

I Kept My Heart From No Pleasure  
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11  
September 19, 2021  
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CenterPoint Church

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

### **Introduction**

Oscar Wilde tells the story of a young man named Dorian Gray. In the story, a painter named Basil has been very impressed with Dorian, so he paints a portrait of him. Dorian has been warned that his youth and beauty will fade away, so he acquires the painting and expresses his great desire that the painting would age while he stays the same. And that’s exactly what happens: Dorian stays young and good-looking while his portrait, hidden away in his house, shows what he would look like getting older. Dorian throws himself into wild living, trying to experience everything, no matter how dangerous or decadent, and the painting takes on hideous facial expressions that parallel his lifestyle. When the painter comes to his house and sees how the portrait has changed, he is horrified by it; which in turns angers Dorian so much that he kills him and disposes of the body. He is haunted by grief and guilt, and spends his time in opium dens until he decides to destroy the painting of himself. But when he does, a reversal happens - the portrait merely reverts to its original form and he ends up dead on the floor, old and hideous.<sup>1</sup> I’ve always seen this story as such a brilliant way to examine what life would be like if there were no consequences, if we could stay young and beautiful forever and indulge in whatever behavior we wished. But that pursuing pleasure with no conscience eventually does change us and destroy us on the inside, no matter what it looks like on the outside.

Hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure, is an old story. We may think the modern world invented the pursuit of pleasure, with its “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” mentality, pleasure cruises, exclusive nightclubs, adult bookstores, and web browsers that can find anything. But that diversion is as old as man. From Sodom and Gomorrah’s depravity to the Roman Empire’s decadent lifestyles, nothing we come up with these days is new under the sun. Blaise Pascal, that great scientist and theologian, said, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both – to be happy. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

We seek pleasure because we think it will make us happy and satisfy us. As we look at Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 this morning, we are going to explore whether that is true. In last week’s text Solomon, the author, had looked into whether pursuing wisdom was all it was cracked up to be. When he found it lacking, he decided, in today’s text, to pursue pleasure. You’d probably agree that a lot more people try pleasure than wisdom, unfortunately, so this text may speak more directly to us than last week’s. If people pursued wisdom more than pleasure, there’d be a lot fewer unplanned pregnancies, fewer sexual assaults, fewer drunk-driving accidents, a lot less need for addiction treatment programs. But Solomon needed to experience everything, so he kept his heart from no pleasure.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-picture-of-dorian-gray/summary>

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1966), p. 235.

He starts his search by

### **I. Cheering (Himself) Yourself Up With Laughter, Alcohol, and Fun (vv. 1-3)**

*<sup>1</sup> I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup> I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" <sup>3</sup> 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.*

So, Solomon quickly runs through a few things that he has tested to see if they are fulfilling: laughter, alcohol, and folly (or fun). These are things that we think will make us feel better, and they usually do in the short-term (who doesn't like to laugh and have fun?), but long-term they are empty if you're looking to them for ultimate meaning and value. Solomon says, "What's the use?"

As I read these verses, the first mental picture I get is of Solomon throwing these huge banquets – 1 Kings talks about this huge number of animals that were slaughtered for his table every day to feed his court. And you can see the King feasting and laughing and just trying to live it up. As I think about today's world, I get the mental image of someone who loves to go hear stand-up comedians in bars, and just drink and laugh and then run around with their friends afterwards, hoping to feel alive and that they're having the time of their life. But everybody knows how that story ends, don't we? You can dip your toes in those waters and if you're not swept away, maybe you've had some fun. But ultimately, you're going to be asking yourself, as Solomon did, "what use is it?" You're either going to keep chasing the highs until you wreck your life (or someone else's) or you're going to finally wake up and realize how empty it all is. I remember talking to a man who was in South Florida in the late 90's, roughly the same years that I was there. I was a youth pastor and got married and lived a pretty quiet, reserved life. He was single and going crazy partying hard in all the nightclubs; sampling everything Miami had to offer. And I said something like, "Man, I missed out on all that." He said something to the effect of, "Brother, you didn't miss anything, it was so empty. God protected you. I hated myself at the end of all that. My life was falling apart until Jesus got ahold of me."

What's the common thread between the men on this following list: Jim Carrey, Owen Wilson, Robin Williams, Rodney Dangerfield and Chris Farley? I'm sure you know that they all are (or were) comedians. But did you know that every one of them has had serious depression?<sup>3</sup> You could use them as your case studies for how people use humor to deflect pain and try to pull themselves out of their misery. But what it tells me is that Solomon is right: for all of its benefits (helping us relax and not take ourselves too seriously), laughter cannot be the key to life.

As we think about alcohol, another comedian, Russell Brand, who has had serious addiction problems, said something pretty profound: "Drugs and alcohol are not my problem, reality is my problem, drugs and alcohol are my solution."<sup>4</sup> Substance abuse is a symptom of the real problem, trying to fill a void in your heart that substances were never meant to fill. To get drunk or high can be the easiest way to avoid dealing with the real pain and issues in your life. Now, I don't condemn drinking a glass of wine, beer, or a cocktail; everything in moderation when you're of age. I also don't think that Solomon was getting drunk because in v. 3 he says, "*to cheer my body with wine - my heart still guiding me with wisdom.*" I get the picture of him collecting the finest wines available in the ancient world and studying how to pair the perfect Merlot with prime rib, or whatever. But ultimately concluding that as interesting as that is, it's still empty. We turn to these amusements to fill our days with, but ultimately that's all they are: a way to pass the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Josh Black's sermon "The Search for Satisfaction" from May 8, 2011, found at [firstfreewichita.org](http://firstfreewichita.org).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.russellbrand.com/give-it-up/>

In the next 5 verses, Solomon gets seriously down to business with

## **II. Finding Identity in Accomplishments, Possessions, and Other People (vv. 4-8)**

*<sup>4</sup> I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.*

Solomon spent thirteen years building his amazing palace, you can read about it in 1 Kings 7. He also went crazy building his own Garden of Eden, an entire forest with parks and their own private irrigation system. Did you notice that Solomon used the phrase “for myself” or “made myself” four times in these few verses? That comes across as pretty selfish. But don’t forget that Solomon has built the temple for the Lord, which blessed all of Israel, and that his reign helped all of Israel to flourish. But he doesn’t mention those things here; he just mentions how he has thrown himself into trying to find satisfaction and meaning in building things all over the place. You get the mental image of someone like Donald Trump before he was President – putting up hotels and golf courses and casinos with his name on them all over the place. On the one hand, that’s what businessmen and developers do, that’s the goal – hopefully it helps bring jobs and helps other people. But everyone needs to ask themselves, “Why am I doing all of this? What does this say about my need to feel significant as I build all these things.” I think every person who owns a home and takes pride in fixing it up should ask themselves, “Why am I constantly adding to my house? Of course, I need a place for me and my family to live, but how much of this is showing off or keep up with the Joneses?”

Verses 7-8 mention gathering possessions – slaves, livestock, money, and treasure. I mentioned in the intro sermon how wealthy Solomon was, 1 King 10:23, 25 says, “*King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches... every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year.*” I remember hearing that when Hollywood actors have been nominated for awards, they are showered with free stuff from companies. When athletes reach a certain level of fame, they are given free shoes and clothing with their endorsement deals. Companies want to have the famous people be seen using and wearing their products, right? But the irony is that they’re the ones who can afford to pay for them. That’s what happened with Solomon – he was wealthy beyond imagination, so every king or queen who came to see him and make an alliance with him brought him huge gifts that he didn’t need. And here he says that he just loved gathering it all. We’re going to have a whole sermon on wealth, so we won’t examine that.

He doesn’t go into great details, but I think the mention of concubines in verse 8 is his signal that he has tried to find pleasure with many different women. 1 Kings mentions his 700 wives and 300 concubines. Why doesn’t he mention his wives here? Some commentaries suggest that the wives were mostly strategic political alliances with other nations, they were not necessarily for his pleasure, that’s what the concubines were for. It’s hard not to write Solomon off at this point as a selfish, tyrannical horrible person who used people for his pleasure. While he’s trying everything he can to find some ounce of meaning in life (and not really succeeding), what do all these concubines and slaves get to do? They just exist to do his bidding. I guess that’s the reality of the kingship back then, but it doesn’t make us any less repulsed by him. But the message he is driving at is that sex doesn’t bring true satisfaction or meaning any more than laughter, accomplishments, or being entertained. And man, does our culture need to hear that. There is such sexual confusion and boundary-pushing; again, nothing new under the sun. But we need to hear over and over that sex is not where we find meaning and purpose; that it too is an empty pursuit.

The last three verses are his conclusions that

### **III. The Pursuit of Pleasure Comes Up Empty (vv. 9-11)**

*<sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

Those are strong statements in verse 10: “*whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them*” and “*I kept my heart from no pleasure.*” Anything he wanted, he took. Whenever he was tempted with some pleasure, he gave in. He essentially became a slave to his passions, but, he says, “*my wisdom remained with me.*” In other words, he was still testing everything, methodically studying and evaluating whether these different areas would bring him the joy and satisfaction that he desired. He says that he experienced great pleasure, but then upon reflection, he realizes that there was nothing to be gained from it; nothing to show for it at the end of it all. It’s not that it doesn’t help at the time, it’s that it ultimately doesn’t satisfy. Pleasure for its own sake can never truly satisfy.

We’ve mentioned some really big things in life, but what about the little things? How many of us feel bored for 5 seconds and we whip out our phones to play a game or watch TikTok or read news or somehow fill those empty 2 minutes that we have to wait in line? What would happen if we were alone with our thoughts or used that time to pray? I’m as guilty as anybody. You know what I’m really excited about right now? Fantasy Football. My team is so stacked this year, I drafted well and picked up some guys off the waiver wire last week, I think I’m going to do great. Is there anything more fake and empty than fantasy football? It literally does not exist except on a website, and the only thing it accomplishes is that I get more sucked into football and can either gloat to my buddies or have to listen to their gloating. What about you – where do you run for pleasure, for a little bit of excitement or entertainment when life’s too boring or stressful? Are those things doing a good job giving your life meaning and purpose?

### **Conclusion**

At the same time that I’m criticizing pleasure, I feel like I also need to be balanced and say that God is not looking for us to live lives that are void of pleasure. On the contrary, He has wired us to enjoy the things in this world. We should enjoy our morning coffee or afternoon tea or evening glass of wine, all in moderation. We should find joy in conversations with others, in hiking through the woods and exploring nature, in testing our bodies through exercise and trying new things. Sexual intimacy with our spouse was God’s idea for meaningful pleasure, a beautiful gift! Building things with our hands, laughing with others, listening to music – God has hardwired us to enjoy these things. The problem is when we worship those things, when we make an idol of them and pursue them as if they have ultimate meaning for us. Every one of those things should point us to the greater source of them – our Creator. Even our hunger for pleasure and for meaning should point us in a spiritual direction.

We need the obligatory C.S. Lewis quote here: “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, when you feel like

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), pp. 136-7.

something is missing in your life, don't go wild trying to find the right pleasure to satisfy it; let it remind you that you yearn for the fullness and joy of heaven, the ultimate pleasure of being united with God and the glory that will be yours forever! In heaven, you will never experience pain, loss, or the effects of sin ever again. You will experience pleasure and satisfaction beyond your wild imaginations. Seriously, we cannot come close to picturing how wonderful heaven will be.

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (our Community Group memorized this last week) is: "What is the chief end (purpose) of man?" And the answer is: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." We should be hedonists pursuing pleasure, but don't settle for temporary fun and folly that don't last. The longest-term pleasure we can find is joy and delight in God. That is a pleasure that will last for all of eternity; it is not a short-term thrill that temporarily numbs the pain of living. It is the greatest possible happiness we can ever have. The problem is that we don't believe that God wants us to have that joy, or that we'll find it in Him. If that was true, why would He have put verse like Psalm 16:11 in the Bible? "*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is **fullness of joy**; at your right hand are **pleasures** forevermore.*" The Bible's solution to the emptiness of earthly hedonism is not to renounce pleasure, but to seek the greatest pleasure that is found in God, and to realize the good pleasures in life are from Him.

Jesus told a story about a young man who decided to leave home with his inheritance money and sow his wild oats. He burned through his money chasing pleasure with what Jesus called "reckless living." Unlike his older brother who stayed on his dad's property and helped with the family business, he completely turned his back on the family, interested only in selfish pursuits and worldly pleasure. But then a crazy thing happened: his money ran out right as a famine came, and he had nowhere to go except taking a job feeding pigs and sharing their food. He was utterly humiliated and hit rock-bottom. Finally, he decided the best thing that he could do was go beg his father to take him back in and treat him as a servant. He knew that he could never go back as a son, having insulted his father and disgraced his family. He would probably have to endure beatings, insults, and being assigned the worst chores, but at least he would be safe and fed. So he walked home, and as he got within sight of the house, his father saw him up the road. Jesus' listeners might have gasped, wondering how angry the father would be, how much he would take out his wrath on his disrespectful waste of a son. That's what the son deserved for pursuing his selfish pleasure, right?

Luke 15:20-24 tells us that, "*while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* But the father said to his servants, '*Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* And they began to celebrate."

Beloved, you can give yourself over to pleasure, sin like there's no tomorrow, be a world-class self-centered hedonist. You've been warned that that life is empty and you'll regret it; I'm begging you to pursue a life of purpose, meaning, and self-sacrifice. But if you don't, and we all pursue our own selfish pleasures to some degree – whether your pet sin is named pornography, alcoholism, promiscuity, adultery, substance abuse, gambling addiction, whatever. At the end of your using those things, you will feel worthless. You will feel, like the prodigal son, that you are not worthy to be God's child. You might expect Him to be ready to let you have it, unload His wrath on you when you come to Him in repentance. But God will look down the road, His heart will fill with compassion and excitement for His child that has been wandering, He'll take off running and knock you over with the biggest embrace of your life. He will put His robe of righteousness on you, He'll put His ring of

identity on your finger, and He'll get the celebration in heaven started. Because God loves to welcome repentant sinners home.

It should never cease to amaze us when we remember that God can't just overlook our sins to welcome us home and forgive us. It costs Him something: someone has to pay the penalty of death for our sins; Hebrews 9:22 says that *"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin."* Jesus had to perfectly obey the law and never sin for His entire life, never indulge in the sinful pleasures of this world; and then offer up His sinless life on the cross as a substitute to take the punishment for you and me and all who would be saved. All of our pleasure-seeking, meaningless pursuit of things to fill us up – all of our sins were nailed to the cross and crucified with Jesus. As our new song says, *"By grace I am redeemed (and) restored, and now I freely walk into the arms of Christ my Lord."* Beloved, *"delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart"* (Psalm 37:4). Amen.

Benediction:

Colossians 1:11-14 – *"May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*