

The Mystery of Mankind

Ecclesiastes 7:15-8:1

All is vapor and out of our control, and what is more mysterious than the wildest creature on earth—mankind? In this section Solomon has shown that outward appearances aren't always what they seem. Just because someone appears prosperous doesn't mean they can enjoy their wealth (6:1-12). Adversity for the faithful is a means to glory (7:1-15). Now he talks about people: how to understand them with wisdom, how to avoid faux wisdom, and the gift the God that makes your face shine.

The Map

- I. 1:1-2:26 Satisfaction cannot be found in a vaporous world. Only God can give it.
- II. 3:1-5:20 God is sovereign over all despite grief and hardships.
- III. 6:1-8:15 Having strength and wealth does not mean you have the power to enjoy them.
 - i. 6:1-12 Prosperity is not always a blessing.
 - ii. 7:1-15 Adversity is not necessarily an evil.
 - iii. 7:16-8:1 Be wise in understanding people.
- IV. 8:16-12:14 Last, Solomon addresses challenges and difficulties, and the need to seek wisdom and live joyfully despite them. This is the gift of God.

Righteous Over Much

The simplistic, idolatrous mind has a checklist plan to get everything. The Christian version of this appeals to “faith”: if you can believe it, God will do it. “Faith healing”, “word of faith”, and countless ten-step books to the perfect everything prey on the desperate and those who think they can get on their own what only God can personally give. James says we can (and should) plan, but God bestows the blessing (or not), and it's arrogant to forget this (Jms. 4:13-16). Paul says that he plants, Apollos waters, but only God gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Someone becomes “overly righteous” not by loving God and His law too much, but by adding to it. If one rule is good, aren't two better? Since alcohol is very dangerous, aren't you better off abstaining completely? Maybe, but Jesus didn't. Since cigarettes are expensive and addictive, isn't it a sin to smoke one? No, not necessarily. Paul couldn't be more plain that the only sin against the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit is sexual immorality, but this doesn't stop us from misapplying the principle elsewhere (1 Cor. 6:18-19). Rules are simple but wisdom is hard, at least on the front end, because it requires to read, think, study, pray, and ruminate on Scripture. It's much easier to say, “Don't taste, don't touch, don't handle” (Col. 2:21). Don't look, don't watch, don't go there, don't think about that. Solomon says not to be overly “wise” and destroy yourself (v. 16). At same time, don't be wicked or foolish, and die before your time (v. 17). There's the other ditch that makes light of sin and refuses to make distinctions between good and evil (Heb. 5:14). People reject legalism in favor of license, like the drunk Luther describes compensating for falling off one side of the horse by throwing himself off the other. Are we doomed to do this? Not at all. The fear of God cuts through everything (v. 18). You don't have to believe all women just because they're women, you don't have to believe all men because they're men, and you don't have to split the difference. You don't have to favor or despise people because of the color of their skin or the nation they hail from. This wisdom gives more strength than ten rulers of a city have (v. 19).

Knowing Good & Evil

You can honor those who legalism and license through God's gift of wisdom, but it would be foolish to conclude that they are not sinful: “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin”

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(v. 20). “If we say that we have no sin,” John says, “we deceive ourselves and truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). Adam and Eve were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they weren’t ready for it, but Solomon prayed for this kingly wisdom and received it (1 Kgs. 3:9). When Paul called himself the chief of sinners he was not being faux-humble. He understood himself and his need for ongoing, daily repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing by the grace of God. Heroes are good; idols are bad. Everyone sins so don’t be constantly disillusioned and disappointed with others. Instead, show them the same grace that has been shown to you. If you have been forgiven much, then you are able to love much. If you have not, then it will show up in how your inability to love, which means bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things (1 Cor. 13:7). “I just can’t even believe they....” No, you can. We overhear things and more often people tell us things that others say about us. The Preacher says don’t take it to heart when you hear your servant cursing you (v. 21). Many times you have cursed others, so don’t worry about it (v. 22). If this applies to cursing, how much more to gripes, complaints, uncharitable judgements and the like? Solomon tried to understand the wickedness of folly, the evil of evil, but it’s beyond (vv. 23-25). Why do we sin? It’s not just dumb. It’s madness. He sees the woman who ensnares the sinful man. Even as he thinks he gets away with it, away from God and His law, he falls under judgment. But the man who fears God escapes (v. 26; cf. Prov. 20:16). Solomon found one man among a thousand with wisdom but couldn’t find “the woman” (vv. 27-28). He is no misogynist and contrasts lady wisdom and lady folly throughout Proverbs (1: 20-33, 3:13-18, 4:5-13, 8:1-31, 9:13-18). The Proverbs 31 woman crowns the book. The word “found” can mean “comprehend” and so he says, “I can understand the wise man, but the mysterious wise woman is beyond me.” But if he searches among his household, considering his harem, it wouldn’t be surprising to not find a wise woman who was a part of his mess.

Let Your Face Shine

However mysterious mankind is and incomprehensible our foolishness, the plain truth remains: “Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (v. 29). It’s important for sinners to keep the righteousness and holiness of God central and unclouded. This realistic understanding of good and evil, of God and man, of our need for mercy and redemption that can only come through Jesus does not make you cynical and fussy. The wisdom that God gives lights up your face and takes sorrow and gloom away (8:1). In *The Return of the King*, Sam asks Gandalf, “Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?” The gospel is *good* news for all the nations of earth (Ps. 67:4). Light is stronger than darkness, grace triumphs over law, forgiveness overcomes bitterness, and hope conquers despair.