

LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY

EAT, DRINK, . . . AND BE WHAT?

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11



The Heart of the Matter

Fast-lane living is not limited to twenty-first century citizens. Solomon cut that swath centuries ago. Pushing aside all restraints, ignoring every twinge of guilt, the man set out on a quest for pleasure that would make the sensual lifestyle in Vegas pale in comparison. Solomon's world was a cafeteria. Hedonism was *never* pursued with greater commitment. When he laughed, it was nothing short of an uproar. When he drank, it was with limitless intensity. His sexual escapades knew no bounds. Even his meals became lavish, luxurious feasts. Solomon embraced the lure of self-gratification with extreme determination. No project was too lavish, no dream a mere fantasy; whatever he imagined, he lived out. We're talking maximum involvement! And, as we shall discover . . . maximum emptiness.



Discovering the Way

1. What's Up? Look Around.

"If it feels good, do it!" This is the "golden rule" of our postmodern generation. It comes in different forms, all of which point to the same philosophy of hedonism as a means of finding fulfillment in life. Philosophical hedonism draws on an ancient belief that because the material world is all there is and because humans are only physical beings, joy and purpose can only come from pleasurable experiences through the five senses.



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2. What's New? Listen Well. (Ecclesiastes 2:1–10)

As king of Israel, Solomon had the greatest political clout in the Near East and ready access to whatever he desired. During what could be considered an ancient “midlife crisis,” that wise and wealthy king took advantage of his time, wealth, and wisdom, applying them toward a vigorous pursuit of happiness in the world “under the sun.” He pursued every kind of pleasure, engaged in building projects, and sought the good life.



DIGGING DEEPER

Is Asceticism Christian?

Is getting pleasure out of this world bad? Does God want us to go through life abstaining from the sights, sounds, scents, sensations, and sweetness of His physical creation?

It's true that there are some Christian “ascetics” who believe all pleasure in this world is sin—or at least will lead to sin. Their view of the ideal Christian is the puritan hiding himself away in a monastery, avoiding any contact with the evil, physical world. They view God as a white-clad, cosmic killjoy who scans the earth to put the kibosh on anybody having a good time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Pleasure is not bad. God created the world and gave us five senses to enjoy His creation. In fact, Paul himself told Timothy that extreme asceticism—denying people the enjoyment of things of this world—is a sign, not of spiritual Christians but of heretics and false teachers, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude” (1 Timothy 4:4). Yet the enjoyment of God's gifts should be accompanied by an attitude of thankfulness and joy, returning glory to God for His graces, as Paul taught in another place, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Religious asceticism is a legalistic pursuit that replaces God's wonderful gifts with our own self-righteousness and suggests that God never intended for people to live joyous, abundant lives in the physical universe He created. The solution is to accept God's intention for the physical universe and our place in it and to return thanks to Him for His glorious gifts.

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Starting Your Journey

So what's wrong with living a life like Solomon's? All the sensual pleasures he experienced "under the sun" promise painful consequences.

- They hold out promises that lack staying power. Their initial ecstasy leads to ultimate agony and futility.
- They disillusion us and turn us into cover-up artists.
- They offer to open our eyes but, in reality, blind us.

How do you determine whether or not to engage in certain pleasurable activities? Let's learn from Solomon.

- If it feels good . . . think about it, question it, and appraise it!
- If it lacks substance and carries with it consequences . . . reject it!

What frantic pursuits are you engaged in that promise fullness but deliver only emptiness? Are you turning to God for fulfillment and a proper perspective on the good material gifts He's given you to enjoy?