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Maxims for Success
Ecclesiastes 6 & 7

July 16, 2017

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^D Job 1:21, 2:10; Ephesians 4:15

^E 1 Timothy 1:15

A. The Title

1. Success

a. And the winner is ...

- (A) Two Kentucky Farmers who owned racing stables had developed a keen rivalry. One spring, each of them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking that a professional rider might help him outdo his friend, one of the farmers engaged a crack jockey. The two horses were neck and neck with a large lead over the rest of the pack at the last fence, but suddenly both fell, unseating their riders.
- (B) The professional jockey remounted quickly, rode on to win the race.
- (C) Returning triumphantly to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him fuming with rage. "What's the matter?" the jockey asked. "I won, didn't I?"
- (D) "Oh yeah," roared the farmer. "You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse." In his hurry to remount after the fall, the jockey has jumped on his competitor's horse.
- (E) Success is meaningless unless we are in the right. -{2}.

b. The American Dream

- (A) The American Dream was first publicly defined in 1931. Historian James Truslow Adams used the phrase in his book *Epic of America*. Adams' often-repeated quote is, "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." -{3}. – the culture of rugged individualism
- (B) it could be stated equally as the Canadian dream
- (C) but it has grown more solid over the years in terms of specific measurements: one's education, one's job, the size & location of one's house, the number & makes of one's cars and so on
- (D) if you have these then you are counted to be a success
- (E) success is identified with power, position and possessions

c. The Bible's View

- (A) on success – which is God's view – is considerably different
- (B) Jesus said: "... one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." (Luke 12:15 NKJV)
- (C) and God's formula for excess probably never stated more clearly than Joshua 1:8, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

- (D) success is defined as obedience to God's will as found in His word
- (E) and is often viewed collectively of God's people, His church
- (F) these middle chapters in Ecclesiastes bear out that point of view

2. Maxims

- a. or proverbs, are simple practical truths
- b. usually they are reminders of self-evident principles already known
- c. these middle chapters of Ecclesiastes are filled with them
- d. this is no surprise, since its author, Solomon, is said to have spoken 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32), some being recorded in that book
- e. here in Ecclesiastes they are used in support of his argument
 - (A) that life is vanity – futility, frustration – for the man under the sun who leaves God out of his or her life
 - (B) that only by having a God-centred view of life does it make sense
- f. let us look at some of these lessons, and see how they apply to us, both as individuals and as a local church, the body of Christ

B. Unfulfilling Human Success

1. Riches, Wealth & Honour

6:1-2

- a. *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men — a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction.*
- b. here is a man – an individual – who has apparent material success
 - (A) he has riches – his financial needs are well taken care of
 - (B) he has wealth – *This is not a repetition of the same idea of riches as might at first appear. "Wealth" is but another form of the word "weal," or "well-being," including those things which tend to the welfare of men, not merely money or other riches.* ^{—{4}} – but true prosperity
 - (C) he has honour – the acclaim and acceptance of others
 - (D) his material possessions include everything he desires
 - (E) all being the gift of God, so honestly acquired
- c. in contrast to 5:19 (*"Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God."*)

the words imply this man is grasping after all his desires

- (A) so that God does not allow him to enjoy them
 - (B) what is his is taken and enjoyed by a foreigner
 - (C) not by a rightful heir but by one who has no right to them
- d. humanly speaking, he is successful; but it is all vanity

2. Family & Longevity

- a. the following verses list similar situations, where there is apparent success but it is all empty
- b. things that man counts as success but God does not
- c. there is the man with a large family – a hundred children! – but is unable to enjoy them due to poverty, in verses 3 to 5
- d. there is the man who has a long lifetime – two thousand years! – yet does not enjoy good things and dies all the same, in verse 6

3. Discontent

6:7-9

- a. is the mark of the falseness of human success
 - (A) the examples of riches, family, longevity have illustrated this
 - (B) the endeavours of labour and wisdom likewise do so
- b. **All a man's labour is for his mouth and yet the appetite (literally: soul) is not satisfied. For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.**
- c. "what the eyes see" is a way of expressing "the things you have", without the undue ambition of wanting & seeking more
 - (A) labour, in itself, does not provide contentment: it fills the table, but the soul may be left empty
 - (B) the wise man does not gain any more contentment by thought than the poor man has because of necessity
 - (C) and is this at all to the credit of the poor man?
- d. so, even in contentment, any success is more apparent than real

C. Success Is How You Finish

1. Life's Serious Side

7:1-4

- a. A good name is better than a good ointment, And the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting, Because that is the end of every man, And the living takes it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
- b. This chapter begins with a series of maxims or proverbs
- (A) a series of things better than others
 - (B) truths & principles to discern between true & false success
 - (C) and the first few are all associated with death
 - (D) because it is death which distinguishes true success
- c. First of all, it is one's character that determines true success
- (A) combining Luther's translation with Karl Delitzsch' gives "a good odour (= reputation) is better than sweet scent"
 - (B) many equate "name" in this verse with "reputation" but "name" as used in the Bible is more than that: it is representative of the real person; a person's nature and character
 - (1) so Jesus named James & John, "sons of thunder"
 - (2) we pray in the name of Jesus – what He is – our Saviour
 - (C) and it is when our character is complete – when we have finished this earthly pilgrimage – that the character can be evaluated
- d. the next question: how do you deal with another person's death
- (A) for some it is a time to find ways to avoid thinking of death: go to a pub; have a wake; feast and forget
 - (B) but funerals are not for the dead – their time of frustration on this earth is finished – but for the living, that we take it to heart
 - (1) that the person who has died be an example to follow
 - (2) or a warning to heed
 - (3) then sadness can render good to our heart: our will & desires
- e. so we conclude, that to be truly wise (not simply clever or prudent)
- (A) we need to observe sorrow as a necessary part of life
 - (B) not merely cast it off flippantly and frivolously

2. The Finish Line

7:8

- a. The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.
- (A) There was a young student pastor who was called upon to preach his first sermon. He mounted the steps

to the pulpit, head held high, full of smiles. In the first few minutes he lost the audience as well as what he intended to say. Miserable, he finished off with a few words and abjectly descended from the pulpit. An elder said to him, "If you had gone up as you came down, then you would have come down as you went up."

- (B) many the person who has started a project full of confidence & pride has seen it end in disaster
 - (C) A study conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC, showed that a major reason successful people are fired or forced to retire before advancing as far as they were expected is due to their inability to handle anger, especially under pressure. ^{-{5}}.
 - (D) that is why patience is better than haughtiness of spirit.
- b. Paul personalised this truth: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14)
- Keep your eyes on the prize,
For the home in the skies,
God is still on the throne! ^{-{6}}.

3. Keep God in Mind

7:13-14

- a. Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one as well as the other So that man may not discover anything that will be after him.
- (A) these words are not levelling a criticism at God's justice
 - (B) rather they state His sovereignty
 - (1) that nothing good comes upon us that is not his will
 - (2) nothing sad come upon us that is not for His purposes
 - (3) when I complain about my circumstances; we about our church's, we are saying 'God doesn't know what His is doing'
 - (4) in all his trials Job recognized this:
 - (a) "... The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21 NAS)
 - (b) "... Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10 NAS)
 - (C) hardship has a part in God's purpose that the believer may grow up – i.e., mature – into Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4;15)

D. Deal with the Sin Problem

1. The Problem Stated

7:20, 29

- a. **20 Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. ... 29 Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.**
- b. why is it that man-based success is vanity – futile, empty? It is sin.
- c. the person who would claim that they have never sinned can only do so by having the wrong world-view
 - (A) a world-view that exalts man to be the standard of right & wrong
 - (B) a world-view that omits God, thereby debasing his absolute purity
 - (C) but Solomon does not mince words: all have sinned
- d. this is a fundamental truth about mankind
 - (A) from the Creator's hand, was not neither good nor bad, which is how some people picture his state of innocence
 - (B) but he was pronounced good by God, which is the same as upright as pronounced here by Solomon
 - (C) man was without sin, yet able to sin as history afterwards proved
 - (D) and since then, though knowing good and evil, but now under the dominance of sin, men of all times and in all circles of life: they seek many arts (calculations, inventions, devices), by which they go astray ... ^{-{7}}.
 - (E) in the words of the hymn, "sinner by choice, an alien by birth"^{-{8}}.

2. The Problem Solved

- a. Paul's words sum it up: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." (1 Timothy 1:15)
- b. it is when we make that statement, only genuinely putting our own name in the place of Paul's, that our sin can be dealt with
- c. for Jesus Christ died on the cross, a perfect sacrifice for our sin, so that we can be forgiven and made acceptable to God as our Father

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AV	Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS	New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NLT	New Living Translation © 1996 Tyndale Charitable Trust
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version © 1989 National Council of Churches of Christ
RSV	Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 National Council of Churches of Christ; Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd

Some of the commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

- BM - Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
 - EBC - The Expositor's Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, MI:
 - Calvin - Calvin's Commentaries
 - Gill - Exposition of the Old Testament, Exposition of the New Testament, by John Gill, D.D.
 - JFB - Jamieson, Fausset & Brown
 - K&D - Commentary on the Old Testament - Keil & Delitzsch - Eerdman's, 1959
 - Kerux - The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.
2. Leadership, 1991 fall issue, "Actions Speak Louder Than Verbs," by Herb Miller - Kerux illustrations 1826
 3. Source: <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-the-american-dream-quotes-and-history-3306009>
 4. From the Biblical Museum, *in loc*.
 5. Kerux illustration #696
 6. 'God Is Still on the Throne' by Mrs F. W. Suffield
 7. Condensed from K&D, *in loc*.
 8. From 'A Child of the King,' by Harriet E. Buell, 1834-1910