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THE GOLDEN SLIPPER PROBLEM

Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:3

The defending Super Bowl champions, Tampa Bay Buccaneers opened the NFL season playing a primetime game against the Dallas Cowboys. Something unusual occurred that evening. Laurie seemed to get very interested in the game. She doesn’t normally get much into games involving two teams she has no attachment to, but this one did draw her in. It turned out to be a great game, but that wasn’t what seemed to be of such interest to her, although she did get a little caught up in the drama of it. No, what caught her interest was one particular player, a man named Tom Brady. Heard of him? She seemed fascinated by him. I’m sure it had nothing to do with the fact that he is one dashing, handsome dude. She would tell you it is because he’s doing something no one thought possible, playing quarterback at an elite level in the NFL at the age of 44. It has never been done before and likely never will be again. He played extremely well in that game.

We learned that game also drew the interest of Toby and Anna, and during it they had what proved to be a classic married couple miscommunication. While they were watching the game Anna said at one point, “I think Tom Brady dies his hair.” Toby reacted in a weird way. He seemed shocked and said, “Why would you think something like that? That’s a terrible thing to say.” Surprised, Anna said, “What’s so terrible about dying his hair? It’s not that big of a deal.” Then Toby responded, “Why are you suddenly talking dying hair?” It turned out that Toby thought she said, “I think Tom Brady’s going to die this year.” You can see why he reacted.

Think about Tom Brady. Let’s assume that he is not, in fact, going to die this year, which as far as I can tell, is a pretty good bet. I have no idea if he dyes his hair. The question on many minds is, how long is he going to play? He is still playing terrific football. He said years ago he wanted to play until he’s 45, but now there are rumblings of him trying for 50. When is it going to be enough? Money at this point, for him, has to be irrelevant. He’s made many millions in salary and endorsement fees, plus his super model wife has made millions. He has nothing to prove. He has records for most games won as a quarterback, most passing yards, most passing touchdowns, most Super Bowls played in, most Super Bowls won, most Super Bowl MVP awards, and the list goes on. He is the acknowledged greatest quarterback of all time. So why isn’t all that enough? Hopefully part of it is he loves playing football, loves being part of a team. But part of it is it is human nature that nothing is ever quite enough. Most players quit because they have to, they’ve gotten too injured or too old. It is unusual to say, “That’s enough for me. I’m satisfied,” when one doesn’t have to. And that points us to a problem all of us deal with. Today we are going to look at Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:3 and be reminded of some elements that are crucial for having a satisfying life.

THE WORLD OVER PROMISES AND UNDER DELIVERS

As part of our recent bathroom remodel project Laurie ordered some glass tile as an accent for the bathtub surround. The store she bought it from informed her they would send it to us and it would be delivered on a certain date. But then the project moved ahead much faster than we expected. She realized on a Saturday that we needed that tile on Monday, but that it was going to be delivered at the end of that week. She canceled that order and found that we could drive to the store and pick up the tile Sunday afternoon. So we did that. In the process she learned that the tile she had initially ordered had already been shipped. It actually showed up that Monday afternoon at our house. I was impressed with the fact that the store said they could get it to us on Friday, but it actually arrived on Monday. So now we had two boxes of the tile rather than the one we needed. I tell that story because the store promised something, then did much better than what they had promised. They under promised and over delivered.

Compare that to the ads for toys that make them look amazing. Laurie recently showed me an ad for a toy that she thought Wesley might like. In the ad it did lots of cool things. But I know that if we got that toy it would not be nearly as cool as it looked in the ads. Somehow those toys never live up to the hype in the ads. When I was a kid it was toys you could get by saving cereal box tops. When you had enough you sent them to the company in Battle Creek, Michigan, and sometime later the promised amazing toy would show up in the mail. But it was never as good as they made it look. It was kind of like the Little Orphan Annie secret decoder ring in the movie *A Christmas Story,* when Ralphie uses it to decode the spy message, “Be sure to eat your Ovaltine.” A crummy commercial! Those toys over promise and under deliver. The Teacher tells us that is the way of the world. In the end, everything here does that to some extent.

In these verses the Teacher points out several ways that the things of this world fail to deliver on their promises. The things of this world promise us quite a bit. All of us have various thoughts floating around in our heads about how life would be better. They start, “My life would be much better if…” The truth is that there are things that would make our lives better. A filet mignon dinner at Ruth’s Chris Steak House is just better than a sirloin steak dinner at Denny’s. The problem is that the things of this world promise more than being better, they sometimes tell us they will give us the full life we want. A key component of that stuff of the world is money, because it is the thing that gives us so many of the other things we think will fill our lives.

We take our thinking a step beyond, “My life would be better if…” That actually can be true. But we expand that to “My life will be fulfilling and satisfying if, and only if…” We all have, at various times finished that sentence with some thing in this world. It could be having some social status, being liked, gaining approval, getting a particular job, having success, reaching a financial goal, living in a particular place, or any of a myriad of possibilities. We think that something we can gain or achieve is essential to our happiness and fullness of life. Failing to gain whatever that thing is seems unbearable to us.

As I said, there are some big problems with that thinking, and these verses point out several of them. There is one big one that is that the heart of our problem. I will identify that shortly. In 5:8-9 Solomon discusses how the poor are often oppressed in this world as the powerful use their power and position to enrich themselves at the expense of the less powerful. So that’s one clear drawback to this world that affects the majority of people.

But we really start to get to the problem with the stuff of this world in verses 13-15. Wealth can be lost through some misfortune. Remember Jesus said the stuff of this world can be eaten by moths or stolen by thieves. I have seen this happen. I recall some friends who were in our church many years ago. He had started out in the real estate industry. He did fine, but he got connected with some other people that had a vision for how they could do much better by investing in real estate. By the time we got to know them they were doing extremely well. They had lots of properties and had a big home in a very expensive area. They were building a real estate empire. And then a recession hit. Their properties were highly leveraged, and as the real estate market tumbled one by one their properties began to turn into problems. They tried everything they could think of to stop the bleeding, but in the end nothing worked. They lost everything, including their home. Their whole empire collapsed. They had to move to a different state where the cost of living was lower and had to start over from basically nothing. I actually have a list of friends who have had something similar happen to them. They seemed to have it all, but in a surprisingly short period of time they found themselves with nothing.

Laurie and I had some funds in retirement accounts that we saw get cut nearly in half at one point by a recession. That’s how it is in this world. Stuff can get taken away in the blink of an eye. Verse 15 reminds us of a stark truth. “Everyone comes naked from their mother’s womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart.” We come into life with nothing, and we go out with nothing. None of the stuff of this world lasts.

There’s another problem in 6:2. God gives people wealth, possessions and honor, everything their hearts desire. But what they don’t get is the ability to enjoy them. The things they have turn out to be just things, and they don’t actually give satisfaction and joy at all, at least not for very long. The things we aim at and gain, don’t produce lasting joy and satisfaction.

I have mentioned this before, but when I was a kid there were two boys the same ages as Jerry and me who lived across the street from us. We played with those guys a lot. But they always got lots of cool toys, stuff that was better than what we got. At one point their parents bought them real football jerseys with numbers on them and everything. Such things have proliferated in our world today. They’re everywhere, but back then they were hard to come by. I wanted a jersey, too. At that young age some of our heroes in Bakersfield were guys who played high school football. My dad mentioned that maybe he could get an old jersey from East Bakersfield High School for me. That would have been the best, way better than what the McMillans had. But it didn’t happen. What a disappointment. Years ago I told that story in church, and a couple of months later some members of the church gave me an actual jersey from my old high school. They had contacted my high school and arranged to buy a jersey from the school! I was blown away. What a kind act of grace and love! I finally got that jersey that I had wanted so badly! That thing has sat in my closet now for more than 15 years. Though that jersey has lasted, it didn’t bring fullness of life. It mostly has just taken up space in the closet. You might say that was because that was a childish desire, and that’s true. But at some point we realize everything ends up being a childish desire. That’s how it is with the stuff of this world. Its value wears off quickly, and often it wears away. It overpromises, then cannot deliver on those promises. It never can.

The biggest problem, the one at the heart of all of this, is in 5:10. “Whoever loves money never has enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.” You could substitute anything for money or wealth in that verse. Whoever loves status, approval, success, pleasure, comfort or anything else will never have enough. Proverbs 27:20 says, “Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes.”

When is death satisfied? When does death say, “I’ve taken all the human beings I will ever need. I’m done. I’m not going to take any more people. ” That never happens. The problem for us is, we never are satisfied either. Oh we may set our sights on something that we absolutely must have, and when we get it have a sense of satisfaction, feel very happy. But for how long? More than a nanosecond, but not a lot more. We almost immediately move on to something else, something more.

In May of 2018 the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* reported on a study done at Harvard University. They surveyed 4000 millionaires. They asked them to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 how happy they were. Then they asked them, “How much money would you need to rate a 10 on the happiness scale?” The question was multiple choice with possible answers ranging from they had as much as they need up to they would need 10 times more money than they currently have. Only 13% of them said they had enough money already to be that happy. The most common response was the highest amount possible in the test. It was that they would need 10 times as much as they currently had! That was the answer 26% of them gave. These were millionaires, and that many of them felt they needed to be multimillionaires or even billionaires. The next most common answer was that they would need 5 times as much money as they had! That was the answer of 24% of them. Do you see the point? These are wealthy people, and the overwhelming majority said they needed more to be happy, and most said they need a lot more.

THE ANTIDOTE FOR THE DISAPPOINTMENT IS CONTENTMENT

We see what is really needed in 5:19-20. “When God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to ***accept their lot*** and be happy in their toil, this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life because ***God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.***” What we need is to have the ability to enjoy whatever God gives us. We need to accept our lot and be happy, and if we do that we will be occupied with gladness of heart. To accept our lot and be happy is to be content with what we have and where we are. Please notice that ability to do that is a gift from God.

The great 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, said, “It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy that makes happiness.” John Bunyan, the 16th century pastor who wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, said, “If we have not quiet in our minds, outward comfort will do no more for us than a golden slipper on a gouty foot.” If you have painful gout in your foot, the fanciest, most expensive shoe, isn’t going to help even a little. If you do not have quiet in your mind, if you are not at peace and content, then no amount of money, status, power or pleasure is ever going to bring you satisfaction.

In 1 Timothy 6:6-7 Paul wrote, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” He had mentioned in verse 5 that there were people who thought that godliness is a means to financial gain. In his day, as in ours, there were people who thought they could make lots of money in the religion business. Appearing to be godly was a potential way to get rich, if you are scruple deficient. Those people had pretend godliness, not the real thing. They weren’t about true godliness. They weren’t about knowing God. They were about getting money, and saw supposed godliness as a means to that end.

They failed to see, as Paul says, we come into the world with nothing and go out with nothing. Yes, maybe you think life is like a big casino and you have built an enormous stack of chips. The problem with this casino is you have to leave all the chips when you exit the casino. You can’t take any with you. Perhaps like no other, this life is truly a zero sum game. You start at zero and that is exactly where you end up.

But Paul says that’s not true of godliness. You can and will take godliness with you out of this life. It is a means of enormous gain, but only when combined with contentment. That’s because if you are not content in this world with wherever God has you and whatever he gives you, then in reality you are not being godly at all. You are pretending godliness, just like the hucksters who tried to get rich peddling ersatz religion. You are pursuing something else as the source of gain. If you are content with whatever God has for you, then you can focus on true godliness, which yields great gain in this life, for it is a joyful life, and even greater gain in the next life. Being content is key to the true gain.

Harvard psychologist, Shawn Achor, says the thought, “If this happens, then I’ll be happy,” is a false construct. He says we are wired for discontentment. Studies show that when we achieve success or gain something we have been pursuing, our brains move the goalposts. They automatically shift to an even better house, job, car, more money, more approval. We never arrive.

We are all aware of the problem of substance addiction. When a person puts chemicals into his or her body, the brain adjusts so that it depends on that chemical. That person’s body essentially adapts to it. Neurologists call that tolerance for the chemical. Greater and greater amounts of the chemical are then needed to give the person the same effect.

Researchers are now finding that this tolerance effect happens in relation to non-substance matters as well. Our brains adjust to circumstances as well as chemicals. In his book, *Authentic Faith*, Gary Thomas wrote, “No matter how much money we make, our mind will function in such a way that even vast wealth eventually will feel ‘normal.’ Our brain becomes accustomed to a certain standard of living, and once we become accustomed to something, it’s only a matter of time until we become bored with it.”

When my son, Toby, was getting ready for his senior year in high school, he looked forward to playing football in his final year. I was amazed as the football coaches upped the already extreme demands they had for the players in terms of the workouts they had to do. They told the players this was what was required in order for them to move the team to “the next level.” I was surprised by that. The previous year that team had gone undefeated, won their league championship, won the CIF championship were ranked number one in the State of California in their division. I thought, “Exactly what level is above that? What is this next level they are going for?” Our problem is something in our brains always wants to go to the next level in everything. That means there is never any real peace. We never arrive at a place of satisfaction.

What we need is contentment. Actor James Earl Jones was asked in an interview about the pursuit of happiness. He said, “Every step I take…it’s just about being content, that’s all. I don’t know what the pursuit of happiness is. What do you mean, pursuit of happiness? No, contentment. If that doesn’t put a glow on your face, nothing will.”

I once saw that truth played out in front of me while we were on vacation. Laurie and I were staying at a resort hotel that we never thought we could afford to enjoy. We had previously walked through the grounds of the place and marveled at the beauty of it, but it was way beyond our budget constraints. Then one year we put a bid on Priceline for a hotel in the area that this resort was in. It was an absurdly low bid. To our surprise and glee, our bid was accepted. Then we learned that it had been accepted at this amazing resort! We couldn’t believe our good fortune. We didn’t know how that happened, but we weren’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. So we checked into that resort. Our room was very nice. We knew that it was one of the lesser rooms in the resort, but it was very comfortable and we were thrilled to be there. At one point I was at the front desk. I don’t even remember why I was there, but while I was there I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation between a hotel guest and an employee that took place not far from me. It became apparent that this guest was staying in one of the best suites in the hotel, but he was complaining. I can’t even tell you now what he was unhappy about, except that I thought it was rather petty. It certainly was not something that would have affected his enjoyment of the resort. This man had ridiculous expectations and demands, and when they weren’t met he was actually kind of ugly about it. I went away from that moment thinking about the contrast. Laurie and I were just happy, actually giddy, to be there. We were truly content with our accommodations. That man had way more than we did, but wanted more and was unhappy he wasn’t getting it. So the question I have is, who do you think enjoyed their vacation more? I’m certain we had a much better time than he did, because we were content with what we had, while he was focused on what he wanted and didn’t have.

APPLICATION

What we need is to be content. So how do we become more content? Here’s what you can do to be more content. Become a “G Whiz.” By that I mean become a whiz at three things that start with the letter G.

**God**

The first is God. We must pay attention to the fact that these verses remind us that being able to enjoy what we have and to find satisfaction in life is a gift from God. ***It is not a result of having the right set of circumstances.*** Contentment is inside of us. It will never come from a change outside of us. The big lie is “if only this would happen, then I’d be content.” No, you won’t. If you’re not content today, you won’t be content when something changes. Gary Thomas wrote, “a discontented person won’t find contentment through any outward change.” Think of contentment as being almost like one of your physical traits. You have brown eyes. If your outward circumstances change you will not suddenly have blue eyes. If you are not content, you will also not suddenly be content if you get something you are sure you must have. This means if we are going to ever really be content, we are going to have to look to God to provide it.

We must guard against looking to and trusting in some thing of this world to finally provide some peace, satisfaction and contentment for us. Remember the football jersey that I wanted so much. It was a disappointment when I didn’t get it as a child. But what if I had gotten it? It wouldn’t have been long before it was just a thing. It would have been forgotten. Yes, I know, that was an insignificant, trivial thing, so of course it would have been forgotten. The problem is whatever you think is so important that it is crucial to you having life, the same thing will happen to it. You’ll get it, enjoy it, maybe even revel in it, then eventually find that you think you need something else, and that first thing will be taken for granted or even forgotten, and you won’t be content. So when you start obsessing about anything as the thing you need to be content, you need to picture it as my football jersey, because it will end up being the same.

Psalm 16:11 says to God, “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” The joy, the satisfaction we want is found in God’s love and presence with us. In John 7:37-38 Jesus said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within.” There it is, the life, the joy, the contentment flowing from within, not from outside of us. It comes from continually believing in Jesus, continually drinking from his grace, his goodness, his love, his provision and wisdom. Either those verses or true and the life we seek comes from Jesus, or they are not true and we are wasting our time here. We are to be pitied. But what can we do practically to experience that contentment from God?

Psalm 118:24 in the New American Standard translation is familiar. “This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” God has given you this day. He has given you what you have today. He has put you where you are today because this is where he wants you to be. The question we face is, are we willing to accept what God has for us today? Do we believe that what God supplies today is enough? If we do, then we should rejoice in it, and if we rejoice in something we are content with it.

Does this mean it is wrong to ever try to change anything? No. Laurie and I have some blinds in our windows in our bedroom that are terrible. They are ugly, and they have another drawback. They’re not effective at cutting out light so in the morning the rising sun streams into our faces. Would it be wrong for us to want to replace them? No. But we are on the wrong track if we say we cannot rejoice today, can’t be content with those things in our bedroom. I don’t like them, I want to change them, but if they are there the rest of my life, I can still rejoice.

Neurologists have scanned the brains of people of faith as they recalled times they felt especially close to God. The scans showed that a specific area of the brain called the caudate nucleus lit up in the scans. They found that this part of the brain that is activated when we feel connected to God. Then came a really surprising and interesting finding. The neurologists tested other people by scanning their brains while they showed them images of products that are hot brands. The exact same area of the brain lit up! The scientists discovered that people who bought some new items had the same kinds of sensations as people who had deep religious experiences.

The stuff of this world wants to mimic God, to tell us it can give us life. It is not true. God is the author and source of life. We will only find life, true life, peaceful life, content life from him. So we need to major in believing that today, this day, God has given us what we need for life, what is best for us, what is for our good. So we should rejoice and be content in where he has us, and ultimately rejoice in our relationship with him. Being satisfied comes from being connected to God, loved by him. It comes from knowing God. Jesus said in John 17:3 that knowing God is eternal life, the life of fullness that we all long for. Proverbs 19:23 says, “The fear of the Lord leads to life, then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”

**GENEROSITY**

One of the most powerful ways we can become more content is by seeking to become more and more generous. Generosity comes from taking our eyes off of ourselves and putting them on how we can love and bless other people. Here’s a principle we know, but we easily forget. The more we focus on ourselves, the more unhappy we will become, for as we look at ourselves we will only see how much more we need. As we seek to love and bless others we experience the joy of giving and we do what God has created us to do.

Remember 2 Corinthians 8:2. Writing about the churches of Macedonia, which were stuck in intense poverty, Paul said, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” In their terrible ordeal of persecution and poverty, these people begged with Paul to let them give to help other believers. They had overflowing joy. Isn’t that what you want? It comes from being generous, and the more generous we are the more we quit being obsessed with ourselves, and the more content we can be.

I’ve noticed a change that has taken place at more and more fast food establishments. They have a credit card reader that has a small screen that presents your bill, then you sign on it to pay the bill with your card. But the innovation that has come with these card readers is they always ask if you want to add a tip to your bill. Until a few years ago I never thought of giving a tip at a fast food restaurant. You ordered your food at the counter, paid for it, and a bit later they would bring you the food. End of transaction. Now they are asking about tips! They typically give you options like 18% or 20%. This irked me at first. The whole tipping thing is kind of annoying to me, but all my life I’ve been used to tipping the servers in restaurants. After all, they wait on your table, giving you a glass of water, taking your orders, bringing your food, and so on. But at a fast food place they just take your order, hand you the food and send you on your way. So at first I felt a bit annoyed by this subtle demand for a tip and their suggestion it should be in the same range as people who serve you in a more traditional restaurant. But then it hit me. The people working in a fast food restaurant are not making much money. They’re not living the dream. This is no one’s idea of a career position, and they are far from well paid. I realized that I can bless these people in a small way, I can do a small kindness for them, by giving them a tip even though they’re not waiting on me like servers in a traditional restaurant. In other words, I can be generous and express a little love to them. When I saw it that way, it became kind of fun to add a tip to that bill. Generosity is a lovely thing that brings joy and contentment into our lives.

When I refer to generosity we usually think of money, and that is surely a big part of it. If you’re not generous with your money, then by definition you’re not generous. But I mean something larger. I mean we should seek to have generosity of heart. If you want to be content, seek to always love, for that is what God has put you on the planet to do. Think always of blessing, giving to others in every way that you can.

**GRATITUDE**

Remember that guy at the front desk of the hotel. He had a lot. He had a much, much nicer room than Laurie and I had. How do you think his attitude and his spirit would have changed if he had focused on how thankful he was for the wonderful place he was staying? It would have been an entirely different ballgame for him.

More does not bring us life. Paul Piff is a professor at UC Irvine. He has done experiments using rigged Monopoly games. He observed that when they rigged the game in favor of a person, giving them way more money than others and many advantages, those players started to become more rude toward other players, less sensitive and more and more demonstrative of their success. Then he conducted similar experiences with real life wealthy people, and noted the same result. He said in every experiment higher incomes correlated with more mean behavior. He said, “As a person’s level of wealth increases, their feelings of compassion and empathy go down, and their feelings of entitlement and self interest increase.”

More stuff doesn’t fill us with life or make us better more joyful people. In fact it does the opposite. So we should give thanks to God that he loves us, and see everything we are and have as a gift from him. The more thankful we are, the more content and the more joyful we will be. 1 Thessalonians 5:16 commands us to “be joyful always.” How can we do that? Paul tells us in the next two verses. Pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances.