

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

Learning to Love Good

Main idea: Enjoy the life that God has given you, and look forward to the judgment of God.

I want to briefly summarize the sermon this morning before I preach.

Life isn't fair. We all seem to know that to be true, and yet we fight against it. We try to make life fair through legislation and the court system, which we call justice. And those can certainly be good and necessary tools to strive for fairness in our broken world. But I want to ask the question: why isn't life fair? We know that God is good, fair, and just, and God created life, so why isn't life fair?

Of course, we know it's because of our sin, right? And yet, God put us here, knowing we'd sin. God gave us life to enjoy, and serve Him, and yet He's also allowed us to sin against Him, which brings His judgment. And yet, it's His judgment that eradicates evil so that there will be no injustice in the life to come.

So, if I could summarize the sermon today in one sentence, it would be this: learn to enjoy the life that God has given you, and look forward to the judgment of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

I also observed under the sun: there is wickedness at the place of judgment and there is wickedness at the place of righteousness. I said to myself, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every activity and every work." I said to myself, "This happens so that God may test the children of Adam and they may see for themselves that they are like animals." For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the

other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. Who knows if the spirits of the children of Adam go upward and the spirits of animals go downward to the earth? I have seen that there is nothing better than for a person to enjoy his activities because that is his reward. For who can enable him to see what will happen after he dies? (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22)

Father, so often we look around the world, and even at our lives, and we see injustice. We see evil, even in our own hearts. When we attempt to find meaning and fulfillment in this life, so often we get overwhelmed with sadness. So help us to find our joy in Jesus, who helps us to see beyond this life, and into the life to come. In Jesus's name, Amen.

So, life isn't fair. Many people work all their lives, and have very little to show for it, while others hardly work at all, and inherit a fortune. Some people cheat and steal to get what they want, and get away with it, while others play by the rules, hoping that it will eventually pay off, but it never does. And we could probably give a billion other examples of how there's no such thing as karma. From a humanistic perspective, this world is full of righteousness as well as wickedness, and it seems that you can just pick whichever one you desire, and the outcome in your lifetime could potentially be exactly the same, because life just isn't fair.

And yet, a pastor named Mitchell Dillon wrote this online:

There is a moral compass in all of us that manifests itself at a very early age. When my three children were young and had behaved badly I would ask them a question like, "After all, what is more important, being nice to your brother or getting what you want?" All three of them, at every age, always knew the right answer to such questions. They didn't always like the right answer, but they always knew what it was. - Mitchell Dillon

Isn't it true that we often know the good thing that we need to do, even if we don't want to do it? And the good thing often has nothing to do with whether it will lead to a favorable outcome for us in the short term, but we know that it's right. It says in James 4:17:

It is sin to know the good and yet not do it. (James 4:17)

I'm sure we've all been guilty of that at times. So Solomon writes in our passage today, verse 16:

I also observed under the sun: there is wickedness at the place of judgment and there is wickedness at the place of righteousness. I said to myself, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every activity and every work." (Ecclesiastes 3:16-17)

We saw earlier in chapter three that there's a time for everything. A time to be born and a time to die. A time for war and a time for peace. And we talked then about how these things are in contrast to each other. One of these is good, and one of them is bad. And yet, God assigns a time, or at least provides room for a time, for each of these.

And today, not only do we see that there's time for each of these, both for good and for bad, but we also see that our wickedness permeates both. There's wickedness at the place of judgment, and even at the place of righteousness. And that's pretty unexpected, right? Because we expect there to be wickedness at the place of judgment, that's why there's judgment, because wickedness deserves judgment. But Solomon writes that there's wickedness even at the place of righteousness. In other words, even our greatest acts of righteousness are nothing but filthy rags before God.¹

Apart from faith in God, all of our greatest deeds are tainted by our sin. And it could be for a variety of reasons. We could do something good not because we really care about good, but because we want to be seen as

¹ Isaiah 64:6

good. Or sometimes we do something good because we want to convince ourselves that we are good. So even our attempts at righteousness show that we're not really righteous. We're sinners through and through.

This is considerably different from how most people view morality, and even how a lot of Christians view morality. Most people seem to think that we can be good if we do enough good, and that only those people who commit crimes that are deemed punishable by society are bad. All those sinners out there, they're bad! But we're the good guys. But the Bible teaches that we're all bad. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.²

So Solomon reasoned in verse 17 that "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every activity and every work." And that, of course, is true. It's not a popular thought, but it's true. God will judge both the righteous and the wicked. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

So there is a judgment to come, books will be opened, and the Bible says that God will judge each person according to what He has done, and according to the names that are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Revelation 20:12.

I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. (Revelation 20:12)

Verse 15.

² Romans 3:23

And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15)

We will all be judged according to what's in those books. God will judge both the righteous and the wicked, and the Bible says that none are righteous, not even one. So make no mistake: we will all be judged, because God is the Judge.

Which, of course, is exactly why Jesus came. Many people think Jesus came so that we could avoid judgment, but that's actually not what Scripture teaches. Jesus came not so that we would avoid judgment, but so that we might experience God's judgment, which is good. Jesus said in John 9:39:

I came into this world for judgment, in order that those who do not see will see and those who do see will become blind. (John 9:39)

According to Jesus, both the giving of sight and the taking away of sight are part of the same judgment.

And He also said in John 12, speaking about going to the cross:

Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself. (John 12:31-32)

Through the judgment of the cross, Jesus cast out Satan, the ruler of this present world, and through the same judgment of the cross, Jesus draws all people to Himself.

Well, anyway, I'm just saying that we often think of judgment as something for others, those that we deem the bad people, while really according to the Bible, judgment is for all of us, which is to embrace, because it's only through God's judgment, God's decision, that we can be saved.

Verse 18.

I said to myself, "This happens so that God may test the children of Adam and they may see for themselves that they are like animals." For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. Who knows if the spirits of the children of Adam go upward and the spirits of animals go downward to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21)

According to science today, we are all animals. Specifically, we're classified as mammals, just like the monkeys. And, of course, we're a lot like the animal world, right? Biologically, we're not much different, because God used the same building blocks for all life. We're made up of carbon and oxygen, which make up our cells, which make up us. And that's true of all life.

But we often say that what makes us different from all animal life is our superior intellect. But then there's this.

[Video of Smart Animals]



As we learn more about the animal world, we find that animals are often much more intelligent than we once assumed. It's difficult to discern how much of what they do is instinct versus self-determination, but there's no denying at this point that animals are capable of at least some complex reasoning.

Now, we might say that we're obviously still superior to the animal world in our intelligence, but that's more of a matter of degree, and it's a matter of interpretation, because I'm sure we've all met a few people who don't seem to have the IQ as some of those animals.

So many people say it's not our intelligence that separates us from animals, but the fact that we have a spirit. When God created Adam, it says in Genesis 2:7:

The Lord God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Literally, it says that God breathed the spirit³ of life into him, and he became a living soul.⁴

But Solomon seems to say in Ecclesiastes that we just don't know if that's a sure distinction. We don't know if our spirit goes up to God, and the spirit of animals remains in the dirt. In other words, there's no definitive answer about whether all dogs go to heaven.

But there is one distinction that remains true: we were made in the image of God.⁵ No other creatures on the planet were made in the image of God like we were. And therefore, being in the image of God, we have the capacity to do good, and to love, and to reflect God's love, goodness, and justice in the world.

Verse 22.

³ נֶפֶשׁ: breath, life, spirit

⁴ נֶפֶשׁ: soul, living being, person

⁵ Genesis 1:26-27

I have seen that there is nothing better than for a person to enjoy his activities because that is his reward. For who can enable him to see what will happen after he dies? (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

So once again, like last week, we come back to this idea of motivation in living. We can't live for the next generation, and from the perspective of living life under the sun, we can't even so much live for heaven, because we don't know what heaven will be like. But we can learn to enjoy where we are right now.

So much of life, we work for tomorrow. We think we can achieve something that will make life better. But if you're not content now, you probably won't be content tomorrow.

But God desires that we learn to enjoy the good things that we do today, recognizing that God gives us that reward. It's good to enjoy life! So learn to love what's good. Learn to love God and His judgment.

And yet, there is an answer to that last question that Solomon asked in this passage: who can enable us to see what happens after we die? Solomon wrote much of Ecclesiastes from a humanistic point of view, but the whole of Scripture reveals that there is an afterlife, and we obtain it by grace through faith in Jesus. Jesus enables us to see what happens after we die. It's through Jesus that we have eternal life, and He opens our eyes to see that life.

Much of the Christian life is about learning to love what's truly good. It's learning to love what God calls good. It's learning to love justice. True justice, which is God's judgment, is not merely getting what we think we deserve, or other people getting what we think they deserve, but rather God getting what He deserves. And God is worthy of all praise, and He deserves for all people everywhere to look to Him as Lord.

So will you, now, look to Him?