

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Twelve): Paradox, Conclusion

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Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18:

I have seen all things in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all.

I have never spent so much time attempting to acquire a clearer understanding of so few verses as I have on this paradox. I do not regret it in the least because Solomon's seemingly simple observation in verse 15 states a potentially serious challenge to the converted. As mentioned in a previous article, Ecclesiastes 7 may be the most controversial chapter of the entire book because Solomon says so many confounding things within it. In addition, people have such varied opinions about what he meant. Verses 15-18 may be the most confounding of all.

The paradox of verse 15 is a head-scratching statement. The paradox itself is clear. It simply describes a "why are these things happening to me?" circumstance. Part of the problem that arises is that, in the context, Solomon gives no specific answers to the dangers posed. He cautions us about the paradox in verses 16 and 17, but then another question arises: What is the danger or dangers? My purpose, especially as we begin, is to warn against misjudging the seriousness of the issues of verse 15.

Psalms 73 helps to provide some explanation because it presents an event in the life of a godly man that is an almost perfect fit for expanding our understanding of the paradox. Psalm 73 explores the seriousness of the

challenge of discontent combined with envy. If left unresolved, both of those reactions are dangerous. The issue in Psalm 73 is not merely a passing trial, as it calls into question God's sense of justice, and the psalmist himself expresses that it was to him a serious situation—so much so that he says his foot almost slipped. As we would say today, he almost left the church.

We also know that the psalmist did the right things in order to receive a solution. Overall, he not only endured it, he actively endured it through prayer. He was not just passively enduring a confounding and confusing thought pattern. The psalmist reports that he went into the sanctuary and prayed in faith. God solved the problem.

However, Psalm 73 still does not answer why Solomon cautions his readers so sternly regarding the paradox's spiritual dangers. He goes so far as to ask, "Why should you die?" indicating that he perceived the paradox as a serious challenge. He did not mean why should one die at this moment, but rather, why should one die *spiritually*, that is, having lost one's opportunity to be in the Kingdom of God. Since Solomon does not give much help right in context, we must look elsewhere within the Bible for answers.

Misjudging God and the Paradox

The authors of *The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary*, p. 109, catch the essence of the paradox's seriousness to a righteous person. In a rather long analysis of Ecclesiastes 7:17-18, it states

This is not a caution against aiming at the highest excellence in goodness or wisdom, for these are the proper objects of a righteous ambition. It is rather a caution against the conduct of those who presume to find fault with the methods of God's dealings with men, as if they could devise and conduct a more satisfactory scheme.

This is the most daring form of human arrogance.

The comment warns against the probability that, after first misjudging God's part in the trial, the righteous person will foolishly act on his misjudgment and begin producing its bad fruit. Thus, his second misjudgment is that he will actively attempt to impress God by means of his works.

Three comments drawn from *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* by Sidney Greidanus, p. 189-191, are helpful to show the seriousness of turning to super-righteousness to solve the paradox:

Choon Leong Seow states: “Becoming overly righteous is the hubris that one must avoid. That attitude is the very opposite of the fear of God.” Becoming over-righteous is a flaunting rebellion against God’s will because, in this case, hubris is not merely a normal, carnal pride but excessive, defiant pride. Why? God has willed that He will save men by His grace. Exhibiting hubris through super-righteousness is saying to God, “I will force You to save me by dint of my works.”

Another commentator, Michael V. Fox comments, “Straining for perfection is presumptuous, a refusal to accept human limitations.” Note the humility of the apostle Paul in contrast to this presumptuous hubris: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; I labored more abundantly than they all. Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (I Corinthians 15:10). Paul humbly accepted his limitations, taking no credit whatever.

Commentator William P. Brown remarks, “A life obsessed with righteousness, in fact, blinds a person to his or her own sinfulness.” His comment is bluntly insightful in terms of the trap within super-righteousness: The super-righteous person is so blinded by his conceited efforts that he does not see that his focus is completely on himself.

Each of these comments is a caution not to overlook the serious consequences of misjudging God and the trial. Those quotations isolate the danger: a possible mistaken judgment of the circumstance followed by an unthinking reaction to the spiritual and emotional suffering the righteous person is experiencing, emphasizing his own works. Any normal Christian would desire to end his suffering; it is only reasonable. To resolve to do better is also good, but Solomon’s cautions suggest concern for a reaction that will produce bad fruit that are a threat to a person’s salvation.

We know from Psalm 73 that the psalmist reacted correctly:

If I had said, “I will speak thus,” behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image. Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. (Psalm 73:15-24)

Putting the picture together correctly, we can grasp the thread of the psalmist’s thoughts as his trial proceeded. The psalmist was in grave spiritual danger of misjudging his suffering as punishment for sin. In reality, he was harshly judging God, accusing Him of unfairly overdoing a painful correction. Is it even possible to find God being unjust? Earlier in the psalm, the psalmist was indeed guilty of a sin: He clearly perceived his envy of the wicked. However, his grasp of the real problem was late in coming: that he was filled with fear and lacked faith that God was truly always with him, overseeing his life, his best interests, and therefore his spiritual development.

His lack of faith and its resulting fear drove his envy, twisting his mind into perceiving the wicked as better off. The issue clarified when he went into the sanctuary and began to see through prayer that God was fully justified and not picking on him unfairly. By the term “sanctuary,” he may have literally meant the Tabernacle or Temple, but we can understand that it does not have to be a literal building but a place of private prayer in communion with God where He enabled him to think correctly. Verses 21-24 clarify this.

Thus, the psalmist immediately began a four-step program:

1. He continued on by faith, enduring the suffering.

2. He prayed fervently for God's solution to take effect.
3. He firmly rejected any attempt to solve the problem on the basis of his own spiritual righteousness.
4. He was thoughtfully careful that he did not misjudge his circumstances any further.

The truth expressed in II Timothy 1:6-7 is helpful. "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." God's gift of His Spirit enables us to confront our fears and make sound spiritual judgments in alignment with His will. It leads us to understand that, once we are called and converted, these trials, though sometimes very difficult, are rarely punishments. They are exercises in learning good judgment regarding faith, love, and fear. If one misjudges in the manner of the paradox and therefore reacts wrongly, the effect could lead to one of two possible spiritual extremes. Thus, Solomon gives his cautions.

Perhaps these possible alternatives can be illustrated this way: Imagine a horizontal line drawn across a blank sheet of paper. Both the beginning of the line on the left and the end of the line on the right represent extreme reactions as well as the results produced should a person make wrong choices within the trial.

One can react radically to the left, becoming completely liberal, by choosing simply to give up. The result would be spiritual death. The other extreme reaction would be to choose to turn sharply right, becoming righteous over much, and the bad fruit also produces spiritual death.

Why? Because either extreme is rebellion against God's grace. The psalmist neither gave up nor attempted to become super-righteous so that God would be impressed and owe him the blessing of relieving the pressures of his suffering. He chose a path right down the middle, to trust God.

Turning to the right to become over-righteous is the choice we should be more concerned about. Why? Because most of the truly converted will not simply give up. They may become weary and confused, but they will not walk away from God's mercy.

Envy the Unconverted

Let us begin evaluating the envy of unconverted people as illustrated in Psalm 73. To aid us in not growing envious of the unconverted, it is helpful to remember a small number of things to help us judge the circumstances, and we will see that these factors add up to them being in a precarious spiritual position. Why should we envy them in their precariousness?

Romans 1:18-20 describes the position any given unconverted person is in because of his failure to repent.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them, for since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

The unconverted are most definitely being held accountable by God. They are not escaping judgment; they are not being given a "free pass" on their sins simply because they are unconverted. Therefore, their poor choices have the potential to eliminate them from conversion and eternity. The converted must not misjudge unconverted people's apparent ease in living without faith and the fear of God. Their lives are not as contented as they might seem to the casual observer.

Based on Romans 1:18-20 their position is insecure, to say the least, so we will quickly evaluate their position realistically:

First, the wicked are making choices, but with neither faith nor God's grace guiding them, and God is judging them. Second, they are making those

choices without a relationship with God to access in their times of need. Third, we know full well God is not giving them an unlimited get-out-of-jail-free card just because they are unconverted. Our conclusion has to be that we converted people have tremendous advantages over them because of our calling. There is no valid reason for envying the unconverted.

Understand that a deep trial sometimes requires us to repent and change our ways and thinking. The danger, the reason the cautions are given, lies in being lured into thinking, by our resolve to be righteous, that God owes us something because we do a few good works. If we yield to that temptation, the trial becomes a major danger.

A simple but important question needs to be answered: Do we truly grasp—have we thoroughly thought through—the fact that God owes us *nothing*, absolutely nothing, zero, zilch, nada? Yet, we owe Him *everything*—from life itself to every breath of air we breathe, to the knowledge we have of Him and His purpose, to forgiveness and the gift of His Spirit. Everything!

This is where the knowledge of John 17:3—“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”—comes to our aid. Knowing God becomes especially important because intimate knowledge of Him is the very thing our carnality does not want to achieve. Our carnality fears knowing Him and draws back from it to avoid becoming dependent on Him. Thus, Romans 8:7 warns us that our nature looks upon God as the enemy; it fears being beholden to Him. Our carnality is nothing more than a remnant of the spirit of Satan’s world in us. It is a spirit of self-centeredness that always wants to hold some of itself back in order to preserve its independence.

A Sharp Turn to the Right

What can happen if a person chooses to make a sharp turn to the right, an attempt at super-righteousness? Just like everything else concerning spirituality, Satan has his counterfeit. In this world, super-righteousness as a solution may appear attractive to certain personality types. Consider Colossians 2:18-22:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

The key to grasping this austere regimen lies in the phrase “basic principles of the world” (verse 20; “rudiments” in the KJV). The subject of Paul’s teaching does not involve God’s laws at all but worldly, pagan teachings that involve asceticism and demon worship. A “rudiment” is a basic, elementary principle or act of worship, and these rudiments are drawn from the world. These ascetic practices have nothing to do with God’s true religion. Verse 22 confirms this when Paul writes that these regulations are the decrees and teachings of men, not God.

Paul’s counsel on the extreme disciplines of the super-righteous, such as those practiced in the world by ascetics, is that they produce a puffed-up mind—pride, a haughty spirit—rather than humble obedience that truly impresses God, such as that praised so highly in Isaiah 66:1-2:

“Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the Lord. “But on this one will I look; on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

In no way is the apostle teaching that we must not discipline ourselves to live balanced lives within God’s laws to avoid sin. The super-righteousness Solomon cautions us against would include conduct similar to what Paul is telling us about here.

There are people in this world who are deeply and sincerely religious but not because of conversion. They are prone to do extreme things like virtually imprisoning themselves, living in all-male or all-female religious compounds, and spending their entire lives in prayer and study. Yet where is the generous giving of their lives in service to fellow man? Such are those who will crawl from bottomland to mountaintop on hands and knees out of dedication to their god. They will permit themselves to be nailed to a cross and displayed in a parade through town on a holy day dedicated to that town's patron saint.

Consider what the Catholic Church does by forcing their ministry to remain unmarried because they think it is a holier state and impresses God. But look also at all the sexual molestation cases it has produced. Does celibacy produce good fruit?

Romans 12:3-13 provides us with a profound list of services God desires of us:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

A Brief Look at Pharisaism

We need to be as clear as we can be about what the paradoxical situation has the potential to produce in a person's life if it goes unrecognized and is allowed full freedom to take over and produce its fruits without resistance. The following is a worst-case scenario. Not everybody will end up this badly, but the potential exists, which is why God gives the warnings about its dangers. It tends to focus the individual entirely upon himself.

Paul writes in Acts 26:4-5:

My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

The key phrase for our purposes here is “the strictest sect of our religion.” The history of the Pharisees shows that they had thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that would fit well under the definition of super-righteousness. In fact, they established and built the Pharisees into what they were at the time of Christ.

Super-righteousness is a beginning step into Pharisaism, and we know well the relationship Jesus had with them, those who “strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.” Is it wisdom to become like the Pharisees, who, because they thought God was not strict enough, added their traditions to His laws?

The foul fruit of super-righteousness is pride, and that is why Solomon cautions us so strongly in Ecclesiastes 7. Pride destroys relationships, whether with God or man, because the proud person demands attention and submission that can never be satisfied. It is the height of self-centeredness. They are demanding, display various degrees of narcissism, and tend to be standoffish, considering themselves to be better than others.

In the case of the Pharisees, their narcissism drove them to their absolute failure: not to recognize God in the flesh through His teachings. Instead, they, like Satan, actively attacked Him and succeeded in manipulating political and religious pressures to the extent that they, with the help of the Romans and Sadducees, put Him to death.

Jesus' famous castigation of them in Matthew 23 reveals many of their characteristics: They made things hard on others but would not bend to help; they showboated their good works; they expected to be catered to, not serve; they desired public praise; they loved to receive titles; they looked down on others as inferiors; their teachings were false; they heaped greater difficulties on those who already needed help; their sense of judgment was completely skewed; they pursued tiny points of law with great zeal while overlooking truly important things; they were outright hypocrites; they loved to say, "If I were in that position, I would never have done that"; and they were clever deceivers.

Faith, Fear, and Wisdom

The solution to the Ecclesiastes 7:15-22 conundrum, which is so simply stated, involves the converted person's faith in God. At the same time, it also heavily involves his fear of God and applying thoughtful wisdom to ensure he analyzes the situation accurately. Two of these spiritual qualities are directly named in Ecclesiastes 7. The one not directly named is faith, but it is critical to the right solution. Influencing all three qualities is knowing God well enough from within the relationship to activate them all correctly. II Corinthians 5:4-7 will help our understanding:

For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight.

God is preparing us for entrance into His Kingdom in much the same way a human instructor prepares a school student for graduation and service. There are two major differences though: We must matriculate our lessons by faith, and in our case, the purpose—to be clothed with glory and eternal life—is huge by comparison.

These verses assure us that God has made a contract with us—the New Covenant—in which we are responsible for carrying out assigned duties. He

is preparing us to fulfill those responsibilities to a far greater extent in His Kingdom. As He is preparing us, we must live by faith.

Luke 14:26-27 reminds us of the seriousness of the pledge we made to Jesus Christ at baptism, to live by faith while carrying out our responsibilities:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

This serious commitment works in our favor. Knowing God's character from the midst of this close relationship, we can always confidently be reassured that God is in control despite how difficult events look to us. This truth became the foundation for the psalmist's victory in his situation in Psalm 73. Our responsibility is to trust Him as the psalmist did, to walk by faith, not by appearance or physical observation. God is faithful!

Paul, then, clearly establishes what our aim should be no matter the circumstances in our lives. We should desire to please God by being faithful to Him in return as demonstrated by trusting Him. He reinforces this by stating that we must be ready to answer for our choices.

Romans and Ephesians make it clear that God accepts us in His presence at conversion and at all times during conversion only upon the meritorious sinless works of Jesus Christ. This is because, as Paul shows in Romans 7, sin stains all our works no matter how meritorious they may seem to us.

Perhaps the most important counsel regarding the paradox appears in Ecclesiastes 7:18: "He who fears God will escape them all." He means that the God-fearer will escape all the paradox's pitfalls. Notice he says escape, which means we will face them, not miss them entirely.

Why is the fear of God the solution for the godly? David explains in Psalm 34:11 that the fear of God is a resource the godly must have, but they must learn it. We do not have it by nature. Why? Consider first that the carnal mind is enmity against God. Yet, to fear God is to have a deferential, reverential respect for Him. Those qualities are direct opposites. An

individual does not even begin to grasp God's character until he is called and experiences a close, intimate relationship with Him, coming to know somewhat of God's power, purpose, and character as a result.

That knowledge is why the deference and respect are part of his thinking. The fear of God thus includes some measure of experience with Him and therefore trust of Him. When we trust Him, we *know* He is involved. He never tries us beyond our abilities, and He is ever-faithful. With that package, we are equipped to face our trials with humility, letting Him carry on with His creative purposes without our getting in the way by doing our own thing, as the super-righteous would surely attempt. This combination opens the door to true wisdom.

The apostle Paul's example shows we will come through the trial knowing that God has delivered us by His grace. There will be absolutely no room for boasting before Him, which, if done, could very well seal our doom by keeping us from His Kingdom. Regardless of what others are doing in their situations, those with the fear of God will strive by faith to face life's trials humbly and patiently. This principle will guide and guard us from the temptations that the evil fall into so easily.

The wisdom for us lies in having faith that Christ is our righteousness, our wisdom, our sanctification, and our redemption (I Corinthians 1:30). Christ in us is our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). Salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Therefore, we do not need to put ourselves under the frustrating pressure of super-righteousness, to manufacture our own righteousness and wisdom that will never measure up anyway.

True wisdom is that we must patiently discipline ourselves not to allow ourselves to be persuaded or even goaded by the misdirection that the unconverted can fall into because Christ has revealed more important matters for us to attend to. He encourages us to have a "single" eye (Matthew 6:22, KJV), that is, to be single-minded in following our Savior. We must let God do His creative works at His pace and not try to outdo Him by our own misguided efforts. We are preparing for an eternity of cooperating with Him. So let Him do His perfect work.

Notice this wisdom clearly spelled out by God in a cautionary admonition to Israel:

And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. (Deuteronomy 8:18-19)

We cannot completely stop the influence of worldly righteousness because of the carnality remaining in us, but we can forcefully resist it by using the gifts Christ has given us within our relationship with Him. We know our weaknesses, but we must carry on in that relationship despite human nature's vain appeals. Salvation comes from within the relationship with Him. The better the quality of the relationship, the more God is pleased and the better life is.

What does He want from us? He wants from us what is good for us. That is simply to keep His commandments, not anything we add to them. Keeping them as He commands is hard enough and sufficient for Him to create the image of His Son in us.