

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

### **Party Time!**

(selected passages from Ecclesiastes)

Study #5

#### Introduction: A few of my favorite things...

Playing the role of Maria, Julie Andrews sang about some of her favorite things in 1965 classic, The Sound of Music. We know Maria's favorite things. Here's a short list of some of MY favorite things:

Time with my family and taking long road trips  
Books about history and Tom Clancy novels.  
Time spent with good friends and getting in shape,  
Trekking with only my pack on my back.

Planting and nurturing a garden of veggies,  
Walking the neighborhood, watching a moonset,  
Seeing a moonless star-studded night sky,  
Getting up early to greet the sunrise.

Popcorn with hot sauce and grilling up burgers,  
Fixing a car - and then having it run right!  
Thunder at nighttime and cool summer morns,  
Getting a personal note from a friend!

These are a few of MY favorite things!

You could take a few minutes and compose a song of your own, listing some of your favorite things, too. Yours might be VERY different or somewhat similar to mine. But we all have things we like to do.

And you and I are not alone. As a culture, we enjoy getting out of the rut, getting away from it all, kicking back and relaxing. Witness:

- the proliferation of Sea Worlds, Six Flags, Disneys and other theme parks;
- the popularity of Netflix and Blockbuster Online;
- the Internet where we can spend (waste? invest?) hours with U-Tube, Facebook and MySpace and gaming;
- spectator sports watched from the comfort of the couch or at the arena;
- actual sports played - from basketball and football and golf to Frisbee.

All of this is testimony to our commitment to doing a few of our favorite things. We love our pleasures, leisures, amusements, and recreations. We like to have some fun. Actually lots and lots of just good, clean wholesome fun.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes has a lot to say about fun and about pleasure. Solomon, the author of the book, was **VERY** committed to grabbing all the gusto he could from life.

At a certain point he decided to pursue pleasure, almost as if to say, *"I've had it up to here with these mind games and intellectual pursuits - I'm going to have some fun,"*

Today, we're going to see a fun-loving side to Solomon we haven't seen to this point as we watch him take a break from philosophizing and plunge headlong into hedonism.<sup>1</sup>

In previous messages, we have watched Solomon search for the ultimate meaning in life. Today, he is not really looking for ultimate meaning. He's looking for the ultimate experience.

We'll start off by paying attention to a few comments Solomon makes that are downright encouraging when it comes to pleasure.

Some people seem to think that God is like some cosmic kill-joy whose main goal is to make sure nobody out there is having a good time. And if they are, His message is a loud and clear, *"Cut it out!"*

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<sup>1</sup> Hedonism is the philosophy that says **pleasure** is of ultimate importance, the most important pursuit.

News flash! Not true!! God wants us to enjoy life to the full.

## God - Pleasure's Champion!

### Enjoyment of Life is a Gift from God

*God wants us to enjoy our stuff (5:18-19)*

*[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.*

God is the One who gives people the capacity to enjoy life at all. Enjoyment is God's gift to you and me.

If you have wealth enough to buy some things that make life easier and more enjoyable - well, go ahead and enjoy those things.

He doesn't say that those who "have it" are to flaunt it in front of those who have not. But neither should those who **have** be ashamed or feel guilty, either.

Over the years, I've acquired a few "things" I thoroughly enjoy.

I've bought some top notch tools over the years. There's nothing like a well-made tool that's just fit for the job at hand. My books are a source of great enjoyment to me. I appreciate having reliable transportation (hasn't always been that way...) and a house that does way more than keep us out of the weather.

I've taken some great vacations with the family - and the memories of those trips are some of the best memories I have in life.

You've got things you enjoy, too. Favorite possessions and pastimes, good, nurturing relationships. Hey - don't feel guilty about them - enjoy them! They are the good gifts of a good God.

God also wants you to be content where you are in life and to enjoy your present station in life.

*God wants us to enjoy our station in life (9:7-9)*

*[9:7-9] Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. [8] Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. [9] Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.*

In other words, let life be a party!

In the ancient world, white clothing was reserved for the rich and famous. Only the wealthy could afford to dress in clean white clothes.<sup>2</sup> Oil was the sign of gladness in the oriental world and was a part of any festive occasion.

Here's the message:

If you have a husband - enjoy him! If you have a wife - enjoy her! The advice is to go ahead, get married, and enjoy the delights of married love and lifelong companionship.

Do you have kids? Love 'em and laugh with 'em! Enjoy your roommates! And if you're living by yourself - look for friends with whom you can share the joys of life.

Enjoy good food and good drink.<sup>3</sup>

Look for the hilarious in life; the funny; the silly; amazing coincidences; find humor, not aggravation in the peculiarities and eccentricities of your loved ones.

<sup>2</sup> When I've been in Russia, rarely do I see anyone dressed in white, for the reason mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> It would be hard to miss that Solomon speaks positively about wine here, although we shouldn't take that as a **command** to drink wine. It surely says that it is not necessarily a sin to drink wine. More broadly, enjoy the wonderful tastes that can stimulate the palate.

Last Monday morning Kathy and I spent a few minutes watching a baby squirrel play with a stick in the backyard. It was hilarious. As we watched the squirrel together, it dawned on me that I allow the perfectly pointless to freshen my day all too seldom. Solomon would say, *“Go out of your way to watch the squirrels play!”*

Take time out for a laughter break.

There is a time for laughter. In fact, according to Solomon, there is a time for every activity you can think of.

### **God Has Appointed a Time for Laughter (3:4a)**

*[3:1] There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven -*

*[2] A time to give birth and a time to die;*

*A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*

*[3] A time to kill and a time to heal;*

*A time to tear down and a time to build up.*

*[4] A time to weep and a time to laugh;*

*A time to mourn and a time to dance.*

*[5] A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;*

*A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.*

*[6] A time to search and a time to give up as lost;*

*A time to keep and a time to throw away.*

*[7] A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;*

*A time to be silent and a time to speak.*

*[8] A time to love and a time to hate;*

*A time for war and a time for peace.*

(\*If you are of a certain age, I dare you to read those words without humming the old Byrds song - *“To everything, turn, turn, turn....”*)

Yes, we don't want to miss that there is a time for **killing** and **tearing down** and **mourning** and **hating**.

But significant for our purposes is that God has made it so that there is an appropriate time in life for a good, full-throated, deep belly laugh.

I resent the caricature of Christians who never crack a smile.

It's like the guy who walked up to a man he thought he had identified as a pastor. The man replied, *“No. I'm not a pastor. I've just been sick this week.”*

Or the supposed line from the funeral of a Christian: *“He was entirely unselfish, and in his long life he never committed a pleasure.”*

I don't believe it! Christians are not kill-joys because we know that the God who made us is not a kill-joy.

My experience has been that whether Christians are watching a Spurs game, meeting as a Care Group, Sunday School class, discipleship group or dinner group, or they are out for an evening together, laughter is never far removed.

According to Solomon, God wants people to enjoy the world He has created and the life that He has afforded them.

You might even think that he is carrying things a bit far at a couple of points. For instance, what he says in 10:19 may sound pretty shocking.

### **Solomon Calls on us to Enjoy Life**

*A hedonist's view of life (10:19)*

*[10:19] Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything.*

We can hardly believe that Solomon is saying these things. But look it up in your own Bible. I'm not making it up!

*“Eat, drink, and be merry. Spend, spend, spend. Make hay while the sun shines! Do your getting while the getting is good!”*

Similar thoughts surface one chapter later.

*A word to the young, and the young at heart (11:9-10)*

***[11:9] Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes... [10] So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body...***

Listen to him. He tells young men to give full rein to pleasure. Pursue childhood and youthful pleasures.

But, if you're following along in your Bibles, you'll notice that I didn't read those two verses in their entirety. There is more than what I read out loud. Here's the whole thing.

***[11:9] Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. YET KNOW THAT GOD WILL BRING YOU TO JUDGMENT FOR ALL THESE THINGS. [10] So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, BECAUSE CHILDHOOD AND THE PRIME OF LIFE ARE FLEETING.***

Have a great time! (*Oh, and by the way, God will judge you...*). Enjoy your youth to the full! (*And don't think for a moment that youth lasts forever...*).

Well, THOSE are downer thoughts! And this was supposed to be my HAPPY Ecclesiastes sermon - at least as compared to my memorable Mother's Day sermon of last week! (sheesh...)

So, let's just not go there. Let's get back to the theme of pleasure. Remember, Solomon was no armchair quarterback when it came to pleasure. He was first string, on the field, going for the gusto.

In the second chapter of the book, he tells us that he's going to "test drive" pleasure. He's going to try a bunch of stuff out, drive it off the showroom floor, take it out for a spin and see if it delivers what it promises.

He tried it all. To start off with, he built stuff. Solomon had an edifice complex.

## **A Pleasure-Seeker Evaluates Pleasure (2:1-11)**

### **Solomon Expands his Works (vv. 4-6)**

*Edifice complex (v. 4a)*

***[2:4] I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself...***

This is not a reference to the Solomonic Temple he built for God. What is in view here are the various "houses" he built for himself. We know about some of the houses he made, a few of them built for his many wives.<sup>4</sup>

You may remember that the main royal palace took thirteen years to build and was called The House of the Cedars of Lebanon. It contained large ornamental shields of solid, beaten gold and had a throne room unsurpassed for grandeur. It was outrageous in its splendor!

In addition to the building projects, Solomon also gave himself to some exterior decorating projects.

*Exterior decorating (v. 4b)*

***[2:4]... 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.***

No doubt the finest wine in the kingdom was made from the grapes picked in the royal vineyards.

And wouldn't you have just loved to have seen the gardens! I can only imagine how beautiful they were.

We even know some details about three of the ponds he mentions. Archaeologists have unearthed evidence of an average size of about two and a half acres per pool, with an average depth of thirty five feet. Given the tools and machinery available in the ninth century BC, that's an amazing accomplishment.

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<sup>4</sup> He also built storehouses for grain and treasure as well as guardhouses for military purposes.

We Americans have been accused of being guilty of “conspicuous consumption.” - but we have nothing on Solomon! All that he did, he did with a capitol “I.” **“For myself”** is the consistent refrain of this section.

He goes on to tell us that he greatly increased his possessions and his wealth.<sup>5</sup>

### **Solomon Expands His Holdings (vv. 7-8)**

*[2:7] I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves.<sup>6</sup> Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. [8] Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.<sup>7</sup> I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.*

All of these people and animals and things were solely for Solomon’s pleasure.

- The singers sang at his parties.<sup>8</sup>
- The slaves did his bidding.
- The flocks and herds provided choice food for his festivities.
- The silver and gold purchased whatever he wanted.
- The concubines were for his sensual pleasure.

And just in case you’re thinking, *“Solomon was the most hedonistic, sexist man I’ve ever heard of!”* - all I can say is, **“GRANTED!”**

I am not going to try and make excuses for the man. He was what he was.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A summary of Solomon’s wealth is found in 1 Kings 4 and 10, if you would like to review the specifics.

<sup>6</sup> He had homeborn slaves - children born to the slaves he owned.

<sup>7</sup> Note Deuteronomy 17:17 which expressly forbids accumulating gold and silver, lest the king (future king as of the writing of Deuteronomy) have his heart turned away from the Lord by riches.

<sup>8</sup> These would not be Levites, some of whom had the responsibility to sing at worship.

<sup>9</sup> In the end, Solomon was punished for his sins. God did hold him accountable for his lifestyle.

But, get this: He is telling us about a time in his life when he was deeply out of fellowship with God, and was simply out to get pleasure. He wants us to know that he left no stone unturned in his seeking for pleasure. He tasted every pleasure he could find to the full.

With an unlimited line of credit he walked through (you pick the store) Bass Pro Shop/Cabellas/Toys R Us /Best Buy/Zales/Jareds /Lowe’s/ Neiman Marcus/The Apple Store - and indulged every fantasy.

He caps off this listing of his pursuit of pleasure with this.

### **Solomon Refused Himself NOTHING (vv. 9-10)**

*[2:9] 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.*

One of my favorite professors in seminary was Dr. Howard Hendricks. “Prof” was a fun-loving guy, but he wanted his students to become self-controlled, disciplined, disciples of Christ.

So, he encouraged us all to practice saying **“NO!”** to something every day - just to keep in practice. I wish I could say that I’ve followed Hendricks’ advice. But I’ve done a lot better than Solomon did!

Solomon went to great lengths to make his life as comfortable as possible in every way imaginable. He bought every convenience that could be purchased. He would have been first in line for the Barcolounger of his day. He would have bought Maserati chariots, had houses in the ritziest neighborhoods, vacationed in the Bahamas.

He availed himself of every pleasure available - just because he wanted to; just because he could.

And at the end of the day, after all his pleasure-seeking, what has it gotten him? Here is his assessment of life with every pleasure in hand:

## Final Assessment (2:11)

***[2:11] 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.<sup>10</sup>***

No matter how fully - and even how successfully - pleasure was pursued, in the end, it's nothing. Soap bubbles.

Today's English Version of the Bible reads, "*I realized that it didn't mean a thing.*"<sup>11</sup>

One more comment about pleasure-seeking gets our attention.

***[6:7] All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied.***

We work to eat, so that we can gain strength to work in order to go on eating.

But, you know, it's possible that Solomon's not ONLY talking about food here.

In many places in the Bible "appetite" is a symbol for the hunger in each person for soul and spirit nourishment.

In the same way that our appetite for food is never satisfied (we always need another meal), so our appetite for fulfillment - spiritually - won't be satisfied by a life of delicious experiences, thrill-seeking, or comfort.

The Bible says that we are all made in the image of God and that we have deep hungers and thirsts.

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<sup>10</sup> *[2:1] 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?"*

<sup>11</sup> The Message (Eugene Peterson) has, "Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.

Solomon's testimony is that after a lifetime of seeking to satisfy those hungers and thirsts with the most pleasurable experiences and the most comfortable existence imaginable, there those hungers and thirsts remain, unquenched.

For the king of Israel, after all his pursuit of fullness through pleasure, there remained only the sensation of emptiness. It was as if he had been eating air, drinking nothing, chasing the wind.

So, what would Solomon advise us? What would he say to us Americans who are on the fast track to pleasure and comfort?

Brace yourself. He would first of all tell us to think about death.

## Solomon Points Beyond Pleasure

### **The Fact of Judgment is Sobering... (7:4; 11:9b)**

*Concentrate on the sadder side of life (7:2-4)*

***[7:2] It is better to go to a house of mourning  
Than to go to a house of feasting,  
Because that is the end of every man,  
And the living takes it to heart.  
[3] Sorrow is better than laughter,  
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.  
[4] The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.<sup>12</sup>***

We all know the places of pleasure. It's where the good times are. At a baby dedication at church, a wedding, a graduation party, a vacation. It's great at the party

The place of mourning is the funeral home, the nursing home, the hospital. Who wants to go there?

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<sup>12</sup> In another contrast between the wise and the foolish, Solomon says that mourning is better than laughter. *[7:3] Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.*

Well, the wisest man who ever lived says that it's better to go to the funeral than to the wedding.

Why? Because in the house of pleasure, or in the middle of the party, we are tempted to believe that "*under the sun*" is all there is. We are prone to forget that we are all terminal.

But it is easy to remember we're terminal when we're walking the halls of the hospital or the nursing home or when we're strolling the grounds of the cemetery.

Those settings bring us face to face with life and death. There, eternal matters matter. There, we think about God.

Then, after having invited young men (and let's go ahead and include young women as well) to follow the impulses of their heart and the desires of their eyes wise old Solomon offers another piece of advice.

*Realize that judgment is coming (11:9b)*

***[11:9] Be confident that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.***

Imagine, if you will, the following announcement being made at the halftime of an NBA game. Instead of the usual Forrest Welmaker speech about "*not re-playing or re-broadcasting this game without explicit written permission from the NBA or we'll sue the pants off of you,*" over the loudspeaker we hear THIS message:

[Announcer] "*We hope you are enjoying the game this evening. The following message is brought to you by your Maker.*

[Voice of God] "*Judgment is coming; you will all stand before Me one day. Be confident that I will bring you to judgment for all your works.*"

[Announcer] "*We now return you to regular programming. Enjoy the game.*"

How would you react if you heard that announcement at halftime of an important game, or as a replacement commercial on "Lost" or "Desperate Housewives" or at a break in an upcoming debate between the Democrat and Republican candidates for president?

Would you be cynical? Would you doubt your senses? Or would you take it to heart and embrace Solomon's message that the pursuit of pleasure is, ultimately, a dead-end street?

Let's listen to Solomon one more time.

### **We NEED What Only God Can Provide (2:25)**

***[2:24] There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. [25] FOR WHO CAN EAT AND WHO CAN HAVE ENJOYMENT WITHOUT HIM?***

The reason for the emptiness that comes with our pleasure is not that pleasure is wrong, in and of itself. Remember, pleasure is the gift of God.<sup>13</sup>

The problem is not with pleasure. The problem is that we suppose that pleasure - meaningful work, sexual pleasure, financial gain, hours at the amusement park, a favorite TV show or that latest blockbuster movie - will do for us what only a relationship with God will do.

Our problem is not that we can't find enough pleasure. Our problem is that we are alienated from God because of our sin. And to solve the problem created by sin, we must turn to Jesus.

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<sup>13</sup> The New Testament echoes this thought in a couple of places. James tells us, ***[James 1:17] Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*** And Paul says, ***[1 Tim. 4:4] For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude.***

## Conclusion:

Now, in turning attention to Jesus - which is where the Bible would have us turn, I want to be quick to say what I'm **NOT** saying.

I'm NOT saying that the keys to life fulfillment are **success, wealth, health, pleasure PLUS Jesus.**

The Bible doesn't say that if you're looking for fulfillment, you really need to tack Jesus on to whatever else you're enjoying or that He is the really important "icing on the cake."

No. Jesus claims to be much, much more than that. He claims to be the one essential for LIFE. Without Him, the possession of everything else means nothing. The absence of everything else is no loss with Him.

Once, Jesus made a stunning claim when He was in Jerusalem at the conclusion of one of the three annual feasts of the Jews, the Feast of Tabernacles (also called the Feast of Booths).

Tabernacles is an eight day party celebrating God's provision for the people's needs, both in their wilderness wanderings in the days of Moses and in the contemporary yearly harvest of crops.

The last day of Tabernacles is a day of rest. And, in the time of Jesus, a part of the ritual of the final day involved taking a pitcher and filling it with water from the Pool of Siloam, there in the heart of Jerusalem.

That pitcher was then poured out, symbolic of God's provision, poured out for His people through the ages.

On the day that this ritual was enacted, Jesus took the opportunity to speak. And after all we've seen today of Solomon's search for the satisfaction of his appetites, and after all we've tried to find that fulfillment, Jesus' words come with potent force.

*[John 7:37] Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. [38] "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"*

People are thirsty. You are and so am I. There are a variety of beverages that promise to slake our thirst. Solomon tried them all. Maybe you have, too.

But Jesus makes the audacious claim that He - not His teachings, not His way of life, not His moral influence, but He! - is the drink that satisfies. He satisfies at the deepest level of the soul. He's done that for me and he'll do that for you.

He offers Himself and invites you to trust Him and Him alone for your life: for the forgiveness of your sins, for the hope of eternal life, for the meaning that you long for, for LIFE!

He has proven Himself trustworthy by His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And this absolutely trustworthy Jesus is inviting you to trust Him. Now. Come to Jesus.