

The Advantage of Wisdom - Ecclesiastes

6:7-8:1

Introduction

- Good evening everyone, I'm so excited to be able to speak this evening as we continue our series in Ecclesiastes!
- The book of Ecclesiastes is a book that has a very special place in my heart, and I would probably call it my favourite book of the entire Bible! It's a complicated and confusing book to be sure, but the more we dig into it, I think the more we begin to see its beauty, and I hope you've been able to see that as we've been studying it together for these past few weeks.
- A few years ago, I decided that I was going to take some time to study the book of Ecclesiastes in my devotions. It was a book I'd never really spent much time with, and one I didn't really understand. It seemed to me like a book that just said "all is vanity" didn't really fit too well in the Bible. I wanted to understand it though, so for about a two week period, I committed to reading the entire book, start to finish, almost each day.
- The more I read through this book, and the more time I spent with it, the more I was able to see how the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes pointed us so clearly to Christ and to the Gospel.
- That is not to say, however, that this is not a challenging or difficult book. There are many verses in this book, including some that we'll look at today that seem incredibly difficult to process and understand, but as we look at our passage this evening, I hope we'll be able to see how the preacher is encouraging us to live a wise life, and more than that, showing that a truly wise life can only be found in the Gospel.

The work and wisdom of man is vanity (6:7-7:12)

- The passage that we're looking at is Ecclesiastes 6:7-8:1. This is coming directly on the heels of the passage that Darryl looked at with us last week in which he encouraged us to find our happiness, not in anything of this world, but in simple contentment and humble obedience to God.
- This passage, then, moves forward from that discussion on where happiness is to be found in life, and takes us through a bit of a journey that the preacher is going on in an attempt to understand man's pursuit of wisdom, and what ultimate value there is in living a wise life.

- Remember what the preacher says about himself in Ecclesiastes 1:16:

“I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” - Ecc. 1:16 (ESV)

- So right at the beginning of this book we’ve been introduced to this teacher who is claimed to be the wisest man in all of Jerusalem, and possibly the wisest man ever, yet this is how this passage begins in verses 7-8:

“All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?” - Ecc. 6:7-8 (ESV)

- So this is the wisest man to ever live basically asking, what’s the point of being wise? What is the point of all of man’s work and his wisdom?
- The answer that he comes to isn’t a very encouraging one, and not the one we’d expect to find. He says in verse 7 that *“All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied”*. Basically, man works and works and works, but what ultimately does it accomplish? We work to satisfy ourselves, yet find we never actually reach that point of satisfaction. This is what Darryl looked at with us last week, that we try so hard to find happiness and satisfaction in so many things in this world, and yet we never seem to find it. We work so hard to earn money so that we can provide for ourselves, and yet we never seem to get to the point where we have enough. There’s always more we seem to need, and so we keep on working to get it.
- The teacher doesn’t just stop with our work, however. He continues to ask *“What advantage has the wise man over the fool?”*. This is an odd question to see asked by the wisest man to ever live. The point that he’s getting at here, though, is that ultimately he sees no real advantage of wisdom when he thinks about that previous statement. A wise man and a fool alike will both work to find satisfaction, and yet never seem to get it. It does not matter how wise you are, that is always true.
- In verse 9 then, what the teacher is saying is that it is better just to be satisfied with what you already have, than to continue to strive for more as he says:

“Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.” - Ecc. 6:9 (ESV)

- This continual quest for more satisfaction ultimately yields nothing, and once again the teacher makes his declaration that we see so often throughout the book, “this also is vanity”.
- He drives this point home in verses 10-12 which say:

“Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” - Ecc. 6:10-12 (ESV)

- Now this really isn't the encouraging type of passage that you would be expecting to hear in a sermon on a Sunday, but stay with me. Throughout this passage we're going to be following along with the teacher on his quest to find meaning, or purpose in wisdom. His goal is to find what value wisdom and a wise life has since, as he's said, it seems to him to be vanity. A simple breath, here one minute and gone the next.
- So in these verses we see that despite all man's work and wisdom, nothing really seems to be accomplished. Man doesn't seem to be able to change the way the world is by his works or by his wisdom, and the harder he tries, the more useless it seems. The work and wisdom of man is utter vanity.
- How many of us have felt this way? We work so hard day in and day out, yet at the end of the day we don't really seem to have accomplished much, and we wonder what all of our work is for if it doesn't seem to do anything. Well let me encourage you with this, the author of Ecclesiastes understands how you're feeling, and has felt the same thing. But remember, this is only the beginning of the journey that the teacher is taking us on in this passage. It doesn't end here.
- Beginning in chapter 7 we have a list of proverbs, these short one verse lessons, which have a common theme of the teacher saying that living a wise life is better than a foolish life. It is better to try to live a wise life than to just give up and live it up as much as you can. Look at what verse 4-5:

“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,

but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise

than to hear the song of fools.” - Ecc. 7:4-5 (ESV)

- So the teacher is encouraging the reader to seek to live a wise life, and this little section of proverbs culminates in verses 11-12 which say:

“Wisdom is good with an inheritance,

an advantage to those who see the sun.

For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,

and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.” - Ecc. 7:11-12 (ESV)

- So, having begun this passage, the teacher has told us that the work and wisdom of man is pure vanity, and yet spends 12 verses talking about the importance of wisdom, and encouraging the reader to live a wise life, so the question is: what’s changed? What has changed between the teacher saying “What advantage has the wise man over the fool?” and “*Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun*”?

The work and wisdom of God is unchangeable (7:12-14)

- I want to read for you now verses 12-14:

“For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,

and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

13 *Consider the work of God:*

who can make straight what he has made crooked?

14 *In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” - Ecc. 7:12-14 (ESV)*

- So after this list of proverbs, advising the reader to pursue a wise life rather than a foolish one we find these words: “*Consider what God has done*”, and then he says “*Who can make straight what he has made crooked?*”.
- What the author is saying here is really the exact opposite of what we saw at the beginning of the passage. He began talking about how all of the work and wisdom of man is vanity. We work and are never satisfied, yet here he shows how the work and wisdom of God is unchangeable as he says “*Who can make straight what he has made crooked?*”.
- Now it’s important to note that when he’s talking about “What God has made crooked” he is not saying that God has messed things up and we have no hope of fixing the mistakes he has made. What he is saying instead is that God is sovereign and has created the world a certain way. He is also sovereign over what happens in this world, so it is not up to us, as his

creation, to look at what God has done and decide that we would like it to be done differently. This applies to the world, and to each of our individual lives. Look again at verse 14:

“In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” - Ecc. 7:14 (ESV)

- This is certainly an appropriate verse for the year of 2020. In times of prosperity we are to be joyful and glad, praising God for the gifts and the blessings that he has given, and in the times of adversity, we are also to give glory to God because he is sovereign even in those times. It can be much harder to remember that God is in control when things around us seem to be spinning out of control, yet the writer of Ecclesiastes really is giving us an encouragement here that no matter what, God is in control, and we can trust him.
- It is God who is in control of this life, not us, no matter how hard we try. While the work and wisdom of man is nothing but vanity, the work and the wisdom of God is unchangeable. So what does that say to us about where true wisdom, and a wise life can be found? Verses 11-12 make it clear that there is a specific advantage to wisdom, answering his question from verse 8 of chapter 6, and in the next part of the passage he is going to elaborate on what exactly that advantage is, and where a truly wise life can be found.

A Wise Life is only found in God (7:15-26)

- Now we're going to continue on this journey with the teacher, now that he's established that the work and wisdom of man is vanity and that the work and wisdom of God is unchangeable, he's going to elaborate more on his earlier comments on wisdom starting at verse 15:

“In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” - Ecc. 7:15 (ESV)

- So this seems to be calling back to his earlier question of “*what advantage has the wise man over the fool?*”, but look what he says next:

“Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” - Ecc. 7:16-18 (ESV)

- So here he's beginning to describe how to live a wise life, but what on earth is going on in these verses? The teacher is saying not to be overly righteous or overly wicked. So do we all have a certain allowance of sin in our lives? We can get to a certain level before it gets really bad? Just try not to be too wicked? Not quite.
- In the first part of this verse he says "*Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise*". What he's doing here is not saying "make sure you're not too good of a person. Make sure to do a bad thing here and there to balance things out". What he's actually talking about is something that Darryl touched on last week, and that is the idea of trying to find your security, or value in blind religious observance. Trying to do enough good religious acts in order to please God and earn your own salvation.
- One of the best examples of this principle comes from the Pharisees in Jesus' day who were so committed to following every part of God's law, and even went so far as to write laws of their own in order to keep themselves from even coming close to breaking God's law. They thought if they just did enough, then they could earn God's love and acceptance, and looked down on anyone who they thought wasn't as righteous as them. Jesus had some harsh words for the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." - Matt. 23:27-28 (ESV)

- This is what the teacher is talking about, those who are so committed to trying to earn their salvation through religious ritual, but are lacking any heart behind it. There is a pride that he is speaking to in trying to earn our own salvation.
- On the other hand, the second part of the verse says "Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool". So is he saying, a little sin is ok as long as it doesn't go too far? Not at all, what he's actually saying is that all of us are sinful people, and we shouldn't try to earn our own salvation through good works, but we shouldn't just let the pendulum swing the other way and just give into every sinful impulse that comes into our mind, embracing the whole "live it up" mentality of our world. We should not deny that we are sinful, but we should not allow ourselves to be ruled by that sin. This is something that Paul touches on in the book of Romans:

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? - Rom. 5:20-6:2 (ESV)

- So Paul hi-lights this truth that God's grace is shown so clearly in that he saved us while we were still sinners, but when we are saved we are committed to die to sin and live for God, not continuing to be ruled by sin as we were before, but living for God, and not trying to earn God's gift of Salvation on our own through good works and religious observance, but recognizing it as the free gift that it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- It is then in the next part of this verse that the teacher gives us the key to where a wise life is found when he says "the one who fears God shall come out from both of them"
- We find in the book of Proverbs in 9:10 these words:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,

and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. - Prov. 9:10 (ESV)

- It is here, in fearing the Lord that we find true wisdom, and the way to live a wise life. All of the work and the wisdom of man is vanity, but the work and the wisdom of God is unchangeable, and because of that, a wise life is found only in God. It is only in fearing God, and living in devotion to him that we find true wisdom. Not trying to earn his love through good works, not just giving up to live our own way and hope that God will be ok with it, but living in obedience to him, following his commands and putting our trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord.
- And the teacher points out in verse 23-24:

"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?" - Ecc. 7:23-24 (ESV)

- Living this kind of wise life is not an easy thing for us to do, and it is not something we can do by our own strength. Even the wisest man to ever live found he was not able to find this wisdom on his own. To live a wise life in God takes prayer that God would teach us how to follow him, and live wisely in his sight, and prayer that he would give us the power to do so through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Conclusion - One Wise Man (7:27-8:1)

- The teacher now concludes this passage, and the journey that we have been on with a final warning. In verse 25-26, this is what he says:

“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. 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.” - Ecc. 7:25-26 (ESV)

- And in verse 27-29 he writes:

“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. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” - Ecc. 7:27-29 (ESV)

- Now this seems like an odd thing for the teacher to include at the end of this conversation on wisdom. We’ve talked all about finding true wisdom in God rather than ourselves, and now here we have a collection of verses saying that the teacher has encountered only one upright man, and not a single upright women. So what’s going on here in the end of the passage?
- Well these last few verses are not meant as a blanket statement, or judgement on genders, that there are some righteous men, but to find a righteous woman is impossible. Rather, the teacher is speaking from his own experience in this moment and giving a warning to the reader about who they choose to surround themselves with, and the danger of allowing ourselves to be influenced by the wrong people. If this passage were written by a woman it could easily read “one upright woman in a thousand, yet not one upright man”.
- Remember that this book is either written by Solomon himself, or someone at a later point in time writing as if they were Solomon, and Solomon was famous for two things.
- Solomon was famous as the wisest man who ever lived, and yet he was also famous for having hundreds of different wives, many of whom were from other nations, and used their influence over Solomon to cause him to begin worshiping other Gods rather than the one true God.
- What the teacher is saying here is a warning to be careful about the people that you allow to have the deepest influence in your life. When he speaks of “one man in a thousand” he is talking about how rare it is to find someone, a friend who will truly encourage you and challenge you to live this life of wisdom that he has described, and how dangerous it is to surround yourself with people who will try to pull you away.
- This is not saying that we should not associate with anyone who isn’t a Christian, but we are being warned about who to allow to have the deepest influence in our lives. Solomon is the perfect example of someone who allowed hundreds of people into the deepest parts of his life who slowly pulled him away from God and caused his downfall. He encourages us to seek to

find those people who will continue to turn us back to Christ, will call us out if we start wandering away, and always challenge us to go deeper in our relationship with Christ.

- And no matter who we are, man or woman, there is truth to be found in this verse that there is one upright man to be found. One friend that we can rely on to help us live this life of true wisdom in God that the teacher has described. There is only one man to ever live, the only human being who ever perfectly embodied the type of Godly wisdom that the teacher encourages in this passage, and that was Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of what we see in this passage, who lived a perfect and a wise life, and through his death and resurrection provides a way for us to live a wise life only through him. All he asks of us is to put our faith in him, and follow after him.
- And in the final verse, 8:1, the teacher writes these words:

"Who is like the wise?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

A man's wisdom makes his face shine,

and the hardness of his face is changed." - Ecc. 8:1 (ESV)

- And there you have it. The beauty and the advantage of true wisdom. The wisdom that is not found in ourselves, or our own efforts to be righteous, but rather the true wisdom that is only found in God through a relationship with Jesus Christ.