

Pilgrim's Progress (9): Vanity Fair

Ecclesiastes 1

By Dr. Derek Thomas

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Now, if you have your Bibles at hand turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter one. Ecclesiastes, chapter one. And the reason, of course, why we're going to read a few verses from Ecclesiastes 1 is because there we will come across the use of the word *vanity*. And as we have been pursuing these summer weeks *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, allowing that to be the window or portal into the Scriptures and into the truths and pastoral issues that the Bible brings to bear upon our lives, this evening we come to the place known as Vanity Fair, or Jackson, Mississippi! And before we do that I want to read Ecclesiastes 1, and before we read that, let's look to God in prayer.

Our Father, again we humble ourselves in Your presence. We are a needy people. We cannot live apart from Your word and Your instruction and Your wisdom. We read in the word that if any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God who gives liberally and upbraids not. And as we read Your word now, we ask that we might be given grace to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Write Your word upon our hearts, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Ecclesiastes, chapter one:

"The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."... [And then, in verse 12]... "I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted."

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, last Sunday evening we left Christian in the Valley of the Shadow of Death,

and you'll remember that he was hearing noises all around him in the Valley, and mingled with those voices were his own voice as he prayed aloud to the Lord to help him. He had discovered, remember, that the weapons that he had been given in the Palace Beautiful — the weapons (a sword, a helmet, and a shield) were of no use to him in this Valley, and the only weapon that would avail and prevail in this Valley was the weapon of All-Prayer. And as he prayed in the company of these fiends, he cried out, "I will walk in the strength of the Lord God," and so they went back.

It's interesting — Bunyan has Christian pray out loud in certain circumstances, and in certain circumstances I think it's perfectly fine to pray out loud. Sometimes I wonder when I'm driving about I-55 whether people are just talking into an invisible cell phone with a cord — it looks kind of peculiar when people do that — or whether they're actually praying out loud as I often find myself doing when I'm going up I-55.

Now Christian was comforted by what he thought was, you remember, the voice of a man who said, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...." Now, we're not told at that point who this voice belonged to, but it's actually the voice of a wonderful character in *Pilgrim's Progress* called Faithful. Faithful is Bunyan's most beautiful character in the whole work. And now as the journey proceeds out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death and towards Vanity Fair, and as they walk there are actually three of them. There is Faithful and Christian, but there is also an aptly named individual called Talkative. That's why in *Pilgrim's Progress* there are many pages now that you have to turn over, because Talkative never stops talking.

One of the interesting things about this ensuing conversation together is that Bunyan has Faithful, at the behest of Christian, recount his spiritual journey. In the history of the church there have been periods, I think...in Wales, for example, there was a part of church life called the *sciat*. It's a Welsh word; I'm not sure whether it's really translatable, but they would meet on a Friday evening and the purpose for that meeting was purely and simply to talk about spiritual experience. It was very disciplined. It was monitored by some of the elders, some of the more experienced Christians. If the conversation went down an alley that it shouldn't, it would be brought back again. But it was to underline that the Christian gospel is a gospel, but is experienced. It's more than notion. It's more than head knowledge. It includes head knowledge, it includes the marvelous learning of *The Child's Catechism* and the wonderful help that that can be, but it's more than that. It also includes spiritual experience.

And so Faithful now begins to recount his own journey. Now one of the interesting things of Faithful's recollection of his journey is...you remember when Christian had come to Palace Beautiful, there were two Lions guarding the way. The Lions that were chained...something which Christian of course didn't know, so he was afraid; but once he saw the chains he was able to walk down in

between the Lions...but they were very much awake and roaring. But when Faithful recounts his journey he too has been to Palace Beautiful, but this time he tells us that the Lions were asleep, and that has led interpreters of *Pilgrim's Progress* to PhD dissertations: "Why were the Lions asleep for Faithful, and why were they asleep for Christian?" And one of the more interesting answers is, if you remember when we came to the Lions, one of the suggestions in the allegory of John Bunyan is that the two Lions represent the state and the church, and they were very much alive and awake as far as Christian, as far as John Bunyan was concerned — a non-conformist who spent twelve years in prison being persecuted by both state and church in cahoots together — but perhaps there were other Christians who did not suffer that kind of fate, and maybe...maybe...Faithful is an Episcopalian!

Maybe Faithful was an Anglican who didn't suffer the persecution that the non-conformists (Baptist and Presbyterians, and Congregationalists and others) did during this period when John Bunyan is writing *Pilgrim's Progress*. So Faithful may be somebody like William Gurnall, or he may be somebody like Richard Baxter: well known Puritans and would have been known to John Bunyan. Well, that's a little aside, but it's interesting that Bunyan would have Christian and Faithful, perhaps a non-conformist and an Episcopalian, who formed the closest of bonds, and how the whole issue of companionship and friendship to John Bunyan was so very much important.

Now after a lengthy walk with Faithful and this aptly named man, Talkative, the conversation comes round to spiritual matters and the way in which Christianity affects the heart. And all of this is too much for Talkative and he leaves.

Faithful tells part of the story. He meets five different individuals. We won't detain ourselves now with them, but one is called Wanton — a lady. It's not in some of your editions, and if it isn't, then get rid of it and get the one that it's in, the proper one! Wanton — who flatters him and tries to seduce him with many promises and all manner of contentment.

And then an Old Man called Adam the First (the Old Man of course from the language of the Apostle Paul) who promises him all kinds of things if he would work for him; and then three daughters called the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life. That's something that's familiar to you from the writings of First John.

And he also meets with Discontent, who urges him, as you might expect, to go back, because there was nothing for him if he goes forward. And finally he tells of meeting someone called Shame, who says that too much religion is a very bad thing and it leads to the loss of freedom, and it leads you to be a member of a minority status and so on.

Well, Faithful and Christian encounter Evangelist again and there's a little

conversation between Faithful, Christian, and Evangelist. Evangelist congratulates them on being faithful to come this far, but warns them that danger lies ahead of them again, and that danger is Vanity Fair.

Vanity Fair is about the temptations of the world, the allurements of the world, what the world seems to promise.

But, in the language of Ecclesiastes 1, in the end it's all a mirage, it's all vanity, it's all worthless. It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus' final words to the disciples are about temptation? In Gethsemane, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation," Jesus says. Paul says in I Timothy 6:9 that those who want to get rich fall into temptation and to snares, and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

Now, Vanity Fair is a town built by Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion — three names in the Bible for Satan, of course. Now, in the town there are some deliciously named streets, like a French Row and Italian Street and so on, which are all very interesting; but there is a Fair, and this Fair is open all the year round selling all sorts of vanities: houses and lands and trades, and places, and honors, and preferments and titles, and countries and kingdoms, and lusts and pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as wives and husbands and children and masters and servants, lives' blood, body, souls, gold, pearls, precious stones, and whatnot. And you see what Bunyan is doing. He's saying that temptation is not just one kind, that even your family can be a source of temptation — that you put your family above the church, or you put your family above God, or you put your family above your own Christian life and testimony. And there are all kinds of temptations and idolatries that can enter into our lives.

Now, Bunyan says, and it's a very important line, "These pilgrims must needs go through this Fair." There was no way of avoiding this Fair. There was no way of doing what some of the medieval mystics suggested for the way of godliness, and that is to retreat from the world. The pole-dwellers, in an even earlier period of church history, who tried to live for years and years on top of a pole to try and divorce themselves and eradicate themselves from the pressures and temptations of the world...and robust Christianity says that true discipleship is gained and learned by actually going through Vanity Fair and emerging victorious and a conqueror.

Now, the idea of a Fair and a town called Vanity Fair (a city, if you like), is part of Christian literature down through the ages. One thinks, for example of Augustine's *City of God*, in which he pits the City of God against the City of the World and so on...and here is the godless city, where all godlessness seems to gather and concentrate in one, as it were, globule. It's what the Book of Revelation presents us in the closing chapters, you remember - chapters 17, 18, and 19, in the destruction of the City of Babylon so that the City of Jerusalem might triumph.

And here is Faithful and Christian, and they're making their way through Babylon: they're making their way through Vanity Fair. It's about worldliness. It's about worldliness.

Ligon and I were interviewing one of the prophets of our times, David Wells...David F. Wells...on Friday for *First Things*, and you should make your utmost to try and listen to what he had to say by way of a synopsis of what he's written over the last ten to fifteen years. He was asked at one point in the interview to define *worldliness*. And I took it down, because I knew I'd be speaking on worldliness, and this is what he said—and it appeared to come off the top of his head: “Everything in a culture that makes sin look normal and righteousness look odd.” Everything in a culture that makes sin look normal and righteousness look odd — that's worldliness. That's worldliness, and there is an enormous coercive power to go along with sin as though it were the normal thing to do.

Well, Faithful begins now to enter Vanity Fair along with Christian, and what we see is the reaction of Vanity Fair to them.

I. The marks of true discipleship.

And we see in the first place the marks of true discipleship. What is it about Faithful and Christian that upsets the people, the town-dwellers of Vanity Fair? - because they do get upset. And three things stand out.

One, their dress was different. Isn't that interesting? Their dress was different. Some said they were fools, some said they were bedlam, and some that they were outlandish men, that they dressed differently. They looked, in their very clothing, different. Now there's something that we could dwell on.

Their speech was different. The words that came out of their mouths were different. They spoke the language of Canaan. When I was converted, I went to this prayer meeting. I'd only been converted about a couple of weeks or so, and it was my very first experience of a prayer meeting. I'd never heard people pray. I'd heard read prayers, but I'd never heard extemporary prayers coming from my own peers. And I didn't understand half of the things they were saying. They were talking about “this corner of the Lord's vineyard.” This is Wales! There are no vineyards in Wales! I had no notion what they were talking about. It was the language of Canaan; they were using Bible metaphors, you understand. And you and I, we speak a different language. You understand that. Sometimes when we speak to our relatives who are not converted they don't understand what we're talking about. They don't get it.

Their dress was different, their speech was different, their interest was different.

They did not wish to look at what was for sale. If the tradesmen called to them to buy something, they would put their fingers in their ears and cry, "Turn away, mine eyes, from beholding Vanity!" It's a staggering thing as we read this part of *Pilgrim's Progress* that here is Bunyan saying to us that the Bible view of godly Christian discipleship is other-worldliness; that Christians stand apart from the culture, they're countercultural in their speech and their attitudes, in what interests them, in the things that they discuss, in the things that they buy and sell. Their homes are different, their lives are different, everything about them is different, and this is what so upset the townspeople.

At one point Faithful, back in the conversation between Faithful and Talkative before they enter into Vanity Fair, Faithful asks Talkative, "How does the saving grace of God discover itself when it is in the heart of man?" That's a typical sort of question that Faithful wants to know. He wants to know about what a true Christian is. How did you experience the grace of the gospel? What are the evidences? What are the evidences of a true, genuine, spiritual work of God in a person's heart and life? What is that? How does it manifest itself? And it soon becomes obvious (it's a most interesting and informative section of *Pilgrim's Progress*) that Talkative has no idea. He has a lot of notions, but he doesn't grasp spiritual things. So that's the first thing. The marks of true discipleship, the marks of what a true, genuine, Christian looks like.

II. The cost of true discipleship.

Secondly we see the costs of true discipleship, because there is a cost to be paid. If you dress differently, there'll be a cost to be paid. If you speak differently, there'll be a cost to be paid. If your interests are different from the interests of the world, there will be a cost to you. You may be ostracized. Young people, tonight, when you stand up for Jesus in school, or even amongst your peers in this church, and you stand up for what is right, and you stand up for what is true, and you stand up for what the Bible says, there will be a cost. You may lose some friends, and you have to ask yourself, 'Which is the more important: my friendship to Jesus, or my friendship to my peers?' And may God help you young people to make the right choice, and may the rest of us support and uphold those who make the right choice, and honor them...honor them.

Well, there's a cost for Faithful, especially. No sooner has he been introduced into this tale and you fall in love with him. He's an ideal Christian. He's a mentor. He's the kind of person we all want to know, and we can perhaps think of somebody who is a Faithful character in our lives. I can certainly think of a couple of elders that I've known in my own life who are now in glory who had an immense influence on me in their conversation, in their prayers, in the things that interested them: in the things that would fascinate me, but they would show a benign sort of indifference, as though they had more important things on their minds.

Well, trumped up charges are brought against Faithful and Christian, and they're put into a Cage and they're made the objects of men's sport and malice and revenge. "They only have benefits by Christ to eternal life," Bunyan says in another place, "who die by His example as well as live by His blood." And Bunyan is saying there is a cost to being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and let him take up his cross and follow after Me."

Now one of the things that helped Christian and Faithful in this trial was something that Evangelist had said to them:

"Here also they called again to mind what they had heard from their faithful friend Evangelist, and were the more confirmed in their way and sufferings by what he told them would happen to them. They also now comforted each other, that whose Lot it was to suffer, even he should have the best of it; therefore each man secretly wished that he might have that preferment: But committing themselves to the All-wise dispose of Him that ruleth all things, with much content they abode in the condition in which they were until they should be otherwise disposed of."

It's almost as though each one is vying with the other wanting to suffer more, because they had begun to understand what suffering actually was. It produces godliness. It's character-forming. It makes us more and more like Jesus Christ, that's what they had begun to understand.

Now, the Tryal is presided over by Lord Hate-Good, and the charge brought against them is "That they were Enemies to, and Disturbers of their Trade...." - that they were enemies of the world, enemies of godlessness. Now I wonder, if those charges were brought up against us, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That's the charge that's brought against them.

Now Faithful and Christian are in this Cage; they're being reviled; they're looking to the Lord; they're beginning to understand the place of suffering. Three witnesses now are brought to bear: Envy, Superstition, and Pickthank.

Envy argued that Faithful had dishonored the laws of the town. Superstition said he held troubling and pestilent views; and Pickthank said that he had spoken unworthy things against the Governors of the town. Now Faithful's defense was that he had only kept the word of God. Now this was enough for the Judge, and he reminded the Jury of the ancient laws of their town, which were pertinent to the case, the acts in the days of Pharaoh and the acts in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, and the acts in the days of Darius, and all of which demanded that Faithful be put to death.

And here's the Jury: Messrs Blind-man, No-good, Malice, Love-lust, Live-loose,

Heady, High-mind, Enmity, Lye, Cruelty, Hate-light, and Implacable. Now there's a jury for you! And of course Faithful is condemned to death. He is tortured, and then he is killed. And Bunyan gives this marvelous, moving description of Faithful's death:

Now I saw that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses waiting for Faithful, who (as soon as his adversaries had dispatched him) was taken up into it, and straitway was carried up through the clouds with Sound of Trumpet, the nearest way to the Celestial Gate. But as for Christian, he had some respite, and was remanded back to prison; so he there remained for a space: But he that over-rules all things, having the Power of their rage in his own Hand, so wrought it about, that Christian for that time escaped them, and went his way. And as he went he sang, saying,

“Well, Faithful, thou hast faithfully profest
Unto thy Lord, with Him thou shalt be blest;
When faithless ones, with all their vain delights,
Are crying out under their hellish plights:
Sing, Faithful, sing, and let thy name survive;
For tho' they kill'd thee, thou art yet alive.”

And Bunyan, of course, is drawing on the theme that has been dear to Christians down through the ages, that the seed of the saints, of the martyrs is actually the very lifeblood of the church itself.

Tonight, my friends, as we sit in the comfort of this building tonight, there are believers — true, genuine, believers in Jesus Christ — in various parts of the world. And they've been taken by night, put into a prison, tortured in unbelievable ways. You can read about it, you can get emails about it; some of it is very, very genuine, and those who know these things tell us that there have been more martyrs in this century than in all of the other centuries combined. And we need, you and I, as each day goes by, to in our prayers remember that, and to remind ourselves we're not worthy of these people. We're not worthy of these people: people like Faithful — killed — and this beautiful testimony of how God sends a chariot and horses to gather him and bring him by the nearest way into the Celestial City.

There's a beautiful passage — and with this, I'll close — which describes for us...and it's only a couple of lines in *Pilgrim's Progress* and you can easily miss it...but Bunyan says that Jesus walked in Vanity Fair. Jesus walked in Vanity Fair.

Now as I said, the way to the Celestial City lies through this town where this lusty Fair is kept, and he that will go to the City and yet not go through this Town must needs go out of the world. The Prince of Princes himself when here went through

this Town to His own Country. You see what Bunyan is saying? He's taking us to the Book of Hebrews: that "we do not have an High Priest who is not touched with the feeling of our own infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are." He went through Vanity Fair. He knew the allurements that the world can offer to compromise, and He emerged victorious as our great Trailblazer, the one who goes before us and opens up a pathway for us to follow in His footsteps. Oh, may God help us, as we continue in the study of *Pilgrim's Progress* and as we allow it to be the window and the portal into the Scriptures, to hear this emphasis, this biblical emphasis on strong, mature godliness and discipleship as we endeavor to live our lives in this world.

Now let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for John Bunyan, but especially his ability to take us to the Scriptures, to open up the Bible to us; to make that real by his imaginative powers and the use of allegory; these vivid, vivid pictures to bring those truths for self-denial and for pursuing hard after You and fleeing sin and pursuing after righteousness and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. May these things be deeply impressed upon our hearts. And bless us, we pray, and do us good, and hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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