



Ecclesiastes 12:9-14
Ecclesiastes: Wisdom for Today
The Final Conclusion

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This morning we wrap up the series we've been in the last several weeks looking at some of the key themes and big ideas of Ecclesiastes, and what those things all mean for us today. Next week we will start a new series for Advent and Christmas that will be based on the book of Job. Just kidding. Wanted to make sure you were paying attention! The series is titled, "A Very Different Christmas: What Are You Hoping For This Year?" The overall structure of the series will be guided by a book of the same title by a Christian evangelist and pastor named Rico Tice. I have copies of the book available for you in the lobby this morning. Rico was a keynote speaker at a conference I went to in Cleveland this last spring, and I came across this book of his while there. He's British, but don't let that scare you off from reading the book, because he does actually have a good sense of humor, and I *know* he loves Jesus a lot because he was willing to help pastors be better pastors at a conference in Cleveland. It's one thing to say "yes" to a conference in San Diego or Orlando...but it takes a real sacrifice to say "yes" to one in Cleveland. So based on that alone, you *know* he really loves Jesus and really wants to see the Kingdom of God grow.

There are 50 copies of the book available at the Info Center this morning. Pick one up for your household, and then there are two things you could do with it at that point. First, you could use it each week throughout Advent as a weekly devotional that will tie in with each Sunday's message. Each sermon will correlate to a chapter in the book. That would be a fine way to use it, though I will let you know that we will have here very shortly an actual Advent Devotional that you may use as well, though it won't tie in to the sermon series. The other thing you could do with this book is read it in a day or two, and then give it away. You could give it to someone who doesn't know much about Jesus or who maybe knows something but still wonders about who he is and why more than 2.3 billion people around the world would cling to His name and celebrate his birthday. And perhaps as you do that, God would give you an opportunity to invite them to know Jesus, or invite them to join you on a Sunday for a message that correlates to what they've read, or open up a door to a conversation about faith.

But today we wrap up Ecclesiastes, probably the most unusual book of the Bible, and yet perhaps also the most contemporary feeling book of the Bible as well. Other than some cultural references that are foreign to us today, it could have been written yesterday.

How many of you remember the movie, “The Princess Bride”? It flopped at the box office, but has become an absolute classic that no person should die without watching at least once. What you may recall about that movie is that while most of it is set in medieval time period, it opens and closes in the 1980’s with a grandfather reading a story to his grandson. The story he reads is the story of The Princess Bride which makes up the bulk of the movie. But by the time you get to the end of it, you almost forget the original context of grandfather and grandson, though a couple times in the middle of the story it briefly comes back to the grandfather and grandson. That’s a little bit like Ecclesiastes. Throughout most of Ecclesiastes we’ve been reading about observations on life that are told through the persona of “The Teacher” (Koheleth).

Someone after last Sunday’s services was talking with me about Ecclesiastes, and his comment was that it seems like Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of someone who *doesn’t* know God. It’s as if it’s reflecting a quest for the meaning of life *apart from God*. It’s not that the author doesn’t love God; it’s that he’s trying to look at life through the lens of someone who doesn’t love God. So he adopts this persona called Koheleth (The Teacher) and share his observations of what life is like trying to find meaning and purpose in it without God. Occasionally there are some reminders about God and his true self comes through; it’s like he breaks out of the character for a moment to remind us that this is in fact written by someone who believes in and trusts God, kind of like the occasional breaks in The Princess Bride that remind us it’s a story being read by a grandfather to a grandchild. But otherwise it’s a report through Koheleth on observations and attempts to find meaning and purpose in everything BUT God.

And then you come to the last few verses, where two things happen: First, Koheleth, the character throughout Ecclesiastes, is dropped and things are no

longer in the first person narrative of Koheleth. Instead, Koheleth is referred to in the 3rd person. It's like Princess Bride returning to the Grandfather and grandson. And then secondly, we get the final word on this quest for the meaning of life. What has he learned through all these trials and errors of his own, and learning from observing of others? Let's read Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 (saving verses 13-14 for later) to find out...**Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 here.**

So, that is almost the final word. We'll get to the last two verses in a moment. Before we do, there are a few things to learn here. **First, the Teacher was wise, but he didn't keep his wisdom to himself: He taught others.** This is kind of an interesting point to have made here: that the fact of his wisdom and the fact of his decision to share that with others – to teach others – are separated. It seems to me that part of being wise is recognizing the importance of sharing what you've learned with others – of passing along your wisdom so that others can learn from it as well. In other words, part of being wise is recognizing the opportunity and even the obligation, of sharing what you've learned with others. Maybe that's too idealistic, or perhaps some might disagree. But it seems to me that the wise person shares their wisdom with others, as Koheleth did.

Take, for instance, Tesla's **new truck** they unveiled this week. You'd think someone would have the wisdom to share with Elon Musk that trying to demonstrate the invincibility of the truck's glass by



throwing metal balls at it might not be a good idea. Certainly someone had that wisdom in them, right? But it didn't get taught.¹ Part of being wise is passing along your wisdom.

More practically: Let's look at parents and grandparents. Regardless of whether a parent or grandparent considers themselves to be wise, the fact is that compared to a child, there is a lot of life experience and knowledge that those older generations have that can be shared with the youngest. There is wisdom to pass on about how to handle money, relationships, God, and that if you love God you ski rather than snowboard ☺ (Kidding!)...so forth. And sharing that wisdom is a part of parenting and grand-parenting: **You pass**

along what you've learned about life to the younger generation. Whether the next generation listens to your wisdom is a whole other story, of course...but when we have opportunities to do so, we should pass along our wisdom. So let's be wise, and share our wisdom with others.

Second of all, we see that he chose his words carefully, and at the heart of what the Teacher taught were uprightness and truth. Jesus says that “the truth will set you free.” This doesn't mean the truth is always easy. Freedom brings responsibility with it. But if we compare truth to it's opposite, it helps to clarify. The opposite of truth is falsehood and lies. And you don't have to think about it very long to realize that even just a couple of those, let alone a whole life built on lies and untruths, will hem you in and hold you down. They are not freeing in the end, but just the opposite. And so: **Words of truth and uprightness are what set us free, and the wise person lives by them and shares them with others.** We've seen that throughout Ecclesiastes as he has shared his experiences and observations of life trying to find meaning in all of these different things.

Lastly: wise words, as verse 11 says, will goad us, or prod and push us, to keep us on the straight and narrow path. They sink into us like nails into wood, holding things together. In other words, words of wisdom are important and necessary, and we would do well let them lead us in living wisely.

Then we get to the final observation of life. After all of life has been experimented with (money, possessions, etc.) to see what the purpose and meaning of life is and what *really* matters...just when it seems that all has been exhausted and there is no hope at all for any sense of meaning, purpose, or value...we get one final observation. We might almost expect Ecclesiastes to close just before this. After the verse about so many books and how studying wearies the body, he could have ended it with “So take to heart what's been said here and good luck with life.” Or he could have just said that life is all about the hokey pokey, because “that's what it's all about.” Or that life is all about rowing your boat down a stream, because “life is but a dream.” Instead, we get one final observation that is the key to unlock the meaning and purpose of life. Here are the last two verses of our passage

today where we get this:

Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,

for this is the duty of all mankind.

For God will bring every deed into judgment,

including every hidden thing,

whether it is good or evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Fearing God and keeping His commandments is the duty – the responsibility, the calling – of each person on the face of the earth. ***This is the all-encompassing key to finding meaning and purpose in life that the teacher, in his wisdom, wants to teach us.*** And he comes to this conclusion after trying, and observing others who tried, to do just the opposite of this. He’s learned that anything under the sun from which we try to derive meaning and value in life apart from God, or in place of God, will fall flat. As we’ve seen the last several weeks, Ecclesiastes is filled with observations about trying to live life far from God and God’s commandments: building a foundation for life on money, lust, possessions or power; observing the oppression in the world and the cruel way people treat one another, and so forth. All of these things go against the Ten Commandments, which Jesus summed up as “love God and love your neighbor.” Ecclesiastes is a report on life apart from loving God and loving neighbor.

The conclusion is that none of that stuff works, none of it satisfies, it’s all pointless in the grand scheme of things; the only certain way to gain meaning and mission in life is to fear God and keep His Commandments.

And notice how brief and succinct he is with this. All his other observations he reflects on and comments on, covers multiple times in some instances, and so forth. Not here. It’s brief and to the point so we would remember it. It cuts through all the clutter of life that seeks to win us over and replace God. It’s like he’s saying to us: don’t assume that just because something is complex and intricate that it’s a suitable place from which to drive meaning in life. Rather, the place you find meaning and mission and value in life is actually quite simple: Fear God and keep His commandments.

This reminds me of the scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when Harrison Ford's character is looking for the Holy Grail – the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper – and he comes into a cave-like room (like he always seems to do in every Indy movie, and usually bad things happen in them) and this one is filled with all kinds of cups and chalices. All of them are fancy – gold, silver, decorated with jewels, intricate carvings and adornments, and so forth. One of the guys who is in competition against Indy picks the wrong cup – he picks the fanciest one there – and it cost him his life when he drank from it. The right cup is there in the midst of all of them and is easy to overlook because it is a simple clay cup. No adornments, no intricacies, nothing fancy or complex. When Indy sees it, he says, “That’s the cup of a carpenter.” He chooses wisely. He fills it from the same pool of water that’s there, takes a bold step of faith and drinks a generous amount...and it leads to healing life rather than killing it. The simple cup was the right cup.

Similarly, there’s a lot in life that is shiny and bright and really attractive; Koheleth tried them all and observed others who tried them as well. And the wisdom he’s passing along is that building our life on those things is meaningless and pointless and robs us of the real life that God promises. **The true wisdom he wants us to know is that the life of fearing God and obeying his commandments, although it is less flashy, is where the meaning of life is found.** It doesn’t come decorated in gold and jewels and all kinds of intricacies and complexities; it’s simple: Fear God and keep his commandments. Nothing more needs to be said about it, because *that* is where meaning and purpose in life are found.

As we begin Advent next week and move toward Christmas Eve (worship services) and Christmas Day, perhaps it’s good to remember that the birth of Jesus was really pretty simple. Yes, there were some angelic announcements. But no public Blue Angels Fly-over; no spotlights revolving and shining up into the night sky. God came to us in human form, as a baby. It’s simple, unadorned, not all that intricate.

Is there some facet of life where we have forgotten to fear God and obey His commandments? Have we been seeking to find meaning and purpose in life

through other means? There's so much that always is calling out to us, tempting us. Maybe something in your life has even replaced God. Ecclesiastes would tell us that while there are no temptations under the sun that are new, finding purpose in them is the same today as it was then: that those things are meaningless. Everything, apart from God, is meaningless. So whatever facets of life for you are far apart from God, confess that this morning. Come into God's arms who welcomes you back, and re-engage your life with the simple, unadorned final conclusion of the whole matter and meaning of life: Fear God and keep His commandments. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ The grown son of a church member used to work for Tesla, and apparently he called friends of his who still work there to ask what happened with this. Apparently Engineers encouraged the stunt not to be done, because they had tested the glass in that truck some 150 times or so, and were concerned it was stressed and wouldn't take another shot. Then, there is a lot of speculation about whether Elon Musk just didn't care, and figured there's no such thing as bad publicity.