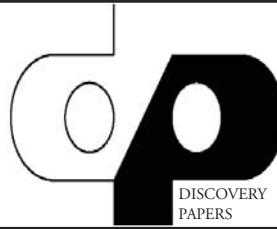


TREASURE & HEART

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



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Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
Matthew 6:19-24
2nd Message
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The family tension in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is easy to understand. Intoxicated with the possibilities of the fast life, "The younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and squandered his wealth in wild living" (Luke 15:13). The older son, jealous and measuring his resentment with money, reproached his father saying, "All these years, I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me anything" (Luke 15:29). Wealth is a seducer that leads to broken lives and damaged relationships. We know the adage that "money talks," but when it talks it lies.

This study will consider these lies. We are in the midst of a series that compares two voices from the Bible: one from Koheleth in Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament; the other Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Both of these texts pull aside worldly facades, yet they lead to different conclusions.

Ecclesiastes is written from a singular perspective among all the books of the Bible. In common with the others, God is acknowledged as creator and determiner of events. Uniquely, however, Ecclesiastes describes human experience as cut off from revelation about God's heart and purpose. And if God is silent then idols' voices are going to speak loudly. The foremost god-substitute is wealth, promising pleasure, prominence, and security.

This falsehood is both old and enduring. It was the lie that the prodigal son believed on his way to personal ruin. It is the driving conviction of Silicon Valley—there is nothing new under the sun. Koheleth's experiment with wealth as a source of fulfillment has much to teach us.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

¹I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. ²"Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" ³I tried cheering myself

with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. ⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

**My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my
labor.**

**¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands
had done**

**and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing
after the wind;**

nothing was gained under the sun.

We observe that this undertaking has unlimited resources. Brains, money, servants...not a single obstacle in his way. Unlimited exploration, no opposition; let's see what happens.

Let me comment of some phrases from these verses. First, "I tried cheering myself with wine" (Ecclesiastes 2:3). Surely not cheap frat party booze, but elegant wines, witty company, and ten-course meals with the perfect vintage

to match each course. Do lavish meals bring about lasting fulfillment?

Second, “I undertook great projects” (Ecclesiastes 2:4). Houses, vineyards, gardens and parks, reservoirs, immense herds, and flocks.

In 1927 William Randolph Hearst began construction of an estate that would later be known as Hearst Castle. In the 1940s it featured 56 bedrooms, 61 bathrooms, 19 sitting rooms, 127 acres of gardens, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, tennis courts, a movie theater, an airfield, and the world’s largest private zoo. It was under construction for more than 25 years, until the end of Hearst’s life, and he was never satisfied with it.² There is nothing new under the sun. Koheleth (and his imitators) experiment on the largest scale to see if grand undertakings give meaning to life.

We read further, “I amassed silver and gold for myself” (Ecclesiastes 2:8). Perhaps life is a competition with money as the measure. The one with the biggest stack wins.

And “I acquired men and women singers and a harem as well” (Ecclesiastes 2:8). Exquisite music and beautiful women, eye-candy for black-tie soirées. A stable of sexual partners responsive to every whim.

At the end of this research we read in Ecclesiastes 2:9-11:

**⁹“In all this my wisdom stayed with me.
¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired...
¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands
had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing
after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.”**

The Searcher had everything and it was empty. Considering this experiment as a whole we can make two observations.

First, it was refined rather than sleazy, “My wisdom stayed with me and I sated every appetite in a way that generated respect from sophisticated people.”

Second, the experiment opened every door, followed every possibility. The Searcher was not like the prodigal son who ran out of money and ended up having to eat with the pigs. There was nothing left undone and yet the result was emptiness.

Let me also make two observations about what is missing.

First, there are no relationships. Recall the Beatles song, “*Can’t Buy Me Love*.”¹ where they sing, “I don’t care too much for money, money can’t buy me love.”¹ When we read of Koheleth’s experiment, there is not a single reference to a friend, teammate, child, or companion. He has a harem, but no partner; estates, but no home; no band of brothers; no circle of sisters; no joyful memories of common battles or shared celebrations. Friends can open their hearts in talk around a campfire and nothing is added by moving the conversation to an elegant dining hall. Wealth does not connect one heart to another.

Secondly, the Searcher makes no examination of himself. All of the five senses are pampered in his telling. There are soft fabrics that cover the skin, there are bursts of flavor that break on the palate, there is banishment of ungainly sights and sounds and smells—but nothing that penetrates the heart. The most important discoveries are made about ourselves. The world is meaningless because our souls are damaged, not because we do not have all the toys our neighbors have. None of the Searcher’s expenditures gave him insight into himself.

By contrast, Jesus’ instruction focuses on our hearts; what we are made for. We are created to be servants, not masters. Our essential task is to choose whom we will serve. In serving God, we become stewards with important responsibilities and store treasure for ourselves as well.

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your

eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³**But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!**

²⁴“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

We are required to make a choice. No one can serve two masters or have multiple loyalties. An eye that tries to focus on many things is blind. The one we serve shapes our values and what we value determines our character. Our treasure and our hearts are intertwined.

I could not help but think of Tolkien’s great character from *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum. A circle of gold, his Precious, became Gollum’s absolute treasure, demanded ultimate loyalty, and finally claimed his life.

Serving God leads to the storing up of treasure. We choose how to use our energy, time, focus, networks, and wherewithal. These investments are either eternal in value or are vulnerable and fading.

Each servant of God has an individual assignment and unique duties. Two of the greatest men of faith in all human history are Abraham and Elijah. Abraham was very wealthy and Elijah was homeless, verging on starvation. Each of them pleased their Master and stored up treasure in heaven. Jesus said to the rich young ruler, “Sell everything you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me” (Mark 10:21). Not long after, Mary took a vial of perfume worth a year’s wages, broke it and poured it on Jesus’ body, anointing him for burial. And we might recall the experience of the apostle Paul.

Philippians 4:12-13

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

There are no formulas, rich or poor, we must be led by the Spirit and honor God with our time and treasure.

I want to conclude with some observations about eternal and temporal investments.

What lasts forever—unfading, protected, impervious to rust and moths—is the work of God. All of my accomplishments will fade. The question then is what is he doing? What is the activity of God that I can participate in?

Each believer is the handiwork of God. He’s drawing children to himself and then making us like Jesus. God is making saints that will form a community that will never end.

How, then, can I cooperate with God in the work of changing me to be like Jesus? How can I make choices that agree with God: that I should become different from the inside out; that my heart should change? Prejudice replaced by compassion. Freedom from the need for human approval. Delight in service and generosity. Fear replaced by courage. Among the eternal treasures is the character of Jesus being forged in me. I can learn to cooperate with that good work.

Further, we can love the people God loves. He loves the redeemed, and he loves those who are not redeemed. He loves his children and he loves his enemies—he came to seek and save the lost. We invest in eternal things by choosing love.

And we can worship. We are temples of the Holy Spirit—He is as near to us as our own breath. Thanksgiving and adoration resound forever. Mary’s broken vial was extravagant, holy, and eternal.

I began to follow Christ when I was sixteen and now am sixty-one. Honoring Jesus as Lord and turning from the promises of idols has been difficult at every stage of the journey. At sixteen I was trying to make a good beginning. At sixty-one I am concerned with how to reach the finish line. Do I have enough money? Am I on the right track? Who should I look to impress? I want a Jesus-centered heart. I want to be a steward that honors him, yet treasures stored on earth seem so important and demand so much attention.

I recognize both the younger son and the older son in Jesus’ parable. I recognize them in me. I observe the resent-

ment of the older brother who upbraided his father for having not giving him enough. I sometimes accuse God of that. I'm familiar with the plans of the younger brother who wanted life to be an endless party. I recognize that kind of foolishness in me.

But, thanks be to God, I also know the Father of these failed sons. Jesus story centers on the Father whose love never wavers, who knows the brokenness of his sons and humiliates himself in order to forgive them and make them new. My weakness, distraction, and sin are not too high a barrier and God will finish the work he has begun in me.

We will choose to serve God or idols, store treasures on earth or in heaven—these are crucial, life shaping decisions. And our Father will not let us fail in making them.

NOTES:

¹Beatles : *Can't Buy Me Love*, Songwriters: Paul McCartney; John Lennon.

²<http://www.hearstcastle.org/>

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