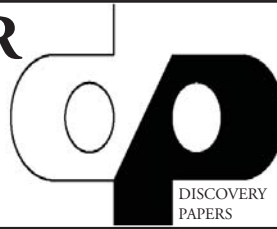


CHOICES THAT MATTER

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



Catalog No. 100627
Ecclesiastes 9:1-6
Matthew 7:13-23
6th Message
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This is the second to last message in a series comparing Ecclesiastes and the Sermon on the Mount. The section of Ecclesiastes below is the final one we will consider in which Koheleth (the Searcher) speaks from an ‘under the sun’ perspective.

The Searcher’s book begins with an anguished cry—“all is futile.” He then makes various efforts to change this condition, seeking to find happiness in wealth, scholarship, hard work, a cry for justice, and self discovery. All of these experiments fail. The opening verses of Ecclesiastes 9 are a capitulation to despair—‘under the sun’ nothing we do matters.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-6:

¹So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. ²All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

**As it is with the good man,
so with the sinner;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.**

³This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. ⁴Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

**⁵For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.**

**⁶Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.**

Our choices are meaningless. Death and dust are the final victors.

We will not be surprised to find that Jesus has a different perspective. The statement that “all share a common destiny” (v. 3) is emphatically not true. The reign of death is not universal. There is “a road that leads to life.” For Jesus, the word ‘life’ means abundant life—not just survival (a scrawny dog outlasting a dead lion). Jesus tells of a road that leads to significance, community, and the approval of God. In Matthew 7:13-23 we will encounter three challenges: enter the narrow gate, beware of teachers who deceive, and beware of our own heart’s capacity to deceive

Matthew 7:13-14:

¹³“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

The picture Jesus draws here is not hard to envision. There is a narrow gate with a narrow road; a broad gate with a broad road. Jesus calls on anyone who will listen to enter through the narrow gate. That is the gate to the path that leads to life.

Of course, he is not talking about examining a map. Where is the path? Jesus himself is the path. We recall that he uses ‘gate’ and ‘road’ language of himself, “I am the gate by which the sheep enter. I am the road. I am life itself. I am the guide to follow.” To enter the narrow gate is to trust and follow Jesus Christ.

What is meant by the ‘broad road’? It is the way of life into which everyone is born. It is life under the sun.

This road encompasses people who imagine they have nothing in common with each other. The proud and the envious; the successful and the outcasts; the fun-loving and the frightened; every language and culture, atheists, agnostics, and adherents of all the religions of the world (including those with roots in the bible and the church). Amidst broad diversity one trait is shared: all are headed for the same dire destination. Recall Koheleth's words: The righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not ... know that they will die ... and even the memory of them is forgotten.

To change the metaphor, imagine the broad road is a wide river on which many are floating. In some places the currents go faster than others, but the river is headed forward, relentlessly forward, and not too far in the distance is Niagara Falls. The journey "leads to destruction" (v. 13).

How beautiful, then, is Jesus' oft repeated call, "follow me"—that is, enter the narrow gate that leads to life. Fishermen left their nets to follow Jesus, a tax collector his parchments. Disciples of John the Baptist followed him. Lonely outsiders and those with loving families, the rich and poor and in-between, turned from the broad road to trust him.

It is important to get the picture straight. If all roads led to the top of the mountain then Christians are justifiably disparaged for making so much of Jesus. If, however, all travelers are headed toward the waterfall then urging faith in Christ is an act of love not arrogance. "Enter the narrow gate" is not a call to selfish isolation. It is an offer of rescue.

The words "narrow" and "few" speak to our experience of deep change. I don't think Jesus is saying anything about the final number who will join him in the world to come. However, if we heed the call to follow Christ our familiar world and regular associations will change. We will experience a deeper sense of God's presence and less applause from the world.

This should not surprise us. Anything worth gaining has a cost. It requires time and attention (limiting options) to have a few really good friends. Some hikers will see beautiful lakes in the high country—those who have packed just a few necessities in order to make the trek. In order to

follow Jesus (fitting through the narrow gate), much will be left behind including, perhaps, plans we have made for our future, long held resentment of old enemies, ownership of useless baubles, and more. We must expect to be misunderstood and be willing to be ridiculed.

Following Jesus changes our life purpose, but it does not isolate us from neighbors and family members who do not yet believe. Very few disciples become hermits or monks. The majority are called to make a difference in the 'real world' circumstances they inhabit—"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The narrow road is not a place of safety removed from all the human predicaments of Adam's children who are loved by God.

A second challenge concerns deceivers

Matthew 7:15-20:

¹⁵"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

This passage also confronts the conclusions of Ecclesiastes 9. In his despair Koheleth would have been unconcerned about false or true voices. If nothing we choose has any consequence then categories like true or false, right or wrong, are a matter of indifference. Jesus, however, is dead serious about them. False prophets stalk with deadly intent, themselves headed for conflagration. Jesus instructs us to inspect the life of a teacher/prophet. You can rely on a person who displays the fruit of the Spirit in his behavior.

Of course, we are most vulnerable to being led astray when we are being told what we want to hear.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul uses "itching ears" as a figure of speech (it reminds me of our dog—she loves to have her

ears scratched). “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” When we are impatient or lazy or proud we are most vulnerable to the designs of a well-disguised wolf.

Sheep’s clothing can take various forms. Sometimes we are taken in by a deep voice and scholarly style which seems to offer more than one whose approach is a simple telling of the truth. A dramatic flair may tantalize us. Celebrity voices seem important no matter what they say. The test for prophets is character. We should only listen to those who live out the truth they proclaim.

Let me also note the danger of being over-cautious. Sometimes the word we need to hear is not familiar. Rather it is new wine in new wineskins. We can use an apparent concern for false prophets to avoid a teacher whose insights and application of the truth strike a new chord. A new prophet can be a true prophet. In the end, the test is one’s character, because the ones who know God will live out what they proclaim.

Matthew 7:21-23:

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

This is a dire warning. Not only are deceiving prophets a danger, but there are some who have deceived themselves. “Lord, Lord”—these words represent good theology, spoken fervently. Much may have been accomplished by the power of Jesus’ name, but as Balaam of old reminds

us, a person can be a channel of God’s power without being changed by it. Individuals and organizations can raise money, build buildings, alter political landscapes, and accomplish great things, yet Jesus’ word could not be clearer. “I never knew you.”

This outcome could be compared to the husband who is surprised to find his wife and children have left him. The dialogue is easy to write: “I accomplished so much, worked so hard, provided for every desire—I did it all for you!” And the reply is sad and simple. “In all your doing there is no relationship. I never knew you.”

In the texts we are considering here Koheleth and Jesus are directly opposed. Either our choices have no consequence or they have eternal consequence. The Searcher points to the grave. Jesus points to himself. He is the narrow road and is himself the giver of life. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

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