

This Is Us
Dead Ends
March 31, 2019

Intro

One of the more unspoken aspects of the American dream, or the dark underbelly if you will, is the idea that,

“I want to do what I want, when I want, with whom I want.* and then there is a little footnote or fine print at the end because we are a civilized society that goes like this (you can help me with this as I read the fine print),

“I want to do what I want, when I want, with whom I want.* ... as long as nobody gets hurt.”

The problem is that you if you live like this for very long you WILL hurt somebody. You'll hurt you, and you're somebody. We tend to forget that. Or as the song we just heard says,

“If your gonna swing from the chandelier and live like tomorrow doesn't exist and fly like a bird through the night, eventually the sun comes up, you're a mess and then here comes the shame.”

You see, any time you or I live by the motto that “I want to do what I want, when I want, with whom I want” we are going to eventually hurt someone. And that someone isn't just other people. That someone is you. You are a somebody. But you won't just hurt you. Eventually you'll hurt your parents. Or eventually you'll hurt the people with you. And then there's the one we never hear about, it you do this for very long, you'll eventually hurt the people coming after you. You see

It is impossible to live like that without somebody getting hurt.

If we know someone is eventually going to get

hurt, why do we think it's ever ok to live like this? I think the underlying reason is this: we all want freedom. We all want freedom to do whatever we want to do. We don't want people telling us what we can or cannot do. We don't want "rulers" in our lives, whether those rulers are parents, or bosses, or teachers or the government or God. We want to do what's right in our own eyes. We want to have maximum freedom.

But some obvious questions come with this kind of mindset. Where does a life of maximum freedom take us? Where does it end up? What's the cost to our lives and the lives of others? These are just some of the questions we are going to try to answer today as we continue in our series, "This Is Us".

Review

As you know, we are in the middle of a series called "This is Us". In this series we've been

discovering some surprising and unsettling truths about ourselves. In week one, we learned that we humans are created in the image of God.

To be created in God's image means that we are meant to be creators and relaters. In addition, because we are "the created", we are made to submit to the Creator which means we are also meant to be worshippers. And it's only when we pursue all three of those roles, the roles of creators and relators and worshippers that will we experience the "shalom" (or peace) that God intended. That was week one.

Last week, we learned that in spite of our best efforts, we don't always experience the "shalomy" life for which we were intended. God created the world to be a place of shalom. But because our "parents" Adam and Eve turned to their own way (which the

bible calls "sin"), the world is now cursed. And the fallout from their original sin has affected all of God's creation, especially us. And since we live under the curse of sin, we are blinded to our own sinfulness and tend to justify our rebellious behavior. In addition, nothing we do in this life is totally pure anymore because it is all tainted by our sinful nature and so all of our natural desires are in some way disordered and distorted. So that's where we were when we ended last week.

The Pursuit of Total Freedom

So let's go back to the opening premise that we started with today. I said one of the more dark, unspoken aspects of the American dream, is the idea that I want to do what I want, when I want, with whom I want as long as it doesn't hurt anyone.

If we were honest, some of us have probably wondered what it would be like to live like

that. Play along with me for a bit. What might it be like to have all the money in the world and spend it on whatever your heart desired? Like having a million dollar yacht in Florida or vacation homes in exotic places like Grand Cayman or the coast of Italy or on the Bay of Kotor, in Montenegro? (there actually is a place called that!)

Or what would it be like to have every kind of food you love right at your fingertips 24/7, to eat as much as you wanted, whenever you wanted it? Sort of like having a food court with Texas Roadhouse, Joe's BBQ, Red wok and Culver's right in your backyard. (Those are some of my favs by the way!)

Or what would it be like to have 100' hd tvs in every room of your house, or an olympic size swimming pool in your backyard, or to own your own sports team? Ok. Now I'm getting carried away! You see if we let our minds

wander a bit, we can conjure up a picture of what it might look like to have total freedom to live any way we want to live.

Whether we realize it or not, any desire to live in total freedom is nothing more than a quest for something which will meet the needs of our heart. We are all looking for the secret to finding delight anytime, anywhere, and under any circumstances. What we are looking for, in reality, is the secret to contentment.

Believe it or not, I know of someone who experienced a life like this and lived to tell about it. I'm actually aware of someone who did whatever he wanted when he wanted with whom he wanted. His name has been around a long time. No, his name isn't Warren Buffet, or Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates. His name is Solomon. King Solomon that is. The son of King David who you can read about in the books of 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles in the Old Testament portion of the bible.

According to all historical accounts, he is considered to be the richest man who ever lived. If there ever was someone who did what he wanted, when he wanted and with whom he wanted, it was Solomon. So it stands to reason if we really want to know where a life of total freedom will lead us, who better to examine than a person who actually lived it firsthand.

In Chapter 2 of the book of Ecclesiastes, we are introduced to the record of what Solomon found in this search for total freedom and fulfillment. Here we have an examination of the various ways by which men have sought throughout history to find contentment, enjoyment and delight in life. One of the most popular ways that people seek to find happiness is what philosophers call hedonism, or the pursuit of pleasure. All of us instinctively feel that if we can just pursue

pleasure, we will find happiness. That is what Solomon takes up first to see whether or not that is true.

He begins with describing his pursuit of pleasure and the outcome of that pursuit in verses 1-3 of Ecclesiastes 2:

I said to myself, "Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the 'good things' in life." But I found that this, too, was meaningless. So I said, "Laughter is silly. What good does it do...

...to seek pleasure?" After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness...

...most people find during their brief life in this world. Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 NLT

There is a lot implied in the passage I just read. Solomon, with all his riches, gave himself completely over to the pursuit of pleasure. He must have spent weeks and months, even years, in this search. Imagine what his palace must have been like in those days. Every night they had stand-up comics, and lavish feasts, with large quantities of wine consumed. In fact, you may be interested to know what just one day's menu consisted of during the time of Solomon's reign in the royal palace. In the book of 1 Kings we read:

The daily food requirements for Solomon's palace were 150 bushels of choice flour and 300 bushels of meal; also ...

...10 oxen from the fattening pens, 20 pasture-fed cattle, 100 sheep or goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roe deer, and choice poultry. (1 Kings 4:22-23)

That was the menu for just one day. Now did you notice what Solomon said about the outcome of this hedonistic life? He said, "What use is it?" What does it contribute to life? Nothing, is his answer. Pleasure consumes resources, it does not build them up. Pleasure, Solomon concludes, adds nothing to our lives in the long run.

Next, he moves to another form of worldly pursuit in Verse 4:

I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees.

I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6 NLT)

Here is another form of pleasure -- houses and landscaping. Many people today attempt to find ultimate satisfaction in this way. It is true that there is pleasure in designing and building a house. But some people give their whole lives to this. It was said of the emperor Nero that he found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble. But history tells us that he did not do that for the beautification of Rome, he did it for his own gratification and his own fame. Solomon too gave himself to this. His own house took fourteen years to build. He also built houses for his many wives whom he brought to Jerusalem, spending time, money and interest to do so.

In verses 7-8, Solomon continues to describe some other aspects of his pleasure-seeking lifestyle:

I bought slaves, both men and women, and

others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in...

Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines.

I had everything a man could desire!
Ecclesiastes 2:7,8 NLT

He had servants to wait on his every whim. Solomon had ranches to provide him with a diversion and he made much money raising his various herds and flocks. Some of us have large bank accounts that give us a sense of security, or want more to increase our security. Solomon says he gathered "silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces," and brought it all to Jerusalem. He

had all the money he ever needed and more.

Now what exactly did he discover at the end of his pursuit of wealth and pleasure? Here are his honest conclusions, Verses 9-11:

So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure.

(sound familiar?) I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish,

it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. Ecclesiastes 2:9-11 NLT

It was all meaningless. Like chasing the wind. It's important for us to know that, historically,

this was not the kind of life that God had intended for any king of Israel. In fact, God had given strict instructions on how the kings of Israel were supposed to live. For example, in Deuteronomy 17, it says that the king “must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses” (v. 16). It says he must “not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away” to idolatry (v. 17). It also says he must not “acquire for himself excessive silver and gold” (v. 17); and finally, he must diligently and humbly keep God’s law (v. 18). In summary, Israel’s king must avoid trusting in earthly power (symbolized by horses), idolatry, resting in wealth, and neglecting God’s commands.

How did Solomon stack up against the standards for a king of Israel? In his early life, he did fairly well. At the beginning of his reign he is said to have “loved the Lord and walked

in the statutes of David his father" (1 Kings 3:3) But as he grew older, his foreign wives "turned away [Solomon's] heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God" (v. 4).

The Slavery of Total Freedom

Now let's push pause for a minute. I'm sure by now most of you are thinking, "What does this have to do with me? I'm not like Solomon. I'm not a millionaire. I am not a polygamist. I'm not a hedonist. Seriously. How is any of this relevant to me?"

If that's what you are thinking, I totally understand. Because on the surface, this all seems unconnected to most of our present reality.

But there is a lesson here for all of us and the lesson is this:

Whenever you choose to do what you want, when you want, with whom you want, all you do is you trade one God for another.

In the end, that's what happened to Solomon. He traded Jehovah, the Lord God, for another lesser god. As a result, he was no longer able to resist temptation. He willingly walked away from God and then found himself in a place where he could not freely go back.

And this very same thing can happen to us. Whenever we start doing whatever we want to do whenever want to do it, we can't quit and neither did Solomon. When we allow other gods, like the gods of wealth, rest, comfort, or pleasure creep into our lives, they will turn our hearts away from God.

I've noticed as I've gotten older "the god of my retirement account" is always tempting

me to be more concerned about the next stock market uptick, or how much my retirement account has gained or lost, than what God wants me to do to glorify him with my remaining days on this earth.

What about for you? What areas of your life are you more interested in pursuing than what God wants YOU to do with YOUR remaining days on this earth? I'm sure all of us can point to an area such as this. It is these places in our lives where "lesser gods" can creep in and turn us away from full devotion to the Lord.

The bottom line of what I'm trying to say is this:

There is an area of your life and my life in which you desire to pursue total freedom to do what you want, when you want with whom you want and it's a dead end.

And it's a dead end for three reasons. Let me explain why.

First:

#1: A life lived apart from God will be meaningless, regardless of your education, fulfilled goals, pursuit of pleasure, or the abundance of wealth.

I want to show you an interesting verse in Ecclesiastes 2 where Solomon draws some final conclusions about his pursuit of pleasure. He says,

“There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” Ecclesiastes 2:24a

If you are like me, you are puzzled by what it says when you first read this verse because it appears to be saying “eat, drink and be

merry", which is the exact opposite of what we've been saying. Unfortunately here is an instance where we have lost the true meaning of the verse by a bad translation. The words, "better than," should not be in the sentence because they are not in the original Hebrew and so they do not belong here. What this text actually says is,

There is nothing in man that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

What it is really saying is that there is nothing IN man, there is no inherent value in him that makes it possible for him to extract true enjoyment from the things he does. That is the first thing Solomon says. In the next verse, he basically says the same thing.

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Ecclesiastes 2:24b-25)

What Solomon is saying is that enjoyment is a gift of God. There is nothing in possessions, or material goods, or money, nor is there is anything in man himself that can enable him to keep enjoying the things he does. It is only possible to have enjoyment in all your life if you take it from the hand of God.

That's the first reason why the pursuit of total freedom apart from God is a dead end.

Here's the second:

#2: The pursuit of unbridled freedom leads to slavery.

In our attempts to do what we want, when we want, with whom we want, we end up serving little kings like appetite, lust, fear, comparison, insecurity, dysfunctional relationships, addiction, loneliness, and

greed. We become slaves in the midst of our desire to be totally free. You see it works like this:

Satan is always trying to push us to extremes. On one extreme, he tempts us to become legalists and to satisfy ourselves, and God by adhering to a strict external code of do's and don'ts, which we imagine will please God and demonstrate our suitability for heaven. At the other extreme, he tempts us to become lawless "wind chasers"; that is to satisfy ourselves by rejecting all codes and to live completely free to pursue our personal lusts and desires. Both of these extremes are man-centered and destructive. Satan has something for everybody and both extremes are bondage. And the satanic lure of unbridled freedom is dangerous because it can enslave us.

The bible makes this very clear:

Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads...

...to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. Romans 6:16
NLT

What the Apostle Paul is saying is this: If you yield yourself to sin, you become a slave of sin. There is no middle ground. We are either a slave to our sin (such as total freedom) or we are a slave to God. The liberty God gave us was not to be used as a springboard to do what we want, when we want with whom with want. As John Stott says, "Christian freedom is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin. True liberty is not the privilege to do whatever we want, but the privilege to do what God wants.

Which brings me to my final point.

#3: There's no such thing as total freedom. We are always under authority – God's authority.

You and I were created to be ruled over, which means when we say no to one king, we always choose another king. There is no such thing as absolute and total autonomy. Jesus calls us to freedom, but that does not mean independence. Freedom in Christ doesn't mean we have no ruler or king. We have His yoke in our lives. That's what the bible says.

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me,

because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.

For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light." Matthew 11:28-30.

In ancient times, a young oxen was yoked or tethered to an older oxen as they together would push a grinding wheel in a circle to make flour out of wheat. But even though the young oxen was walking and working beside the older one, the older oxen did the work while the young oxen learned to walk in a circle and follow the lead of the older one.

That's the message of the verse we just read. You see, we all need to be yoked to Jesus. Without a yoke, we have no direction and no purpose. Every Christian is given a measure of control, but that doesn't mean you should control you. You and I do a terrible job of controlling ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit, Jesus living in us, to control us from within. And Jesus' yoke is tailor-made for each

of us, so that as we are co-yoked, we may walk and work with Him to the glory of God!

Conclusion

So what do we make of this idea of doing whatever we want when we want with whomever we want? According to King Solomon it's chasing after the wind. Whenever we pursue independence from God we wind up at a dead end. Whenever we pursue pleasure and unbridled freedom, It's just a matter of time before we become jaded and burned out with life. And whenever you live to do whatever you want, when you want, with whom you want, somebody is going to get hurt. And that somebody is you. If today you find yourself bruised and battered and disillusioned from the lesser "gods" you've set up in your life, I've got good news. There is a remedy. There is always a way back. There is always a second, 3rd, 4th, 5th

chance for those who want to start over because God loves prodigals. We worship a prodigal God.

Song: Prodigal

Communion:

Wherever you are, whatever you have done...it isn't the end, Your Father will meet you with arms open wide. Some of us here today find ourselves far from God...bruised, battered and disillusioned because of the life we have been living. So what do you do know that you find yourself a million miles away from God? You do what the song says. You come running like a prodigal. You run back to God, Back to the cross. Back to Jesus where you belong.

And that's why we celebrate communion. It's a reminder to us that there is ALWAYS a way back even if we are a million miles away from God. Our God loves prodigals. He's a

prodigal God because his arms are always wide open ready to welcome us back home. And since he's a prodigal God, he has provided a way for us to be forgiven and restored through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

So today as we celebrate communion, we do so with the knowledge that you can never out sin the grace of God. This ceremony reminds us that it's not about what we've done – good or bad – but what He has done on our behalf.

That's why the Apostle Paul writes that ...

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in

my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (NIV)

So, come to the table, take a piece of the bread and dip it in the juice and eat it with thankfulness for his grace and mercy.

CLOSING:

Thanks for coming. Next week, Rick will be back in the saddle as we continue in our series, "This is Us". Thanks for coming!