

“EXCESSIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

June 19, 2022, 6 PM

Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

Introduction.

Excessive righteousness. That sounds like a strange title for a sermon. After all didn't Jesus say unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20)?

Do Solomon and Jesus disagree, contradict each other?

Solomon continues to wrestle with how God has designed life under the sun to be a mystery.

Solomon has seen it all in his brief life under the sun. Things what wisdom can't make sense of.

He sees the inequity of things. The good die young and the wicked live long. This is one of the mysteries of God's sovereignty that is beyond finding out. There are things that belong to God and God alone.

Wisdom can't solve all the problems we face or answer all the questions we have. Since wisdom can't solve all problems, don't go overboard, or be excessive in pursuing wisdom.

7:16 Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

Don't be overly righteous.

Why should we not be as righteous as we can be? Solomon's words seem strange to us.

Are we not to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength? We cannot love God too much or strive to serve Him too earnestly or trust Him too completely.

This is not a warning against true righteousness, but in vain or false righteousness, righteousness that is concerned with externals, and not the heart.

Does any verse in the Bible more clearly admonish our age than this?

A smug, condescending self-righteousness has descended on our land.

Every one of us have our pet positions we have solidified over the years through our favorite news outlets, some brilliant, articulate podcaster, some favorite bloggers. Then come the memes, followed by a t-shirt or hat or bumper sticker.

Then follows the despising of the other side. We feel high and mighty, absolutely confident we are right. Man does not live by soundbite alone, or memes alone, or podcasts alone, or national news alone. Wisdom is seldom found on TV or social media.

True religion is not a matter of opinion, debate, majoring in minors, but a matter of the heart.

The externally righteous should beware of trusting in their righteousness and false religion.

Solomon is not talking about genuine righteousness, he is talking about external righteousness, the kind of righteousness that is a show, that passes itself off as real righteousness.

Remember what Jesus said about the Pharisees. They had a reputation for righteousness. Everyone thought they were righteous, pious, super Christians. But Jesus exposed them as false, fake, whitewashed tombs.

Luke 16:15 And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

The antidote is fear of God (vs. 18).

Don't be overly wise.

Romans 12:3 ... not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

You are human, don't think too highly of yourself or your opinions or your wisdom. You don't know what you don't know. Remember pride goes before the fall.

The antidote is fear of God (vs. 18).

Don't be overly wicked.

What a strange warning. Isn't the slightest degree of wickedness too much. The least sin merits us an eternal hell.

Solomon in a sense is saying watch out for both ditches. Stay out of the ditch of external righteousness, of trusting your morality. Of the holier than thou attitude. And stay out of the ditch of immorality, of the secular than thou attitude.

Don't sin that grace may abound, don't indulge in wickedness and folly. Don't think that you can get away with a little bit either.

What if the next sin hardens the heart and closes the door to grace. This would be folly. How close to the edge of hell do we want to venture, and how confident are we. we will know when to stop?

The antidote is fear of God (vs. 18).

The fear of the Lord is our greatest protection.

The fear of the Lord is the best defense against false righteousness.

The fear of the Lord is the best antidote against human pride and false wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the best protection against all sin and wickedness and unholiness.

Verse 19 Don't be overly wise in your own eyes, but seek wisdom, seek the wisdom of ten men.

True wisdom is strength.

Solomon uses the analogy of a city governed by a council of ten rulers. Most cities would be doing well to have one wise leader. But imagine a city with ten wise rulers. Now that would be a strong city. Wisdom is strength, a wise person has the strength of a well-governed city.

Wisdom governs thought; so the wise person knows how to think about things in a God-centered way. Wisdom governs the will; so the wise person knows what choices to make in life. Wisdom governs speech; so the wise person knows what to say and what not to say. Wisdom governs action; so the wise person knows what to do in any and every situation. Take hold of wisdom, and it will make you strong (Philip Ryken).

Verse 20

Balances the wise man's pursuit of righteousness with the reality of his failure. There are many who do good, but there is no one who does good and does not sin.

Romans 3:10-12 "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

So this is wisdom, to recognize the limits of wisdom. This wisdom is better than ten wise men.

In our pursuit of practical righteousness, of sanctification, pursue it, yes, but in the full knowledge and awareness that we will not achieve it in this life under the sun. Live with this.

We will need wisdom to walk this fine line. We must pursue righteousness, while fully aware we cannot attain this goal in this life. Don't despair, don't give up.

Verses 21-22

More wisdom for the righteous. It is wise not to be *overly curious*, or to try to hear or know too much. Just as we should not be overly impressed by others righteousness, so we should not be overly offended by others sinfulness.

We have all done what other sinners have done. Who of us can plead not guilty, when it comes to words we should not have spoken. How many times have we broken the law of love? We have all sinned with our tongue just as much as we have been sinned against.

We should be careful about condemning the speck in someone else's eye when there is a log in our own. Let us beware of holding others to higher standard than we hold ourselves.

Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

Verses 23-29

23 All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. 24 That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

Remembering Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, he tells us he has thoroughly scrutinized everything, he has conducted a complete investigation, he has left no stone unturned. He has considered every angle, every facet. He can't get to the bottom of it, yet this is wisdom.

"I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me, I could not compass it. After all, *This only I know: that I know nothing, and the more I know the more I see there is to be known, and the more sensible I am of my own ignorance.* MH

Solomon recognized his ignorance, his creaturely limitations. True wisdom belongs to God and is beyond our grasp. Human wisdom falls far short of God's wisdom.

The more we know, the more we realize we don't know. As the circumference of our knowledge grows so does the circumference of our ignorance.

Before God who can boast? His ways are truly not our ways, His thoughts are so far beyond our thoughts.

This is a compelling reason why we should not engage in the endless speculations behind conspiracy theories.

II Timothy 2:23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

I Timothy 1:4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations.

I Timothy 4:7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness.

James 3:15-18 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

How do we imagine ourselves to be experts on germs, fiscal policy, causes of economic trends, experts on military involvement in Afghanistan or Ukraine, or constitutional law.

When we see every issue as a nail and we have the hammer of wisdom, that is folly. "We arrogantly believe we are wise enough to right all the wrongs going on in the world around us. This isn't wisdom, it's folly" (Joseph Spurgeon).

There is a tyrant worse than any government, and that is the tyrant of self and sin. We are more in bondage to both of those than we are to any government or policies.

It winds up being endless speculation. Rather than tackle the problems facing us in our own hearts, homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

Verses 26-28

In Solomon's search for wisdom he did become wise enough to tell us that wickedness is utter folly, and folly is utter madness. And in the wickedness of folly there is something worse than death, the wicked folly and snare of sexual immorality. This is an area that the wisest man shows his own folly.

I Kings 11:1-6 Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, ... from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. 3 He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. 4 For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. ... So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.

If the wisest man could not escape her temptations, what hope is there? None in our own strength or resolution. Only by walking in the fear of God and holiness by God's power and grace.

Solomon also wrote the book of Proverbs and in Proverbs he devotes several chapters to the folly of giving in to sexual temptation. Sexual immorality is a trap, a snare, that puts our souls in bondage to sin and in rebellion against God.

The only escape is to seek to please God rather than ourselves. Sinful pleasure is only momentary.

Verses 27-28

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Or worse yet, among two thousand people, he can't find but one wise one.

Solomon is writing from his own experience. In his court he found virtually no men of integrity, and among his harem he found no women of integrity.

This is not a sweeping universal statement, but a sad judgment on his own sin and folly in so departing from God's law and will, in gross violation of God's intentions for marriage.

This exposes Solomon's only folly not choosing women who belonged to the covenant, who fear God and seek Him.

There are no bragging rights for men here. The men in his circle were only one tenth of one percent better than the women.

In any case, righteousness and wisdom are very hard to come by and even when you find the one, that person is still a sinner.

All men, all women, and he himself are all sinners. This leads to his sad conclusion, 7:29.

Verse 29

Solomon's conclusion.

God made man upright, in His image, more capable than all other creatures. Man, the upright creature in the garden, the one to name all the others, the one to exercise dominion and authority, sought his own way.

God made the world straight, man made the world crooked. God made man dependent on God, and ever since man has been trying to find ways to be independent from God. First by eating of the tree in the garden, listening to the serpent, building the Tower of Babel.

We deny God and then try to play God. We try to make ourselves the center of the universe, we try to make our knowledge the pinnacle of wisdom. And human pride blinds our eyes to the utter folly of our efforts, and deaf to the laughter of God at our stupidity.

In Genesis men were made upright, but he rebelled and ever since that time he has been using his God-given gifts against God and to our own destruction.

What we all need is the righteousness of Another.

There is none who is righteous, there is only one who is righteous.

Trust in no righteousness except that which comes from Christ.

II Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Matthew 5:6 Hunger and thirst for God's righteousness.

Matthew 6:33 Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

II Timothy 2:22 Pursue righteousness.

I Corinthians 1:30 ... because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Prayer: Holy Father, God of righteousness, holiness, purity and perfection, we claim to love you and follow you, yet we drift along in complacency, we neglect the weighty things, and ignore the most important things. We seek to excel in things that are temporal, trivial, temporary and not in the things that are eternal, true and lasting. Holy Spirit, wake us up, stir our hearts, create a real dissatisfaction with our spiritual condition, give us a holy discontent with anything less than a real desire to know you and love you and follow your ways, all your ways. Give us ears that hear the call to high righteousness not as a call to legalism or drudgery but as a call to life and a call to glory and a call to what most truly satisfies our deepest longing as men and women. Help us hear it as a call to an authentic Christian life.