

## The Pursuit of Pleasure

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, Psalms 16:11, 2 Timothy 3:1-5

### Slide 1

How would you define pleasure? One definition is: *“The enjoyment or satisfaction derived from what is to one’s liking, gratification, or delight.”*

Regardless of how you may define it, the definition of pleasure is usually good, but what we’d have a difficult time agreeing on is how you’d experience the greatest pleasure in life.

Think about it. What are the things, that you like to do, that give you the most pleasure? Do you get pleasure from eating, being outside, i.e. taking a jog, bicycling, walking?

What about watching or participating in sports? Or gardening, building things, listening to music?

There are even those who achieve pleasure from their achievements, i.e. getting awards at their workplace, getting promotions, etc.

Although we can agree on some form of definition of the word pleasure, what we can’t agree on is the best way to pursue pleasure because there are so many avenues in life to pursue and find pleasure.

Yet, the corporate world is accommodating our need to find pleasure, by allowing us to do so 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Even so, some people, who are constantly pursuing pleasure, are never satisfied. We live in a culture that’s bored with life.

This revelation is brought out in today’s passage, as we find that there’s no eternal pleasure apart from a relationship with God.

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's attempt to document what life is like when it's lived totally apart from God. The conclusion he makes, throughout the whole book, is that life, apart from God, is meaningless.

Last week we saw where Solomon tried to find meaning in the life cycles of nature and the human life cycle only to realize that, not only is life meaningless and not only are all those things in nature meaningless, but they're monotonous.

But, when you put God into the picture, all of a sudden everything takes on a divine and eternal quality. We're able to see life and nature the way a child is able to see it, with God in all of it.

Today, we're continuing to follow Solomon's quest to find meaning in the pursuit of pleasure.

## **Slide 2**

Because Solomon was quite wealthy, he had the time, talent, treasure, and power to pursue any form of pleasure he wanted.

He summed up that pursuit in Ecclesiastes 2:1, when he wrote, *"I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.'" But that also proved to be meaningless."*

In order to discover pleasure, he pursued many different avenues that are not unlike what we pursue today. Some suggest that he was following a hedonistic philosophy of life.

The idea that, to achieve true happiness, the best thing we can do is avoid pain and pursue pleasure. So, he began by pursuing wine, eating, and laughter.

Ecclesiastes 2:2-3, *“Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.*

Then he tried pursuing pleasure through the building of great projects whether it was houses, buildings, or monuments.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-6, *I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.*

Like many men and women today, he tried to find pleasure in his accumulation of wealth. While Solomon didn't have a stock portfolio, he invested in livestock, servants, gold and silver.

He even tried to find pleasure in relationships with women, acquiring 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Ecclesiastes 2:7-8, *I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart.*

We don't have his entire lists of pursuits, but just in case he missed anything, he sums up his pursuits in verse 10, *“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.”*

Reading this passage, it sounds like it was a success. He found delight and pleasure in all he desired. But as we know, Solomon eventually puts a negative spin on things.

Ecclesiastes 2:11, “*Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.*”

Again, he uses that the word “*gained.*” We learned last week that “gain” conveys the idea of profit, what’s left over after a transaction.

When he used this word, he’s basically saying that after all his pursuits of pleasure, there was nothing left over. Did you catch the phrase “*chasing after the wind?*”

If you read through Ecclesiastes, you know that just like “*under the sun,*” this phrase “*chasing after the wind*” is very common. It means pursuing something that ends up slipping through your hands.

Solomon had the ability to extract pleasure from every possible avenue of life at that particular time, yet he always came up short. It always came up meaningless.

So, like in the first chapter, when he looked for meaning in nature and life, and found it to be meaningless, he found the pursuit of pleasure meaningless, too.

This is a lesson that should be taught to our children in school because I believe it would save them a lot of unnecessary pain, hardship, and disappointment, but we know that’s probably never going to happen.

In reality, regardless if this lesson is learned in school or not, they’ll learn this through the school of hard knocks.

Most of us have lived long enough to know that all those things that we've pursued always seem to come up less than satisfying.

In fact, if we pursue something too hard and too long, we actually damage our ability to find pleasure in anything. That's what you find in addiction.

### **Slide 3**

Dr. Archibald Hart wrote a book called, *Thrilled to Death*. The premise of the book is pretty simple.

He thinks the younger generation has overstimulated their brains or are in the process of overstimulating their brains, which limits their ability to experience any long-term pleasure.

He referred to this inability to experience pleasure with the word *anhedonia*, the inability to gain pleasure from normally pleasurable experiences. It's a real word.

It's from the Greek *an*, which means "without," and *hedone*, which means pleasure or delight, so *anhedonia* basically means "without pleasure or delight." *Hedone* is also where we get the word hedonistic, a pleasure seeker.

His book, *Thrilled to Death*, suggests that we have overstimulated our brain so much, or at least the younger generation has, to the point of not being able to experience pleasure to the degree that we were meant.

This inability to experience pleasure is a byproduct of the culture in which we live today where we have access to stimulating our brain 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

There's no reason to be bored today. If you get bored or lonely, just send somebody a text, go online to a chatroom, or an online gambling/gaming room.

If you don't like anything you see on the internet, turn on your TV. If you can't find something on those 200 channels, then look at your DVR and watch one of the many shows you've recorded.

If the kids get bored riding in the car on a long trip, just pop in a video or plug in their iPads so they can become occupied. We provide constant stimulation to the brain in a way for which it was never designed.

We have a place in our brain, called the *nucleus accumbens*, which is our pleasure center. It's causes us to feel pleasure when it's stimulated by something.

The things that stimulate our pleasure center come down different pathways depending on the source.

Watching a sunset, food, sex, drugs, alcohol, or even enjoying a video game are some of those pathways that create pleasure in our pleasure center.

This whole system of the pleasure center and its pathways is known as the pleasure system. This system is very, very powerful.

There were experiments done in the 1950s on rats. These rats were taught that, if they pushed a certain button, it would stimulate the pleasure center of their brain.

After a while they began thinking, "*I kind of like that. I want to do it again, and again, and again.*" They kept doing it. They couldn't get enough. In fact, they said one rat was able to achieve 10,000 impulses an hour.

It couldn't get enough. So much so that when the choice came between food and water, and that electronic stimulation, they consistently picked the electronic stimulation to the point of death.

Dr. Hart says that this applies to human beings, too. Everyone has this stimulation around us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is the world our children live in and their children will enter into.

We're allowing them to have full access to all this stuff. There's no reason to be bored. Just hit the button. Hit the button. Hit the button. You constantly stimulate, stimulate, and stimulate.

Some older individuals might say, "*What's wrong with that? We had stuff in our day.*" Yes, we did, but this is different. 30 years ago, you didn't have the ability to stimulate your brains 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, like today.

You say what is wrong with that? Dr. Hart says, "*What is wrong with it is, we're frying our brain. We're destroying our pleasure center.*"

It's like any addiction. Why does an drug addict need to get high more and more and more? Because the pleasure's no longer there. It forms an addiction.

Over time, that threshold for pleasure becomes higher and higher and higher.

You have to constantly be stimulating more to get to that threshold. Eventually what happens is you have no pleasure left in your brain.

Imagine the difficulties our children will have in their marriage when they're not able to experience any form of pleasure with their mate. This is serious.

In fact, Dr. Hart says that this *anhedonia* is the cause of mental illness as seemingly minor as a sleepless night all the way up to schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, and ADD.

That's what's happening to brains that are overstimulated. We learn from Solomon, from our own experiences, and from scientists that too much of a good thing is not always good.

I think most of us know this, yet we see that the world just can't get enough. It's constantly seeking some form of stimulation, some form of pleasure in any way they can get it.

#### **Slide 4**

For Christians, that are familiar with the New Testament, this should be no surprise because this is exactly what Paul wrote to Timothy about 2,000 years ago.

*2 Timothy 3:1-5a, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power."*

Does this sound familiar? Does it sound like today? It sounds like we're in the last times as evidenced by the statement, "*Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*"

Don't get me wrong. The solution isn't to stop pursuing pleasure. God gave us that pleasure sensor. God wired us that way. The solution isn't in unhooking those wires.

The solution is found here in this passage. If the problem is that we're lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, then the solution is that we must become lovers of God rather than lovers of pleasure.



In other words, we must destroy the idols that we've made in our lives. In Biblical times, the people would worship idols made of wood, stone, and in some cases gold.

We have idols today except our idols are made from different materials like plastic, metal, silicon, and paper. The bottom line is they're idols.

To have idols in our life of any kind is a violation of the first and the second commandments that say, *"You shall have no other gods before me"* and *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or the earth beneath or in the waters below."*

Yet we have idols of pleasure in our lives. It's not that we should stop pursuing pleasure or stop doing enjoyable things, but we must begin to reverse things, to make God our greatest good and our highest form of pleasure.

We should become what theologian John Piper refers to as *"Christian Hedonists."* Those two words don't seem to go together, especially if a hedonist is someone who pursues pleasure.

But he explains, *"By Christian hedonism, I don't mean that our happiness is the highest good. I mean that pursuing the highest good, in other words God, will always result in our greatest happiness in the end."*

It's a reversing of the order. A Christian hedonist knows that the sin is not pursuing happiness. The real sin is being satisfied with things of the world when God offers us so much more.

It's as if God's sitting on His throne saying, *"Why are you messing with this stuff? You're trying to get your mind stimulated by this plastic, paper, or silicone thing and all the while I'm sitting here just wanting to heap out an abundance of pleasure on you."*

C. S. Lewis sums it up best when he says, *“We’re half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. We’re like an ignorant child who wants to continue to make mud pies in a slum because he can’t imagine being offered a vacation at sea.”*

We’re too easily satisfied to play with mud while God says, *“I have a 12-day cruise to the Mediterranean waiting for you and you want to stay on the pier and play in the mud.”* That’s how ignorant we are.

### **Slide 5**

But again, God’s not trying to be a killjoy. What He’s trying to do is help us find real joy in life. When we pursue God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, we’ll begin to find that pleasure.

The pleasures of earth will still stick around, which is okay, but we’ll view them differently. We’ll view them not as an idol, but as gifts from God.

C. S. Lewis defines this, in one of his books, as *“refreshments on the journey.”* God offers us refreshments. He offers us a game of golf, or football, or a sunset, or a myriad of other things as *“refreshments on the journey.”*

The one thing we don’t have to worry about, when we see these things as gifts, is that we’re unlikely to become addicted like a drug addict.

Frank Laubach said, *“You learn to become intoxicated with God.”* As we pursue God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, what happens is God begins to open up pathways of pleasure.

Food, alcohol, gaming, golf, or whatever are pathways. All they give is a temporary buzz, they’re not lasting. You can’t name something on earth that’s eternal pleasure.

But, as God opens up these pathways to us, we begin to experience eternal pleasures. Pleasures that are not only valid here but valid into the life to come.

The psalmist said it best in Psalm 16:11, *“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”*

Why are we settling? I don't like to use this word, but compared to what God offers, every pleasure that this world gives us is crap. There's no other way to explain it except we settle for less.

God made known to us the path of life and that path of life that He made known is Jesus Christ. It all fits together.

As we pursue a relationship with Jesus, through the daily practices or the weekly practices of prayer, Bible study, meditation, and worship, what happens is we begin to tap into the eternal pleasures of God.

## **Slide 6**

### Conclusion

In closing, my question to you is pretty much the question I asked at the beginning: *“Where do you find your greatest pleasure in this world?”*

If you find more pleasure in anything in life other than what you find in God, you have idols in your life and you need to destroy them.

Then, as you destroy those idols, you will begin to find pleasure in God. You will begin to experience, not only the temporary pleasures of life, but the eternal pleasures that are made available to us through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 16:11, *“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”*