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NBC – AM Service
6/18/17

Pointless Pleasure
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 2, Ecclesiastes chapter 2.

In the last days men will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – that is the truth presented in 2 Timothy 3:4. Of the many things which point us to the reality that we indeed live in the last days – this most certainly has to be one of the most convincing. Mankind has greater opportunity for the constant and frivolous pursuit of pleasure in our day than ever before. Literally, at the touch of our fingertips we can be whisked away to a world of pleasure, of our own choosing, and tailored to our particular likes and tastes. In our Western culture we have such extravagant wealth that this great opportunity for pleasure is matched by unhindered access. We can actually afford to bring this pursuit of pleasure into the castles of our own homes and enjoy them in relative anonymity.

Men – today is Father’s Day – a day we remember the gift God has given us in our father, and a day we do a gut check as to what kind of man, what kind of husband, what kind of father, what kind of son, what kind of brother we actually are. I am not sure I could have picked a more appropriate text for Father’s day, and you know I didn’t pick it for Father’s Day specifically – it just happened to be the next text in our series. God picked this text for this day for us to consider together. Men – whether you are a seasoned father or grandfather, a new father just starting out, or hope to one day be a father, or you just want to be a faithful man before the Lord – you need this text in Ecclesiastes 2 as one of the foundation stones of your practical faith. This text needs to inform you and shape you and caution you and transform you by renewing your mind. You need this text because you are being fed a deadly lie about pleasure from our culture. Pleasure is king and pain is the devil. The Greek philosopher Epicurus is best known for presenting this idea that mankind is motivated by a pursuit of pleasure and an avoidance of pain. This is called hedonism when it acts as a control system on a person’s life. These two polar opposites exert power and influence on the human psyche – like a gas pedal and a brake in a car. Most people – especially most men in our culture – have given themselves over to the complete pursuit of pleasure at any cost. Men abandon their families because the pain and struggle are too great and the immediate pleasure is too small. So they leave. Men stay in their physical homes with the biological families, but they abandon them every night by slipping off to some fantasy world where their deepest pleasures are met in the anonymity of privacy. It is not just men, but as the men in a society go, so goes the society – and men have refused to grow up and take responsibility so that they can live one more day and one more year in their youthful and foolish pursuit of pleasure. And where has it gotten us? Are we any happier? Are we any more fulfilled or satisfied? Is our society a better place? How’s this wholesale pursuit of pleasure working out for us?

You know what we need? We need someone who can do an experiment for us. Someone who can go deep and wide into the world of pleasure. Someone who can jump into the deep end of pleasure and tell us if we are swimming in the right direction.

Enter Solomon, and enter Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. He's the man for the job, and he has a message for our pleasure-seeking hearts. He's drowning in the deep end of pleasure and he is screaming at us to turn around – it isn't all we think it is! Solomon says this in 2:1.

Let me point out the landscape of the text here. The whole passage is hemmed in by the verdict of Solomon's experiment with pleasure. It is all vanity – he says in verses 1-2 and again in verse 11. This verdict is proven as he explains his experience with pleasure and shows us its incredible vastness. No one knew the experience of pleasure like Solomon did – and he brings us in verse 11 to the naked truth – reality without any clothes on – here it is – it is all vanity. There is nothing to be gained by pleasure under the sun. While this all sounds so hopeless – it is actually so life-giving. A right understanding of the truth of this text puts us on the path to true joy by saving us from the path of pointless pleasure. In these 11 verses we will see that Solomon's test is sufficient and his conclusion is unmistakable and his life is cautionary.

I. Solomon's Test is Sufficient

- a. First let's consider that Solomon's test is sufficient. I don't know about you but when I first read this text I think something like – well, I would like to give it a try. I mean, sure, Solomon says that it is all worthless and vain, but really – maybe he got it wrong. I read about all that he had and about all that he did and about the unhindered pleasures he pursued and enjoyed, and then I read his words – all was vanity and a striving after wind – and I think – man, Solomon needs a psychologist because he is obviously mentally ill. He obviously missed something along the way. Let me have a shot at it and then we will see if his conclusion is valid. I know you're thinking the same thing – so let me disabuse you of this. Look at the facts of this little experiment he does. In verse 1 he sets his heart to test himself with pleasure. He tells his heart – go ahead – enjoy yourself, don't hold back. Swing for the fences heart – go for the gold! And go for the gold he does. He tests pleasure to the fullest extent humanly possible.
- b. *Self-Centered*
 - i. His search is completely self-centered – which is what you would want if someone was going to test out pleasure right? What good is a test on pleasure if you hold back and serve others along the way? Well, rest assured – Solomon didn't make this pursuit about anyone other than him. You know the most often repeated word in these 11 verses? It is the Hebrew word “li” which is the preposition “to” combined with the first person singular suffix. So literally it is “to me.” That's what this is all about. It is for himself, by himself, unto himself, centered upon himself, and fully dependent on himself.
 - ii. Just glance over verses 3-8. I searched. I made. I built. I planted. I made. I planted. I made. I bought. I had. I gathered. I got. I became. I surpassed. Or how many times does he use the words myself, or my, or me? I understand

that he is speaking in the first person, but the repetition of the I, me, my, myself is overwhelming. What this translates into English is that he refers to himself 41 times in the text! 41 times! This is a self-centered pursuit of pleasure – and again – if we are going to have someone jump into the deep end of the pool of pleasure and tell us if we should swim down there – then this is how we would want it to be. We would want them to have a completely self-centered pursuit of pleasure – because that is what is beckoning us in this “under the sun” here and now kind of world.

c. *Excessive*

- i. His test is also excessive. In every possible category of pleasure, Solomon goes beyond any extreme we could even imagine to test out pleasure. Can the fullest experience of pleasure bring meaning to life and yield true and lasting satisfaction? Well, if you are going to try to answer that question you better test it out with excessive pleasure. Don't dabble in the shallow end – dive into the deep end! And so, he tells us here that he tried to cheer his heart with wine – which is not just pointing to alcoholic drink, but to the vast banqueting and excessive food and wine of a massive party. In fact in 1 Kings 4 we are told about his daily provision for food.
 1. ²² Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ²³ ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl. (1 Ki. 4:22-23 ESV)
- ii. It has been estimated that this much food could feed 10,000 people per day! And that is on the small end of the estimates. But his experiment wasn't limited to food and wine. He built houses (in fact, his took twice as long to build as the Temple did), and vineyards, gardens, parks, he bought servants, had great flocks and herds, silver and gold, great treasure and wealth, music, and so many women around him as wives and concubines that his every fantasy was easily fulfilled. Notice that each of these things in the list is plural. He didn't build one house or one vineyard, or buy one slave, or have one wife, or have one singer – he was excessive. He had a “go big or go home” mentality. If he was going to investigate this pleasure thing then he was going to do to the hilt. If a little felt so good, then more must be better.
- iii. In 1 Kings 10 we are told that Solomon's yearly intake of gold was 666 talents. A talent is about 75 pounds – so that is about 49,950 pounds of gold. He had so much gold that he decorations for his houses out of gold. He overlaid his ivory throne in gold. All of his cups were gold. All of the vessels of the house of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None of them were of silver the text says, because silver was simply too common in the days of Solomon. It was so common that it lost its value! I know what you are saying right now – Solomon – are you sure it is all vanity?

d. *Unsurpassed*

- i. This vast and excessive search put Solomon in a spot where no one before him or since him has ever been. He was literally on top of the world. There was no one who was greater, wiser, wealthier, or more capable of experiencing all the pleasures this world has to offer. Just listen to the words of 1 Kings 10:
 - 1. ²³ Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. ²⁴ And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. ²⁵ Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. ²⁶ And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen. He had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. ²⁷ And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah. (1 Ki. 10:23-27 ESV)
 - ii. No one has ever been in Solomon's shoes. The greatest, the wisest, the wealthiest, the most capable of experience every pleasure this world has to offer.

c. Unfettered

- i. But if that wasn't enough to convince you that Solomon's experiment is worth considering, look at verse 10 and see that his search was also unfettered. He set no limit to his pursuit. Whatever his eyes and his heart wanted to do – he let them do. Nothing was out of bounds, and nothing was off limits. If it seemed pleasurable – then he went after it.
- ii. He uses the eyes and heart combination in verse 10 to point to both the outward and the inward aspects of his pursuit of pleasure. If his eye told him something was pleasurable then he pursued it. If his heart called him to some pleasure – then he went after it. The only hindrance he put on his pursuit was pleasure. If it was no longer pleasurable then he moved on to something else. It was an unfettered search for meaning in pleasure.

f. Wise

- i. Notice also that this search was done with wisdom as a companion. So, in verse 3 he says that his heart was still guiding him with wisdom, and in verse 9 he says that his great and unsurpassed wisdom remained with him throughout this escapade of pleasure. This does not refer to the fear of the Lord kind of wisdom, but the wisdom which had been given to him by God, but which he had then taken and used in a man-centered and man-dependent way. But it was still the greatest man-oriented wisdom that has ever been present in one man. He went through this whole experiment with the unique ability to test it all and to be honest and truly appraising of it all. He was not deceived by the lure of pleasure, but rather he was able to objectively evaluate the usefulness of pleasure. Did it

actually provide any lasting value for life? Does it actually hold any key to the answer of the meaning of life?

- ii. You and I could not make that evaluation like Solomon could. We are too easily deceived by the lure of pleasure. That is why we read this text and quietly we wonder if Solomon is mentally ill. How could someone have so much and say that it is all vanity? But that is because we cannot objectively evaluate our own experience of pleasure, let alone the greatest experience of pleasure ever known by one man. So, once again – we see that Solomon has a message we need to hear and he is the perfect one to tell us. He’s been there, done that, has the t-shirt – and has the wisdom to objectively evaluate it all and give us the bare-boned truth. And if you won’t listen to Solomon, then you won’t hear it from anyone.

II. Solomon’s Conclusion is Unmistakable – vs. 10-11

- a. So, his test is sufficient, and next we see that his conclusion is unmistakable. When we combine the truth of verses 1-2 with the end of verse 10 and all of verse 11 we can’t possibly miss Solomon’s point. Speaking of the pursuit of pleasure as a means to giving meaning to this life under the sun Solomon says this – “behold, this was also vanity. I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’”
- b. This laughter in verse 2 is speaking of the jollity and frivolous kind of laughter. The laughter which looks for anything and everything to amuse us so that we don’t have to face up to the harsh realities of life. In other words – in our day and age you could just turn the TV on and there you would find what Solomon is describing. And what does he say about it – it is mad – or mindless – or senseless. It lacks judgment or the ability to be judged in a helpful way. It is not just senseless, but when it is combined with the uselessness of pleasure in the second part of the verse, it is now immoral and evil – a total waste of time and effort.
- c. But this conclusion really becomes unmistakable when you look at verses 10-11.
- d. *Pleasure is pointless because it is cyclical – vs. 10*
 - i. In verse 10 he shows us that pleasure is pointless because it is cyclical. He describes his unhindered pursuit of pleasure, and then he tells us that he found pleasure in all of his toil, and this was the reward for his toil – the pleasure he experienced. In other words, he was pleased with all the self-centered works he did to pursue pleasure, and they brought pleasure to his heart, but that was it. That was the reward for all the toil – the pleasure of the moment of the toil and the reward. Then it was over. And so, if he wanted more pleasure he had to do more toil. It’s like a philosophical round-about that doesn’t have any exits. You just keep going round and round from toil to pleasure, and then to toil again so that you can get to pleasure again. You never arrive at the destination because it doesn’t work that way. Pleasure can’t be the destination, because you never fully and actually arrive at pleasure.
 - ii. Just consider some of the Solomon’s of our own day – some men who have risen to the pinnacle of life. And what do they say to us from the mountaintop of success? Well, consider NFL star Tom Brady. He did an

interview with *60 Minutes* shortly after quarterbacking the New England Patriots to their third Super Bowl. He was asked what he was going to do now that he had everything he had ever wanted. He said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, ‘. . . It’s got to be more than this.’ I mean this isn’t, this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be.” Then the interview asked him, “What’s the answer?” Brady simply replied, “I wish I knew. I wish I knew.”¹

- iii. Or consider what our current President – Donald Trump – said in his book *Trump: Surviving at the Top* which was written in 1990. “My attention span is short, and probably my least favorite thing to do is to maintain the status quo. Instead of being content when everything is going fine, I start getting impatient and irritable. For me the important thing is the getting, not the having.”²
 - iv. Both of these men prove the point. Rampant success and unhindered pleasure does not bring anything which lasts. Pleasure is pointless because it is cyclical. To get pleasure you must toil, and to keep pleasure you must toil again in ever new ways.
- c. *Pleasure is pointless because it is profitless – vs. 11*
- i. But, in case you still are not convinced, look at verse 11. The very first phrase – then I considered – literally means that he finally turned and faced the reality of it all. He turned his attention to the truth of the matter. He finally let wisdom speak – the wisdom which had been his companion through it all. And by the way – they was no short search for pleasure and its meaning. It took him decades to build houses, amass wives and concubines, roll in the wealth, buy slaves, etc. He had pursued pleasure in his excessive and unsurpassable way for years on end. Now at the end of his life he turns and faces it all and come to this conclusion. It is all vanity.
 - ii. Notice how he employs all of his key phrases and words at the end of verse 11. “All was vanity” and “striving after wind” and “there was nothing to be gained” “under the sun.” These are the 4 phrases which appear throughout the book – and here there are – all in one validate his one unmistakable conclusion: Pleasure is pointless because it is profitless. Pleasure can’t bring us to the point of any true or lasting gain in this life. Pleasure has a great advertising department, but its manufacturing department stinks. It always promises more than it can actually deliver.
 - iii. Pleasure is a terrible destination because it is ultimately profitless. It’s like thinking that you are going to some remote island for a Club Med vacation only to be dropped off on uninhabited and undeveloped island.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, Preaching the Word Series, pg. 51-52.

² As quoted in David Hubbard, *Mastering the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. Pg. 77.

Pleasure is a terrible goal for life because it yields no true meaning. It cannot be a meaning maker because in the end it really doesn't add anything to worthwhile or eternal to the mix. Just think of Solomon for a minute. What if he had lost everything overnight? What of pleasure then? Could his pleasure experiment still give him any hope of making meaning out of life then? Jesus gave a similar situation as an example in one of his parables in Luke 12. He was proving the point that life is not made up in the abundance of our possessions and he told the parable of the wealthy farmer who had an unbelievable crop and so he built more barns and he planned to eat and drink and be merry for several years because he had enough provision to no longer need to work. Now listen – this is the Gospel's picture of what so many in America think of when they think of retirement. Make enough and store it in enough barns so that you can eat and drink and be merry for a few years because you have worked hard enough. But Jesus says – that is foolish because your soul will be required of you, and then what. Those things you have stored up to enjoy – what if you die tomorrow? This is Solomon. He is at the end of his life, and what does he have to show for it all. He has so many things, but in eternity, what will it all matter? Jesus' antidote to making your life about your possessions was to make your life about laying up treasure in Heaven rather than on Earth. Pleasure is pointless because pleasure is ultimately profitless. Solomon's conclusion is unmistakable here!

III. Solomon's Life is Cautionary

- a. So, since this is true, then we must see in Solomon's life a huge red flag waving in our face, warning us that there is danger ahead. The sad reality for Solomon is that there is nothing he can do to change his course in life. He has given so much effort into this pursuit of pleasure that it has defined his life, and now in his old age that cannot be corrected. But there is hope for us. We can see in Solomon's life a warning, and by the grace of God we can be transformed from self-centered hedonists to those who fear the Lord.
- b. So, we must learn from Solomon's life that in our sinfulness we are prone to take any good gift which God has given and make much too much of the gift while minimizing the Giver of the gift. This is what Solomon did. He put the pursuit of pleasure as the chief aim in his life and when he did this he put the gifts in a place of greater prominence than the Giver of the gifts. So, God had given these things to Solomon to enjoy, but he quickly turned aside from his relationship with God and the pleasure which these things brought him became the chief end. In other words, Solomon turned people and objects into means or avenues of pleasure for himself. He exalted himself to the position of god and therefore everyone and everything else became his subject to the fulfillment of his own pleasure. This is why Solomon's experience is so appealing to you – why you would like to give it a go and see if it might work for you. It appeals to your desire to be like God, and this is the core temptation of the Fall in the Garden. I have told you that Ecclesiastes is the extrapolation of the core elements of Adam and Eve's fall lived

out in the context of everyday life. So, we are prone to Solomon's sinful mistakes here because we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We have the same human flesh which is prone to the same sinful realities. In the Garden they were tempted with being like God, and this appealed to them so much that they disregarded God's word and went their own way and brought sin and death and condemnation upon them and all their offspring. This is the powerful lure which sits at the heart of pleasure. It calls you to be like God and to enjoy the god-like qualities of power, authority, and self-determined pleasure.

- c. But when we do this we lose all ability to make sense of any of God's good gifts in life. His gifts were never meant to be ends in themselves. He never intended for them to be enjoyed absent of a right relationship with Him. And when we do that, we lose all ability to assign proper meaning to the gifts. Just think of a child on Christmas morning and you will begin to understand our own tendency so often as a child of God. The gifts under the tree are given as an expression of love from parent to child, but the child can so quickly become wrapped up in the gift and the pleasure that gift brings to the child that they miss the point of the gift altogether, and by early afternoon on Christmas Day the gift has already started to lose its appeal. At the heart of this is a misunderstanding of the point of the gift and a spurning of a relationship with the giver. So, you and I often find ourselves like that small child on Christmas morning. Moving from one gift to the next, absent of true thoughts about the One who has given the gifts and thinking about how we are going to use the gifts for our own end – our own pleasure. So, just think of Solomon. Mankind has lost the greatest existence it ever knew in the Garden when sin entered in and destroyed our right relationship with God. It is striking how much similarity there is between Genesis 2 and Ecclesiastes 2. Solomon re-creates his own Garden of Eden like experience in his life. He is trying to re-gain what was lost by Adam and Eve. But he does this absent of the one central and controlling element – a right relationship with the God of Heaven. This was the fundamental thing which was lost in the Garden, and because this was lost, the full experience of pleasure in the good gifts of God was also lost and mankind was banished to far from perfect existence in a sin-cursed world. The way back to this paradise where pleasures never fade and where joy abounds at every turn is not to re-create a Garden of Eden like paradise here on this earth. No, the way back is through the redemption of sin. The main problem has to be dealt with before the fullness of joy can be experienced.
- d. But before we turn to the Gospel, consider for a moment the abundance of the goodness of God in light of our sin-cursed world. Isn't it a fascinating and mind-blowing reality that we get to have any pleasure at all in this sin-cursed world? Having spurned God like we did, we should have more of a desert like experience than we actually have. Even in our sin-cursed existence we have so much which God routinely gives us to enjoy. From sunrise to sunset, every day is filled with his merciful blessings of good things – air to breathe, eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a tongue to taste, and hands to touch – and all of those faculties give us the ability to enjoy the good things around us. Beloved – this should point

us to the vast goodness of God. His goodness is so great and his pleasures are so vast that they break through into our sin-cursed world. Can you imagine an existence which is absent of sin and free from the curse? Just think of all the good things you enjoy here in this world and then take away the limiting and condemning effect of sin and just imagine how full of pleasure it will all be! All of God's good gifts in this life are but a foretaste of the innumerable and unending and unimaginable good gifts we will enjoy in the New Heavens and the New Earth. And all of these good things now are given to us to draw our attention, our hearts, our worship and our affection to our Maker and Creator. The psalmist says in Psalm 16:11 that at God's presence there is fullness of joy and at his right hand there are pleasures forevermore. All of His good gifts given to you today are meant to draw you closer to Him in Whom are found all the good things your heart longs for. These gifts are the overflow of His unending goodness, and our enjoyment of them ought to take us ever closer to enjoying Him.

- e. And the way there – the presence of God where pleasures never cease and the fullness of joy is the constant experience – the way there is through His Only Son. Life under the sun doesn't have to be vain because God has given us His Only Son. He has taken our vanity, our sin, our rebellion and all the condemnation we have earned. The curse has been taken by Christ and will one day be completely overturned by the returning Christ. But you will only enjoy those forevermore kind of pleasures if you are in Christ through repentance and faith. You must be born again to a new and a living hope – the hope of complete salvation in Christ Jesus. Have you been born again? Do you know reconciliation to God through Jesus' work on the Cross of Calvary? Have you experienced the forgiveness of your sin? Do you have within you the hope of glory – which is Christ? If you don't – look to Jesus and live. You are surrounded by people who would love to point you to Jesus Christ and saving faith in Him. Maybe your friend invited you this morning, or your parents brought you, or maybe you are here all on your own. If you are unsure of your standing before God, don't let today end without talking to someone who knows Christ Jesus. Ask them to help you understand the Gospel, and ask them what you must do to be saved.
- f. Brother, sister – will you let Solomon's life be your caution flag? Will you learn from him, or will you continue down your path of pleasure-soaked, fun-filled and yet absolutely vain living? Christ has saved you from this, and He offers so much more! He is the path to true joy and everlasting pleasures. Follow Him! Let's pray.