

May 13, 2018  
Rick Myatt

PURSUING THE WIND  
Ecclesiastes 2:1-7

Have you ever set a goal, longed for some accomplishment, then achieved it and ultimately found that while it was gratifying to have done it, found that it wasn't quite what you'd hoped? When we look back on our lives we can usually feel good about achieving goals like that, be proud of them, yet also find that life kind of goes on pretty much the same. We still find that we are yearning now for something else. That's something we should pay attention to. It tells us something about life.

Recently Laurie and I were watching an action show on TV and we saw a scene where the woman lead character got into a fight with a guy who was a lethal assassin. It was quite a fight, and in the end the good guy, who in this case was a girl, won the day. Watching it I was thinking it just wasn't realistic. The reality is that men are bigger, stronger and faster than women. It's just a physical fact. A fight between a trained, hardened man and a trained woman is going to end badly for the woman. As I was thinking about that Laurie said, "I am getting kind of tired of every woman on TV being a tough chick who can beat up any man." Of course when we watch any movie or TV show we have to suspend our insistence on reality, but when the producers intentionally ignore reality on a fairly consistent basis we should understand they are promoting a message.

You would have to be blind and deaf to not notice the huge push for women in our society. Today, everything seems to be about girl power. The message is that women should be on equal footing with men, if not superior to them, in every endeavor and every circumstance of life. Women can and should do anything and everything that men do. Five years ago Sheryl Sandberg published a book that was a best seller entitled *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will To Lead*. Sandberg is a Harvard Business School graduate, former assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury and Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. In the book she expresses her belief that women often stifle their dreams, ambitions, careers and even their personal lives because they are afraid. They are afraid, she claims, that if they appear too smart or capable they will intimidate the men in their lives. They are afraid if they are to have a successful career they will have to give up a happy family life. They are afraid they might fail or look foolish or disappoint the expectations of others. She asks women, "What would you do if you weren't

afraid?” She tells women they need to “lean in” to their dreams and ambitions. She calls on women to reach their full potential as women.

That message is music to the ears of many in our society. I totally think women are and should be equal to men. And the emphasis on woman power is a counterbalance to the reality that throughout history women have been suppressed, oppressed and often mistreated by men.

However, there is a subtle trap in the thinking of our culture. Don’t we need to ask what it means to reach one’s “full potential”? Potential for what? When it comes to anything even slightly mechanical I have unlimited potential for messing up. Is it important that I fulfill that potential? And why does it matter if anyone fulfills their potential? Ms. Sandberg has assumed some things in her challenge. She assumes fulfilling potential means becoming a leader in some field, being successful, having a career that might be envied by others. It means accomplishing the things one dreams of. And she assumes this is important because then one can feel worthwhile and have a sense of fulfillment in life. Let’s be clear that those are presuppositions that she has assumed to be true. They are presuppositions that need to be examined and questioned.

Kelly Wallace wrote an article on the CNN website about this thinking and the feminist movement that is going on in our culture. She said opportunities are now open to women, in some cases for the first time, and this is true in business, politics, science, sports, art, nearly every field. So she wrote, “It’s a great time to be a girl – or is it? Because behind all these possibilities is a troubling development. Girls’ anxiety and depression are climbing and turning increasingly tragic.” Between 2007 and 2015, a period of only 8 years, the suicide rate for girls aged 15-19 doubled.

Rachel Simmons, the author of best selling books *Odd Girl Out* and *The Curse of the Good Girl*, says, “No one can dispute the wholesale...collapse of girls’ wellness right now...It’s really a crisis.” She says a massive wave of depression and anxiety is washing over girls in our culture. In other words, this big push to have women compete and succeed in every field is actually doing serious damage to them. Doesn’t that suggest that there may be something wrong with the movement’s presuppositions? Simmons has theories about why this crisis is occurring, but I fear she is missing the heart of the problem. It actually is an issue that impacts both men and women.

A recent article in *Psychology Today* acknowledged the reality of the damage that is being done to women, and laid the blame on 3 messages our culture sends: your worth is based on your appearance, your worth is based on approval and attention from others, and your worth is based on accomplishments. All of us, men and women, feel the weight of those messages. And our society, while denying the validity of those first two messages, actually hypocritically endorses them.

But the real killer is that last one. Nearly everyone in our culture totally embraces it. The feminist movement has totally bought into it. Much of the push to have women fulfill their “potential” is founded in that idea. You fulfill your potential, you find your worth, through accomplishments. And that idea is what is driving all the damage that is being done. Does anyone ever question it? Could it be that principle, which drives so much of our society for both men and women, actually is the problem? For an answer I direct your attention to Ecclesiastes 2 where we will see the effect of living by that principle.

#### SOLOMON TRIED PLEASURE

There are those who debate the identity of the writer of Ecclesiastes, but he introduces himself in 1:1 as “The son of David, king in Jerusalem.” It could be that this is someone else seeking to represent Solomon’s perspective, but we have no proof of that. This enigmatic book consists of Solomon’s musings about life and its meaning. In this chapter Solomon describes his attempts to understand what life is really all about and to find a sense of peace and fulfillment. He did what an awful lot of people do. Verse 1 says he decided to test himself with pleasure to see what is good.

It would appear that he launched into a party lifestyle with reckless abandon. He tried cheering himself with wine and simply having good times filled with laughter. It sounds like he went to college. After I graduated from college I worked in a ministry to college students. One of the things we did to try to reach students with the good news of Jesus that was mostly ineffective was we took a group of students from our ministry at spring break to the Colorado River. I don’t know if it’s still the same, but back then students used to flock out there to get some warm weather, some sun, some water skiing, and some heavy duty partying. Solomon would have been right there with them in this phase of his life.

What I saw was an awful lot of desperate people drinking themselves into oblivion, dealing with hangovers and having absolutely nothing but emptiness to show for it.

Solomon experienced the same thing. He said, “Laughter is madness.” In other words, that whole lifestyle is insanity. It gains one nothing but regret.

A couple of years ago Laurie and I went back to Mississippi to visit Michael and Carissa. During the visit we went down to Pensacola to watch the Blue Angels fly there. The day after the airshow Michael took us to a place a little ways from Pensacola that was actually in Alabama. That day we got inner tubes and floated down the Blackwater River for a couple of hours. There were quite a few people doing the same thing. But I noticed a couple of groups in particular that were thoroughly lubricated with alcohol. What a metaphor for their lives. Floating along, not really going anywhere, and drinking themselves into a place where they were not really able to coherently interact with their environment along the way. This is no news to anyone, but the pursuit of partying and pleasure is a total dead end. Solomon’s experience only verified what anyone with half a functioning brain can observe.

#### SOLOMON TRIED PROJECTS

Verses 6-7 tell us he tried to do some impressive projects, building not just a magnificent house, but several impressive homes. He planted vineyards, created gardens, built irrigation systems. That’s actually an understated description of what he built. He was most famous when it comes to building for constructing the famous temple in Jerusalem. But you can read in 2 Chronicles 8 a list of some of his projects. They included numerous cities, walled and fortified cities, storehouses and much more.

Solomon attempted to find some sense of fulfillment in accomplishments. He tried to make his mark on this world and leave a lasting legacy to give him some sense of meaning and fulfillment. His accomplishments put anything we might do to shame. He was one of the most famous men in all of history.

All we need to do is ask, what person alive today is going to accomplish more than Solomon? Which person is going to end up more important in human history than he was? Donald Trump? Oprah Winfrey? George Lucas? Any Kardashian? Megan Markle? None of them will even be a blip on the radar of human history compared to Solomon. And these are some of the most successful and famous people alive. Solomon had far greater accomplishments than any of them.

#### SOLOMON TRIED POSSESSIONS

Solomon also tried amassing wealth. Verse 8 says he amassed gold and silver, singers and a harem of wives. He piled up more stuff that he wanted than anyone else alive. We can see in 2 Chronicles 9:13 that Solomon received 666 talents of gold every year. That was just one source of revenue for him, there were others that likely netted him more than that sum. However, that sum is worth noting. I did the math on it and found that was the equivalent of around \$832 million of gold. He got that every year, for 40 years! That amounts to over \$33 billion. That's just from one source.

I came across one source that estimated Solomon's wealth in today's terms, taking into account his many revenue streams. They came up with an astounding figure of \$2.1 trillion! Apple Corporation is currently worth \$900 billion. Microsoft is worth \$650 billion. That means Solomon could have bought them both, lock stock and barrel and had \$500 billion left over!

His wealth was truly unimaginable. For some reason recently Toby and I were looking at the prices of corporate jets. No one in our family is thinking about buying one, though we have a pilot in the family who could fly one if we had one. This was just a matter of curiosity. We discovered they are really pricey. A Gulfstream 650, the biggest, fastest corporate jet on the market, sells for a cool \$65 million. Toby's a doctor, but he is in no danger of ever being in the market for something like that. Solomon, however, could have bought 32,000 of them! Yeah, I'd say he was pretty good at amassing wealth.

#### SOLOMON TRIED PHILOSOPHY

In verse 12 Solomon said, "Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly." In other words, he tried to understand what life is all about, what it means. We all know that Solomon was blessed with great wisdom. In 2 Chronicles 9:1 it says, "When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, she came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions." In other words, this famous and powerful ruler heard about this king in Jerusalem who was the wisest man alive so she traveled there to ask him the toughest questions of life.

In 2 Chronicles 9:6 she said, "not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me." This guy wasn't just a party animal, or the world's greatest capitalist, or a dynamic leader and builder. He was, at the time, not just the smartest man in the room, but the smartest man on the planet.

#### SOLOMON'S CONCLUSION WAS PITIFUL

Solomon didn't mention attempting a career in sports or movies, which is what so many young people dream of today. But he was the ultimate celebrity, a star in nearly every field of life. If anyone thinks they can establish a sense of worth, fulfillment and meaning through accomplishment, Solomon was way ahead of you. Wherever you go, no matter far you go, he has been there before you. What did he conclude?

Verse 17 tells us. "I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." All of it, the projects, the accomplishments, the money, the fame, the pleasures, even all the smarts he gained ended up being meaningless. It was like chasing the wind trying to catch it. All you will ever end up with is handfuls of nothing.

Our culture is telling women they have to fulfill their potential by being a leader and a big success in some field. Part of the reason for that is men have been believing that for a long time. I invite you to consider this. Did Solomon fulfill his potential as our world urges? Yes, he did. And how did that work out for him? He said the whole thing was a waste of time. It was pointless, empty. He ended up hating life.

No wonder women are being engulfed by a deluge of depression and anxiety. They are being pressured by our society, having enormous stress put on them, to pursue and accomplish something that will never truly fulfill their potential. All it will do is end up being an empty waste of life.

Can what Solomon said really be true? Consider Tom Brady, quarterback of the New England Patriots. He's got it all. He is talented, successful, famous, handsome, married to a supermodel, absurdly wealthy. And at one point he said, "There's got to be more than this." Jim Carrey, the actor, also rich, successful and famous, not long ago gave a speech at the Golden Globes show that capsulized Solomon's message. After parodying his own success and making fun of the two Golden Globes he had previously been awarded, he said, "I dream of being three time Golden Globe winning actor Jim Carrey, because then I would be enough. It would finally be true, and I could stop this terrible search for what I know ultimately won't fulfill me."

I am all for equality for women, but I also want both women and men to understand that the push to achieve, to accomplish, to be successful, to be

somebody, is a lie that destroys lives. It drives us away from that which brings peace, fulfillment and meaning in life.

### APPLICATION

What should we be telling not just women, but everyone? Where does fulfillment and meaning in life come from?

### CONNECT TO GOD

Well you knew we were going to go there. It's church, right? So it's always going to be about God. It should be no surprise that a pastor would say this, but it is true. In Ephesians 3:19, at the end of a long prayer for believers Paul related the final outcome that he prayed for in their lives. It was that we would "know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

How full is God? He is the definition of full. God has not been sitting around on his throne for eons feeling depressed and thinking, "there has to be more than this." What do you think God is like? In 1 Timothy 1:11 Paul called God "the blessed God." What do you mean when you say, "I am really blessed"? You mean "I have it really good and I know it. I'm really thankful for where I am." That's what Paul meant when he said God is blessed. He has it really good and likes where he is. One scholar has said you could translate that God is the "happy God."

In John 15:11 Jesus told his disciples that he instructed them so that "my joy may be in you." That would not be especially motivating unless they really wanted the kind of joy that Jesus had. That means that Jesus was full of joy, joy so complete we don't really know what it is like. In Romans 14:17 Paul said the kingdom of God "is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom of God is a place of peace and joy! That's because God himself is full of peace and joy.

People long for success, for accomplishment, for acclaim, for wealth, not really for those things in and of themselves, but for what they think they can bring. If you knew for a fact that success in some endeavor was going to make you sick and miserable, would you want it? Many years ago some friends got together and gave us a great gift for our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They gave us money for a trip to Hawaii as a way to celebrate. We ended up taking the trip several months later, in February. It seemed perfect. The day we left here was literally the coldest day we have experienced in the more than 38 years we have lived here. We landed in Hawaii on a gorgeous, sunny 80 degree day. It was glorious. We were ready for a

restful, relaxing, warm and refreshing tropical vacation. That first day there was all we hoped for. The second day started out the same. But in the late morning of that day the wind began increasing significantly. Within an hour it was blowing so hard you would get sandblasted if you tried to sit on the beach. That evening it was downright chilly, and following the winds clouds and rain rolled in. We spent our week trying to find brief respites of nice weather amid rain and wind. But hey, we should be happy because what we wanted was to be in Hawaii, right? No, what we wanted was something we thought Hawaii could give us, which was warm, sunny, tropical weather. It wasn't just Hawaii, it was what we thought Hawaii could give us. It ended up being one of the most disappointing vacations we've ever had. All those things Solomon tried and people today are fixated on, are not what we want in and of themselves. We pursue them for a result we think they will produce.

We will be way ahead if we keep in mind what it is we want. It isn't success, or accomplishment, or money, in and of themselves. It is what we have assumed they can bring us. If they don't, the whole thing will be disappointing. We need to listen to Solomon. He tried all the things we try, and they didn't work for him. They won't work for us either. What we want is the fullness of God, the joy and peace and blessedness that is the hallmark of his character. It only comes from him.

Go back to Ephesians 3:19 where Paul prayed that we would be filled to all the fullness of God. In the first part of that verse he told us how that happens. He prayed that we might, "know this love that surpasses knowledge." The more our lives are utterly rooted in God's unconditional love for us, the more that becomes the filter that we view of life through, that bathes our feelings about ourselves and everyone we encounter, the more we will be filled to the fullness of God. It doesn't come through winning applause, gaining power or influence, being somebody, having enormous resources, it comes through being utterly overwhelmed by the unlimited love of God.

Psalm 16:11 says, "You make known to me the path of life, you fill me with joy in your presence." When we start thinking it is the career, the success, the approval, the money that we want, we need to remind ourselves that's an illusion. We want the fullness of God, and those things cannot give it to us. So we rejoice in his unconditional love for us, we live in his grace, we continually thank him for his goodness to us, we live in his presence and trust in his wisdom and his power to provide for us.

**LIVE FOR SOMETHING BIGGER**



There is a special edition of the DVD of the baseball movie *The Natural*, that features Hall of Fame shortstop, Cal Ripken, Jr. talking about success. In that interview he mentioned that he had years in his career where he had individual success but that the team did not. He said those years were not fulfilling at all. Asked about his greatest play, the one that meant the most to him, he said it was catching the last out of the World Series. It was a routine play, but it meant the most to him because it achieved what he most wanted, that the team would have ultimate success. Then he made this crucial statement. “We all want to be a part of something bigger.”

Like many boys who grew up in Southern California Toby was into surfing and skateboarding. Those are fine sports, but Laurie and I wanted him to participate in some team sports as well. We hear about how a sport can teach important lessons. Too often kids are taught by parents and coaches the absolute wrong things. Winning is what matters and you only have value if you’re really good. But what we wanted Toby to experience was working for something bigger than himself, sacrificing for the team’s goals, not the individual’s. There is joy and meaning in that. That is true in life as well. To be really full, we have to work for something much larger and more meaningful than ourselves.

That’s a truth that is actually fairly obvious, but that we tend to forget on a pretty regular basis. If we really want to experience fulfilling our “potential,” making the most of life, then we need to do all we can to expend our lives for a cause that is bigger than us. The problem is there is no shortage of causes available to us, many of them quite impactful. But in the end, what does it all matter? If we are but the result of random accidents, if matter is all that exists and life is over at the grave, then none of those causes matters a great deal. But if there is a Creator God, if he made us for a purpose, then living for his purpose is the thing that matters above all else. So if we want to really live, we need to live for his glory, for his will, for his purpose. We need to see advancing his kingdom as the most eternally significant thing we will ever do. It is the cause worth giving our all to.

## CARE FOR PEOPLE

Here is where the irony really hits. Today women are told that they need to pursue their dreams of careers, accomplishments and achievements. They are told that to be a mother whose main focus is caring for a family, loving a husband and raising children, is to waste one’s potential. It is to be enslaved to patriarchal models of the past. It is to be stifled.

But listen to a couple of verses. In 3 John 4 the apostle John wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 Paul wrote, “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will rejoice in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”

These passages suggest that what really matters in life is people. If you want to experience fulfilling your potential, it is about making a difference, an impact. But what does that mean? Mostly it means having a life giving effect on people. In fact, people are really what life is about. Almost 10 years ago *The Atlantic* magazine ran an article that discussed a study that was begun at Harvard in 1937. This ambitious study began with 268 people as subjects. It was originally called the Harvard Study of Adult Development, but it is now mostly known as the Grant study. The plan was to follow these people for the rest of their lives tracking a wide variety of factors and influences, looking for their affects on the health and happiness of the subjects. The study ran for 72 years. In the article Dr. George Vaillant, who led the study for the last 42 years was asked what he had learned about health and happiness from poring over these people’s lives. He said, “The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.”

Do you hear this? That’s all that matters. We know it’s true. A 2006 study by *Success* magazine asked people what they thought were the most important factors for a successful life. 89.9% said a good relationship with one’s spouse, 89.6% said good relationships with family and 86% said a good relationship with God.

Eugene O’Kelly was a CEO of a major accounting firm. He admitted he was “controlling, orderly, privileged, powerful and felt like an eagle on a mountaintop.” Then at age 53 he was diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor. He wrote a book titled *Chasing Daylight* about the process of dying. In it he wrote shortly before his death, what if I hadn’t worked so hard? I could have spent more time with my family and could have been a role model for balance in life. Do you see what his regret was? He had the success so many dream of, but when all was said and done realized he had missed out on the things that matter most, and that was loving people.

Famous singer and songwriter Billy Joel, who has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in discussing that honor said, “You don’t get hugged by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. You don’t have children with the Rock and Roll Hall

of Fame. I want what everybody want: to love and to be loved, and to have a family.”

Way too many people only realize this when it is too late and like O’Kelly end up with a great big pile of regret. If we really want to fulfill our potential, meaning experience life as it should be, be fully human and maximize peace, joy, meaning and fulfillment, then we should make loving, blessing, serving other people what our lives are about. And that is something all of us can do no matter what our vocation or position is. Whatever the job you have, if you do it with the goal of loving and serving people, you will do it right and do it well. If you don’t, I guarantee you will do it wrong.

For 8 years actor and author Ben Stein wrote a column published by E!Online. He stopped because he was tired of being part of the entertainment system that has such terrible values. In his last column he wrote, “We are not responsible for the operation of the universe, and what happens to us is not terribly important. God is real, not a fiction, and when we turn our lives over to him he takes far better care of us than we could ever do for ourselves.” He talked about how he realized he could never be as great an actor, writer or economist as some others, then said, “But I could be a devoted father to my son, husband to my wife and...a good son to the parents who had done so much for me. This came to be my main task in life...I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters and that it is my duty, in return for the lavish life God has devolved upon me, to help others he has placed in my path.”

We honor Moms today, because they have the most profoundly important and fulfilling role in life. Don’t let the world pull the wool over your eyes, Moms. Stay the course and do what matters most. And for the rest of us, let’s not fall for the lie. Let’s invest our resources where they will matter, and that’s in people.



