

A House of Cards

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

In the western world, there's something about our homes that tells us whether or not we have arrived. Think of all the house buying or house flipping reality TV shows: *House Hunters*, *Trading Spaces*, *Flip this House*. Even feel-good shows like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* communicate a strong message: "Get the right house, and you can have a great life."¹

But it goes beyond our homes. Think of shows like *MTV Cribs* or *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. It's not just the house, it's the whole lifestyle that goes with it—the cars, the estate, the help, the social life—entertainment, booze, and sex.

But you can have all that and still feel like you haven't quite arrived. In 2005, after having just led the Patriots to their third Super Bowl, Tom Brady said in an interview with *60 Minutes*, "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what is.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, ' . . . It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be." When the interviewer asked, "What's the answer?" Brady could only say, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."²

Why is it that as we give ourselves to building our lives, our careers, our homes, our fortunes, that we can't escape the sneaking suspicion that what we're really building is a house of cards. You know, where you stack playing cards one on the other. One small bump and the whole thing gives way.

Is there any lasting gain in a life of pleasure and human achievement, or in the accumulation of all our stuff? That's our question this morning. And if not, if this isn't "what it's all cracked up to be," then what?

Last week we began looking at the first of several research projects that Solomon undertakes in his quest to answer the question he raised back in ch. 1:3: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" This first study takes us from 1:12 through 2:26 and focuses on human achievement and human wisdom. We saw the introduction last week at the end of ch. 1, and talked about how it's okay to ask our hard, honest questions about life, faith, and God, and that if we learn from the results of Solomon's study, we'll find there are healthy ways to go about doing that. In our passage this morning, 2:1-11, Solomon now gets into the meat of his first

¹ Philip G. Ryken, *King Solomon: The Temptations of Money, Sex, and Power* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 101.

² Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 52.

study—exploring human activity and achievement, or “all that is done under heaven,” as 1:13 puts it.³

As we’ll often see in this book, he begins by summarizing his goal and his findings in vv. 1-2. He begins with his goal: “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’” He’s opening a brand new deck of Bicycle playing cards and saying, ‘Let’s build a house and see if we have any fun.’ He’s looking for pleasure or joy—satisfaction and delight. There’s got to be something worthwhile to do, some meaningful way to expend his energy.

But before we’re out of the gate he already tells us where we’re going: “But behold, this also was vanity.” Fleeting and fruitless. Vapor and smoke. What do you mean, Solomon?

He gives us a snapshot in v. 2: “I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” If you’ve ever been at a party or wedding reception, enjoying time with friends, laughing, and someone takes your picture mid-guffaw, and you later you get tagged on Facebook and the whole world sees you. You look quite foolish. Solomon would use the word “mad” (2:2; cf. Job 12:17). And what’s true of you in that moment is true of laughter itself: something so fun in the moment can look so foolish later on. And whether that laughter arises from a celebration⁴ or good clean fun, or out of cutting sarcasm,⁵ lewd joking, or even wild partying,⁶ it doesn’t get you anywhere in the long run.

And as with laughter, so with pleasure. Solomon says, “What use is it?” Listen to that question: “what *use* is it?” What do I get out of it at the end of the day? Remember that Solomon’s quest is to find something of lasting gain *under the sun*—in the realm of human existence that you and I live in day in and day out—what we can see and experience for ourselves. He’s not focusing at this point in the book on what happens *above the sun*—in God’s realm, and what difference God makes. He goes there periodically, but he wants to see what can be made of life if we limit our perspective to the here and now. So he looks for pleasure, and he asks, “what use is it?” He lets us know up front that his search was in vain. Pleasure is like an expired coupon in the checkout line—despite all your hopes it gives you nothing in the end.

But then Solomon brings us into his journey, into his experiment in vv. 3-11, where he’s going to test wine, works, wealth, and women, looking for pleasure and lasting gain in his house of cards. Human activity and achievement, all that is done under heaven.

He takes the first card out of the deck, and starts with wine, v. 3: “I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine- my heart still guiding me with wisdom- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.” Again, we see his goal clearly at the end of the verse—he’s trying to figure out if there is anything worthwhile for humans in this fallen world in our short time here. First

³ Note how 1:12-15 uses the Hebrew root for “do/make/deed” three times to introduce the study in 2:1-11, which uses it an additional nine times, along with “toil” four times. Similarly 1:16-18 uses “wisdom” four times and “knowledge/know” five times to introduce the study in 2:12-16, where “wisdom/wise” is used another six times and “know” once more. Both studies are concluded in 2:17-26, with an additional two uses of “do/make,” ten uses of “toil,” four uses of “wisdom,” and three uses of “knowledge.”

⁴ E.g. 1 Sam. 18:7; 2 Sam. 6:5, 21; Zech. 8:5.

⁵ E.g. 2 Chr. 30:10; Job 30:1.

⁶ E.g. Jer. 15:17; cf. Jdg. 16:25, 27.

up, wine and folly. Like laughter, wine by itself is a good thing—part of God’s good creation, as it will be part of his new creation (Ps. 104:14-15; Isa. 25:6-9; Lk. 22:18). And when used responsibly and legally, it can be enjoyed as a gift. But scholars are quite divided here as to whether Solomon is using it responsibly, or giving himself to drunkenness. On the one hand, this seems to be part of his systematic test—“my heart still guiding me with wisdom.” But “taking hold of folly” seems to imply drunkenness, because “folly” here is typically immoral (cf. 7:25). Either way it amounts to nothing.

Some of us here know firsthand the destruction and devastation that alcohol can wield when abused. You know what it’s like to run and hide when Dad gets home, to have to get up and drive to the local jail in the middle of the night to pick your mom up because she failed the breathalyzer, or to watch your child flush their college scholarship down the toilet. We think we’ve got something worth living for, but before we can even get that playing card balanced it falls flat. And that’s true whether you abuse alcohol, or whether you enjoy it in holiness—there’s no lasting gain in it. As one author aptly describes: “good food, good coffee, and good wine are all headed toward the same place, which in most cases is the sewage treatment plant.”⁷

And so we pull another card from the deck. Let’s try what Solomon calls “great works.” Verses 4-6: “I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.”

This is quite a lavish description, and it parallels the description of Solomon’s building projects in 1 Kings 7. It took Solomon seven years to build the temple, the house of the LORD. It took him *thirteen* years to build his own palace and estate with the richest cedars and costly stones (1 Kgs. 6:38; 7:1-12). But there’s another passage being paralleled here. Listen again to the imagery: “I . . . planted vineyards . . . gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.” What other passage in Scripture might that remind you of? Genesis 1-2. In his quest for pleasure and lasting gain from human activity and achievement, Solomon sets out to recreate Eden—his own new creation. Only this one has no forbidden fruit, as he amasses for himself people, possessions, and everything he needs to party—the next three cards from the deck.

Verses 7-8: “I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man.”

He had the building and grounds, now he needs the staff, the stores, the treasure, and the entertainment. So he purchased slaves for himself, exploiting other humans made in God’s image to re-create his personal Eden (cf. 1 Kgs. 9:15-22). He collected a ridiculous amount of livestock. 1 Kings 4 tells us his provision for a single day included 180 bushels of flour, 360 bushels of meal, along with “ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl” (1 Kgs. 4:22-23). To this he added his great wealth. He

⁷ Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 27.

had so much gold that 1 Kings 10:21 says “silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon.” And to his wealth, he added music and sex. A chorus of singers, and a harem of wives and concubines to make your head spin. And notice how many times the word “I” occurs in these verses. “I made great works, I built houses and planted vineyards for *myself*, I made *myself* gardens and parks, I bought slaves, I had great possessions, I got singers and concubines.”

One card gently placed on top of another, and then on another. All for me, looking for pleasure and lasting gain.

And lest we criticize Solomon for his extravagance, let’s not forget that we are neither different, nor immune to the same temptation toward indulgence. We like our stuff. We find significance in our stuff. When one storage facility manager was recently asked why his business is so successful, he answered, “People are narcissistic and materialistic. They can’t part with their stuff.”⁸ Instead of using and even enjoying our stuff like a gift, we treat it like a god. We look to it for identity, for value. And with it we create our own personal Eden—my life, my stuff, my world, just as it should be.

It’s interesting to see Solomon’s description of the initial results of his experiment in vv. 9-10: “So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.” He found surpassing fame, enduring wisdom, and unbridled pleasure. He had arrived. And in the process he denied himself nothing that might possibly give him pleasure or joy.

But, not unlike Tom Brady, even when you’re sitting on the top of the world, you have this sneaking suspicion that “this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be,” that it’s really all a house of cards ready to crash at any moment.

Listen to Sri Lankan scholar Vinoth Ramachandra’s observations about life in the western world: The people of the modern West (and the middle class of non-Western cultures) are better fed, better housed, better equipped with health care than those in any previous age in human history. But paradoxically, they also seem to be the most fearful, the most divided, the most superstitious and the most bored generation in human history. All the labor-saving devices of modern technology have only enhanced human stress, and modern life is characterized by restless movement from place to place, from one experience to another, in a frenetic whirl of purposeless activity.⁹

I don’t think there’s much modern about the modern world—this is precisely how Solomon describes things. This is his assessment of his search for pleasure and lasting gain in all the activity and achievements possible for humans in this world. Verse 11: “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” All our achievement, all

⁸ Heather Donahoe, “Storage Space Grows and Grows . . .” *The Tennessean*, May 12, 2008; cited in Trevin Wax, *Holy Subversion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 71.

⁹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 12-13; cited in Ryken, *King Solomon*, 106.

our pleasure, all our possessions and stuff—they don't last, and they don't fill us. Vapor. Smoke. Pretty soon we find ourselves singing John Mayer:

I'm dizzy from the shopping malls,
I searched for joy, I bought it all . . .
Something's missing and I don't know how to fix it,
Something's missing and I don't know what it is . . .¹⁰

We design our dream home and love it, until our friends come up with something better, or our bank account comes up a little short. We live life plugged into our iPods like virtual theme music playing in the background of our everyday life. But eventually, that favorite song gets a little old. Even the most moving orchestral piece is followed by the silence and emptiness of the concert hall after it's locked up for the night. The secret lover or the friend "with benefits" doesn't satisfy. The porn leaves you hollowed out on the inside. The spouse that you thought would be the answer to all your problems is just another sinner like you. "Something's missing and I don't know what it is . . ."

And whether they give way one by one, or come tumbling down in a great crash, all this achievement, this "frenetic whirl of purposeless activity," everything we spend our time doing in the few days we have on earth, disappoints and disappears. Vapor. And holding onto it is like trying to hold onto the wind.

But not only is recreating our own Eden foolish and futile, it's also rebellious and idolatrous. Tim Keller explains, "Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God."¹¹ And as rebels and idolaters, we not only have nothing to show for our work, we stand under the just condemnation of a holy God.

And so where do we go from here? If this really is all there is, what it's all cracked up to be, our own personal Edens have been found wanting, and we've found ourselves at odds with the God of the universe, then what? What we need is a new creation—but not one of our own making. What we need is the new creation that Jesus Christ is making—a new creation that he established through his life, death, and resurrection, and that he will bring to glorious completion when he returns.

In Jesus, God is making all things new. What Adam failed to do, what Solomon attempted to recreate and failed again, what we strive to do and fail again and again, Jesus did, as God's eternal Son—fully God and fully human, able to stand in our place. He turned this broken world upside down, taking all the sin, rebellion, and vanity on himself on the cross, taking it away, and then rose on the third day to begin God's new creation. The world made right. It is not yet complete—we wait for Jesus' return to complete it. But God's new creation is already at work in Jesus, by the Spirit, and through faith in Christ we can become part of that new creation. A people rescued from the futility of our fruitless activity, who bear fruit for God that will last (John 15:16). Listen carefully to 2 Corinthians 5:17—a familiar verse to some of us—and think

¹⁰ John Mayer, "Something's Missing," from the album *Heavier Things* (Sony Music, 2003). As cited in Wax, 74.

¹¹ Tim Keller, "Talking about Idolatry in a Postmodern Age," April 2007. Available at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/Talking-About-Idolatry-in-a-Postmodern-Age>.

about it in light of Solomon's failed attempt to recreate Eden, in light of our failed attempts to find lasting gain and significance in a broken and fallen world: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." New creation has dawned in Jesus.

So what then do we do with all our stuff? With all our activity and achievement while we live out what days we have in this fallen world? We need to be able to distinguish in our hearts and our actions the difference between treating something as a *gift* versus treating it as a *god*, and there are three things that will help us do that as we look to God's new creation in Christ.

First, *be satisfied in Jesus*. Be satisfied in Jesus. Throughout his test, Solomon took several things that by themselves were good—wine, work, a house, possessions, music, sex—and he set them up as gods, saying, "What can you do for me?" None of them could make good. When he looked for satisfaction, he found emptiness, vanity. But when Jesus is all our hope, all our satisfaction, all our joy and *pleasure*, when we look with faith to his new creation which has begun and is to come, then we have a pleasure, a joy, and a lasting gain that can *never* perish or fade. And in the meantime, we can trust Jesus to take care of the rest. Listen to what he says in Matthew 6: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, *even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these*. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (6:28-30). Be satisfied in Jesus. Don't be anxious about stuff. You can and will lose stuff, but you can't lose Jesus—not if you belong to him (Jn. 10:27-30). And when we're satisfied in Jesus, we are in place for the second and third points.

Number 2: *Be thankful for what you have*. Be thankful for what you have. Recognize that what money, what home, what food, car, what job, what school, what spouse you have—all of it is a gift from God. And gifts are meant to be enjoyed. *Not worshiped*, but enjoyed. When I give my kids a gift for their birthday, I expect that they will enjoy it. I don't want them leaving it in the box and throwing it in the corner. I want them to tear it open and use it! But I don't want them to worship it—to think about it night and day, to always be begging and whining for it, to throw tantrums when they can't have it. It's a gift; it's not God. And if they want it that bad, it won't give them what they're looking for. So also when God blesses us with good gifts, we need to receive them as gifts and enjoy them with thankfulness.

Just because something can be abused doesn't mean it shouldn't be used properly. Our temptation when we see someone abusing wealth is to demonize wealth, which in turn means to idolatry poverty, making it more holy. Or we demonize alcohol, which means idolatry teetotaling. That becomes God. We see sex abused and so we demonize it, forgetting that it is good and designed by God, a gift for a man and women to enjoy within the covenant of marriage. If we're not careful, we look at the broken world around us and become like the false teachers and liars in 1 Timothy 4, "who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:3-5).

Be thankful for what you have. Don't treat it like a god, but enjoy it as a gift, which is only possible if you're satisfied in Jesus. But third, and this is very important: *Be ready to part with*

what you have. Be satisfied in Jesus; be thankful for what you have; and be ready to part with what you have. And there are several reasons for this.

First, what you have is vapor, a house of cards. Eventually it will disappear, and all you'll have left is either Jesus, or nothing at all. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow. Think of the parable that Jesus told in Luke 12, which we heard earlier this morning. The man had so much abundance that he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. And God called him a *fool*. His focus was on amassing his wealth, but his soul was required of him that night, and all his stuff went to someone else. Don't be a fool and hold tightly to your stuff. Be satisfied in Jesus, enjoy it while you have it, and be ready to part with it.

A second reason we should be ready to part with our stuff is the grace of generosity. If Jesus is enough, if he's all we have, and he supplies our needs, it's easy to share freely with those in need. In fact it's an expression of God's love for us and for others to share in the grace of giving. That's hard to do that if we're treating our money like God, looking for lasting pleasure and gain. It's a little easier when we treat Jesus like God, and follow his pattern of laying down his life.

And that brings us to the third reason and perhaps most important we should be ready to part with what we have: the gospel may require it. The gospel of Jesus, and our calling to advance that gospel, may require it. Listen again to the verses Tom read at the beginning of the service (from Mark 8):

And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? (Mk. 8:34-36).

Denying yourself is not en vogue today. Saying no to who you are and your personal ambitions, surrendering them to Jesus, dying to your self (which is what it means to take up your cross; Jesus was headed to go die when he took up his)—that's not popular. Instead we want to build our own Eden, redesign creation around our own desires and ambitions, and to find lasting value and pleasure in it. We want to gain the world. But the cross bids us come and die; be willing to part with the things of this world if it means being more useful to Jesus and his mission.

I don't know what that looks like for you. It may mean choosing to eat out less so that you can be more generous to missionaries or those in need. It may mean selling everything you have and becoming a missionary. That's between you and the Lord. But I do know this, whatever God asks of you, big or small, in order to use you to make his name known and rescue more and more people for the hopeless vanity of life without him—whatever he asks will be worth it. Our reward, which is Jesus himself, more than compensates the loss. As I've quoted before, missionary and martyr Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

We live in the chaos and rat race of life in a fallen world, where all the activity and achievements that we're tempted to trust in will at some point or another prove fleeting and fruitless, a house of cards. So be satisfied in Jesus instead. Be thankful for what you have. And be ready to part with it when the time comes. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Discussion Questions

1. Solomon's attempt to find lasting significance and gain in his activity and achievements effectively resulted in him trying to recreate his own personal Eden. In your moments of frustration, disappointment, greed, or exasperation with life, what would your personal Eden look like (i.e. if you could snap your fingers and make life work the way you want it to)?
2. What good things in your life are you most tempted to treat like God? What evidence of that do you see in your heart, words, or actions?
3. Among those things you're most tempted to look to for life and meaning, what subtle reminders do you see in them that they are bound to disappoint you?
4. How does being satisfied in Jesus and the new creation he is making make a difference in how you approach your daily activities, achievements, and possessions?
5. How do you enjoy a good gift without worshiping it or demonizing it?
6. How willing are you to part with your stuff when the time comes (whether it's an opportunity to be generous, a chance to lay down your life for the gospel's advance, or simply the decay and disappearance of that stuff)? What holds you back? How can you pray for one another to hold tightly to Jesus and loosely to our accomplishments and possessions?