

# Enjoying Life To the Fullest

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:1

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2017-01-22

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## Text

11:9 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, And let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; Walk in the ways of your heart, And in the sight of your eyes; But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. 10 Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, And put away evil from your flesh, For childhood and youth are vanity. 12:1 Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the difficult days come, And the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them":

## Introduction

Well, it's good to be back with you all. The time that Kathy and I had in Tennessee was a wonderful mix of the intense (which wore you out) and the sublime (which refreshed you). And that was true at both presbytery and at the conference that followed. Kathy spent the two days that I was at presbytery talking non-stop to the women of Christ the King Church - answering questions that she was being peppered with - she really led her own conference. And those questions kept coming eleven hours a day when I joined her. Though it was exhausting, it was strangely refreshing at the same time.

It sounds like Rodney and Gary already shared some of their experiences at the Presbytery summit. I think that summit will prove to be a turning point in our denomination. I won't repeat what Rodney and Gary have already shared with you other than to say that there was a lot of soul-searching, repenting, praying, discussion of where our denomination has gone wrong and where we should go.

Anyway, speaking of the title of today's sermon, "Enjoying Life to the Fullest," I wanted to point to how Heritage Church ended that summit with a 30 course formal banquet that was more than a meal. All of our senses were drawn out to appreciate the glory and the goodness of God in food and music. And that's why they called it a gastronomical liturgy. They knew that some of the elders in our denomination have gone through a lot of pain, and this was their way of ministering their love and the Scriptures while they ministered with food. I like to think that I am a foodie - obviously nothing

on the level of the Lanes. But I have always appreciated well-crafted food, aesthetically presented, in a charming atmosphere, with music and well-thought-through dialogue. And yet that presentation absolutely blew me out of the water. I've never experienced anything like it.

My only guilt was wishing that Kathy could have experienced it with me. And I mention guilt because in my early life I would have had guilt enjoying such pleasure. It was a false guilt that actually blasphemed God's goodness. Unfortunately, by my early twenties I had become an ascetic who thought that sacrifice was the only way to please God. I'm not putting down sacrifice. Kathy and I made major sacrifices this past week. But God wants us to learn to enjoy life to the fullest. And not just enjoying magnificent things like that banquet, but enjoying the simple things of life - like a humming bird outside the window, or the refreshment of cool clear water.

As you can tell, I'm not preaching on Revelation today. I'm pulling out a sermon from 2006 that Ken Cope said I should preach every year. I didn't follow his advice. But I want to once again remind those of you who unduly deprive your bodies of joy, that God loves to minister to the whole man - body and soul.

If you are a workaholic driven to activity and if you feel guilty when you relax, you might be shocked to know that God mandated rest not only on the Sabbath, but for 30 additional days in the Old Testament, which included three weeklong festivals. And when you add the festivals to 52 sabbaths, you have over eighty days of mandated relaxation. And actually it is more when you consider how long it took to travel to the temple. Can you imagine 80 mandated days of rest!? Wow! Does that seem like a royal waste of time? And then imagine attending two or three week-long weddings. That gives you a tiny inkling of how different our highly driven American culture is compared to the Hebraic culture of the Bible.

## **I. An overview of the message of Ecclesiastes**

So this morning I want to look at how to enjoy life without guilt, and why it is that over-indulgers like Solomon did not enjoy life. We want to trace God's delight in delighting us, but also see how a failure to delight in the Giver robs us of our ability to delight fully in God's good gifts.

Turn with me to Ecclesiastes 3. I want to give you a quick overview of the book of Ecclesiastes. And I want to show you a contrast that is found throughout this book that is a key to understanding this book. In verse 1 he describes things under heaven, and in verses 16 and following he describes

things as viewed under the sun. Those are two opposite ways of looking at life. If the physical sun is the highest thing in your life, then this practical Deism leads to emptiness. Verses 16 and following show only emptiness. But contrast that with the phrase “under heaven” in verse 1. That is living continually under something that transcends the physical creation; that transcends the physical sun. That is living coram deo (before the face of God), and verses 1-8 say that there is meaning and purpose for every event that is lived under heaven.

But let’s focus on verses 11 and following. In 3:11-13 he says,

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor - it is the gift of God.

Enjoying life is a gift of God. That’s why Solomon couldn’t enjoy life during his backslidden years. God's not going to bless backsliding. Enjoying life is a gift of God. You can’t fully enter into the enjoyment of a flower, a sunset or poetry without God’s gracious help. Now some of you agree because you hate poetry. But everything, including sweeping the floor can be a joy when you do it as a love service for God with a consciousness of His approving presence.

In 2:24-25 Solomon says,

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, was from the hand of God. When you truly receive food and drink from the loving hands of a personal God, there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and that his soul should enjoy the good in his labor. This is said by a man who found vexation in his labor because he failed to live life in God; under heaven. But if you are living life under heaven, it doesn’t matter what your circumstance, whether rich or poor, you can enjoy life and you need nothing better.

Chapter 9 says, "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life." God is not against pleasure. He wants us to enjoy life in all of its facets, all of our days. Chapter 11 says, "Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun." Even the simple things like the sunshine brought him delight when he walked in fellowship with God.

Now that was not always true for Solomon. Using the past tense, Solomon says he knew what boring was all about. His life for years was filled with vanity and emptiness. You might think that it would be impossible for

Solomon to be bored. Surely he was too busy to be bored? Yet Solomon said, "Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind." (2:17). When God was left out he hated life, he hated his work, he hated his fleeting pleasures. When keeping busy didn't help, he turned to entertainment and in chapter 2 found that this too left him cold and empty. Surely it would be exciting to be as wise as Solomon, yet he said, "For in much wisdom is much grief" (1:18). Solomon knew how empty sensual excitement could leave you. You read through the book and you will see that Solomon had tried every way that modern man tries to enjoy life, and though it provided fleeting happiness, it was ultimately without success.

When you look to banquets to satisfy your emptiness, it will leave you with a spiritual emptiness, but when your heart is satisfied in God, it has heightened pleasure in God's good gifts like that piece of fudge brownie or that juicy steak. But let's look at the opposite extreme, not self-denial, but self-indulgence. At root humanistic self-denial and self-indulgence have exactly the same problem.

One of the pastoral journals I receive told a parable that I think illustrates well our attempts to live under the sun rather than under heaven; seeking the gifts rather than the Giver. It told of a truck driver who was driving through a large city. There was nothing particularly unique about the driver or the truck except for one thing--at every traffic light the driver would get out of the truck, take a baseball bat and beat on the side of the trailer at the back of the truck with all of his might. Then he would jump back in the cab of his truck and drive on to the next light where he would repeat this ritual. (You are already guessing that this is an apocryphal story.) The journal says,

A fellow following him in a car was puzzled by this bizarre behavior and asked him at one light why in the world he was beating on the side of his truck. "Oh," said the driver, "the answer is simple. I have a two-ton truck and I am carrying four tons of canaries in it. That means that I have to keep two tons of them in the air at all times."

Maybe you feel like you are carrying around an extra two tons of canaries. And when things get too heavy to bear, like Solomon you try to stir up your life with some new activity. When you feel weighed down with those canaries you go out and buy something, and that makes you feel better - for awhile. Or you sit in front of the Television set and veg out and that makes you feel better - for a while. Or you get busy. Or you raid the refrigerator and stuff your face. So it is not just the ascetics and Stoics who miss out on real living. It is also the hedonists and the Epicureans. If you are trying to cope with the extra load of canaries like Solomon was, then I think this

passage at the end of Ecclesiastes has something to tell you. So let's look at chapter 11, beginning at verse 9.

## **II. Enjoyment Doesn't Just Happen (11:9-12:8)**

### **A. *It Is Commanded ("Rejoice" - 11:9a)***

The first thing that the whole book of Ecclesiastes makes clear is that enjoyment doesn't just happen. Vanity does. Vanity can happen all by itself, but not enjoyment. If we are to learn to enjoy life, then we need to take the responsibility squarely on our shoulders. Don't depend on others. You are responsible to enjoy life.

My Bible makes 11:9-12:8 all one paragraph. And this section starts with a command. "Rejoice." It doesn't say, "Beg God to make life less miserable." It doesn't say, "Hope that a friend will come along." It doesn't say, "Get married so that you can start to enjoy life." It doesn't say, "Pray for healing so that you can begin to enjoy life." Ecclesiastes actually assumes that we will have pain, troubles, aging, and difficult times, but it still gives us the responsibility to rejoice.

Now that may seem like a burden at first, but it really is a liberating thought. If God commands us to rejoice, that means that we have the ability to rejoice by His grace - in the very circumstances that bother humanists and make them think all is vanity. And of course this is consistent with the rest of the Bible. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." Now you might be thinking of a condition in your life in which you can't rejoice, but you'll have to take that up with Paul. He said, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Yes, even when your job is miserable. Yes even when your spouse isn't perfect. Yes even when your finances are down. Rejoice in the Lord always. By my computer count we are commanded to rejoice well over 100 times in the Bible. God does not want our Christianity to be dull or our faces dour. He commands us to rejoice.

### **B. *There Is No Need To Wait For It ("in your youth" 11:9b; cf. 12:1-8)***

Secondly, Solomon says there is no need to wait until you are older before you can begin to enjoy life. Unlike the 20th century when youth is admired and we hate getting old, back then people were dying to get older. They might have thought that really living was when you could leave home. And once you left home, they might have thought that really living was when you owned your own farm. And when you owned your own farm you might envy

the elders who influenced the decisions of the society and sat in the gates. Solomon says, don't ever wait to enjoy life or it will never happen. The last phrase of verse 10 says, "for childhood and youth are vanity" and in 12:1-8 he says that old age has its vanity. Waiting won't solve anything. Waiting won't get rid of the vanity. Vanity can exist anywhere and at any time. That's one of the chief messages of Ecclesiastes. You can be bored and empty as a youth or as an old man. So in 11:9 he says, "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth."

The key to enjoying life when you are old is learning to enjoy life now. The key to enjoying life with a donut in your hand is the same key to enjoying life when the fridge is empty and the donut store is closed. The key is being focused on, enamored with, and centered on God.

One of the greatest problems Christians face is that they are waiting to enjoy life. In my counseling I have found this to be true of so many people; they are waiting to enjoy life. Some are longing for the day when they will be able to pay off their debts, get a home or buy an automobile. But the truth is that as long as you seek happiness in this way, it will elude you. Christ warned us, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." (Luke 12:15). I am convinced that if you feel that you need even one dollar more in order to be happy, you never will be happy. Because not even when you have an abundance does your life consist in your possessions.

Some might think, "I will truly be happy if I could only have a child." But Mark 10 tells us that the irony of life is that we can only enjoy our wife, our children our lands and our houses when we give those up to God, see ourselves as stewards, and become satisfied with God.

### ***C. Your Attitudes And Planning Make The Difference (v. 9c-d)***

Verse 9 goes on to say that attitude and planning is key. It says, "Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes" [or as the margin says "as you see to be best"]. In other words, your heart attitudes and planning make all the difference in the world. We can't just let life happen to us. We need to evaluate what is the best use of our time and energies, evaluate what resources we have, and make decisions to live consistently with that. Too many people come home without having planned to watch TV, but after they plop in the chair, that's the easiest thing to have access to. And so they sit and channel surf letting whatever hits them hit them. That's a passive approach to enjoyment that does not maximize life. The same people walk

into the kitchen without thinking or planning what they will eat. They just graze as the notion hits them. This verse indicates that our heart should guide our eyes to a life of enjoyment, and as the margin indicates, we need to evaluate what is best. Your attitudes and planning make a huge difference. Plan your day, and plan to enjoy your day to God's glory.

#### ***D. God Will Hold You Accountable For This (v. 9e)***

But Solomon doesn't want to be misunderstood as saying that any impulses of the heart, or any way you see as being right will bring enjoyment. He says, "But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment." This point needs to balance the previous one. It is when our heart and our plans conform to God, that true enjoyment comes. As Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." When your heart and your plans are as they should be, then far from being frustrated, you will constantly be given the desires of your heart.

So that's the preface. Solomon says that you can enjoy life now. If you are waiting for something to happen, then you are not approaching the subject Biblically.

### **III. How to enjoy life.**

#### ***A. "Vexation" Is Determined By Heart, Not By Circumstances (11:10a)***

But what are the steps to enjoying life? We will go through them quickly. He says in verse 10: "Therefore remove vexation from your heart." The idea of the Hebrew word for vexation is heart resistance to something that can't be resisted. This is a major hindrance to enjoying life - getting frustrated, anxious, resentful, or angry over things we cannot change. It is the result of trying to take God's providence on your shoulders. As long as you try doing what is God's work alone - like changing your spouse's heart for example, you will end up being frustrated and unable to enjoy your spouse as fully. Some people get frustrated because they can't change the humanism in the American government. God can move a king's heart, but we can't. Others get frustrated because they can't change the way their boss thinks. Others get bitter from mistreatment. But while people can abuse you or refuse to change, only you can let them make you frustrated, angry and bitter. Refuse to allow your heart to be controlled by the evil out there. Remove vexation from your heart. Psalm 37 says that it won't do any good; it only causes harm. Be faithful with what is your responsibility, and relax in what is God's

responsibility. In fact, there have been several times in my life when I was stressed that I would take a piece of paper and put two columns - my responsibilities and God's responsibilities. And often the things I was anxious over were in God's column. I had no business being stressed out by those things; they weren't my responsibility. So this first point is a critical one.

### ***B. Pursue holiness (11:10b)***

A second step is to pursue holiness. Chapter 11:10 goes on to say, "and put away evil from your flesh." Ironically, even Christians often think the opposite. They see God's laws as designed to make us miserable and occasionally are tempted to throw off the restraints of the law. That is like a train wanting to be free by leaving the tracks. A train was built for tracks just as we were built for the law, and the only way that train can have speed, power, freedom and functionality is as it restricts itself to its maker's design. In the same way, James twice calls the law of God "the perfect law of liberty" (1:25;2:12).

There can be no freedom when we leave the railroad tracks of the law. In contrast, Christ says that obedience to His commandments brings fullness of joy. Freedom and joy can only come as we seek to please our Maker. Any view of grace that neglects this phrase will in the long run rob you of enjoyment, not enhance it. Put away evil from your flesh.

### ***C. Don't Equate Happiness With Physical Vitality (v. 10c)***

The next step is to remember that happiness is not dependent on physical vitality. And especially in America where youth is idolized, we need to be reminded of this. He says, "For childhood and prime of life are vanity." The idea that youthfulness is essential to enjoying life is such a trap for Christians. Women often don't feel good about themselves when they start getting bulges and wrinkles and varicose veins. Their feelings of worth often come from their attractiveness. Men often get the blues when they think of their balding spots or the fact that they can't play basketball as aggressively as they used to. We are so focused on physical fitness and beauty that enjoyment of life is lost when those things are lost. It's a shame. And Solomon says, forget that. It is the inner man that is the key to enjoying life. So don't equate happiness with physical vitality.

***D. If You Don't Learn To Enjoy Life Now, Things Won't Get Any Better (12:1-7)***

Fourth, if you don't learn to enjoy life now, things won't get any better. He immediately jumps from calling youth vanity to saying that old age is vanity when it is sought for fulfillment. In 12:2-7 there is a graphic description of the deterioration of the body over time. He uses poetic language to speak of sight loss, hearing loss, taste loss, loss of teeth and strength. His point again is that if you don't start enjoying life in youth, it won't magically get better before old age. And if you don't start in old age, you won't enjoy life before the silver cord is loosed (a metaphor for death). Chapter 11:8 tells us that people can live many years and rejoice in them all. That is God's purpose for you. To enjoy life every day of your life.

***E. Live Life Before The Face Of God (Coram Deo) (12:1,6)***

But he ends with the repeated phrase in verse 6 which I think is key to this whole sermon: "Remember now your Creator." In verse 1 he told the youths to remember God now, and in verse 6 he tells older people to remember God now. It is when we live all of life before the face of God that life begins to take on meaning and we begin to enjoy it.

The simple principle is that seeking after happiness as an end in itself is the sure way to miss happiness. When I was in Ethiopia I collected butterflies. At first I would run after them, and found it extremely difficult to catch them. Someone showed me how to catch them without chasing them, and I found I was able to catch them much more easily. In fact, sometimes they would come to light on my body. And that's the way it is with enjoyment of life. When we seek it as an end in itself, we ironically end up losing it. However, when we seek God as the end in Himself ironically He gives us the byproduct of happiness. Happiness is a byproduct, not a goal. But never forget that God wants you to enjoy life. Satan will make you doubt that, but God wants you to enjoy life to its fullest. The answer to the first catechism is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." May each one of us learn how to enjoy life by enjoying God. Amen.