

# The New Quest and Law of Life. 7:1-29

by W.J. Erdman

*W.J. Erdman's sermon emphasizes the pursuit of wisdom and moderation in the quest for a meaningful life amidst its vanities.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 4:7, Ecclesiastes 3:14, Ecclesiastes 7:16-18, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Ecclesiastes 7:26, Ecclesiastes 7:29, Ecclesiastes 8:12, Ecclesiastes 12:13

**Topics:** "Fear Of God", "Moderation In Life"

## Description

In this sermon by W.J. Erdman, the Preacher embarks on a new quest to discover 'the Good' in a high law for life under the sun, possibly found in the fear of God. He seeks wisdom as the means to find the Chief Good, balancing the better and worse things in life to find the 'golden mean.' The Preacher cautions against extremes, advocating for prudence and moderation in all things, even in righteousness. He addresses the contradictions in the treatment of the righteous and the wicked, advising against self-righteousness and excessive wickedness, emphasizing the importance of finding the safe mean and living in the fear of God.

## Transcript

A third pause, deep and solemn, ensues; but is broken abruptly as before. Yet for a while, all is darkness and despair. His former conclusion has utterly failed him. He has reached his crisis. "The Good which is comely for men" has not been found. He will set out on a New Quest for "the Good," and look for it in some true and high law for the conduct of life under the sun. What it may be is not necessarily clear to him at the start. Possibly, as attested by passing hints in the former part of the search, it will be found in the fear of God; and possibly, too, as in preceding recognitions of God's relation to human affairs and earthly enjoyment, the Chief Good may at last be found in this very fear of God and the two "conclusions" become one. Once he had asked, "Is this vain life worth living?" now, "How can life, in spite of its confessed vanities, be made worth living?" Once, "What is the Good for which men should labor?" Now, "Is the Good in some high law of life?" Once,

"Is the Good in having goods?" Now, "Is the Good in some form of being or doing good?"

To discover this law of right living, he uses a peculiar method. He is going to be wise again, indeed, but, convinced by his former investigations that vanity is inseparable from human life, he will not seek "the Good" in hap hazard things and uncentered "times" of life. His wisdom heretofore had guided him in all his search, and wisdom shall still be the principal thing either as a good and end in itself, or as the means

and method of finding the Chief Good. This too is noteworthy, he turns his face now to the immediate future. Formerly, he had complained of death and Sheol for ending, so soon, his life and enjoyment under the sun, just when he was ready to have a long time of it, and for making it forever impossible to know what would be after him on the earth; but now, knowing the grave is inevitable, he would rather know and live for what is just at hand. He would rather know what is before him, on earth, before death, than know what is after him after death.

And so, in philosophic mood, he balances the "better " things of life over against the worse and in view of God's unalterable work, which leads the wise man to make the best of every thing both good and evil, he strikes an average of human experience, and in that average finds the law of "the golden mean." An ideal perfection is unattainable; the crooked and in complete will forever remain so.

A third time he thus breaks a long silence, and rousing himself from his deep depression, abruptly begins to discourse, as to himself, in rhythmic, high and philosophic speech. He does not say " he turned again and saw this or that." He hath seen it all. "The whole have I considered in the days of my vanity." To himself, again calm and serene, he says, " thou; " he is talking to his better self. And yet see how natural wisdom is justified by her wise child under the sun; he tries at first this practical average, this vaunted mean -- not a high, but as he soon finds it, a lower law of life. But he will be very serious-minded indeed, and no longer test mirth and laughter and the song of fools and the pursuit of wealth to find in them the Good sought for so long; but, keenly conscious he is more than the beast he drives or the clod he treads upon, he will seek in religious observances and mournful funerals and charitable deeds and self-restraint, the unknown blessing his soul desires. He will not now have it even questioned whether former days, in the world's long ago, were better than the present; his face is turned to the future; he is going to live in the busy world; and as to money it is good, but wisdom is far better, for it is life giving.

Possessed of this idea of a wise behavior and this potent principle of a prudent mean, so avoiding all extremes, he starts out anew to apply his heart to know wisdom and to apply his law to the affairs of men. At first he tried by experience to find " the Good," then by observation, but now he will apply rule, and law, and " wise saws and modern instances." He knows it is still a vain world and full of anomalies and contradictions; but being now neither optimist nor pessimist, he will exhort and caution against extremes, even in righteousness, for now prudence and moderation are everything.

The At the very start he meets a certain contradiction in the contrarious treatment, even by God, of the righteous and the wicked; and at once he applies his law of a prudent mean, and seeks to dissuade men from puzzling themselves too much with hard questions, and from thinking they could be more righteous than God, and manage the world better, if they had a chance. He emphatically says, " Be not righteous over much, neither make thyself over-wise; why shouldst thou destroy (confound) thyself?"

This is human; but still more is it like the natural man trying to strike a religious average, a smug medium, like many men to-day and even professed Christians, to make these words mean, " Be not so self-righteous, so fanatical; avoid excitement; worry not over the 'doctrines;' take religion calmly."

Still another like word, this "prudent man" addresses to sinners, running to excess of riot and in danger of speedy judgment: "Be not over-much wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldst thou die before thy time?" This word, sounding so plausible to young men, and seemingly such a maxim of that prudence the world admires so much and practices so little, is quite human, when it is made to mean by men who belong under the sun, " Sin a little; sow a few wild oats; know the world; see life; stop in time." In brief,

avoid bold wickedness and count not on over much righteousness; escape is found in the safe mean, and is also compatible with the fear of God.

Then the Preacher, evidently trying to make himself believe all this, seems to halt in such "lame and impotent conclusion" and say there was not anyhow a perfectly righteous man on earth. Telling himself he knew it was so in his own case, and that wisdom was after all the thing to be desired, he suddenly falls into a confession of despair over his futile endeavor to find " the far off, the soundless deep of the work God worketh from the beginning to the end." He cries out, "All this have I tried by wisdom; I said I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?"

"He and his heart," however, keep on considering things and revolving thoughts, laying one thing over against the other, to find out the reason; and he finally concludes that, while men worthy the name are very scarce, the extremest evil he has found under the sun is a bad woman, and he who escapes from her must have been good indeed in God's sight. He also adds that God made " man ('the Adam') upright, but they have sought out many inventions." One is, that Adam " fell up! " and has been going up ever since he started under the sun. However, this natural man thought differently, and knows all life is somehow " out of joint," and wonders what can "set it right."

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