

“THE VANITY OF WISDOM.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Introduction.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 were a poetic prologue, an introduction. His poetic evaluation of all human endeavors was that they are “hebel,” vapor, fleeting, futile, vanity. Mankind can’t save himself or gain any real advantage in this world for the next.

Now in Eccl. 1:12-18 Solomon rolls up his sleeves and get to work. He begins by showing us the path he followed to come to the conclusions he came to. He shifts from poetry to prosed. He shifts from third person to first person. “Come with me,” he says, “and I will show you what I did, what path I followed to try to find the benefit, advantage, profit of all our labors and efforts under the sun.”

He begins by telling us why we should listen to him and trust what he says. He gives us his credentials, and they are truly impressive. He is an expert who is speaking from real experience.

He is the king, he holds the highest rank. He has unlimited authority, power, time, resources, wealth and wisdom. All things are at his fingertips and disposal. If the answer can be found there is no one better suited or situated to find it.

He is king of Israel, not some backwater nation, not some idolatrous, heathen land, but the people of God, the only nation on earth with the true knowledge of God and the righteous standard in the Law. For 40 years Israel dominated the world and there was peace.

He is the king in Jerusalem, the city of God, the city in which the glory of God dwells.

He says (vs. 16) he has surpassed all who have gone before him in experience and knowledge, which is really saying something when you remember who went before him, his father David, a great king with a great heart and love for God.

Is this boasting or is it true? Scripture answers that for us:

The stories of Solomon and his wisdom are well known. When he became king, God appeared to him and said, “Ask what shall I give to you?” (I Kings 3:5).

Talk about your genie in a bottle kind of question. Ask from me whatever you want and I will grant it to you.

I Kings 3:9-12 “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11 And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.”

I Kings 4:29-34 God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, 30 so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. 32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. 33 He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. 34 And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.

The great *Queen of Sheba* herself came to see for herself and test Solomon's wisdom and testified he was far wiser than even all the reports of his wisdom.

II Chronicles 9:5-6 She [Queen of Sheba] said to the king, “The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, 6 but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, half the greatness of your wisdom was not told me; you surpass the report that I heard.”

What he said is true, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

He was and still is the wisest man to have ever lived.

He asked God for wisdom and set his heart to seek and to search out wisdom. He acquired great wisdom.

He studied everything under the sun. He made great progress in his search. He left no stone unturned. He went into every nook and cranny, he looked down every rabbit hole. He surpassed everyone else who had ever undertaken such an endeavor. He went all in not only with his head but his heart.

He set himself to get all the insight he could into philosophy and mathematics, into husbandry and trade, merchandise and mechanics, into the history of former ages and the present state of other kingdoms, their laws, customs, and policies, into men's different tempers, capacities, and projects, and the methods of managing them; he set himself not only to seek, but to search, to pry into, that which is most intricate, and which requires

the closes application of mind and the most vigorous and constant prosecution. ... to make an experiment how far the enlargement of the knowledge would go towards the settlement and repose of the mind (Matthew Henry).

The anticipation or expectation is that wisdom would lead to happiness.

We expect doctors to find cures and heal all our diseases.

We expect engineers to build bigger and better buildings and bridges.

We expect scientists to answer all our questions.

We expect politicians to make perfect laws for everyone.

We expect pastors to know the theological answers to God and life and suffering.

How many times have you wanted to know why something happened or when something will happen? How many times have you wanted to know what is ahead?

Of course it makes complete sense that the place where Solomon would start his search would be wisdom. Wisdom was what he was all about. Wisdom is the highest road to happiness, the path of greatest success. If this proves unfruitful, then all other paths will as well.

The fruit of seeking wisdom in Solomon's experience.

Investigation. 13; 16-17a

Conclusion. 14; 17b

Proverbial explanation. 15; 18

His conclusion is, seeking after wisdom is an unhappy business (sore travail).

It is all a striving after wind, a chasing after wind, or in our modern words a herding of cats. It is frustrating business. The hurrier we go the behinder we get. The harder we work, the more work there is to do.

But it is worse. We are created in the image of God, we are created with an ability to know, to learn, to examine, explore, discover, create. We are given a desire to know and learn and strive after wisdom.

Why then this weariness in pursuit of understanding life, why the unsatisfied desires, why the unsuccessful search for happiness?

Solomon explains with a proverb:

Eccl. 1:15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking (missing) cannot be counted.

What is crooked cannot be made straight and the reason it cannot be made straight is because God has made it crooked (7:13).

Why? The world is twisted, bent and broken, because it is cursed by God because of our sin, he brought it on ourselves. God laid this unhappy burden on us back at the fall.

Rom. 8:20 Creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.

Genesis 3:17-19 And to Adam [God] said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

The phrase children on men in our text is actually best translated the sons of Adam. To the sons of Adam is given this unhappy, painful business, this work of affliction. All creation has turned against us, and we have to work all the harder now in this fallen earth.

It is both an unhappy task, made worse by the fact that sin has rendered the sons of Adam inadequate for the task, his understanding is faulty, compromised and corrupted by sin. Sinners cannot make straight what God has made crooked.

God will have us see the depth of our sin, the bankruptcy of our spiritual nature, and weariness of our efforts before we can see the only hope is in him.

In other words, there is a purpose behind the seemingly meaningless task of seeking wisdom. Seeking after wisdom is an unhappy business (sore travail) because God has made it so.

This frustrating, fleeting, weary world and existence is God’s doing, it is exactly where he has placed us. God has purposefully placed us under this sun, in this wind, on this globe, that goes around and around and around.

At some point after all our striving, we must surrender to acceptance. God is God and the world is the way it is.

We naively think more facts, knowledge, time, effort or money will fix any problem. But there are so many things we just can’t fix, can’t put back together, can’t make right. And having more information won’t help.

Solomon explains with another proverb:

Vs. 18 In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

With the vast increase in knowledge in our day, we still have the same age old problems.

We are not living in the dawning of the age of Aquarius.

We are not living in a world that is getting better and better.

Conclusion and application.

As I said last week, we are going to have to go down with Solomon before we can go up. He is going to descend into hell, before he comes back up. Darkness before light. Death before life.

He has to try to get us to come to our senses.

He is no quick healer, no shallow pundit, no easy believism. No Twitter type response from him. He is honest, he is in the midst of the struggle, the answers don't come quickly and he doesn't give them quickly.

But don't get the idea Ecclesiastes is anti-wisdom or anti-work or anti-science. Wisdom is not useless, worthless. It has served to help him arrive at these conclusions. And later he will say ignorance and folly are far worse.

But while being useful, wisdom still brings sorrow and frustration.

Like a parent who is wiser than a child and mourns over the path children take, knowing the pain that is ahead for them. The child lacks wisdom and will only gain it by painful experience.

Wisdom is to be desired and preferred over folly, but the wise person knows more about pain and suffering and frustration than the fool does. He is more aware of life's disappointments.

Solomon ultimately is putting wisdom in it proper place.

Don't keep striving after the wind, trying to corral it, instead learn from that frustrating futility and turn to the one who rules the wind, who's Spirit is like the wind, the breath of life.

John 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Don't keep drinking water that never satisfies and still leaves you thirsty, come to the waters of life, drink the water that Jesus gives.

John 4:13-14 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Don't look to nature and think something in creation holds out hope, that you can corral it or lasso it, or control it. Nature is teaching us to look to the Lord of nature, the Creator of all things.

Don't look at the smoke and clouds and mist and fog, look to the one who is enthroned in smoke and clouds who knows and overrules all that is vaporous.

Don't look to human wisdom to solve the problems and give the answers to life's deepest, most vexing and most important answers. The search for wisdom apart from the God of wisdom is futile, the search for the answers concerning life is chasing the wind apart from the Lord of life.

Wisdom and knowledge are powerless, and ignorance is fatal, outside of knowing God and His Word. This is why true wisdom says to pray as Paul prayed:

Colossians 1:9-10 We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the *knowledge* of his will in all spiritual *wisdom* and *understanding*, 10 so as to *walk in a manner worthy of the Lord* [righteousness], fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.