

**LIFE MATTERS 5: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
ECCLESIASTES 9:7-10
JANUARY 31, 2016**

I have some good news and some bad news for you. Lent is coming early this year. For those who don't know, Lent is a spiritual season observed by some in the Christian church leading up to Easter. Lent is a 40-day season leading up to Easter meant to prepare your heart through meditation and usually fasting of some kind. You have probably heard different people preparing to give something up for Lent. People give up certain foods like sweets or alcohol.

This is where we get to the good news/bad news. The good news first: Lent is early this year, but it's still after Super Bowl Sunday. That means you can eat all the queso, chocolate fudge bon bons and any other snack you can shove in your face during four hours of football. The bad news: Lent is early and it is before Valentine's Day. The number one chocolate day of the year colliding with a spiritual season wherein many people give up chocolate. You can see the problem. You can also see a lot of people who might've given up chocolate for Lent changing their minds to something less problematic. This also happens to be the theme for the movie *Chocolat*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXjncclJI0Q>

This small stoic town is embarking upon Lent and the sly wind from the north brings with it a chocolate maker named Vianne. Vianne is the exact opposite of the tone and perceived values of the town. Vianne is not all that religious. She is a single mother. She dresses with style. She talks with spice. She is a woman prone to celebration and all of this is represented in her chocolate. All the while, most of the town has given up chocolate for Lent.

The embodiment of the town's tone and values is found in its mayor. He is strident and legalistic. He runs the town with a somber tone. The preacher is his puppet and he

continually preaches a message of law, isolation and deprivation. Thus the story is launched as people in the town begin to get a new taste of life. The chocolate begins to awaken passions and restore relationships. All the while, the mayor is working overtime to expel this woman and her tempting truffles.

I'm wondering which version of God you grew up with? Whether you were inside or outside of the church. Who was God? The chocolate maker or the mayor? Depending on your culture and your family and your theology and your preacher, he could have been either. The reason why he could be either is because either case could be made in the Bible.

When you read the Old Testament, you often see the mayor. He hands out rules and commands obedience. There seems to be a lot of wrath and a lot of death, but it's not all negative connotations when it comes to the mayor, in fact there is something to be said for reverence and a healthy fear. One who rules. One who has a mission for you and expects you to follow it. Then you have the chocolate maker of the Old Testament. The same God that can come off as serious and somewhat angry requires several feasts every year, seven feasts to be exact wherein you stop everything and eat/drink to your heart's desire. He is the God of the Psalms, which is poetry and music. He is the God who delights and woos his people to come back.

When you read the New Testament, you will find the same thing. You will find the mayor when Jesus says pick up your cross and follow me. You will find the mayor when you see the Great Commission and know that we have a difficult and serious mission to fulfill. But then you also see the chocolate maker. Jesus goes to parties. The Pharisees accuse him of being a glutton and a drunk.

Which one is it? The kind of God we have directly affects what kind of followers we should be. Qoheleth wrestled with this same question.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

This passage is one of seven times in Ecclesiastes that Qoheleth distills the purpose of life down to eat, drink and be merry. This is problematic for a few reasons: 1) this is the same guy who in chapter 2 (and many other times) has said the pursuit of pleasure is hebel or meaningless, but now he is saying just the opposite. He says, "Eat, drink and be merry during this hebel life." 2) The other problem is this seems to be at odds with other scripture. This seems to be hedonistic and at odds with our high calling, our mission and our holiness. It sounds a bit like hedonism. It sounds a bit lazy and slothful.

So which one is it? Which one is he? Which one are we? The mayor or the chocolate maker? If you are new here or haven't been here in awhile, we are going through the book of Ecclesiastes and looking for the meaning of life. Ecclesiastes was written by a man who had it all, wisdom, wealth and women. He had the time and ability to have it all and he was still left wanting, which leads to that big question we all occasionally ponder, "What's the meaning of life?"

As a reminder, we have committed to read this book on its own merit. It would be easy to bail ourselves out and say Qoheleth didn't know about Jesus and didn't have the promise of eternity. True, but he does have a faith in God, and he is wrestling with God. That's why a lot of you love this book. It is an honest pursuit. It is a striving and struggling with God and with purpose, and a big part of that conversation comes down to how we spend our time. This is a big question for every Christian.

I know there is more to it than this, but our view of God as mayor or chocolate maker leads to two general camps: Christians focused upon the Great Commission and Christians focused upon the Great Commandment. I know those two can and should be overlapping, but you know these people when you meet them. The Great Commission people are dedicated to spreading the gospel and winning souls. They are committed to the work of the gospel. For this group, the Christian life is best described as a battle and a race. It is

about training yourself and having a wartime mentality. For the Great Commandment group, they are dedicated to the love ethic. Love God and love others. For this group, the Christian life is best described as communing and worshipping, as a banquet or a feast.

I feel pretty certain about this dichotomy because I see it pop up regularly in the ministry of Jesus. One of the more famous episodes is Mary and Martha. Jesus comes to the house of Mary and Martha. Martha does all of the work and that lazy bum Mary sits at Jesus' feet soaking in all of the teaching. This is the moment when Jesus tells Martha to relax, that she is worrying and working unnecessarily and Mary has chosen the better way. But for all of the Martha's in the room, you know someone needed to wash the feet and someone needed to prepare the food.

Which one is he? The Jesus of dying-to-self and missions or the Jesus who goes to all the parties and tells people to sit down and relax? That's a big question and the simple answer of course is: yes. Both.

Let me make a case today, a case that Silicon Valley with its busyness and work ethic skews toward the mayor and toward Martha. What's the vision and what are the quarterly projections? That kind of verbiage is sewn into our culture and it often seeps into the church. We have plans and documents, goals and metrics and those things are okay.

Here is the switcheroo for you today. The question is not which kind of God is he? Because. Yes. He is both. He is the mayor and he is the chocolate maker. He does have laws and he does have grace. He does have mission and he does have communion. He gave the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

The question is which side do you lean towards and where do you need some correction. If I was to guess, some of you today need to slow down and taste the chocolate.

Teresa of Avila was a Catholic mystic nun who lived in the 16th century, and that combination should make you turn your head. The church was on the brink of reformation,

but the Catholic Church at that point was fraught with rules and seriousness. It was oozing a mayoral approach to God. This woman was a mystic who began to see the deeper mysteries of God found in experiences outside of the liturgy. She bore within herself dueling natures. She was a pious nun who practiced austerity and deprivation, but she was also known for indulging in the gifts of God. Two great quotes are attributed to Teresa of Avila (apocryphal or not).

After being criticized for enjoying a sumptuous delicacy of partridge, Teresa fired back at her accuser, "When you fast, fast; when you partridge, partridge." Another quote that is attributed to this nun, "God is good. God and chocolate is better."

Qoheleth is at the end of his life and he is searching for meaning. He is distilling down all that he knows. He is trying to let those who follow have some idea of how to handle their lives, and what they should focus on. Then seven different times: Ecclesiastes 2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7-10 and 11:9. Enjoy your food. Enjoy your drinks. Enjoy your relationships. Get dressed up. Put some oil on your head. Have some fun. Enjoy it.

Here is my guess, if Qoheleth was born about three thousand years later, he would probably have an office on Sand Hill Road. He would be someone important. He would hustle, and he would be a titan of industry. Remember the question today is not which version of God is correct because they both are. God is grace and law. God is mission and communion. He loves Mary and Martha. The question is, "Which way do you lean, and where do you need some correction?"

Qoheleth was a busy man with a lot of plans, and if he was actually Solomon, you can imagine him undertaking that great work for God and finding great meaning in it. But at the end of his life, I think he was doing some reconsidering. Not that he was wrong but just doing a bit of correction, of discovering more of God and receiving his gifts in a new way. Savoring God. Appreciating his gifts. Tasting his gifts.

I want you to watch a video that shows what I mean. This is a little boy who has just tasted bacon for the first time:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtMVMNST_g4

Did you see him close his eyes? He loved it so much, he just started yelling out, "Bacon!" Kids act like that, but as we grow up, we learn to hide our appreciation and not yell out, "Bacon!" But maybe we shouldn't. I think we can lose the wonder. Food becomes fuel. Food becomes a hassle to overcome when everyone gets home and you are fighting with your kids to try to get a meal prepared and then fighting to get them to eat it. We can lose the wonder of the gift.

Qoheleth tells us to enjoy good food to enjoy wine with a joyful heart, to enjoy our relationships. To find a pair of jeans you love. To spend some money on a massage. Enjoy the gifts. Now this is the moment when some of your alarms are going off. What else could we do with that money? What about missions? What about the poor people? Jesus was asked the same question when someone wasted a lot of money on a gift for him. He made room for extravagance. Not for greed or endless luxury. He made room for the gifts. He made room for beauty and for tasty things. He brought great wine to big parties.

Here is the thing I want you to hear today. This is not about eating a filet and training your mind to thank God for it. You can do that, but it isn't the point. When you savor it and go, "Hmmm" (and maybe shout out, "Steak!") then you are worshipping. This doesn't mean you need to sing a hymn after having sex. The thing I want to remind you is there is no separation between physical/spiritual. Everything is spiritual, so when your pleasure receptors go off, you are tasting God. When you spend time in a long embrace, you are holding God. When you celebrate with a precious bottle of wine or a big banana split, you are savoring his gifts.

Harold Kushner wrote a book about Ecclesiastes called *When All You Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. When addressing this passage and others like it in Ecclesiastes, Kushner said this:

“If logic tells us that life is a meaningless accident...don't give up on life. Give up on logic. Listen to that voice inside you which prompted you to ask the question (about the meaning of life) in the first place. If logic tells you that in the long run, nothing makes a difference because we all die and disappear, then don't live in the long run. Instead of brooding over the fact that nothing lasts, accept that as one of the truths of life, and learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory, in the joys that fade. Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever. In fact, learn to savor it because it is only a moment and will not last. Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting.”

I love that last line, “Moments in our lives can be eternal without being everlasting.” I know you have experienced these moments, maybe seeing your first child or grandchild being born. Maybe your first trip to Lake Tahoe when you saw the mountains and the vast blue lake. Maybe seeing your bride walk down the aisle on your wedding day. Maybe riding your bike for the first time in the Santa Cruz Mountains. These are all spiritual moments and these are all gifts.

Here is my hope for you, if this is hard for you, I want you to taste today. I don't want you to linger with guilt. I don't want you to be worried about how else the money or time could have been spent. This brings us to life with others. For every Mary in this room, there is a Martha. For every mayor there is a chocolate maker. We have to do life together. There will be a Sunday in the near future when we ask you to get to work. Serve Sunday is coming up on February 21. It is about taking serious our high calling of service and outreach. But today is about the high calling of communion, the high calling of experiencing the gifts.

If you are in a Life Group, I encourage you to have a taste party. Everyone bring your favorite dish. Not the cheapest dish. Not the easiest to make dish. But your favorite. Or your favorite wine. Or your favorite dessert. Share some of the gifts with one another and savor them together. Maybe even bring some bacon.

Beyond your life with others, the question today for you is, are you savoring the gifts? This is a great question in Silicon Valley. You could be having very expensive food and great

vacations but experiencing none of it. Conversely, someone down the road could be sitting in their local park with a box of Twinkies with sunlight on their face, and they could be in the very presence of God.

The Jewish Talmud also references this idea saying, "In the world to come, each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on the earth that we refused to enjoy."

At the end of the movie, *Chocolat*, the mayor has had enough. It is the night before Easter and thus the end of Lent. He wants the tempting truffles of the chocolate maker to be gone forever. He sneaks in with the intention of destroying all of her work and obliterating her chocolate. It does not go as planned.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWfGoD34pNs>

He wakes up Easter morning with chocolate on his face. He wakes up on Easter morning as a new man. This chapter closes with a reminder from Qoheleth about the fragility and fleeting nature of life. The not so subtle message, have some chocolate today. Share a meal today. Taste and see that the Lord is good today.