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What Are You Searching For?

Skillful Living

Proverbs 23:1-35

Pastor Bryan Clark

All of us, as people made in the image of God, have legitimate longings and desires—the desire to be significant, to find meaning and purpose, to experience pleasure, safety, security. Those are all legitimate longings and desires that reflect people made in the image of God. All of those are ultimately intended to lead us to God. We find, ultimately, the satisfaction, the fulfillment of those desires in a relationship with God. When we do not turn to God to satisfy those longings, we search for satisfaction in other places, and that always leads to trouble. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 23. In Proverbs chapter 23 the writer of the proverbs identifies four specific things that we turn to, to try to satisfy those longings, other than God. One is money and stuff, wine, food, and sex.

Now it's interesting: this is a three-thousand-year-old writing, but it's as relevant as today's newspaper, because this is not new. People have searched to satisfy these longings in these things for thousands of years. Verse 1:

> **When you sit down to dine with a ruler,**
> **Consider carefully what is before you,**
> **And put a knife to your throat**
> **If you are a man of *great* appetite.**
> **Do not desire his delicacies,**
> **For it is deceptive food.** (*NASB, Proverbs 23:1-3)

Now I want to draw your attention to that phrase **put a knife to your throat**. I just want you to think about how graphic that is, how dramatic that is! Even though we interpret the Scripture literally, that doesn't mean that we don't make room for figures of speech, metaphors, hyperbole. This is hyperbole; we refer to it as exaggerated speech. It's like when Jesus said, "If your eyes lust after a woman, pluck them out." It's not actually advocating that you mutilate yourself. It's just exaggerated speech to make a point. But even then, I want you to think about how graphic that language is. If I, in a sermon about this text, told you, "If this is your problem, you might as well put a knife to your throat," I'm pretty sure I would get at least a hundred emails saying, "Pastor, way over the top!" And I agree with that. But I want you to stop and think about it. It's in the text and it gives you a sense of how serious this matter is to use language that graphic.

The idea in verse 1 of **sitting down to dine with a ruler** is that a ruler is a mover and a shaker, someone who can make things happen. This isn't a nice little casual lunch; this is a power lunch. Maybe we would say today, "It's dining with the devil." What's the problem? Well consider carefully what or how the Hebrew could be interpreted: "*...who is **before you, put a knife to your throat if you are a man** or woman (a person) **of great appetite**."* That idea of **appetite** basically means if you're looking and searching for something: if you're trying to find significance, if you're trying to find meaning and purpose, if you're empty...you're hungry—you're searching. You're dining with the devil, discussing the possibility of selling your soul in order to find that which satisfies.

This idea of **appetite** basically carries the idea that I'm searching to satisfy a deep, legitimate longing, but through something other than God. We talked about this quite a bit last week. This can come from how you were raised; it can be something you have to do with one of your parents; it can have to do with relationships and peer groups. It can come from a hundred different things, but ultimately there's something in me that is driving me to prove I have significance, I have value, I matter. "Check me out, I'm not a loser," and when that's deep in my soul, it makes me at high risk for going down a bad path and experiencing the consequences of that.

Years ago, many years ago, I had a friend. He was a little bit younger than me; he was somebody I really liked, I really enjoyed. But he struggled through life, barely got through high school, took some college courses, failed them all, and was just kind of struggling to find his way. We were talking one day and he informed me that he was going to go to law school to be a lawyer. Now I didn't think this was probably possible because I knew he had flunked out of the college courses he had taken, so I pursued the discussion, trying to figure it out. And he finally just told me, "I'm going to go to law school to become a lawyer and I'm going to go back to my class reunion and I'm going to prove to them I'm not a loser." That's exactly what the proverb is talking about; it's extremely common. That young man never really found his way. It led him down a bad path; he ultimately ended up taking his own life.

Gary McIntosh, in his book *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, talks about how many leaders are considered highly successful in our culture, but they're driven by a dark side, by a motivation where they are trying to prove, "I have significance; I have value; I matter," and that is a very dangerous motivation. So dangerous the proverb says, "You might as well put **a knife to your throat,**" because that's bound to lead you down a path of destruction. Verse 4:

> **Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,**
> **Cease from your consideration *of it.***
> **When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.**
> **For *wealth* certainly makes itself wings**
> **Like an eagle that flies *toward* the heavens.** (Vs. 4-5)

Now we've talked about this a lot. There's nothing wrong with making money; there's nothing wrong with having money. From Genesis to Revelation that's never a problem. The problem is when we *love money*. The problem is when we live *for* money. The problem is when we are driven from deep within us to somehow prove we matter by the houses we buy, the cars we drive, the stuff we accumulate. You can be wealthy and not think this way; you can be poor and definitely think this way. It isn't a matter of whether you have it or don't have it; it's a mindset. It's a searching for some sort of significance and value. The idea is you end up then living for the things that don't matter. At the end of your story, no matter what you've accumulated, it grows wings and it flies away. I mean I just can't imagine standing before God, having lived this life with people around me applauding me as being a great success, and then standing before God and God informing me, "By the way, your life—a total miss!" I just can't imagine that moment. That's the risk! When I'm a man of appetite and I'm motivated by the wrong things, I'm very easy to lead astray. I think you can pretty much count on the fact that if you are a person of **appetite**, trying to meet those needs through money and stuff, you are guaranteed to go down the wrong path and waste your life. That's the warning. Verse 6:

> **Do not eat the bread of a selfish man,**
> **Or desire his delicacies;**
> **For as he thinks within himself, so he is.**

He says to you, "Eat and drink!"
But his heart is not with you.
You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten,
And waste your compliments. (Vs. 6-8)

In an ancient culture there weren't motels and hotels, so there was a really high value on hospitality. If you were out traveling when it was nightfall, it was expected that you would take in a traveler; you would give them a place to stay; you would give them food and water. The idea of this part of the proverb is someone who is fulfilling the letter of the law but resents every minute of it. He wants his stuff for himself because that's the basis of his significance, and so he resents the fact that you're staying with him; he resents the fact he has to give you food. He gives you some dried-up morsel that's so bad you will probably vomit it back up, and no matter how much you try to compliment him, he won't hear it. He's angry and bitter and resentful. It's kind of this idea of the heart of someone who seeks their value and significance in the things of this world.

Now this has been a passion of ours as a church for about fifteen years—of really seriously trying to cultivate a generous culture—and God has done amazing things! If you are visiting with us this morning, I just want you to know that seated around you are some of the most wonderfully generous people in this community. I would say churches by and large across the country are filled with people who simply fulfill the letter of the law but they resent it. They resent any time the preacher talks about money. They get angry; it sets them off. "Why do we have to talk about money?" And you really have to wrestle with, "Why is that?" What's going on deep in these people's souls that so upsets them? That contrasted with people who have learned the joy of generosity, who understand that God has given me what He has given me to steward. They've found the joy of generosity, and they would never go back to this self-centered way of living. One of the things we celebrate together as a church is we have become a very generous church. We have discovered the joy of generosity. Chances are if that's how you live your life, you're almost guaranteed to travel down the path and live for the things that ultimately matter. So one of the things people turn and search for to satisfy these longings is: money and stuff. The second one is found in verses 20 and 21:

Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine,
***Or* with gluttonous eaters of meat;**
For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty,
And drowsiness will clothe *one* with rags.

It's talking about somebody that turns to the bottle, turns to **wine** and drinks too much. There's the wine and there's food. **Gluttonous**—I'll get to that in just a moment. Pick it up then in verse 29. Twenty-nine to the end of the chapter is the longest running discussion about the misuse of alcohol in all of the Bible, so it's helpful that we read it. Verse 29:

Who has woe? (Woe is like calamity.) **Who has sorrow?**
Who has contentions? (which is conflict) **Who has complaining?** ("Poor me; I'm the victim)
Who has wounds without cause?
Who has redness of eyes?

So verse 29 is a good description of somebody who abuses alcohol. The questions are answered in verse 30:

Those who linger long over wine,
Those who go to taste (or I think better translated search...) **for mixed wine.**

So what's the problem? Well, it's not just the problem of those who drink wine; it's **those who linger long over wine**—excess, too much. The second part of verse 30: **Those who go to taste mixed wine**—the term for **mixed wine** is only used twice in the Bible. Nobody quite knows what it means, but the relevant term is actually this term *search for*. Much of the language there and in the following verse is the exact same language used earlier in the book of Proverbs for the seductress woman, for the young man that goes out on the street and he's searching basically for the harlot or the prostitute. It creates this image that alcohol is like this seductress; it's like this woman. It calls to us. It lures us in to somehow satisfy the longing in our soul. So the last part of verse 30 could be translated **those who go to search for her**.

Do not look on the wine when it is red,
When it sparkles in the cup,
When it goes down smoothly; (Vs. 31)

Almost all of those terms are used for this seductress woman earlier in the book of Proverbs. So the red is like a beautiful woman in a red dress. **It sparkles...goes down smoothly**. It's this description of this seductress that calls to us to somehow satisfy those longings in our soul.

Now we talked about this a few weeks ago, that there's nowhere in the Bible where the Bible condemns the responsible use of alcohol. Again, I know some people don't like to hear that, but if we're going to be people of the Book, we have to accurately reflect what the Bible says. Wine was extremely common in the ancient culture. The quality of the water was very poor and wine was found in pretty much every home. It was just kind of a normal part of living. Some people try to make an argument between fermented and unfermented wine but that argument just doesn't really stand up. This is the typical Hebrew word for wine. It's sometimes used in a very positive way such as in Psalm 104:15—that wine is a gift from God; it delights the spirit. It's the same term. There's another Hebrew word that is sometimes translated *new* wine or *fresh* wine. It's just the idea of wine that hasn't fermented as long, but there are texts in the Old Testament where that wine intoxicates people, so you can't make the argument it was unfermented. That's just not the case. The issue is with the *abuse* of alcohol, with the *abuse* of drugs and alcohol. We put all that in the same category.

Now just a couple of things for what it's worth: If you're maybe somewhat cynical, you may think in your mind, "The only reason that you say that is 'cause you're trying to defend you own behavior." So if it helps you, I personally don't consume any alcohol; I'm not trying to defend my own behavior. It's not my behavior. Now I make that choice not because I think it's more spiritual, not because I think that makes me a better Christian, not because I think I'm more committed to Jesus. I don't think any of those things. I do it for two reasons: One is because, as a congregation we do have a lot of people that struggle with alcohol, and I just stand in solidarity with them. It's like, "Hey, I'm going to stand with you; we can do this together. We don't need it... together." A lot of people really appreciate that. I think it's best in my role. But the second is it does help when we have this conversation. People can't say I'm defending my own behavior. It's not my behavior. It kind of neutralizes the discussion a little bit. I'm just trying to accurately reflect what the text says.

So the issue is clearly stated: The problem is heavy drinkers; it's people that linger too long over their wine. So having a glass of wine with a meal or a beer—something like that—no problem, but

it's when it crosses that line into intoxication. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament clearly forbid that. I think the line is the legal limit. There's a lot of research that goes into saying that is the point in which someone's judgment is impaired and that is the biblical concern—when at some point our judgment is impaired by the substance, that is the line. So think of it this way: Having a nice glass of wine with a meal—fine. It's just enjoying a refreshment, like a good meal. But I would challenge you to think about this: Once that glass of wine is for any reason other than just simply enjoyment, I would question it. In other words if it's to relax, if it's to deal with your stress, if it's to get a little buzz, if it's to help you sleep, at that point it's not just something you enjoy; it's something you need. So I would ask you the question: Why do you search for that in a bottle instead of in your relationship with God? Isn't God supposed to be the One we go to for our refuge? Isn't God the One we go to with our stress? Isn't God the One we go to, to deal with our anxiety and our fear? Isn't God our place of refuge? Why would I turn to a bottle? Why would I not turn to God? It's helpful to really assess, "Why am I doing this? Am I searching for something I should be actually experiencing in my relationship with God?"

Several years ago I was involved with a group of pastors from around the country, similar size churches. We were in a group for two years, met four times over those two years—a great group of guys! On one occasion the guys were just sharing and kind of going through struggles and whatever, and it was getting pretty personal. All of a sudden one of the pastors talked about coming home at the end of the day, trying to deal with the stress of ministry, and would do so with a glass of wine...and another glass...then another glass. Everything kind of got quiet and he looked around the room and he said, "I just need to tell you; I think I have a problem. I can't stop." Pretty soon one of the other pastors said, "Yeh, I think I have a problem too." Then one of the other pastors said, "I think I have a problem too." About one-third of the pastors in the room admitted that it started just trying to deal with their stress; it ended up they felt like they had a problem and they couldn't stop. It's a legitimate question: Why do I turn to the bottle and not to God to deal with the stress, the anxiety, the stuff in my life?" The risk is talked about. Verse 32:

At the last it bites like a serpent
And stings like a viper.
Your eyes will see strange things
And your mind will utter perverse things.
(I'm going to add,"Your mouth will say stupid things.")
And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea,
(He's talking about somebody staggering on a boat at sea.
It's a good imagery of someone who has had too much to drink.)
Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast.
(Someone who's the lookout but they're asleep on the job;
they are passed out because of the alcohol.)
"They struck me, *but* I did not become ill;
They beat me, *but* I did not know *it.*
When shall I awake?
I will seek another drink." (Vs. 32-35)

It's pretty graphic imagery of someone who then gets out of control with their alcohol and just kind of a graphic description of that behavior. One of the things that I have found over the years is it's really hard for some people to assess, "Do I have a problem or not?" Several years ago I was in a men's group and met someone there. We've become friends and are still friends, and over the course of a conversation he said to me, "You know, I don't think I have a drinking problem, but I'm not sure." I said to him what I've said to a lot of people over the years, "You know, here's what I

would do. Just go six months without it. If you can go six months without it, it doesn't faze you; you probably don't have a problem. But I think you're going to find out pretty quick." About three weeks later he said to me, "I have a problem...it's a big problem!" He realized this is far more of a problem than he realized. To his credit, he faced it; he dealt with it; he just told me the other day he's "X" amount of years sober and doing great. I found this to be pretty common in Christian circles. It's easy to say, "It's not a problem." "Fine, go six months without it. If it doesn't affect you, you probably don't." But you may be surprised what you learn.

Again, why would you search for satisfaction in a bottle for the things that ultimately should come from your relationship with God? Verses 20 and 21 also have the same basic conversation for food. People can use something that's good—food—but overdo it and become gluttonous, and it has the same basic idea. What am I looking for? What am I searching for? What am I trying to satisfy? What's causing me to act like that? People can pursue food and misuse it just like they do alcohol. It is interesting to notice that gluttony is in the same verses with those who drink too much alcohol. It does have the same concern.

When I was growing up in the fundamentalist movement, one of the things that always confused me was you had preachers that were a hundred, two hundred pounds overweight, barking to people about alcohol and cigarettes because, "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit," and I was thinking, "But what about the food thing?" Somehow it was okay to be a glutton but they barked at the smokers in the room? It's like food can be another thing we turn to, to find comfort, to find peace, to deal with the stress. A lot of people stress-eat and it has the same basic discussion as the wine. Why would you look to food to satisfy the needs that ultimately only God can meet? The last one is in verse 26:

> **Give me your heart, my son,**
> **And let your eyes delight in my ways.**

I love verse 26, but I find it very, very challenging. Much of Proverbs is a father having a discussion with a son. That's kind of the metaphor that's set up for the book of Proverbs. What verse 26 is saying—the father is saying to his son, "Son, trust me with your heart," literally, "Observe my ways." Basically the idea is me as a father saying to my kids, "Hey, trust me with your heart and just watch me. Follow me. I promise I will lead you down the path of life." In this case it's in a context of the concern over sexual immorality. Verse 27:

> **For a harlot is a deep pit**
> **And an adulterous woman is a narrow well.**
> **Surely she lurks as a robber,** (like a mugger)
> **And increases the faithless among men.** (Vs. 27-28)

So the harlot is a prostitute. The word **adulteress,** I think is a poor translation. We've talked about this before. Literally the Hebrew is "strange". If you have a King James, I think it says "a strange woman". It's actually a really good translation. Not strange in the sense of odd but it has the idea of foreign, which carries the idea of any sexual behavior outside of God's plan and purpose. The idea is that's strange to God. God made us as sexual beings; this is where God intends for that to happen; any activity outside of that is strange to God and it is destructive.

Verse 27 is extremely graphic. I'm going to be a little bit sensitive here, but thinking of the woman's anatomy and then thinking of the idea of a **deep pit** and a **narrow well**, you can figure it out. It's very graphic language. The idea is that in this deep pit which is a well, somebody comes;

they're very thirsty, but the well is so deep you can't get to the water. It's just a teaser, but it never satisfies. The idea of a **narrow well** is the same thing. You come; you're thirsty; you're dying of thirst, but the well is blocked. It's so narrow you can't get to the water. Again, it has this idea that it just teases, but it never actually fulfills. Verse 28, she's like a *mugger*, waiting for some naïve person to come down the alley and she's going to mug them.

Now I think we all understand this is a huge problem in our culture. We are a sexually-contaminated, sexually-confused culture. The whole idea of this proverb is: what are you looking for? What are you searching for? What's the need you are trying to satisfy that you cannot get satisfied in a relationship with God? What do you think is going to satisfy you on that computer screen? I mean honestly, in your own heart, answer the question. After a session on the computer screen, are you deeply satisfied? Are you deeply fulfilled? Are you really glad you did that? The answer is, "Of course not!" It's about shame. It's about guilt. It's about self-loathing. It's about hating yourself. It's about feeling enslaved and you go away more dissatisfied than ever. Some sort of a fling that satisfies? Is it working? At some point you have to ask, "What am I doing and why am I doing that?"

That's where verse 26 is so critical. We as a Christian community ought to be able to penetrate out into our community and say, "Hey, trust me. Trust me with your heart. Follow my example and I will lead you to the path of life." But a lot of Christians can't say that because they themselves aren't living that way.

I'm fifty-nine years old; I've been married for thirty-seven years. The only woman I've ever known sexually is my wife. When we engage in intimacy, I share with her something I have never shared with anyone else. Are you really going to tell me that you think an image on a computer screen, some sort of a little fling, offers the same depth of soul-satisfying intimacy as a life long, one flesh relationship, as God intended? Especially to the young people, it breaks my heart! You're giving away a piece of yourself you don't get back—and again and again and again! The culture lies to you, "No harm, no foul." I guarantee you, twenty years from now you will regret that. You can't go back and change the past, but it can stop today before you give more of yourself away. What are you looking for? And is it working? If it's not working, isn't it time to consider the need for change? Those of you that are single need to understand that ultimately the sexual drive is the soul's longing to be intimate with God. I would never tell you to go without. I would tell you to find what your soul is longing for in a deeply intimate, meaningful relationship with God. You can be just as satisfied as those of us that are married, because ultimately that need is met in a relationship with God.

Those that are not meeting legitimate powerful needs in a relationship with God look elsewhere. They turn to money and stuff. They turn to alcohol and drugs. They turn to food. They turn to sex. But all of those lead down a path of destruction. The writer of Proverbs says, "**Put a knife to your throat,**" if you're a person of appetite. If you're searching for something that will satisfy outside of a relationship with God, you are headed down a dangerous path.

I want to close by letting you know some resources that can be of significant help to you. One we've been talking about is the *Money Talks* series. It's a six-part series that deals with what I think is the core issue in the Bible about money. It's not about budgets; it's not about debt. Primarily they're biblical conversations about money that help you evaluate your value system, help you see clearly what it is you're actually living for. It's a small group study. Grab a group of friends for six weeks. We've asked people to try to go through it sometime before the end of the decade. You can get it at the Publications Center.

Second of all, several years ago I wrote a book called *All It's Meant to Be*. It's my attempt at a theology of sexuality. In all of this sexual confusion, how do you figure out, "Why did God make us as sexual beings, and what is supposed to be the role of that in our lives as Christians?" So hopefully that will be of some help. That's also at the Publications Center.

Number three: In your bulletin there's a link. You follow that link; it will take you to the website and there's a long list of resources that can help you with every single area we've talked about this morning. One of the things I love about Lincoln Berean Church is we offer so many resources to people. Whatever it is you are struggling with, I guarantee you there is a resource that can help you. Go to the website, check it out: Lincolnberean.org/happenings

Lastly, up on the 200 level is the Care Center, the Prayer Center. If you want to talk to somebody, if you just want somebody to pray with you about some of these things, someone is waiting there. They'd love to do that. Every person in the room, you have legitimate longings and desires that are intended to lead you into a dynamic, intimate relationship with God. But when you do not meet those needs in a relationship with God, you will go searching to meet those needs in other places which always leads to disaster. So one more time: What is it you think you're going to find in money and stuff, in the wine, in the food, in a sexual relationship that you cannot ultimately find in a relationship with God?

Our Father, we celebrate that You have made us in Your image to experience a depth of love and intimacy and delight in a relationship with You. But when the enemy lures us off the path, we quickly head down a path of destruction that just breaks our heart again and again. God, may we find our life in You through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Your Son, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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