

CLASSICS (1): THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY—a sermon by Gary Hindman. FPCUC. Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 1:1-19; Revelation 21:1-5a

*Texts: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity...there is nothing new under the sun." --Ecc 1:2b, 9b
"The Risen Christ) said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" --Revelation 21:5a*

Oscar Fingal O'Flaterie Wills Wilde was born October 16, 1854 in Dublin, Ireland where he lived and attended school, including Dublin's Trinity University. Later he attended Oxford and excelled in the study of literature—an interest he started acquiring as a boy in his mother's salon.

With his peculiar interests, long hair and velvet knee breeches Wilde was seen as an eccentric in Victorian England. His wit, brilliant mind and unusual flair brought both critics and admirers. In 1884 Wilde married a wealthy Irish woman and by her he had two children.

A writer of poems, stories and plays, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written in 1891, is his only novel. In 1895, at the very peak of his career, Wilde was taken to court, tried and convicted of homosexual offenses and sentenced to two years of hard labor. The prison experience left him disillusioned, depressed and bankrupt. It also caused him to change his name and flee to the more liberal environs of Paris where he lived until his death on November 30, 1900.

The Story: Our story begins in the London studio of Basil Hallward who was putting the finishing touches on an oil portrait of his handsome young friend, Dorian Gray. Another friend, Lord Henry Wotton, was watching the painter, admiring the portrait and longing to meet the man so amazingly portrayed in the picture; but Basil Hallward did not want Dorian to meet Lord Henry because he feared that the impressionable Dorian would likely fall under the spell of Wooten's cynical, worldly ways.

Hallward's fears were soon realized for while they were talking Dorian came to the studio, met Lord Henry and began a long, not-always-healthy relationship between Dorian and the older Lord Henry. On this same day Hallward put the last touches on the portrait and signed it. The picture of Dorian Gray was clearly his best work to date and when Lord Henry offered to buy it, Hallward said the picture was not for sale but was to be given to its name's sake, Dorian Gray.

Dorian looked long and hard at the portrait, so vivid, so real, so full of youth and vitality—and Dorian grew sad. "All too soon," he thought, "I will grow old and wrinkled and my youth will fade." How he wished he could remain forever young, like the portrait. So strong was his feeling that he distinctly whispered to himself that he would give anything, everything, even his soul, to keep his youth.

Dorian and Lord Henry became close friends. The older Lord Henry would ply his cynical, worldly thoughts on the impressionable Dorian Gray. One day he gave Dorian a book about a young man who tried to realize in his brief life-time all the passions one could imagine. Dorian saw the character of the book as a hero and began to pattern his own life that way spending his days as a wastrel seeking pleasure by venting his passions in parties and debauchery. Sometimes his passion would take him to vile places in the poorer sections of town.

It was while he was attending a third-rate theatre that he became infatuated with Sibyl Vane, a young actress in the bud of youth. Playing Shakespeare's Juliet she stole his heart and Dorian dreamed of making Sibyl into a first-rate actress who would thrill stages all around the world. Sibyl was flattered at the attention of the young, handsome aristocrat who took Lord Henry to see one of her plays. But on that particular night her acting fell absolutely flat because her passion had left acting for her new-found love of Dorian. She was hissed by the audience and Dorian was greatly embarrassed. Later that night, in her dressing-room, Dorian coldly and cruelly told Sibyl that her poor performance had killed whatever love he had had for her and that he never wanted to see her again.

Meanwhile, the picture of Dorian Gray, which had stood in Basil Hallward's studio was delivered to the Gray home. When Dorian returned home after being so cruel to Sibyl he noticed a most peculiar and subtle change in the portrait. Just as he had been cruel to Sibyl so now, the picture had the most faint trace of cruelty about the mouth. Thinking he was only imagining this change, Dorian looked first at the painting, then at himself in a mirror. Dorian was filled with horror at a most startling revelation: that the picture was, in some sense, alive! It was evolving into something ugly while he, living an ugly life, was continuing to look unchanged!

Afraid of what this could mean, he resolved to make up with Sibyl and wrote her a passionate letter. But it was never delivered because Lord Henry came over with some appalling news: Sibyl Vane had died by suicide the night before. Moreover, her hot-tempered brother sought revenge on the mysterious man who had broken his sister's heart. But Sibyl had never known Dorian's full name so he could just go on undetected—only the picture seemed to know and so Dorian resolved to hide his portrait in an upstairs attic away from all eyes but his.

Years went by. Dorian Gray continued to live a hedonistic life. He did vile and shameful things by night and behind his back people gossiped of scandalous reports about him and the picture of Dorian Gray became uglier and more sinister by the year—even as the face of Dorian Gray stayed ever young and belied his age and the evil things he was doing. Like the character in the book Lord Henry had given him, Dorian experimented with crime, drugs, and the occult. He frequented opium dens and had sordid affairs with women and more and more of the decent people of London would have no time for Dorian Gray.

On the eve of Dorian's 38th birthday the artist Basil Hallwood came calling. The two had been estranged for years and Hallwood announced that he was leaving, that very night, for Paris. Bothered by the rumors about Dorian, Hallwood tried to get him to change his ways. He also commented on how youthful and unchanged Dorian looked. So Dorian broke with his secret and took Hallwood to his attic and unveiled the portrait now so hideously changed beyond recognition except for the signature Hallward had painted so many years ago. As Hallward looked on and realized what he was seeing, Dorian was gripped by an ugly passion and seized a knife and stabbed his old friend over and over to his death.

Just then, the portrait began to drip of blood and Dorian took steps to dispose of Hallwood's body.

Dorian did not live too long after that. His past started catching up with him and he was haunted by the horrors of his life. Hallwood's death was being investigated and Sibyl Vane's revengeful brother had somehow found him out. Dorian was in a panic. He decided the only thing to do was destroy the picture. Using the same knife that had murdered Hallwood, Dorian entered the attic, unveiled the portrait, now uglier than ever, and began to stab it repeatedly. Suddenly, in the neighborhood, people were hearing a bloodcurdling cry of agony. When Dorian's servants broke into the attic they discovered a body with a knife in his chest. The body was scarred, wrinkled and withered beyond all recognition except that he had on the personal jewelry of their master. And old, disfigured Dorian Gray was laying dead before the now transformed painting of the young, innocent, vivacious, picture of Dorian Gray. For you see, in his desperate attempt to kill his conscience, Dorian Gray had killed himself. And that is how the story ends!

Application. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is based on an impulse that is present in many, many people—the deep-seated wish that we could stay the same, always be young and happy, that life would never change and that when things are going well that they could stay just as they are. Thus, when Dorian first gazed upon his portrait and saw himself in the prime of his life, he wanted to remain there so badly that he would give anything, even his soul, to have things stay that way.

The “preacher” of Ecclesiastes offers a powerful sentiment in the opening chapter of his book. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” he says, as he reflects on the fact that some things seem never changing even as we grow old before them. Many people are afraid to grow old and they are afraid of change. Perhaps they do not wish to trade their youth for their soul, like Dorian did, but they think about it and they wish they could take back the years and they are willing to go to great lengths to have what they once had.

I think of the fifty-year-old man who divorces his wife, the mother of his kids, to pursue a woman half his age. I think of the woman who gets a face lift or a tummy tuck or the money spent on hair transplants or simply the billions spent annual on cosmetics. “Vanity of vanities.”

But the author of Ecclesiastes is not simply talking about personal vanity—he is talking about the vanity of life—the meaninglessness that comes to lives that are without positive purpose. He looks at the cycles of the seasons, the weather, the habits and attitudes of so many and finds it all so wearisome.

Some people's lives are wearisome because of the oppression of society. Tennessee Ernie Ford used to sing such a song about a coal miner: “We load sixteen tons, and what do we get...another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go, I owe my soul to the company store.”

Dorian Gray had another kind of boredom, the boredom of the idle rich. His was not an endless amount of tedious work, it was an endless round of parties, social affairs and sensual pleasures one after the next. His life had no perspective. He knew nothing of Jesus' call to service before self, of finding your life by losing it in the service of others, of loving God and neighbor in the great equation of life.

Golf is a great sport. I had a friend whose whole life revolved around golf. If he had a good round he was happy for the rest of the day; if not, his mood showed it. As he grew older and could no longer play as well, he fell into a great depression. Emerson was right when he said, "Any excess causes a defect." In other words, too much of anything is a bad thing. And that was the case for Dorian Gray. Like many people today, he spent too much time looking for pleasure until in the end, pleasure itself was an abomination and he was looking out over his life with the sentiment of the preacher saying, "There is nothing new under the sun."

But that is wrong; it's dead wrong. There is something in life that is ever new and ever wonderful and forever worthy of our attention—and that is the love of God we can know in Christ Jesus. The God of the Bible is a rescuer. He comes to us from without to bless us within. Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ he (or she) is a new creation; behold, the old has past away and the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) The great vision of John in the Revelation is of the Risen Christ who reigns in power and authority and who makes the amazing promise that he will dwell with us forever and ever. He will not leave or forsake us and that we are moving to that eternal state where there will be no more mourning or pain or crying or death anymore. He ends the passage by saying, "Behold, I am making all things new!"

Dorian was bored with life and let evil take its toll. We are called to serve the Lord in gladness and not give evil a chance to take root in us. Today's novel is like an allegory in which every human life is like a portrait that changes under the burdens of sin and suffering. And it would be an accurate description except for the fact that God is constantly renewing us and making all things new. God is a God of grace and forgiveness. The last word for the faithful is not the weight of our sin but the benediction of God's mercy; God's last word to you will not be a picture of despair but a benediction of his eternal love made possible by the cross of Christ. Free beings in Christ are children of hope and joy who live life abundantly as forgiven people! Truly, Christ makes all things new! So live and walk in his glorious light! Amen!