

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the gospel according to Ecclesiastes

“Finding Joy in Living”

This morning we enter a text in our Ecclesiastes series that deals directly with the heart and the motives we have for living. This text applies to us so well in our day as we live in a consumeristic, wealth saturated culture. The preacher of Ecclesiastes has asked some very hard questions regarding life and the meaning of it.

The nature of these three questions that we will answer implies that there is an object, a relationship and a reason for our existence in life. When we have understood and answered these three questions, the preacher of Ecclesiastes says there will be one of two outcomes in our lives – joy or hopelessness. I pray that this morning you would find Joy in your living. Let's begin by reading the text.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Last week, Pastor Timothy taught us on the injustice of life seen under “the loom.” In order for us to begin today's lesson with the correct context we have to look back and the beginning of this chapter. The preacher says in Chapter 4 verses 2 and 3,

*And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.
But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done
under the sun.*

“What is the point of our existence?” the preacher cries. “Would it not have been better to never have been born, than to face all the evil under the sun in this world? What joy can we glean in life? Is it not all vanity?” And so the questions arise.

Ventura, what are you living for? What is it that you strive for? That consumes your thoughts on a day to day basis? When you lay your head down at night, what eases you to sleep? When you get up in the morning, what gives you strength for the day?

Here in Ecclesiastes 4:4 it says that the reason we work and toil is purely out of man's envy for his neighbor. We live to outdo one another with financial gain, with possessions, with popularity and status. We continuously live in a world of comparison with those around us. I wish I had his car. I wish I had that home. I wish I had their job. I wish I had that body. I wish I was that beautiful or smart or funny. Fill in the blank. We covet what we do not have.¹

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 110. “...like all of God's blessings, work can be distorted by sin. Here the Preacher points out that much of our work is motivated by envy, by the sinful desire to get ahead in life by getting ahead of other people. Economists sometimes identify the competitive urge of self-interest as the engine that drives a capitalist economy. But Ecclesiastes sees a deeper motivation at work, a motivation that comes from a selfish heart.”

The preacher of Ecclesiastes says, “This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.” The world is at war with itself and there is no end to the desire for more. If one accumulates wealth and power, then others will rise to supersede. The desires of man’s sinful heart is an empty chasm that has no bottom. Striving to fill it will would be a worthless endeavor.²

Ecclesiastes 4:5-6 gives us three analogies. One is called the fool. He crosses his arms and abstains from labor. Now I want to address that this is not depictive of one who cannot work due to physical or mental incapacibilities or a stay-at-home mother nurturing children. The fool is the one who has the capability to work in order to support themselves but refuses to do so and puts out a begging hand. The analogy of “eating his own flesh” is a gruesome picture of the effect that not working has on them. They will waste away in want and will not achieve anything.

The second holds a handful of quietness and is content with where he is and what he does. To him, he has found enjoyment in life and does not bend his will for more. But the third takes two handfuls of toil and striving after the wind. This third man cannot get enough but continually strives for more, only to lose it all in the end anyway.

The preacher points the reader to contentment. While the first one “wastes away” and the third one “strives vigorously” for more, the second man finds peace and contentment to live life with no desire for more.³ This comparison teaches us of the folly of laziness as well as endless striving, but who can say that they are content with what they have? Is not the whole world in search for more?

When God’s children refrain from coveting the things of this world and begin coveting Christ, then a contentment will be revealed.

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” – Hebrews 13:5

Why does the author of Hebrews insert that quote? It doesn’t seem to fit necessarily. Unless you and I recognize that we have everything we could possibly want in Christ. A Puritan prayer reads, “In Him thou hast given me so much that heaven can give no more.”⁴ The Apostles Peter and Paul also taught this message in their letters.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence. – 2 Peter 1:3

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sake He became poor so that you, by His poverty might become rich. – 2 Corinthians 8:9

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 110. “...wanting what God has given to someone else instead of what he has for me is vanity, a striving after wind.”

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 110. “This beautiful comparison is built on a double contrast. ‘Quietness’ is contrasted with ‘toil and... striving.’ A good synonym is ‘contentment.’ The quiet person is peaceful and composed. Rather than always striving for more, he or she is satisfied already.”

⁴ The Valley of Vision (Edinburgh, Eng.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 29

My dad will often tell me, “David... I’m the richest man on earth.” We laugh for a bit and then he says, “No really, we have been so blessed by God what more could we want?” Let that kind of perspective perpetuate in your mind. Why is it that we desire the things of this world when we have inherited the Kingdom of God? If you are a believer today, then you are called to abstain from the things of this world! Put away from you the desires for your neighbor’s possessions, your neighbor’s wife, coveting what you do not have, and believing the lie that Christ just isn’t enough for you.

If we walk in the ways of this world – coveting consumerism, materialism, status, fame, and wealth so that we may rise above our neighbor, then our end is sure to be meaningless and our life will be spent in vain. Yet, if we walk in the ways of our Father, we will find great joy in the contentment of this life clinging to His loving hands and longing for the coming day when we shall see Him face to face.

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. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. – 1 John 2:15-17

The conclusion to our question is, those who live for the things of this world will end up with nothing. Rightly said by the preacher, it would have been better if they were never born. However, those who live for the Father, will not only find joy and contentment in *this* life, but have an eternal reward awaiting them in glory.

*...an inheritance imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
– 1 Peter 1:4-5*

Where are you today? Do you covet the things of this world? Don’t let this question breeze by without taking moment to analyze your heart. To “covet” something is to have a deep rooted passion or desire for that object or idea. Most often the Scripture uses this term in a negative light. That is because we continually covet things that we should not. But God *did* created us to have a deep rooted passion for something. He created us to have an overwhelming desire for Him and His glory. Leave the things of this world behind. Covet Christ!

Here in these verses the preacher transitions from the want of worldly possessions to the relationships we have with those around us. Here we have a picture of a workaholic. This man works and works and works, but he is alone. There is no one else to share his wealth with. This is the man, as described above, who takes two handfuls of toil and striving after the wind. He constantly desires more and cannot get enough. Possibly, this is the reason he is alone. Did he drive away all those who could have potentially loved him? We don’t know. Yet it doesn’t seem to bother him since he has never asked himself the question (I paraphrase), “Who will I spend my wealth with? Who will benefit from all my work?” The preacher says, “This too is vanity.”

Let’s face the facts that we actually aren’t too different from this man. What we do, we do for ourselves. Few times do we really place others before ourselves. Even as believers we struggle with this among those whom we love the most. Don’t think so? Then there would be no need for these passages.

*Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Eph. 6:25
Wives submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. Eph. 5:22*

Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Honor your father and your mother.

Eph. 6:1-2

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Eph. 6:4

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ. Eph. 6:5

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not to his own interest but to the interest of others. Phil. 2:3-4

Ventura, we need to remind ourselves daily that we make ourselves the first priority. That in every decision I make or in every action I carry out, there is a deceitful and selfish motive behind it. Am I truly acting out of complete love to those around me? Am I sacrificing for those whom I would call brothers and sisters? How can we get to that point?

I once heard that a definition for love could be expressed this way – Love is the complete sacrifice of one’s self for the benefit of another. Although I don’t know if this definition fully grasps the picture, I do believe it points us to a greater reality. Left to myself, I will never truly “love” anyone or sacrifice for them. Much like the man who toils all day long and has no one to share with, so too I would spend my life in vain for the treasures and riches that I acquire for myself. However, if I am changed by the power of Christ Who truly “LOVED” His children by completely sacrificing Himself for the benefit of those whom He loved, then I will know that true “LOVE” and I will be able to mirror it because Christ now lives within me.⁵

The preacher now turns his attention to community. First, the man who was alone labored so hard that he had no one to share his wealth with. His eyes were greedy for more and he never thought about relationship. But if there are two, then there is a reward for their toil. Note what the reward is. Is it wealth? Is it possessions? No the reward seems to be companionship. If one falls, the other can be there to help. If it is cold at night, then they would keep each other warm. In the Mediterranean climate, it was common practice to lie side by side at night and place their cloaks over them to keep them warm. This was not in any way a perverted act but was cultural for them at that time.

The key here is companionship. We were never created to be alone. In the very beginning God saw that man should not be alone and created a companion for him.

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” – Genesis 2:18

In this, we do not limit relationship to husband and wife, but we see broader implications with the family of God. We were created to assemble together and worship God. We were created to grow

⁵ Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 106. “One of the ironies of the atonement is not just that Jesus suffered and died to renew certain relationships, but that he suffered and died *alone* to do so. Abandoned by God and people, Jesus made it possible for people to be in a right relationship with God and neighbor. From Gethsemane to Golgotha, a slow, sad separation occurred. Jesus was forsaken by Israel. He was forsaken by the Twelve. Finally, in some inexplicable way, he was forsaken by the Father – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

together, to work together, and to battle together so that the world might see what it looks like to worship God as a community.⁶

Ventura, are we living for ourselves? Or are we living for the benefit of one another in this church, glorifying God through His body. Christ is the One who holds us and sustains us. This is why the picture of a church is so important. Look around you. These people are the living manifestations of God's hands and feet. We look to him and cling to Him through our gathering here because He is the one that desires our companionship. That is our reward!

For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you." – Isaiah 41:13

We find joy in this life through our companionship with one another, which ultimately points to our companionship with God.

Now the preacher turns to man's legacy. What was the point of it all? What will be remembered of man? Here we find a proverb that distinguishes two people. On one end you have a poor and wise youth, and on the other end you have an old and foolish king. Following the context of how the preacher has been talking, he said it would have been better to not even be born than to live in vain. Here, we see the preacher contrasting this king's former life of poverty verses his long reign as king.

This king came from prison and poverty, and was made king. It seems that he became a great king as there was no end to all the people he led. It says that all the living who move about under the sun along with the king's successor who was to stand in the king's place when he died. Yet in all of this, it was vanity. For even after such a miraculous story of a king who went from rags to riches, he will be forgotten, and those who come after him will not rejoice in him.

If that story is not enough to leave a resounding applause in the hearts of people through the ages, then what hope do I have in leaving behind a legacy? What will become of my end? What is the purpose of my life? According the preacher, it would have been better for that youth to have remained poor and wise than to have aspired to such a state of an old and foolish king who will leave behind no legacy at all.

How will it end for man? Those who strive and toil and aspire to something greater will turn to dust just like the rest of man – even like the beast of the field. But what about those who are found in Christ? Ventura, just like every king and every throne on earth, man will fall and be forgotten. This too is vanity. However, those who look and place their hope in the true King will never fade away.

⁶ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 102. "Just as the body of Christ "does not consist of one member but of many" (1 Cor. 12:14), we need each other for service ("the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the fee, 'I have no need of you,'" v. 21). We also need each other for mission (and Jesus "called the twelve and began to send them out two by two," Mark 6:7), perseverance in holiness ("And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near," Heb. 10:24-25), and even church discipline ("Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven..." Matt. 18:18-20).

Christ our Lord left the glories of heaven to come down to this earth and be born in poverty. He was rejected by man and was not received by His very own people. He was unjustly convicted as a criminal and wrongfully accused by His creation. Christ our Lord suffered and died as one who was accursed and hung on a tree. He was placed in a tomb as one dead, lifeless, and routing.

But our Lord rose from the grave victorious over sin and death. He ascended on high and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. There is no end to this King's reign. His legacy shall never be forgotten throughout all eternity! His reward is glory and He calls His children home to an everlasting joy with Him.

How will it all end? It ends with Christ reigning forever and His children worshiping Him at His feet. It ends with the devil and all those who follow him punished, alone and forgotten.⁷ Indeed for them, it would have been better if they were never born.

⁷ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 106. "Hell is the ultimate place of isolation. Not three, nor two, but one – you are alone with yourself, your sin, and your shame forever."

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