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THE PROBLEM WITH PLEASURE



If money were no object, what would you buy just for the fun of it?

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **21**

Pleasures and possessions don't offer lasting joy.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Roman Catholics and many Protestants observe Lent, a time when they will fast from some desired thing for forty days prior to Easter. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, but observers use the Tuesday before as their last day to eat fatty foods. That day became known as “Fat Tuesday”—or as we commonly know it: *Mardi Gras*.

Somewhere along the way, Mardi Gras changed from a time to indulge in fatty foods to a pursuit of every kind of carnal and sinful pleasure. Many cities and regions celebrate Mardi Gras, but this worldly pursuit is perhaps most closely associated with the French Quarter in New Orleans.

But people don't have to wait for Mardi Gras to pursue countless worldly pleasures. We live in a day and age where the pursuit of pleasure is available at the click of a mouse or a call on a cell phone. Today's world lives for pleasure. If you want it, buy it. Don't hold back from whatever you want to make you happy.

Worldly pleasures may seem enjoyable, but the enjoyment is brief and temporary. Worldly pleasures will always leave us empty.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Ecclesiastes 2:1-3

¹ I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

As you read Ecclesiastes, keep in mind the phrase Solomon frequently used: “under the sun” (Ecc. 1:3). “Under the sun” reflects a worldview where nothing exists above the sun: no heavens, nothing supernatural, and no God. So then, to live a life solely “under the sun” is to live a life without God. To view life as only “under the sun” is to have a purely secular worldview.

If this world is all there is, what’s the point? So why not pursue pleasure? If God doesn’t exist, and if this life is all there is, then perhaps I should derive what meaning I can in my personal happiness and the stuff I accumulate. Isaiah later saw this attitude in the rebellious nation: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Isa. 22:13). Solomon tested this idea to see if he could find true joy and fulfillment in pleasure.

When Solomon said, “I said in my heart” it was similar to our expression: “I said to myself.” This was a serious search. Solomon was putting himself in the secularist’s shoes. Solomon wanted to “test” whether or not pleasure leads to lasting joy. This is an important lesson for all of us. Before we discount those with whom we disagree, it’s important to try to understand where they’re coming from. Of course, that doesn’t mean we have to know everything about others’ beliefs or that we should experience every bit of immorality and debauchery to understand the worldly person. Rather, we should examine the reasons why people are motivated to live their lives the way that they do.

What priority should a person give to recreation and fun?

QUESTION #2

Solomon mentioned two areas of pleasure he investigated:

- ▶ **Laughter.** Sometimes we try to overcome awkward situations with laughter. We may even hope to overcome grief with laughter, but “even in laughter the heart may ache” (Prov. 14:13). Laughter is no indication of real joy. Solomon discovered that pleasure and laughter fall short.
- ▶ **Alcohol.** Solomon discovered the use of wine did not bring fulfillment. Solomon was not talking about drunkenness. He drank wine but apparently without allowing himself to become intoxicated. He was very careful here. “I searched with my heart . . . my heart still guiding me with wisdom.” Solomon wanted to discover if using alcohol was “what was good for the children of man to do under heaven” during their short lives.

What Solomon described could be a script for an alcohol commercial: a mixture of alcohol and laughter. Everyone has a drink in hand and laughter abounds. Advertisers want to convince us this is the “good life.” But Solomon showed us the sobering reality that these “pleasures” accomplished nothing. “But behold, this also was vanity.”



Ecclesiastes 2:4-8

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

When is enough,
enough?

QUESTION #3

PLEASURE ... FOR A SEASON

People who experience empty lives often grasp for pleasure through inadequate, sinful means. Answer the questions below the images.



What's one way you most often see people pursue pleasure?

Why do these attempts always fall short of giving us satisfaction?

Since seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake accomplishes nothing, maybe building a personal empire will give our lives the meaning we crave. Notice the self-focus in Solomon's words: "great works . . . houses . . . for myself." Solomon probed meaning in four areas:

- 1. Building projects.** Solomon was a master builder. King David had made all the preparations for building the temple, but his son, Solomon, actually built it (1 Kings 5–6), as well as his own palace (7:1-12).
- 2. Accumulating wealth.** Wealth in the ancient world was also evidenced by how many servants you had, and Solomon had acquired plenty of them. Solomon's wealth was not "new money"; he had servants long enough that they had children who also served in Solomon's house.
- 3. Patronizing the arts.** Solomon not only had an abundance of slaves, he also "got singers, both men and women." Here was Solomon's personal choir. He could bring them out if he wanted to be entertained.
- 4. Indulging himself sexually.** Solomon's downfall was his sexual indulgences with numerous women. "He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart" (1 Kings 11:3).

When we look for meaning by building our personal empires and accumulating possessions, it may appear to the world that we have it all. But "stuff" does not satisfy. It does not fill us with purpose and meaning. Possessions, wealth, and self-focus fills us with everything except what matters.

Ecclesiastes 2:9-11

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Solomon achieved abundant wealth, so that he could easily claim, "I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem." That's not bad, considering that King David was his father. Accounting for inflation, Solomon would still likely be one of the richest persons in today's world (1 Kings 10:14-29).

The limitless pursuit of pleasure is no reward. After all his success, Solomon claimed he had earned the right to enjoy every pleasure under the sun. He saw this as his reward to himself for all his struggles.

In spite of his pursuit of pleasure, Solomon couldn't escape "toil." Because we're sinners in a sinful world, we'll never escape toil in this present life. Solomon justified his pursuit of pleasure as something he deserved, but this "reward" proved to be no reward at all.

The self-absorbed focus on our achievements leaves us empty. Solomon came face to face with everything he had accomplished and all that he had labored to achieve. His conclusion in verse 11 is startling: "all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." It's as if Solomon was trying to exhaust all the negative vocabulary he used throughout the book to exclaim, "It all comes to nothing!"

If this life is all there is, and if we live life like Solomon, thinking that the world owes us, our job owes us, and everybody owes us for all we've done; then we, too, will come up empty. Pleasure and possessions may feel like a reward for our work, but it is a reward that doesn't last.

How would you summarize Solomon's teaching on pleasures and possessions?

QUESTION #4

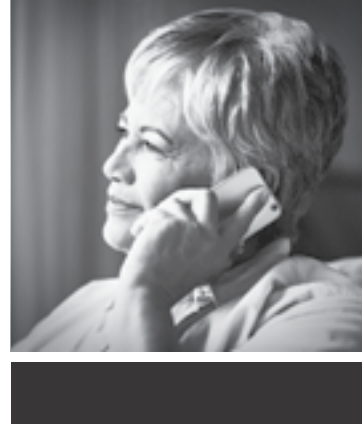
How can our group help one another maintain a proper perspective on pleasures and possessions?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

Only God gives us lasting joy. Start cultivating this lasting joy in your life this week. Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Give God the glory.** How can you fight against the empty pursuit of pleasure? Identify something you enjoy—and do it. But do it to honor Christ and give God the glory.
- ▶ **Memorize Scripture.** Memorize a passage such as Philippians 4:4-7 and recall it when you become anxious, discouraged, or the toils of your own struggle tempt you to seek “reward” in the wrong way.
- ▶ **Acknowledge the achievements of others.** Too often, we get caught up in our own achievements. That leads to a false “reward” mentality. Contact others and thank them for their achievements. Encourage them. Consider how to do this in ways that also affirm them in the presence of others.



God is not against pleasures. Allow Him to be the source of your joy. Your greatest pleasure is God Himself.

My thoughts