

Chasing a Carrot on a Stick

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 7

Ecclesiastes 6:7-9

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Chasing a carrot on a stick is a phrase that has been around quite some time and carries with it a negative connotation. This phrase illustrates the message that King Solomon departs in *Ecclesiastes 6* as he describes, in *verses 7-9*, the human condition of chasing after things we desire which are constantly just out of reach. There is a warning attached to each verse which can help in maneuvering through deciding how to live a righteous life.

Discussion Points:

Your life can be full while at the same time your heart can remain empty, so don't be deluded.

- Why does a busy life not guarantee a fulfilled heart?
- What is the significance in *verse 7* of the Hebrew word translated *longing* or *appetite* (nephesh) being the Hebrew word for soul, the inner being of mind and will and emotion?
- Why should what God is doing in you always take priority over what God might do through you?

Improving your station in life doesn't mean you are succeeding in life, so don't be deceived.

- Why does your station in life not affect the desire to chase that craving that is just out of reach?
- In what ways are people living at both ends of the spectrum equally unable to reach that tantalizing carrot of fulfillment and satisfaction?
- Even if a man was to finally obtain the goals he pursues, what does it profit him to gain the world but lose his soul (*Matthew 16:26*)?

Discussion Guide Cont.

There will always be something above and beyond what you already have, so in the meantime, don't be distracted or discontented.

- How will you end your life empty, resentful, and joyless if you chase after things you don't have and refuse to enjoy what you do?
- Why is persisting with a heart that keeps on wandering in its travels for satisfaction a destructive way to live?
- How is God's plan a solution to these distractions and discontentment?

Gospel Connection: (Portions taken directly from Steven Davey's sermon, *Chasing a Carrot on a Stick*.)

Even from the youngest ages, the temptation of chasing things just out of reach can deceive, and this condition won't get any easier until Christ returns and you are perfected. However, during the time before His return, don't live a day without Him! He will help you to avoid being blinded, deluded, or sidetracked.

Chasing a carrot on a stick is an illusion that won't bring satisfaction. It is deceitful. It is a distraction from the most important things in life. Life isn't about that carrot, it is about Jesus Christ. Life with meaning is about God's will, His word, His gospel, His life, His Spirit transforming our minds and hearts and giving purpose and meaning in life as we walk with Him, ultimately for the glory of God.

Practical Implications:

Think: Am I chasing any carrots in my life?

Pray: Thank God thank He offers help in avoiding the pitfalls of chasing carrots. Praise Him for His grace and mercy.

Do: Evaluate whether you have carrots in your life that you need to stop chasing. Rather chase eternal things of significance.

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Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 7

Ecclesiastes 6:7-9

The phrase, chasing a carrot on a stick, has been around a long time. The picture that comes to mind is of an unfortunate donkey motivated to keep pulling the plow because the farmer has attached a long pole to his harness with a tantalizing carrot dangling at the end of the pole just beyond the reach of the donkey. The expression has come to refer to people chasing after something they really want to catch, but it is always just out of reach.

Just over a year ago, Harvard Business School undertook a first-of-its-kind studyⁱ of over 4000 millionaires in the United States and they made a very unique observation. This research team asked each of these millionaires a series of questions related to their station in life. One question inquired how much money they had, and the range swung from one million to more than 100 million dollars.

The answers were predictable. When asked how happy they were on a scale of 1-10, very few said 10. As a follow up question, they were asked how much money it would take to help them reach 10 on the scale of happiness. The majority of them answered that if they had at least twice as much, they would arrive at happiness. What the research team found interesting was that it didn't matter if someone had one million or 100 million, the answer was the same – they wanted twice as much.

The lead researcher, Michael Norton, said that they discovered a surprising, underlying issue in their research – they discovered that the deeper issue wasn't so much, "Do I have

enough?" but "Do I have more than those around me?"

He illustrated their findings by writing – "If someone had \$50 million dollars but moved into a neighborhood where everyone obviously had much more than that, they were suddenly no longer happy."ⁱⁱ

It wasn't that these millionaires didn't have a lot, they just wanted more; and deeper than that, they wanted more than other people.

This disease hasn't just infected millionaires, it is the condition of the sinful human heart. It shows up in the nursery down the hallway where one kid has a toy the other one wants; it shows up in the middle school gathering this morning where someone has the newest iPhone that the other desires.

Advertisers are now well aware of the power of getting children into chasing carrots, too, and companies are now spending billions of dollars a year targeting children between the ages of 2 and 12. That is because they discovered that by the age of two, children can recognize and ask for items by brand name; in fact, before they ever hit kindergarten, children will influence \$300 billion dollars-worth of purchases by telling their parents everything from what they want to wear to what they want to play with to what they want to eat for breakfast.ⁱⁱⁱ It has nothing to do with going to a Christian school or public school or home school; it has everything to do with their fallen heart that, early on, figures out how to chase after carrots.

But the real, more dangerous issue for all of us, more than dollars and cents and toys and cereal, is that the carrot happens to be a brilliant distraction. Whatever it is people are chasing, it has the ability to distract the mind, deceive the heart, and waste the energy of life from the reality of meaning and purpose God intended. In fact, the carrot happens to be Satan's greatest tool in distracting the human heart from considering life and death. Jesus called it the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other thing (*Mark 4:19*). The Lord Jesus also warned, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? (Matthew 16:26). In other words, here is somebody who beat everybody in the race and has more than everybody around him, but then he died – now what matters most?



In my studies, I came across an artist's rendering of this very warning. It pictures the Great Deceiver, Satan, hidden under a cloak riding on a donkey while holding that stick out in front on the animal's face and dangling from the stick a tantalizing carrot. All the while the donkey is distracted by chasing the carrot as it moves closer and closer to the edge of a cliff.

That is the human race. It is reaching, lusting, wanting, and racing for more while cleverly distracted from the reality that their life is in danger. These are the solemn issues on the mind of Solomon as he makes another entry into his diary. He is going to effectively describe chasing a carrot on a stick and the frustration of being beaten in the race by other people – and ultimately – the wasted life at end of the race.

These are serious issues, and I don't believe for a moment that you are here today by coincidence. Perhaps this description of life is God's warning, especially for you today. So take your copy of *Ecclesiastes 6*, and, as we

tour the next three verses, I want to summarize what Solomon says in the form of three truths or warnings. These are warnings from God through Solomon to us; they are just as true today as they were 3,000 years ago when Solomon entered them into his journal.

The first warning is this:

Your life can be full while at the same time your heart can remain empty.

Notice *verse 7*.

All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied (*Ecclesiastes 6:7*).

The word here for *mouth* is to be understood in terms of the material world – our physical needs, including the necessities of life like food, shelter and clothing.

The word *toil* is a reference to the work you do for a living – you work hard, you get paid, you cash your paycheck to pay the bills and buy the groceries. There is nothing wrong with working hard and succeeding in that work; that alone can bring glory to God and credibility to your testimony.

Perhaps you remember that Solomon told us earlier in *chapter 5* that our jobs, our talents, and skills were a gift from God. But Solomon is referring here to more than a job that pays for physical, consumer needs. In fact, you could translate this last phrase in *verse 7* – ***yet his appetite is not satisfied*** – to read, yet his longing for fulfillment is empty.^{iv}

You are working hard, your schedule never lets up, but there is still this longing. The Hebrew word translated *longing* or *appetite* is *nephesh*, which is the Hebrew word for soul, the inner being of mind and will and emotion. We could easily refer to this in New Testament terminology as the heart.

What Solomon is saying is that life down here under the sun – which is his expression for life without meaning defined by fellowship with God – a person can be busy and productive and

get all wrapped up in consumer purchases, everything that satisfies their mouth without ever finding satisfaction in their heart. A person's life can be full but their heart can remain empty.

Here is the second warning:

Improving your station in life doesn't mean you're succeeding in life.

Now Solomon asks two rhetorical questions to prove his point – *verse 8*:

For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what [advantage] does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? (Ecclesiastes 6:8).

Solomon expects us to answer, “None of them have any advantage!”

In other words, if all someone lives for is to satisfy their mouth, their physical appetites, even the wise man has no advantage over the foolish man, and the poor man has no advantage by figuring out how to mix in with the crowd.^v

Solomon asks and answers the question with hard hitting reality – does anybody have an advantage over anybody else in this race for the carrot? And he gives two illustrations to prove his point. One is ‘what about the smartest person in the room?’ Well, unless a 4.0 grade point average is equal to happiness and contentment, the answer is no. And the answer is “no”. Our world is filled with brilliant and unhappy college graduates and PhD's.

The other illustration asks ‘what about the poor man then?’ This poor and, implied, uneducated man who doesn't have the right family name and can't afford an education, but is clever. He knows how walk, Solomon writes, among the living; in other words, he knows how to make friends and build a network to improve his station in life. So is he the guy with the advantage on the road to happiness? No; in fact, he will be just as frustrated because he isn't moving up the ladder fast enough. Somebody

else got the raise. Somebody else got the promotion. Somebody else got the better deal. This poor guy can't catch a break.

Solomon is illustrating with people on both ends of the spectrum; he is effectively saying that the carrot isn't any closer to a brilliant member of the academy than it is to a poor man without any education who has learned how to live by his wits. People living at both ends of the spectrum are equally unable to reach that tantalizing carrot of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Improving your station in life isn't proof that you're truly succeeding in life. There are plenty of CEO's and celebrities who prove this point.

This leaves warning number three:

There will always be something above and beyond what you already have.

Look at the proverb Solomon delivers in *verse 9*:

Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 6:9).

What do you see? In other words, what do you see in your hand, right now? What has God given you right now? You want to chase after the wind? You want to end your life empty and resentful and joyless? Then chase after things you want and refuse to enjoy what you already have.

He is not telling you not to dream big or attempt something ambitious or accomplish something impactful in life; he is simply saying that it's better to have a little and enjoy it than dream about stuff that doesn't belong to you.^{vi}

The words here translated the *wandering of the appetite*, is literally the traveling nephesh - the wandering soul.^{vii} The heart that keeps on wandering in its travels for satisfaction. The songwriter would call him the ramblin' man who just won't settle down.

Call it what you will - unsatisfied, restless, the 7-year itch, the mid-life crisis, the grass is

greener on the other side. These are expressions that betray our fallen hearts, which began as early as preschool to want something we don't have.

This is Solomon to a "t". He didn't have a 7-year itch, he had a 7-minute itch. He never settled down. Read his biography of discontent sometime in the *Book of I Kings*. He never settled down with one wife – he had to have one more; he never had enough gold and ivory and greenery – he had to have one more shipment; he never had enough houses and gardens – he got bored with it and had to build another. He was the ultimate wandering soul.

He calls it what it is here in *verse 9* – it was all *vanity*; it was all emptiness; it was all *striving after the wind*. He essentially says, "I could never catch that carrot either."

This is the human heart. It is your heart and mine apart from being satisfied with Christ. It is being earth-bound instead of Heaven-bound.

Beloved, if Christ isn't enough;

- if the will of God isn't interesting enough;
- if walking according to the word of God isn't good enough;
- if enjoying the presence and pleasure of God isn't satisfying enough,

then nothing will ever be **enough**.

There will always be something above and beyond that you don't own or that you can't have or that you didn't win in this racing after that carrot on a stick.

I came across a fascinating study of Olympic medalists and their attitude while standing on the stand after receiving their medals. They discovered that bronze medalists were typically much happier than silver medalists. Silver medalists were focused on how close they came to winning gold, so they were not satisfied with silver; but bronze medalists were focused on how close they came to not winning anything at all – and they were just happy to be up there on the stand.^{viii}

Here are the three warnings from a man who lived through them all repeated for emphasis

and to add another touch of warning to each of them:

Warning #1:

Your life can be full while at the same time your heart can remain empty.

So don't be deluded.

Don't be duped into thinking that because you are busy you are involved in things that are essential.

In fact, as a believer, what God is doing in you will always take priority over what God might do through you. Man, this is a warning for me; I don't know about you. I want to be busy with my hands, God wants to be busy with my heart. Don't pursue a full and busy life while ignoring the transforming work of God's Spirit in your heart.

Warning #2:

Improving your station in life doesn't mean you're succeeding in life.

So don't be deceived.

Don't equate true success with your address or your VIP access. From the outside, Solomon couldn't get any higher on the food chain. He was the man; he had arrived! If anybody had caught the carrot, it was Solomon.

I received Time magazine yesterday in the mail – I subscribe to it so I can stay irritated in life. Actually, I want to know what the world thinks about what the world is doing. This issue listed the 100 most influential, noteworthy women in the world. I have seen the list of the 100 most influential men as well. I took a few minutes and leafed through the pages though I didn't have time to look at all of them. I saw 20 or so of them; some of them had already died, some were alive, but as I skimmed the pages of the influential, what I saw were several tragic lives applauded by mankind, but known as having openly rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it grieved my heart. I felt such pity for them. Can you imagine, having your name listed in the 100 most influential men and women in an internationally acclaimed publication, to have a name and influence

recognized in human history, but not have your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? Along with the tragedy of being further deceived along the way by all the approval and all the applause . . . imagine being applauded on earth and then miss Heaven.

They had gained the world, but lost their soul. Don't be deceived – especially by the approval of the world around you.

Warning #3:

There will always be something above and beyond what you already have. It started in preschool . . . and it isn't going to get any easier until you are home with Christ and perfected and glorified in holy affection.

So, in the meantime, don't be distracted or discontented.

Don't be blinded, don't get enamored or sidetracked. Chasing a carrot on a stick is an illusion that won't bring satisfaction. It is deceitful. It is a distraction from the most important things in life.

Life isn't about that carrot, it is about Jesus Christ. Life with meaning is about God's will, His word, His gospel, His life, His Spirit transforming our minds and hearts and giving purpose and meaning in life as we walk with Him, ultimately for the glory of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/8/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Grant E Donnelly, Tianyi Zheng, Emily Haisley and Michael I. Norton, "The Happiness of Millionaires":

https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/donnelly%20zheng%20haisley%20norton_26bec744-c924-4a28-8439-5a74abe9c8da.pdf

ii Adapted from Joe Pinsker, "The Reason Many Ultra-Rich People Aren't Satisfied With Their Wealth," *The Atlantic* (12-4-18):

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/february/study-finds-rich-are-still-not-satisfied.html>

iii Katy Kelly & Linda Kulman, "Kid Power", citation:usnews.com (9-13-04)

iv Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1983), p. 122

v Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Ecclesiastes: Be Satisfied* (Victor Books, 1990), p. 77

vi Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 78

vii John Phillips, *Exploring Ecclesiastes* (Kregel, 2019), p. 194

viii <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/july/4071408.html>