



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 8:1 – 8:13

Lesson 10 of 16

2007-08

"Consistent Living Under The Sun"

TRANSCRIPT

Our text tonight is in Ecclesiastes 8:1 and we will go all the way to verse 13. *Consistent Living Under The Sun* is what I've entitled this message and the structure of our passage tonight falls into two parts. The first, verses 1 – 9: His thoughts on power. And second, verses 10 – 13: His thoughts on punishment. The application is for the believer to learn to live *consistently* in light of those two subjects. Now I won't read the text tonight since I have plenty to say about these verses and I don't want to run short of time.

Our study revolves around one simple theme, namely what Robert E. Lee called the best word in the English vocabulary: The word 'duty'. Paul called it 'our reasonable service' (Rom 12:1). He also said in I Thessalonians 4: 1, "...we instructed you how to live in order to please God..." And again, in Ephesians 5:15-16 he said: "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."

Peter, a different personality with his own vocabulary, picks up the same thought: I Peter 1: 17b '...live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear'. And, again, in II Peter 3: 11-12 he said: '...think of the kind of holy and godly people we ought to be as we look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.'

In the lesson tonight in chapter 8 our Teacher, the 'man with the powerful mind', will set our hearts and affections on a prescribed way of living. We want to live life with skill that can best be described in our English language as consistent. We want

to live *consistently* before God (or as General Lee would put it; ‘doing our duty’). Now our goal to live *consistently* is because of what we believe. For what we believe will determine how we’re going to behave and how we’re going to actually think about the world. That’s the point of the instruction tonight.

Now, as we’ve been following our lessons over the past weeks, we have learned from our Teacher two progressive thoughts that have dominated those lessons again and again and again. First: *God is absolutely sovereign*. And second: *Man is not upright; he is wicked*. That is his basic nature and his heart. Thus, his life is totally flawed ‘under the sun’. Man ‘under the sun’ desperately needs a compass. He needs a way to measure himself in order to live a *consistent* life; or ‘to do his duty’. Very unfortunately for him though, he has no ability. He has no compass; for he has nothing within himself to guide him or direct him. But for us as believers, we have the scriptures to guide our lives and to measure ourselves by.

So, our Teacher begins our discussion by asking (vs1) “Who is like the wise?”, followed by “Who knows the explanation of things?” We recall in last week’s lesson, (chapter 7:25, 27), that he was seeking something beyond his reach: Namely, ‘the scheme of things’. Rather than finding his answer, all he could observe ‘under the sun’ was the deep depravity of man. Now, in light of those conclusions that he has already reached, the only possible answer to the first rhetorical question that he now poses to us is “No One”. There are no wise: Nor are there any who know ‘the proper interpretation of a matter’.

And yet there is an answer for us, the believer: Believe the Word of God and trust it. Those who truly know God by faith and look to his God as the source of his reality will be wise. In every matter the wise person, the skillful person, will trust Him in every matter explicitly: For he knows that God, who made him and who knows his time, has framed his life. We don’t have to have all the answers. But we know who does. By faith, I rest in His all wise plan for me and when I do that, my countenance will be changed.

Now notice the second half of the opening verse before us (1b). The man of skill has a brightened face. His hardened appearance is gone. Why? Because he doesn't have to get up in the morning and fix the world; much less fix his own circumstances. In confidence he knows that his God counts the hairs on his head, knows his frame, and that he is but dust. He knows that God has already measured out his days and that he cannot exceed them. And he knows that an all wise providence is working out every detail in his life for his benefit. It all works together for good and that is a great blessing. *Consistent* living is our goal; and it leads to being at peace with ourselves.

Now we want to be at peace with the world around us as well; so, our 'man with a powerful mind' will now give us some thoughts, or counsel, on how to stay out of trouble with the world. Verse 2 is a warning that a person should be careful to obey the king. Government has its set of frustrations: Yet the righteous man can actually thrive in government just as he thrived in the king's court in past days. We have wonderful examples of this in Nehemiah, Joseph, and Daniel. And, also, in Hushai who thwarted the counsel of the great Ahitophel before Absalom (II Sam 17). In each and every case these were men of talent, but they advanced because of their unquestioned loyalty to the king and the government that God had put them under. The prepositional phrase here gives us a causal use. Notice your NIV and the translation '*because*'. Thus, the oath or vow to God bears all the weight of heaven and earth that we should follow the king's command. Of course, our only dissent with government would be if it decreed a matter that opposes the Word of God. Then the believer must obey God: But that's a lesson for another day.

Here then is *consistent* living for the Christian. Let's listen to Paul's words in Romans 13:1-2: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement upon themselves".

Question: What corrects and controls men in their lives ‘under the sun’?

Answer: Two things; 1. Government (with its laws of the land). And 2. The Church (which God uses in redeeming man while ministering to his soul, caring for his life, and teaching him how to live above the moral plane of ordinary men). Without those two entities, government and the church, you will have madness and chaos. Just wait until the lights go out in Dallas and then you’ll see.

In verse 3 he teaches us about proper behavior in the presence of the king. He is telling us of the necessity of obeying the king and his government. He tells us that it is not prudent to argue with the king, whether he be good or bad; a David or a Herod. His judgements are all powerful: So, the text counsels; ‘Stay in the king’s presence and speak to our government about good, pure, and righteous things and righteous causes’. That’s our role. Stay in the presence of the government and tell them the truth. Be the light, be the salt, be the good neighbor. That’s our place.

Verse 4: “Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him “What are you doing?”” Very interesting that Job 9:12 poses the same rhetorical question; only it is about God and not a human king. Here is your NIV: “If He snatches away, who can stop Him? Who can say to Him, ‘What are You doing?’” Now could it be that ‘our man with a powerful mind’ is drawing a comparison saying that the king’s authority is virtually godlike? Well, I think there’s ample support for this comparison for we know that the Spirit of God inspires our text. So, this verse 4 does indicate one thing very clearly: When dealing with government one must use his wits, be sensitive to its power, and always tell the truth in every instance.

Verses 5 affirms what he has already taught us in verse 2. Namely, people are safe if they obey the royal command. And the last portion of this verse highlights the importance of appropriate timing in an action or in a word.

Now, of particular interest to the bible student is Charles Bridges’ comment from his commentary on Psalm 119. Specifically, vs66: ‘Teach me knowledge and good judgement, for I trust your commands’. Bridges, a great bible teacher of a past era, links that phrase with our verses 5&6 right here and points out that the wise man is always

the patient man: Because he uses good judgement and he waits upon the Lord in every occasion. He awaits God’s timing. And while awaiting God’s timing he waits for God’s manner as to the handling of a situation. For you see, when God does it, it will always be right; and right on time.

Let’s just think for a moment the key phrase from the book of Ruth (a book all about the providence of God). Chapter 3:18, a hallmark text for providence: “Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.” That is waiting upon God. That is good judgement. And that, for us, is ‘*consistent living*’, ‘doing our duty’, being accountable to the God who made us.

The end of verse 6 is the subject of human limitations. Notice the conjunction translated ‘*though*’ in the NIV. We understand it as a ‘contrast’ word. The noun ‘*misery*’ is literally ‘*trouble*’. Man is not able to know naturally ‘the how’ and ‘the when’ of good timing and good judgement: Thus, he is burdened with trouble and misery. That’s why we need divine guidance. Divine guidance in every matter and we wait for it. ‘LORD, teach me knowledge and good judgement.’

Verse 7 sets forth the crux of the matter: ‘Knowing the future’ (which is beyond human ability to know) can keep one from incompetent decisions. And human intuition is of no value when we need wisdom and Godly results.

Now, you may say ‘I have great business intuition’. Well good for you; but that’s of no value whatsoever in spiritual matters when good timing, good judgement, and God’s providence must all come together. Let’s just think about God’s timing for a moment. How quickly did it take to knock down the Berlin wall? It occurred over one weekend. It happened so fast that no one was prepared for it. How quickly did it take for the Soviet socialistic republic to split apart? Before we could even digest the facts; it was gone. How long did it take for ancient Babylon to fall? Daniel 5: One night.

June 21st is our summer solstice; the longest daylight of the year. That morning, two years ago, we got the call that my brother-in-law, a 56-year-old doctor, was found dead sitting in his chair; holding a TV changer. Heart attack: Gone. He had left his office

asking his secretary ‘When was the next appointment for tomorrow, the time’? Then within a week of that event, 53-year-old head coach of Northwestern University football team, Randy Walker, dropped dead of a heart attack. I flew to Chicago and attended his funeral. Speaking at that funeral was the new Indiana head football coach, Terry Hoepfner. He and Walker had apparently been long time friends and it was a very moving and wonderful tribute. This past summer, just this summer, new head football coach of Indiana, Terry Hoepfner, suddenly died of a brain tumor. You know the common thread that ran across my mind of these three people and their deaths? They had no idea that their last day was going to be their last day. The fact is that you may soon remember these words from me and say: “He spoke to us of the brevity of life and now he’s gone, too”.

You want to know how to think *consistently* and live *consistently*? Let me give you a verse of scripture. Psalm 118:24, you probably know it by heart. ‘This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it’. We just live for Him today. We just enjoy Him today because today is all we’ve got. Notice your text (vs7): ‘For no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?’

Verse 8. Now that he has reminded us of human ignorance, he will enumerate four instances of human impotence. Notice first; *the inability to control the wind*; second, *the inability to prevent death*; third, *the inability to get out of battle* and lastly; *for some it is the evil that controls them such that they cannot be rescued from it*.

Here we first observe that the first two of the four *human incapacities* are related to expressions of *no power*. Now, think of the contrast here. We were told earlier (vs4) that the king has great power: But none like this. There is some ambiguity over the exact force of the word ‘*wind*’. Some see it not as the wind (like has blown in tonight from the north) but rather as the *breath of life*; and thus links it to the next sentence which tells us that ‘no man can control his death’ (vs8b). In other words, the word ‘*wind*’ would be a reference to breath itself: *The breath of life*. This may very well be since it really doesn’t change the meaning of the verse that emphasizes the inability or the powerlessness of man.

The third and fourth sentences are much more difficult to understand. The word ‘*discharged*’ (vs8c), occurs only in one other place: Psalm 78:49. And here it is in the NIV: “He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation, and hostility—a *band* of destroying angels.” ‘*Band*’ is the word that Eccl.8:8c translates ‘*discharged*’. So, in these two verses with the same Hebrew word, we have completely different meanings and different translations. So next we have to go to the root of that word to see if we can find a link, a common point, that we can understand the word better—And we do, for the root of this word is ‘*to send*’. So in Psalm 78:49 we see a ‘*band*’ of the angelic host who were given orders to destroy their targets in Egypt. They were ‘*sent*’ with orders. Here in our verse in Ecclesiastes, the soldier has no power to release himself from war unless orders are ‘*sent*’ That’s the implied idea. Now, in Deuteronomy 20:5-8, the Law allows for a discharge from the army only before and not during a war. This is the exact situation that’s represented by ‘our man with the powerful mind’.

The fourth and final sentence highlights the wicked or the evil man. There is not a lot of consensus as to the exact meaning of ‘wickedness will not release those who practice it’. I think this is an example of what Dr. Johnson would always warn young students about: ‘Scholars that are able to teach and who have great understanding of the language and of the syntax and grammar, but who would not provide any theological interpretation to a text were frustrating to read or listen to’. You were just left flat and unable to connect the dots. I believe, however, that our topic does have a great theological interpretation and I would suggest this to you:

Here is the woman in the garden. She looks at the apple. She thinks it will be good to eat; so she takes it and she eats it. Then later, she finds out that she’s in the midst of horrible consequences and that she has no power to extricate herself. Now, this is what *Wisdom* does in the book of Proverbs: It laughs at the fool. For a long, extended period of time the fool just ignored *Wisdom*: and now he is in a crunch and begging for help. And *Wisdom* just laughs at him; for the fool has too long scorned the truth. Like Br’er rabbit with the tar baby, he has no way to get himself free by himself.

Next, in verse 9, he concludes this unit based on his observations ‘under the sun’. The phrase “All this...” is a reference to his mind where he applied it powerfully. He said: “There is a time... (again: ‘A sovereignly ordained event’) “...when man lords it over others to his own hurt”. It is unclear if the harm actually befalls the perpetrator or the receiver of the abuse. It’s just not clear from the text. The NIV takes the position of the latter; and this is a good understanding because the context itself is about power. (See earlier: The power of a king; the power of God’s providence over the wind, et cetera). The power again right here: The power to release yourself from evil and the power that one would lord over others. This again fits what he has already told us back in chapter 4:1-3; that the powerful oppress the vulnerable. And with the word time, we would say God’s sovereign plan for evil people is to rule and reign for a period of time.

This is His plan. The heart of *consistent* living for the believer, for the righteous, and for the upright man is to walk in the world of the wicked and the powerful men: Trusting in a sovereign God to watch over us and to protect us from them; if at all possible. But often, as we well know, it seems the wicked and their plans prevail; and they get to the righteous and run over them. But here is what we need to remember: This is God’s will too. You see the Chaldeans and the Sabeans in Job 1, with their raids upon Job’s herds, congratulating themselves at the end of the day: ‘Oh what clever generals we were!’

But do you see the word time here (vs9)? That word. That pregnant word, inserted by ‘our man with a powerful mind’, tells us of God’s providence that preserves the wise. It tells us of God’s sovereignty that teaches the wise what He is preserving and teaching: And that is ‘All is going according to My plan; it is all going according to My purpose’. We will live *consistently* when we remember and know that their victories are controlled and are only temporary. In the end, my friends, we win big time.

Now in our next section (vs10-15) he raises a new question: “Are the wicked really punished?” In the world of life ‘under the sun’ Godless people often flourish and grow complacent: Particularly about God and religious things. Yet, here is something even worse than that scenario: Religious hypocrites. They would come and go in ancient

Jerusalem professing thoughts and outward displays of obedience, when in actuality they were living an entirely different kind of life in private. But notice your text and the word ‘*buried*’ (vs10). The wicked, whether he be in the land of ancient Israel or an individual in our day today: They do not last. The Hitler’s, the Mao’s, the Stalin’s; they don’t last.

Nor the “religious figureheads” at the time of our Lord Himself. Honored with favor in their day; and now no longer alive. ‘Under the sun’ they were admired and propped up by an adoring public. But for them now, it’s over. We need to remember that and think about their outcome for our *consistent* living. And what we need to remember is: It’s all very much God’s plan for the wicked and very much God’s plan for them and the world to have a strong and resourceful reign. We need to know that and remember that.

Lastly: You never have to concern yourself or wonder about God’s rule no matter what happens on planet earth. Verse 11: “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong.” Here’s ‘our man with the powerful mind’ asserting that when there is no apparent punishment for evil then evil itself is going to flourish. Now, as believers, we want to see God act. And we want to see Him act; NOW! And we want to see Him act powerfully; NOW! But God is patient: Everything is moving at His pace and His plan.

I do think it’s a fair interpretation here to ask a government to carry out its judgements swiftly and publically. The idea of holding convicted people for years and years and years cannot be supported by ‘the man with the powerful mind’. I will give you a couple of quick examples to that theory. II Samuel 1; An Amalekite thought he was currying favor with a future king by telling David that Saul was dead. ‘Here are the king’s bracelets. Here is the king’s crown. And he was wounded. That’s my testimony. He gave me an order to strike him down, so I did. I followed his orders, I finished him off’. Then David wept; then David tore his robes. And then later that day, David asked the Amalchite the one question he was not prepared for. ‘Why were you not afraid to strike down the Lord’s anointed?’, and he gave the word and had him swiftly executed.

In II Samuel 4, two dark mavericks thought they would curry favor with David by murdering his rival, Ishbosheth. They happily brought his head to David in a bag. But David made a public example of them (II Samuel 4:12). He gave the order to have them executed and then he had their hands and feet cut away from their torsos and their bodies hung by the pool at Hebron. That’s how David trained his men and that’s how he established his kingdom. Not with great oratory, not with great speeches; but by examples. This is what a righteous kingdom does, and this is the way that it treats the wicked—We would do well in our society to think like that.

Verse 12. If you can understand these next few verses, you can fully appreciate the *consistent* life we are called to live; for here is ‘the heart of it’ as he spells it out to us. “Although a wicked man commits 100 crimes and still lives a long time, I know it will go better with the God-fearing men, who are reverent before God.” Today, in our lives, the wicked rule. Let’s face it: They rule. They call the shots. They have the power both politically and economically to have their way in the world. And as we abide ‘under the sun’ until our King comes, and He establishes His rule and reign, we, in humility, will continue sojourning through this life: Representing Him in the stations to which He has placed us. We are not called to make over the world. Our desire is not that society be reformed (and that’s a common theme in Christian teaching today and that is not the truth). We’re not here to reform a society, but rather we are here to be the reformed people of our society: The lights, the salt, the truth. We know and understand the dictators, the godless tycoons, and the corrupt as they live their lives with a flair and style that makes them today’s life winners. Turn on the television; they’re waiting for you. But pay careful attention to the teacher’s judgement (vs12b): “...I know it will go better with a God-fearing man...”

I want you to remember something (but it is not being buried with Christ in baptism; or being resurrected with Christ into a new life in a new world for all eternity). Rather, I want you to remember that our Teacher is telling us that the people who know God and walk closely with Him have the very best of this life: The best of what we call this existence in time and space. This is his testimony to us: We inherit the earth. If we

live *consistently* before God, no matter what the world’s ‘flavor of the day’ is, we will be the ones that are on the right side of history. We will be.

Verse 13. What the wicked thought were long days of prosperity were actually ‘appointed days’ for greater judgement; and that thought ought to scare the common man to death. The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19f): All those years of laying around in that purple silk. It only made things worse for him in the end. This phrase, “...lengthen like a shadow” (vs13b), is an idiom for what we would call a growing reputation. We say today: ‘That man casts a long shadow over a city, or a country, or a business’.

Well, let’s consider for a moment the ‘long shadows’ of scripture. We have a great example in Luke 3. Here are Dr. Luke’s words: “In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis...during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came...”. It came to one obscure fellow. His father’s name was Zachariah. The place that the Word came to him was not in the crowded streets of Jerusalem or in the temple like Isaiah the prophet. No, the Word of the LORD came to this individual in the quiet wilderness. His name was John. And in the midst of the ‘long shadows’ of John’s day, our Lord Jesus called him ‘the greatest man among all the living’. In the context of those days of ‘the big hitters’, the men of ‘power’, and the men of ‘means’, came one man. And we all know John today. We know him very well today. We think of him often today. And all the others and their kingdoms and their power we think very little of. Matter of fact, they’re just tiny footnotes of history.

The wicked’s day will not ‘lengthen like a shadow’. That’s what our ‘man with the powerful mind’ is saying. You see in the day that Paul preached, Nero ruled Rome for he was emperor. But in our day, we name our beloved sons ‘Paul’ and our common dogs ‘Nero’.

My dear friends in Christ Jesus, live your lives with great *consistency*. Do your duty by living in this darkened and decadent world as lights, as salt, as truth: Because you are the grand winner of time and eternity. The Word of God declares it so: And it will be that way.

But until that day, and until that time, we as God's people will gather together and we will sing our songs unto Him. We will remember His table. We will be baptized in obedience to Him. We will hear His Word: And it will burn in our hearts, because it is His Word accompanied by the power of the Spirit to bring glory and honor to Him. He is the great power of all powers: He is our God, He is our Savior, and He is worthy of our worship.

Please know friends that we are not the stragglers: We are the winners! In the midst of all that is happening around us God is building His church; He is forging His kingdom. And we will take our place in His parade and be His beloved: To the end that He is glorified forever and ever and ever.

That is His Word to us for *Consistent Living* in a day like today.

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