

## Vanity or Victory?

### I. Intro

- a. Time and time again I have shared with you that each message I share with you is something that God has first spent time teaching me. I don't find it coincidence that it's been awhile since I have last spoken. You see, during the past few months God has been teaching me a tough lesson. He has been changing my perspective.
- b. I remember one day in college, we had a tunnel system that the whole school was connected by except my dorm. One day after lunch, a couple of my friends and I were walking up the stairs out of the tunnel and heading back to our dorm and we were talking. My buddy was talking about how he was having a really good day; everything seemed to be clicking so to speak. It was at this time that I proposed the theory that we all have 2-3 days of bliss each month. The remaining 28 days? Well those are composed of a mixture of good days and really bad days and it is this combination of mediocre good days and bad days that make those 2-3 days each month so great. It is because you would persevere through the struggles, because you would press on through the tough times that each month would bring that those days of bliss taste so great. It is because you don't get comfortable when things are just okay but keep striving for something better that those days of bliss are so special. But the thing that you notice in this theory is that it never stays in a state of bliss. One never reaches a point where everything around you seems to be working together in harmony. Eventually something will come along that will disrupt the state of bliss and we are set on this journey to regain that state once more. We are set on this journey to discover what brings us joy. And with this cycle, because nothing seems to ever help us stay in this state of bliss where everything seems to be working together, we continuously try different things thinking that it may be the one that will ultimately make us happy.
- c. You need not tell me that this is a depressing view of life. Believe me, I know. But unfortunately, this has been my view. And this is why God has been changing my perspective.
- d. As a young man on the beginning of this journey, I am faced with numerous temptations; numerous vices around me saying that it will bring me happiness. I am by nature, more of a realist. I know that because of this sinful nature inside of me there will be nothing that can bring me lasting satisfaction. As soon as I give into one of these vices, the second I realize what I have done, I feel so unsatisfied and worse than before. But does that mean I should not pursue happiness? I mean, the question that I have asked myself over and over the past few years is "Is this the way life is supposed to be? We each get a couple days of pure happiness each month and then just fight through til the next few days of happiness come along. How do I find joy in this world when it is filled with sin? What will make me happy in the day to day grind as I go through my routine day after day after day? Ultimately, I am asking what should my perspective be and how does my perspective inform me of how I define happiness?

- e. And if we are honest with ourselves, this is not some battle that I, a young man on the beginning of his journey, face alone. No matter what stage of life we are in, we all find ourselves in this pursuit of happiness, trying to enjoy the life God has given us in the midst of this sinful world as we battle between flesh and spirit.
- f. So today, we are going to examine this pursuit of happiness that we all find ourselves chasing after. We are going to determine what our perspective on life should be. We are all striving each day to find happiness, to reach this place in life where we aren't struggling with that which brings us down, that which saddens our spirit and steals the joy from inside. We are trying to balance the good days we have each month with the crummy ones so that it is more even keel and less lopsided. The question is, where will we allow this pursuit to take us? Based on our perspective, we could end up pursuing happiness in a plethora of places.
- g. To find the answer, we are going to turn to the book of Ecclesiastes.
  - i. This book is one of five included in the poetical classification of books of the Old Testament (Job, Psalms, Proverbs and the Song of Songs being the other four).
  - ii. The term Ecclesiastes comes from the Hebrew word Qohelet and is understood as the leader or teacher in an assembly. This book is therefore best read with the view of a teacher sharing with his students his thoughts and his views based on what he has encountered in his own life.
  - iii. So, who is this teacher? Well verse one reads, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." We are never explicitly told, but there are a few verses similar to this one that imply Solomon, the son of David and king of Jerusalem was the author.
    - 1. We read this of Solomon in 1 Kings 4:29-34 "Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. 30 Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 For he was wiser than all men...and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. 32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005...34 Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom."
    - 2. So, here we read that Solomon was the wisest man of all and we know that he was the son of David and succeeded him as king in Jerusalem. We will assume that Solomon is the author and if he is not, I believe it is safe to say it would be someone similar to Solomon in the sense that he had endless resources and searched for the meaning of life in everything but could not find it.
    - 3. 1 Kings 10:16-27 gives us insight into Solomon.
      - a. King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold, using 600 shekels of gold on each large shield. <sup>17</sup>He made

300 shields of beaten gold, using three minas of gold on each shield, and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon. <sup>18</sup>Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with refined gold. <sup>19</sup>There were six steps to the throne and a round top to the throne at its rear, and arms on each side of the seat, and two lions standing beside the arms. <sup>20</sup>Twelve lions were standing there on the six steps on the one side and on the other; nothing like it was made for any other kingdom. <sup>21</sup>All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None was of silver; it was not considered valuable in the days of Solomon. <sup>22</sup>For the king had at sea the ships of Tarshish with the ships of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks. <sup>23</sup>So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. <sup>24</sup>All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart. <sup>25</sup>They brought every man his gift, articles of silver and gold, garments, weapons, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. <sup>26</sup>Now Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen; and he had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, and he stationed them in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup>The king made silver as common as stones in Jerusalem, and he made cedars as plentiful as sycamore trees that are in the lowland.

4. And in the next chapter 1 Kings 11:3
  - a. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines
5. Solomon had wisdom, wealth, and women. He was known throughout the world. It would seem that it is clear that the author is speaking and teaching from experience, which is the greatest teacher of all. I mean, here we have a man who seemed to have the best of everything and yet, listen to how he begins the book.
  - a. Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
  - b. The Hebrew word for Vanity is "Hebel" meaning "vapor or breath"
    - i. It is used 30+ times in the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes.
    - ii. Other translations used to capture the meaning of this word are empty, futile, meaningless, absurd, fleeting or senseless.

- iii. Warren Wiersbe describes it like this: Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is vanity.
- iv. The point, and that which the teacher goes on to explain throughout his writings, is that everything in life is empty, everything under the sun, meaning everything in this age, is meaningless.
  - 1. Ecclesiastes 1:14 I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.
- v. And just like the term King of Kings or Lord of Lords or Holy of Holies is used to describe the supreme of all Kings or of all Lords, this search for meaning in life is the supreme vanity of vanities, it is the most meaningless and absurd task one could do with his life. To pursue happiness and meaning in life from that which is under the sun is striving after wind. Simply stated, it's stupid. Why would you chase after something that you can't catch that has already blown by?

- 6. Yet we say in our hearts, if only I had more money then I'd be happy or if only I were married to so and so or if only I were popular...you see where this is going? Solomon was there. Solomon had it all and he is writing this book of Ecclesiastes as a memoir of his life and his own pursuit of happiness so that we will heed his words and not strive after the wind as he did.

II. Transition: Ideally, we'd hear the words which the teacher has to say to us and we'd follow his advice so that we don't make the same futile mistakes. But, we are humans and it is part of our sinful nature I believe to want to show that we can succeed where others fail.

- a. Illustration: I had met this girl and had been talking with her, took her out on a few dates. She seemed to be some of what I wanted and need in a girl and things were going well. I was talking to a friend who I found out knew her, not well but did know her. He told me of some of her past that I did not know, some things she had done to other guys she had dated and how she would just flip and go psycho on the guys. I heard him, I heard what he was saying, but inside I was thinking to myself, yeah but come on, it's me. She wouldn't do that to me. I mean this girl was really diggin my chili so to speak. I just knew she wouldn't flip on me like that. Well, sure enough, out of nowhere I was blindsided by this girl and needless to say, I was not able to succeed where others had failed but instead became another casualty. Had I heeded the advice of my friend, it would have spared me from wasted time and wasted energy. But, fortunately we learn from our mistakes, or at least have the opportunity so with that, I want to get into our message today and look at a few places we go to pursue happiness.

III. Our Perspective

- a. I want to begin by reading from Ecclesiastes and I want you to just listen to the words of Solomon. Hear the places he goes to pursue happiness and meaning in life. As you listen, imagine yourself and if you could be saying the words that he is saying. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
- i. I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. 2 I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" 3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. 4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; 6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kinds and provinces I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men--many concubines. 9 Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. 10 All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. 11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.
- b. Could you hear yourself? Have you ever been guilty of making similar remarks? I know I have. I mean, I haven't literally made gardens or parks for myself and let it be known I have not had homeborn slaves. But you get the point. Here is a man, the wisest man of all, the king in Jerusalem and he is giving us a peek into this period in life when he let himself indulge in his surroundings. He had wealth, he had concubines of women, he had prestige.
- c. But why? Why does he say in verse 1, "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.'"
- i. You can sense frustration. For whatever reason he has not been satisfied with the life he had been living so he says, hey, why not try this, why not indulge in pleasure.
    1. Ecclesiastes 1:8 All things are wearisome...
    2. And in Acts 17:21 when Paul is in Athens we read this, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new."
    3. The same is true today as it was then. When things get boring, when things are wearisome, we look for something new. We want something to change things up. So, what do we turn to? Quite simple. 1 John 2:16

- a. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.
- d. Fleshly Desires. We turn to our fleshly desires thinking that they will provide happiness for us, thinking they will make us satisfied. I want to spend the rest of the time looking at a few of these that are common to all of us in today's society.
  - i. (Materialism) One of the greatest issues, particularly in America is materialism, the love of possessions. Ultimately, those who struggle with collecting things, always having to have the newest and greatest, reveals the belief of individuals that things, possessions are the greatest good in life.
    1. Have any of you seen the show Hoarders? It is a series which depicts people who collect tons and tons of junk. It gets to a point where that person's relationship with others is affected as they have become so tied down by their possessions that they have chosen to keep junk and let relationships with others fade. Their houses are filled with things, useless possessions. Most of the people they show have beds but haven't slept on them in years but instead sleep on a mound of junk on the floor instead. When I was in college, my freshman year was a year of learning. I had two roommates. Our rooms were literally like jail cells, maybe, maybe a tad bit bigger. But when you consider three grown guys living in one room, with three sets of beds, dressers, desks...well there just isn't much room so you want to make the most of what you have. Well one of my roommates had found a couch that was rather comfortable so we got it and brought it back to our room. It wasn't long before that couch was covered in who knows what-clothes, books, anything that was brought into the room my roommate piled it on. We'd have people come by the room and they wouldn't even know that there was a couch in the room. They thought we had gotten rid of it. My roommate had piled a stack of newspapers so high in the bathroom; it was literally up to my waist-and I'm a tall guy. And when we would look at him and ask why, he just had this goofy smile on his face. It made him happy. He liked that he had practically every paper for the entire year stacked in our room.
    2. People become so tied to their possessions that it becomes unhealthy. They find their meaning in life based on these possessions. As you watch in the show Hoarders as this crew throws away the majority of these things, and a psychologist is talking to the people, you can see some of the people ready to break down. Those possessions have made them who they are and given them meaning.
    3. But what do we read in Luke 12:13-15

- a. Someone in the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14 But He said to him, “Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 Then He said to them, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”
  - b. You can buy all you want, but you won’t be satisfied.
  - c. Our possessions don’t make us who we are. We are more complex than that. It takes more than things to give us meaning in this life.
  - d. Yet time and time again, when we are down or having a bad day, we go shopping, buy a new purse or dress.
  - e. Yet time and time again, when it’s been a stressful week at work, we go buy the newest gadget.
  - f. Why? Because those new earrings or that new phone brings us happiness. It helps us forget about our problems.
  - g. But what’s the problem with this? It only holds us over for a little while. It’s not long before we have another bad day at work or another emotional fight with a friend that brings us back to reality, back to feelings of sadness causing us to go shopping to buy something else so that we can be happy again.
- ii. (Wealth) Closely tied to possessions is the myth that wealth will make us happy.
1. In the movie “The Pursuit of Happiness” there is a scene where Will Smith, playing the role of a man in serious financial trouble who becomes a single father who has no money and is evicted from his apartment with his son, walks down the street and passes a man getting out of his shiny red convertible and he stops and stares at this man in awe and asks “What do you do? And how do you do it?” The man responds that he is a stockbroker for a particular company and points to the building in front of them. Will Smith stands in awe and lets us inside his thoughts as he recounts that moment and how everyone coming in and out of the building looked so happy to him. He remembers asking himself, “Why can’t I look like that?”
  2. A lot of us have this mentality. A lot of us think, particularly my peers those of us at the beginning of our journey, that if we had a good paying job that allowed us to purchase what we wanted THEN we would be happy.
  3. We hear about athletes and the contracts they sign or actors that make so much for being in a movie and we see them on shows and doing interviews and they look so happy and if only, if only we were in their position, then we’d be happy too.

4. Possessions and wealth are not the answer to this wearisome life.
  5. Does that mean you shouldn't enjoy the possessions God has given you? Not at all. In fact, Solomon gives us insight into this as well.
    - a. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19 Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. 19 Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God
    - b. If you work hard and earn wealth and have possessions, Solomon actually says that it is the gift of God to enjoy them.
    - c. There are numerous avenues and alleyways that this road could take us but I want to stay on the path we are on today.
    - d. If we have wealth or possessions, the point is they will not bring meaning to our life.
    - e. There will still be an emptiness inside if we continue to try and pursue a life of happiness and meaning by gaining more and more wealth.
  6. Ecclesiastes 5:10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity.
  7. Matthew 6:19-21
    - a. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
  8. Finding meaning in life from wealth and possessions is an endless cycle. "For not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."
  9. We will always be left wanting more.
  10. Now, it's always easy to think of wealth and possessions in a message such as this.
    - a. When discussing finding meaning in life, these are often among the popular choices to go.
    - b. But there are many other places we find ourselves pursuing happiness and meaning in life.
- iii. (Charity) How about charity? Have you ever given either money or your time in order to make yourself feel better? It happens all the time. This

is why we are troubled when we think of good people who are always giving of themselves yet aren't Christians. They do good, just as we do good at times because we find happiness in it. It adds meaning to our lives.

1. Matthew 6:1-2 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. 2 So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by me. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."
  2. Is there anything wrong with giving? Of course not. But you can live your life and give away everything you have and give all of you to good causes, but that's not going to satisfy you forever.
- iv. (Controversy) How about debaters-people who argue just to argue, live for conflict because they get happiness from showing how smart they are or that they are superior or maybe they just enjoy the kumbaya feeling when they make up with who they fought with and that brings them happiness.
1. I am guilty of this one. My brother told me I should be a lawyer because I enjoy arguing just to argue. I will play devil's advocate and take the opposing side anytime just to debate. I get joy out of seeing if I can successfully debate with someone. This is something I have worked on because at the end of the day, I realized it just feeds my flesh and is a vain attempt to fill the void inside.
  2. I think of the Pharisees and Sadducees who quarreled with each other to show off how much of the Scriptures they knew.
  3. Mark 8:11 The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him.
  4. They were trying to prove they were in control, that they were superior to Christ.
  5. It's not like Jesus was the only one they argued with. They argued with anyone they considered to be a blasphemer and to that point, they had been pretty successful in outwitting their counterparts, giving them control and feelings of happiness. This was their meaning in life, to debate anyone that opposed the letter of the law. Yet it too left them empty.
- v. (Popularity and Prestige) Speaking of Pharisees, what about people who seek meaning from the job they have or the title they are given.
1. Mark 12:38-40 As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 40 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

2. Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever felt good because of the power you had or the position you were in? I was working with the brick paver business and was given some business cards that had been made up for me. It had my name Judson Clarkson and right under that it said Sales Manager. One night I was with some friends and my phone and wallet were on the couch next to me. This girl saw my wallet and pulled one of the business cards out and read that and was all impressed. Of course I didn't mention that it was my dad's company and I was the only salesman. I mean, that was a good feeling. But it too soon faded.
  - vi. I could keep going. Drug and sex addicts seek to be filled through getting high or satisfying any physical desires they may have.
  - vii. Manipulators who are filled with happiness as they gain control of others by twisting a situation to favor them.
  - viii. Those who find pleasure through their body. Maybe they are constantly watching what they eat to maintain an image that gives them favorable responses from the opposite sex when they go out and makes them feel good.
  - ix. It is everywhere around us. It is in everything we do. Most everything I mentioned has the opportunity to be good, just as it does to be evil.
  - x. It all has to do with our perspective.
- e. (Focus is on Present Day and Age)
  - i. When it comes down to it, after looking at all of these examples, I think it is plain to see how what we find happiness from reveals our perspective on life.
  - ii. Matthew 16:26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?
  - iii. We can have all the wealth in the world, but if we don't understand where our treasure truly is, we will still be empty.
    1. If we are in a great job with a great title, there is nothing wrong with that. Just as long as we realize that our job doesn't make us who we are.
    2. That is the point of this message.
    3. The world is constantly seeking to offer us opportunities to fill the void inside of us.
    4. The world is constantly seeking to have us indulge in its pleasures in order to find meaning in life and to be happy.
    5. But hear the words from Solomon, the one who had it all. Just verses after we are told of how he gave himself over to pleasure.
      - a. Ecclesiastes 2:17 So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.
      - b. After giving himself over to his wealth, to his prestige as king, to his power, his numerous women and concubines,

to wine...he is still left hating life. He has yet to find any meaning in anything he has pursued.

#### IV. Conclusion

- a. The majority of us are familiar with a document known as the Declaration of Independence. In it we find the words of Thomas Jefferson, who adapted them from previous writers and philosophers but nevertheless penned them himself in this document expressing the beliefs of this new country. He wrote, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It has been often observed and wondered, just how did he know to put the pursuit part in there? How did he know that happiness is something that is to be pursued and not actually a right to be had by everyone?
- b. Romans 5:1-5 reads:
  - i. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
- c. It may not sound it, but these verses contain our answer. And next week we will take a look at the words of Solomon and what he says is the answer when all is said and done. He tells us what our perspective should be and where we should find meaning in this life and how to maintain that perspective so that we don't have to seek meaning in the pleasures of this world that leave us unsatisfied.