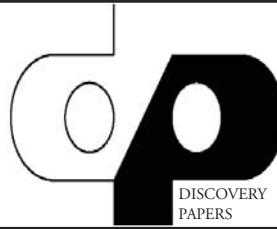


JUSTICE & LOVE

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



Catalog No. 100613
Ecclesiastes 3:16-20
Matthew 5:43-48
4th Message
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This study is the fourth in a series which compares the insight of Ecclesiastes and the Sermon on the Mount. I believe that the Searcher, who wrote Ecclesiastes, was a man of orthodox faith who set aside all he knew of God's revelation in order to ask the questions that are answered by God's word. In prior studies his questions have centered on personal contentment—wealth, pleasure, accomplishments, learning, and the rewards of work. He finds that gaining these things does make him happy. In this study his question has a wider scope—not what is pleasing, but what is right.

Kindness of heart poses a problem for those who think of evolution as a closed, purely natural process that can explain all human experience. Consider the following observation from Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City:

"If we see a total stranger fall in a river, we jump in after him, or feel guilty for not doing so. In fact, most people will fill the obligation to do so, even if the person in the water is an enemy. How could that trait have come down from a process of natural selection? Such people would have been less likely to survive and pass on their genes. On the basis of strict evolutionary naturalism . . . that kind of altruism should have died out of the human race long ago. Instead, it is stronger than ever . . . Evolution therefore cannot account for the origins of our moral feelings, let alone for the fact that we all believe there are external moral standards by which moral feelings are evaluated. Our moral awareness is mysterious, immutable and powerful."²¹

We want to live in a world in which justice prevails and truth is honored. We want to live in a righteous society, and each of us wants to be known as a good person.

Consider that many folks are more troubled by a condemning conscience than physical pain. Entrepreneurs feel compelled to become philanthropists. Politicians claim to be patriots. Soldiers will choose to be maimed rather than

be branded a coward. We fear exposure of our darkest secrets more than anything else.

However, neither our culture nor our hearts are just. We have moral expectations that we can't fulfill or ignore. Let's consider the Searcher's observations concerning injustice.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-20

**¹⁶And I saw something else under the sun:
In the place of judgment—wickedness
was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was
there.**

**¹⁷I thought in my heart,
"God will bring to judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time for every deed."**

**¹⁸I also thought, "As for men, God tests
them so that they may see that they are like the
animals. ¹⁹Man's fate is like that of the animals;
the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so
dies the other. All have the same breath; man
has no advantage over the animal. Everything
is meaningless. ²⁰All go to the same place; all
come from dust, and to dust all return.**

In verse 16 he says, "I saw something else under the sun"—he saw the ascendance of evil. Koheleth describes a judge with the power to reward and to punish. He knows instinctively that a judge should be honorable, fair, generous, wise, and life-enhancing—and yet, "In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there" (v.16).

He wonders, "I thought in my heart," (v. 17) if God will intervene. Perhaps he "will bring to justice both the righteous and the wicked . . . every activity . . . every deed" (v. 17).

However, the idea of God's intervention is problematic.

Without a prior word of love or a promise of mercy, the coming of a judge may have a harsh outcome. No one has claim on God's favor. His just measure of me may lead to condemnation. And His apparent slowness to respond makes us wonder if He cares.

The Searcher's second thought (v.18) is even worse. Perhaps there is no difference between human beings and animals and we are too insignificant to gain the interest of a righteous God.

The animal world is filled with cold-blooded violence. Nobody gets upset if a fish eats an insect. Fish are supposed to eat insects. Maybe concepts like righteousness and wickedness don't apply to us any more than they apply to any other carnivore. Thinking this way, Koheleth is like many in our time who argue that all thoughts of morality are arbitrary social constructions with no foundation.

Before turning to the New Testament, let me make a couple of observations about injustice. First, wickedness thrives when those with a functioning conscience withdraw, refusing to take a stand and when no one speaks up for the oppressed and those "whose god is their belly" (Philippians 3:19) are admired. Wickedness thrives when we want to be liked more than we want to be truthful.

Second, wickedness reigns when we are seduced by it. When I choose lies to get my way, make claims of 'righteous anger' to achieve revenge, or rationalize twisted thinking and selfish instincts.

"Under the sun" (v.16) we observe injustice and cry out against it, but we require the intervention of God for anything to change. Jesus' instruction describes this intervention, but not as we might expect. He does not draw lines between the good and bad, or insist on a fair division of benefits. He points us to the love of God.

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you

love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus words first echo those from our passage in Ecclesiastes. He speaks of the righteous and unrighteous enemies, persecution, and teachers who justify hatred.

Verse 43, in some ways, is the very essence of the problem that we saw in Ecclesiastes—the work of a wicked judge. Leviticus 19:18 reads, "love your neighbor as yourself." It was intended to cause the expansion of love—from self to the near neighbor, to one beyond him, to someone yet further away. The command to hate an enemy twists a good law to evil purposes, "in the place of justice, wickedness was there" (v. 16). And Jesus' answer to this persistent problem is love, "I tell you, love your enemies." (Matthew 5:44)

It is impossible to fairly balance the competing demands of broken people. Love gives more than it receives. Koheleth viewed the world's selfishness as a tragedy. Jesus views it as an opportunity for the revolution of love to change everything.

Jesus also offers practical instruction for loving enemies. He says first to observe the Father's behavior and as obedient children to imitate Him. God causes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on everybody, not just His favorites. He is generous to blasphemers, liars, and cheats. He gives to them everything in the natural world that He gives to His own children.

Lovely fragrances and beautiful vistas are lavished on those who oppose the concerns of God equally with those who serve Him. His generosity teaches us to love. And we can learn from His patience as well. God gives gifts and withholds punishment from hard hearted men and women who have no use for Him.

2 Peter 3:9 declares, "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." He loves those who oppose Him; He

is waiting for them to come to their senses. His generosity and patience teach us how to love our enemies.

Further, we are given particular instruction to pray. Prayer may lead God to alter the circumstances of enmity between an adversary and myself. And when I bring the name of an enemy into God's presence, my attitude toward him will change. "Pray for those who persecute you" (v. 44) and expect to see God work.

Finally, we note that loving enemies is much more than reciprocity—greeting those who return the greeting. Too often churches are indistinguishable from other well-meaning social groups. Jesus is calling us to love threatening, unpleasant outsiders; not follow the giving-in-order-to-get pattern of those who have no faith.

So, we step forward. God is generous, I will be generous. God is patient, I will be patient. God loves those who oppose him, and I will too. But I find myself unable to imitate my heavenly Father. Fear and selfishness are too much for me.

The queen bee classmate who ridicules and threatens a vulnerable seventh-grade daughter engenders fury not love. The academic or business rival who lies and steals to gain undeserved advancement. The adulterer who callously destroys a marriage—how is love possible in these circumstances? The religious authority figure who abuses children and teaches them to loathe God in the process. Love for him as well?

We can observe God's love—his patience and generosity, but in our own strength we cannot imitate our heavenly Father. We need to be made new. And we discover that His love is much deeper than rainfall and sunshine. The Son of God died in our place and was raised so we can experience newness of life.

We discover that there is a depth to God's love that we had no idea of until we attempted to imitate it ourselves, and could not. We come to Him broken, we want to be His children, but we fail at being His children. Will He change us? Will He forgive us? Is there hope for people like us who want to be right and cannot be right? We discover that beyond divine generosity and patience, is the cross of Christ.

Romans 5:8 declares, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He will pay the ultimate price to bear our inadequacy, our sin, and our failure. There is no boundary to His forgiving love. He is committed to making His children like Himself.

We are told in verse 45 that the Father "sends the rain." And of course this statement refers to literal rain and the watering of crops. But rain is also a symbol for grace out-poured and for the overflow of mercy.

Rainfall and God's love are joined in a powerful scene at the end of the movie, *Ben-Hur*,² which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1960 and still shows up fairly often on late night television. The story's climax occurs in Jerusalem at the hour of Jesus' crucifixion.

Ben-Hur is a swashbuckling tale of hatred between enemies. The protagonist, Judah Ben-Hur is a wealthy Jew from Jerusalem whose hated rival is a Roman patrician named Mesala. Mesala sends the mother and sister of the hero to prison, and enslaves Ben-Hur, who rises from misery to finally defeat the Roman in a bloody chariot race in which Mesala is dragged and trampled. As he is dying, Mesala wounds his rival one last time—"your mother and sister are not dead as you supposed, but worse than death, they are abandoned to pain and disgrace in a leper colony."

Ben-Hur's hatred consumes him and he returns to Judea, finds the women (who had heard and believed Jesus' message) and travels with them to Jerusalem on the day the Savior died. The sky darkened, thunder rolled, and "God sent the rain" which healed the women of their disease and melted the warrior's hardened heart.

God is generous in nature to those who find Him contemptible. But such gifts are only the beginning. If we will receive it, the gracious 'rain' which heals the broken, forgives sinners, sends power to the weak, softens hearts, and breaks chains will fall on us as well.

Koheleth observed the triumph of injustice. Jesus said, "Love your enemies" (v.44). The power of love is the greater power. Ultimately, it is the love of God shown to us on the cross of Christ that transforms everything.

NOTES:

¹*The reason for God: belief in an age of skepticism* / Timothy Keller. Copyright© 2008. Riverhead Books, Published by the Penquin Group (USA) Inc. All Rights Reserved.

²*Ben-Hur* (1959) is MGM's three and a half hour, wide-screen epic Technicolor blockbuster—a Biblical tale, subtitled *A Tale of the Christ*.

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