

**Ecclesiastes 7: 15-18; “Do not be Overly Righteous”, A Bible Study
conducted on January 5th, 2011, by Pastor Paul Rendall.**

The Preacher Solomon, in Chapter 7, has been talking mostly about wisdom. He has been stating that it is never vain to attempt to be wise with the wisdom which is from above. The true wisdom; the best wisdom and counsel; is found only in God. It is only to be found by seeking for His blessings and receiving His Word. This book is a part of God’s blessed Word. And so, Solomon is implying that there are some men who are wiser than others, even among those who know the Lord. In verse 5 Solomon said that “it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.” In verse 11 he said, “Wisdom is good with an inheritance.” He said that “wisdom is a defense as money is a defense.” He said that it “gives life to those who have it.” Then in verses 13 and 14, he bids us test ourselves to see whether we are wise or not by considering God’s work of making things crooked. He asks whether we are among those who stop and really consider; that if there is something crooked in our life; that He has appointed it. He has ordained it. He has ordained and providentially brought those difficult things that we cannot change in our life; at least they cannot be changed without Him. But by the grace of Christ, we have seen, we can not only bear up under them, but we can even rejoice in them if we belong to Christ, because God does indeed cause all things to work together for good to those who love God; to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8: 28) Now this evening we want to look at the subjects of being overly righteous and overly wicked. We will hopefully be looking at ourselves rather than thinking about others, and we want to see if we are wise in this regard. So we want to look 1st at the meaning of what it is to be overly righteous and overly wise. And then 2^{ndly} – What it means to be overly wicked. And then lastly, what it means to escape from both.

1st – What does it mean to be overly righteous and wise?

The way that Solomon words this may seem very strange to us. “Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise.” Does not God want us to be wise; as much as we can be wise? After all; was it not Solomon himself who said in Proverbs Chapter 4: 7, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.” “And in all your getting, get understanding.” So then; how can we have too much wisdom or be overly righteous? And we also remember what the Apostle Paul said on more than one occasion in his letters: “But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.” (1 Timothy 6: 11) (Also 2 Timothy 2: 22 and 3: 16) If we are to pursue righteousness, then we must ask; when comes the time when we are pursuing it too much? I think that the answer can be found if we will turn to Philippians Chapter 3. Here in Philippians Chapter 3, Paul draws a distinction between fleshly righteousness and godly righteousness. He says in verse 1, “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.” “For me to write the

same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.” “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!” “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh.” “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so; circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.” “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith....”

Now there are several things that we need to observe from these verses. The first is the phrase in verse 3, “confidence in the flesh.” This phrase is referring to the confidence that Paul had before his conversion; that he was righteous, because he thought that he was what a good Jew was supposed to be. He was outwardly righteous; doing what was expected of him in his religion. He followed the religious traditions and thought of the Pharisees, and sought to win their approval. He thought that this was the beginning and the end of true religion. This fleshly confidence was a self-confidence that the religious lineage that he had come from, the ceremonies that had been performed over him, his zeal for the law and for persecuting Christians, were all wise and righteous things for him to do and to have engaged in. He says in verse 6 that when it came to the righteousness which is found in the law, that he was blameless.” But all this was self-deception he is saying now. It all flowed from his own fleshly way of thinking and evaluation of himself. He thought himself wise and righteous because he was doing what the law commanded him; at least outwardly. But he was really only pursuing his own righteousness which was from law, and He had failed to see that He could not be justified by this pursuit. He failed to look outside of Himself to God in faith. He was being overly wise in that he was wise in his own eyes and in the eyes of other religious men like Himself who did not really fear God. Paul, before he was converted, was only concerned with impressing himself and other men who would agree with this fleshly form of self-deception.

The second thing we need to observe is the phrase, “not having my own righteousness which is of the law.” To be truly wise and righteous, Paul needed to count all pursuing fleshly righteousness, like this, as loss. Pursuing righteousness in a fleshly way is, as Solomon tells us in verse 16; “destroying oneself.” To have Christ is to have true righteousness. For Paul, to have Christ was the most excellent thing that any person could ever have. He would have true righteousness and real wisdom instead of fleshly wisdom. He would know more of Christ. In his conversion he came to know that to miss knowing Christ and having Christ’s grace,

would mean losing his soul. But there is even something more that he is saying here. Paul now knew, and he grew to know it more and more after he became a true Christian; that he did not need to be overly righteous in this outward sense, because he was pursuing righteousness by faith in the way that he lived his Christian life. He knew that it was being overly righteous to pursue his own righteousness, as though all depended upon his thoughts and his performance in a religious way before men. Turn with me to Matthew Chapter 5, verse 17. Here Jesus clarifies this for us. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets.” “I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” Skipping over verses 18 and 19, look at verse 20. “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Here we see that Jesus came to fulfill the law, and is stating that every person needs a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. What does He mean? He means they need a heart religion based upon faith in His righteousness. This heart religion will manifest itself in good deeds in relation to keeping all of God’s commandments, but it will not be a fleshly outward righteousness which is trying to impress other people with the “good things” that we are doing.

Look over at Chapter 6, verse 1. “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them.” “Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” “Therefore when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men.” “Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.” “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.” You see; this is true righteousness; pursuing it first in secret in prayer to the Father; then doing the good deeds to please God and to help other people. This is all done by faith, not according to our own evaluation of ourselves. This is what the phrase, “not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing” means. To be overly wise, is to be wise in your own eyes; not letting God’s word and His wisdom; His way of doing things; lead you. Proverbs 3: 5 and 6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding: in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.” He will teach you how to be wise and righteous in the right way, so that you will not be fanatic driving yourself and others on to be overly righteous. People who are overly righteous are always trying to prove that they are more spiritual than others; always more involved in more religious activity than others. They think that righteousness is a matter of competition with other people. It is not. It is a relationship of loving obedience to God; living by faith in Jesus Christ.

2ndly – What does it mean to be overly wicked? (Verse 15 and verse 17)

“There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness.” “Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish; why should you die before your time?” Concerning the just man who perishes in his righteousness we have already spoken. He is the man who is outwardly righteous; interested in religious externals. He is so interested in his own opinion of himself and other men’s opinions of him, so much so, that in his self-made righteousness, he fails to see God’s righteousness is a matter of the heart being right before God through faith in His promises. But there is also a wicked man who is overly wicked, and one of two things will happen to such a man. Either he will prolong his life in his wickedness. Or he will die before his time because of it. Let’s look at both of these principles of truth for just a few minutes. A wicked man may prolong his life in wickedness because God is graciously waiting for him to repent. He shines his sun upon him; He causes His rain to fall upon him. He gives him all that his heart could desire of this world’s goods and pleasures. Psalm 73 talks about this. But in the end, even though old, still he must die and be held accountable for the way that he lived to himself, and for himself; but not for God. Sometimes wicked men live to be old. But sometimes they do not.

Turn with me first to Psalm 55, verse 22. Here David is instructing God’s people how they should conduct themselves during times when others are angry with them and perpetrating violence against them. They are to pray and to expect God to do something against the perpetrator of such things. “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.” “But You, O God, shall bring them down to the pit of destruction; bloodthirsty and deceitful men shall not live out half their days; but I will trust in you.” There it is – “Bloodthirsty and deceitful men shall not live out half their days.” Why not? Because they have provoked God with their evil deeds to shorten their time here upon the earth. There is a conception in God’s mind, an exact calculation, of how long each man’s life will be. He knows all of our days before there is even one of them. But a person can so provoke God by their wickedness that He will shorten their life. In His Divine foreknowledge he knows what each man’s life will be like and what He will become over time, and His knowledge of the sins which they commit against righteous people will bring Him to take them out of this world, and away to judgment before they have lived out even half of the days which they could have if they would have repented. Look at verse 19. “God will hear, and afflict them, even He who abides from of old.” “Because they do not change, therefore they do not fear God.” They do not change; they do not repent of their sins; this is the reason that God afflicts them and brings them down to the pit of destruction.

Not only violent men are dealt with in this way; but also hypocrites He deals with in this way of His holiness. Turn with me to Job 36. Elihu (who did not speak wrongly of God or of Job, by God’s own declaration later) says this in verse

13: “But the hypocrites in heart store up wrath; they do not cry for help when He binds them.” “They die in youth, and their life ends among the perverted persons. You can see that it is being overly wicked in the sight of God when we will not come to repent of our sins when we have been repeatedly warned. But a few verses before this, we are told of what eternally good things happen to those who do repent. Verse 7 – “God does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous; but they are on the throne with kings, for He has seated them forever, and they are exalted.” “And if they are bound in fetters, held in the cords of affliction, then He tells them their work and their transgressions—that they have acted defiantly.” “He also opens their ear to instruction, and commands that they turn from iniquity.” “If they obey and serve Him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures.” “But if they do not obey, they shall perish by the sword, and they shall die without knowledge.” As our text says in verse 17 – “Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time?”

And then 3rdly and briefly – What does it mean to escape both being overly righteous and overly wicked? (Verse 18)

“It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all.” Solomon is saying that the only way to escape from both is to fear God. The life of faith in God and Christ is a life of balance. It is a life of living by godly principles. The fear of the Lord will deliver you both from eternal death and dying before your time. And it will also keep you from self-righteous pride, so that you perish in your righteousness; either by an early death because of practicing austerities in your religion, or perishing eternally because you are overly wise in promoting your own righteousness instead of God’s. Let us see from this that knowing God through Jesus Christ our Lord; that we should pray to know how we should go about to keep God’s commandments. When we do so, we will be taught the fear of the Lord. We will be taught by God Himself to act from the principle that there is a balanced obedience which God is looking for; and we will then go about to live that way. We will not be people of extremes in regard to either religious self-righteousness or wickedness. We will be those who will go about to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is never to be thought of by the Christian as being overly righteous. We will go about to do this by faith, in all humility, knowing that only through Christ can we begin to pursue true righteousness. Verse 18 of our text in Ecclesiastes says, “It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all.” Remember these verses in closing – Psalm 34: 11 – “Come you children listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” “Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?” “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.” “Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry.” “The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the

earth.” That is how you learn the fear of the Lord which will keep you from being overly righteous and wise, and overly wicked. Be a good listener to God’s word and pay attention to the example of godly men. What an incentive this is; for us to pray.

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