

got wisdom? Lesson 6

Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:6

If for no other reason, we are grateful for Solomon, as the preacher, writing to share with us his numerous observations as he is introspectively reminiscent about his past experiences. Continuing with the concept of “a time for every purpose and for every work”, he now looks at the inequities and *unfairnesses* of life (Vs. 16-22).

We can certainly understand what appears to us to be injustices going unpunished, wrongs going un-righted, the playing field never being leveled. However, and interestingly it is always easier to see these things perpetrated by others. We have to be careful to not look so punishingly at others while failing to see ourselves (Mt 7:1-6).

By his observation and our own experience, we know that the consequences of violating God’s moral law are “suspended” in many cases. We also know that He will ultimately balance the scales (Rom 14:10-12). What Solomon was not privy to was the grace of God in Christ, which affords us a greater level of mercy.

As we have gratefully discovered, it is in God’s mercy that He forestalls immediate judgment for our wrongs and offenses committed against Him. Thanks be unto God! If God’s judgment was instantaneous or even hasty, there would be no room for forgiveness and repentance or, no place for grace.

Vs. 18-22

Shifting his thoughts, Solomon considered that since the end of man, who has lowered himself to the status and stature of animals, is death, life is hopeless. This is the same “under the sun” or “this world only” view that so many have despite the fact that while our earthly bodies will return to dust our souls shall live on (Vs 18-21).

Where Solomon failed in his thinking, God succeeded through His great wisdom and mercy devising a way that the spirit of sinful man could “rise upward”, while His justice be intact. God sent His Son to take the penalty for man’s rebellion against God, so that we may be cleansed of our sins and be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-19).

Vs. 4:1-6

Unfortunately, the preacher continues in this despairing reasoning (4:1-3). In the opening of chapter 4 Solomon has seen the affliction of those who are oppressed. There is only the possibility of oppression, as those who have the power to oppress, mistreat those who do not have the power to resist.

Rather than saying, “they have no comforter”, we would imagine that he, as a king and ruler over his people, would have been in a position to address or deal with the oppressors. Because of the nature of human social structures, he likely understands, as do we, that the pursuit of superiority and its leverage against “the less than” will always be around.

In Solomon’s time, the gift of our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, had not yet been given to the people, and so, indeed, the evil that men perpetrated upon other men could be unbearable. This is why the onus is upon us, who have the Comforter, to ourselves be comforters to the oppressed who do not have the Comforter (2 Cor 1:3-7).

The perpetual nature of oppression does not relieve us of our responsibility to fight for justice, equality, and civil rights of the marginalized, misfortunate, and oppressed (Lk 4:18-19; Mt 25:31-40). Despite what we may believe about this life “under the sun” we are still called to work the works of Him who called us (Jn 9:1-5).

Seemingly scatterbrained, he now thought of those who gain success through toil and skillful work and how it simply brought envy and sometimes hatred from others (Vs 4-6). This common jealousy of success made life seem like vanity and grasping for the wind, particularly when your success isolates you from others.

Solomon here answered the tendency for those jealous of the success of others to be lazy. Like fools, they fold their hands and do nothing — and so waste away. Yet it wasn't the success of their neighbor that made them waste away; the foolish, lazy man consumes his own flesh.

The first obstacle to man “enjoying his work” that the preacher noted was the oppression by other men. However, the second and more personal obstacle is our motives. Man's motivation for work, as witnessed by Solomon, springs not from his desire to improve society, but from his envy of his neighbor.

Working from the envy of one's neighbor, Solomon realized that a man could never find peace and tranquility in his life, because the envy of one's neighbor can never be satiated. We'll never win trying to “keep-up-with-the-Joneses”, so we must learn the value of contentment. It is better to have less and be content (with quietness) than to have more and constantly be grasping for further success.

THE TAKE HOME:

- 1. We certainly know life is not fair and that there are injustices all over the world, big and small. Has your relationship with God empowered you or stifled you in the face of either?**
- 2. In what ways have you been an oppressor or the oppressed and how did your relationship with God allow to view yourself in your circumstances? What did you do to correct it?**
- 3. Think of a time that you found yourself playing the comparison game, and then consider what you could do or have done to escape from the envy that was driving you. How did/do you find contentment?**