

November 17, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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LIFE IS STILL GOD'S WORK Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

Maybe you have “been there done that” in this hypothetical situation. You are driving on a two-lane road that has double yellow lines most of the way. The speed limit of 55 M.P.H. is clearly posted on the big white signs. But the guy in front of you chooses to creep along at 45 M.P.H. You think, “Come on man, either lead, follow, or get out of the way.” Finally, the old fellow pulls off at the “Do Drop Inn.” You resume a comfortable speed, obeying the posted speed limit. That’s when the redneck fellow in the beat-up pickup pulls up behind you riding your bumper like he is about to run over you. Now you’re thinking, “Come on man, I’m doing the speed limit.”

Why can’t other people get it right like I always do? We are a nation of laws. Most people are familiar with the important laws. So, why can’t people just obey the laws no matter what area of life is at issue? Furthermore, there are many unspoken (or sometimes spoken) rules that should govern ethical conduct, proper etiquette, due respect, or proper decorum. Why do people ignore those rules, especially when I am the person to whom ethics, etiquette, respect, and decorum should be shown?

And of greatest importance to us who love God, “Why does it seem like everyone gets away with breaking almost all of God’s laws without facing any expected retribution?” That is the agitating question the Preacher/King kept running into during his deep investigation of life. Why is the wicked hypocrite praised when he dies? Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people? Why isn’t punishment brought to bear quickly on those who do evil? We ask the same kinds of questions.

The answer to these difficult questions is twofold. First, be patient. God is keeping the score. God does not sit by unconcerned that wicked sinners ignore or attack His law as if they have impunity. God will level retribution in due time, even if that time is not until the end. For now He is being patient and we need to be patient. Second, trust God to control His creation according to His plan for His glory. All activity, all conclusions, all judgment is part of God’s work. We can be content to trust that God fully understands the very things that cause us so much confusion. He has not lost control, nor will He lose control of any of these things.

Where is Justice? (vv.10-11,14)

What are we supposed to do when, contrary to our sense of justice, sin is praised? The Preacher wrote that this can be the case when we observe the death of the wicked. He recorded, *Then I saw the wicked buried (v.10a)*. The Preacher/King has already addressed the end of the vain life, the life lived without God. He saw how the wise and fool alike die and are soon forgotten (2:16). He understood that there is a time to be born and a time to die (3:2). He concluded that in one way humans and animals do not differ in that both die (3:19). He knew that the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing and they are forgotten (9:5).

Thoughts of death and dying are morbid, negative, and generally avoided (except in blockbuster movies and classic novels). That is true, but, in fact, seeing the wicked buried can be very profitable. “The sight of a funeral is a very healthful thing for the soul.” (C.H. Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit*, p.281.) A memorial service, standing at the grave of a friend or loved one, even the sight of a hearse is a good reminder that we are all very fragile. Observing death reminds us that we are all headed to the same end because of the effects of sin on life. While contemplation of one’s death is not pleasant, only a fool would deny it or try to avoid consideration of the reality.

Everyone dies, but how do we remember those who do die? Like Solomon, we might tend to disagree with the popular opinion of the deceased as they are honored. Solomon remembered that *they used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city*

where they had done such things. This also is vanity (v.10b). The Preacher has in mind a person who was known to frequent the “holy place.” That might be a reference to a Jewish person who frequented the temple precincts, the place Solomon built for God’s glory. It might even refer to a priest who actually entered the building.

At any rate, the person had a reputation for being religious at the least. Isn’t almost every person who dies remembered as a saint, someone who loved God, someone who loved others? It is a rather rare occasion when the minister is bold enough to tell the audience of friends and loved ones that the deceased was an irreligious hypocrite.

So, too, it appears that the Preacher does label the subject in this statement as a religious hypocrite. Probably the statement should be interpreted as it appears in the ESV text: *and were praised in the city where they had done such things*. The deceased was praised for attending the temple. But notice that on this matter the Preacher concluded, *this also is vanity*. Such praise is empty, useless, futile, because they person was not as religious as he appeared to be. That is why the next statement addresses evil that has not been dealt with speedily.

However, it is possible to interpret Solomon’s statement to say that the deceased person *was forgotten (KJV)*. That is generally the meaning of the Hebrew word used here. That is also a theme Solomon has presented previously. But the overall context of our chosen text is the futility of people getting away with unrighteous living. Therefore, we conclude that the Preacher’s gripe is that a religious hypocrite who did evil died and was praised just because he went to church. We can identify with that problem and can also be irritated because of it.

We conclude through common sense that justice withheld leads to greater evil. Also Solomon realized that things don’t work out well when evil is not punished. Evil grows *because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily (v.11a)*. Every society has laws that establish the standard of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable actions.

When a person does *evil*, we expect a response. Evil is action (though it flows from thought) that is bad, malignant, harmful and, therefore, not acceptable. Moses juxtaposed bad practices against the

righteousness presented in the Law telling the people, “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15). In the beginning, God explained the same contrast regarding the forbidden tree. God warned Adam and Eve, “*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*” (Genesis 2:17). Our first parents disobeyed God, ate the forbidden fruit, and since that day we know the difference between good and evil. *Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22)*.

And since the day sin entered the world and God judged it, we fully expect the law-breaker to receive punishment. When justice is slow in coming, we are subtly taught that there is no penalty for doing evil. Now we know from experience that the slower the legal system moves, the quicker the crime rate increases.

As a result of slow or non-existent justice against evil, evil proliferates. Solomon understood that when justice is not speedy, *the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil (v.11b)*. Humanity’s natural bent is to do evil. No one has to teach us to sin. We lie, cheat, steal, hate, lust, and are jealous, envious, covetous by nature. That certainly fits the Preacher’s previous conclusion, *All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt (Ecclesiastes 8:9)*. And those hurtful traits are obvious in a child who is only two years old.

How sad to realize that we are so evil by nature that the only way we can live in somewhat civilized societies is by the constant threat of punishment for doing wrong. Take away the reality of punishment for sin, and sin grows like kudzu and bamboo. And someone is going to ask, “Where is justice?”

Furthermore, isn’t it obvious that good things happen to bad people? It is also true that bad things happen to good people. Why do righteous people suffer retribution? *There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked (v.14a)*. Of course, we know that there is no one who is wholly righteous. But there are sincere, well-meaning people who strive for righteousness. We know people who really desire to be conformed to the standard of God’s character.

Why are people like that punished as if they are wicked? Does not our heart ache when we read stories about the pain and sorrow our brothers and sisters in Christ face in other cultures? We know that thousands of fellow Christians are being incarcerated and even tortured right now simply because they love Jesus. We know of pastors who have been arrested, Christians who have lost their jobs and homes, churches whose buildings have been burned simply because they tell the good news that there is salvation from sin's penalty only by faith in Jesus.

Maybe worse than the foregoing situations is the reality that the wicked are rewarded. *And there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity (v.14b)*. Why are athletes who use banned drugs exalted as winners when they broke the law? Why are Mafia bosses, pimps, producers of pornography, and drug lords wealthy beyond imagination and living the good life? Where is God? Is He not just? Why doesn't God level justice where it is deserved?

At times we are tempted to agree with Asaph's conclusion: *For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind (Psalm 73:3-5)*. "Where is the justice in all this painful reality?" we wonder. God's answer to us is . . .

Be Patient. (vv.12-13, 15)

God's justice is pending (vv.12-13). Temporarily, in this life, it looks like too often bad things happen to people who love God. However, in the long run, it will go well for those who respect God. *Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him (v.12)*. Obviously, there are a lot of sinners who appear to be getting along just fine. They are your unregenerated friends, neighbors, co-workers and family. But what will be their lot after they die?

We know that it will be well for those who fear God. Fear of God is the beginning, the first step, the foundation of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). Often in the Old Testament "fear of God" is

tantamount to salvation by faith in God's promises. All of God's promises fulfilled in Christ point to eternal life characterized by incredible, indescribable blessings. Eternal life is as "well" as life can ever be. Eternal life is the gift of God's mercy because He poured out justice against sin on His Beloved Son for our sakes.

The wicked person will also live forever. But the wicked person will not be blessed in eternity. We can rest assured that in the end the wicked will be judged. *But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God (v.13)*. Sooner or later, the Lord will pour out promised justice against all sinners. Moses promised, *"For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. And I will heap disasters upon them; I will spend my arrows on them." "Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly"* (Deuteronomy 32:22,23,35).

But, in this life, God patiently waits for sinners to acknowledge their sin, repent, and trust Him. Moses had the privilege of seeing the reflection of the Lord's glory. *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6)*. And so God patiently works with the wicked. And as He does, it is sad that sinners do not realize that God withholding justice due them is a demonstration of His longsuffering. *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)*.

So, because God will pour out His blessings and because God will pour out justice, in this life enjoy God's blessings. We all know that life "under the sun" can be frustrating. But even in that kind of setting, Solomon decided, *And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun (v.15a)*. Focus on the problems, unfairness, injustice of life, and you will be miserable – and rightly so. Life under the sun really offers no good thing. It offers passing stuff at best. The really good things are eternal blessings from God. We will never experience lasting joy by trying to find satisfaction in even the divine gifts apart from the Divine Giver.

The good news is that God rewards us even in frustrating circumstances. *But to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun (v.15b)*. God has given life under the sun. Along the way God also gives blessings to enjoy while we toil under the sun. Take for example the exhortation to, *Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:9)*.

Try to enjoy those blessings while ignoring God the Giver and you will still be frustrated. Better to rejoice in the Giver of the gift first so that we can enjoy what He gives. Here we can compare God's plan for His people to rejoice and celebrate at the festivals that were intended to focus on Him. Were those times so very different from the joy we have of gathering together on the Lord's Day to rejoice in His work, His blessings, His promises? Do we not rejoice as we praise Him in song? Our times at the Lord's Table are times of great joy as we remember the Lord's ultimate blessing of purchasing our eternal life. Why live under the burden of injustice in life when you can rejoice in corporate joy as God's people talk about our joys in Christ?

Trust God. (vv.16-17)

Human wisdom does not have the answers. Like Solomon, we can prove the deficiency of human wisdom by simply investigating the "treadmill" of life. *When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep (v.16)*. "Applying his heart to know wisdom" was Solomon's big experiment. He arrived at unfavorable conclusions like, the business of life robs people of sleep. That is another way of saying, "If the passing issues of life are your focus, you will be stressed out." An important conclusion from reading Solomon's experiment is that none of us can figure out everything. Nor can any of us control everything or everyone. In fact, none of us can control even the simple matters of our own lives.

And no one can explain the enigmas of life. Try your hardest to figure out life and you will come up empty. *Man cannot find out the*

work that is done under the sun (v.17b). How hard and long you seek is irrelevant. *However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out (v.17c)*. There is not enough human wisdom to explain life. *Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out (v.17d)*.

We must conclude that empirical observation is quite limited. At some point, we must come to the conclusion and be fully assured that God knows what He is doing. At that point, remember that it is all the work of God. Like the Preacher we must say, *Then I saw all the work of God (v.17a)*. Pay attention to God's work. It is actively happening all around you. It is obvious in nature, the created world. It is obvious in people. It is obvious in circumstances. It is obvious in you.

See all the work of God, then interpret all the work of God through the lens of His Word to you. The Bible causes us to see God at work. The Bible helps us understand much about what God is doing. The Bible encourages us to rest in sincere trust in God when we can't explain what He is doing.

Then, resting in the truth of God's Word, acknowledge God's control over His work. There is great comfort in resting in God's control – resting in the assurance that God is in control. Faith in God's promises and works provides the only real "safe place" in life and in eternity.

My Aunt Zelda claimed to be an atheist. She argued that when a person dies, that is the end. Period. Like a tree falling over in the woods and rotting away. One day as she was preparing to go into major heart surgery, she said, "Dave, if I don't make it through this surgery and I die, if nothing else, I will prove you wrong. There is no life after death." That is an interesting argument in light of her standing argument that at death she would cease to exist. How can something non-existent prove anything? It appears to me that even in her denial of life after death, her conscience testified that there really is a God, and He is still in control even after we die.

Life is God's work. God is actively engaged. No doubt God has a perfect standard of perfect justice. No doubt it appears that some people get away with evil and wickedness all their lives. No doubt it also appears that some people who love and fear God suffer injustice in many ways. But never doubt that God who is in control of life is

keeping the score. Don't become agitated at the apparent score because the game is not over yet.