

“LIFE UNDER THE SUN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Introduction.

We learned in seminary that in preaching pastors are allowed two finalisms and three in conclusions. Tonight is our third of three in conclusions to the book of Ecclesiastes. We started in February and have heard 26 sermons on this remarkable and unique book. I am very grateful to Pastor Mike and Elder David Watson for their excellent contributions along the way.

The two of them convinced me to do this series, I am not sure I would have done so otherwise. It is one of the harder books to understand. It reminds me of the late, great Winston Churchill's famous quote defining Russia as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” That's Ecclesiastes.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a profoundly unsettling book. It is devastating to our pride concerning the meaning of our lives and our work. It is a devastating blow to all that we hold near and dear as Americans, our strong sense of independence, our strong sense of self-achievement, self-advancement.

Our grand emphasis of success and accomplishment. Success in our world is defined with setting goals and then achieving them. This is how we measure worth, value, importance. Our self-worth depends on what you have to show for ourselves.

It challenges everything we use to measure our self-worth in what we have, what we have done. In our world the most important thing is to do something. We are bound up in finding efficiency, effectiveness, the right methods. We are on a hamster wheel of ceaselessly striving for relevance and importance.

When we introduce ourselves to others, the first thing is always what do you do? Our worth is in our utility, in our usefulness. We have lost an understanding of what is worthwhile and useful, what truly promotes joy and peace.

Ecclesiastes blows up our whole world, especially our western American mindset and mentality. If Ecclesiastes hasn't rattle you to the core of where you get your identity and self-worth, then you have missed it.

Reflections on Ecclesiastes 3:9-15.

Ecclesiastes 3 is just one of the seven carpe diem passages scattered through the book. It is an excellent summary of the challenges this book makes to our worldview. It sets up the contrast well between God and us in our life here under the sun.

In Ecclesiastes, God is God and man is man. One is infinite; one is finite. One is all-knowing and all-governing; one is ignorant of the millions and millions of things God is doing at any given moment.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 God has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

We are in the middle of what God is doing, but we cannot see or know the beginning, the plan, nor can we know the end, the glorious goal.

Ecc 3:14-15 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. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been.

God is God, He is eternal, what He does is eternal. God's will is His wisdom. God's work is complete, it cannot be improved or added to or taken away from. God does all He purposes to do and He cannot be thwarted. God does not allow us into the control room, into the decision room of the world. What He says and does cannot be altered or amended. It is perfect, without defect or deficiency. Since it is perfect it is utter presumption and folly to think otherwise.

After our journey through Ecclesiastes how can we not be left with a sobering, profound, humbling sense that our lives and work and all human action is vain.

What is the point of all our activity and endeavors when in the end God's will will be done with or without us? He is free to use us or not, to take our works or leave them.

Isn't God the supreme, sovereign Lord and Ruler over the entire universe. Hasn't God known and ordered all things from before the foundation of the earth?

Ecclesiastes is actually meant free us from trying to control our universe, free us from feeling the crushing burden of responsibility for everything, for outcomes, results; to free us from feeling guilty for something you can't control.

Ecclesiastes actually frees us to receive from God's hands all we have and enjoy it and God, to taste His love and goodness and return thanks, and make Him the center of it.

Reflections on the inutility of man.

For the time that remains I want to reflect with you on the uselessness of our lives, or in the words of one writer, the inutility of man (See Jacques Ellul, *Meditation on Inutility*).

This last August I was at the fair with my grandkids in the kiddie rides watching a couple of my grandkids going in circles in those little cars. They were driving their cars with all the fury of Jehu in his chariot, but they are not in control. Their actions don't make anything happen, they contributed nothing to the progress of the ride. And they were having the time of their lives, pure joy.

We cannot help God steer the course of human history, we cannot assist God in any truly decisive way. What we offer to God is like what our two-year-old offers to helping us set the table or sweep the floor or wash the car. It doesn't add anything quantitative to accomplishing the chore, but there is a joy and purity of freedom in it. It gives joy to us.

Let me explore a few areas of our inutility before God. Hang in there with me, we are going to go down before we can go up. This is going to be humbling, sobering, maybe downright depressing, before we get to the joy.

Consider the vanity and inutility of our toil and work.

Eccl. 2:11 I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ps. 127:2 It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.

Proverbs 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

Proverbs 20:24 A man's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way?

Proverbs 27:1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

The OT is full of laws and commands about what to do and not to do. The Hebrew people labored for 1500 years to work out their salvation, to be reconciled to their God? The blood of millions of animals, and to what end? Was it sufficient? Not at all.

In one great and glorious divine act God works out our salvation in Jesus Christ. Before we ever loved Him or did anything God loved us first and did everything. It is all grace, grace upon grace. Our birth is grace, our life is grace, our salvation is grace. Everything is given, everything is done already. Even our good works have been prepared for us by God beforehand (Ephesians 2:10).

There is no sense this is part God and part us. It is all God. We add or contribute nothing.

Faith without works is dead, but our faith and our works are all grace, given to us as gift. In the presence of an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God what is there for us to do? Our works are commanded from us at God's demand, and yet are they not seemingly and finally useless?

Consider the vanity and inutility of prayer.

Psalm 8:3-4 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

Psalm 139:1-4 O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ...
4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

The paradox of prayer, asking the God who already knows everything and does everything. If God is sovereign and His will always prevails, then how is prayer useful?

God knows our needs better than we do, God foresees and anticipates what we will ask. Jesus knew the thoughts of all those He encountered on earth, He could read every mind.

How can our fumbling, awkward, fleshly prayers move the Almighty holy God? Who has ever given God counsel? Our thoughts are not even close to His thoughts. Aren't our prayers just so many petty needs, wants and complaints? How do we who are evil know how to ask for good things? (Matt 7).

Even when we try to pray, Scripture tells us we don't know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26ff). The Spirit prays for us, Jesus intercedes on our behalf. Why pray to the one who is already praying for us? God commands it, yet it seems useless, unnecessary.

Consider the vanity and inutility of wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 2:12, 15-16 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. 15 Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance

What are we to make of wisdom, the serious attempt to use right reason so to intelligently order our lives. We try to exercise wisdom in politics, business, philosophy, education, social interaction, in justice, morality, technology.

Yet the wisdom of God called creation into existence and everything in it, the wisdom of God laid the very foundations of the earth and everything on it.

Aren't we told in Scripture the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man (I Cor. 1:18ff)? Aren't we told in that same Scripture to consider that not many of us were wise when we were called? Isn't the wisdom of the world folly with God (1 Corinthians 3:19).

Who can know the mind of God? Are not His thoughts and His ways as high above us as the heavens are above the earth? Wisdom; it is the command of God and yet a useless service.

Consider the vanity and inutility of sharing and preaching the Word of God.

What about preaching and sharing the Word of God? Isn't preaching called foolishness? What human words can compare to the majesty and glory and beauty of the Gospel? As Paul pleads, who is adequate for these things. Are we not all unschooled Galileans?

How can the unspiritual understand spiritual things? Isn't the only way spiritual things can be known and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit? Apart from the Holy Spirit nothing happens. What changed Paul's heart, except the direct intervention of Jesus from heaven?

What can we say if inward illumination is only from God? What good is witnessing and evangelizing if God is the one who opens blind eyes and deaf ears?

God commands us to preach and witness, yet is it seemingly useless service?

Implications, further reflection on Luke 17:9-10.

What are we to make of all this inutility. Consider:

Luke 17:9-10 Does [the master] thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

This is what Ecclesiastes is all about. Everything human, everything of the flesh, everything under the sun, is utter folly, but, and this is important, coming to that conclusion must never keep us from action, it must never become an excuse for doing nothing.

We cannot say what the Preacher says until after we have toiled with all our energy, until after we have prayed with great earnest, until after we have exercised wisdom with all our minds might, until after we have preached with passion calling for changed and transformation.

If we say it is all vain, all futile, all useless before we have acted, then we invite the judgment of God on our disobedience. We must first obey everything God has commanded.

We must obey, and after we have obeyed, only then may we say it is vane, futile, useless. And then we must surrender it all into the hands of God to do with whatever He will, whatever pleases Him.

We must be able to say we have been unworthy, unprofitable servants. We make this judgment upon ourselves. But notice, this is our judgment, not God's. We say it is folly, futile, useless, but not God.

When we are humble, then God exalts us, and says "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." But that is only God's judgment to make, never ours. Ours is to say, "I have been an unfaithful, unprofitable servant."

[I have given my adult life to being a pastor, to preaching and teaching and shepherding. And to what end? What difference has it made? Is the world really a better place for it? What have I done that God could not have done just as well, or frankly much better, without me?

How much do I want to boast in my accomplishments or achievements before God? It is more honest to confess my inability, my inadequacy. If there is any good that comes from any of my actions, all I can say is it was grace. It wasn't my doing, in fact He did it without me and even in spite of me. I have done nothing, He has done everything.

If we make much of what we have done, if we magnify our own works, if we are proud of our success and achievement, if we say, "Jesus, look what I have done for you, aren't you impressed?" Woe to you, for you shall be brought down.

So now we come to the even harder matter. We think what is not useful is not worthwhile. We only want to do what is good, productive, efficient, effective, profitable. We have visions of value, importance, greatness. We want visions, mission statements, audacious goals, benchmarks, pursuit of excellence. We want what the world wants and strives after.

This is bondage, this is subjection to the world. Freedom is found in judging ourselves to be unworthy, unprofitable, useless in the grand scheme of eternity, and free to give everything over to God, to His glory, accredited to His grace. Our works are not a grand pursuit, but a humble act of obedience, because He first enabled us, first loved us, first gave us what to do.

We don't do anything to make the world a better place, we do it because we are free to obey and free to let it be useless, unprofitable for the glory of God. We humbly acknowledge we are completely dispensable, completely unnecessary in God's grand plan. If I never existed absolutely nothing would change in God's eternal purposes. We are only here because of His love, His will, and at His disposal.

In Him we live and move and have our being. In Him we have freedom to obey and freedom for Him to decide what to do, what to use or not use. In Him we have freedom to toil, to pray, to think, to preach, and count it all nothing on our part, all grace on His part, all for His glory.

May He increase and we decrease.

Conclusion.

One might sum up the call and challenge of Ecclesiastes to be learning how to act faithfully in the face of the uselessness and fleetingness of life and our work without giving up hope.

Our world is wrong to think the only motive for action is in success, accomplishment, activity. Our world and we are wrong to be preoccupied with achievement, accomplishment, with getting things done. We must abandon human illusions of self-importance, put aside all pretense of pride.

Our most important human act is not the production of anything but is only extravagant faithfulness to God motivated by love for God. God loved us because He is love, not because of our results, and not in order to get results from us.

Jesus spent His whole life saying no to the idols of success and accomplishment. He is only concerned with one thing and one thing only, faithfulness to His Father. He for the joy set before Him obediently endured the cross.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

Rejoice, do good, work hard, eat your bread, drink your wine, love your wife.

Our higher motive is to act out of love for God and because He has commanded us to work, pray, seek wisdom, preach and witness. The response to inutility is faithfulness, joyful obedience. Joyfully fear God and obey His commands.

“O infinite God, you conceal within yourself the final explanation of life’s mysteries. For this I trust you. You execute your will in my life without my help. For this I rest in you. You sanctify all events with divine meaning and purpose, so that I am always safe, no matter what evil befalls me. For this I rejoice in you. With you there, O God, being who you are, everything ultimately will be all right, because all things are moving toward your glory. O God and Father, be glorified here on the platform of my little life, for your glory is my eternal security and everlasting joy. In the holy name of Christ. Amen.

April 23, 2005, prayer in Raymond Ortland, Jr., A Passion For God, p. 162.