January 6/7, 2018

Learning to Enjoy Life

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26; 3:9-15; 5:10-20

Pastor Bryan Clark

Life is a gift. It's made up of moments—ordinary moments, special moments, and sometimes even magical moments. Over the last thirty days we've all had moments. I really hope you didn't miss those moments because the reality is: those moments are gone. If you missed them, you missed them, and you will never have them back again. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ecclesiastes—Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes—Chapter 2.

If you're new with us, we always spend a couple of weeks in January talking about money...stuff... but more than anything else, really talking about what matters and what we should be living for, just to get ourselves kind of calibrated for the year ahead. Ecclesiastes is considered Hebrew poetry. It was written by Solomon. Solomon was David's son. Solomon inherited an amazing kingdom and under Solomon it continued to flourish. Solomon had unimaginable wealth. He had unlimited stuff. He had unimaginable pleasure and power and position. It's actually hard to imagine anyone anywhere in the world today that would come anywhere close to what Solomon had in the ancient world. Yet with all of that, at this point in his life he was utterly miserable. He was seeing the emptiness and the vanity of everything in life and he was trying to figure out what ultimately matters. What is it that will cause me to enjoy life? So in Chapter 2 he's talked about the emptiness of wealth, the emptiness of pleasure, even the emptiness of wisdom. At the end of the day, big deal, who cares, why does it matter? That's kind of the Bryan summary. So you get a picture of that in chapter 2, verse 17:

> **So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun... (**Anywhere in Ecclesiastes, you see the phrase *under the sun* it simply means while on this earth **...was grievous** (or deeply disappointing) **to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 2:17)

This whole idea of *chasing the wind* is a great imagery that Solomon uses again and again and again in Ecclesiastes. You can imagine a group of children at a park chasing the wind. That's all kind of cute when they're children. When we do that as adults, it's not very cute. It's actually deeply devastating that, after a lifetime, all we would have to show for ourselves is nothing more than a lifetime *chasing the wind*. That's what Solomon is wrestling with. Verse 18:

> **Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.** (Vanity means empty or worthless.) **Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. (**Vs. 18-23)

So Solomon's talking about even if he lives his life with a great deal of skill and thoughtfulness, whatever he accomplishes, at the end of the day it's simply passed on to someone else and someone else may be wise. Someone else may be a fool but ultimately it's all lost. He's kind of despairing with the idea, "What is the point? What is the point of all this grief and all this labor and all this heartache and trying to be faithful and knowledgeable and skillful in all of this? When you think of labor, don't just think of what you get paid for. In Ecclesiastes it's pretty much everything that defines your day all day long. We might think of it in terms of busyness—all the busyness of life. One of the things that defines life today is people are so busy. It's very common when you ask someone, "Hey, how are you doing?" what they say is, "Busy. Oh I'm busy...I'm so busy!" You want to ask, "Well are you bragging or are you complaining? I mean what's up with that answer?" But that's what people say; they say it all the time, "Oh, I'm so busy." And part of that is I think in our culture we've thought busy means important; busy means significant; busy means, "I'm in demand." Did you ever stop to think busy may mean, "I'm doing nothing in life *but chasing after the wind*"? At the end of the day, the scorecard will not be determined by how busy you are. If you're too busy, then stop it; get control of your life; stop saying that. *(laughter)* But here's the deal: What Solomon is saying is no matter how you live your life, no matter what you accomplish, no matter what the fruit is, you die; it goes on to somebody else and somebody else is going to take care of it or somebody else is going to misuse it. But, at the end of the day, it's all lost, and he's wrestling with, "What is the point of that?"

Starting then in verse 24 he gets to what we refer to as conclusions. There are six conclusions in the book of Ecclesiastes. This discussion kind of keeps cycling around his despair and frustration and then moves to these six conclusions. If that's all true, then what is it that actually matters? Verse 24:

> **There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God.**

When we see the words **eat and drink**, it kind of sounds like, "Eat, drink and be merry," you know, "for tomorrow you die." It sounds like party time in our culture! That is definitely not what Solomon is saying. It carries the idea that once you have the basics of life—we would say shelter, food and water—then stop and think about each day as a gift from God, and each day has moments. Those too are a gift from God and to begin to think about, "Why does this day matter?" The Hebrew one it talks about to **tell himself that his labor is good** could be translated—I think better translated—*caused his soul to see the good in his labors*. It's talking about a discipline, a daily discipline of realizing today is a gift, and I'm sure God didn't give me today as a gift so I could waste it, so I could spend it *chasing the wind*. So I discipline myself to cause my soul to see the good in my labor today. What are the moments today that matter in order that I don't miss them?

> **For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?** (Vs. 25)

Now that's not specifically talking about salvation and a personal relationship with Jesus. While that is certainly true, what Solomon is talking about is more this idea of being mindful of God—that God has given you life as a gift and this day is a gift from God. Therefore, within this day there are moments that matter, so cause my soul to see it. That's basically what he's talking about there.

> **For to a person who is good in his sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy...**

Again, **good** in this context isn't morally good. This Hebrew word doesn't mean that. It's good in the sense of being aligned with God and that God has given this day and this day matters and it's a gift.

So once you see it from God's perspective, once you get in alignment with that, that's what He's talking about. That's what He means by **good**. So He says that those people live with **wisdom**, which means *skill*. Those people live with the **knowledge** which is the same as the word in Proverbs. It means *an understanding of what actually matters today*, and then with **joy** that leads to the joy of life that we're all seeking. The opposite of that, of course, would be doing nothing more than *chasing after the wind*...

> **...while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after the wind.**
>
> (Vs. 26)

It's easy to read these words and kind of dismiss this as not necessarily applying to me all that much. I would suggest to you the overwhelming majority of people, including Christians that live in America, will get to the end of their lives and will have accomplished nothing more than merely chasing after the wind...chasing after money...chasing after stuff...chasing after position...chasing after significance...chasing after pleasure...chasing after something that will ultimately make me happy. The problem is this is so common. It is so ordinary that it just seems normal. Everyone around us is living that way so it's easy to get caught up in that and think it's normal. That's how everyone lives, and therein lies the problem. That's why Proverbs is saying you have to actually cause your soul to see the good in your labor today. God gave you a gift. The gift is today and today there are things that matter, so you have to discipline yourself to wrestle with, "What is it that matters today? I don't want to miss it."

When you think about this whole labor thing, it's helpful to think it's not so much that you need to change what you do. Think of it in terms of what you do for a living. It's maybe more of a case that you need to rethink why what you do matters, and why is that a moment that God has given you? So think through a number of different industries where people might be tempted to just crank it out day after day after day. What if you're in the automobile industry? What if you sell cars or you're a mechanic that fixes cars or a body and paint shop that restores cars? Maybe you sell car insurance. However you're related to that industry, it would be easy to think this is just about making money; this is just about the bottom line; this is just about cranking it out to get a paycheck in order to buy stuff. That would be the equivalent of merely *chasing after the wind*. Does anybody in the room really think God gave you today as a gift to waste it that way? But what if we rethink that a little bit? In a community like ours, it is almost impossible to pursue life and your dreams and to experience those moments without reliable transportation. We don't have a lot of mass transit in Lincoln. Most people need a reliable vehicle to have a chance to pursue their dreams. Think about your moments over the last thirty days. Think specifically of the special moments and even the magical moments. I would suggest almost every one of those in some way involved a car, a vehicle. You had to drive to grandma's. You had to drive to be together at Christmas. You had to drive to the restaurant or on your little trip or to the mall or whatever it is. People in that industry need to understand if I, with honesty and integrity and great skill, make it possible for somebody to have reliable transportation to pursue their dreams, you did something that day that matters, that made the fulfillment of that magical moment possible.

What about people in the construction world? It's easy to think we just go out and build things; we get a check and we move on. Again, think of your moments over the last thirty days. I would suggest every single one of those moments happened in some place that was built by someone—a house, a restaurant, a mall, a hotel. Whatever it was, somebody built that...somebody with a lot of skill...somebody with a lot of dedication...somebody who invested themselves in that home where,

over the duration of that home, there will be one magical moment after another. Somebody made that possible. It's a way to rethink why that labor matters, cause my soul to see good in that labor.

Think of those in the health care field. We have many in the health care field that attend Lincoln Berean, for us to just experience life or a quality of life, so many caring, compassionate, dedicated people. This is one that is near and dear to my own heart literally. I mean really, how many of us in the room this morning would say, apart from the dedicated, skillful people in health care we would not be alive today? You can't have moments if you aren't still alive.

What about our educators, school teachers? It's really easy to get caught up in the monotony of all that day, after day, after day—cranking it out, getting a paycheck. After a while that's all it becomes and you lose sight of the fact that maybe you were given life as a gift to be a teacher in order to awaken something in the mind of a student that will set the trajectory of his or her life. Maybe something awakens in their soul that will awaken a dream that will affect thousands and thousands and thousands of people. Maybe for some students, the first time they'll ever experience a moment where an adult genuinely believes in them will be a teacher at school and through that moment, something dramatic will change.

Probably my favorite teacher in my K through12 experience was a sixth grade teacher at Prescott Elementary by the name of Mrs. Grieve. Mrs. Grieve was awesome. There are lots of things that made her awesome but maybe more than anything else there was just a sense that she genuinely believed in us as students. At that age that's a pretty big deal. I remember on one occasion she was talking about the importance of drinking deeply from the well of life—that life has so much to offer. It's like an adventure and there's so much to pursue, and don't limit yourself to just a few things. She talked about sports. She talked about music, about the arts, about academics. She talked about all these different things that are part of life and the importance of pursuing them to be a well- rounded person, to drink deeply from the well of life. And then she said, "There is a student in our classroom who exemplifies this. His name is Jay McCoy." Jay was a good student. Jay was a pretty good musician, a good athlete. He had the whole package and I thought, "Yeah, Jay." Then she said, "There's one other student who I believe exemplifies this. His name is Bryan Clark." Think about that sixty seconds when I was a sixth grader that I can still remember today like it was yesterday. I was utterly stunned. Maybe for the first time in my life I'd ever thought I was good at anything. But something within me awakened to the possibility of a way to live life that set a trajectory for the rest of my life. Any of you that know me well as an adult, one of the things that defines me is I have my hands in all kinds of things, and a lot of that stems back to what she said that sixth grade year—that life is a deep well and has so much to offer. It's an endless pursuit of things in life. Whatever it is, it's not so much that you need to do something different, it may be just that you need to think differently about what you do and why it matters. It's more than just collecting the paycheck. It's more than building a business. It's more than just some way to buy more stuff. Today is a gift and today matters.

Going on to chapter 3—a pretty familiar passage—the one where there's a time to live, a time to die, time for this, time for that. A lot of people see it as this beautiful poem but it's actually kind of a cynical poem. Solomon's in a bit of a bad mood at this point in his writing and he's talking about the emptiness and monotony of life. He's basically saying, "Okay, there's a time to live, a time to die, a time to do this, time to do that, and at the end of the day, who cares and why does it matter?" We all feel this don't we—kind of the every day monotony stuff of life? That doesn't seem, at the end of the story, to really matter much. You get that in verse 9:

What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task (could be translated the burden) **which God has given to the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.** (Vs. 9-10)

He's referring to his poem. This is that burden we carry—the monotony of life, day after day after day, and who really cares? That's kind of where he's at. Verse 11:

He has made everything appropriate (or beautiful) **in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.**

What he's saying is, "God is up to something and has been from the beginning to the end. *We have eternity in our hearts* and what He means by that is there is something deep within us that feels like we were made for something other than this. We feel dissatisfied with the monotony of life. Is this all there is? *A ti*me *to be born, a time to die, time to eat, time not to eat* and he goes on like, "Is that really all there is?" and there's something in our soul that says, "That can't be all there is. It feels like I was made for something more." This is what creates the dissatisfaction in life and rightly so, in the sense that we *were* made for something different from this. This *isn't* the world as God intended it to be, and one day we *will* experience the world as God intended it to be. But that is in the new heaven and the new earth, so always in this life there's going to be a level of dissatisfaction and we're always going to battle against and struggle with kind of the monotony and the ups and downs of life, wondering, "Is this all there is?" It's really important that we understand that because it's that kind of emptiness within us that causes people to chase the wind. They start to pursue money. They start to pursue pleasure. They start to pursue possessions—more and more and more. Somehow, someway, something's got to satisfy, and you end up wasting a life *chasing the wind.* That's what he's talking about. That's what Solomon has done, and it all comes up empty and meaningless. So again, what do we do? We're back to the conclusion again. Verse 12:

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor (causes his soul to see the good in his labor)**—it is the gift of God.**
This is now the repetition of the same conclusion:
I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has *so* worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by...or literally what has hurried by. (Vs. 12-15)

Now that all gets kind of confusing, but ultimately what he just said is the same conclusion. When it's all said and done, here it is: Every day is a gift and every day matters and I must cause my soul to see the good in the moments I have today. That's where I find joy in life. He goes on to say that ultimately everything about God is forever! ***God seeks what has passed by*** or hurried by, essentially saying that God will hold us accountable for the days we've been given. It is entirely possible that we get caught up in the monotony of life and just keep cranking it out—one day after another, collecting a paycheck, just kind of going through the cycles of life. But God doesn't see it that way. God sees it that each day is a gift and I gave you that day as a gift for a reason, so I must discipline my soul to see the good in my labor each day. Why does this day matter? What he essentially is saying is, "That's where you're going to find the joy in life! You're never going to find it chasing the wind. It's not out there. It's in disciplining yourself to see the reality of each day. Rich, poor, black,

white male, female—all of that is irrelevant. We all have days and we all have moments and we all have the same responsibility to discipline ourselves to capture the moments that matter each day.

Skip over to Chapter 5. This, again, is familiar in Ecclesiastes, is very familiar throughout the Bible. Pick it up in verse 10:

> **He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity.**..it's empty; it's worthless. **When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.** (Vs. 10-12)

He's just articulated a familiar biblical message—that if you love money, money will never be enough. You will always want more and more and more. The more you make, the more you spend. The more you make, the more other people want it. It's just this cycle that never ultimately satisfies; you end up doing nothing more than *chasing the wind*. That will be the end result of all you've accomplished. Verse 13:

> **There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.** (Vs. 13-17)

Basically this person that loves money then either hoards it to his destruction or out of his greed, he makes a bad investment and loses it. But he's basically saying that even if you thrive and are filthy rich, at the end of the day you die and it doesn't matter. Nobody takes it with them. The Jews had a proverb: *There are no pockets in a shroud.* Nobody takes anything with them in death. So what Solomon is realizing is someone who is filthy rich, who has more possessions than you can imagine, never has unending pleasure. It's all empty. It's all worthless. It doesn't matter and he's despairing with life. What is it that ultimately brings meaning to life? Now we cycle again to the same conclusion. Verse 18:

> **Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink** (the basics of life) **and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.**

This is the same message that keeps cycling. At the end of the day, if you have the basics of life, then you discipline yourself to cause your soul to see what is the good in my labor today. In this one he says...*in the few days of life that I actually have.*

If you think about eternity, imagine a line going across; it's endless all the way in both directions, and that represents eternity. Now imagine a line that's maybe the width of this front section here and that represents time. The beginning of time to the end of time within the scope of eternity and imagine we take a razor blade and make a little tiny scratch on that line. That represents the duration of your life. The scratch is so thin you can't tell if it's twenty years, fifty years, eighty years or a

hundred years. It's almost insignificant in light of eternity. What he is saying is even though in light of eternity you only get this tiny little scratch, really just a few days, it is possible if you discipline your soul to see the good in the moments you've been given, that in those moments you can connect with what is eternal, and what you do will still matter a hundred thousand years from today. That is utterly remarkable! It will never happen if you're *chasing after the wind*. It will never happen if you're trying to find your happiness, your significance, your value, your pleasure in all the stuff of this world. It only happens when you discipline your soul to realize today is a gift and I only get a few of these. But in this day there will be moments that will matter forever, and I discipline myself to see the good in my labor today.

Solomon's told us that God's up to something—that God has a plan. That plan is eternal. We can't understand it because we're limited but there is something big going on and in the few days that I get, it is possible to connect with that and in my few days to connect to something that will matter forever. That's essentially what he just said.

> **Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered** (or enabled would be a better translation) **him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.**

He's saying basically that God has blessed you. Enjoy it...Celebrate it...Share it...Be generous with it! But in the process, don't lose sight of what matters. Don't allow that to distract you into chasing after the wind, for you still have to discipline yourself to understand what matters. Verse 20 says:

> **For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.**

He's specifically talking about somebody that God has blessed and, rather than getting caught up with that and how long am I going to live and what if I lose my riches and all the worry, fear and anxiety that go with that, he is saying, "This is a person that understands every day matters, and I have today and I cause my soul to see what's the good in my labor today." That person will enjoy every day and not get caught up in the fear and the anxiety and the despair that goes with trying to figure out all the things we can never change or control.

The broader application would be: there are two ways that people miss the moments in life. One is *chasing after the wind*—trying to find happiness and meaning and purpose in all the stuff of this world. The second would be that our days are filled with so much anxiety, so much fear, so much despair about things that may never happen, things we can't change or control that *we actually miss the moments we have today*. To spend time fretting and worrying and being fearful about things that may never happen and to miss the moment today that did happen is the all-time worst tradeoff ever. So we understand that every day matters. *Life is a gift. Every day matters!*

Many of you know for the last nineteen years this has been a point of passion for me. The turning point for me was December, 1998. I had just had a heart catheterization, was lying on the table, waiting for the cardiologist. When the cardiologist came, the first words out of his mouth were, "Bryan, there is no human explanation for why you are alive. None of us can figure it out. You should be dead." I have known with a passion, from that moment on, I am on bonus time. By all human explanations I should have been dead. For reasons only God understands, He gave me bonus days. Maybe part of that was so that I could passionately appeal to you—to understand life is a gift. Don't waste it. Don't get lost in the emptiness and the monotony of life and just crank out day after

day after day. Every day is a gift. Every day has moments. I am fully aware that over these years God has given me bonus moments. In the most joyful moments we've celebrated as a family to the absolute worst moments that we have experienced together as a family, I have thanked God that I got one more day. I got the chance to be there in the most devastating moments of my daughter's life—to maybe be some strength, some encouragement, some sense that she's going to get through this. God gave me that day. I don't take that for granted. When I come back in from a horse ride, when I go fishing with a buddy, when I get the chance to play my cello in the Christmas orchestra, I don't take any of that for granted. I have disciplined myself every night to rehearse my day and to capture the moments that God gave me by giving me bonus time.

Friday was an ordinary day but then it wasn't all that ordinary. I got to have lunch with someone who means the world to me. A few years ago, by his admission, he was ready to throw in the towel and be done with the Jesus stuff. Today he exudes the joy of Jesus. We talked about that and I thanked God I got to spend that day with him and to share that moment. Friday afternoon I spent time with two of our ministry staff. They were hurting; they needed to be listened to. They needed encouragement, some comfort. They are people that help people every single day, but Friday they needed some help and I thank God I was able to be there, to be part of their story that day. On the way home on Friday, I got to stop by the house of some friends to see the new little baby. A little baby, five pounds two ounces—tiny, so vulnerable, so dependent and so beautiful—fearfully and wonderfully made, a genuine glimpse of the handiwork of God! In a few months that baby will be very different. That moment I shared on Friday I will never get back, and on the way home I thanked God I got that moment. It's a good moment. I got home and my daughter Jamie was there. Her husband's out of town; I didn't know it; she showed up for supper. It was great! What does an empty-nest couple do in the winter...in the evening...in the country? Of course, we play darts! *(laughter)* So we invited Jamie into our madness and we had a rousing game of darts that evening. I'm not going to say that Jamie and Patty aren't good at darts; I'm just going to say there are way more holes in the dry wall today than there were a couple of days ago. We laughed; we played. It was great; it's a beautiful moment! We may have twenty more years of those moments but that may be the last one. I don't know. None of us know. All I know is I didn't miss it. When I laid my head on the pillow that night, I thanked God for another day.

Many of us gathered as families this Christmas. You do understand that for some of you that will be the last Christmas you'll ever gather like that as a family on this earth. Over the course of the weekend, with the number of people that walk through these doors, there will be dozens of us here this morning, who a year from now will be in the presence of Jesus. We do the funerals all year long; I know that's true. We might have lots more days. We might have one more day. Life's a gift. It matters. Don't waste it. You don't get tomorrow back ever! *Life's a gift. Capture the moments because that's where you'll find the joy of life!*

> *Our Father, we celebrate that You give us days. There are a number of us in the auditorium this morning who know we are on bonus time. Lord, may we all live each day causing our souls to see the good in our labor. It is one more day to make a difference in someone's life, to be involved in something that will matter forever. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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