

## **The School of Hard Knocks**

Ecclesiastes 7:14-29

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Several years ago, I came across some of my old report cards. My lowest grades in Junior High were in Band and Spanish – I haven't made much improvement in language or the arts over the years. In High School, Spanish, Math, and Zoology caused me much distress. You might get a kick out of one of my college report cards. For one semester, my lowest grade was in Public Speaking! Some of you are not surprised by this one.

Since my Spanish in High School was “muy malo,” I decided to take Italian in college, which was a huge mistake. I realized I was in trouble when the professor told us after the first day of class, he would not speak any more English. Everything would be in Italian from that point on.

I languished with this language, getting a “D” for the semester. The next semester I had a TA (Teaching Assistant) who wouldn't speak English either (what's up with that?). But then something very exciting happened. The TA's went on strike! That meant I didn't have to go to class. We were supposed to keep up with our work, but I didn't crack a book for weeks. When the strike was over, I went back to class and ended up with an “Incomplete” for a grade. The next semester I actually got an “F.”

I felt like a failure and wanted to bail on college. I hung in there, eventually getting saved and then after four years at the University of Wisconsin, transferred to Moody Bible Institute, where my grades were much better (that's probably because they didn't offer Italian or math). Those feelings of failure, however, stayed with me for a long time, and came back to the surface when we were missionaries in Mexico, and I struggled to learn Spanish.

Have you ever felt like a failure and just wanted to quit? Does it feel like you're just taking the same class over and over, wondering if you'll ever pass the course?

Actually, we've all been enrolled in the School of Hard Knocks. This is an idiomatic phrase referring to the painful education one gets from life's negative experiences. As we've been learning in our study of Ecclesiastes, Solomon was a student in the school of dissatisfaction as he vainly searched for meaning and

significance under the sun. He earned a lot of incompletes and failed every course he took.

As we finish Ecclesiastes 7 today, let's refresh our memories of what we learned in the first half of this chapter three weeks ago.

- It's better to have a good reputation than great riches.
- It's better to participate in a funeral than to party at a feast.
- It's better to listen to a rebuke than to go through life laughing.
- It's better to be patient than proud.
- It's better to live in the present than to be locked into the past.
- It's better to have faith in God's providence than to fight against Him.

Let's pick up Solomon's search as we focus on eight lessons learned in the School of Hard Knocks from Ecclesiastes 7:15-29.

Here's our main idea: *Life only makes sense when we live it for the Lord.*

**1. Understand life is often unfair.** Let's turn our attention to 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."*** As Solomon got older, he realized his life had been brief and empty. He felt like he had seen it all and had experienced everything life had to offer.

It especially bothered him that the righteous don't always prosper, nor do the wicked always suffer. This same conundrum is addressed by Asaph in Psalms 73:3: ***"For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."*** This angst was expressed in a question asked by Job in Job 21:7: ***"Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?"***

Solomon struggled when he saw a righteous man perish while an unrighteous man lived a prolonged life. It's certainly true that some righteous people die way too young, while those who seem wicked often live too long. One heartbreaking story that came out of Hurricane Helene was when a mother, her parents, and her 7-year-old son were up on the roof of their house while the water was rising. When the building started coming apart, they were all tossed into the raging water. The mother survived, but her parents and son drowned. Nothing about that seems fair, does it?

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**2. Don't be a spiritual pretender.** At first glance, verses 16-17 can seem confusing: ***“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?”*** In his commentary on this passage, Philip Ryken notes, *“Grammatically speaking, this ...may refer to someone who is only pretending to be righteous and is playing the wise man.”*

Notice the phrase, ***“do not make yourself.”*** This is a reflexive verb, meaning it's something we do to ourselves, or more literally when the action is *“directed or turned back on itself.”* The picture here is of someone who focuses on producing extreme external righteousness like the Pharisee in Luke 18:2 who self-righteously bragged, ***“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”*** We could say that the truly righteous strive to obey God's Word while the overly righteous seek to add to God's Word. We must avoid two extremes: *self-righteousness* and *sinful unrighteousness*.

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**3. Revere God and turn from evil.** Instead of focusing on being a Pharisee or a fool, we're challenged to fear God in verse 18: ***“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.”*** Jeremiah 32:40 says, ***“I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”*** I've always liked Exodus 20:20: ***“Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”***

The word ***“fear”*** means, *“to revere with holy awe.”* One commentator defines it as *“trembling trust.”* God works His ways and His will in such a way that we should respond with holy reverence. To fear God is to know that He is God, and we are not. It's the idea of revering and living in awe of the Almighty who is awesome in His holiness. He sees all that you do, and it is His hand that sends circumstances into your life. He is the one from whom the angels in glory hide their faces. He brings wrath and judgment and yet is loving, merciful, gracious, and compassionate, inviting us to come before Him as children approach their fathers.

This reminds me of what Oswald Chambers wrote, “*The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.*”

I just finished reading a fantastic new book by Erwin Lutzer called, *The Eclipse of God: Our Nation’s Disastrous Search for a More Inclusive Deity (and What We Must Do About It)*.

Lutzer calls us back to fearing and revering God. Here are a few excerpts...

*Our choice is clear. Either we as a nation, and most urgently, we as a church, return wholeheartedly to the God of the Bible in repentance, or we will find ourselves worshipping the weak, impersonal, and dark gods of our culture...this is not a time for revenge and anger, but a time of counting the cost of true discipleship and gladly paying the cost no matter what it requires...we must return to the God of fire, the God who is both merciful and just, the God who redeems but also judges. We must renew our understanding of His sovereignty and His holiness. We have been given boundless spiritual resources to help us withstand the headwinds of a world that has lost its way. In truth, we have at our disposal the very power of God, if only we would be humble enough to take steps to receive it.*

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**4. Walk the pathway of wisdom.** Like Dr. Christopher Yuan shared last weekend, we must learn God’s “no” and love God’s “yes.” Christianity is not a list of regulations of do’s and don’ts, but a relationship of love where we’re called to live wisely as we see in verse 19: “***Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.***” Proverbs 24:5 says, “***A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might.***”

The pastoral team and deacons have been meeting one Saturday morning a month this fall to seek God’s wisdom regarding our vision and staffing needs. This past Tuesday, the staff fasted and prayed during the lunch hour as we focused on where God is working and how we can join Him.

When I think of those who are pursuing wisdom in the school of hard knocks, I celebrate the courage of those in Celebrate Recovery. I wanted to pass along a need in one of our women’s 12-step groups. We’re looking for women who would

be willing to provide rides on Tuesday nights for two women who live in Iowa. Call the church office for more details.

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**5. Recognize the pervasiveness of sin.** Because of Adam's fall into sin, the entire human race has been plunged into depravity. Listen to verse 20: ***"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."*** This verse is reinforced in Romans 3:10: ***"None is righteous, no, not one."*** 1 Kings 8:46 says, ***"...for there is no one who does not sin."*** Psalm 14:3 adds, ***"They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one."*** Lutzer writes, *"The seeds of every conceivable evil lies coiled like a serpent in every human heart."*

This is fleshed out in a personal and practical way in verses 21-22: ***"Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others."*** Because everyone is a sinner, sooner or later, almost everyone will say something sour about you. Before you retaliate, remember how many times you have talked badly about others. Blaise Pascal darkly observed, *"If all men knew what was said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world."*

Our sins don't smell any better than other people's sins so we shouldn't get mad at those who sin in the same way we do, or in ways we don't.

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**6. Trust God even when His ways are mysterious.** Are you OK when things don't make sense to you? Will you still trust Him when all your questions are not answered? Let me ask it like this: *Can you worship a God who isn't obligated to explain His actions to you?*

Join me in verses 23-25: ***"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? 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."*** The phrase ***"to know"*** means, *"to learn,"* and ***"search out"*** means, *"to spy out and to explore."* Solomon kept on trying to figure it all out, but the answers were ***"far off"*** and ***"deep, very deep."***

Sometimes we focus on formulas to try to figure out God's will like the overreaching title of a book by a best-selling Christian author, *12 Daily Practices to Guarantee Tomorrow's Success*. That's quite a promise, isn't it? Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

While God has revealed many things in His Word, He has not told us everything as Deuteronomy 29:29 declares: ***"The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."*** Psalm 36:6 says, ***"Your judgments are like the great deep."*** Job 11:7 poses a question, ***"Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?"*** Just recently, I read Romans 11:33 to someone in the hospital. He found it very comforting: ***"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!"***

This week, one of my college friends from Madison is grieving the passing of his father. When I called Jim to support him and pray for him, he said, *"Brian, the Lord's ways are mysterious...but good."*

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**7. Pursue purity by putting up moral guardrails.** Because we're swimming in a hyper-sexualized culture, it's imperative for us to have a gameplan which includes guardrails. We see this in verse 26: ***"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."*** Solomon uses some very strong words to describe the consequences of sexual sin – *bitter, death, snares, nets, fetters, and taken.*

While Solomon didn't practice what he preached, he did warn others about the dangers of sexual immorality in Proverbs 5:3: ***"For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol."*** Proverbs 7:22 adds: ***"All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter..."***

My mind goes to Genesis 38, one of the most scandalous chapters in the Bible where we read of Tamar seducing Judah, and he gives in to her. In Genesis 39, Judah's younger brother Joseph is repeatedly enticed by Potiphar's wife, and he flees from her.

Do you have some moral guardrails? Make sure you are watching what you are watching online and get some accountability software like Covenant Eyes if you need some help. If you're married, don't flirt with anyone not your spouse. If you're single, flee those situations where you might be led to compromise.

As we learned in our Holy Sexuality Conference last weekend, God wants us to be holy because He is holy. BTW, nearly 400 books and 75 copies of the *Holy Sexuality Home Video Series* were purchased! Angela Yuan said the response was unlike other much larger venues they speak at. This shows a strong desire to grow in holy living. Here are some highlights shared by Dr. Christopher Yuan.

- *We've allowed psychology to supersede biology; our feelings now take precedence over the facts of nature.*
- *Today, experience reigns supreme, and everything must bow down to it. No longer do we uphold sola scriptura (scripture alone). Instead, the world embraces sola experientia (experience alone).*
- *Holy sexuality consists of two paths: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.*
- *Unconditional love does not mean unconditional approval of my behavior.*
- *The opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality. The opposite of homosexuality is holiness. The opposite of every sin is holiness.*

I want to share one response from the conference which is representative of what I heard from many others.

*Pastor Brian, Thank you to you and the deacons for having Christopher Yuan come...I was at service early on Saturday night and got to speak to Dr. Yuan for 15 minutes...that conversation and then his testimony was life-changing for me. I feel like my head is barely above water in my life and the conversation he had with me spoke into my heart and gave me great encouragement. Thank you for bringing his message to Edgewood and the Quad Cities. Tears streamed down my face during service as I felt hope in the hopelessness I have been feeling and experiencing.*

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**8. Admit you are a sinner in need of the Savior.** We see this in verses 27-28: ***“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.***

Note how many times he uses “I” and “my” in this section. He’s not saying women are worse sinners, he’s simply sharing his experience. It should be pointed out that men also sin by seducing women or by abusing them. Since Solomon had 1,000 women as wives and mistresses, he concluded there was not a righteous one among them. This makes sense because of what 1 Kings 11:3 says, ***“He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.”***

One reason Solomon could not find a virtuous woman is because he only saw women as sexual conquests and never took the time to discover who they were as image-bearers of God. His encounters left him feeling empty. Here’s an application of this to our culture today – sex outside of biblical marriage arrests the mutual process of discovery. One pastor writes, *“You cannot discover who you are, or who another person is when you are involved in wrongful sex.”* Plus, God won’t bless your relationship, and you will be plagued with guilt and shame.

Solomon was not negative about women. He said a woman symbolized true and godly wisdom in Proverbs 8. He spoke of a virtuous wife in Proverbs 31 and celebrated womanhood in Song of Solomon. He also had a high view of marriage in Ecclesiastes 9:9: ***“Enjoy life with the wife whom you love...”***

In his searching, he only found one man who was wise. I wonder if he was referring to himself. Solomon summarized his quest in verse 29: ***“See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”*** This teaching is rooted in the opening chapters of Genesis.

- **God made man upright.** In Genesis 1:26, God said, ***“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”*** In verse 31, He called His creation ***“very good.”*** The word ***“upright”*** means, *“right, just, straight.”*
- **But they have sought out many schemes.** Genesis 3:6 tells us their uprightness did not last, ***“She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”*** Ever since the first sin, we have become experts at sin. The word ***“many”*** refers to an abundance of iniquity and ***“schemes”*** has the idea of *“inventions and evil imaginations.”* Mankind has gone in search of sinful schemes.

After sin was unleashed, it didn't take long for it to affect and infect everything as we see in Genesis 6:5: ***"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."*** One need only look at the headlines, or inside our own hearts to discover unbridled depravity. The New Living Translation captures it this way: ***"I discovered that God created people to be upright, but they have each turned to their downward path."***

In Cologne, Germany, there's a building called the "Documentation Center." It has won many awards for exposing the evils of Nazism with numerous exhibits, a research library, and even displays of torture chambers. Mirrors are strategically placed in various rooms and hallways so when you look up, you see yourself. It forces one to ask: *Could I have done this?* The obvious answer is yes.

If we were to receive a holiness report card, we'd all get at least three "F's."

- **Failure.** Romans 3:23: ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."***
- **Futility.** In Ecclesiastes 7:15, Solomon describes his life as ***"vain,"*** or empty.
- **Final Judgment.** The third bad grade is perhaps the worst. Hebrews 9:27 says there's a final judgment coming: ***"And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."***

The good news of the gospel is that there is ***"a righteous man who perished in His righteousness."*** His name is Jesus. He's not one in a thousand, He is one in billions upon billions. He is the only righteous man who ever lived. Listen to Romans 5:15: ***"But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many."*** Because of Adam's sin, we're all sinners, and we're all separated from God.

But Jesus, as the second Adam, exchanged His righteousness for our rottenness. We see this in Romans 5:17: ***"For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."*** Jesus reverses the curse! He's the answer to all our sinful schemes!

Let me come back to the story of the 7-year-old who died in Hurricane Helene. According to his mother, when their home broke apart, and Micah fell into the raging water, he cried out, *“Jesus, Jesus, help me, help me!”* His mom reflected on that moment, *“My son called to the one God Almighty. And I think at the moment he was rescued and became my hero.”*

Will you cry out to Jesus for salvation right now?

## **Communion**