

Oct. 8, 2006 • "Ecclesiastes, Part 11; Love Interrupts" Matt Chandler

If you have your Bibles, grab them. Ecclesiastes 7 is where we're going to be. Chapter 7, starting in verse 15, "*In my vain life I have seen everything.*" This is king Solomon talking. He is smarter than you, wealthier than you, prettier than you and he has lived beyond anything that you will be able to live. I cannot explain all of that right now, but I have already previously. "*In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.*" Now, at the center of all religion, at the center of every religion out there, you can go fringe and go Wicca or the Branch Davidians, or you can go mainstream, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, at the center of all religion, including most Evangelicals, at the center of most religions and most philosophies sits the idea of karma. The idea that whatever good you put out there will be returned upon you. And so, if you are good, then good things happen to you, and if you are bad, bad things happen to you. And so, religions build around it like this: If you follow the religious rules, then in the end good things happen to you (ie. Heaven, 72 virgins, become a god and populate a planet, depending on what your belief system is), or if you're bad, then bad things will happen to you (you're punished, God's wrath befalls you, you get hell). So, it's built around karma. In fact, even the universe seems to operate at times on this kind of yin/yang, give/take system. And let me give you an example for those of you who remember 10th grade science. Let me show you karma at work. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. That's karma. So, it seems like the world's operating under karma. I mean, it's the basis of most philosophy, it is the basis of all religion. Now, if you ask a Christian, "You guys believe in karma?," we'd be like, "You take that voodoo stuff out of here. We believe in the Bible. We don't believe in this karma trash, you Eastern mystic." But if you listen to us talk, you'll see that karma very much fits into the worldview of most Evangelicals. Like, you let something bad happen to somebody we think is wicked, what do we say? "Well, he had that one coming, man. You mess with the bull, you get the horns. I mean, you play with fire long enough, you'll get burned." Or this is the one that's even more telling about us. You let something bad happen to someone we think is righteous, and listen to the things we say. I mean, some of us go over the top and play it to the tilt. We'll say, "Of all the scoundrels I know, why did that happen to a good guy like Jim?" Isn't that karma? "Bad things can't happen to good people. Good things are supposed to happen to good people. They put out the good vibe. They throw out the good yin, the good yang should come back...Oh, they were bad, they had that coming." Well, Solomon's going to say that if karma is the operating system of the universe, something's gone horribly wrong with it. And he's going to point out two distinct flaws. Here's the first one. He says, "Here's my problem with karma. Here's my problem with good getting good and bad getting bad. I've known good, righteous men who have died young and I've known young dirty, evil men who become old dirty men." He's going to say, "Here's my problem with karma. I've known people who love Jesus, love God, live upright, are good human beings, and they die or they have the most horrible things in the world happen to them. And I have known the most wicked of men who have lived to be 103 off the wealth they acquired through wickedness." Solomon goes, "If there's karma out there, it doesn't work." Here's what he's really saying. Let me pull it into 2006. "I don't think karma exists," Solomon says, "and if it does, it's broken because I watch the news." Fit what happened to those Amish girls into karma. At what level? If it works, it's broken.

So okay, let's give karma it's due now. What if it's kind of this overarching thing, but there can be

violations of it? What if, on a whole, you do good, you get good back and if you do bad, you get bad back, and there are just these exceptions? “Well,” Solomon would say, “my first problem is that, well it doesn't seem to work because I've known good men who have died young and I've know evil men who lived to be 103.” But then, he has another problem with it. And it's the next part of it that we'll spend the majority of our time on tonight. This next verse will be a lot of your favorite verses for the first ten seconds until I explain it. Here's what verse 16 says, “*Be not overly righteous...*” And the room's like, “Awesome! I got it! I'm doing this! For the first time, you've read something that I am doing.” “*Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?*” Now, this makes it sound as though righteousness should be taken in moderation. I mean, it says it, “Don't be overly righteous.” It makes it sound like we should be good Christian folk. “We should go to church, only cuss in our car.” I mean, go through the list, you know it. “We should do this, but let's not get overly righteous now. Let's not start claiming we're the only way to God. Let's not get a shirt that says I heart Jesus. I mean, let's be middle of the road, good church folk. Let's do that. Let's be righteous but not overly righteous. Okay, well the key to this text is found in the second verb. It's a reflexive verb, and since I have no confidence in the education system, let me point it out to you. Let's read verse 16, because there's something that's being revealed here, something that's being said that I think is going to sting. “*Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.*” According to Solomon, there is a rightness that is wrong. Solomon is attacking us being right in our own eyes. He is attacking the idea of self-righteousness. Now, the reason self-righteousness is so hard to preach on is because everybody who really needs to hear it hears me talking about self-righteousness and is immediately thinking of someone else who needs to hear this. So, I'm going, “Let's talk about self-righteousness,” and the people who are self-righteous are like, “Yes, let's. Because Stacy here needs to hear it.” Now, let's define self-righteousness, because I think what's going to happen here tonight is you're going to see how wrong our right is. Self-righteousness is defining our rightness by what we do not do. That's self-righteousness. When you measure your rightness by what you don't do, your rightness is coming at the expense of someone else. This is why most people in the western world do not feel like they're losing their soul. Here's why. Because we have defined wickedness as some large-scale, cataclysmic evil event. And by defining wickedness like that, we sit over here and say, “I don't do that, so I must be right. I don't murder, I don't steal, I don't kill school children, I don't blow stuff up, I've never taken someone's money, I must be right.” And we compare our lives to this cataclysmic, large-scale wickedness and say, “I must be right” without ever giving thought that maybe it's just as wicked to live in a realm of shallow triviality, indifferent to the sorrows of the world. And listen, every bit of media feeds us. I mean, every time that we turn on the news, we can go, “Oh, I'm alright. I'm a good person.”

Now Jesus, He had monumental problems with defining rightness like this. Like, He tells this story: There's this church service going on. And there's this guy up on the front row, and he is an uber-believer. I mean, he is decked out, WWJD bracelet on. He's got a tattoo of a flaming dove for the Holy Spirit on his arm. He's got the largest Bible in the room. It's the family Bible with the naked baby angel on the cover, and it's King James Version because that's the only way God speaks. And he has a giant journal, and the pen he's writing with is one of those fat pencils you used to get at Six Flags, except his has got Philippians 4:13 going down the back side of it. And he's taking notes, and every time the preacher says something, he's like, “Hmm. Mm hmm!” And he's wearing everything he's supposed to be wearing. I mean, he's got the Christian attire on. He's doing the deal, front row. He's got it down. He doesn't even need to look down at his naked baby angel Bible because he's got the text memorized.

And he's enjoying the service, but the room's kind of gotten weird because there's a guy in the back who won't quit sobbing. And he's doing that kind of uncomfortable sobbing where everyone in the room is having a hard time concentrating because we know something's going on back there. And he's sobbing out of control, and we're all kind of wondering to ourselves, "I mean, where are the deacons? We're trying to learn about Jesus here. Mr. Sobby-sobberton in the back is somewhat of a distraction to me." And then after the sermon's over, there was this response time, and it was time if you were a member or if you were a believer, you could say something. And Mr. Philippians 4:13, he stands up and his cape kind of flaps out behind him. He stands up and he says this prayer as loud as can be, "Father, Father God, thank You that I am not like this man in the back, that I have not stolen what He has stolen, I have not visited the places he has visited, I have no reason for sorrow. Thank You that I am not like he." And in the movie, the camera pans off of him and it pans across the crowd, and the majority of men and women in the room, with arms crossed, agree with the prayer. "Yeah, thank God." There are a few, like 4 or 5 in the crowd who are like, "What?!?" And then finally, the camera zooms in on the man in the back, and he never even heard pencil guy's prayer. Like, he never even knew the guy was praying about him. He was too busy sobbing and saying, "Father, forgive me. I'm a wicked man."

And then, Jesus asks this rhetorical question. He says, "Who goes home justified?" This is a religious word for "Who goes home right before God?" If you don't know the answer to the question, it's not pencil boy. No, Jesus says, "The one in the back, he goes home justified." There is a rightness that is wrong. And Solomon here is caught in a trap, and the trap will start to develop as we continue tonight, where every time he tries to be right, he ends up becoming self-righteous. Every time he tries to do what is right, his spiritual nose grows long and he begins to look down it at people. And then, I want you to look at the result of it on his spirit. It's pretty cataclysmic. Look in verse 16 again, "*Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?*" Now listen to me, the wrong kind of rightness, in the end, kill off a piece of your soul. This aspect of wholeness that we find in Christ, there's a part of the soul that's supposed to be filled with vitality and energy and life, and God says "The right kind of rightness does it, but the wrong kind of rightness will kill you. It will shrivel up your soul." There's a wrong kind of rightness.

Look at what he says next, "*Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?*" Okay, so now he goes on and says, "When I pursue righteousness, I end up becoming self-righteous and I'm in this place that Jesus finds very offensive. I become self-righteous and I set myself up and become smug because I've accomplished things. And so, when I pursue righteousness, it ends up going bad for me. Before I know it, I'm following a set of rules, I've got no joy in it whatsoever. And when I try to be right, when I try to walk in rightness, there's this trap, this thing that happens to me, and it doesn't work. But then when I try to do nothing or I try to be wicked, part of my soul dies there too." So then, his answer at first is this, "Well okay, don't be overly righteous and don't be wicked." Then, he moves on and tries to explain further. He's going to make this argument in verse 18, and then he's going to blow up his argument. I love this guy. "*It is good that you should take hold of this,...*" This what? Righteousness. So, he's going, "It's good that you should take hold of righteousness, that you should want to be right, that you should want right standing before God. This is a good thing for you to take hold of this." While at the same time, "*It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand.*" So once again, we go back to missional living being in the world but not being of the world. Let's keep reading. "*...withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten*

rulers who are in a city.” Okay so Solomon says that the man who is wise and the man who fears God will figure out how to be the right kind of right while avoid the wickedness of the world. So, we should strive for rightness, but the true kind of rightness not the wrong kind of rightness, and we should avoid wickedness, but he's says, “The one who can figure out how to do this is smarter than ten presidents, because it's horrifically complex.” Look at why it's complex in the next line, “*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*” So, he just completely backed us into a corner. Because here's what he said, “Strive for righteousness, avoid wickedness, but you'll never be righteous. The key to life is becoming truly righteous and avoiding wickedness, of which you have no chance.” In fact, he's going to go on to expose the self-righteous tendencies in all of us. Look at the next line, “*Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.*” Here's what he just said, “You know how angry you get when someone dogs you? You know how angry you get when you feel betrayed by someone who's supposed to love you, when you find out you've been the butt of someone's joke, when you find out people have issue with you, that they have problems with you?” The reaction is never, “I wonder if there's any merit to this.” Every time I'm confronted about junk in my life, my first thought is never, “I wonder if there's any merit to this.” My first reaction is always like, “Oh, well that's funny, because I've noticed some junk in your life. Let's sit down. I go first, and then leave.” But here's the point of Solomon, “You throw a spiritual, maybe even physical tantrum any time you are treated like you yourself treat others. And you will, in that moment, think of all the good things that you do instead of the fact that your heart knows deep inside that the very things you're angry about, you've done to another.” Solomon goes, “You're busted. You're self-righteous. No one's right, because even their right is wrong.” And then he's going to say, “I've been trying to figure this out but haven't been able to.” So, look at it, “*All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise,'*” So, here's what he's saying, “I'm going to figure out how to do this. I'm going to figure out how to be righteous and not give into wickedness, but not give in to the wrong kind of right. I'm going to figure out how to do it.” But what does he say in the next line? “*..but it was far from me.*” “I've been trying to figure this out, man. And I can't figure it out.” Okay, continuing, “*That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?*” He's saying, “This drive that we have to be right, to be righteous, to have right standing before God, it's this very difficult, deep, confusing thing because when I try to be right, it goes wrong and if I try to do nothing, then I fall into wickedness. It's like no matter what I do, it doesn't work.

Okay, so I told you when we started Ecclesiastes that the Old Testament asks questions and the New Testament answers it. The Old Testament points outside of itself to another answer. And so, we've got a question here, “How does this work?” We've got this question here, “Since no one can be right and the right that we get into tends to be the wrong kind of right, is there any hope for us? Or are we doomed to take what karma gives us?” Romans 8. So, all of us know at one level or another that karma's not working for us. It's like this noisy machine that's slipped a piston or something and it's clanking around in our soul. And we keep trying to do good and are not really finding any peace, and we're trying to avoid our definition of bad (you know, we're post-modern, so nobody gets to define good or bad to us. We define it for ourselves). And we're trying to stay away from what we view as bad and we're trying to cling to what we view as good. And in the end, karma's just not working for us. There's this noise inside of us that won't shut down and won't shut off. And in the middle of the noise of karma, love interrupts. Look with me, verse 1, “*There is therefore now no condemnation...*” You want to hear a funny thing about this Greek word “no?” It means “no.” It means that there's none. “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” So follow me here,

because something has happened in Jesus that has removed the philosophy or maybe even the law of karma from our lives. Something has occurred in Jesus that has taken from us the yin and the yang. It's removed it. Because you and I are worthy of condemnation because even our rightness is wrong, and when we're not doing the wrong kind of rightness, we're wicked. And so, we're due condemnation, but now somehow in this man Jesus, there is no condemnation for us. That means our past, whatever's in your past, whatever horrific skeleton or bone yard is in your past, there is no condemnation for it. And it means that right now, in our present, our present reality, that Jesus is not in love with some future version of you and me but loves us now. "...those who are in Christ." It means our future is secure, we're not going to stumble on this screw up that Jesus is going to be like, "Oh me! This seemed like a good idea on the cross, but I didn't see this one coming. You, you're out. So for those who are in Christ, something's happened in Jesus. And listen, the thing that happened in Jesus is what sets biblical Christianity up and against and different from every religion and philosophy out there, even a lot of what Evangelicals teach. "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus.*" Something happened in Jesus that removes the yin and the yang. He's going to tell us what it is. Verse 2, "*For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*" So, there's been a switch, there's been a change in the ruling party of the soul. So, you're born into this idea of the law, which is basically karma. You're going to do some things that produce a reaction, that reaction being condemnation because your right is wrong and when you're not doing the wrong kind of right, you're being wicked. And God has replaced the law of sin and death with the law of life and peace. So now, we've got a new king, we've got somebody making the rules. Verse 3 is one of the greatest texts in the Bible. "*For God has done...*" Who did it? God. Whatever this thing is that happened in Jesus, God did it. And if you go, "What about me?" Oh, your part's next. Here we go, "*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*" So in the middle of this broken down dinosaur called karma, love interrupts, God comes in the flesh and absorbs the reaction of your action and pays the bill. God, Jesus, grace pays the bill, past, present, future. For what the law could not do, weak in the flesh God did. This is the difference, this is what sets us apart from every religion and philosophy in the world, that we no longer ascribe to karma, we ascribe to grace. But here's the thing. Grace is this very beautiful reality that I think most of us miss out on. Like I think, whether we ever would admit it or not, we just tend to run back to karma over and over and over again. And I'm wondering, is it because we just haven't meditated and thought on what actually has been purchased for us, what actually has occurred in us, what He's actually done in us, what happened in the cross of Jesus, what was purchased for you and me. Because if you're outside of Christ and you try to figure out what's happened to us, why grown men lift their hands like they do, why we do the goofy stuff we do, it's we know that we didn't do anything here. God did, and that's such an overwhelming reality to the human soul. And you know, biblically, the thing that's supposed to lead us to conviction and repentance is not some guy telling us moral codes but it's the kindness of God. But so few of us ever sit back and pray and think and dwell on what was purchased on the cross, so we continually run back to karma. And it's why the majority in this room refuses to acknowledge that God just might be pleased with you right now. Most of you have got your spirit in this future happening that one day, you're going to be this right kind of guy that God favors and enjoys. And so many at this thing that follows you everywhere, this thing that you were a part of, this thing you did, this sin that haunts you, and you just can't believe the blood of Christ would cover it. So you're trying to do right to overcome it, and it's the wrong kind of right. I mean, come on. Righteousness is a state of being, it's not a list of

action. Righteousness is a state of being. It's the way we are when purchased by Christ.

Okay, so let's do this. I want to just ask you a couple of questions, and here's the game. There's no reason to play church right now, because you'd only be lying to yourself. So, I want to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer them honestly, which means don't be fast, don't start quoting texts to yourselves. I want you to answer them honestly about where you are right now. And I want you to find out, because I want you to see how easily you can operate under karma and try to attach Jesus' name to it. And I think some of you are going to see tonight that you're not following biblical Christianity; you're following some perverted version of it. So, let me ask you some questions. Let's start. Are you currently defining your rightness, your righteousness by what you do or do not do? If I were to walk up to you right now and say, "Hey, tell me why you're right. Tell me why you're good," what would you say? How are you defining your rightness? What makes you a good man a good woman? How do you define that? What makes you right before God? Does God love you? If you answer yes to that, let me ask you this. Why? Why does He love you? Do you bring God joy? Like does God look at you and is He pleased? Now, if you answer these wrong, then you're outside of what the cross of Christ purchased for you. If God's pleased with you because you did or you didn't do, then you're outside of what was purchased for you in the cross. Jesus will be going, "No, no, no, no. That cross solved that. You've gone back to karma." If you said, "Well, no. God's not pleased with me right now," listen, sin has repercussions but it has God's pleasure in you. It doesn't fleet like that. If you say, "No, He's not pleased with me right now because last night I really blew it," okay you blew it. Then repent and move on, but the pleasure of God hasn't flexed in all of that. It's karma. I mean, do you see how easily you can get away from the cross of Jesus and you can set something else at the center? And anytime that you do that, the message of grace is gone. Anytime the cross is no longer central in doctrine, in preaching, in teaching, in your life, all of a sudden we're leaving what was purchased for us and we're clinging to a system that didn't work for us to begin with. And unfortunately, we're attaching Jesus' name to it.

Maybe tonight you've come in here with this thing that's always on you, this thing that will never leave you alone. It's something in your past, something you've done, something you've been a part of, and the moment you did it, it made a scar on your soul. Maybe you were a part of something that you'd just never imagine you'd be a part of, such a thing that left a scar on your soul, and it's just always there. And it's always there to remind you. Maybe tonight you finally hear that there's no condemnation, not because of you but because of Him. He is our righteousness, He is our rightness, He is our wholeness, what God did, what you can't. Maybe tonight is the night we finally leave what's behind and press on for what is ahead. And maybe by the Holy Spirit of God tonight, you walk in here with these sins that you can't shake and you're constantly a part of them, you've probably been a part of them this afternoon. Maybe tonight is the night you finally realize that Jesus loves you despite it. And maybe that finally sinks to the deep places and causes repentance. So what the law, what karma could not do, weak as it was in the flesh, God did. And karma is interrupted by love. And let me tell you why this is so important for you to get tonight. Like, did you know you were created to worship? Like earlier tonight, when Drew Bledsoe threw an interception in the end zone that got run back 102 yards, most of the dudes in this room were trying not to say the F-word and screaming at the top of their lungs, right? And when they played well, they were like cheering. If you've ever been to a concert, have you ever noticed that even people who know nothing of Jesus at a concert where good music is playing will lift their hands and and clap and they'll do very similar things to what we do in

worship? Like the fullness of your heart, what you were created for, who you were created to be is a worshiper of God, and the heart is home in worship to Him. And here's why this is so important tonight. The more you ascribe to karma, the less worship there is. And the less worship there is, the less joy and peace and hope there is. But the more God has done, the more Jesus has done and the more we were unable to do, the more a grateful heart overflows in worship towards God finding our souls at home. This is why karma's so unbelievably devastating to so many of you. This is why you trying to be right goes wrong, because as you move forward in your rightness, you become great and He becomes a non-need and worship doesn't exist, which means the very purpose you were created is negated. God did, God did, God did. If that could ever sink into your heart, and I could pray and fast, that's all I could do for you tonight. This thing is divinely mysterious. It can't be manipulated, levers pulled, you might even get this in your head, but that moment when it captures your heart and you realize "He did it. God rescued me. Got came and got me. God did this, and His love endures beyond all my sin, beyond all my screw ups, beyond all my doubts, beyond all my stumbling. His love endures, His joy in me endures, His passion for me endures in that moment when we begin to repent and just want to be near Him. So, I just pray that somewhere in this 50 minute rant, the Holy Spirit of God would touch you. If you want to know why we raise our hands and say, "How great is our God, sing it with me," it's because he makes us rich, because we're a bunch of broke fools in here. It isn't because He made us healthy because some of us are deathly sick. In fact, a good friend of mine who works at the Center for Christian Counseling, loves Christ with all his might has been in the hospital for a couple of weeks now. We don't say "Great is our God" because He makes us healthy and wealthy. We don't sing "Great is our God" because of some therapeutic healing that He brings. We sing "Great is our God" because grace paid the bill in the cross of Christ. And we sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me" because God did it.

And so, I'm going to pray for you tonight. I'm just going to say a blessing. And I'm going to say "amen" and you'll be dismissed, but here's the deal I want to make with you. I know there have been times in my own life where, for whatever reason in a moment, I kind of feel the Spirit there and feel God there and feel like He's speaking to me. And if you're in that place tonight and in this room right now, the Lord's speaking to you and He's pressing on you and you maybe feel Him working on your junk, maybe pulling out some things, maybe replacing some things, don't feel like you have to run out of here. You don't. Stay as long as you want. Just sit her and enjoy Him and pray through it and think through it and journal through it. And no, we're not the first ones to confuse grace with karma. Go read Galatians tonight, specifically chapters 2 and 3 where Paul says, "Who bewitched you? How are you back at karma already?" So may the interrupting love and grace of God intervene in the deep parts of your soul tonight, and may what is behind you finally be behind you by the blood of Jesus.