

SERIES: THE KINGS QUEST FOR MEANING IN THE REAL WORLD
Lesson #2: “Looking For Purpose in Pleasure”

Opening Events and Prayer

Icebreaker: How many products or places can you think of that are focused totally on entertainment, pleasure, or making life painless? How much do you think we as a culture invest in these pursuits? *Not all pleasures are bad but all of them can be. Wisdom from God is critical.*

This week's question is ... "Will pleasure, entertainment, and a pain-free life bring contentment and clarity?"

What does Solomon try in this area? - Read 2:1-3, 2:8-11, 6:3-6, 6:7, 8:10-11, 10:16-17

There are at least nine major areas where Solomon attempts to find contentment and clarity in a life of pleasure. He experiments with:

- **Laughter** – the sheer folly of amusement, laughing it up to forget all one's cares
- **Alcohol** – he asks the question, “Is happiness in the bottom of the bottle?”
- **Embracing Folly** - making life entirely about having fun, amusement park living
- **Men and women singers** -In our day this might include movies, shows, the arts in general, television, sports, video games. Basically full on entertainment of any sort used to occupy one's time or escape from reality.
- **A harem** – This term is typically translated “harem.” In favor of this translation is Solomon’s clear penchant for women of all stripes and ideologies, which actually contributed to his falling away from God. In essence, we’ll classify this as a pursuit of Sex and the pleasure it brings. This would have been considered too crass to actually say by the author, but the implication seems to be the harem, i.e. a collection of wives and concubines.
- **Fame** - the recognition of others as an obsession.
- **Family** – literally, heirs, but could also extend to the prominence and honor that was culturally accorded to those blessed with many children. This is still a true in many parts of the world. Additionally, in our own culture, sometimes Parents seek their value, contentment, and clarity in the accomplishments of their children.
- **Longevity** - doing whatever can be done to make for a long life, to include health pursuit, fitness, natural whole foods, seeking a long life as the fountainhead of purpose.
- **Feasting** – Food and the merriment that comes with a good meal shared with friends.

The nine we have here cover almost any area of pleasurable pursuit that we can think of, yet Solomon says, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired." - 2:10. Solomon doesn't mess around when he investigates he went for broke and exhausted every avenue.

Discussion questions:

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- *What do you think motivated Solomon to investigate this approach to finding contentment and clarity in life?*
- *Was it wrong for Solomon to investigate a life of wine, women, and song? Why or why not?*

What does Solomon discover?

- *He found all these pursuits hebel, a chasing after the wind.*
- *Purpose in pleasure is fleeting. The laughter dies away and the difficulties of life still remain, the confusing things in life still perplex. Isn't this always the case when we try to escape from life rather than live it?*
- *Purpose in pleasure is empty. No matter how much food he had, he still got hungry. No matter how many heirs he produced and how much honor and respect he gained from an expansive family, he remained unsatisfied. He could never see enough or hear enough or enjoy enough to where he finally said, "Ah. That got it! Enough's enough. I no longer have any desire for more pleasure."*
- *Purpose in pleasure is a vain pursuit. A man is unable to enjoy what he has because he, in order to remain marginally satisfied, constantly must pursue more. He wonders why he is pursuing it in the first place. What a confusing life to live.*

When pursuit of pleasure and a life of ease becomes the prime focus of a culture, the culture loses its ability to discern good from evil. It lives in moral turmoil because it, as with a crack addict, does whatever it takes for the next fix. When the pursuit of pleasure is unrestrained and glorified, it becomes a self-feeding beast. When it seems there is no punishment for wrongdoing, people are more tempted to do wrong.

Discussion Questions:

- *We live in the most marketed to culture in the history of the world, how does Solomon 's quest relate to this?*
- *How is the marketing of products like the "Double Down Chicken Sandwich" and nudity as a sales gimmick (see the articles in teacher's resources) influencing people's perception of pleasurable pursuits?*
- *Where should the church weigh in on these matters? The sex sells article clearly implies that some believe the church is out of place? What do you think and why?*
- *How would you explain your position to a non-Christian?*

Is pleasure inherently bad?



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People often characterize the enjoyment of some pleasures, sex or alcohol for example, as evil, while considering a love for food or a passion for hiking as innocuous or even good. Is this an accurate representation of the facts, biblically?

What is the source for all the things that Solomon experiments with? (Each of the pleasures that Solomon sees man pursuing ultimately have their source in God. Think about it for a minute. Who invented laughter or wine or food or sex or Exercise? All of these pursuits are from God, so what's the problem? If these things are from God then it must be okay to enjoy them right? Now granted some of these pleasures are more generally appealing, if you will. Certainly, we would all agree that while movies are a multi-billion dollar business, ornamental horticulture is probably in no danger of reaching the same status. While sex can bring a great deal of pleasure, so can a good swim. The problem is not so much the pleasure itself but the context in which it's placed and the purpose for which it is pursued. For example, it's more likely to be oversexed than it is to be over-hiked or to be overfed than to enjoy one's model railroad too much. Maybe the key isn't that one is any worse than the other, but that some have greater potential for damage when they are not guided by the parameters which God sets forth for each.

Discussion Questions:

- *Wouldn't it just be safer to stay away from certain pleasures entirely than to struggle with them? Did God intend for you to live a safe life?*
- *Why is keeping things within the parameters that God sets for them so challenging?*

God doesn't want us to shun these pursuits entirely. The problem is putting them in proper place and perspective. However, before we look at how to properly place pleasure in our lives, we need to deal with another question many well-thinking, Christians people bring up:

Shouldn't life be lived in all seriousness?

Some would say that God didn't intend for man to take great pleasure in anything on the earth. They believe that life must be lived earnestly focused on the spiritual aspect only as if to segregate spiritual life as a separate thing from physical life. This line of reasoning comes more from Plato than from the Bible. It supports the idea that somehow the spiritual is inherently superior to the physical.

While well-intentioned, this line of reasoning leaves massive questions. If God didn't want you to enjoy the pleasures of the physical life, 1) why did he make them so pleasurable? 2) If the spiritual is better than the physical, why did he make the universe physical and then pronounce it good? and, perhaps more importantly, 3) why does he command us to enjoy them and spend an extensive amount of time carefully delineating



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parameters within which to do so if he didn't intend for us to enjoy them?

*Now, certainly, we cannot advocate **recklessness or hedonism** in pursuing pleasurable activities in life. They must not become the place we seek contentment and clarity because, as Solomon discovered, they can never meet the demand and they were never intended to. God designed pleasure to **fill out** life, not to make a life **out of it**. If you get it right, these God-created pleasures supplement and enhance a contented life of God-honoring purpose, making it extraordinarily enjoyable. If you get it wrong, these same God-created things can ruin and waste your life. So, while life must be guided by sober judgment, it need not be stoically endured with hypersensitivity towards law-keeping and the dangers posed by pleasure.*

Now to the final question...

How do you properly prioritize pleasure and entertainment?

*As we've already seen, life lived with pleasure and entertainment at the center is doomed to a hollow and relentless pursuit for the next high. It's a life that, by the very insatiability of its desires, motivates dissatisfaction and confusion, **hebel**.*

*The problem we encounter with all these issues of pleasure is, as Mandy Smith says in her book on Ecclesiastes **Life Is Too Important To Be Taken Seriously**, we "often only look at external actions and categorize them into 'sins' and 'harmless distractions,' but we **ignore** what is happening in our **hearts.**" (Smith, M, p.23)*

It is what is transpiring in the heart that drives the train in understanding where pleasure fits. Is the motivation selfish, "I want to get all that I can get for me"? Is it, "When I get this or have that experience, I'll finally be fulfilled and complete"? When you become obsessed with pleasure and entertainment and it becomes THE priority, you are wandering down a dangerous path to destruction in pursuit of a wind you cannot catch.

*God did not wish us to live **safe, dull** lives of emotional and physical numbness. He provided the pleasurable aspects to add zest, **vibrancy**, and richness to life out of a love for us we cannot fully comprehend. The pursuit of pleasure as the source of contentment and clarity is a warped pursuit of this zest in life. Truth be told, our lives must always find the true vibrancy, fulfillment, contentment, and clarity in life in a **continuously** devoted relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can bring the kind of fulfillment that satiates our desire for life. John constantly emphasizes Jesus as the source of life in his Gospel:*

- *John 1: 4 "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. "*



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- *John 5:21 "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. "*
- *John 5:26 "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. "*
- *John 5:39 - 40 "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. "*
- *John 6:48 "I am the bread of life."*
- *John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. "*
- *There are many more passages in John that we often only take as pertaining to eternal life or spiritual life, but as citizens of a kingdom that is both now and not yet, we must recognize that life in the kingdom **NOW** is also full of God's greatness.*

The pleasures in life are the icing on the wonderful cake that he's already made of life, that's what makes life in Christ life to the fullest or as the KJV says "Life more abundant!"

Pleasure's proper place is within the parameters that God has set. If you eat all icing you'll just get sick! We must recognize the permanence and preeminence of the One who gave us the temporary. Sex is wonderful, for example in a God-honoring marriage, but reprehensible when it turns into an end in itself, when it is self-serving. It can become a toxic addiction harming ourselves and others when pursued outside of that context. A well-prepared meal is exceptionally satisfying, but when we eat until uncomfortably full, passing our God-designed physical limits, or we continuously over indulge in food, like the double down chicken, it endangers our health and wellbeing, placing stress and strain on those loved ones God placed in our lives eating can become monstrous. What's really worse, lust or gluttony? Better that both the appetite for sex and the appetite for food be within the parameters for life that God has set where both enrich life.

Summary Discussion Questions:

- *Where do you need to reassess your life take it less seriously and enjoy God's gifts more?*
- *Where do you struggle with seeking pleasure and entertainment instead of letting Jesus bring the contentment and clarity in life?*
- *How can we help each other in this area?*

For further investigation:



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- *What do the Scriptures tell you about Jesus as the source of life? Focus not only on eternal life, but him as the source of physical life and what it means to be alive for God right now.*
- *Why does God choose the parameters he does for life? What Scriptural evidence leads you to these conclusions?*
- *What view does the book of Ecclesiastes take on good fortune or luck as it pertains to contentment and clarity in life?*