

A Good Name

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn together now to Ecclesiastes chapter 7, the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 7, and for a few moments we're going to look at verse 1, indeed the first part of verse 1, a good name is better than precious ointment.

And this passage looks somewhat gloomy, it really on first sight might appear to be a passage that looks at life from a very sort of downcast and moody kind of outlook.

But of course what it's doing really is looking at those things like death and mourning and telling us that in the sense in which they're presented, they're better than facing up to feasting and just living for those things.

Because these are the things such as death and mourning, as it says there in verse 2, this is the end of all mankind. It's really dealing with the things that give us pause for thought and reflection on what are the most important issues that we face as human beings.

And that's why it says there the day of death is better than the day of birth. It just is a matter of reflection upon that issue of death itself and all that is necessary in preparation for it.

[1 : 27] But we're not going into the passage there, I want to just look at the first part of it there, a good name is better than precious ointment. And precious ointment there means the kind of thing that was often in those days and still found as a liquid rather than as a cream.

Perhaps we tend nowadays to think of ointment as a kind of a cream that you smear onto something and therefore apply in that way.

But this ointment, the idea here is an oil such as the oil with which priests or kings were anointed. Or a precious perfumed oil such as you find in John chapter 12 where Mary took that very precious flask of oil that she had kept and poured it out on the Lord and used it for that anointing of Jesus.

It was a very expensive thing and something which she had kept for that purpose. So that's the kind of thing that's here illustrating a good name. And what I'm saying is a good name is better than precious ointment.

So our consideration today is what is a good name and why is it important? What does a good name consist of and how should we seek to maintain it?

[2 : 46] What is our responsibility towards others and the maintaining of their good name? Practically, these books like Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are full of such issues.

And we really tend at times to neglect these books and therefore neglect the practical wisdom that they give us because it focuses very much on not just our relationship to God, but the practical outworking of that in such things as a good name and the maintaining of a good name.

Now a good name is more than a person's reputation. I could have a very good reputation amongst many people and still be a bad person inwardly.

A person's reputation is not the same as a person's character. And that's really what a good name here essentially is about. It's a person's character.

It's what a person really is inwardly as well as outwardly. And of course these should correspond. In a hypocrite, they don't correspond.

[3 : 53] In somebody who has a good reputation, it doesn't necessarily mean that inwardly they're a very good person. They may be quite different at home to what they are in public.

A good name is more than a good reputation. It means that the character of that person inwardly is also something that is seen correspondingly in an outward way.

The way they live their lives in public corresponds to what they are in private, what they are in their hearts, what they are in their souls. That's a good name. It's more than just what people think of you.

It includes, very much includes, what God thinks of us. In fact, it begins with what God thinks of us and then moves to our public persona as well.

And what it's saying is a good name is better than precious ointment, precious oil or that fragrant, expensive oil that you pour forth or in those days poured forth on certain occasions.

[4 : 52] I was going to say the ladies amongst us, but it should maybe be the gentlemen amongst us. You know what it's like when you have to buy perfume for somebody special to you. It's no use coming with cheap stuff, really.

It has to be something that really is pungent, that has its own aura about it, if you like. And whatever we think of those things, as we'll see in a minute, that's an important thing in respect to making the connection between this precious oil and the good name of which it's an illustration.

And there are three things that come to mind as we look at this relationship, this illustration of a good name by precious ointment. First of all, a good name, just like a precious ointment, is composite.

In other words, it's made up of different elements, but elements that harmonize together, elements that form together one beautiful combined whole.

When you think of the elements that are chosen for precious ointment, precious perfumes, we understand that the person who is making up this perfume, this precious oil, and indeed you'll find it in the Old Testament in Exodus 30, we'll refer to that in a minute, God gave instructions for the special oil that was to be used in anointing, the various spices, as it says, that were to be used in that.

[6 : 20] And they had to be combined in a certain way, just like the person making a perfume has to combine them in a certain way. If there's too much of one or the other, it just doesn't have the right balance.

And therefore, it doesn't really smell the way it should. And you can't really hand that over to somebody that you love and expect them to be delighted with it. It has to have that combination properly that makes each of these elements have its own properties contributed to the whole thing, and yet the whole thing is a wonderful blend that comes across to you when you smell it, when the aroma, when the fragrance comes to fill the room, or the person that's wearing it has it on their skin.

So that's what's needed with this oil. It's a composite thing. It's made up of all of these elements, and they're combined in a special way. And it is exactly the same with a good name.

And one of the best places I think we can see that is in the way in which Paul wrote to the Galatians, and the Galatians in chapter 5, where he talks there about the fruit of the Spirit.

You remember there he's contrasting the works of the flesh, and he tells us that the works of the flesh are such as these. And what he says is the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to one to the other, the works of the flesh.

[7 : 46] And he goes on to specify some of them. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

And you can see from first glance, these things are not harmonic. These things don't actually form a beautiful whole when you put them together. They're not a composite blend that makes something beautiful out of them all.

They're ugly. They're distorted. Whereas he says, the fruit, and you notice the difference in the word. He calls these the works of the flesh, but when it comes to the things that flow from the Spirit of God and the work of the Spirit of God in a person, he uses the word fruit.

And you notice he's not using the plural. He's using the word fruit singular. It doesn't say the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace.

What he's saying is the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, it's one whole fruit. It's one product. But it's made up of these elements.

[9 : 03] They all combine in a wonderful way, blending together perfectly as God manufactures this in the life of his people. This is what he does.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And you can see that not only are these very opposite to the list of the works of the flesh, but they are also things which combine so beautifully together.

They form a precious spiritual ointment, if you like, a special and precious composite oil of good character.

That's a good character. That's essentially, in the highest sense, where good character comes from. It's not something we're born with. Some people are born with, certainly, a better character than others, naturally, yes.

[10 : 06] But a good character, essentially, a good name, essentially, is not something we produce ourselves. It's the work of God's Spirit. It's something that God brings about.

It's something that belongs to redemption, to salvation, to what God does by his Spirit working in us. In other words, it's the blending of all of these together, the love, the joy, the peace, the gentleness, the self-control.

Well, that's what forms this wonderfully beautiful character. And it's really, of course, in the Bible called sanctification, the work of sanctification.

And that is the same thing as God making us holy. And the thing about that is that you can carry this forward and think about it further yourselves.

Let me just mention it and leave it with you. You can follow it out yourselves. The thing about that is that when you think of a good name and a good character and think that it is essentially, and in the highest sense, what God produces, what is happening by the Spirit of God working in us, what is happening there is really essentially God making us like himself.

[11 : 21] Good character is essentially being like God. And that's what God is set on. And that's what God will produce eventually in all of those who will be saved in Christ.

Not only will they be in their own persons, people of good name and character, in a perfect sense, finally, in glory, but God is putting them together as a body of people.

And he's putting them together in a way that gives them the responsibility of looking after things like their unity and their peace together and their relationships together.

Yes, they're dependent on his Spirit and on his help and on his strength, but he's giving us the responsibility of looking to our good name and of protecting our good name and of looking to the good name of others and protecting their good name as well.

And do you remember what the psalmist said in Psalm 34 when he spoke about his desire to be found in the house of the Lord where God was worshipped, where God was experienced in those days by him in the temple or in the tabernacle and where he said that he would actually exalt the name and seek the name of the Lord to be uplifted and where he was looking to being so that he would see the beauty of the Lord.

[12 : 54] The beauty of the Lord. You see, the beauty of the Lord brought out for us especially in Jesus Christ.

You can see in a sense that Jesus is the ointment, the precious oil of God's revelation and he's poured this out in this world, in the person of Jesus Christ, so that we could see what beauty was like.

So that we could see what is a beautiful person really like? What is a beautiful human being like? Not necessarily in the way in which Jesus eventually was so badly treated that his whole appearance was marred and distorted by pain and by mistreatment, but you just think of the beauty of his character.

See, this is not just physical beauty we're talking about. A good name is more than just what a person's face looks like or what a person's body looks like. It's not to be thought of in terms of the way the world today would look at what is a good person or what is a good character or what is a good name.

That's far too often nowadays packed into the whole cult of celebrity, isn't it? And that's what beauty very often is defined as, simply and merely in physical terms.

[14 : 13] The Bible warns us against that. The Bible warns us against judging by outward appearances. The Bible warns us against giving an emphasis simply to the physical or primarily to the physical.

Beauty is something that begins within. Beauty is something that has its roots in the soul. It has its roots in the work of God, in the work of redemption, in the work of saving us, in the work of sanctifying us.

And that's where God makes us like himself. There's something else about ointment as a composite that's also important. That is that very often, again this is not from expertise by any means, but we understand that in order to bring out the best fragrance and these elements, you have to crush them.

You have to crush some of them at least. You take the raw material and you have to pound it. You have to actually bring out its wonderful properties and fragrance by some way or other crushing it and then you combine together the elements that are crushed so that eventually you end up with the final product.

Spiritually, it's exactly the same. Why does God bring his people so many difficulties and trials in life?

[15 : 34] I'm not saying that they have any trials more than other people who are not Christians, but why should trial be at all in the lot of the Christian? If God has saved people, if they're on the way to glory, why should there be difficulty in their lives?

Why should there be big problems in their lives? Why should there be things that they struggle with? Why should there be failures? Why does God allow these things? Why does he bring about providences in the lot of his people just as much as in the people of the world?

Why does it bring about providences that really grieve them, that really hurt them? Well, this is one reason. Because when our lives are crushed and the essence of faith, of trust, of compliance with God's will, of love for God, when these things come forth, they are actually like a precious oil.

There's a fragrance to them. They're noticed. There are things which are beautiful to God himself. There are things which we'll see, as we'll see, are influential as other people also experience.

That kind of thing in the life of a Christian. Exodus chapter 30, from verse 31 onwards, you can read the passage afterwards yourselves. That's where God gave the instructions to Moses, to the people of Israel, as to how this precious ointment that was to be used specifically on that occasion was actually to be produced.

[17 : 11] It had to be, and partly some of them, had to be crushed, beaten small, sometimes is how the translation puts it. So that you took something, whether it was a leaf or whatever, and you had to beat it small, you had to grind it down, only then did it release its properties.

And that's what our life, too, as Christians, is like. In God's design of it, we yield our fragrance, just like a rose petal.

When you smell a perfumed rose, it's a wonderful smell, but if you take one of the petals and crush it between your fingers, it's actually then even more perfumed, if you like.

It brings out what's actually in that perfumed rose already. Now that's very easy to speak about. And it's not as easy when we are actually in the difficulties.

When we do have things that complicate our lives, when we have unexpected events, when we have disappointments, when we have people let us down, when we've let other people down, when we have all of these problems and struggles in life, it's not as easy then to say, well, this is really so that the perfume of my life will actually spread out from this.

[18 : 28] But that's really essentially what happens when we draw near to God, when we take our strength from Him. And when He gives us the peace of mind and the will to accept and the ability to move on.

That's where these precious things come. The perfume, the ointment, the good name, the character is formed under adversity, under different struggles.

And as the character is formed, so like a good ointment, the perfume of it wafts out and the pungency of it becomes more obvious to those that see it.

So it's a composite. It's made up of many elements. Secondly, it is valuable. A good name is valuable as a precious ointment is valuable.

They actually cost a lot. The most expensive perfumes, I suppose we say they're far too expensive anyway and they're really far more than they should be and I'm sure that's true. Maybe they cost far more than they actually cost to produce, be that as it may.

[19 : 30] They're expensive because many of the most expensive ones have very expensive elements used. Things which are produced only in small, tiny amounts and distilled in a way that the essence of that is so very expensive.

And of course in the past it used to be a sign of wealth. If you had a flask, very often with precious ointment in it, precious perfume, it was a sign that you were quite well off.

You couldn't afford it otherwise. Sometimes a flask like that would cost you up to a year's wages in those days in the past. So you had to earn a lot of money in order to possess such a thing in the first place.

And it was often an investment. It was handed on in the family even if it wasn't used by the time the person who owned it died. And that's the way it is with a good name as well.

Think of God's name. God's name is a name that in itself is good. It's essentially good. It's intrinsically good. That's to say that this good name has something in itself that is precious, that is valuable.

[20 : 40] just as God's good name in itself is good. God gives himself the name of good. God is good.

He's filled with goodness. There is intrinsic value in his name. Something which in its own properties is good.

And that's why for human beings to have a precious ointment in the old days especially I'm sure it's still true in terms of precious perfumes that they are valued.

Not only are they valuable but because they're valuable they are valued. They're looked after. You don't waste them. You use them in a way that's fitting with the value that they have.

And that's why God in the Bible says that he protects his own good name. Remember that more than once in the Bible God's name is said to be jealous.

[21 : 44] We mustn't think of that in a way that we use jealous very often in our common speech. When it says that God's name is jealous what it means is he protects his own good name.

He protects his name and the reputation that goes with it. You remember Moses when God had said to him after the incident of the golden calf he said let me alone I'm going to destroy these people.

They're stiff necked they're not listening to what I'm saying. I'm going to make a new start with you Moses and I will make of you a great nation. And Moses turned to God and he pleaded with God and he with prayer as it were took hold of God and one of the primary things he said to God in prayer is Lord what will happen to your good name?

Do we have that priority that concern in our lives today? Do we have that in a very important place in our hearts the good name of God?

Do we think about that in relation to our conduct? Do we think about that in relation to what you see happening in the world that you know is obviously contrary to God?

[22 : 55] Do you think about that when you see people who are professed Christians or theologians and yet come up with things that they say are acceptable that you know the Bible is against?

The good name of the Lord is what is really at stake. The character of God as it's something that he himself values.

And so it is for you and for me a good name this character that God gives us especially that is something that you must value that I must value and that you must keep valued above most things.

Why do you feel grieved if you're misrepresented? If lies are spread about you? If people say things about you that are just rumors that are not true?

Why does the Bible actually tell us that it's wrong to go about spreading rumors if we don't know whether or not these things are true about other people? To be gossips to be busybodies as the old translation says it with regard to other people and what's in their lives.

[24 : 08] Well because the good name of people is involved in that. And a good name is something that is at stake when people are misrepresented when lies are spread about them when their name or character is assaulted when things are not true and yet spread about that person.

Thankfully I've never had to deal with the trauma of a burglary. some of you may have. I've met certainly many people who have had or some people who've had the trauma of burglary.

It is a trauma. Somebody comes into your house and ransacks through your goods and steals things that they themselves want to sell on or whatever. It's a trauma.

It fills you with such a sense of anxiety and it just leaves that horrible mark in your life and your mind for a while at least.

It's a trauma. But then while we don't want to downplay that, if somebody actually takes away your good name and your character from you in a sense it's actually worse than losing your goods and having your house burgled or having your car stolen, it's one thing to have that, you can replace that, but it's a lot more difficult to replace your good name, your character or a stain on your character.

- [25 : 43] That's why this is saying a good name is better than precious oil. It's better in itself and that means that you protect it, that you look after it, that you value it, that it's valuable and valued to you.

It's connected in fact with at least three of the Ten Commandments, which really are the foundation, as you know, for our moral outlook and our morality and behavior.

The third commandment, what is it? I can ask you to stick your hands up. Third commandment, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

sometimes we just confine that to using bad language, to swearing, especially swearing that uses the name of Christ or Jesus or God.

But taking the Lord's name in vain is a lot more than that. Taking the Lord's name in vain is in fact any use of the Lord's name or the Lord's character or the Lord's reputation that is not true to what it is.

- [26 : 56] A bad use of the Lord's character or saying some things about the Lord that are contrary to what the Bible says about. That's why it's serious when you listen around you to the things people say about God blasphemously at times.

That should really grieve us because that's nothing less than an assault on the integrity of God, on the good name of God, on the very character of God himself.

You shall not take his name in vain. And then number nine of the commandments, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

None of us here would ever think of going out tomorrow and stabbing somebody to death or shooting them.

Yet it's all too easy for us within this heart to do that with our thoughts or even with our words at times.

- [28 : 04] All you have to do is malign someone's character and in a spiritual and moral way you've stabbed them, you've wounded them, you've assaulted their good name, you've deprived them of the right to maintain their character and good name if they haven't done anything against themselves.

That's why as Christians we value other people's good character. It's not just a matter of looking after our own good name. It's not a matter just of protecting and valuing our good name and valuing our good name especially as Christians.

You have to actually value the good name of other people even if they're not Christians, even if they never come to church. Everybody has their own character. Everybody has the right to have their character maintained and to expect that you and I will not malign or destroy or assault that character.

So it's valuable. A good name is better than precious oil. It's composite. It's made up of all these different elements that form our character.

Thirdly, it's useful. A good name is useful and by that I mean it's influential. It has influence. It's something which is noticed and something which in its own way is beneficial.

- [29 : 36] Just think about fragrance again or the pungency of a nice perfume. Think of what's said in John chapter 12 about that incident where Mary anointed the Lord with this very precious ointment that she poured out.

It actually says that the whole house was filled with the aroma of that oil of that ointment. It was so pungent. It had such wonderful fragrance to it that very soon it just filled that house and of course it had an impact.

And it had an impact not just physically for those who could smell that wonderful fragrance. It had an impact on Judas Iscariot. It brought out what was in his heart. Because not everybody likes the fragrance of a good perfume and not everybody likes the fragrance of a good name, the good name of a Christian especially.

Judas Iscariot showed himself for what he was. Why was this ointment not sold and given to the poor? And John's comment is he said this not because he cared for the poor but because he cared for the money and he was a thief and helped himself to the funds of the disciples.

your good character is important not just to yourself not just to your loved ones.

[31 : 02] It's important to the church. It's important to God. It's important to others who see you. And you know the more we understand at least this to be the case if you buy a perfume that's got some but not much of the essence of the perfume and it's not as expensive because it's not as pungent.

But if you go for the real stuff, the essence of perfume, it's very expensive because a little amount of it is very pungent compared to the stuff that's watered down or whatever.

And that's how it is without character especially with Christian character as well. The more of the essence of God there is in it, the more of the essence of holiness there is in it, the more of the essence of God's work through his spirit bringing about the fruit of the spirit, the more there is in it of love and of joy and of peace and of self-control.

And these things mentioned in Galatians 5, the more of that essence there is in it, the more fragrance your life will have, the more influential your life will be, the more impact your life will have.

for Christ, for God in this world, the more it will stand out against the stench of sin and the more indeed people will notice the difference between that fragrance and the stench of sin and the horrible smell and putrid smell of wickedness and evil and sinful lifestyles.

[32 : 43] Christian character communicates. Let's just think of what Peter said before we finish in his first Peter, first letter, first Peter and chapter two.

Now of course, Peter is writing to people who are really suffering for their faith and need direction as to how to maintain their integrity, their good name if you like, in that sort of setting.

They are surrounded by all of these difficulties and they have all of these trials in their life. They are persecuted for what they are believing in and this is what he says in chapter 2 and verse 12 where he says, Dear beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable. In other words, he says, maintain your good name, your good character. Why? So that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Or in chapter 3, he says something similar at verse 13. Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed.

[34 : 01] Have no fear of them nor be troubled. But in your hearts honor Christ as Lord, the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

He wants them to have an impact. Even with those that are causing the suffering for them, those who are persecuting them, those who are reviling their good name as Christians.

He wants that turned around and he's saying, how do you turn that around? Well, ultimately only God can turn it around. But towards that he's saying, maintain your good character.

Look after your good name. Look after the good name of others with you in the church. Look after the character of those who share with you in witnessing to Christ.

[35 : 02] Christ. Not all, as we said, will like or be happy with that fragrance. Today we begin by asking ourselves, what kind of fragrance does my life exude?

Not asking to what extent we have a fragrance exuding from our life. I have to ask myself, first of all, and ask you as well, what kind of fragrance is it?

Is it the fragrance of a holy life, a life that's committed to Jesus, to being like him? Is it the fragrance of a good name, a good character, a character that is produced by the work of the spirit of God within you?

And what do I think of that good name? How am I looking after it? What do I think of the good name of others?

Even if they don't respect me for what I am as a Christian, even if they make life difficult for me, what then? How do I react to that? What is my response to that?

[36 : 13] Well, Peter, as we said, has an answer to that for us. They may not like that fragrance, but of a Christian life or a holy life, but we have no option, friends, but to live it out.

That's what Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. No one lights a lamp to put it under a basket, but on a stand.

And it gives light to all in the house. You see, the same properties essentially as perfume are in light. Light in its own properties, spreads out and eliminates the darkness.

That's why a good name is important, because it has influence, because God uses it to further his kingdom and his cause and his glory and his name.

In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

[37 : 20] A good name is better than precious oil. Let's pray. We ask, O Lord, O God, that you would give us grace daily so that we may maintain the good name that you produce in the life of your people.

We look to you, O Lord, as one by whose spirit your people live, so that more of that fruit of the spirit might be evident in our lives. Help us to value the good name of others as well.

Help us, Lord, we pray, to be concerned to maintain the integrity of that good name that you give to your people, whether it is in ourselves or in other people.

And we pray today, Lord, that you would enable us to look after it in such a way that would especially regard your good name first and put this above our own reputation, above anything else that we know of in respect to ourselves.

Hear us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.