

The Puzzle of Pleasing God

Ecclesiastes 7:14-22

This is the week that several of our college students return to or arrive on campus. Let's remember to be in prayer for them this year. As many of you know, my college experience was one of the most formative times in my walk with God. I was a brand new Christian when I arrived at the University of Nebraska, and it was in those first couple of years through a campus ministry that I learned how to spend time with God reading my Bible and praying, how to share my faith, how help others learn to do those same things.

But I remember a time during my sophomore year when everything I thought I knew about walking with God was all of a sudden called into question. I encountered some trial in my life—something went wrong in my world; I honestly don't remember what it was. But I remember feeling completely lost, like everything I had learned about walking with God over the past two years somehow didn't work. I had been praying, I had been studying my Bible, sharing my faith, memorizing Scripture, discipling another student, and now all of a sudden the wheels had come off in life, and I was clueless. What had I done wrong? What am I not doing that I need to be doing in order to make it up to God or to get him to start blessing me again? I thought these were the things that would be pleasing to God; but somehow, I must not be pleasing him, because these things wouldn't be happening in my life. But if all this isn't enough, what is?

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I'm honestly curious whether I'm the only one in this room who's had that experience. You think things are good with you and God, and then something terrible happens, and you're left wonder what you did wrong. Was it because I felt that nudge to share the gospel with that person at Panera but I didn't do it? Next time I'll do it Lord. Was it because I'm slacking in my quiet times? I'm not giving enough money? What is it?

It's a good thing to want to please the Lord, to want to honor God with our lives. As humans we were made for God's pleasure—to delight in him, make much of him through lives of holiness and obedience. But what's the connection between pleasing God and enjoying his favor? Or to put it another way, what's the connection between doing good for the Lord and enjoying good things from the Lord? How do those two things fit together?

That is precisely the puzzle that the Preacher is trying to solve in the second half of Ecclesiastes ch. 7, vv. 14-22.

If you're just joining us, we have been walking through the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament for several months, following the Preacher (probably Solomon) in his attempt to find lasting significance and gain in this world—in what we see and do everyday (setting aside God for the time being). But in his search for something that lasts, something that fulfills in this

world, under the sun (as he puts it), instead he has found that *everything is vapor*, smoke, vanity. You can't hold onto it, or make sense of it, and it doesn't amount to much in the end.

So how should we as God's people live in a world that doesn't make sense, that doesn't satisfy or always work the way it should—what we call a *fallen world*, where human sin has made a mess of God's good creation? That's his burden in the second half of the book, chs. 7-12. Last week we saw what lessons could be learned from the funeral parlor—what the reality of death has to teach us about living as God's people in a fallen world—with sober-mindedness and a patient hope in the God who raises the dead. Our passage this morning picks up on this recognition that life doesn't always go the way it should, and then asks the question, *So how does that relate to our desire and efforts to please God?* What's the connection between doing good things for the Lord (what Solomon refers to as “wisdom” and “righteousness”) and receiving good things from him, when the world is filled with so many bad things? How do those two puzzle pieces fit together?

Our default mode as humans (or at least fallen humans) is to think that doing good for the Lord should result in receiving enjoying good things from the Lord. There's another word for this: it's called *performance*. Our world operates by performance. We have performance reviews at work, where if we do good things, we receive good things, like bonuses and raises. We obsess over athletic performance, such that athletes feel the need to take “performance-enhancing drugs” in order to compete—when nature and the gym just aren't enough. We even treat most of our relationships as a performance—if you do this for me, I'll do this for you. If you mess up, you're going to have to make it up. This is our default mode under the sun.

And the truth is we like a performance-based arrangement, because it helps us know what we can expect. If my grade in the class is based on my performance on that test, then I know that I do well on that test, I can expect a good grade for the class. If I bomb the test, I know exactly why I got a poor grade. There's safety and control there. How much easier would life be in a world spoiled by sin, if we knew that all we had to do was x, y, and z in order to get a, b, and c? Do well on the test = good grade in the class. But if we do great on the test but get a bad grade, we don't have a category for that one. Something's wrong. And we feel that we have the right to demand better.

We like the idea of a performance-based relationship with God. But is it true? Does God really work that way? And if not, then how can we know what to expect when we relate to him? What happens when we do well on the test but God still gives us a bad grade? Or when our friend fails miserably, and God blesses him instead?

Our passage this morning gives us four reasons why *God is not asking us to perform for him*, why our relationship with him doesn't work that way. Rather, we see that whatever life holds for us—whether good or bad—comes ultimately from God's gracious and sovereign hand. So we should seek to please God, not because of what we get out of it, but because he is worth it.

1. God Tells Us He Doesn't Work that Way (v. 14)

Listen to v. 14: “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”

For many of us, especially those of us who are living “the day of adversity,” this is hard to understand. The first part makes a lot of sense—in good days, be joyful. Most of us know how to do that. But what does it mean that bad days also come from God’s hand?

It doesn’t mean that bad days were part of God’s design in the beginning. As the last verse in the chapter says, “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (7:29). Sorrow, suffering, death—all of these are a systemic result of human sin and rebellion against God’s heavenly throne. Bad days are not the way it’s supposed to be.

But the fact that both bad days and good come from God does mean that God’s rule over this world has not spiraled hopelessly out of control. He’s still on his throne; he’s still working out his perfect plan to bring glory to his name in all the earth, and he’s doing it through both prosperity and adversity.

We saw this back in ch. 3:11, commenting on “a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh,” and so on. Verse 11 says, “He has made *everything* beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Our sovereign and gracious God makes every event *beautiful, fitting, suitable* in its time—according to his plan. The only problem is that his plan is so wonderful and expansive that there is no way for us to take it all in. We can’t find out what he’s done from beginning to end; we can’t see the whole picture. Which means that we also can’t find out what anything that will be after us—we can’t predict our future. Relating with God isn’t as simple as good test grade = good class grade. Sometimes God uses our trials and sufferings to accomplish his plan, just as he used the tragedy of the cross to rescue the world. And if the outcome of our life is not a direct result of our behavior, that means we can’t control our future, or find out “what will be after us.” We’re not in control. The good news is that God is, even when he gives bad days along with the good, according to his beautiful but mysterious plan. And so we can’t perform for God; instead we have to rest in God’s grace.

That’s the opposite of performance: Grace. We talk about grace a lot here, but we can never talk about it enough. Grace is when God gives us something incredibly wonderful even though we deserve something utterly terrible. We deserve his judgment for our sin, our rebellion. Instead, through faith in Jesus, God deals justly with sin and graciously with sinners. Because Jesus lived the life we couldn’t live and took our rebellion on himself, paying the debt we owed, God gives us the opposite of what we deserve when we trust in Christ: new life instead of eternal death, hope instead of despair, freedom instead of bondage, a place in his family, instead of eternity away from his presence. And by grace God is with us in both the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. Jesus knows what adversity feels like. He tasted evil, calamity, crisis in an infinitely deeper way than any of us can imagine in his life and on the cross. And so Hebrews tells us, in Jesus “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

We want to figure out how our performance for God affects his blessing for us, because then we might be able to control how life goes for us. But relating to God is not a performance. It’s about resting in his sovereign plan and clinging to his grace, whatever life gives.

2. *Experience Tells Us It Doesn't Work that Way (v. 15)*

Verse 15: “In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” We like the idea of trying to control the outcome of our life based on our performance. But stepping back and looking at the world shows us that it simply doesn't work this way.

When we lived in Lincoln we had friends in our church, a godly young couple, who celebrated their first pregnancy, only to discover that their daughter had Trisomy 18. Elizabeth lived 5 days. A year later Joseph was born, which means “the LORD adds” to their family. At thirteen months he died in his sleep. What do we do with that? Here's a godly young couple who would raise their children to love Jesus, and there are countless families out there having tons of children who will never hear their parents speak of Christ.

If we believe that what comes from God's hand is based on our performance, then what do you say to someone hurting like that? *I guess you just didn't pray hard enough. You didn't believe strong enough. Maybe there was some hidden sin?* We start to sound like Job's accusers. We have nothing to offer them but guilt, and scorn, and shame. But if God is working something out that none of us can see, we don't have to try to jam puzzle pieces together that simply don't fit in our search for an explanation. We can simply put our arm around those who are hurting, and find comfort together in a God who is gracious and compassionate, who is familiar with our sufferings, and who will one day deliver us from all evil and sorrow in the new creation to come.

3. *There's Utter Confusion for Those Who Try to Live that Way (vv. 16-18)*

Verse 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?”

Verse 16 is one of those verses that makes a pastor sweat when you come to it—“What do I do with this one?” But what he's telling us here is not to live as though life is a performance for God, such that you have to exaggerate your righteousness and wisdom to avoid the fate of the righteous person in v. 15, who was cut off before his time. If you think that by beefing up your righteousness and your wisdom—being extra righteous, extra wise—you can somehow control the outcome of your life, you're in for a big shock (the word ‘ruin’ or ‘be appalled’ is a little bit better than ‘destroy’ at the end of v. 16; cf. Isa. 52:14; 63:5). Pleasing God doesn't work that way; the pieces of the puzzle don't line up. And pretending that they do can only result in dreadful confusion and disappointment, even anger with God for not “keeping up his end of the bargain.”

But pleasing God is not about what we get out of it; it's about what *he* gets out of it—his honor, his glory, his praise. We seek to please God *because he is worth it*. Our relationship should not be one of performance, but one of *worship*. The difference is simple but subtle: a life of performance says, I obey because I get good things. And if I'm extra righteous, I'll get extra good stuff. A life of worship says, I obey because *God* is good. Because there is nothing more satisfying in this world than knowing him, and because he alone is worthy of my obedience and worship regardless of what life holds.

Doing good for God does not secure God's blessings; it's not a show, and so there's no need to exaggerate our righteousness or wisdom. But neither should we plunge headlong into wickedness and folly, as v. 17 warns us. For that does have a tendency to really mess up your life. There are two warnings in these verses—not to exaggerate our righteousness or plunge headlong into wickedness. And those who fear God—who recognize that he is God and we are not—will heed them both. As v. 18 says: “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” There is utter confusion for those who try to perform for God.

4. Wisdom Is Good, but Our Sin Gets in the Way (vv. 19-22)

Last week we saw how wisdom really is a good thing. Living according to God's design in creation really is beneficial for life under the sun. As v. 19 says, “Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.” But the benefit of wisdom is also limited because of our sin, because of our fallenness. Which is another reason why performing for God doesn't work. Even if that were the arrangement, none of us would be good enough. This is what the Preacher tells us in v. 20: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”

Most of us think that we're basically good people. And compared to one another, we are. But God's standard for doing good is not just “a little better than the guy next to you,” or “at least not as bad as that guy!” God's standard is his own goodness. And all it takes is a single sin to fall miserably short. So Paul says with Solomon, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . .” (Rom. 5:12).

This is another hard pill to swallow for some of us. Especially if we're good at performing. If we're good at keeping up the show for God and for others. But the preacher offers just one illustration to make the point, v. 21: “Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.” How many times have you said something unkind, even under your breath, about others? It seems so little, but it illustrates the point—not one of us stands perfect before God.

Doing good for God cannot win his affection and approval because none of us are ultimately good enough. Performing for God can really only lead us to one of two places—either prideful arrogance when we succeed, and we think we're something, or hopeless despair when fail again and again, and nothing that we do seems to make a lick of difference. Our obedience becomes a hollow duty, a meaningless activity, motivated by guilt, shame, and fear, rather than joy, grace, and love.

Once again, we need the gospel of God's grace. We need the grace that reminds us that “a person is not declared righteous by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). We need the grace that is sufficient for us even in our weakness, in good days and bad (2 Cor. 12:9). The grace that teaches us “to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:11-13, NIV). We need the grace that strengthens us to obey by God's Spirit, not our weak and corrupt flesh. That frees us to

give our lives in obedience to God, not because of what we get out of it; but because he's truly worth it.

We need wisdom to navigate this fallen world and make much of God. But more than wisdom, we need Jesus. We need the grace of our loving and sufficient Savior, "whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).