

A Glitch in the System

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

If you're visiting us this morning we are working our way through the book of Ecclesiastes and we're about halfway through chapter 7 so let's begin by reading vv. 15-20.

¹⁵ In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness. ¹⁶ Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?

¹⁷ Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?

¹⁸ It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.

¹⁹ Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

²⁰ Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.

Geico has a series of commercials where someone is asked an awkward question and needs to find a great way to get out of answering it. In one of the commercials, a young girl asks her father, "dad, where do babies come from?" He answers, "ask your mom." "She's not here, she's shopping." "Oh, well the fact is...switching to Geico can save you 15% or more on insurance." "And that makes people happy?" "Yes, very happy!" Awkward question avoided!

What we're going to find as we go through this passage is that Solomon makes some statements that lead to some really awkward questions. So awkward that I thought about just zeroing in on the couple verses that aren't uncomfortable and saying something like, "time doesn't permit us to get into the other verses..." but that seemed like the coward's way out. So, let's jump in.

The theme of these verses are that there is something wrong in this world. God has given principles and laws but there is a glitch in the system, a fly in the ointment, a flaw that affects everything. And I want us to notice that beginning in verse 15, Solomon seems to be taking this to a more personal level than he has up to now. Many times up to now he has talked about life "under the sun" being meaningless and everything under the sun being meaningless, but in verse 15 it seems to hit closer to home than it has before:

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

I think this is important because up to now, Solomon has been that guy with the clipboard doing an experiment. God gifted him with incredible wisdom, and he has decided to examine every avenue of life "under the sun" - which means life from an earthbound perspective. If this life is all there is, what under the sun has or gives meaning to life? So he goes down all these roads: he goes down the road of having a lot of money and possessions. He goes down the road of parties and riotous living. He goes down the road of pleasure, sex, and indulging every desire. Then he goes down the road of building and accomplishing great things. He goes down the road of working hard. He tries living wisely and he tries living very foolishly. And it all comes up empty. In the final analysis, none of these things are able to make life meaningful and provide the answers to the big questions he is asking. Because ultimately, whichever road you choose, it all ends up in the same place: the hollowing out of everything you've accomplished and the grave.

So everything in life is meaningless, but here he puts down the clipboard and gets more personal. This isn't Solomon the clinician, this is Solomon the frustrated man. It's one thing to say "everything is meaningless, and another thing to say, "my life is meaningless." So what he's going to say is from the heart. This has affected him and he's going to rant.

The first thing that bothers him is that he has seen people who tried to live righteously and obey God die young, and people who don't care about God and hurt and abuse people and do wicked things live to a ripe old age. And yet, God said that those who live righteously will live a long life.

"You must follow exactly the path that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are going to possess"
Deut 5:33

A young missionary family dies in a car accident. A godly Christian woman finds out she has cancer. People who seem to be living for God and trying to love and obey Him have their lives cut short by tragedy, and people who are wicked and ungodly just seem to keep prospering and live into their 80's or 90's. What's up with that?

Well, Solomon isn't going to try to answer that question, but he is going to equip us for living in a paradoxical world. He says, "don't be overrighteous or overwise" and don't be overwicked or foolish. Look at verse 18: *It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.*

It can sound like he's saying don't be too righteous and be sure to mix a little wickedness into your life just to keep it balanced, but that's not what Solomon is saying. One of the wrong conclusions we can come to when we see tragedy hit a godly person's life is that they just weren't godly enough. God is punishing them for not being righteous enough. And so we can compensate by pushing ourselves to be more righteous, uber-righteous, super-righteous, so that we avoid a similar end. Or we can go the other way and become so disillusioned that we say, "what difference does it make?" and just give ourselves to a life of sin.

There is such a thing as being "super-righteous". The Pharisees were super-righteous. Jesus said they tithed on their mint and dill. If they had a little garden growing mint, they counted out one tenth of it and gave it to the Lord. We're not talking wheat or barley where there'd be a lot of harvest and 10% would be significant, we're talking about tiny, precise measurements of the smallest increase in their wealth they were meticulous to tithe on. They were extreme. Like someone who finds a dime lying on the street and is careful to throw a penny into the offering on Sunday.

Super-righteous isn't a believer who is passionate about Jesus. We're told by Jesus that we shouldn't be lukewarm in our love for him, we should be hot. But, the super-righteous seem to always be emphasizing how high their standards are, how much they love Jesus, how little they care about normal, everyday stuff. Being around them is exhausting cause everything is hyper-spiritual. I find it's hard to relate to them because they just don't seem to be real. It's a form of legalism because they're trying to get in good with God by being the most righteous person in the room. We need to remember that Jesus told the super-righteous Pharisees that he didn't come for the righteous, he came for sinners. When the Pharisee and the sinful man both ended up at church at the same time, the super-righteous Pharisee thanked God that

he was so righteous, not at all like that sinner over there who won't even raise his eyes to God. I can look you straight in the face cause I'm so great. But the sinful man looked down in humility and pled with God to have mercy on him, a sinner. And Jesus said it was he who left there justified in God's sight. Don't be super-righteous or super-wise. Don't go to that extreme.

But what about the other side - are we to hold onto a little wickedness? No, Solomon has observed an incontrovertible fact in this world. We are all sinners. Verse 20 he says, *Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.* We don't have to hold onto a little sin, it will hold onto us. We are all sinners, and we need to hold onto that fact. I can never forget that I am not truly righteous and will never be in my own efforts this side of eternity. But that doesn't mean that I throw up my hands and dive into sin, thinking "in for a penny, in for a pound!" Avoiding both extremes for the believer means that we recognize that we are sinners saved by grace, that our righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, and so we are aware of our need for grace and forgiveness every day. But at the same time, we pursue sanctification - growing in godliness. Loving and obeying the Lord more and more, not less and less. People who think that grace means they can live however they want and bank on forgiveness have never known the true grace of God in their lives. People who are driven to be super-righteous so God will accept them have never known the grace of God in their lives. Whoever fears God will avoid both extremes.

Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—²² for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. vv.21-22

People are going to criticize you. People are going to bad mouth you. People are going to gossip about you. Don't go tracking down every negative thing anyone ever says about you. Charles Spurgeon gave some really good advice to his students who were training to become pastors, he said you need to be blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. Ignore a lot of gossip. Don't try to confront or address every criticism of you or your ministry. He likened it to a spider who is waiting on his web for the slightest tingle and vibration and then ran out to kill the prey that is caught. There are people whose antenna's are up for any perceived criticism, so sensitive to the slightest hurt, that they live in constant alert - was that a vibration on my web? Did I just feel a tingle of insult? Was that a tremor of criticism I felt? Who just set off my alarm? And we can start asking around and investigating and listening for and expecting people to bad mouth us. And, Solomon says, when you live like that you're gonna hear what you're expecting to hear. And if you're honest, you have done the same thing to others. We all have a built in tolerance for talking about others - it's not gossip, I'm just relaying facts - but a hyper-sensitivity to someone talking negatively about us. We live in a fallen world. We all make mistakes. We need to be careful to speak well of others and when there's a problem go to them about it instead of 34 other people about it but not them. But we shouldn't live in constant paranoia that someone's saying something negative about us.

Solomon then takes us with him on a personal journey to find or discover the sum of things. The Hebrew verb for "find out" is used 8 times between 23-29 and the Hebrew word for the sum of things or schemes is used 3 times. If you boil everything down to one sum, what would it be? He's looking for the theory of everything - the one thing that will answer everything. He looks and searches and uses all his wisdom but in the end he realizes that it is beyond him. Let's read vv. 23-25

*²³ All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"—
but this was beyond me. ²⁴ Whatever exists is far off and most profound—
who can discover it? ²⁵ So I turned my mind to understand,
to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things (or sum of things) and to
understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.*

The paradoxes and anomalies and ironies and tragedies and mysteries that are built into this world are beyond his ability to discover. Don't ever think you'll be able to figure everything out and put everything into nice, neat boxes. "This is why this bad thing happened to that good person. This is why so much good happened to that evil person." God's word gives us insight and understanding into life, but it doesn't try to put a bow on every mystery in life and neither should we. Solomon doesn't discover the sum of things, but here's where things get dicey. He's searching for the sum of all things, the theory of everything, and he comes up short, but what he does come up with makes it sound like the biggest problem in the world is women:

26. I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

And it doesn't get any better as he goes on:

*²⁷ "Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things— ²⁸ while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand,
but not one upright woman among them all.*

What's the deal, Solomon? You're searching for the sum of all things and what you "find" is that there are women that are worse than death? That it's hard to find an upright man in a thousand but you can't even find that among women? Why are you so down on women? Didn't you realize how hard that would make it for guys like me who are trying to preach through your book? The men in the room are mildly curious, "hmmm, I wonder what he means?" But the women in the room are sitting on the edge of their seats, their eyes boring into me, "yes, *please*, tell us what he means!" And I know the wrong answer and I am in deep trouble, beginning with my own wife. I've studied numerous commentaries and found a great answer to this: switching to Geico can save you up to 15% on insurance! And that makes people happy! Let's close in prayer...

Actually I didn't find great answers, and commentaries differ in explanations. Certainly the "woman more dangerous than death" mirrors the adulteress in Proverbs, but why this sudden outburst against women? I think this is where Solomon gets the most personal. Yes, it seems that Solomon has an issue with women, but I think what we're seeing here is a glimpse into his heart, and his heart is raw. This whole section seems to be more personal, opening up with "in my meaningless life..." and talking about godly people taken in the prime of their lives - Solomon has almost certainly experienced that. He goes on to counsel us how to take criticism - no doubt a subject he knows something about. The king would be a lightning rod for criticism and gossip.

But of all the pains and regrets in his meaningless life, the biggest one is his dealings with women. Remember the Bible tells us that it was his wives that turned his heart away from the Lord and after false

gods (1 Kings 11:4). Solomon had all this wisdom and yet acted incredibly foolishly when it came to women. He began to marry women from other countries just to forge political alliances. He allowed lust to replace real love. We know that because you can't really love 1000 women. I mean, stop and think about it: for a guy to have two wives is one too much. To have three or four wives is crazy. Five wives and you're ready to do a reality show. But Solomon didn't stop at 5 or 10 or 20 or 30 or a hundred or two hundred. It's ridiculous. When Solomon says that he found one man out of a thousand who was upright, but not one woman among a thousand, he was probably talking about this ridiculous stable of women he had accumulated, many, if not all, of whom he didn't really love and who didn't love him. Most of them didn't love the God of Israel, and turned his heart away from the God of Israel.

So I suspect what we hear here is the pain of a man who hasn't found a woman among all the hundreds he's married to who he really loves and trusts. And they probably don't love and trust him either. I heard a speaker once say that the love story contained in the Song of Solomon probably documents the one woman Solomon really loved and who really loved him, but by then she says with agony to her lady friends, don't awaken love before its time cause Solomon had messed up that one beautiful love story by awakening love 999 times before!

So ladies, don't be too hard on Solomon and don't take it personally. It's the rant of a hurting and disillusioned man. And his wives could probably rant the same way. When a woman gets hurt by man after man after man, she begins to learn mistrust. She gets callous and cynical about the motives of all men, and it's very hard to earn her trust.

Verse 29 brings us to the biblical, universal truth that God created man and woman upright, but we have gone in search of many schemes. We were created to be perfectly good and loving and honest and pure. The way God created us, before the Fall, we wouldn't need locks on our doors or passwords to guard our bank accounts because no one would ever steal anything. A mom who wanted to go into a store without her two year old, could leave him in the hands of any stranger and be perfectly secure knowing he or she was in good hands. There was no such thing as kidnapping or stealing or hurting or murder or cheating or adultery or lust or anger or corruption.

But the Fall left us schemers. Sin left us schemers. We scheme about what we want and we find underhanded ways to do it. There are women who are, like the woman Folly a dangerous snare. They set a trap and everything they do is calculated to ensnare and destroy a man. And I think there are (and this is where I would differ from Solomon) a hundred men for every one woman, whose hearts are even more dangerous. They manipulate and scheme and abuse and cheat and lie. The great flaw in this world, the big glitch in the system, is sin. We messed up and distorted the good that God had created, and distorted the image of God in us. Now instead of reflecting God in moral purity and goodness, we try to be our own gods and put sinful schemes in motion to attempt to rule our lives and get what we want.

The answer the Bible gives to this fatal glitch is Jesus. He is the sum of all things and the solution to the heartbreak and brokenness and wickedness that is all around us and inside us. When Jesus comes into our lives, the first thing he does is cleanse our scheming hearts with forgiveness. All the guilt and stain and shame of past sins are covered with his blood, so that we do not need to be ashamed or feel impure and filthy in God's presence.

The second thing he does is start to clean up lives from the inside out - he cleans our hearts, which results in cleaning up our lives. If our hearts are filthy, our lives will be filthy. If our hearts are clean, our lives will be clean. He begins to straighten out the twisted and crooked bends in our hearts so that we begin to live and walk uprightly, the way God meant for us to walk. That doesn't mean we'll live a smooth and trouble free life when we come to Christ. There is a glitch in the system. But we are promised an abundant life, a life set free from the bondage of sin, a life restored into right relationship with God, and the hope of eternal life.

As we close, let's take a moment to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts. Maybe you're wrestling with some tragedy and are tempted to interpret it as God abandoning you. There's a glitch in the system - we live in a fallen world. What we can trust, what you can trust, is that God is good and that He loves you. Those who trust in Jesus can know that all things are working together for good.

Maybe you've been the victim of criticism, or maybe you've been quick to criticize and speak ill of others. Bring that to Jesus right now.

Is there a dark room, a scheming room, that you keep hidden from other's eyes? Open it up to the Lord through honest confession and repentance.

Is there a broken relationship(s) in your life? You can't change the other person, but God can bring change to your heart where you've contributed to what's wrong in the relationship and healing to your heart where you've been wounded by the other person.

Let's pray.