

Ecclesiastes 7:15–29 | “Your Own Righteousness Will Not Do”

Preached on August 2, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 7:15–29 this morning. *[pauseeeee]*

Sometimes we can start to think that we can control the circumstances of our lives. *[pause]*

Maybe we planned something out, thinking of every possible scenario, and things went well.

And now we assume that if only we do the same thing for every future event, then *they* will go well, too. *[pauseee]*

Or maybe you did some good things, saw a good result, so now you start thinking that it must be your right actions that did it. *[pause]*

An example of this may be someone who starts attending church, and then the circumstances of their life seem to be going better.

They think, “Look, my regular church attendance led to these good things!” *[pause]*

Or people think, “I’ve been doing my devotions every day for a week, and now I got that promotion, it must have been my devotions that did the trick.” *[pauseee]*

They assume that if they keep doing good things, then they will automatically have good things come their way.

It’s like they think that life works like a vending machine: I put in the right amount of change, and I get what I selected. *[pause]*

Well Solomon comes along here in Ecclesiastes 7, picks up that mentality, throws it down, and shatters it. *[pause]*

He will show us that we are not in control of our own lives, no matter how hard we try—even our righteousness will not work. *[pauseeeee]*

I’ll READ the passage for you. *[READ 15–29]*

The first thing that we see this morning is found in verses 15–18, which teaches us that...

I. You cannot use your own righteousness to control your life.

In verse 15, Solomon gives us his observation and it’s that he has seen righteous people die, and wicked people live long lives. *[pause]*

This is the opposite of what many people think should happen...

They think that the godly should live long since they are following God, and the wicked should not, since they reject God. *[pauseee]*

This is the way that Job's friends thought, too...

They believed that if you did good, you received good, and if you did bad, you received bad, and we can sometimes think that way, too. *[pause]*

When someone gets cancer or dies, we think, "They were living for the Lord. So why him? Why her? All the while, there are so many wicked people out there who are happy and healthy." *[pauseeee]*

You see? That's the kind of thinking that we tend to have, yet Solomon is showing us that life doesn't always fit into our neat, little categories. *[pauseeee]*

Knowing this, how are we then to live?...

He teaches us to avoid the extremes: be not overly righteous nor overly wicked. *[pause]*

Now that's a shocking statement! *[pause]*

Some people are confused because they think that the author is saying that it's wrong to be a very godly person, but that's not what he's saying.

Instead, it's vital to remember the context—this is given right after mentioning that sometimes the righteous die young, and the wicked live long. *[pause]*

So what he's saying is that you must realize that you cannot automatically prolong your life through your own "extra good" righteousness. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes people can see the good things they do as making them deserving of blessings.

They think, "If I follow God, then I will receive a longer life, prosperity, and minimal suffering." *[pause]*

Some pursue asceticism or other extreme measures trying to get some sort of good from God, but your own righteousness cannot be used that way.

Remember? He has seen the righteous perish in their righteousness, so don't be overly obsessed with right living, thinking that you can control your future through it. *[pauseeee]*

How often have you looked upon your righteous deeds, and thought, "Look at what I've done, I deserve things to go well"? *[pause]*

That's trying to use your righteousness as a tool to control the hand of God.

And life doesn't work that way, Ecclesiastes says, so don't do it. *[pauseeee]*

Your own personal righteousness cannot secure your future, and if you try to obsess over it, you will run yourself into the ground. *[pause]*

As he says, “Why should you destroy yourself?”

This is like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day: they tried to secure favor with God through self-righteousness and what a heavy burden! *[pause]*

In fact, Jesus calls them out for laying heavy burdens on others,¹ and says to the people, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”² *[pauseeee]*

Your own righteousness and wisdom do not guarantee a long physical life or bring automatic blessings—God’s providence is more complex than a straight formula. *[pauseeee]*

In the past, I’ve brought up a guy named Bryan Johnson...

Johnson is a tech mogul who believes that he has figured out the basics of immortality, spending millions of dollars to do so. *[pause]*

In a podcast interview, he was asked, “Do you believe that there’s a possibility that you won’t die?”

And he responded by saying, “Yes. Unquestionably.”³ *[pausee]*

Well recently, it has come out that he has an autoimmune disease, whereby his stomach is eating itself.⁴ *[pause]*

So the person who thought he knew all the answers and did everything to live forever has been diagnosed with an incurable disease. *[pauseeee]*

Like Bryan Johnson, many people think that if they can just know or do enough, then they will live long or prosper...

But like Bryan Johnson, we are confronted with the reality that we do not ultimately control our future. *[pauseeeee]*

So Solomon has told us not to be overly righteous, but also, not to be overly wicked. *[pause]*

The reason is because you can’t use wickedness to mechanically secure longevity, for folly *can* mean an early death. *[pause]*

Your godliness or lack thereof cannot control your future.

So according to verse 18: hold both of these truths in hand—don’t go to either extreme. *[pauseeee]*

¹ A reference to Matthew 23:4.

² Matthew 11:28.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roHeUk7ApUo>.

⁴ <https://www.foxnews.com/health/biohacker-hoping-live-160-reveals-alarming-diagnosis-stomach-eating-itself>.

Don't think that your self-righteousness will secure your future, nor should you pursue wickedness, thinking that that's the key.

The key is to fear the Lord, for as verse 18 says, "for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them." *[pauseeee]*

Fear of God leads you to avoid both extremes of self-righteousness and wickedness. *[pause]*

On the one hand, if you fear the Lord, you will not seek to live a life of wickedness.

But did you know that the fear of God prevents you from self-righteousness, too? *[pause]*

If you fear the Lord then you know that your life is a gift from God, not merit.

He's Lord and master, not the other way around. *[pauseee]*

When you truly fear God, you won't try to leverage your righteousness with God and act like He owes you something.

Instead, you will depend on Him, leaving all of your life (from beginning to end) in His big, capable hands. *[pauseeeee]*

Some in this very room may be thinking that God owes you something for all of the things that you've done. *[pause]*

You've been reading your Bible, attending church, helping others out, and maybe even serving in the church.

And now you expect your life to go a certain way. *[pause]*

If you don't get it, you become angry at God. *[pause]*

Understand that you cannot use your righteousness to control your life, so humbly fear the Lord, and trust Him with the future. *[pauseeeee]*

Something else that we find is that...

II. You cannot use your own wisdom to understand everything.

Now wisdom *does* have value. *[pause]*

The author is a man of wisdom, and he doesn't want us to throw wisdom out with the bathwater of what he said. *[pause]*

It truly does have value, for as he says in verse 19, "Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city." *[pauseee]*

This shows us that true strength is found in wisdom, not mere political power or leadership positions. *[pause]*

So many in our day think that *they* are the strong ones, but we see here that in reality, if they are not wise, they are not strong.

It's the wise person who's the strongest, for they will have an inner stability that firms them up through life's difficulties. *[pauseeee]*

So wisdom does have value, for it can guide your life, but understand that wisdom is *limited*. *[pause]*

There in verses 23–24, he says that he wants to be wise, but it's far off and deep. *[pauseee]*

Wisdom is limited in that we cannot gain it *fully*. *[pause]*

Solomon was wise and sought even more wisdom, but felt that it was still far off and deep. *[pauseeeee]*

It's like if someone went into space and tried to reach the far reaches of space.

No matter how far they went, it would still be 'far off.' *[pause]*

It's also like trying to reach the bottom of a lake by swimming down. *[pause]*

I remember a couple of times in a lake trying to go down as far as I could to reach the bottom, but still not touching it.

I kept thinking, "It's gotta be coming soon," but it never came—that's what perfect wisdom is like: deep, very deep. *[pauseeee]*

This shows us that we want to be more wise, but we find ourselves continually failing at it.

And if you feel that strongly, then realize that you are not odd, but Solomon felt the same. *[pauseee]*

Wisdom is real and valuable, but our wisdom will always be limited, and that's why we need the Lord and *His* wisdom.

His wisdom is infinite, complete, perfect, and full, and that's why James tells us that we must go to God for more wisdom and ask for it.⁵ *[pauseeee]*

In our wisdom, we cannot fully understand everything. *[pause]*

You can't make sense of every twist, turn, bend, or crook.

⁵ A reference to James 1:5.

There are things in life that baffle us—there are situations so complex that we feel at a loss as to what to do. *[pauseeee]*

Our wisdom, no matter how much, will always feel like it's not enough to add everything up. *[pause]*

In verse 25, he speaks of seeking out and searching for “the scheme of things.”

Yet in verses 27–28, he tells us that he added things together, but still didn't find out how it all worked together. *[pauseeee]*

God has given us wisdom to live in this world, and it can truly help us to be strong, but realize that your wisdom will always be limited...

God has left some things beyond our understanding, beyond our wisdom, and beyond our knowledge. *[pause]*

We won't know everything that God is doing, and this means that even the wisest person on earth will still have a number of unanswered questions. *[pauseeee]*

This shouldn't lead us to throw up our hands in despair, and give up on wisdom, for Solomon didn't.

Rather, we should humbly say, “I don't know everything, but there are things that I *can* know. I will pursue that, and leave the rest with God.” *[pauseeee]*

So don't turn your eyes upon your own wisdom, turn your eyes upon your Lord. *[pauseeee]*

The third point that we find in this passage is that...

III. You cannot use your own righteousness to save you.

In his song called, “Imagine,” John Lennon asks us to imagine no countries, no religion, no heaven or hell, and no possessions and the result would be everyone as one, living in peace. *[pause]*

He says that there would be nothing to kill or die for, no greed or hunger. *[pause]*

Do you see the assumption in Lennon's song?

He thinks that people are inherently good, and so what we need to do is just get rid of religion, countries, and possessions and all would be peace and harmony. *[pauseeee]*

Likewise, in the book called, *Pay It Forward* by Catherine Ryan Hyde, a 12 year old boy is assigned a project to think of a way to change the world. *[pause]*

He comes up with a plan to show kindness to 3 people, and then those 3 people are supposed to do the same for 3 others, and so on. *[pause]*

The belief is that this kindness will multiply so much that the world will be transformed by it.
[pause]

Once again, do you see the foundational assumption?

It's that our kindness towards others can save society from its woes. [pause]

Although those two examples are cheered on by our world, they do not reflect reality.

Rather, Solomon shows us that humanity is less good than we assume, and so our righteousness cannot be the answer. [pause]

Look at verse 20, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."
[pause]

As Solomon observed life, he found an essential truth that there is no one perfectly righteous.
[pause]

This goes right along with the rest of Scripture...

Romans 3 tells us that there is none righteous, no, not one, and that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.⁶

So no one is completely righteous on their own, and not a single one of us can say that we have never sinned. [pause]

This means that it's not just our environment or circumstances that are the problem, but fundamentally, we are the problem. [pause]

It's not like we can just remove some obstacles and everything will be fine and dandy.
[pause]

You cannot trust your own righteousness to secure your salvation—it will eventually fail you.
[pause]

Mankind's righteousness cannot solve mankind's deepest problems. [pause]

To prove his point, the author gives an example of our sinfulness in verses 21–22...

He talks about not taking to heart every insulting thing that people say about you, for you know that you do the same thing. [pause]

He says not to take everything "to heart," so don't let it all get deep inside of you, causing it to impact your life. [pause]

This is hard, isn't it?

⁶ A reference to Romans 3:10, 23.

We usually let every negative thing said about us affect us, but we can't let that happen. *[pause]*

Your own sinfulness should humble you when other people sin against you. *[pauseeee]*

There has been and probably will be a lot of things said about you. *[pause]*

How will you let it affect you?

Will you pridefully act like 'you've never done such a thing'? or will you humbly remember some of the things that *you* shouldn't have said? *[pauseeee]*

There's a place and a procedure to rightly handle this type of situation, but this verse is talking about what you let happen *in your heart*. *[pause]*

Do you let it affect your heart too deeply? *[pauseeee]*

Solomon has been making the point that there is no one righteous, and he gave the example of our words, but another example is in the prevalence of sexual sin. *[pause]*

In verse 26, he talks about a "woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters." *[pause]*

A person who pleases God may escape her, but the sinner does not—this sounds a lot like what's said in the book of Proverbs.⁷ *[pauseeee]*

He's showing us that sexual temptation is a common, strong temptation found in this world. *[pause]*

There are other sins, of course, but if you think about it: adultery, pornography, fornication, and sexual crimes are all common.

So no wonder Solomon uses it to prove the lack of righteousness among humanity. *[pauseeee]*

Sexual temptation is like a trap, and so many have been ensnared by it.

It looks appealing, yet we can get caught in its net. *[pause]*

It's the one who pleases God, who escapes it, so the only way to escape the trap is to look to the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

You see, your own righteousness cannot help you avoid this temptation—you need a right relationship with God.

And it's when you love, fear, and trust God that you are led to resist this temptation. *[pauseeee]*

⁷ See Proverbs 22:14 as one example, among many.

Joseph with Potiphar's wife is a great example of someone who stood against seduction by reminding himself that it was not just sin against Potiphar, but sin against God.⁸ *[pauseeee]*

Our own righteousness is extremely lacking, for Solomon says that he found it hard to even find a virtuous person. *[pause]*

He says in verse 28, "One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found." *[pause]*

That phrase, "one...among a thousand," is most likely an idiom for it being *extremely rare*.

So put simply: a truly righteous person is a rare find, that's how much mankind is lacking in righteousness. *[pauseeee]*

Now some people trip up over the line about not finding a virtuous woman, but this seems to be Solomon's personal observation, rather than a universal statement about *all* women. *[pause]*

The Bible shows us virtuous women, and Proverbs even declares the excellence of a virtuous woman. *[pause]*

Solomon's own experience may also help explain his words...

He had hundreds of wives and concubines, and those wives eventually turned his heart away from the Lord.⁹

So it's not surprising that he would be deeply affected by his personal experience. *[pause]*

Also, the very next verse shows us that Solomon doesn't think that the problem was women, but humanity as a whole...

He says in verse 29, "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." *[pause]*

So he's not saying women are sinful and men aren't, but the point is that a truly righteous person is a rare find: he could barely even find a righteous man. *[pauseeee]*

You see, the problem isn't God, it's us. *[pause]*

God made man upright—this is what we find in the beginning of Genesis.

He didn't create Adam and Eve as sinners, but they sinned against Him *after* they were made. *[pause]*

The problem is *us*, for we seek out many schemes. *[pause]*

⁸ A reference to Genesis 39:1–10.

⁹ See 1 Kings 11:1–3.

Mankind is good at being bad, for we creatively come up with ways to rebel against God.
[pause]

This means that the fault isn't in God's design, nor are we just passive victims, instead, we are active schemers, who scheme to get our way, rather than go God's way. *[pauseeee]*

So what is the reason for our woes?...

Some people try to blame God, or their environment, or their past, but Solomon puts it squarely on our own shoulders. *[pauseeee]*

Our righteousness is extremely lacking—it's not like we can be good enough to correct what's wrong with the world.

Our righteousness falls short every time. *[pauseeee]*

What Solomon is telling us, then, is that...

You can't rely upon your own righteousness and wisdom to master life.

So many people look to mankind to find the answers, the solution, the key to mastering life.
[pause]

We think that we just need to dig deeper, get smarter, or do more, and everything will turn out fine.

But Solomon slaps us with a reminder that *we are limited*. *[pause]*

Yes, righteousness and wisdom have value, never forget that, but you must be aware that your own righteousness and wisdom will always be insufficient to control life. *[pauseeee]*

I can't prolong my life by doing good deeds.

I can't figure out how and why everything works by gaining more wisdom.

My own righteousness and wisdom will not do because I am limited, but also, because I am sinful. *[pauseeee]*

None of us is perfectly righteous, but we have sinned against God, and therefore we cannot save ourselves, nor control our lives. *[pause]*

This text therefore pushes us away from ourselves and to God because the answer is not in me or us, so the answer must be *in Him*. *[pauseeee]*

Since I can't figure out everything with my own wisdom, then I need to trust the infinite wisdom of God.

I must go to Him for more wisdom, and even though I won't *fully* know how and why everything works, I can trust that it's under His wise control. *[pause]*

Likewise, since I can't prolong my life through my own righteousness, I am led to look for righteousness *outside of myself*. *[pauseeee]*

The answer can't be in my righteous deeds, but in the righteousness that God provides through Jesus Christ. *[pause]*

You see, our righteousness is not enough, for we all sin, but God provided a way to be made right with Him and experience everlasting life. *[pause]*

It's through Jesus, the Son of God, who came to this earth, lived perfectly righteous, and then died in our place, for our sins.

Then he rose again, and now all those who place their faith in Him alone are declared righteous before God. *[pauseeee]*

In a grand, gracious, merciful "swap," Jesus took our sin upon Himself and paid for it, and we receive Christ's perfect righteousness on our account. *[pauseeee]*

None of us does good and never sins, and we have sought out many schemes against God.

But now through faith in Jesus, we can stand righteous before Him, as though we had never sinned. *[pause]*

We can be forgiven, declared right, adopted, and given eternal life, and it's through Jesus and *only* Jesus that that's possible. *[pauseeeee]*

You can't rely upon your own righteousness and wisdom to master life, and that's why we need to rely upon the righteousness and wisdom of Christ. *[pause]*

You still won't be able to prolong your *earthly* days, nor understand everything in the universe.

But you can be assured of eternal life, and you can come to know the most important, eternal things there are, for you will know God. *[pause]*

So will you fear the Lord, trusting Him everyday? *He's* what you need.