

The Folly of Worldly Temptations

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 7, 2023.

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11).¹

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

The Folly of Worldly Temptations

To the churches in Corinth,² Philippi,³ Thessalonica,⁴ and including Timothy personally,⁵ the apostle Paul commands imitation, specifically of himself in Christ: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1), he says. That he could make such a statement, indeed a command, not just once but repeatedly tells us much about a man devoted to God. For, he was the same man who assisted those who stoned Stephen,⁶ persecuted the church,⁷ and would have continued in his murderous mission were it not for divine intervention. It took the revelation of the resurrected Christ himself on the road to Damascus to halt the Pharisaical zealot, quite literally, in his tracks.⁸ Perhaps, in light of his past, Paul referred to himself as the “worst” of all sinners (1 Tim. 1:15 NET), “the very least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8), and the “least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because [he] persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9). And yet, he was bold to say to the Philippians, for example, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9).

Similarly, Solomon’s past is quite sordid, leading some (wrongly) to discount Ecclesiastes as the lament of a frustrated old man. Rather, Solomon serves as a case study, not for imitation, but of what not to do. As history reveals, he to whom God appeared and spoke and promised wisdom, discernment, riches, honor (1 Kings 3:12-14), sinned and did wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from God’s commandments and rules (Dan. 9:5). But as his covenant child, God had mercy upon him, not leaving him to the blindness of his sin but graciously opening his eyes, again and again, to see the folly of sin, and through his failure and by God’s grace, he preaches to us that we might learn from God’s mercy shown to him.

For Solomon’s sin is not foreign to the fallen human condition. Just as “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9), or “under heaven” (1:13), the temptations we encounter are no different than the first. For, when Satan in the form of a serpent succeeded in tempting Eve, the Scripture says that she saw the forbidden fruit as “good for food,” a “delight to the eyes,” “to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6), and so she ate and sinned and shared, and so “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). The apostle John summarizes the three temptations of Eve, common to us as “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Apart from the forbidden fruit, however, what Eve desired was not evil: food, pleasure, and wisdom are all blessings from God and to be enjoyed as part of God’s good creation. But when we seek them apart from God, and especially in what he forbids, we sin and suffer for it.

² 1 Cor. 11:1, 4:16

³ Phil. 3:17, 4:9

⁴ 2 Thess. 3:7-9

⁵ 2 Tim. 3:10-12

⁶ Acts 7:58

⁷ Acts 8:3

⁸ Acts 9:3-6

The Temptation of Perception

Eve looked not to the Lord but the forbidden fruit as “to be desired to make one wise.” Similarly, Solomon looked not to heaven but the world “to be desired to make one wise,” pouring himself into the pursuit of “all that is done under heaven” (1:13). The expression “under heaven” is a Hebrew idiom similar to “under the sun,” meaning life in this fallen world, and Solomon wanted to know it “all.” He would learn more, experience more, know more, until there was nothing left to know. If God in heaven knows it all, then Solomon “under heaven” would know it too.

If this sounds like arrogance, it’s because it is. Satan tempted Eve to sin saying, “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). Solomon looked to the world to be enlightened, to know what God knows, to be like God. But are we really any different? Consider the age in which we live, the so-called information age, in which we have access to more information than ever before. But what is behind our zeal to know more? Is it to glorify God and grow in godliness or is it to be like God?

Consider our consumption of so-called “news”: What is gained from our ever-increasing consumption? In his 1985 classic, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman observes, “The news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.”⁹ Postman foresaw the futility of our age, but long before him, Solomon said,

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (1:18).

We live in an age of seemingly unlimited consumption of information and yet we are more anxious, vexed and sorrowful, for it. Like Eve and Solomon before us, we want to know all that God knows, only to find futility.

Yet, Scripture does encourage the pursuit of wisdom, so what is the distinction? We are to grow in godly perception. The sage says, “Get wisdom, / and whatever you get, get insight (Prov. 4:7). Perception in itself is not sin, but the pursuit of it apart from God is, as Eve learned quickly. Wisdom, knowledge, insight are not found apart from God in worldly pursuit, but ...

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov. 9:10).

The irony of Eve’s sin, and Solomon’s subsequently, is that God gives wisdom to those who ask. James writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). Rather than ask, Eve ate. Rather than petition, Solomon consumed. And when we disconnect the gift from the Giver, when we disconnect wisdom from God, when we disconnect what we know from God’s provision, we deceive ourselves into thinking that what we know or what we can know answers everything. Solomon puts it this way:

⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 69.

What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted (1:15).

Some things in life are what they are, and all the wisdom in the world can't fix it.

The Temptation of Pleasure

Eve looked not to the Lord but the forbidden fruit as “delight to the eyes.” Similarly, Solomon looked not to heaven but the world and its pleasures, saying to himself, “enjoy yourself” (2:1). Like his pursuit of wisdom, he poured himself into pleasing himself, pleasure became his purpose. He restrained neither his head nor heart nor hands. Whatever he desired he did. While Solomon will have more to say about his pursuit of pleasure later, here he tells of the lust of his flesh in laughter and liquor.

The irony is neither bring fulfillment but let us like leeches, craving more and more and leaving nothing. If you know someone consumed with entertainment or intoxication, you know that sobriety is lacking, figuratively and literally. In the pursuit of entertaining or intoxicating amusement, there is never enough. Rather than soberly seeing what Solomon saw, the entertainment addict determines that he has not indulged enough, surely more will satisfy. But it never does.

The pursuit of pleasure apart from God, and in godliness, is folly, accomplishing nothing of substance (2:3 NET), which is why the one consumed with amusing himself seems characteristically superficial, shallow, and sad. David Gibson observes,

Our national pastimes, for all their pleasure and fun, for all their creativity, are, for most people, simply a means of anesthetizing themselves against the pain of reality. Whether you are at the more sophisticated end of the scale with art, music, and fine wine, or whether you are watching a bawdy stand-up comic in the back room of a shabby pub ... does it solve much?¹⁰

Looking back, Solomon says, no: “I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” (2:2). Pleasure disconnected from God yields not blessing but curse, often the curse of futility.

In contrast, pleasure in God is not only a blessing but lasting. The psalmist sings to the Lord,

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

Unadulterated pleasure is found not apart but in God, according to his Word, through the indwelling presence of his Spirit, both today and forever. As our Shorter Catechism teaches us,

¹⁰ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 40.

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”¹¹ We were made to glorify God but also to be pleased in him. What Satan offered Eve, was counterfeit, believing the lie that pleasure is found apart from God’s will not according to it. And this is the temptation, to believe the lie and seek satisfaction in the counterfeit. Or, as C.S. Lewis put it,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹²

The Temptation of Provision

Eve looked not to the Lord but the forbidden fruit as “good for food.” Similarly, Solomon looked not to heaven but the world and its provision. After seeking to know it all, and then forget it all, it is as if Solomon decides to go to work to get it all. He says, “I made great works. ...I built ... I made ... and planted ... I bought ... I had ... more than any ... I also gathered ... [and] got” (2:4-8). In the eyes of world, and in his own eyes momentarily, Solomon’s life was a success:

Houses and vineyards, gardens and parks, and don’t forget the fruit trees with pools for irrigation; perpetual slave labor for agricultural and domestic work; herds and flocks, silver, gold, and real estate; along with live music and entertainment.

The world deemed him a success, and Solomon could confess, “I became great and surpassed all who were before me” (2:9). But despite all that he worked for, all that he made, built, planted, bought, had, gathered, and got, it was all for naught. What gain he got was simply in the work itself, and even that he found to be “vanity and a striving after the wind.” In the end, “there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11).

By God’s grace, Solomon was rescued from the entrapping sins of perception, pleasure, and provision, and we are of course the recipients of his reflection. But it is far easier to see sin in someone else that it is see it in ourselves, and even more challenging to examine ourselves and say with the apostle, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). What wages war against Christlikeness in us is the sinful flesh, which has an affinity not for godliness but worldliness. For this reason, the apostle John warns us, in the language of love, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). James adds to this, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). We know this to be true, but so often we are enticed by the perception, pleasure, and provision of this fallen world, all of which offer us nothing more than the futility of the curse.

¹¹ “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 355.

¹² C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1942; published in *THEOLOGY*, November, 1941. <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>.

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Instead, let us look to Christ. Eve looked to the forbidden fruit as “to be desired to make one wise,” and ate it and gave it to Adam, and he ate, and so all die (1 Cor. 15:22). But Christ became to us “wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Eve looked to the forbidden fruit as “delight to the eyes,” and ate it and gave it to Adam, and he ate, and so all die. But we look to “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2) that we might find our joy in and through him alone. Eve looked to the forbidden fruit as “good for food,” and ate it and gave it to Adam, and he ate, and so all die. But we look to Christ Jesus, in whom “God will supply every need of [ours] according to his riches in glory” (Phil. 4:19).

Looking back on his life, Solomon saw clearly the brevity of life, the futility of worldliness, indeed the vanity of all under the sun. The story of his life told a tragedy of misspent blessing, but it need not be repeated. What is the story of your life telling? Is it one of faith, surrender, and dependence upon our Lord, characterized by forgiveness and love? Is it worthy of Christlike imitation? Or does it tell the story of vanity, striving after the wind, nothing gained under the sun?

Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.
And when I am dying, how happy I'll be,
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee.¹³

¹³ C.T. Studd, “Only One Life, Twill Soon Be Past.”