Theme: **Fulfillment Depends On Character, Not Circumstances.**

**Introduction.**

When we meet someone, one of the most common greetings is “How Are You?” or, “How are things going?” As we know, this often is not a real question. We really don’t expect the other person to give us a ten-minute rundown on how they are or how things are going, nor do we do that when the question is asked of us.

But if we were to go beyond the quick “fine,” “good,” “busy” answers, how would we answer the question? What kinds of things would we talk about? For many people there are variety of circumstances and conditions which help get a reading on how they are. Things such as health, feelings, family, relationships, work/school, finances. What really sums up how we are, how we are doing?

The conditions and circumstances are often difficult to interpret for ourselves, let alone for others. Yet, like the people of King Solomon’s day, if a person is fairly healthy, has good relationships, work that provides the necessities and able to save a bit, lives a relatively good life, then most assume that life is going fairly well. The other side of the coin is also generally assumed. If a person is not healthy, has poor relationships, economic hard times, a questionable lifestyle, than it is assumed that life is not going well.

Some of the most difficult, disturbing times are when the circumstances of life don’t fit our perceptions of a good, fulfilling life. For example, the one who says, “I’m trusting God, following as best I know how, and yet nothing seems to be going right.” Or, “I prayed about it, felt God was leading, but disaster!” Then too the one who screams to himself and to God,
“Look at him, his careless, carefree living and yet everything is going great for him — it’s not fair! Why?”

We have some clear perspective for when we look at ourselves and others through King Solomon in Ecclesiastes chapters 6 and seven. The warning is, “Don’t judge the book by its cover.” One of the fundamental truths and lessons that is in Solomon’s ongoing look at wealth, possessions, pleasure and wisdom, is that satisfying meaning, fulfillment cannot be provided by any of the things of this world, but that fulfillment depends on character, not circumstances.

While it is natural to evaluate by what can be readily seen, to judge the book by its cover, it can be very inaccurate. God tells us to look at our character. Character refers to who and what we really are, not what we have, or have accomplished, nor what we do not have, or have not accomplished. It is developed in our responses to the circumstances of our lives, but is not determined by those circumstances. Proverbs 23:7 gives us this insight, “as he thinks within himself, so he is.” To escape futility — emptiness, frustration, discouragement — and enjoy fulfillment, we need to evaluate and build character in line with God and His truth.

**Depending On Outward Circumstances Leads To Futility.**

One absolutely essential truth here is that depending on outward circumstances leads to futility. The opening verses in chapter 6 tell us that good things do not guarantee that life is good. King Solomon gives a list of the leading indicators of a good life from his own time in these verses:

- wealth (verse 2)
- honor (verse 2)
- a large family (verses 3-6)
- long life (verse 6)
- hard work (verse 7)
- wisdom (verse 8)
If these things described a person in that time, most would assume that the person was right with God, enjoying God’s blessings, enjoying the good life, happiness, fulfillment. But, Solomon reminds us that good things do not guarantee that life is good. A few specifics:

- Wealth is not secure, another may enjoy it (verse 2)
- Honor also is not secure. (verse 2)
- A large family and long life can be miserable (verses 3-6)
- Hard work and its profits never satisfy desires (verse 3)
- The wise and right living also can’t find satisfaction in the desire for things, even with these good qualities (verse 8)
- The desires, dreams and goals are always bigger, better, sweeter than the fulfillment, resulting in disappointment and frustration (verse 9)

We could look at many examples of wealthy, healthy, popular and powerful people who really have lived empty, frustrating lives. But look at your own life. I am sure you can see times when many circumstances were good, but you found emptiness instead of frustration. Yes, good things do not guarantee that life is good.

A second thing that proves the point that depending on outward circumstances leads to futility is that bad things do not guarantee that life is bad. King Solomon’s catalogue of bad things is found in the opening verses of chapter 7:

- poverty (verse 1)
- death (verse 1)
- mourning, fasting (verses 2,4)
- sorrow (verse 3)
- being corrected (verses 5-6)
• the end of something (verse 8)
• tough times (verse 10)

For most people in King Solomon’s day these things were certain indicators of a miserable life, strong suspicion or even proof of judgment. But God taught the king that bad things do not guarantee that life is bad.

• You may be poor, can’t afford luxuries like ointments or perfumes, but a good reputation is more valuable (verse 1).
• Facing the reality of death, sorrow, mourning and fasting can sharpen your focus on what is really important, much more than a lot of carefree partying (verses 2-4).
• Being corrected by a wise person can help put you on the right track, lead to peace and satisfaction much more than people helping you rationalize, excuse and have a good time in spite of things being wrong (verses 5-6).
• The sound evaluation when something comes to an end is more profitable than pride, rash optimism at the start (verse 8).
• Facing tough times today is much more profitable than living in the good old days of the past (verse 10).

Good things do not guarantee that life is good. Bad things do not guarantee that life is bad. Don’t judge the book by its cover. This is true perspective, but true perspective is often difficult, while poor perspective can be hard to shake.

Few people know who won the 90 metre ski jump at the Winter Olympics in Calgary in 1988. Some people still remember who came in last, flapping both arms for mid-air balance — Eddie The Eagle Edwards. His qualification from England (no one else from there applied that year), prompted the International Olympic Committee to institute an “Eddie the Eagle rule,” stipulating that prospective Olympians must place in the top 30 percent of the top 50 competitors to qualify. Eddie The Eagle Edwards became a star, of sorts. He tried to continue ski jumping. A couple of years after that Olympics, in training he actually had a good jump with good form. But, he landed on his face and shoulder, broke his collarbone, suffered a concussion. It seems as though he got disoriented with that good jump. He was used to, had the perspective of his own, unorthodox, poor form, and didn’t know how to handle doing it correctly.
Good things do not guarantee that life is good and bad things do not guarantee that life is bad.

A third thing that proves the point that depending on outward circumstances leads to futility is that it is seen when we have good and bad things in perspective. It is important to begin by remembering that circumstances do not reveal or determine the nature or quality of life. Along with this, God has given us some truth for perspective of both the good and bad circumstances.

Dominant in these verses is the sovereignty of God. He is the one-of-a-kind, eternal, creating, sustaining, holy and loving God. Chapter 6 verse 10 reminds us that while we encounter many puzzling surprises, God never is surprised—“whatever exists has already been named,” or known. That is great to know! Nothing takes God by surprise, including the good and the bad things in our lives. Chapter 7 verse 14 tells us both are in God’s sovereign plan. Since we can’t unravel God’s ways (7:13), let alone change His ways, it’s of no value to argue with God to try to get our priorities, plans (6:10-11).

And, very important at this point, is the character of God. What can we expect, count on from Sovereign God? We have a glimpse of this in chapter 6 verse 12. We don’t know the good things that God has in store, so never give into “nothing good again” thinking. God’s will is good and complete for us and to us.

- God’s will for us is our sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
- God’s will is good, acceptable, perfect (Romans 12:2)
- God works all things together for good for believers (Romans 8:28)
- “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)
- God surrounds His people “with favor as a shield.” (Psalm 5:12)

God’s desire and determination for us is not to deprive us, to make us miserable, but to enrich, give life with true meaning and happiness. And so, as real and important as they are, we look beyond the circumstances of life when it comes to meaning, fulfillment.
Depending On Character Leads To Fulfillment.

So, if outward circumstances aren’t reliable to lead to and recognize a fulfilling life, what is? As we have stated already, fulfillment depends on character, not circumstances. And so now we need to look at some of the what and how of this.

The wisdom of true righteousness is a good place to start. On the surface, righteous, right living doesn’t always seem to have an advantage. For example, look at verse 15 in chapter 7, “I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.” Once again we are faced with judging the book by its cover, with looking at the circumstances from the “under the sun,” or without God, without His eternal viewpoint. And this leads to futility—emptiness, frustration, “What’s the use?” thinking.

Then, the next verses, verses 16-18.

“Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.”

These verses are subjected to frequent incorrect interpretation, as well as humor. For example, “Don’t be too good nor too bad. Strike a balance—a little righteousness, a little sin.” Or, “Don’t go to church too much, don’t do too much church work and, of course, don’t put too much in the offering plate.”

So what is God telling us here through the king? The caution here is not directed to how others look at us and what we do, but how we look at ourselves. This danger of the extremes is combatted in the Old and New Testaments. On the one hand is legalism. “Look at all my good works … I’ve kept the Law from youth up” (cf. Mark 10:17). Paying attention to the fine points, tithing on mint and dill but neglecting justice, mercy, faithfulness (cf. Mt 23:23). Ending up -self-righteous and being, as Jesus put it, white-washed tombs (cf. Matthew 23:27).

On the other hand lawlessness or, for believers, since God’s gives grace for our sin should we “continue in sin so grace may increase?” (Romans6:1). We should quickly respond along with the apostle Paul, “May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2). The answer is to hold on to true righteousness from God. Then you are truly
wise, can live with fulfillment, and also avoid the ruin of nothing standing God’s test. Here is the wisdom of true righteousness. And, it is a part of who we are. Character.

King Solomon also shows us the strength of true wisdom. True wisdom, again, is the ability to see, understand things the way they really are, as God sees them. It is a gift from God. Reverence for God is the beginning of true wisdom. God gives it to His people generously, graciously in response to our request in faith. It is also a key building block in our character development, in the process of God transforming us to be more and more like Jesus.

Some specific strengths of character with true wisdom are seen in chapter 7. First, look at verses 11-12.

“Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. For wisdom is protection just as money is protection, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.”

It is good to have some tangible security, such as money in the bank, because it takes care of necessities, provides for some of the nice extras. But wisdom with it is better. It guides for all of life, the decisions, keeping what we have and with this accurate perspective comes fulfillment.

Second, drop down to verse 19.

“Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.” (19-22).

While counsel of others can be very helpful, true wisdom is even better. Sometimes counsel can be only “the pooling of ignorance.”

You might think that part of this sounds like the New Testament, such as in Romans 3:23 — it does! Here, since none of us never sin, we need God’s wisdom! Emphasized again at the end of the chapter, verse 29, “Behold, I have found only this, that God made men
upright, but they have sought out many devices.” Wisdom helps us not be a critic, fault-finder, especially when we realize that we have criticized others. The strength of wisdom points to how important it is to our character, and to fulfillment.

Finally we see the importance of character when we understand the limits and scarcity of wisdom. There are limits to wisdom. Look at verse 13 here in chapter 7. “Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?” Earlier in chapter 1 Solomon tells us “What is crooked cannot be straightened” (15).

God gives us the wisdom we need, but even with great wisdom we cannot not figure out everything. God is the Infinite, Almighty Creator, we are His creation. There are limits to human wisdom, and even the wisdom which God gives us. Drop down to verse 23,

“I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?” (23-24).

In fact, human wisdom, without God’s wisdom can lead us down all sorts of blind alleys. Television generally is not a good place to learn truth about the Bible and God. Generally it appears that producers try to find controversial experts and viewpoints — after all, that may draw an audience. As well, most scholars used are from the part of Christianity, in name at least, that discounts the Bible as God’s Word, miracles, deity of Christ, etc. My point here is that God has given us a record, more than reasonable evidence, and even bright thinking apart from God can look at the things of God and go 180° from truth.

Then consider the scarcity of wisdom. Verse 27,

“‘Behold, I have discovered this,’ says the Preacher, ‘adding one thing to another to find an explanation, which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these’” (27-28).

If it were not for that last line, these two verses would not draw as much attention as they do. Understand the setting: Solomon tried to find ultimate answers with wisdom, but found “it was far from [him]” (23). He kept searching, adding one thing to another, and still was seeking, unable to answer the ultimate questions with his own wisdom. He tried others to help, but found few, very few indeed were able to advance his search. What about the “one man among a thousand” and the “not found a woman”? A wide range of ideas have
been suggested. Some dismiss as sexist, perhaps with only a personal conclusion of Solomon, not purporting to be truth. One problem with this view is Proverbs 31. While not 100% sure the King Lemuel listed as the writer of the words on the excellent woman was Solomon, he most likely was. Others point to his 1,000 wives and 300 concubines as perhaps the limit of his search. Some suggest it the woman is a personification of foolishness.

Let’s not miss the point: the scarcity of wisdom. The 1,000 is best taken as figurative to make the main point, such as living “a thousand years twice” back in chapter 6 verse 6. Then we need to consider the kind of statement this is. There are various forms of parallelism in the language of the Old Testament, pairs of statements. This one is a synthetic statement where the two parts together paint the one picture of how rare it is to find the wisdom Solomon was looking for. The conclusion, in verse 29, as we noted earlier, reinforces this: Man was created in the image of God. Ever since Adam and Eve and sin, we have been trying our own way, our own devices, many devices, not looking to God, His wisdom. All of us, each one of us, men and women alike.

**Conclusion.**

The man given more wisdom than any before or after him, tells us don’t judge the book by its cover. Fulfillment depends on character, not circumstances.

This basic truth is neither new nor startling. But that does not make it easy to adjust to, easy to live out. Many things are much tougher than they appear. A number of years ago there was a newspaper article that caught my attention. A major city was opening a new shooting range for their law enforcement personnel. Somebody had a great idea: have a team of crack marksmen there for the grand opening. One would step forward, fire a single bullet cutting the ceremonial ribbon. That's what they did, but it didn't work out exactly as planned. The first shot didn't cut the ribbon, nor the second. In fact, 500 shots later the ribbon remained. Finally, giving up on finesse, an officer stepped up and let go with a shotgun at point-blank range, and the ribbon was cut.

Some things are much tougher than they appear. This is one of them. It goes beyond our habits. It is a spiritual battle. As you reflect on this with God now, evaluate your view of your own life, and of others. Are you judging the book by its cover? Remember that God is
in the business of transforming, renewing your mind. Determine, decide with God to establish and evaluate your life on the basis of character, godly character that God will build in you as you allow Him to work. Along with this, God will bring fulfillment.

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