

## **LIFE MATTERS 2: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES ECCLESIASTES 2 JANUARY 10, 2016**

I've never been, but the town of Buxton in the United Kingdom (UK) sounds delightful. It's called a spa town because of the geothermal springs that pump out to the surface at a comfortable 80 degrees. In a place like Buxton, with an annual temperature range of 40-65 degrees, 80-degree water is highly sought after. Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buxton became a resort/spa town that people would travel to and enjoy the geothermal springs.

People were drawn to the fresh water. In fact, a popular brand of water in the UK is Buxton water sourced right there in Buxton. The town has come to embrace that identity. To this day, people come to Buxton as a getaway, a place known for fresh pristine spring water.

All of this is what makes the Blue Lagoon of Buxton so dangerous. Look at this picture of the Blue Lagoon. It's gorgeous.

[http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/blogs/atlas\\_obscura/2015/05/13/150513\\_AO\\_BrixtonLagoon.jpg.CROP.original-original.jpg](http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/blogs/atlas_obscura/2015/05/13/150513_AO_BrixtonLagoon.jpg.CROP.original-original.jpg)

It's a beautiful and idyllic place with turquoise-like water along a small private beach area. It looks like a dream, but it's more of a nightmare. You see its beautiful, its idyllic and it is also quite poisonous. The pH level of the blue lagoon is 11.3, which, is much closer to the pH of ammonia and bleach than it is safe water. That level of pH can damage your skin and burn your eyes. It can affect your stomach and leave you sick.

You see this isn't really a blue lagoon. It is an old limestone quarry that has filled with water. The high pH is due to the rocks from the quarry. In addition to the pH levels, there are high levels of toxicity from animal carcasses, garbage and human waste because the blue lagoon was a dumping ground for the rock quarry.

Now at this moment, I'm sure you are all contacting your travel agent to book a trip to the Blue Lagoon of Buxton.

Believe it or not, the town doesn't know what to do because people are constantly swimming in the blue lagoon. They can't drain the lagoon because the poisonous water would affect the drinkable water of Buxton. So they posted signs telling people about the high pH levels.

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2012/08/12/article-0-14823AC6000005DC-163\\_964x697.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2012/08/12/article-0-14823AC6000005DC-163_964x697.jpg)

They posted signs telling people about the old dumping ground.

<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-vunotJ2LUR0/UfY9KrmR8LI/AAAAAABNXw/9tjspW-Q4Rw/s1600/The+Poisonous+Blue+Lagoon+of+Harpur+Hill%252C+Buxton+04.jpg>

Yet people still flock to the Blue Lagoon of Buxton. The shimmery blue color is too much to withstand. People read the signs and just decide they can swim in it as long as they don't dunk their heads or swallow any water. The town council doesn't know what else to do. They have told people they are swimming in poison and yet they still show up.

You say, "How are they not getting it? Why would they hear the warnings and still miss it? The short answer is the blue water. They can't resist it. It looks like a postcard, so despite the warnings, they do it anyway. They hear the warning, but the allure is too much.

Today, Qoheleth is going to post a sign outside of the most alluring blue lagoon. The question of course is, "Will we listen?"

## *Ecclesiastes 2: 1-11*

If you are new here or weren't here last week, we started our annual "Life Matters" series. At the start of each new year, we revisit our discipleship path at SFC. As a church, our number one job is to make disciples. But what makes a disciple? That's a good question. You will get ten different answers from five different people, but a disciple is simply someone who looks like the one being emulated. A disciple is one who mimics and patterns their life after someone else. Not just a student who collects data from a teacher, but a disciple is someone who is trying to live, talk and act like they're being followed.

With all of that said, what is a disciple of Jesus? If we are to help you pattern your life after Jesus, what is our goal? We think there are three core markers of a disciple, *Life in God*, intentional Christ-centered worship, *Life with others*, practicing your faith in Christian community and *Life for others*, which is serving and sharing in the name of Jesus. We spend two weeks on each of these life goals and today is week one of *Life in God*. What does it mean to have a life in God?

A life in God is a life of worship, but as I am fond of saying, it is difficult to lift your hands in worship when you are clutching an idol. One of the most nefarious idols out there is the blue lagoon laid out in Ecclesiastes 2, the deep azure waters of pleasure, wealth and entertainment, the inviting lagoon of consumption and diversion. The postcard-esque swimming hole of more and better.

In Ecclesiastes 2, Qoheleth lays out a resume of accomplishments and pleasurable pursuits. The word here for pleasure is not a sinful word. The word means joy or gladness. He is not suggesting a series of things that are increasingly more salacious and depraved, as if he is a debauched person ever in pursuit of a better high or wilder sexual fantasy. The word here is joy, gladness. That's what he was seeking and he has an impressive list.

Qoheleth had the best wine. He built numerous houses and planted vineyards. He had magnificent gardens and parks. He had countless servants; all the money you could want

and the best entertainment money could buy. He had sex with countless partners. Vineyards, big homes, gardens, money, does this sound like anywhere you know of?

Verse 10 sums it up well, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure." By almost all accounts, this man had everyone beat. He denied himself nothing; he had the best of everything, more money, more homes, better vacations, more sex, better entertainment. He had it all. Then those heart-breaking words in verse 11, it was all meaningless, chasing after the wind.

There is something so heart wrenching about a person who has tasted it all and still finds it lacking. I went to a movie this week in which a man with a net worth in the nine figures, a man with A-plus status in Hollywood, a man who cavorts with fashion supermodels, a man with unmatched success did the unthinkable. Leonardo DiCaprio, in this latest movie, ate raw fish and bison liver. He was filthy dirty and spent months in the frozen tundra. He stripped naked and handled a dead horse carcass, and all of it was real. No CGI.

Why would the man with this yacht: <http://ll-media.tnz.com/2016/01/01/0101-leo-dicaprio-yacht-x17-3.jpg>. subject himself to such disgusting and belittling things? Why would the man with everything subject himself to such humiliation and pain? Because the man with everything doesn't quite have everything, he is missing a little golden statue called an Oscar. The most prestigious acting award there is. He has won awards from every other award show, but not the Oscars. He has been nominated four times but never won. Now you can tell he is getting a bit desperate. The man with everything doesn't actually have everything, and it is driving him nuts.

Now here is the sad part. I kind of hope he doesn't win, because if he does, he will realize that after eating bison liver and raw fish and going naked on the frozen tundra that its still just a little golden statue. The problem for Qoheleth is that nothing eluded him. He was able to build, buy and conquer it all. No woman turned him down, no property was unavailable, no hunger was left wanting. He had the rare misfortune of having it all.

Sadly, most all of us will never receive this gift. We are all like Leonardo DiCaprio, just on a lesser scale. We can mistakenly believe there is something out there, whatever our little golden statue is. The wisdom of Qoheleth is take it from me...I have had it all...I denied myself nothing, and I was still left wanting. It was chasing after the wind.

You often hear that phrase, "chasing after the wind." I see within it a double meaning. The Hebrew word for "wind" is *ruach*, which means wind, spirit or breath. It is used numerous times in the Old Testament to refer to God and refer to the soul within us. In the same way at Pentecost, there is a double meaning when the rushing wind descends upon them as the Holy Spirit, so too we find with *ruach*.

The irony of this phrase is that chasing the wind sounds like a fruitless exercise, like a dog chasing its tail. But buried deeper in this phrase could be the idea that when we chase those things, we are looking for God. G.K. Chesterton famously said that every man who enters a brothel is searching for God. Not in the sense that he is so sinful/depraved that he will find God. When we look for satisfaction, we are looking for him. This is the Ecclesiastes 3:11 of it all. When we chase the wind, we are chasing God.

It's easy to see people who are pursuing pleasure, entertainment, sex or money as vapid or sinful. They have the appetite, they just aren't quite sure where to satisfy it.

The sad part for the city of Buxton is that they are a town known for their water. I mean their names are on bottled water. They have been famous since Roman times for their water. People come to them but somehow find themselves in the toxic stew of the blue lagoon. You want to say, "You were so close, but oh so far. You missed something life-giving and found something life-taking." The people in charge were so frustrated by this, they did something drastic in 2013. They dyed the water black. They tried to make the appearance match the toxicity and they turned it into dark, murky water. You wonder if some visitors began to assume that the water in the whole town had gone bad. That none of it was good. In a not dissimilar pattern, the church sees people going the way of Qoheleth and going the way of Leo and we do the same thing. People are diving deep into the blue lagoon of

pleasure, and we turn the waters black. A large portion of people can be educated by the church for decades and come out with clear assumptions that sex, drink and pleasure in any form are bad. There are countless Christians who feel shame and guilt when it comes to sex, pleasure and fun because the church has turned the waters dark, all of them.

Here is the distinction I don't want you to miss today. Listen as Qoheleth sums it up at the end of the chapter.

*Ecclesiastes 2: 24-25*

The very things he said were meaningless, he is now saying they are a gift from God. Sex, food, drink, work are all gifts. The distinction comes in verse 25 when he says, "Who can find enjoyment without God?" The difference to behold here is between an idol and a gift. The same object could be either. It could be the idol of the right zip code or the gift of the right zip code. It could be the idol of a great vacation or the gift of a great vacation. It could be an idol of cabernet or the gift of cabernet.

This is a fine line. That is why some forms of Christianity would prefer to tint the waters black than let people receive the gifts. I've talked about this before, but almost all sin is a good thing taken to an extreme.

The simplest picture of this illustration is a child sneaking cookies out of the pantry. Here is the mindset of a child; cookies are delicious and I wish I could eat them all day long. However, mother has told me not sneak cookies from the pantry. Therefore, mom has some issues with my cookie consumption, but I don't. Mom gets angry about it, but the cookies aren't really bad for me. Inherent in this misconception is that a child does not understand that the mother isn't trying to withhold good things but rather protect the child. A child left to his own devices eating cookies all day long would suffer from an upset stomach in the short term and in the long term could be subject to unhealthiness and disease with unfettered access to cookies.

Now using the illustration of getting sick on cookies as a picture of sin might seem like a minimization. Sin is devastating; it isn't as benign as a tummy ache, and cookies aren't inherently bad, but sin is. In one sense you are right, but let me explain why I think this is an appropriate metaphor. More often than not sin is God-given desire consumed in excess. Sex isn't bad. It is a God-given desire, but when sex is sought in excess outside of the confines for which God created it, it is sin. Money isn't bad, greed, which is pursuing money in excess is. Drinking isn't bad, drunkenness, which is consuming alcohol in excess is. Anger isn't bad, hatred or even murder which is anger carried to excess is. Appreciating things isn't bad, desiring things so much that you covet or steal them is. Sin is often God-given things abused in excess. The Greek word in the New Testament for lust is *epithumia*, but lust is a bad translation. *Epithumia* means strong desire. Jesus tells his disciples he *epithumia* to share his last supper with them. It can be a good strong desire or a bad strong desire. When we *epithumia* God-given things in excess, this is often sin. That is why the cookies make sense. The mother in this illustration enjoys giving her child good things, but the child and his natural tendencies without a governor or law is prone to eat in excess and make himself unhealthy and sick.

In a similar fashion, the temptation of sin, the desires for the cookies of this life leaves most people thinking that God is some kind of grandfatherly prude in the sky who doesn't want us to have pleasure. Many times as Christians, we treat sin as sneaking a treat rather than consuming something that will make us ill and diseased. Just like swimming in the blue lagoon.

C.S. Lewis said, "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desire, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

As ridiculous as it sounds, I swim in the blue lagoon on a regular basis. I am guessing you do too. Despite numerous warnings about wealth and pleasure as the end goal of life, we still go for a quick dip. A lot of people in Silicon Valley are diving in to the deep end of the blue lagoon. Some are seeking Qoheleth-like collections of cars, houses and vacations, while others are seeking accolades, success and a legacy.

If we aren't careful, we can bypass the fresh springs of God and dip our toes into the blue lagoon. Before you know it, we are neck deep and promising ourselves that we won't put our heads under water or swallow any of it. The distinction today is the fine line between a gift and an idol. The main way you can distinguish between the two is the journey and the destination. Idols are not a part of the journey. They are the destination. Gifts are just the opposite. They are received on the journey, but the destination is God.

I have two things for you to consider when it comes to your life in God in 2016.

- 1) Are the things in your life idols or gifts? A) One way you can tell is if you are happy/content. If you are content, then it is a gift that you are enjoying, but if you are thinking about the next time you get to have the gift or the next iteration of the gift, then it's probably an idol. B) Here is the twist to that question. You aren't qualified to answer it for yourself. This connects into *Life with others*, but we can all justify a dip into the blue lagoon. If you have someone else in your life and you can ask them, "How does this look to you? What do you see when I am handling the gift of money, sex or entertainment?" You can tell yourself until you are blue in the face that it is a gift, but you may be treating it like an idol.
  
- 2) How do you treat those who are chasing after the wind? When you find seekers in the Bay Area, our strongest inclination can be to yell, scream, curse and point at the sign, "No swimming in the blue lagoon!" Or we can be so certain that they won't make good decisions, whether our kids or those who are new to the faith, and tint the water black. If there is a possibility that they may dip their toes in, we just paint it all dark. All of the gifts become dangers and opportunities for sin instead of



opportunities for worship. While sex, food and drink can lead you away from God, sex, food and drink can also lead you right into his presence. In the very attempt of leading people to God, we can lead them away. The gifts he left on the trail, the breadcrumbs, we are tossing out.

Wallace J. Nichols wrote a book called *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science That Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do*. In it, he builds a case for the fact that blue water does something for us. We are hardwired to love it. It's in our genes. It's not just a preference, it actually is like we are created to love it.

<https://vimeo.com/143808534>

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God has put within us a desire to swim deeply in his goodness, to dive deep into his grace, to immerse ourselves in his love. Enjoy the gifts he has given you this week and allow all of it to point you back to him.