

The Good Life

In the name of him through whom all the blessings of heaven are eternally ours, dear friends in Christ. Let me start, as I often do, with a question for you to consider. It's this: how would you define *the good life*? If everything were exactly as you would like it to be, what would that look like? How would things be different for you than they are now?

Now, obviously there are as many answers to that question as there are people here this morning. We all have our own aspirations, hopes, and desires. We have individual tastes and personalities. And each of us has a unique situation. What you think of as *the good life* is going to depend on how old you are, what your place in a family is, what kind of duties and obligations you have, and a lot of other factors. Still, I think it's possible to describe in general terms a quality of life that would appeal to most of us. And this isn't my idea; there are a lot of people who think it's possible. In fact, they're banking on it.

From time to time a consortium of real estate developers, homebuilders, interior decorators, and landscapers will get together and set up what they call "a street of dreams". Perhaps you've visited one of these. It's usually where they're setting up a new upscale housing development in a rapidly growing suburb of a major city. The idea is that they're creating the perfect community. So they'll set up somewhere between six and a dozen model McMansions. These homes will be tastefully appointed with all the right furniture and household items. And for a couple of weeks they'll open them up to the general public, who, for a nominal entry fee, can wander through these fine homes and get a glimpse of how the so-called "other half" (which really represents the top five percent or so of incomes) lives. Their hope is that people viewing these homes will like what they see and want to build their own homes in the same development – and even if they can't afford one of the homes, at least they'll want to incorporate some of the features and furnishings they see into their existing homes. Yes, it's all one great big commercial. And it works; that's why they do it.

And these "streets of dreams" really are impressive. I know because I've been to a few (and for the sake of peace in the family, I won't mention that it was always against my will). Within the homes you'll find all kinds of high tech appliances and recreational gizmos. Each bedroom has at least one walk-in closet, and sometimes even the closets have closets. Oh, and its own spacious bathroom too, with a Jacuzzi and tub so large you could swim laps in it. These homes are designed for entertaining, so in addition to the kitchen dining area, there will be formal dining room, a breakfast nook, and an outdoor dining area on the deck or patio. And besides that, there will be a kitchenette with a full bar in the downstairs recreation room; this room also being equipped with a table for billiards or snooker (or both) and a large home theater. I can remember going through one of these homes and thinking, "You know, a family of four could live here and go for weeks at a time without actually seeing one another".

I might mention too that it isn't only the people in the housing industry that get in on the act. No, in any one of these home's four car garages you'll find at least one "sporty" car, say a Jaguar or BMW; a "family" car, that is, a luxury SUV for going grocery shopping and taking the kids to soccer matches; and then maybe a speed boat or other recreational vehicle, *and* a trailer loaded up with motorcycles, four wheelers, or snowmobiles. You've got to have all the toys on display.

Naturally these homes are all together in a gated community that features a private golf course and country club, at which there's a fine restaurant and a sports complex with a full gym, tennis courts, and other opportunities for leisure, for exercise, and for ... and for what, I'm not sure because if you actually lived in one of these homes, you and your spouse would have to be working all the time to pay for it and all the other fabulous stuff inside.

But that doesn't matter to the folks who are trying to sell you on the whole package. What they want you to do is dream of the good life. And they know what appeals to you. So they lay it all out there. They let you experience it for a bit, giving you a little taste so that you'll crave it and begin to think to yourself, "Yes. This is it. If I were living here and had all this stuff, why, then I'd be living the good life."

And this is more than an indictment on our rank materialism – the idea that with enough money I can buy the things that will make me happy. It also reveals our relentless pursuit of pleasure. What you'll note in all of this is a heavy emphasis on recreational activities. They want you to imagine your life as constantly entertaining friends, going to cocktail parties, playing golf, watching sports, playing video games, and on and on. They want you to define the good life as the life of leisure, wealth, and excess. It's not what you do to make your money. That doesn't matter. It's the fun you can have with your money if you make enough of it. That's the good life. And the truth is that most of us buy into this hook, line, and sinker. It's part of our fallen state. It's all about me, what's mine, and how happy I am.

This is the problem that wise King Solomon is addressing in today's reading from Ecclesiastes. And what he's saying, in a nutshell, is that this kind of good life is not all it's cracked up to be. And he ought to know because for a while he lived it, and in so doing he discovered just how empty and meaningless it all was. So he says, "He who loves money will never be satisfied." He's telling us that the pursuit of wealth for the possessions and pleasure it can buy is an endless treadmill. Sure, there's some short term happiness derived from new acquisitions; but the novelty and fun soon wears off. And then there's always something else newer, more exciting, or more promising out there which is just out of reach that you tell yourself if you had, then you'd be really happy. It never works. And part of the trouble is that the more goods you own, the more your goods own you. My daughters are learning about this now. They like having a car at college; but they're discovering that a car need to be maintained. When they were at home, I took care of that stuff and they never thought much about it. And it's not just the oil changes they used to watch me do. No, you've got to replace brakes and tires and tie rods and pretty much everything else that moves. It all eventually wears out. First time homeowners discover the same thing. It's not just cosmetic stuff like interior paint, carpeting, and curtains. No, you've got roof replacement, tuck pointing, plumbing, electrical, water in the basement, and termites to worry about. Those homes on the street of dreams look so very nice when they're all brand new, and everything in them is in perfect shape, and the lawn and yard has been carefully manicured. But they have to be maintained that way.

And that usually means hiring people to do it for you, which is what Solomon means when he says, "When goods increase, they also increase who eat them." That is to say, when your cash flow improves, you think you're getting ahead; but you soon discover that you're now paying people to do the things you used to do for yourself when you had less. And the more you have, the more people you have to hire. For the very rich it means hiring housekeepers, butlers, drivers, security personnel, financial advisors, people to live in and maintain your other homes and properties when you're not there; the list goes on and on. But your own life is still pretty much the same. You still can only eat so much. You can only wear one set of clothes at

a time. And you still have only so many hours a day – hours which are now filled with other pursuits—and far more worries.

Thus Solomon tells us that the sleep of the laborer is sweet; but that the wealthy person's slumber is troubled and brief. The translation we heard makes it sound as if it's the rich diet of the latter that gives him indigestion, and that may be part of it; but really what Solomon is driving at is the worry that accompanies wealth. Let me illustrate with a true story. While in high school I worked for a while in a grocery store. One evening we were throwing freight, which was our term for restocking the shelves with goods from the storeroom. We had these long narrow carts on which we'd place stacks of boxes containing goods that wouldn't fit on the shelf when the new cases first arrived. A couple of times a week, we'd try to put out as much of these items as we could to keep the shelves full. Anyway, one fellow I was working with yanked on his cart and the stack of boxes on the end teetered and fell over. You could hear the sickening crunch of broken glass as jars of pickles, olives, mayonnaise, and who knows what else smashed on the hard floor. It was an accident, and the guy who did it was usually a fairly good worker; but when it happened he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh well, there go this week's profits." Unfortunately for him, the owner of the store happened to be standing at the end of the aisle. Let's just say he wasn't happy with what he saw. He was even less impressed with what he heard this employee say. But the point is this: the kid throwing freight knew he was going to get his paycheck whether the store did well or not that week. The loss was coming out of the owner's pocket. And he's the one who went to bed that night worrying about the people he had working for him and what went on in the store when he wasn't there.

And Solomon goes on to point out that this is a two-edged sword. Yes, the more you have, the more you have to worry about, so you might think you'd find relief in losing what you have; but it doesn't work that way. Even though the increase of goods doesn't bring the happiness you thought it would, if you have a lot and lose it there's real pain involved. This is what he means when he says, "riches were kept by an owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture." He was miserable when he had the wealth; but now that he's lost it, he's even more miserable. Now he considers himself a failure, and he has nothing to pass on to his son. He'll go to his grave as poor and naked as the day he was born. His life, which centered in trying to find happiness in wealth, has left him nothing. He spends the rest of his life, Solomon says, "eating in darkness, with much vexation, sickness, and anger. That is to say he's bitter and resentful – his life just one big waste of the gifts God that gave him. All in all, it's pretty depressing; it's what Solomon calls "a grievous evil under the sun".

Fortunately, though, that's not where Solomon leaves us. He goes on to describe what the good life is really all about. And though this flies in the face of what our materialistic culture teaches, and indeed what our own sinful, selfish beings naturally believe, the wise King tells us that the good life is not fixated on working to gain wealth and the things it can buy; but rather on finding its contentment and satisfaction in the work itself. Did you catch that? To emphasize and help ensure it sinks in, let me rephrase: We usually think of work as a necessary evil. I have to work in order to earn money, because with money I can do the things I really want to do – which isn't work. But Solomon has just shown that's a dead end. You'll never find the good life you seek that way. So instead he says we have to adjust our thinking. We have to stop thinking of money as work's reward. Work is its own reward. And the money you get from it goes to provide you with life's necessities so that you can continue to work and to find your joy and contentment in serving your neighbor through your work. *This* is God's gift to you. This is the good life he's designed for you. Wisdom, divine wisdom, is coming to see this for the truth that it is.

Think of our first parents in Paradise. God gave them each other to love, to serve, and to care for, and the garden to tend. And they found their joy in doing that. Adam was pleased to do whatever he could to benefit his wife; and she found her delight in seeing to his needs. They didn't have any money. And they never thought of trying to avoid work in order to pursue their own personal pleasures. No, they liked working for each other. It's what God designed them to do.

The fall into sin upset God's good design. Or, to be more precise, the fall into sin distorted our understanding of what good is. Now we don't like serving; instead, we want to be served. And so we see God's good gift of work as something evil. But, you see, it's because we're messed up in our thinking. We've got it all wrong.

Again, think of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came into this world to serve us. Though he was God and Lord over all creation, yet he made himself a servant for our sakes. And he served us by performing the worst, most painful, humiliating, and disgusting form of labor possible: he bore the crushing weight of our sins to the cross, and there he suffered and died in our place in order to satisfy the justice of God. This, we are told, he did for the joy set before him. As horrible as it was, it pleased him perform this work for us – because he knew it was the only way we could be saved ... saved, and restored. Restored to what God designed us to be. And renewed in our thinking to understand and fully appreciate what the good life is really all about. It's about the work we can do to benefit our loved ones, our neighbors no matter how distant they may be, and yes, even our enemies.

How can we do this? How can we start living the good life now? It begins by recognizing that we do have it wrong, and that our selfish pursuit of wealth and pleasure is the problem. And when we see it in ourselves, we need to confess it as the sin that it is. And turning our trust and hope to Jesus, by whose labor of love on the cross we are forgiven and renewed, who even now continues to give us his body and blood to feed and nourish our faith in him, and whose Spirit indwells us to guide our thinking, we can even now in this fallen world begin to live according to God's original design for us. And then we'll see that it doesn't make any difference what kind of work you do or how much (if anything) you are paid for it. As long as it benefits someone else, it's part of the good life God has planned for you. And you'll see too that your hands, your time, and your talents are God's good gifts to enable you to serve others on his behalf – just as the things others do for you are also part his plan to care for and to keep you. This too is his gift.

And so this is the good life we have in Christ. And if we can begin to live it now in this fallen world, which is filled with so much sin, sickness, sadness, and wrong thinking, imagine how it will be in the next, when everything is restored to the way it ought to be through Christ Jesus. Then our joy in serving will know no bounds, and we will spend eternity living the truly good life with Jesus and all those who are with him. May the Lord in his mercy hasten the coming of that day. And may he keep us now in faith, living the good life in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!