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STRIVING AFTER THE WIND

One of the saddest passages found anywhere in Scripture can be found in the book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon, one of the richest and wisest men who has ever lived on this planet, reflects back on all that he had done over his lifetime. You would think a man purported to be the wisest man who has ever lived would have made countless well-reasoned, personal decisions that would have enabled him to realize absolutely the greatest joy and satisfaction that life can offer. But sadly, this wise and wealthy man, by his own admission missed that objective by a mile.

But let's allow Solomon to speak for himself.

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also, I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 NASB)

How terribly tragic. To reach the end of your life and have to acknowledge that everything you did during your lifetime that you thought would bring you joy and happiness actually has proven to be a complete waste of time – or as Solomon puts it, "vanity and striving after the wind and there was no profit under the sun."

How could Solomon, with wisdom from God, have been so wrong? How could he have missed it so badly? I have added italics in the passage above to point out where he likely failed. It is the phrase "for myself" and he uses it six times. Where Solomon went wrong was that his focus was on blessing "myself" and not on blessing others.

I wonder if Solomon instead of doing all these things for myself, would have instead “built houses for others; planted vineyards for others; made gardens and parks for others; made ponds of water for others; collected for others silver and gold and the treasure of kings; and provided for others male and female singers...” would he have concluded that his life was nothing but a complete exercise in futility? I think not. I think his life-assessment would have been radically different.

Tragically, Solomon’s wisdom abandoned him in this one critical area of life. He somehow thought that the more things he possessed and experienced the more happiness he would find. But sadly, he discovered to his grief and horror that just the opposite was what he ended up with. It didn’t produce the joy or happiness he was seeking. It only produced an unhealthy relationship with his material possessions and a very small heart. If Solomon missed it, should we be surprised that many of us have also missed it?

Have we come to think that making more money, buying newer and more expensive things, taking nicer vacations, driving luxury cars, buying bigger homes and on and on will finally help us experience the elusive happiness that always seems to be just beyond our reach? And like the proverbial donkey with a carrot dangling right in front of its face, we just keep futilely trudging on, hoping to someday finally get the carrot and eat it.

The good news is that we have even more wisdom at our disposal than Solomon possessed if we have ears to hear it and a heart to embrace it. Here are just a few additional gems of wisdom that can guide our thinking and decision making about material possessions and the role they can and should play in our lives:

Jesus: “...It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35 NASB)

Paul: “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (I Timothy 6:10 NASB)

Solomon: “There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.” (Ecclesiastes 5:13 NASB)

Isaiah: “Why do you spend money for what is not bread and your wages for what does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2 NASB)

Paul: “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.” (I Timothy 6:19-21 NASB)

I am yet to meet a generous person who is unhappy. These two words seem to be mutually exclusive because as Solomon himself finally came to realize, “The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.” (Proverbs 11:25 NLT)

By God’s grace, as long as we are still on this side of the grass, we still have time to make the needed course corrections in our lives so that our end-of-life assessment can be vastly different than Solomon’s. And instead of futility, sorrow and regret, we can change what we are doing so we will now be able to look back on our lives and with great anticipation wait to hear that blessed assessment from our King, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:11 ESV)

We learn from godly wisdom that the greatest joy in life is not found in being rich in material things, it is found in being “rich in good works.” So, what will be your end-of-life assessment of how you handled the material possessions God has entrusted you to manage for Him?

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E. G. “Jay” Link has a unique combination of being an ordained minister with a Master Divinity degree in Biblical Theology and a professional Stewardship planning coach who for over 40 years has been working with very affluent Christian families to enable them to optimize their Kingdom impact with all that the Lord has entrusted to them to manage. After retiring from his personal practice, he then served for five years as Director of Taylor University’s Stewardship Planning Ministry, which he launched for them. Most recently, Jay founded Transformational Stewardship to serve Christian ministries, colleges, and churches to better minister to their highest capacity families. He has written six books, hundreds of articles and has provided an extensive training curriculum for hundreds of professional financial and legal advisors in how to provide stewardship planning services for their clients.