**Vanity Fair**

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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**Scriptures:** 1 John 2:15-17; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 164, 1b, 119:33-40, 278, 374, 380, 383, 439, 523

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#9)

**Theme:** The transitory nature and ultimate meaninglessness of all worldly pleasure in this life.

**Proposition:**  Do not love what is, in the end, empty.

**Introduction**

John Bunyan, the author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress” was familiar with small annual county fairs in 17th century England in particular the one held on Stourbridge Common in Cambridge. At its peak, this fair was the largest one in Europe and was likely the inspiration for Bunyan’s pleasure town called ‘Vanity Fair’. At the Stourbridge Fair, a contemporary of Bunyan’s wrote, there were "*the shops or booths built in rows like streets, having each its name: as Garlick Row, Booksellers' Row, Cook Row, etc. Here are all sorts of traders who sell by wholesale or retail . . . Here is a court of justice open from morning till night . . . Here are also taverns, coffee-houses, and eating-houses in great plenty . . . These mercantile fairs are very injurious to morals*."

The name ‘Vanity Fair’ was later taken up by the 19th century English writer William Thackeray as the title for his novel, which is a satire or caricature of Victorian society. Thackeray never publicly gave Bunyan credit for the title of his novel, but he did describe himself as ‘living without God in the world’ (Milne, Kirsty (2015), p104). You may know that ‘Vanity Fair’ is also the name of a magazine produced in various forms from 1859. The current American tabloid publication began in 1983, promoting popular culture, fashion and covering current affairs. Whereas this magazine and William Thackeray took their names from ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’, John Bunyan took the word ‘vanity’ from Scripture where it appears 31 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes (also in Ps 89:47; Isa 49:4 and Jer 10:3).

The underlying Hebrew word literally refers to ‘breath’, conveying the transitory, passing nature of life (ref. Job 7:16). In comparison with eternal things ‘vanity’ means ‘emptiness or meaninglessness’. In the Old Testament, idols are referred using this word e.g. Deut 32:21 “*They have provoked me to anger with their idols (vanities)*”. In our text from Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon reflects soberly on his own experience of extravagant worldly pursuits and pleasures, writing: “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun*” (Eccl 2:11). Let’s consider this world (by which I mean the worldly system of rebellion and pride that seeks to displace God and His rule) under three points:

1. A place of pleasure
2. A place of injustice
3. A place of slaughter
4. **A place of pleasure**

Solomon knew more about the pleasures of this world than most, if not all, people who have ever lived. He repeats in Scripture an invitation that he gave to himself. I said in my heart, "*Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself*” (Eccl 2:1). This king had vineyards, gardens and parks with all kinds of fruit trees. He had pools, male and female slaves, herds, and flocks. He had silver, gold and other treasures. He had singers and many concubines. Whatever he wanted he got for himself, and he ‘found pleasure’ in his work.

His was surely a ‘kingdom of earthly delights’ – like the town that John Bunyan pictures as he writes about the pilgrims Christian and Faithful: “*When they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair*”. “*This fair is no new-erected business, but a thing of ancient standing*”. “*At this fair are all such merchandise sold – as houses, lands, trades, places, honours...titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures and delights of all sorts – as harlots, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives…bodies, souls, silver, pearls, precious stones, and what not*”. “*Moreover at this fair there are at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves and rogues*”. “*Here are to be seen too, thefts, murders, adulteries, false-swearers*”.

For those who remain in this world on their journey to the Celestial City, passage through this town is unavoidable. You’ve likely heard the phrase ‘*be in the world, but not of the world*’ – reflecting the words of Christ in John 15:19 and 17:14-15. Even trying to remove all the empty, worthless things from your life by isolating yourself does not keep a person from vanity, for the human heart can create idols out of anything. Monasteries, nunneries, or close communities like the Amish or Gloriavale can never provide protection from the worldly system of rebellion and pride that resides in every fallen human heart.

Bunyan explains that the two pilgrims, Faithful and Christian, ‘*must needs go through this fair*’. Notice that by no means everything that Solomon accumulated was inherently bad, although some of it was. Similarly, not all the merchandise sold at Vanity Fair was bad, although some of it was. We heard the law of God earlier from 1 John 2:15: “*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him*”. The ‘things’ in the world here – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – are not from the Father but are from the (fallen) world (1 John 2:16).

The Bible does not teach that money or material possessions are inherently bad, but rather that it is ‘*the love of money (that) is a root of all kinds of evils*’ (1 Tim 6:10). We can enjoy and take pleasure in the good material things in this life: for example food, a home, a motor vehicle, and jewellery. However, when our desire for these things becomes excessive, then they become snares, idols, and the foundation of all kinds of evil. As Paul explains to Timothy “*it is through this* ***craving*** *that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs*” (1 Tim 6:10). The Greek word translated ‘craving’ here literally means to stretch out - especially with one's hands, to snatch, to reach out for. It pictures a person stretching one’s self out in order to touch or to grasp something so that they can snatch it for themselves. Metaphorically ‘craving’ here means to desire something, to covet, to long after, to try to gain, to be ambitious – like a runner lunging for the finish line. It would be like a traveller going through a country fair eagerly reaching out for all the trinkets and temptations on offer and saying something like “*Gimme, gimme that – and that! I want it, I must have it…and more of it!*”.

This was **not** the way that the pilgrims Christian and Faithful went through Vanity Fair. Bunyan writes ‘*They cared not so much as to look upon (what was being offered) and if the (merchants) called upon them to buy, they would put their fingers in their ears and cry* “*turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity*”’ – a reference to Psalm 119:37. This brings to my mind words from Helen Lemmel’s hymn: “*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face,* ***And the things of earth will grow strangely dim****, In the light of His glory and grace.”* The lack of interest that the pilgrims showed in what the vendors in Vanity Fair had to offer was not well received in that place of worldly pleasures, which brings us to our second point.

1. **A place of injustice**

The Pilgrims Christian and Faithful stood out in Vanity Fair because they were clothed differently from the people of that town. When they spoke, few could understand them because they ‘*naturally spoke the language of Canaan*’, but ‘*they that kept the fair were the men of this world*’. In so many human societies, those who are different from the majority of the population are often marginalized and oppressed. So it was for the two pilgrims. Some in the town despised them, mocking them, and calling upon others to strike them. The commotion was so great that ‘the fair was almost overturned’.

Bunyan writes ‘*So the men were brought to examination; and they that sat upon them asked where they came, where they were going and why they were dressed so strangely*’. Those who questioned them thought them mad and disruptive, so they ‘*besmeared them with dirt, and then put them into a cage that they might be made a spectacle to all the men of the fair*’. They were beaten and chained, and their feet fastened in stocks. Bunyan drew here on the experience of Paul and Silas in Philippi, as recorded in Acts 16.

Faithful was brought before the Judge named Lord Hate-good. Witnesses were called to testify against him, including Mr Envy and Mr Superstition. The jury then deliberated. Their names were Mr. Blindman, Mr No-good, Mr Malice, Mr Love-Lust, Mr. Liar, Mr Cruelty, Mr. Hate-light and Mr Implacable. These unjust men unanimously agreed that Faithful was guilty. When Bunyan came to portraying Lord Hate-good, the unjust judge at Faithful's trial, he likely had in mind Sir John Kelynge and the other judges who had kept him in jail for so many years.

Down through history, many Christians have faced injustice because they are different from the unbelieving world around them. They are not captivated by the things that others crave.

They speak the gospel language of grace, forgiveness, thankfulness, praise to God and willing obedience to Christ. Like Bunyan’s characters Christian and Faithful, above all they seek the truth, and they are willing to suffer, and even to die, for what they know to be right.

The greatest injustice ever committed against anyone was the trial of the Lord Jesus Christ. **Firstly,** in the Jewish court of the Sanhedrin where false witnesses were brought to testify against Jesus, and He was condemned for blasphemy. The perfectly innocent man Jesus was unjustly found guilty of claiming to be who He is: divine. **Secondly,** Jesus was tried in the Roman court by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate who said to the Jews “*after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him*” (Luke 23:14). Yet, in weakness and with great injustice, Pilate released a man who was in prison for insurrection and murder and weakly yielded to the crowd who kept shouting about Christ ‘crucify, crucify him’. We heard earlier from HCLD15Q&A38 that Jesus suffered “under Pontius Pilate” as judge “*so that he, though innocent, might be condemned by a civil judge, and so free us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us*”.

The town of Vanity was not a fair place, neither is the unbelieving world where rebellion against God and pride rule. Brothers and sisters, this place of vanity, enticing pleasure and injustice is the wider world we live in and which we must pass through in this life. Solomon wrote wisely “*vanity of vanities! All is vanity*” (Eccl 1:2) yet he himself went ‘*shopping at the world fair*’. He loved many pagan women despite the Lord’s command not to enter into marriage with them. God warned Solomon ‘*for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods*’ (1 King 11:2). So sadly, unlike Bunyan’s characters Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair, “*Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done*” (1 Kings 11:6).

The book of Ecclesiastes has helpfully been described as “*a dark study on a life lived apart from God*”. At the end Solomon looks back over his wasted years and finds no joy in them, only futility, vanity, and “*a chasing after the wind*” (Eccl 1:14). Yet he had learned his lesson—albeit the hard way—and he wraps up the book with the wise advice: “*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Eccl 12:13-14). At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, had Solomon passed through Vanity Fair and was he now on his way to the Celestial City, having learned his painful lesson? We cannot be completely sure of his salvation state. A question mark remains, but you and I can be sure of our state of salvation, as we come to our third point:

1. **A place of slaughter**

Bunyan had already noted that Vanity Fair was a place of *thefts, adulteries, false-swearers, and murders.* We now come to the murder of Faithful. A murder is ‘*an unlawful premeditated killing of one human being by another*’. Bunyan writes that ‘*They brought (Faithful) out, to do with him according to their law; the first they scourged him, then they buffeted him, then they lanced his flesh with knives, after that they stoned him with stones, then pricked him with their swords; and last of all they burned him to ashes at the stake. Thus came Faithful to his end*’.

A far-fetched story? Not at all. It mirrors the martyrdom of many English Christians during the Protestant Reformation and of many others who have been slaughtered for the sake of Christ over the past 2,000 years. Bunyan writes of Faithful’s death: “*Now I saw that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses waiting for Faithful, who was taken up into it, and straightway was carried up through the clouds, with sound of trumpet, the nearest way to the Celestial Gate*”. Bunyan is drawing on the words of Scripture recording the departure of Elijah from this earth in a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

Have you ever played the board game Monopoly? There is a card in the ‘Chance’ pile called ‘Advance to Go’ (collect $200). If you play this card you by pass all the properties where you may have to pay rent, and other possible penalties as you go round the board. It was as though someone played the ‘Advance to the Celestial City’ card for Faithful and he ‘collected’, not $200, but all the benefits of the New Heavens and New Earth.

Like Vanity Fair, this world is a place of death. Ultimately, unless Christ returns first, we will all face the ‘*last enemy*’ (1 Cor 15:26; Heb 9:27). In this world, Jesus was murdered. He was unlawfully killed by the premeditated action of human beings. Jesus is wiser than Solomon and He did not love the world – that is the system of rebellion and pride that seeks to displace God and His rule. But He does love people in the world (John 3:16). That is why He willingly went to a place of slaughter, laying down His life painfully, shamefully and faithfully.

He was not taken up to heaven in a chariot, but after His resurrection ascended into heaven, being lifted up until a cloud took him out of the sight of his disciples (Acts 1:9). It is only because of His faithfulness in not yielding to the vanities of this world and because of His willingness to die for the faithlessness of many – people like you and me, that we can know that we will make it all the way to the Celestial City. We heard earlier from HCLD15Q&A39: ‘*Is it significant that he was “crucified” instead of dying some other way? Yes. This death convinces me that he shouldered the curse which lay on me, since death by crucifixion was accursed by God*’.

What, or who, do you love most of all? This world is indeed a ‘Vanity Fair’, offering many tempting pleasures and pursuits. Some are good and some are bad, but all have the potential to become worthless, empty idols in your heart. Do not love what is, in the end, vanity. Instead love Jesus Christ. If you love Him, then you will desire to keep His commandments (John 14:15) and not to love the things in the world. This is the way to pass through the “vanity fairs” in this life and to be willing to suffer injustice and even death, for the sake of Christ.

AMEN.