

Lessons on Ecclesiastes – The Wisdom of Dis-illusion

Prepared for Las Placitas Presbyterian Church by the Rev. Ken Cuthbertson, June 26, 2020



LESSONS ON ECCLESIASTES #4 – Ecclesiastes 7-8

This week's lesson text meanders through proverbial sayings, and thus is difficult to follow at times... but, there are some true "gems of wisdom hidden here. I have done some rearranging of the verses into more topical groupings....

Topic 1 – Be mindful of death....

7: 1 A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death, than the day of birth.

2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart. 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.

4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Plus:

7: 8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.

It is easy to view these verses as grim and rather morbid... especially for any from a sternly "puritanical" religious background. On the other hand, this is a place where the insights of Buddhism may once again be helpful. "Mindfulness" is a trendy word these days, but what these verses seem to be saying is that "The wise will live in constant mindfulness of their mortality."

We begin Lent with the phrase, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return." For me (KLC) the most meaningful affirmation in our PCUSA *Brief Statement of Faith* is: "In life and in death we belong to God." We do live our lives in the context of mortality, and I think we need to. Denial of mortality is... as *Qoheleth* might say... "fleeting", "empty", and "vain". But... what I think *Qoheleth* is saying in the larger context is that being mindful of our mortality can motivate us to the true enjoyment of the days we have... which is the point!

It is strange to be looking at these words in this week, when we are reading daily... even hour by hour... of new "spikes" of COVID-19, probably tied to "reopening" measures that have allowed too many to disregard safety precautions. Denial, in this case, certainly seems to be foolishness, and can lead to

death. Mindfulness of our vulnerability to disease and death can and does save lives... if not our own, then perhaps those of others. And so, in very practical ways right now:

5 It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. 6 For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is fleeting.

Topic 2 – General observations on Wisdom and Foolishness

7 Surely oppression makes the wise foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

[See verse 8 above in topic 1....]

9 Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.

10 Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

11 Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. 12 For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.

7:19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise more than ten rulers that are in a city.

7:23 All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. 24 That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? 25 I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. 26 I found more bitter than death the woman [i.e. Lady Folly] who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

Verse 26 is problematic. Choon-Leong Seow, in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (p. 944), sensibly suggests that "the woman" in question is Folly itself, both Wisdom and Folly being traditionally personified as women. This, then means that "Folly is a trap..." etc.

Wisdom is elusive, hard to find, but Folly aggressively ensnares.

27 See, this is what I found, says Qoheleth, adding one thing to another to find the sum, 28 which my mind 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.~~] 29 See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes. 8: 1 Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? Wisdom makes one's face shine, and the hardness of one's countenance is changed.

Choon-Leong Seow suggests that the second half of verse 28 (crossed out above) may be a later insertion based on a misunderstanding of verse 26. The passage reads more coherently without it.

One of the traditional Latin words for "wisdom" is "*prudence*", used in relation to practical knowledge, discretion, and good sense. That, rather than a more philosophical sense, seems to be the way that *Qoheleth* intends "wisdom" to be understood. In the New Testament, Paul's contrast between the "works" of the flesh and the "fruits" of the Spirit seem to fall generally in line with the contrast between "folly" and "wisdom" in both *Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs*. (See *Galatians* 5: 19-23.)

Topic 3 – A JOB reprise; but, prudence and moderation is most advisable....

7:13 Consider the work of God; who can make straight what God 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 mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

Verses 7:13-14 sound almost like a reflection on the book of JOB. I'm not saying they are, but they are evocative. Once again, faith and virtue are no guarantee of health, wealth, or happiness. Nor are the wicked bound to get the recompense for their evil doings. *Qoheleth* continues in this vein:

7:15 In my fleeting life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. 16 Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? 17 Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both. [See verse 19 above in topic 2....] 20 Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.

Choon-Leong Seow sees the counsel in verse 16, against being “too” righteous or wise, as counsel against being too extreme in a perfectionistic sort of way. The Scots poet Robert Burns referred to such folks as the “*unco guid*” (the “overly good”). We might understand this as referring to an egotistical sort of perfectionism... in which failure is almost certainly inevitable. *Qoheleth* seemingly advises moderation in all things... even virtue. There is, I sense, also a connection here to the issue we saw in the *Sermon on the Mount* series between the Pharisees’ allegedly legalistic emphasis on outward observance, versus Jesus’s emphasis on inward righteousness and obedience grounded in the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule.

The contrast is to also not be “too” wicked or foolish. Instead, the suggested counsel seems to be to “embrace” righteousness (in a non-egotistical way) while also holding on to being “not too” wicked.

The observation in verse 20 seems almost a critique of the claims of Job, though (again) not necessarily directly.

7:21 Do not give heed to everything that people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you; 22 your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.

Verses 21-22: another nod to the outer versus inward question.

[See verses 7:23-8:1 above in topic 2, 8:2-9 follow in topic 4....]

8:10 Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is fleetingness.

Verse 10 calls to mind the lines from Marc Antony’s funeral oration in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “The evil men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones. So let it be with Caesar.” The passage continues on....

8:11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil. 12 Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, 13 but it will

not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

14 There is a fleeting thing that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is a fleeting thing.

Verses 10-14 seem remarkable in two ways. First, in a Job-like honesty, Qoheleth seems to admit that the righteous often do suffer, and the wicked seem to prosper. But, secondly (and, unlike Job) there is an affirmation that this is “fleeting” and that ultimately goodness will prevail and all will be well. The very canny observation in this is that the slowness of the karmic consequence of evil is itself a temptation....

Topic 4 – “Just following orders?”

8:2 Keep the king's command because of your sacred oath. 3 Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"*

5 Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm, and the wise mind will know the time and way. 6 For every matter has its time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them. 7 Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be?

8 No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it. 9 All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt.

**[Suggested alternative translation of verse 3 phrase: “do not persist in a harmful thing,”]*

These verses in 8:2-9 are perhaps the most disturbing in the whole of *Ecclesiastes*. (That is, assuming 7:26 is referring to personified “Folly” rather than being pure misogyny.) If this were intended as the actual advice of a king like Solomon, it is horrible in its cynicism. If, on the other hand, it reflects the counsel of someone enmeshed in a royal or imperial system, it is rather tragic and remains morally unsettling. Ever since the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal, “I was just following orders!” has been rejected as a defense. (How this may relate to current affairs, I leave to the readers’ ponderings....)

Choon-Leong Seow’s suggested alternative rendering of part of verse 3, comes with the speculation that *Qoheleth* is counseling against sedition against the ruler. (*NOAB*, p. 944) My own speculation about the dashed hopes of “King” Zerubbabel in lesson 1 might offer the least problematic “spin” on these verses. With Zerubbabel having been an underling of the Persian King, bound by oath to that king as his deputy in Jerusalem, but perhaps suspected (at least) of sedition and then somehow “disappeared” from the scene, might the author be offering counsel and... in a sense... absolution to the “Prince of Babylon”? It’s a long-shot suggestion, I know, but it broadly fits with the presumed era of composition, the few circumstances we know of Zerubbabel, and the ever-pragmatic mindset of *Qoheleth*.

[Verses 8:10-14 are found above in topic 3....]

Topic 5 – *Qoheleth* reiterates the main points....

And so, *Qoheleth* cycles back, again, to its thematic counsel, and to its reverently agnostic resignation:

8:15 So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun. 16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.