

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“Striking a Balance”
Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

Introduction

- [Slide #1] There are some days when I really feel good about myself. I like who I am. What I do. My family. How we live. What we live for. The priorities we set. The values we have. All in all I’m a pretty good person. I don’t steal from people. I’m not lazy; I try to work hard. I eat my vegetables and clean my plate. I get along with my neighbors. I’m not deceptive in my dealings with others. I try to be good to be a good husband to Miriam and a good father to the boys. I try to live for God. And for the most part I make good decisions and choices about things. And I think to myself on those days, “Eric Hesse, you’re pretty good at this thing called life.”
- And then there are the other three hundred and sixty-three days of the year.
- Speaker **Ravi Zacharias** tells the story of **G.K. Chesterton** who was once asked, "What do you think of civilization?" Chesterton said, "I think it's a great idea. Why doesn't somebody start one." Later on, after seeing an article in the paper entitled "What's Wrong with the World?" Chesterton sent a short letter to the editor. "Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly, G. K. Chesterton."¹

Transition

We come now to Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 and that’s pretty much the Teacher’s synopsis of things.

[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **There is no one under the sun who does what is right—not even one**
- In other words, “To be human is to be flawed.”² See, here’s the deal. Our picture of ourselves is almost always distorted. We see ourselves, not as we really are, but as sanitized Mr. Cleans. Shiny. Glowing. Angelic. Little halos glinting over our heads. But that’s the distortion. The reality is more like the mirror in the carnival funhouse. Perverted. Crooked. Distorted.
- The Teacher makes this observation the human condition, **there is no one under the sun who does what is right**, not because he wants to rub our noses in it and remind us how deeply wicked and terrible each of us is. That’s not the point. The point is that everywhere we turn; everywhere we look, this life under the sun is deeply frustrating. Life is absurdly absurd. It’s one big dead end street. All we experience under the sun is unsubstantial, flat, and unfulfilling. Or, as the Teacher puts it. *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”* And the reason for this is not because of God. It’s not because of bad genetics. Or environmental factors. We are the problem. We are to blame. The reason our world is flawed is because there is something flawed in us.

¹ Ravi Zacharias, "The Lostness of Humankind," Preaching Today, Tape No. 118.

² Fox, p. 262.

- If your experience of life under the sun is one of unfulfillment, dissatisfaction, emptiness, vanity, or meaninglessness the Teacher has a question for you as to why. Have you ever paused long enough to look into the window of your own soul? What’s wrong with the world? You are. I am. We are the Resident Evil. **There is no one under the sun who does what is right—not even one.**

Transition

Believe it or not life changes dramatically when you realize this truth and allow God the freedom to do something about it. It’s with that goal in mind that the Teacher tells us in Ecclesiastes 7:15-29...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three incontrovertible facts about our failure to do what is right in this life**
- In **verses 15-22** he says our *depravity is universal*. In **verses 23-24** he says our *moral ability is impaired*. And in **verses 25-29** he says our *guilt is unavoidable*. Altogether, **there is no one under the sun who does what is right—not even one.**

Transition

Listen again to **verses 15-22**. [Slide #3] Our **depravity is universal**. *In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his 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. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes]. 19 Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city. 20 There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. 21 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.*

Main Points

- It is so easy to look at all the evil around us and dissociate ourselves from it. It is them over there. Those poor souls from the city. Those savages from that Dark Continent. You know what? The Teacher draws a slightly different conclusion about life under the sun. **Verse 20**. *There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins*. I read those words and I take it to include every single person in this room, especially me. Our **depravity is universal**.
- The Teacher’s comes to this conclusion about based on an observation beginning in **verse 15**. Follow his thinking. *In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness*. In other words, “The righteous die young and the wicked live long, contrary to expectations.”³
- So, he says, **verse 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. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes]*. Because good

³ Longman, p. 195.

people suffer, because evil people thrive, don't legalistically pursue righteousness. And on the other extreme. Don't fall into the trap of libertinism. Strike a balance between the two.

- Which is what the wise person does. [Verse 19](#). *Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city*. There is much benefit in a life of wisdom. Wisdom helps you avoid extremes. In the world of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, wisdom enabled a person to please God. If you were wise, you did what was right. If you were a fool, you didn't. In other words, the wise please God with their lives. Those who aren't, don't. But even the wisest of the wise never get it right all the time. Why? Because our **depravity is universal**. [Verse 20](#). *There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins*.
- Then the Teacher gives a brief illustration of the universality of sin in [verses 21-22](#).⁴ Everyone sins. *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*. More than just occasionally doing things that offend our fellowman there is an evil inherent in our nature that wells up from the deep recesses of our soul and shocks even us from time to time. Or, as the writer of Proverbs questions, *Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?* The answer? None of us. We are all totally depraved.
- See, when I use that word—depravity. By the time I say it and you hear it and your brain processes it, you've already disinfected the word. Somehow I think we think this idea of being depraved is like being one of those toys on the island of misfit toys in the Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer Christmas special. Depravity somehow means being slightly off kilter. Something's not quite right. But overall, everything is still pretty okay. But in answer to the question, "is humanity basically good or basically evil?" The Teacher emphatically says the answer is evil. *There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins*.
- Earlier I mentioned the name [G.K. Chesterton](#). Chesterton was a prolific writer who, among other things, happened to write a pretty good set of murder mysteries called the *The Father Brown Mysteries*. The hero, [Father Brown](#), is like Sherlock Holmes. And in one story Chesterton has him explain how he's able to solve his cases. Father Brown says, "You see, it was I who killed all those people" -in the sense that he looked within himself to find the mentality that would produce the crime he was investigating, and did in fact discover it there.⁶
- Father Brown goes on to say, "No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he's realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about "criminals" as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away; till he's got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skulls; till he's squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat."⁷
- The Teacher's message, the message of the Bible, is that we are that criminal. And until we capture ourselves and realize the depths of our own depravity we will never ever see where

⁴ Longman, p. 199.

⁵ Proverbs 20:9

⁶ J. I. Packer, "I Want to Be a Christian." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 4.

⁷ J. I. Packer, "I Want to Be a Christian." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 4.

God fits into the picture in this life under the sun. And until that happens life will be meaningless. And absurd. And a vanity. Mostly because, by our own depravity, we choose make it that way.

Transition

Look at [verses 23-24](#) and the [second](#) incontrovertible fact about our failure to do what is right in this life. Not only are we totally depraved, [[Slide #4](#)] but **our moral ability to do what is right is severely impaired**. Listen. *All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"- but this was beyond me. 24 Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound- who can discover it?*

- Remember, in the language of the Bible, wisdom is something that enables a person to avoid extremes and live rightly, live for God. So when the Teacher says, "*I am determined to be wise*" what he's really saying is "I'm determined to do what is right." Have you ever said that? I am determined to do the right thing?
- Look at what the Teacher says in response to this determined effort of his. *But this was beyond me*. He couldn't do it. It couldn't be done. Why? Because our moral ability to do what is right is impaired. It is beyond our ability to do the right thing.
- I love dunking the basketball. I used to have calluses in the creases of my palms from dunking the ball so much. But right now, I cannot dunk the ball. I can picture dunking. I can imagine it. I can dream about it. I can see myself dunking the basketball. But I cannot dunk the basketball. It is beyond me. My ability to do so is impaired.
- The same holds true of our moral ability. It is impaired beyond correction. No matter how hard we try, no matter how determined we are to *be wise*, to do the right thing, our sinful nature always lets us down. Or as Paul puts it in Romans 3:12 *All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one*. Paul, or the Teacher, they're not denying our ability to do good things. They're talking about our inability to be good. Sin has so impaired our moral ability, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much effort we put into it, left to ourselves, left to our own strength, without any help, we cannot please God.

Transition

Which leads us to the Teacher's final statement in verses 25-29; the [third](#) incontrovertible fact about our inability to do what is right. **Our culpability is unavoidable**. [[Slide #5](#)] Listen carefully. *So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. 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. 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. 29 This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."*

- When I was in college and single, a group of us guys, to ease our pain of being scorned and rejected by the opposite sex, would comfort ourselves with obscure bible verses about women.

I think the favorite was Proverbs 21:9. *Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.* Somehow reading those words made us feel better about our condition—like we weren't total losers.

- That, however, is not what [verses 25-29](#) are about. The Teacher is not belittling women here; he's not grouching about the failures of the opposite sex like some single guy scorned by love.⁸ That's not the point. The point is that no one, man or woman, really pleases God. A paraphrase of [verse 28](#) could be this, "I have found very few people who please God, no one at all really."⁹
- Look at verse 29. In this quest of his, the Teacher is driven to a single summary point. [Verse 29](#) is the grand total of all his spiritual calculations.¹⁰ *This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."*
- God didn't create us to be sinful. He didn't even create us to be morally neutral—this *tabula rasa*, this blank slate that is neither good nor bad. The Teacher says God created us *upright*. Not upright in the sense of walking on two legs. Morally upright. That word *upright* is a word used to describe a heart which is disposed to faithfulness or obedience.¹¹ That's how God created us. To be faithful to him. To be obedient to him.
- And even though that is how God created us, we all have gone wrong.¹² We are all rotten eggs. All of us have chosen a different path *in search of many schemes*. **There is no one under the sun who does what is right—not even one.** And so the blame for our experience of meaninglessness and vanity in this life under the sun falls squarely on our shoulders. We are the problem. We alone are culpable.

Conclusion

- Listen to me. The reason the Teacher takes us on this painful journey to peer into the window of our soul is not so that we leave here feeling miserable and terrible about ourselves. If that's all that happens I've failed you miserably. The purpose of this painful journey, of introspectively turning inward to glimpse the evil within, is so that we are prepared to hear God's good news.
- Our depravity is universal. Our moral ability to do what is right is severely impaired. Our culpability in the matter is unavoidable. **There is no one under the sun who does what is right—not even one.** God knows our condition. He knows our experience of life under the sun is one of *chasing after the wind*—a search for something we can't catch. He knows about this vanity and meaninglessness and frustration we feel—all the products of our own sinful choices. And he's done something about it. He knows there is no one under the sun who does what is right in his eyes.
- And then there's Christ. All that's wrong with us is atoned for by Christ. And no matter how many times I read the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21 I am continually in awe of God's solution.

⁸ Fox, p. 267.

⁹ Thomas Constable, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, p.23.

¹⁰ Eaton, p. 117.

¹¹ Eaton, p. 117.

¹² Longman, p. 201.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- Whereas the Teacher looks around him and sees nobody who's upright—who does the right thing—who's righteous, through faith in Christ God imputes the uprightness of Christ to all who believe. Through faith in Christ God undoes our depravity, he repairs our moral inability, and he holds Christ culpable for our sin *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. It is through Christ alone, with his help, and standing in his righteousness, that we are able to please God and find meaning in this life. The question is, are you there? And more importantly, what's keeping you from receiving this gift?