

# “THE VANITY OF LIVING WISELY.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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**Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 2:12-17**

## **Introduction.**

Remember who is speaking. Qoheleth, The Preacher, the shepherd king of Israel in Jerusalem, Solomon.

After Solomon’s opening poetic introduction to the vanity of life under the sun in chapter one, which he repeatedly calls a striving after the wind, he makes it the work of his life to exhaustively explore the meaning and purpose of life.

He is conducting a grand experiment. Remember he’s the wisest, richest king who ever lived. He has all the wisdom, time and resources to do the most thorough research ever conducted.

Don’t commit the sin of *chronological snobbery* that says no one from so long ago could ever have done as good a job of it as we could today. Let us not proudly assume we could do better than those who have gone before us. We are in no way wiser than Solomon or better equipped to find the answers he looked for.

CS Lewis defines chronological snobbery as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is discredited.”

Don't commit the sin of intellectual snobbery and elitism that says only we in the twenty first century could possibly explore the depths of what he explored.

Here is what he has done so far.

*First*, he applied his heart to seek and to search out wisdom, which exposed the vanity of wisdom which leads to much vexation of the spirit (Eccl. 1:13).

*Second*, he said to his heart test pleasure (Eccl. 2:1), and so he explored the vanity of self-indulgence whether in laughter, wine, women, or great achievement and success.

Like going into one of those smorgasbord restaurants and trying everything. He experimented with everything he could make, buy, eat, drink, smoke, or sleep with. Nope, no meaning there.

Now, *third*, he applied his heart to consider and explore the vanity of living wisely, which again turns into a dead-end, a cul-de-sac.

If you are thinking we already went down this road back in chapter 1 you are sort of right.

**Ecclesiastes 1:13, 17** I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. ... 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

So what gives? Two responses. First, lest he give up on wisdom too quickly he returns to give it a second go, a second chance. He

puts the most possible stock in wisdom above all the pleasures we can pursue in this life.

Second, the first time he approached wisdom from more of a philosophical direction, here he seems to take a more practical direction.

Solomon says it is better to be wise just as light is better than darkness. A wise man has eyes to see and the fool is blind. A wise man can see better, can make better decisions, can find his way easier, avoid potholes and cliffs. The wise man can see where he is going, the blind man can't.

**But both the wise man and the fool die.**

*And yet.* See those words in the middle of verse 14. This is where Solomon stumbles, this is where he runs into the same wall he has run into before. This path is no better than the others.

Solomon says it is better to be wise, but he is hard pressed to tell us why.

Solomon doesn't have it worked out just yet. So far all his research and seeking and data collecting under the sun are all pointing to the same conclusion. Smart people, wise people, fools, rich and poor, all end up in the same place, a graveyard. Both die. The best he can come up with is that light is better than darkness.

All Solomon can do is state his personal preference for wisdom rather than folly. But one has the distinct impression if a fool came up and argued the point with Solomon he wouldn't have much of a defense.

No doubt Solomon must feel more foolish than wise that he has no wise reasons to justify his choice of wisdom.

Why be wise? Why should I be wise? What advantage does the wise or the fool have?

For the first time, but by no means the last time, Solomon mentions death, the great show stopper.

Both die and neither are remembered, but completely forgotten. This realization seems to render all of life utterly meaningless, pointless. Wisdom doesn't seem to give one an advantage in this life.

If I hold out to you two options, door number one and door number two, but I tell you that whatever there may be behind those options, in the end both lead to death, what great advantage is there to choosing? Whatever strong case we might make for one over the other, in the end it will be considered irrelevant.

If you are playing cards and every card in your hand is going to be trumped, what difference does it make whether you play a king or a two?

**So I hated life.**

Verse 17 is Solomon throwing his hands up in the air, exasperated.

This struck Solomon as most unfair, what a trick life plays on us, *so he hated life*. This sounds like the child who yells “unfair!” when he has first discovered life in fact is unfair.

Life is this gift from God and yet life doesn't give the answer he expects or is looking for.

Remember Solomon has just recklessly rampaged his way through all the human pleasures, wine, women and song as the saying goes, and along with that laughter, success, achievement.

**Ecclesiastes 2:10** Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure.

And now he stands back and surveys the wreckage, surveys all he has done to try and find happiness and meaning and purpose.

In our text he deals with the emotions of hatred, dejection, frustration. We don't expect this from preachers. They are supposed to always be upbeat, blessed, full of hopeful optimism.

Who would want to listen to sermons and counseling advice from this preacher? We want a happy faith. Maybe that's why lots of people skip over Ecclesiastes.

But you would have to actually skip over much of the wisdom literature in the Bible. These books give full vent to a wide range of human emotions. Despair, hatred, lament, complaint, hopelessness.

**Job 3:3-4** Let the day perish on which I was born, ... 4 Let that day be darkness!

May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it.

**Job 16:6-7** If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me?

7 Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company.

**Psalm 77:2-3** In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

3 When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints.

So harsh words like hating life aren't a lack of faith, but part of the path of faith.

We cry out and God hears and answers.

We cast our cares on Him, because He actually does care.

We groan and He helps us in our weakness.

When he says he hates life, it is honest, but it doesn't mean that he always has or that he always will. He can be honest with God, not cover up or hide. He doesn't compartmentalize his feelings, he gives them all to God, the good, the bad, the ugly, the sinful, the broken.

A God-loving, God-fearing preacher can say to God, "I hate life."

**There is a way to hate life wisely.**

We should thank God for Solomon and for how God put him through the wringer, how God put him in the mortar and pestle and ground him, how God put him in the furnace and refined him so that we could learn from his experiences without having to experience them ourselves.

How does a wise man hate life?

There is all kinds of hatred in the world and the fool exhibits many of them. But wisdom only hates in one way, and Solomon teaches us that way.

**Ecclesiastes 2:17** I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

He is not talking about depression like some person who hates life and wants to die.

*Elijah* ran into the wilderness from exhaustion, trauma and fear, and told God he wanted to die. God gave him food, water, and rest, and God's own presence and he was restored.

*Jonah* wanted to die because he hated the people God had sent him to call them to repentance. He would rather drown than change his heart. God saved him, showed him grace and gave him time to come around.

*Job* told God he just wanted to die, he had lost everything and was suffering horrifically, so he pleaded to die.

But those stories are not Solomon's. He isn't grieving over self-pity, spiritual hardness of heart, or terrible, tragic losses and circumstantial depression.

He hates life under the sun because of the fallen nature of life. He hated life because of what he saw on the nightly news, murder, crime, corruption, wars, rape, lies, disasters.

Basically everything that entered the world with the loss of the Garden of Eden. The world didn't used to be like this back in the beginning, we hate what it has become.

All those things that food, drink, laughter, music, money, sex, power can't cover up or make go away or make us numb to. It is right to hate sin, misery, evil, and death.

The fool does the opposite. The fool hates God, God's people, wisdom, love, truth, beauty, goodness. The fool embraces jealousy and selfish ambition (James 3:14-16). The fool embraces "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (I John 2:15-16).

But the question still lingers why be wise when in the end it gains you no advantage and both the wise and the fool come to the same end and fate? Nothing either does changes reality.

The rain still falls on the just and the unjust. The flood in Sumas hit the Christians just as hard as the non-Christians. The wise can't seem to bribe God to treat them better under the sun. Being wise grants no immunity from evil.

**Ecclesiastes 9:2-3** It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.



**Ecclesiastes 9:11** Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

## **Conclusion and application.**

So if you can't beat them, join them, right? Folly is more fun, right?

Imagine a basketball team made up of nine and ten year olds. One team cheats, pushes, trips, trash talks, fouls. Imagine the referees are friends with the cheating team's coach and are biased toward the cheating team and lets them get away with everything.

Imagine you are the coach of the other team. What do you tell your players? You have options.

You could tell them to quit. You could say, "I hate this game, there is no point in trying because it doesn't matter what you do, you aren't going to win."

Or you could tell them to go back out on the court and return evil for evil. You could say, "I hate this game. Since it is so unfair and no one seems to care, you guys go ahead and cheat, push, trip and trash talk. If that is the only way to win, then break all the rules."

The Preacher considers both options. If he quits that leaves folly as the only game in town. If he joins folly, that still leaves folly as the only game in town. So while the Preacher says he hates this

life, he decides to oppose folly with wisdom. Not because he will win the game, or gain some advantage for himself (Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, p. 92-93).

Why chose wisdom over folly?

For its own sake and not for any gain we might get from it.

For wisdoms sake, folly will not have the last word.

For our own sake and not anyone else.

**Mark 8:36** For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

Nothing temporal is going to satisfy souls that are made for eternity.

For God's sake. God is God. God is wise, God is not a fool.

God is the source of all wisdom, all wisdom is a gift from Him.

God loves wisdom and it glorifies Him.

Human life and human wisdom are a gift from Him.

The same one who wrote this, also wrote Proverbs.

**Proverbs 4:5-9** Get wisdom; get insight;

do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.

6 Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.

7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.

8 Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.

9 She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, God most high and most glorious. While we are toiling and laboring here on earth, while we are striving and anxious, while we are troubled and distressed, you forever dwell in infinite perfect peace. All your labors and designs and purposes cause you no worry of being accomplished or fulfilled. Your power knows no limit, your wisdom knows no hindrance.

Grant us your wisdom to help us answer the wisdom of this world. Grant us your peace to counter the false peace the world offers. Guide us by your Spirit and truth in the way that is everlasting. Grant us to know that we truly live when we live for you, for only in you do we live and move and have our being. Continue to call us to fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. We ask this in His name, Amen.