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Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM Ecclesiastes 7:19-29

Who was the wisest man who ever lived? Google that question and be ready for a broad range of opinions. Some people are sure that it was Socrates, the brilliant logician and father of Western thought who died in 399 BC. He said things like, “The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less.” That sounds pretty wise.

Socrates had a great influence on Plato who lived about 50 years beyond his teacher’s death. Plato established the first institution of higher learning, the Academy. He in turn taught Aristotle. These three philosophers are considered by some thinkers as the wisest teachers in the human race.

In more modern times, names like Einstein, Hawking, Dawkins and maybe Ruth Lawrence might be considered. There is little argument against the reality that these brilliant minds think on a level way beyond where we somewhat normal people think. But do they know how to live? How well have they, do they, function in real life?

Furthermore, if there have been brilliant people like this on earth for centuries researching, investigating, probing, arriving at answers, why hasn’t someone found the cure for the common cold? Why can’t we control the weather so that people can avoid the pain and loss of droughts, hurricanes, and tornados? Or even simpler, why do cats purr and why are moths attracted to light? Or in the words of Auger, the ancient philosopher, *There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: “The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid” (Proverbs*

30:18-19 AV). Wise men and women have pondered these questions and arrived with few answers.

Obviously, human wisdom cannot solve every problem. In fact, even the wisdom God gives does not resolve every problem or conflict because we are living in a system that is so thoroughly infected by sin. Ecclesiastes is the record of Solomon’s investigation into these hard questions about life. Most of the time he relied on human wisdom. Most of the time he hit a brick wall in his investigations. Wisdom is good and beneficial in the daily duties of life. But wisdom does not provide all the answers. If we have all the answers, we have no need for faith in God. As we will learn by the time we reach the end of this book, God desires for us to trust Him enough to obey Him. That is sufficient wisdom for life.

The Value and Limitations of Wisdom.

We are not surprised to find Solomon talking about wisdom. He, of all people, would know that wisdom gives strength. But what kind of wisdom? There is a contrast between human wisdom and Godly wisdom. Wisdom that is born in, created by, practiced by humans is about the only kind of wisdom most people ever experience. This amounts to the gathering of truths, facts, realities, and the ability to put those principles to work to benefit real life. This is the wisdom we speak of when we ponder who is the wisest person on earth.

But all human wisdom is deficient when it attempts to understand and explain eternal spiritual truths of God. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write about the contrast of human wisdom and God’s wisdom. *For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:19-20)*. Human wisdom is passing, fickle, and of necessity changing continually.

Ultimately, all human wisdom is limited and will perish in the end. This is the wisdom Solomon used and probed as he sought for answers to life’s conundrums. He and we do better to rely on Godly wisdom. What is it and where do we find it? In His Word, according

to His promises, God offers wisdom that exceeds the bounds of human invention and understanding. It is significant that God gives one of the great invitations to embrace that wisdom within the context of facing life's dilemmas. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (James 1:5).*

That wisdom exceeds the limits of human wisdom. James also contrasted the wisdom of God with human wisdom. It is not a pretty picture. He asked, *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere (James 3:13-17).*

God promises that we can find this supreme wisdom in His word. Solomon's introduction to the Proverbs challenged his son *To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance (Proverbs 1:2-5).* But even before we go searching for wisdom in the Bible, we must first acknowledge that this wisdom is available only to those who truly respect God for who He is. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10).*

Godly wisdom is obviously superior to passing, changing human wisdom. But even human wisdom offers advantages. The preacher concluded, *Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city (v.19).* This is a picture of the rare privilege of a walled, safe city being governed by ten wise rulers as opposed to one wise, or even foolish, king. There is no argument that the ancient middle easterner would consider that to be an ideal situation.

The strength mentioned here is most likely moral strength. Sure, the collective human wisdom of ten rulers would provide military

proWess. But more important to the well being of any city or any kingdom is moral stability, laws that offer equity and justice for all. In light of the previous contrast, we realize that Godly wisdom, wisdom rooted in and stayed on the fear of God, will ultimately be greater than the wisdom of collective experience (ten rulers).

But Solomon warned that in the experiences of life wisdom is limited. He learned from experience that human wisdom cannot explain the anomalies of life. He confessed, *All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? (vv.23-24).* Again the preacher confessed that he pulled together all the experience, knowledge, and truth at his disposal to investigate life.

The words, **all this**, serve as a synopsis of everything Solomon wrote up to this point. It refers back to his original proposal: *And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven (1:13a).* And his conclusion about what he learned about life without God has not changed. Still Solomon admitted, *I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness (v.25).* Or as he said at the outset: *It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (1:13b-15).*

Picture the child sorting out his Legos according to size and color. He puts every piece in order according to the shape, size, and color. That is what the Preacher tried to do with the issues of life. That is what *I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things* looks like. However, for Solomon it all turned out more like the amateur accountant who attempts to make sense of all the receipts, statements, and invoices. He or she vainly tries to put all the numbers in either the debit column or the credit column but gets frustrated when the numbers will not add up.

Even Godly wisdom is limited in a world of sin. In so many ways life reveals or demonstrates the unchanging, unchangeable, unexplainable "crooks in the lot." It is important to stop regularly and *Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? (7:13).* Like the Preacher we spend most of our lives

searching, asking, fretting over matters that have no answer. We often must look like fools to God who keep running into the same brick walls over and over. At some point, wisdom must be content to say, “I cannot explain; I have no answer; I trust you, Lord.”

Practical Application of Wisdom.

Having laid again the foundation or basis of his investigation, the preacher turned to the practical applications of wisdom. This is where we find the limitations of wisdom in a sinful world. First, he concluded that we need to give the benefit of the doubt. This is easier to do when we admit that no one is fully righteous. Based on his investigation, Solomon decided, *Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins (v.20)*.

That certainly appears to be a cynical, pessimistic conclusion. It sounds like the opinion of someone who believes that life has been very unfair. There are people who appear to always have “bad luck” and they often adopt a very negative view of life. That attitude was illustrated several years ago by Buck Owens and Roy Clark who wrote a song that sounds like something Solomon might have sung.
*Gloom, despair, and agony on me
Deep, dark depression, excessive misery
If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all
Gloom, despair, and agony on me*

People who convince themselves that the passing stuff and experiences of life offer satisfaction are prone to accuse Christians of thinking so pessimistically. But we are not the ones who believe in luck – bad or good! We believe that people who have bad luck tend to make bad choices.

In reality, the preacher’s proposal that no one on earth is righteous is exactly God’s assessment of the human race. We are a twisted, perverted version of what He created. We really are sunk in sin. The wise man’s question is where to find the righteous man, the one who *does good*? That phrase might speak of sins of omission. We do not do the good we know we should do, and, therefore, we are not righteous. Similar to that is the question about where to find the righteous man who *never sins*. This probably refers to sins of

commission. We do the sins we know we should not do and, therefore, we are not righteous.

That is God’s overall assessment of the beings He created. Paul described our natural condition, *As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12)*. It really does not take a lot of investigation and searching to discover that wisdom fails because of sin.

And sin makes life challenging. Because this is our natural-born condition, relationships are difficult to maintain. Therefore, we need to work at being slow to take offense. We need to develop the unique personality of being firm on the inside but soft on the outside. *Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you (v.21)*.

The natural response if we hear such a thing is to defend ourselves. Criticism or careless words will stir our natural desire to correct the offender, or worse, wish to fight. Worse is the fact that from childhood we are taught that self-defense is the right response. Of course, in cases where there is danger of abuse, or physical harm, self-defense is perfectly legitimate. That is not the case in this verse. This is a case of a superior overhearing a subordinate slander or talk down about him. That is neither righteous or acceptable – but it happens because of sin.

How we respond to this kind of sin is the issue. A good conclusion might be to respond, “No, I am not offended by what he said because he was talking about a different man. I am not the man who would do what he claimed I did.”

But what if the criticism we hear is true? How do we respond when we are criticized, or worse, when the truth is told about us? Too often we respond with denial, defensiveness (pride), or we are divisive and spread rumors about the offender. None of those are righteous responses. Jesus set the standard for our responses when He was reviled but He did not revile in return, but entrusted His care to the Heavenly Father (1 Peter 2:23).

By the way, it is good for us to also remember that when we point a finger of accusation, three fingers point back to the accuser. So Solomon concluded, *Your heart knows that many times you have*

yourself cursed others (v.22). Who among us has not been guilty of saying unkind things about others? Especially in this day of social media we must be very careful to put a guard over our mouth. In fact, it almost looks like Solomon prophesied the advent of social media. *Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter (Ecclesiastes 10:20)*.

If we truncate the thought at the outset, we are less likely to say something we will regret. Also, we need to consider that too often our criticism of others is what we actually hate in ourselves. Better for us to determine ahead of time to agree with Jonathan Edwards. While he was still a young man he resolved: “Never to say anything at all against anybody, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor, and of love to mankind, agreeable to the lowest humility, and sense of my own faults and failings, and agreeable to the Golden Rule.”

And while we are talking about the stress and strain of maintaining relationships in a fallen world, who can understand the man/woman relationship? It is all too obvious that righteousness is often absent in gender relations. It almost appears that the preacher is guilty of the very practice of unjust criticism as he tells us how the “Huntress” is dangerous. *And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her (v.26)*.

This is not an expression of misogyny (contempt of ingrained prejudice against women). In a couple of chapters we will read one of the positive conclusions of Solomon in this book. *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 (9:9)*. He who encourages the husband’s joy and satisfaction with the woman God graciously gives to make life better is not a misogynist.

Rather, Solomon is speaking about a particular kind of woman who a man should avoid at all costs. Considering all the relationships Solomon had with women, this might be a kind of woman he dealt with on occasion. The “Huntress” is the same kind of woman Solomon described in detail in Proverbs 5,6,7. She is an aggressor

who, like a huntress, lures a man into a relationship with her by her smooth speech, her attractive appearance, her winsome deportment. That is the kind of trap she sets. But the woman has no desire to maintain a relationship with the man. For her the purpose of her hunting is not to gain a man. Rather, for her the thrill is in the hunt. Once she has captured the prey, she trashes the guy because she never really wanted him.

This kind of person very often has been victimized in the past. She was likely abused emotionally or sexually. She responds to forced control over her by exercising control over others. Luring men into her trap where she will break them down is her way of proving (maybe only to herself) that she is in control. The very good news in this verse is the promise that God will deliver the man who walks in fellowship with him from this trap.

But this kind of woman is not the only one with relational problems. We can all be dangerous. *Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things – which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found (vv.27-28)*.

This conclusion really sounds bad. Does the Preacher propose that men are 1/10 of 1% more righteous than woman? We can hear the politically correct police rattling their handcuffs. Actually, compared to other ancient Middle Eastern literature written around the time of Ecclesiastes, this statement is kind to women. Furthermore, another contemporary writer of that time wrote God’s view of women. *An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels (Proverbs 31:10)*. Then in verses eleven through twenty-seven, Lemuel listed all her amazing traits and concludes: *Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised (Proverbs 31:28-30)*. The excellent wife is excellent because of her relationship with the Lord.

Did Solomon conclude from his personal experience that it is hard to find a righteous woman? History records that *He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart (1 Kings 11:3)*. It appears that the wisest of men sometimes

illustrated the definition of insanity: “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

The root problem is that sin disrupts right relationships. *See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes (v.29)*. Sin is the ultimate reason why true wisdom is so rare in the human race. Therefore, sin is the ultimate reason for conflicts in relationships whether those conflicts are men against women, men against men, women against women or men, or all humans against God.

This text should not minimize the importance of wisdom. Wisdom is a precious commodity. Many times in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and other parts of the Bible, God commends wisdom. God challenges us to pursue wisdom, chase after it with all our might. But at the same time, we must acknowledge that because we are fallen sinners living in a fallen world, even when we exercise wisdom, we cannot explain everything. We can be as wise as Daniel and still be thrown into the den of lions by those who only think they are wise. All of this is intended not to frustrate us, but to lead us to deep trust of God, full dependence on Him.