves. I had more sheep and goats than anyone who had ever lived in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> Foreign rulers brought me silver, gold, and precious treasures. Men and women sang for me, and I had many wives who gave me great pleasure.*

*<sup>9</sup> I was the most famous person who had ever lived in Jerusalem, and I was very wise. <sup>10</sup> I got whatever I wanted and did whatever made me happy. But most of all, I enjoyed my work. <sup>11</sup> Then I thought about everything I had done, including the hard work, and it was simply chasing the wind. Nothing on earth is worth the trouble.*



Solomon was perhaps the wealthiest and most powerful king the Jewish people had ever know. His wisdom was beyond what anyone had ever seen. Kings and queens came from all

over the world to hear him speak. Our passage for today speaks of Solomon's success. He built houses and vineyards. He owned slaves and sheep and goats. Kings and queens brought him riches and he enjoyed many wives. Solomon was indeed famous and did whatever he wanted to do. God had asked him what he wanted and Solomon's request was for wisdom to rule well. This request pleased God so He made Solomon much wiser than any man. God was so happy with what Solomon had asked for that He also blessed him with wealth and security to boot. Solomon surely lived the 'good life' – especially for the day and age in which he reigned.

Today, would we still consider Solomon's life to be the "good life"? There are a few aspects that we may consider unacceptable in our culture today. The slaves and many wives would be at the top of this list. But Solomon's power, wealth, possessions, status, respect, wisdom – don't these make society's list for what living the good life would look like? Have a look at the screens.



*[Slide is animated – when clicked on about ten pictures will automatically scroll through.]*

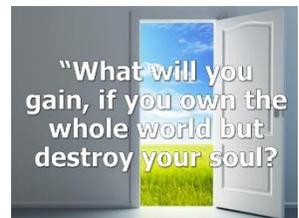
Just last weekend we gathered to celebrate Easter. On Good Friday, Jesus had willingly gone to the cross and died for our sins. While Jesus had come to show us how God wanted us to live, He knew His larger purpose: to defeat the power of sin and death. This is what Jesus did on the cross and in the tomb. Giving for others was something Jesus spoke of often and was something that He lived out. In John 12, as Jesus was preparing to face the cross, He spoke of a grain of

wheat falling to the ground. In verse 24, Jesus said, *“for certain a grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies”*. Jesus was also speaking of His life. He knew that He had to die for there to be fruitful growth – those carrying the Word out into the world must replace His one voice. He goes on to say, *“But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat”*. Jesus knew that the church would only grow when the disciples took up the mantle and began to spread the good news. He concluded this section from John 12 by saying, *“Whoever serves me must follow me”*.



Now, of course, we cannot go to the cross, but we can ‘follow’ Jesus. What would that look like to follow? Jesus gives us an overview in Mark 8. Reading verses 34 through 37:

*<sup>34</sup> Jesus then told the crowd and the disciples to come closer, and he said: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it. <sup>36</sup> What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? <sup>37</sup> What could you give to get back your soul?*



In these verses, we hear echoes of Solomon's wisdom from our opening passage. Jesus says owning the whole world is like chasing the wind. Jesus is clear that there is a very important choice that we must make. In terms of eternity, no one wants to destroy their soul. No one wants to face destruction. Yet it is a choice many make, isn't it?

In Matthew 5, a section commonly known as the Beatitudes, Jesus spells out what we must do to live a blessed life. Following Jesus begins with knowing what mattered to Jesus and knowing the priorities He lived by. In verse eight we read, "*You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right*". To get our inside world right, we must begin with the Bible. We must read it and study it to gain an understanding of how Jesus lived so that we too can strive to live that way. He then goes on to say, "*Then you can see God in the outside world*". This is how Jesus saw the world. He saw the world through God's eyes. When we look at Jesus' life, we see what it means to love God first, to love neighbor second, and to love 'self' last. This is counter to the world's view. The world views success, wealth, long life, and power as what is important. But if we only think back to a time in our life when we would do anything we needed to do to get that promotion or to buy the latest phone, we soon realize that, like Solomon, we were really "*simply chasing the wind*".





The great evangelist Paul instead suggests that we chase God. In Philippians 4, Paul suggests that our ability to live the good life begins with the “mental diet” we choose. In verse eight, Paul writes, *“If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise”*. Of course, there is only one thing that is true and holy and just and pure and lovely and worthy of praise: Jesus.

For Paul, living the good life not only meant getting to know and understand Jesus, but it also meant being filled with God’s peace and joy. Paul wrote to the



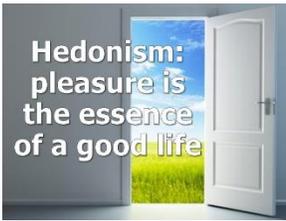
Philippians from a Roman prison cell. A cell would be just about as far from the good life as we could get, wouldn’t it? But for Paul, it was not about his situation or his condition. It was about his relationship with Jesus and his connection to God. The relationship was built upon communication. In verse six we hear about the relationship Paul had with God: *“Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God”*. He went on to explain that when we hand over our anxieties to God and trust in God’s love and care, then God’s peace and contentment will flow into and through us.

At the end of his life, Paul wrote to his dear friend and protégé Timothy. He was again writing from a prison cell. Paul had spent himself pursuing Jesus and his own relationship with God. In these words that he wrote to Timothy, we hear the satisfaction that came from the good life that Paul has lived. Reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4, verses seven and eight, we hear: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and kept the faith. At last the champion's wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me"*. Paul looks back over his life and how he lived it. He is at peace. Through his relationship with Jesus and through his trust in God, he knows that the crown of eternal life awaits him.



When we look at how Paul's life ended - poor, alone, and in prison - many people today would see failure and even more would cringe at the thought of their life ending in such circumstances. Perhaps we would too if we were honest. But living the good life, according to God's plan, has different focuses, different priorities. The focus in modern culture, in the world, is on self. Success in the world today is defined much as Solomon defined it: owning bigger buildings, lording over others, accumulating wealth and possessions, being famous, doing whatever makes one happy.

Today, philosophers and psychologists would call this "*hedonism*". Hedonism is



the idea that focuses on pleasure as the essence of a good life. Like Solomon, we all lived this way once upon a time.

Maybe we still do to some extent. But the problem is, once we attain whatever "it" was that we worked so hard for, we soon stop desiring that thing and begin to desire something else. It is a never-ending cycle. One popular psychological term for this is "restless heart syndrome". This is something we all struggle with from time to time. Once we have finally attained the latest and greatest, soon enough it fades and we begin looking for the next latest and greatest. It is just more "*chasing the wind*".



The Greek and Roman philosophers of Jesus' day had found that the key to true happiness and contentment in life –

finding the good life – and to defeating the pull of 'things' was to be grateful for what you already have. Even they knew that peace and contentment did not rest upon what one had or even who one was. This is the truth we also find in the Bible. God wants us to have a good life. He wants to bless us and to provide for us. In Luke 12:24, we read,

*"Look at the crows! They don't plant or harvest, and they don't have storehouses or barns. But God takes care of them. You are much more important than any birds."* He

also has good plans for us. In Jeremiah 29:11, we read, *"I will bless you with a future filled with hope — a future of success, not of suffering."* Jesus also makes it clear that we are intended to have a good life. In John 10:10 we read,

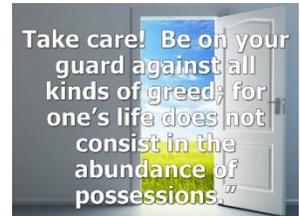


*"I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could have life to the fullest".*

Jesus also makes it clear that abundant life, life to the fullest, is not found in focusing on our possessions. In Luke 12:15, Jesus said,

*"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions".*

This leads us to the question: where can the good life be found?



The ancient philosophers knew the answer, the writers in the Bible knew the answer, and we even know the answer deep down in our souls. It is only when



we reframe the question, when we ask it from the eternal perspective, that we approach the question from the correct viewpoint. When we come at the question from the eternal perspective, we find that the key to living the good life in any

day and age is the same: we find true happiness as we discover and begin to live into the purpose for which we were created. As we go through this discovery process, we learn that true happiness – the good life – is not found in the pursuit of pleasure or possessions or anything else earthly. All that is fleeting. It is, again, chasing the wind.

The good life is discovered when we find our true purpose – the purpose that God created us for and the purpose that Jesus demonstrated when He lived on this earth. We were created to love God and to love neighbor. It is in doing so

that we find our true meaning in life, our purpose. It is in the pursuit of loving God and loving neighbor that we find what living the good life is all about.

What is the good life? It is loving God and neighbor, it is following Jesus, it is making disciples for the transformation of the world, it is doing justice, it is loving kindness, it is caring for people. As we draw near to our conclusion, I must ask: Are YOU living the good life? Ponder it: Are YOU living the good life?



In general, I think that question has two basic responses. Certainly, for many here today, the answer is 'yes', you are living the good life – loving God and neighbor, following Jesus, living out your faith. For you, two follow-up questions are: How will you include others in living the good life this week? What steps will you take to help another to begin living the good life?

For other folks here today, you may not be living the good life. You may see the appeal but there are barriers, there are obstacles. You might even be intrigued by all of this loving God and neighbor, following Jesus stuff - but you are not sure where to begin. So, a question for you: what is your next step? Maybe it is talking to the friend that invited you to church. Maybe it is calling and setting a time to come into my office to talk about it. Whatever your next step is, I encourage you to be courageous and to step forward boldly in faith and trust. It is a journey that will forever change your life. It is my hope and prayer for you that you will take that first step. I wish you blessings on the journey.

For all gathered here today, in the week ahead, as we seek to be followers of Christ, may we each strive to live into the purpose that God created us for. May we bring God the honor and the glory in all we do this week as we live a life worthy of Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) What does it mean for you to “fall on the ground... and die” in this time and place? How does this decision shape your daily approach to life?
- 2) What are some of the major influences or events that have helped you “put your inside world” right? How does this help you to “see” differently?
- 3) When have you let go of your own agenda and found that God has given you something better, deeper, greater? Pray for more of the same!