

Pleasure Does Not Equal Happiness

Living the Far Better Life - Part 2

Ecclesiastes 2:1-12

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On Easter I began a sermon series with you on Living the Far Better Life. I talked about how this far better life is a life filled with meaning. It is a life freed by grace. And it is a life full of energy as we tap in to the power of God. Today I want to suggest that the far better life involves being able to discern the difference between pleasure and happiness. The passage we read from Ecclesiastes 2 introduces this topic rather nicely. Here we have the wealthiest and wisest king of ancient Israel confessing that he didn't know the difference between mere pleasure and true happiness at first. It was something he had to learn. He said, "I denied myself nothing that brought me pleasure and yet it was all meaningless in the end." It didn't satisfy him or bring him happiness. Living the far better life does not mean we deny ourselves nothing pleasurable. It's quite possible to fill your life with all kinds of pleasures and still be unhappy. In fact, it's quite probable that if you denying yourself nothing you will end up very unhappy.

As soon as any pastor begins to talk about pleasure, most people are expecting the pastor to take the topic in a certain direction - to tell you that seeking pleasure is a bad thing; that you ought to deny yourself whatever you find pleasurable and spend your life in self-denial lest you become seduced and tempted by pleasure. That is certainly the caricature we have of the puritan Christians who help found our country. They were Stoic and denied themselves worldly pleasures. But I don't want to hop on that bus this morning and go in that direction. I want to say that I'm all for pleasure. As a matter of fact, I like pleasure. Pleasure is one of God's good gifts. He intends for us to enjoy pleasure. But pleasure has its

proper place. Pleasure, like all God's good gifts, can be abused and misused, and even become very destructive to our well-being.

As we go through life the things that bring us pleasure change as we get older. When you're a baby what brings pleasure is having a clean diaper and a warm bottle. When you're a child what brings pleasure is having a new bike or a new Sponge Bob video. When you are a teenager pleasure comes in the form of a zit free day or a having a fun date for the prom. When you get older the word pleasure takes on a much different meaning. Pleasure is finding the cheapest gas prices anywhere around. For some men pleasure is wearing dress socks and shoes with shorts. Imagine that. Or how about not having to wake up to an alarm clock anymore. I take great pleasure in playing 18 holes of golf and not having any marks higher than a seven. Or finding more golf balls than I lose in a round.

I think we can all agree we experience pleasure all the way through life. The problem is when we live only for pleasure. Then we find our lives very empty. We find that life is meaningless.

The Bible has a lot to say about this topic. The Bible draws a sharp contrast between pleasure and happiness, pleasure and fulfillment. They're not the same thing.

One very prominent characteristic about Jesus' teaching is how he flipped things completely around from the prevailing cultural thinking. He said things like, ***"The first shall be last."*** ***"The greatest in the kingdom will be the servant of all."*** ***"The meek shall inherit the earth."*** ***"Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things [you find pleasure in] shall be added unto you."***

Finding happiness in life is an important part of living the far better life. I'll be honest with you, I look out at you week after week and I don't see happiness exuding from most of your lives. Sometimes I see such sadness and brokenness

written on your faces. And yet God made you for lasting happiness. He wants you to be happy. God is not honored by your being unhappy. He made you for something far better. So what do you need to do to find true happiness?

FIRST, BREAK THE CONNECTION BETWEEN TEMPORARY PLEASURE AND LASTING HAPPINESS. They are not the same thing. We think pleasure and happiness are somehow tied together, but they are not. We have bought into the lie that in order to have happiness we have to have pleasure. That's not true. We have to break the connection between those two ideas. In Hebrews 11:24-25 we read, *"By faith Moses when he had grown up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter choosing rather to endure ill treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin."*

Here's Moses, raised by Pharaoh's daughter, in Pharaoh's household, and yet he chose to stand against the Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. It says he was able to do this because of his faith. What does it mean to have that kind of faith, faith that can stand up against evil?

Having faith is very important. The Bible tells us we are saved by faith. The Bible tells us we are to live by faith. The Bible tells us the only way to please God is by faith. By faith we trust Him to give us the far better life - a life of meaning and purpose and significance - a life of lasting happiness.

The far better life is a life of faith. It is about trusting Jesus to be who he says he is. It's about trusting Jesus to give you a far better life than you can find on your own. *"By faith Moses when he grew up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to endure ill treatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin."* (Hebrews 11:24) Here's our problem. Sin can be very pleasurable but those pleasures are passing. They are temporary. You've got to wake up in the morning and deal with what you've done.

The Bible teaches that a life of sin brings brokenness and eternal separation from God, but it also acknowledges that sin can bring passing pleasure. That's where we get hung up. Without faith we can not overcome the lure of the passing pleasure of sin. But here's something else to think about. Even the pleasure we derive from things that do not involve sin, those good pleasures are still passing and temporary. By faith Moses had the ability to see the temporary nature of pleasure and that is why he was willing to choose to identify himself with the Hebrew people. By faith he understood that true happiness is only found in God, and not just any God - the God of the Hebrew people, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here's the point - pleasure will come to an end. Living for pleasure only - pleasure at any price - is like jumping off a tall building. It's not the fall that hurts you but the sudden stop at the end. I've talked to people who have told me that the two aims in their life before Christ were avoiding pain and finding pleasure at any cost. They will tell you that the ending was very abrupt and the pain was very real. But there are far more people who are still living for those dual aims because they haven't the faith to see a far better way of life.

There is another story in the Bible about a guy who sought pleasure at any cost. His personal life motto was "*Eat, drink and be merry.*" That was his life purpose statement. But the Bible tells us that the very next day that guy died and he's called a fool in the Bible because he gave no thought to where he was going to spend eternity.

Think of it like this - sin is like having fun on borrowed money. Have you ever had pleasure on credit? It's like charging a dream vacation on your credit card or buying all your Christmas presents with your credit card. It's great for a while. There's no pain involved at first. It doesn't feel like it's costing you anything. Then thirty days later a bill comes. You still think it was the greatest

vacation ever or the greatest Christmas ever. So you pay a little bit on the bill. It's still worth it. But then thirty days later the balance comes due again. You think, the pleasure is still lingering in my mind. It was worth it. Then thirty days later it comes again. And thirty days later it comes again, and thirty days later it comes again, each time with interest added. Finally you realize, "The pleasure I had was temporary! But the price I have to pay is long lasting."

That's the reality we live with. Even sinless pleasure is temporary. For example, what's the best meal you've ever had? How long until you were hungry again? How long will the pleasure of your next purchase last, or your next gadget, or your next outfit, or your next car, or your next plunge into debt, or your next cruise or your next peak at pornography? How long will that pleasure last?

The point is: pleasure does not last. It always leaves you empty and wanting more. 1st Timothy 5:6 says, "*The one who lives for pleasure is dead even while he lives.*" You can see it in the eyes of people who have spent their lives seeking pleasure at all cost. They're like an addict who is desperate for their next fix.

What else can we do toward finding true happiness?

SECOND, BREAK THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WHAT YOU DO AND WHO YOU ARE. Pleasure is found in what you do. Happiness is found in who you are. Think back to King Solomon who denied himself no pleasure. He built... he planted... he made... he bought... he amassed... he acquired.... His pleasures all came from doing. We get caught up in this kind of thinking too. We think: if I just do more I'll have more pleasure. We try to build and plant and make and buy and amass and acquire in order to experience more pleasure. Going down that road will bring us temporary pleasure but not lasting happiness. We keep ourselves so busy doing that we're exhausted all the time. Sometimes we just need to sit still.

There was an amazing story in the Los Angeles Times some years ago about a guy named Larry Walters who just couldn't sit still. He always had to be doing something. One day he got an idea while sitting outside in his Sears lawn chair. He went and bought 45 weather balloons and filled them full of helium. He strapped himself into his lawn chair with some sandwiches and some Miller Lite. He had a pellet gun on his lap. His plan was to float to a height of about 30 feet above his back yard and enjoy a few hours of flight before shooting enough balloons to come back down.

But things didn't go quite as Larry planned. When his friends cut the cords anchoring him from the bumper of his jeep, he didn't float up just thirty feet as planned. Instead, he shot up into the Los Angeles sky like a man shot out of a canon, pulled by the 45 balloons, each holding 33 cubic feet of helium. He didn't level off at 100 feet or even 1000 feet. He soared to 16,000 feet. At that point he was stone sober! He was also too scared to shoot any of the balloons for fear he'd get himself into real trouble.

So there he was drifting along with his beer and sandwiches for several hours considering all of his options. At one point he crossed the primary approach corridor of LAX airspace and a pilot saw him and radioed in to the tower his finding. Can you imagine? Flying along and there's a guy in a Sears lawn chair next to you. Eventually, Larry gathered enough nerve to shoot enough balloons and he slowly started to descend in the night sky. As he came down the hanging tethers tangled and caught in some power lines causing a black out in a Long Beach neighborhood for twenty minutes. Larry finally climbed to safety where he was arrested by waiting members of the Los Angeles police department. He was handcuffed and led away when a reporter caught up to him and asked, "**Why did you do it?**" Larry just said, "**A man can't just sit there can he.**"

Solomon must have followed the same philosophy in life. He couldn't just sit there. There's no pleasure in that. So he spent a lot of energy working on his external world. The problem was that he spent very little time working on his internal world, because what we do, and who we are, are two different things. Solomon needed to work on his interior world. Look at the results of his neglect. Ecclesiastes 2:11 reads, *"Then I took a good look at everything I'd done. Looked at all the sweat and hard work and when I looked I saw nothing but smoke - smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing."* We need to take time to think about who we are and work on that.

What else can we do toward finding true happiness which is essential to living the far better life?

THIRD, BREAK THE CONNECTION BETWEEN YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES AND YOUR CHARACTER. Pleasure can be sustained as long as the circumstances are right, but happiness is sustained when your character is right. Have you ever played the "if only" game with personal happiness? If only this would happen I'd be happy... if only this set of circumstances would change, I'd be happy. If only I had a million dollars, I'd be happy. We really do believe happiness comes to us in the mail through the Publisher's Clearing House. We really do believe happiness comes to us if only.... We are so externally based in our view of life. We think happiness is all about what's on the outside, the people, places and things around us. But it's not.

Jesus said, *"Happy are you when men hate you and when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man..."* (Luke 6:22) And Peter wrote, *"Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed."* (1st Peter 3:14) Both of these passages are telling us that true happiness is not dependent on what is happening around us. **TRUE HAPPINESS IS**

AN INSIDE JOB, a matter of the heart. Habakkuk drives this point home when he says, *"The fig tree does not bud. There are no grapes on the vine. The olive crop fails and the fields produce no fruit. There are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls. Yet will I rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior."* (Habakkuk 3:17-18) That's lasting happiness.

How do you find this lasting happiness? **FIRST, RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS**. That's where it all starts. You have to get things right between you and God. If your heart is full of shame and guilt, anger and resentment, you won't have room for happiness. **SECOND, SUBMIT TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE**. Most parents know but few kids have realized - discipline is an expression of love because it is a desire to correct and protect. When Job had everything he valued taken from him, his friend Eliphaz told him, *"Happy is the man whom God corrects, so do not despise the Lord."* (Job 5:17) Jesus taught this when he said, *"Happy are those who hear the word of God and obey it."* (Luke 11:28) Solomon, the wisest king of Israel said, *"Happy is the person who listens to God."* (Proverbs 8:34) And King David said, *"Make me walk along the path of your commands, for that is where my happiness is found."* (Psalm 119:35)