

“THE END OF THE MATTER: FEAR GOD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

Introduction.

This evening we come to the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Let me fill you in on where we will go from here.

Next Sunday evening Dr. Jeff Weima from Calvin Seminary will preach on a Professor's Prayer for the Christian Reformed Church.

Then in the first three weeks of October Pastor Mike, David and then I will each offer a sort of overall wrap up of our own experiences of preaching through Ecclesiastes. I have given each of them freedom to do whatever the Spirit puts on their heart to do. This book has touched each of us in different ways, and it is good sometimes to step back and reflect on what has been significant for us in preaching this great book.

Ecclesiastes 12:8, vanity, fleeting.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity

Ecclesiastes 12:8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

We end as we began. His first words of wisdom are vanity of vanity, all is vanity. And his last. He stated his thesis at the beginning, and set out to prove it, and now he comes to the end.

All! Everything, nothing is excluded. He is utterly convinced of this and means for us to be as well. This was not hastily arrived at, but considered over the long course of life and experience.

We have learned along the way this doesn't mean vain or empty or futile or meaningless, but fleeting. Fleeting, fleeting, all is fleeting.

Like dreams that vanish at dawn, flowers that wither, shadows that pass away, smoke that quick disperses. Think of vapor, mist, fog, things you can't grasp or get your arms around.

Psalms 144:4 Man is like a breath [hebel]; his days are like a passing shadow.

James 4:14 What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

But, and this is important, this is not to be taken in the sense that life is not worth living. This is not pessimism, this is not nihilism. This is not fatalism or cynicism.

This is reality. Solomon takes us by the head and forces us to look at reality. This life, life under the sun, is short, temporary, fleeting, a mist that is scattered by the wind.

The Preacher now brings us to consider what we should do in the light of this reality. He begins by showing us why we should take his word to heart.

Ecclesiastes 12:9, the proverbial preacher.

The author of this book was wise and what he has written is wisdom. This is not boastful, after all his wisdom was a special gift from God and he has employed it well, and for the sake of others.

His wisdom is also evident in that it is not just for himself. He is a teacher. He teaches people knowledge. And in order to do that well, he has painstakingly searched and researched, studied and weighed all things. Then he wrote and rewrote, edited and refined, honing the book to a fine point.

His wise words are not random, not just flung out there, he has set them in order and carefully and thoughtfully arranged them with knowledge in mind. As we said at the very beginning, this book is not fatalism, cynicism, nihilism or pessimism, these are not words of utter absurdity, these are the words of truth, they are from God, directed and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The preacher has done a good job. He has studied hard, he has wrestled with the subject, he has pulled together the important thoughts and arranged them well.

I have seen lately the work that editors do when they work with authors. I have seen how brutal they can be in editing, cutting, rearranging, refining. I have seen them cut out a full third of a first draft.

He has carefully sought to use just the right words most appropriate for the occasion. This is very carefully thought through.

Ecclesiastes 12:10, Pleasure.

He has done good work for us, we can trust it. And some three thousand years later, what he has written still stands the test of time as true and what is true is a delight to the soul. These are the two marks of wise words, they are a delight and they are true. Pleasing and true.

Proverbs 25:11 A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

He sought beauty and truth.

Ecclesiastes 12:11, Pain.

Notice the contrast, the Preacher's words are both delightful and painful. This is yet another mark of the Preacher's wisdom, he speaks all the truth. He doesn't just sugar coat his words.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend. As iron sharpens iron. Is not the Word of God a sharp double-edge sword. So here the Preachers wisdom is goads and nails.

Goads are prods, like a sharp stick used by shepherds to prod an animal back on to the right path. If the animal went too far to the left there was pain, if it went too far to the right there was pain.

Proverbs are goads, they are meant to prod our sluggish souls into action. Remember all the pithy proverbs in chapter 10. Were they not goads to keep us on the right path?

Who of us doesn't need goads to keep us on the right path? Who of us doesn't need warnings, instructions?

Read Psalm 119, in praise of God's Word.

Psalm 119:75 I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

Psalm 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.

All Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, for warning, instruction, awakening our sleeping conscience.

The *nails* have been set and firmly fixed by God. Like tent stakes that keep the tent fixed even in a storm. Who of us doesn't want to be fixed, secure, stable. How often do we experience things that break, come apart?

One Shepherd, God.

Notice the source of these words of wisdom. These are words breathed out by our Shepherd God who is as near to us as a shepherd is to his sheep. This shepherd God joins us in this life under the sun. He is no other than Jesus the good shepherd, the chief shepherd.

May you call the Scriptures your delight, for their eternal truth, their unwavering truth. May it satisfy your hunger and thirst for righteousness. May they be your delight and strong anchor.

Ecclesiastes 12:12.

Of the making of many books, many books, there is no end. I checked, it is well over a million a year. How many of those are good? And how many of those could one person read? What do we read? Is it chaff or wheat? Is it light or darkness, life or death.

It is staggering to consider, stunning really, that the Book of God, the Holy Scriptures is so accessible and portable, so compact as to be easily read every year. Yet it contains everything necessary to make us wise unto salvation. More desirable than much gold.

If we have not been instructed by this book, and mastered by it, then all the other books will not help us. They will just be weariness to us.

Knowledge in pursuit of the truth takes study, hard work, application, more than most people are willing to put in to truly understand what is important.

Read books in the pursuit of wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, perspective and preparation. The end of the matter.

Eccl. 12:13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Solomon brings all of this to a close. This is the end of the matter, the conclusion of all he has studied and learned and written down. The book of Ecclesiastes has been one long, prolonged argument, and this is the end of it.

Notice what it isn't. The summation of it all is not, all is vanity, all is fleeting. That's true, but that's not the point of it all.

Are you surprised by the point of it all? Are you surprised that it is fear God and obey God? Or are you annoyed by it? Does it bother you?

Do our modern ears make it hard to hear? It sounds so Old Testamentish. It doesn't sound very Christian, not like something Jesus would say.

Oh wait.

Luke 12:4-5 I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

Fear God.

Notice he applies it universally, it is the purpose of all mankind at all times in all places. This is the goal, this is what we were created for. We are restless until we rest in Him.

Remember God put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11).

There are two kinds of appropriate fear toward God. One is the terror of encountering the holy God who is a consuming fire, whose wrath against sin is pure, righteous, eternal. This is the fear associated with hell.

But that is not the fear of God Solomon is talking about. When he says fear God he means something else, something best explained by the NT.

This kind of fear of God can only be done by the forgiveness of all our sins by the blood of Jesus. It is done only by the redemption on the cross that satisfies the wrath of God and atones for all our sin. It is done only by justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We know we have rightly understood the fear of the Lord, if it is compatible with loving God.

Psalm 118:4 Let those who fear the Lord say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Psalm 34:8, 9 Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! ...

9 Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!

Psalm 130:4 With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

To fear God is to know God. The person who doesn't fear God doesn't know God.

To fear God is actually the only way to live life without fear. Fear God and nothing else. The best defense against all that produces fear, anxiety, stress, the best defense against all that we can't control or predict, is to fear and trust the God who controls everything.

Obey God.

What does God require of us?

Fear God and do what He says. This is our portion in this life, this is all there is for us to do, and when we do this we receive not despair but true joy, the fullness of joy.

This is what we are made for, made to do, and this is what completes us, fulfills us. The wise person realizes that this brief life under the sun goes best when it is lived according to the one who created life and gives life and numbers the days of our life.

We are not made to know the beginning from the end.

We are not made to know why things happen the way they do.

We are not made to know all the answers or to have all the answers.

We are not made to know why we hurt or have pain or heartache, or why we lose or fail.

Ecclesiastes 12:14, Another reason to fear God and obey His commands.

The book ends as human history ends, judgment, the eternal destiny of every man, woman and child. Every person on earth should expect to come face to face with their creator God.

This is the conclusion of the matter, of all matters. Everything secret will be brought into the light.

Some think that at this point Solomon is just throwing his hands up in the air, giving up in some sort of angst or despair and just taking a leap of faith into the unknown.

Not at all. God is God, God is the beginning and the end, the all in all. Everything is from God and to God. God is the end and in the end there is a great judgment before God, because everything is God's and accountable to God.

Consider what the judgment at the end of the world means. It means that in fact nothing is meaningless or ultimately vanity. It means it all matters before God, and God will take everything into account.

If God cares this much about everything, then nothing is pointless. No detail on earth is too small to escape His notice. No idle word, no secret thought, no sparrow, no hair from a head, no repentance from one sinner.

Conclusion and application.

Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.

Fleeting, fleeting, all is fleeting.

All is fleeting, except this, to fear God and obey His commandments.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

Such is life under the sun.

Jim Elliott: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

He is not fool who holds loosely what is temporary and fleeting, and holds tightly what is eternal and solid. The wise person receives all he has as put there by God for him to enjoy for now, today, and to use for others and for God.

The wise man receives all that he has as a gift from the hand of God to be enjoyed in this short, fleeting life. The wise man enjoys life but most of all fears God, looks to what is eternal, to what has ultimate permanence.

Fear God and obey God. Be wise, trust God and enjoy life.

Revelation 15:3-4 Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!

4 Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?

Prayer: Grant, O Lord, that we may live in thy fear,
die in thy favor, rest in thy peace,
rise in thy power, reign in thy glory;
for thine own beloved Son’s sake, Jesus Christ our Lord.
(William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1645d.)