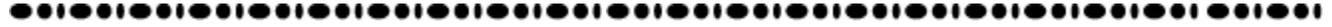


*Week Five*

# GOD AND GIFTS



## **ICE CREAM, COLORS, AND SUNSETS**

Ice cream.

Ice cream?

Yes. Ice cream.

What about it?

I like it.

You like it?

Yes. I like ice cream.

Good.

Blue.

Blue? Like the color?

Yes. Blue...like the color.

What about it?

I like it.

You like blue.

Yes.

Good.

Sunsets.

Sunsets?

Yes. Sunsets.

What about them?

I like them.

You like sunsets?

Yes. I like sunsets.

Good. You like ice cream, blue, and sunsets.

Yes.

So here's a moment...You're eating ice cream while watching the sunset over a blue ocean. Perfect?  
Silence...No response...Mental wheels spinning...An honest thought is finally given.

Almost.

Almost?

Almost.

What else?

Very Berry Strawberry.

Very Berry Strawberry?

Yes. Very Berry Strawberry.

Now you've lost me.

Very Berry Strawberry. The ice cream flavor. It must be Very Berry Strawberry.

So you're eating Very Berry Strawberry while watching the sunset over a blue ocean. Perfect?

Perfectly Peachy.

Perfectly Peachy?

Yes. Perfectly Peachy. My other favorite ice cream.

So it's either Very Berry Strawberry or Perfectly Peachy?

That's right.

Good.

## **LIFE**

The stuff of life. The good stuff anyway...

The cool of the evening. Fresh mountain snow. Long walks with an old friend. Oak trees. Waves crashing on the shore. Candlelit dinners. Little league. Chocolate pie. Sweet corn in August. Watermelon. Swimming pools. The cry of a newborn baby. Jumping frogs. Singing birds. Paychecks. Springtime in the country. City lights. Friday nights. Fresh-cut grass. Championship teams. Holding hands. Touchdowns. Blue sky. Star-filled nights. Freshly brewed coffee. Red wine. Autumn leaves. Sleeping in. Hot dogs at the ball park. Adventure. Wooded trails. Sleepy ponds. Holidays. Quiet moments. Roaring crowds. Early mornings. Late evenings. Faithful friends. Old yellowed letters in the attic. Laughter. Singing. Courage. Little tiny bugs. Splashing fish. Tall glasses of iced tea.

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31).*

Let's linger here. Yes, there's another list, an ugly list, a disturbing list. Save that for another day. Let's revel a bit in the good stuff of life.

Can we frolic? Some don't think we can. Life is serious; God is serious.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

Yes. God is serious. But can't we frolic? Wouldn't God want us to frolic? Wouldn't God want us to enjoy the good stuff? Wouldn't God want us to laugh and sing and jump and embrace and eat Very Berry Strawberry while watching his sun set over his blue ocean?

Let's be honest.

Let's be uncensored.

Let's be vulnerable.

Ready? Here we go...

We like stuff.

We like chocolate pie. We like ice cream. We like laughing and dancing and singing and strolling. We like to be with friends. We like to be alone. We like to listen to music. We like to make music. We like to make love. We like to cheer our favorite team to victory. We like to run and bike and swim and walk. We like lots of things.

We like stuff. But can we? Can we like these things? We are to *love God with all our heart, soul, and mind*. We are to *have no other gods before God*. We've talked of God's competition. Stuff can become gods. Is stuff wrong? Is stuff evil?

Clearly a distinction must be made. We sense that. We know that.

What must we do?

We must slowly and carefully draw our double-edged sword that "*judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12). We must discover what's helpful and healthy, and ghastly and gross about the stuff of life. Something must be divided, distinguished, and displayed. But what? What's the distinction? Let's rejoin Solomon on his quest.

## SOLOMON QUEST CONTINUED

Solomon determined to "*explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven*" (Ecclesiastes 1:13). We listened to what he *didn't* find. Let's consider what he *did* find.

You'll recall he tried pleasure...

*"Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?"* (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

We then read of his frustration with the pursuit of achievement...

*My heart took delight in all my work... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun* (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

He then turned to education...

*"What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless."... Like the fool, the wise man too must die!* (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16).

So pleasure didn't do it.

Accomplishment didn't do it.

Education didn't do it.

## GOD AND GIFTS

Remember the result?

*So I hated life... (Ecclesiastes 2:17).*

But what then? Does he just leave it at that? Does he just fold his arms, shake his head, wallow in cynicism, and declare life meaningless?

Not exactly.

Not at all.

Solomon makes a distinction. Some will find him frustrating. The wise will be inspired. He writes:

*I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, TNIV).*

This is maddening! In one breath he states his frustration with life. In the next breath he beckons us to be *happy and find satisfaction in our work*. This, he says, is *the gift of God*.

You can't have it both ways Solomon.

Do you hate it? Do you enjoy it? Which is it?

*Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Ecclesiastes 2:11).*

And yet we must...

*Eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work. This too, is from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:24).*

This man is speaking from both sides of his mouth.

Or is he? Might he be on to something? Might we discover profound wisdom at the intersection of his commentary on life?

## **IT OR IT**

Carefully consider another insightful observation by Solomon...

*God has set eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

It's that word again: *heart*. God has set eternity in our hearts.

We are designed, our hearts are designed, with a hunger for something big—no, not just big—something infinite, something eternal. Again, “*God has set eternity in the human heart*” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

That's our condition.

That's our design.

That's our longing.

That's our hunger.

That's our wishing, wanting, and seeking.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

That's our pursuit.

The pursuit of *The Eternal*.

We wish for IT.

We hunger for IT.

We seek IT.

We crave IT.

We go for IT.

But...

*God has set eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

There's something in our wiring, our makeup, our design that longs for *The Infinite, The Grand, The Eternal*.

We look for IT in work.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in pleasure.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in accomplishment.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

But God has set eternity in the human heart. It's our design. It's our makeup. It's our crafting.

We don't just want it. We want IT.

So what happens? Life can get quite ugly.

She was crafted with eternity in her heart. She claws and climbs higher and higher on that corporate ladder...the next rung...the next box above...the next win...that will be IT. An addiction is born because she is never quite satisfied. She struggles and strives to get higher and higher because it is never quite IT.

But it was never meant to be IT...just it.

He is crafted with eternity in his heart. He gropes and gripes from one high to another...the next drink...the next fling...the next one will be IT. An addiction is born because he is never quite satisfied. He takes good things and puts them on steroids. He struggles and strives as his life is buried by buzzes that are never quite IT.

But they were never meant to be IT...just it.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

She is crafted with eternity in her heart. She squeezes and squirms from one relationship to another...the next one...the next relationship...the next encounter...that one will be IT. An addiction is born because she is never quite satisfied. She cries and craves to get the one that will finally be IT.

But he is never meant to be IT...just it.

## **GIFTS OR GODS**

Solomon offers a profound observation that must not be missed. What does he say concerning the stuff of life? These are...

...*the gift of God.* (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

The “gift” of God. Gifts not gods.

The human design is one that longs for *The Eternal*. Solomon is making a distinction. It’s critical. Might it go something like this...

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

When we expect a gift to be God, we will hate those gifts as they fail to satisfy the eternal hunger of our hearts. When we let gifts be gifts, we can enjoy these gifts for what they are rather than despise them for what they are not.

God gives gifts, but he never intended them to deliver what only he can deliver.

He is *The Eternal*.

Work is not *The Eternal*.

Human relationships are not *The Eternal*.

Brownie fudge pie is not *The Eternal*.

Money is not *The Eternal*.

Sex is not *The Eternal*.

Baseball is not *The Eternal*.

Spouses are not *The Eternal*.

Children are not *The Eternal*.

God and God alone is *The Eternal*.

Let’s put it all together...

*Love The Eternal with all your heart, soul, and mind because God has set eternity in the human heart. Our hearts were designed for something infinite, something grand, something eternal. All else will prove frustrating when vainly attempting to be The Eternal.*

## **SOLOMON’S DISCOVERY**

Is this what Solomon discovered? We’ve yet to hear how it all turned out. What was the end of his quest? Where did it lead him? What did he ultimately discover? Was he ever satisfied?

### **GOD AND GIFTS**

Solomon reveals his discovery in his final comments in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes.

*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).*

What's he saying?

Solomon gives us as much as had been revealed by God at the time he lived. He points to a time, a day, an event. He looks to the future and instinctively knows one day he will stand before *The Eternal*.

So what does Solomon say?

Live for that day.

Live for that reality.

Live for God.

Don't waste your life expecting gifts to be God.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

Live for God.

Or put another way, a way that sounds familiar by now: Love God.

It's profound. It's simple. It reverberates from every page of Scripture.

Remember David's one thing? David longed to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. Do you see it? David and Solomon had the same *one thing*. Both of their hearts beat for *The Eternal*.

Did David want financial security? Of course he did.

Did David want friends? Of course he did.

Did David want family? Of course he did.

Would David have liked *Very Berry Strawberry*? Most definitely.

But David recognized the deep desire also recognized by his son, Solomon. *God has set eternity in the human heart and only God himself can satisfy that longing. "One thing I ask of the Lord...I ask for The Eternal."*

## **EVERYBODY WORSHIPS**

Consider this. It's a bold thought: *Everybody worships*.

Everybody?

Yes. Everybody.

We don't think of it like worship, but consider this carefully. It's not a matter of worshipping or not worshipping; it's a matter of what we worship. We worship that thing, that person, that opportunity that is at the center of our passion, our desire, our heart. Most worship does not feel stereotypically religious. Most worship feels highly secular. Worship is pervasive; it's just not always worship of God.

And consider the flip side.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

All too often, what we *do* think of when we think of religion or worship is not worship. God spoke of this ages ago through Isaiah: “*These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men*” (Isaiah 29:13). What was near God? Their lips. What was far from God? It’s that word again: their *hearts*. Their lips said one thing, but their hearts were centered upon something else. They did not worship God authentically. They had something else at the center of their hearts, the center of their desires, the center of their passions. It could have been many things. It could have been relational, financial, vocational, or political. It could have been the next buzz, the next adventure, the next big thing. Whatever it was, whatever was their god, it was not God.

Is it any wonder religious circles can, at times, feel plastic?

And positively speaking...

Is it any wonder religious circles can, at times, feel passionate?

Plastic religion comes when the lips say one thing but the heart is somewhere else. There’s something repulsive about this. Passionate religion comes when the heart and lips resonate with a unified desire. There’s something radiant about this.

## **THE SECOND COMMANDMENT**

When considering the god of our trust, we previously noted the first of the Ten Commandments:

*You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).*

As we consider our passions, our desires, our worship, consider the second commandment:

*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (Exodus 20:4).*

Translation?

Don’t worship lesser things. Lesser things will frustrate your heart. The heart is designed for *The Eternal*. Worship God and God alone. Stunning, isn’t it? Scripture comes back, again and again and again, to the same theme.

Let God be God. Trust God. Worship God. Love God.

## **ICE CREAM, COLORS, AND SUNSETS**

So what about ice cream? What about sunsets? What about Very Berry Strawberry while watching the sunset over the blue ocean? What about the stuff of life? What do we do with these things?

Live for them? No.

Enjoy them? Yes.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

An interesting thing happens when the stuff of life is weighted appropriately. We can enjoy them for what they are rather than disdain them for what they are not. We no longer obsess over them. We no

longer grip them, gripe about them, or grope for them. They're there. We can enjoy them. We hold them openly in the palm of our hands.

God will give them. God will take them away.

Stuff will come. Stuff will go.

Some will have more. Some will have less.

We will have seasons of abundance. We will have seasons of scarcity.

Both have their place. Both are designed to shape us. Both serve their purpose in making us into the kind of people we truly long to be. We become the kind of people who, with Paul, can say "*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:11-13, TNIV).

Paul learned a secret.

What was his secret?

Paul could endure all of life's circumstances, times of plenty and times of need, through the strength provided by Christ.

If Christ gave strength, what would he give Paul strength to do?

Wouldn't Christ give him the strength to maintain the greatest of God's commands, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" Wouldn't Christ give Paul the strength to fulfill the first two commandments, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" And, "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.*" In the midst of the ebb and flow of life's stuff, Paul learned to love *The Eternal*.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

## **WHISPERED WISDOM**

Our journey began with a whisper.

We leaned in.

We listened close.

We let ancient words of wisdom speak to us today.

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

This wisdom inspired reflection.

It inspired us to question, to wonder, to dig. Important discoveries have been made, and much more lies ahead, but at this point we must mark something. It is infinitely important and must not be missed.

Scripture says we are "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14).

Scripture says that in this making, "*God has set eternity in the human heart*" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

So this we know...

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

This heart that we are to guard *above all else* beats with no ordinary passion. When this heart was *fearfully and wonderfully made* it was filled with longing, desire, and drive, and this longing, desire, and drive is a longing for *The Eternal*. This heart, this wellspring of life, was fearfully and wonderfully and carefully and thoughtfully designed to love the greatest and grandest of beings.

It was designed to *love God*.

Here's the discovery.

Mark this.

Hold it close.

Carry it with you, and never let it go.

It speaks to where we started, and where we must go.

It directly addresses that which we are to do *above all else*.

*To guard this heart we must direct this wellspring to that which it is designed to love. It is not ultimately designed for anything less than The Eternal. To direct this pulsating passion to little things is to not guard our hearts but frustrate our hearts. "More!" our hearts rightfully beat. "More! I was designed for more! I was designed for The Eternal! Don't ruin me with little things! Guard me. Protect me. Care for me. Guard me, protect me, and care for me by setting me free and letting me run to the only God grand enough and great enough to bring ultimate satisfaction."*

*"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Psalm 119:32).*

Love God. Love God. Love God. Love God.