

Enjoying What You Have

Ecclesiastes 5:13-20

Preached October 18, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

Introduction. This summer, Patty, her mother and I visited Natchez, MS and toured Stanton Hall, one of its many historic antebellum homes. Even though the home was completed in 1857, it was magnificent. Our tour guide shared with us the history of that home, how long it took to build and how much it cost. What amazed me about the story was Fredrick Stanton, whose dream it was to build the place, who invested his time and money to see it built and was its first owner, lived only a short time after it was completed. He was hardly able to enjoy the masterpiece he had built. In the words of the teacher of Ecclesiastes – *“that is a grievous ill we have seen under the sun.”* (Fortunately, his wife and family were able to enjoy it for many years.)

The author of Ecclesiastes writes here about what he witnessed to be “bad” – people who were unable to enjoy the resources they had accumulated either because the possessions brought them harm or were lost by a poor venture or

difficult circumstances. (This is kind of sad, isn't it?) On the other side, he witnessed what he considered “good” – people enjoying what they had and enjoying their work.

Of these two, which would you rather experience – not enjoying what you accumulate or enjoying fully the life you have? I am going to take a huge risk and bet that you would want to enjoy your life and what you have fully.

God wants us to enjoy our lives.

It comes as a surprise to many that God wants us to enjoy life. God wants us to enjoy what we are given, what we earn and what we accumulate. God wants us to enjoy where we live and with whom we live. God desires that we experience joy in life. While there will inevitably be some tough times that come our way, God wants us to enjoy life even in the midst of these. He inspired Paul to write, “Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, ‘Rejoice’” (Philippians 4:4). Always rejoice is God's exhortation to us.

Think for a moment about how we are created to receive joyful pleasure. Our eyes eagerly absorb and long to see beauty – the brilliant and bold colors of a hillside in October, a sunset or a star-filled sky. Our noses come alive with the scent of aromatic roses, seductive perfume or freshly baked bread (Could you imagine living above the bakery on the Arts District Bluff?) Our tongues take delight when they wrap around Nana's Ice Cream, as the bite of chocolate cheesecake slides off the fork into our mouths or as our favorite dish is placed before us. (I probably should say the benediction now because you have most likely left mentally and are thinking of where you will have lunch.) Our ears perk up when we hear the music to which our souls can sing, whether it is the orchestra, a bluegrass band or the melody of a flute. Our bodies rejoice in the warmth of a fire on a cold winter day or a cool breeze in the summer. God created us so that all of our senses could enjoy the world around us.

The theme of God's wanting us to

enjoy our lives on earth and what we have is prominent in Ecclesiastes. There are five other references, excluding the one in our scripture lesson, that speak about enjoying life and what one has. Perhaps Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 says it best: *I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.*

Of course this message is not limited to Ecclesiastes. Perhaps the clearest expression of it is found in one of the letters Paul wrote to Timothy. In a section where the Apostle was providing council about the use of our resources, Paul wrote: *As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment* (1 Timothy 6:17). Did you hear the last statement – God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment? God wants us to enjoy life and what he has given us.

It is critical for us to understand that all things we possess come from God. As the psalmist proclaims, *“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it”* (Psalm 24:1). God owns it all. Because of his love for us, God is the One who shares it with us. Our wealth and possessions are gifts from God.

We understand what it means to share gifts with those we love and the desire we have for them to enjoy those gifts. Last year, Patty and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary. After giving some thought as to an appropriate gift, I decided to upgrade her diamond ring. Without her knowing it, I shopped for a new diamond and purchased one. (Of course, she deserved more than that shiny rock for having put up with me for 30 years.) On our anniversary, I surprised her. When she looked at the ring, she said, “You shouldn't have done this.” I replied, “Do you want me to take it back?” She said, “No.” In my heart, I wanted the love of my life to thoroughly enjoy that gift.

Enjoy your work.

An important part of enjoying the life God has given to us relates to enjoying our work. Half of the passages in Ecclesiastes that speak about enjoying life highlight enjoying one's work or toil – *it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil which one toils.* God wants us to enjoy our work.

The average American spends 93,000 hours at work in a lifetime (www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/08/12/quality-vs-quantity-in-work-life). (Since most of us think of ourselves as above average, we probably work more.) The average time represents 3875 days, 553 ½ weeks or 10.6 years if worked without a break. That probably ranks only second to the amount of sleep one has in a lifetime. We spend a large portion of lives working. Wouldn't life be better if we enjoyed our work?

One of my favorite programs on television is Dirty Jobs. The host Mike Rowe goes around the country spending a day doing some of the dirtiest jobs, from working in a tannery to cleaning out disposal tanks. Among his top smelliest places he has worked are a lift pump at a waste disposal plant, a cave that is home to 40 million bats, a fish recycling plant and a pig nursery. I guarantee if you watch a few episodes, you will enjoy your job more. What is amazing in watching that program is that many who do those jobs demonstrate a sense of enjoyment in doing some of the dirtiest jobs around.

One of the great words in our vocabulary related to work is "vocation." This word has a Latin root "vocatio" meaning "calling." It came into popular use many years ago in referring to a spiritual calling. Today we use it commonly to refer to one's occupation. This idea of calling can help us in terms of moving toward work that is enjoyable.

In the past, many in my generation when considering what they would do to earn a living, looked at a particular occupation in terms of its benefits, particularly how much it paid. That is an important consideration that can influence the joy of work. But there are other considerations that will have a greater impact on one's joy related to their vocation. What are you designed to do – what are your God-given gifts,

talents and passions? Work is so much more enjoyable when we are able to use these. What do you feel "called" to do? What can you do most effectively that can make a difference? (Recently, I spoke with a person who was interested in an open position we have here and she said, "All summer I prayed for a job with purpose.")

God wants each of us to enjoy our work. Sometimes life demands we take a job that may not meet the higher callings. Those jobs may not be available to us or life situations keep us from doing them. Even when we are doing something different than the ideal job, we can still find joy in our work. God is present with us and we can develop relationships that can nourish the soul.

Even if we fail to have paying jobs that fit the ideal vocation, we can volunteer our time in places where we can use our gifts and talents. This can bring great joy. Our author writes that God enables people to "find enjoyment in their toil."

Enjoying the fruit of your labor.

Another important part of enjoying life relates to enjoying the fruit of our labors and those resources we are given. The author here speaks of God giving wealth and possessions and enabling people to enjoy them. God wants us to enjoy what we earn and what we possess.

Some have a difficult time with this type of talk because they feel called to a life of poverty, or for some reason they have a guilt complex about having stuff, or they feel jealous of things other people have. The first group seems to think every true Christian should share their conviction of poverty. The second wants to project their guilt on others. The third group just feel life isn't fair. Despite these people's attitude, God does want us to enjoy what we have.

Some years ago, a person standing in front of her new hummer in the church parking lot asked me, "Is it wrong for us to own a Hummer?" This woman and her husband had the means to purchase and maintain such a vehicle and were very generous to their church, community and family. While I thought about its poor fuel economy and its negative impact on the environment, I wondered, "Doesn't God want them to enjoy their vehicle?"

If you are blessed with a job, business, investment, inheritance or trust that yields millions of dollars each year, does God want you to enjoy those fruits? If you have a job where you earn \$25,000 per year, does God want you to enjoy those fruits? If you can afford to live in a 6,000 square foot home and it serves your needs, does God want you to enjoy it? If you live in a 1200 square foot home that you can afford, does God want you to enjoy it? God wants us to enjoy what we make, have and receive.

Of course there are some boundaries about how we get what we have, the attitude we have, and how we use what we have that are important. We will look at these in a few weeks. If what we have has been gotten through just means and we do not hoard it all to ourselves, then we need not feel guilty about what we have. We must understand God wants us to enjoy what we have.

Keys to enjoying our work and possessions.

God is actively involved in not only giving us meaningful work and those things we need, but also in giving us joy in both. God enables us to enjoy life. That joy however is not like a wizard waving a magic wand and saying, "You will enjoy life." We play a part in opening our lives to this joy.

Let me mention three keys to helping us find joy in our work and in what we have.

- One key is a *stance of acceptance*. The teacher of Ecclesiastes called it *accepting our lot*. We have been given a portion or allotment. For some, it may be great wealth, a high paying job or having that vocation that pays virtually nothing but gives great satisfaction. One might have the resources to drive a Porsche and another may be given a 1995 Ford that runs well. The stance of acceptance is being content with where one is and what one has. That does not mean the person does not try to advance and improve one's life but that person is not "driven" by the lust to have more and better.
- Another key is *the attitude of gratitude*. Thankful people are happier people. You may not have the best job and the

greatest benefits but are you thankful for the job you have? Your home may not be the largest in the neighborhood but are you thankful for having a roof over your head? Think of the opportunities you have been given, the friends and family you have, the rich blessing of God you have received. The attitude of gratitude opens the gate for joy to flood into our lives.

- A third key is the *responsibility of generosity*. God gives his blessings to us so that we can bless others. We are blessed to be a blessing. There is probably no greater joy than sharing what we have been given with others, particularly those in need.

Invitation.

God wants you to enjoy life, what you do and what you have. I urge you go and enjoy life. Take these three keys and unlock the joy God has for you. Take the stance of acceptance. Latch hold of the attitude of gratitude. Discover the responsibility of generosity.