

The Discontentment of the Self-Made Life

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- [0 : 0 0] Last week I heard a song from Bruno Mars. I don't know if you know him. He's a very popular singer. Bruno Mars, one of the most popular singers today.
- And his song, called Billionaire, starts like this. I want to be a billionaire so beep bad so I can buy all the things that I never had.
- Very sophisticated music these days. But it made me chuckle listening to that because I looked it up and Bruno Mars currently has a net worth of about \$175 million.
- But apparently that's not enough because he still wants to be a billionaire. But thank you Bruno because that proves the whole point of what Ecclesiastes is trying to make in chapter 2, the chapter we have in front of us.
- The point of this chapter is to teach us and to convince us that no matter how much people have, they always want more.
- [1 : 0 6] And that is not just true of Bruno Mars. It is true of all of us. Especially as we live in a culture, the materialistic culture we live in today, where we are essentially being programmed every day to be discontent.
- Think about it. Every day we are barraged. Even we don't even notice how many adverts we are exposed to every day. And the core message of an advert for a product or a service is always the same, which is, you are not yet happy unless you get this thing.
- You are not satisfied yet. And you need what we are selling you. And being barraged with that message day in and day out causes us to inevitably, even if it is just subconsciously, think in our own minds, if only I had this, I would be happy.
- If only I had that, I would be happy. If only I had, fill this space yourself, I would be happy. What is it for you? What is it for you? Kids, teenagers, my friends have this.
- If only I had that. If only I had these Converse shoes. If only I had this game. If only I had this Lego set.
- [2 : 2 7] Whatever it is. I would be happy. I would really be happy. Grownups, if only I had this job. If only I reached this point in my career, then I will be happy.
- You know, then I'll settle. I'm just going to strive until I get there. Then I'll be happy. If only I had this house. That's what I'm saving up for. Then I'd be happy. If only I could live in this suburb.
- Then I'd be happy. If only I can retire and then enjoy the fruits of my career. Then I'd be happy. Once I can access my pension.
- Then I'll be happy. What is it for you? You see, we all, whether we know it or not, have in the back of our mind, if only I could just have that, then I'd be happy. Well, Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is in the Bible to convince you, no, you wouldn't.
- No, you wouldn't. And the reason that Ecclesiastes, the teacher, knows this, is that he has tested it.

[3 : 34] He has tested that theory exhaustively. The theory of, if only I had this, I'd be happy. He has tested it. And he has proven it to be false. And he has written down his findings here in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 so that you don't have to waste your life chasing what will never satisfy you.

That is why Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is here. That is why God inspired it, preserved it, and we have it in our Bibles in front of us. So let's see what he finds out. And what he finds out here, and I encourage you to have your Bibles open so you can follow along, is what I've entitled the sermon this morning, which is The Discontentment of a Self-Made Life.

The Discontentment of the Self-Made Life. Now the reason that Ecclesiastes could, by the way, that's not his name, it's his title, it's his role as the giver of wisdom in this book.

It means the accumulator of wisdom. And the reason that he could test this is because it turns out he was one of the 0.0000001% of people who have ever lived who actually had everything they could ever want.

There's not many people in history who have actually managed to get everything they could ever want, but he was one of them. You know, you've got the Elon Musks, you've got the Jeff Bezos, and you've got this guy.

[4 : 59] And throughout history, very, very few people, but there are people who actually managed to just get insane amounts of wealth, and they had access to everything they could want.

And we've already been introduced to Ecclesiastes' true identity in chapter 1, verse 1, last week. I'll just read it to you again. The words of the teacher, Ecclesiastes' son of David, king in Jerusalem.

So this is a reference to King Solomon, the greatest, most successful, and richest king of Israel that has ever lived. Let me read a little bit from 1 Kings, just to give you an idea of what his kingdom was like when he ruled over it.

This is crazy. So, the queen of Sheba comes to visit him. The queen of Sheba is herself a monarch of a great kingdom, one of the greatest ancient kingdoms, and yet she's heard of this guy Solomon in Israel.

She goes to visit him. Let me pick it up from 1 Kings 10, verse 4. When the queen of Sheba observed all of Solomon's wisdom, the palace he had built, the food at his table, his servants' residence, his attendants' service, and their attire, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he offered at the Lord's temple, it took her breath away.

[6 : 10] Now, this is a woman accustomed to wealth, and yet she had never seen anything like this. Let me continue reading from verse 21. All of King Solomon's drinking cups were gold, and all the utensils of the house of the forest of Lebanon, that's a part of his palace, were pure gold.

There was no silver since it was considered as nothing in Solomon's time. For the king had ships of Tarshish at sea with Hiram's fleet, and once every three years the ships of Tarshish would arrive bearing gold, silver, ivory, apes, peacocks.

These were all luxury items. King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the world in riches and wisdom. Okay, so he was one of the very few people in history who literally had everything he could ever want.

And not just riches, but did you notice? Wisdom. So he didn't just have the means, he also had the know-how how to get the best out of the money he had.

He had riches and wisdom which means he was in a unique position to test this theory whether it was possible for a human to build themselves a life that satisfies them.

[7 : 26] And he tested everything that he could. Let's look from Ecclesiastes 2 from verse 3.

He tested alcohol first of all. And that sadly is often the first port of call for people who want to numb the pain and find some happiness in life.

I mean, even the beggars on the streets often they will buy alcohol before they buy food with the little money they get from people at the robots because maybe this is a way to be happy.

So Solomon says, okay, let me put it to the test. Let's see if alcohol is the route to happiness. Let's see if it does what it's advertised to do and numb the pain and just make us happy.

And so he does. Verse 3, I explored with my mind the pull of wine on my body. My mind's still guiding me with wisdom. So he's testing this.

[8 : 30] He's drinking. He's not just getting drunk. He's actually doing a scientific test to see whether alcohol is actually going to make him happy. And then he moves on to test success and achievements as many other people often do with their lives.

Think, if I could achieve this, if I could fulfill this goal in my career, I'd be happy. You know, often people will look at their work, their career for satisfaction.

They become workaholics. Their family hardly sees them because they feel that that's where they will be satisfied. Well, he tried that too. Verse 4-6, I increased my achievements or my projects.

I built houses. I planted vineyards for myself. I made gardens and parks for myself and planted every kind of fruit tree and then I constructed reservoirs for myself from which to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees.

Okay, what's his obsession with gardens? You might wonder. Well, in the ancient world, for a king to have great flourishing gardens like the gardens of Babylon, for example, that was a sign of his dominance over creation.

[9 : 42] And it was a sign also of his dominance over other territories because he would bring plants from the territories he's conquered and show them all off in his garden. So gardens were a sign of success for a king in the ancient world.

And so he tried that. He tried to get as much success as he could. Then he just did the good old money. Let's see if wealth will do. Just like Bruno and many others who believe that being rich will make me happy.

Just getting money. Not everyone believes that, but a lot of people believe if I just get enough money, I'll be good. And so he says, okay, I'll try that. Verse 8, I also amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces.

And then, of course, no experiment in pleasure would be complete without music. I gathered male and female singers for myself and, of course, sex.

And many concubines, the delights of men. Elsewhere in the Bible, we read that Solomon had over 700 wives.

[10 : 51] He really liked women. Okay? Now, you might think that's a cause to a lot of trouble, but he was the king, he was powerful, he could do what he wanted, and any day of the year, he had his pick of the most beautiful woman of the kingdom to gratify his every sexual desire.

And so, you see, he literally tried everything that the world tells and continues to tell us today, is, if you had this, it's going to make you happy.

If you had sex, if you had money, if you were successful in your career, you would be happy. He tried it all. Everything the world today tells us, we need to be happy.

He tried it all. And after trying it all, let's see the conclusion that he comes to, verse 11. Yet, when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. And so, all that the world says, if you had this, you would be satisfied, he says, I've tried it.

[12 : 20] I've tried it all. And you know what it is? It's a chasing after the wind. If you chased after the wind, do you think you would catch it eventually?

That's the point of the illustration. And this is that phrase, by the way, chasing after the wind. We're going to come across it over and over again in the book of Ecclesiastes. It's unique to the book of Ecclesiastes.

So, it's something that really sums up the message of Ecclesiastes, this chasing after the wind. What it means is basically putting all your energy into catching something that you will never actually have.

Contentment, satisfaction. And we've all experienced it. If you think hard enough, you'll probably remember the last time you experienced the chasing after the wind.

When you save for that thing, and save, and save, and save, and you can't wait to get it, and then you get it, and you're happy for like a few minutes, but then very soon after you need the next thing, don't you?

[13 : 28] I got the black shoes, now I need the white shoes. I got the iPhone 8, now I need the iPhone 9, I don't know if an iPhone 9 is it, probably, but you know what I mean, it's always the next thing, isn't it?

No matter what you get, you're chasing the next thing, and you're never quite getting what you want. Have you experienced that? Yes, you have.

We all have. Chasing the wind. And that's not where he stopped, by the way, he went on to experiment with other types of life, and we can read that from verse 12 to 23, we don't have time to get into all of it, but he talks about living a life of enlightenment and wisdom, so like the Tibetan monk, after the pleasure didn't work, he thought what about enlightenment?

And then living a life where you can make a difference and make a legacy, leave a legacy, but he found the same thing with all of that, no matter what you choose to do in your life, no matter what you achieve, what he found is that you will never be able to build a life that satisfies you.

Think about that for a second. Think about what you're putting your energy into now, what you're putting your focus into, what you are thinking about every day, and think about this wisdom that we get in Ecclesiastes 2, which tells us no matter what you manage to achieve in your life, you will never be able to build a life that satisfies you.

[14 : 58] It will always be chasing the wind. And so don't fall for the lie that's in your brain that says if only I had this I'd be happy. It's a lie. He's saying here in Ecclesiastes 2, no you won't.

No you won't, and I think you know it. You won't be happy. And the person who thinks, who tricks themselves into thinking they will be happy, if only I just got this thing, if only I just got this in my career, if only I just reached this level, if only I just got this house, then I'd be happy.

That person, he describes them in verse 23. Look what he says, for all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful, even at night his mind does not rest.

That's what sums up the person who continues to think if only I had this I'd be happy. They are constantly filled with grief, they're always the person who, life is so hard and constantly trouble and always trying to get something more and never happy, never satisfied.

Even at night his mind does not rest because he's thinking, he's scheming, how do I get this, how can I get here, how can I achieve this? And the reason is because he never gets what he's working so hard to achieve, which is actually not money or wealth or whatever, it's contentment, it's satisfaction.

[16 : 27] And he never gets it. As the Rolling Stones wisely observed, I can't get no satisfaction. See, back then they knew what they were singing about.

So again, like, if you weren't depressed coming in this morning, this is a very depressing thing to read, but that's not the end of the chapter. That's not the end of the story.

That's not where it ends, because it's here at this point that the wise king gives the first ray of light in the whole book of Ecclesiastes. so far. In this dark book, he gives this ray of light, because it's the first time in the book that he brings God into the picture.

And he starts talking about the contentment of the God-made life, as opposed to the discontentment of the self-made life. The contentment of the God-made life.

So look at this, from verse 24 I'm talking about, this little end section of the chapter is so important, because he says, after all is said and done, I'm reading from verse 24 now, there is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work.

[17 : 47] I have seen that even this is from God's hand, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? now there's some wisdom, there's some wisdom.

See, what it's saying is contentment doesn't come from getting the things you don't have, and I want you to listen carefully, especially if you're young, and you might be distracted right now, but I want you to listen carefully, because this is wisdom, this is ancient wisdom.

Contentment doesn't come from getting the things you don't have, but it comes from learning to enjoy the things that God has already given you. Learning to get the small daily joys out of whatever situation God has put you in, rather than spending your life trying to change it.

In other words, the secret to Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is learning to live a life from God's hand rather than our own hand.

Let me say that again, this is so key. Learning to live a life from God's hand rather than our own hand. And we see this in verse 11. I quoted it earlier, but I want you to notice something again in verse 11.

[19 : 09] He starts by saying, when I surveyed all that my hands had done, and what I toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless. But then compare that to verse 24.

There is nothing better for a person to do than to eat, drink, enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand. You see, this chapter actually compares what I can get with my hand versus what God gives me with his.

The simple enjoyment of what God has seen fit to give me is actually the key to contentment. rather than chasing the things I'm trying to get with my hands.

It's just enjoying the things from God's hands. That's the simple but profound wisdom of this chapter. And it makes sense because, verse 25, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from God?

You can't enjoy anything apart from the Creator who made you and gives you the capacity to enjoy things and gives you the things to enjoy. It's God who gives us the ability to enjoy anything.

[20 : 18] In fact, reading on, verse 26, for to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

Joy. God can give you joy. God can give you satisfaction without the stuff you think you need to get it.

if only you can learn the secret of living a life from God's hand rather than your own. Being satisfied with what God has chosen to give you rather than what you want to get.

Enjoying your daily bread rather than stressing about tomorrow. life from God's hand and even if you're struggling with your health, which almost everyone is in some way or another, or will be sooner or later, to live a life from God's hand rather than your own is actually accepting this as a trial that God has seen fit to give me right now and enjoying what you're still able to do rather than focusing on what you're not.

You see, that attitude, living a life from God's hand rather than our own, is the key to contentment in a frustrating world. And I wonder if you've found that key yet.

[21 : 48] I wonder if you're actually finding joy in the life that God has chosen to give you or whether you're still spending all your energy trying to change it.

I've found a discipline, a spiritual discipline, that really helps to find joy in the life that God has given is the discipline of thankfulness.

Okay? Throughout the New Testament and the Old, we read God's people being encouraged to be thankful in every situation. In fact, that's what 1 Thessalonians 5.18 says.

Be thankful in all situations. thankfulness in prayer. Starting your prayers thinking, it's such an important discipline, thinking, what has God given me?

Before I start asking Him for what I need, which is typically how our prayers start, right? Let's admit it. And God does want to hear what we need and He loves to hear us rely on Him and He loves to give what we ask for.

[22 : 55] But before we do any of that, what we should start our prayers with is thanking God for what we have. Just thinking, what has God done for me? And once you start thinking, I mean, we had a prayer meeting here on Wednesday night and we started that prayer meeting with thankfulness and once you get going, there's just so much, it's like an avalanche of things, wow, I can't believe actually how much God has truly given me when you start thinking about it.

But we're not programmed to think that way because the world programs us to think about what I still need. And so the discipline of thankfulness is so important. And that's why Christians say grace at mealtime.

You know what grace is? It's a discipline to at the end of the day, and it's been a busy day, and you've got food in front of you, to just stop and go, wow, thank you.

And just to recognize where your food comes from, not your hand, but the hand of the God who gave you the ability to earn it, the hand of the God who caused it to grow out of the ground, and gave you a stomach and a taste bud, taste buds to be able to enjoy, just recognizing, Lord, this is from your hand, and I'm going to stop worrying about tomorrow, and I'm just going to sit down, and I'm going to enjoy this meal, this gift from God.

That's what we say grace for, just this discipline of recognizing what God has given us every day, living from God's hand, the key to contentment, and learning to live like that, learning to live from God's hand rather than our own, that is what pleases Him, that is what pleases God, when His people start to learn to live the secret of living from His hand.

[24 : 47] I read one commentator put it this way, it's beautiful, he says, we most please God by accepting and enjoying what He is pleased to give us.

Let me read that again, we most please God by accepting and enjoying what He is pleased to give us, and trusting that what God is pleased to give us is everything we need, even if it's not what we want.

He's really pleased when we accept and enjoy what He is pleased to give us. And that is true.

We have everything we need, because you know what God was ultimately pleased to give us? His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came down into the mess of this world, so that He could die for our sins, so that we could know God, and that we could be resurrected one day as He was, and live in the new creation, and have our lives redeemed from this mess we're in.

That was what God was pleased to give us, and so the question is, have you accepted what God was pleased to give you in His Son? If God is most pleased when we accept and enjoy what He is pleased to give us, and He was most pleased to give us His Son, the question is, will you accept and enjoy His Son?

[26 : 28] Because that is what will please Him. That is how you will be pleasing to Him. Will you be satisfied in Jesus? Will you find your contentment in Christ?

Have you done that yet? And I'm not asking if you've been baptized or if you are a Christian or if you've been coming to church. I'm asking you if you have truly found your contentment in Jesus yet.

Because it's those who have, who go on to realize that in Jesus, God has also given them everything else.

All the other things that we would otherwise try to attain ourselves in life we already have in Christ. And I mean it, and the Bible teaches that. Romans 8.32 says, sorry, Romans 8.32 He, God, did not even spare His own Son, but offered Him up for us all.

How will He not also with Him grant us all things? All the things you think you can get from this world, that you live your life trying to achieve, the satisfaction you think, and the things that the world can give you.

[27 : 42] God is going to give you all things, but first He gives us Christ. Jesus puts it this way, very simply, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5.5, blessed are the meek, or the humble, for they will inherit the earth.

They will get all things. Or, as Ecclesiastes puts it in chapter 2, right at the end, verse 26, listen to this, for to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy, but to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight.

You know what he's realized here? You know what he's saying? The same thing as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the meek shall inherit the earth. It's saying all the effort that people run around and put into attaining and gathering and accumulating to build lives in this world.

One of the reasons it's so futile is because one day God is going to take all of the fruit of that effort, all of the cities, all of the houses, all of the fancy houses at Seapoint and Clifton and all the other things and everything people in this world have labored to achieve and he's going to give it all to his people in the new creation.

The meek, the humble, who didn't grasp stuff by their hands in this life. God is going to give it all to them by his hand in the life to come. And so let us learn in closing to find our contentment not in what we want to gain for ourselves but in what God has already given us, his son, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 32] Christ. And so let us learn to say with the apostle from Philippians, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and I consider them as dung so that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Let's pray. Our Lord we thank you for the wisdom you give us from your word. Wisdom that points us to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom is all wealth and treasure of wisdom.

And Lord we thank you that you have given your son to us to save us and to call us to live a life not chasing after the things of the world but live a life in preparation for what's coming.

What you will give your people by your hand and I pray that you would help us all to find our contentment in what you have given us each day. Lord help us to get into the habits of thankfulness.

[30 : 50] Help us to get into the habits of sitting in any situation in any day with what's in front of us and finding the small joys in what you've given us as we look forward to the great joys that Christ has earned for us in the new creation.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.