

January 5, 2020
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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THE END OF THE MATTER Ecclesiastes 12

When we were young, it seemed like a day at the amusement park flew by so quickly that we said to our parents, “Oh, do we have to leave already?” On the other hand, fifty minutes in algebra class seemed to drag on forever as we kept looking at the clock on the wall wondering if it was broken.

So has been the story of Ecclesiastes. Solomon, the Preacher, encouraged us to be wise and, at the same time, to enjoy the few pleasures of life because there is plenty of non-pleasure as we fly toward the inevitable end. And we fly so quickly. Fifty-five percent of our people in Community Baptist Church are over forty years old. That means over half of us have already lived about half of our expected lifetime. More frightening is that one-third of us have less than fifteen years left in the average United States life expectancy of seventy-nine years. For a lot of us, it looks like the park is about to close.

The theme in chapter eleven is “exercise wisdom to take care of the important matters of this passing life.” We learned the importance of investing wisely, making wise commitments, working diligently even when we don’t feel like it and, in general, the importance of preparing for the future. Flowing out of that important challenge, we come to the most important and serious matter of life—eternity. In the end, all the stuff about this vain life passes away, including our bodies. What we have left when it is all over is our eternal spirit that will give an answer to our eternal Creator.

Therefore, while you are busy in passing life, looking to your and your family’s well being, don’t forget to look to your Creator. Everything points to that moment when we will stand before Him and

give an answer. The good news is that we are not left to wonder what our Creator will say, how He will assess us, or what He expected of us in life. He has given us all the information we need, to know how to fear Him and how to obey Him. The only real question is, “Do we?” In all our busyness about passing life, we must never lose sight of the reality that when it is over, we will answer to our Creator. What do you plan to say?

Remember Your Creator. (vv.1-7)

Verses one through seven comprise a long sentence that draws to a close many of Solomon’s conclusions in his investigation of this vain life. In light of all that the Preacher concluded, it is fitting for him to challenge his reader to remember our Creator while we are young, or *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth (v.1a)*.

In our youth refers to the days while you are establishing your pathway in life. In the days of our youth, we are making decisions that will determine much about our philosophy, vocation, and pattern of life. During those days (which is behind most of us), be very careful in youthfulness to keep God and His Word as central focus. We need to reiterate that truth time and again to our young people. It would be difficult for parents to be too aware of the need for their children and teens to focus on God. How many do? Many are the tragedies of life as we view the carnage of bad choices early in life that result in spiritual disaster along life’s road. Some sociologists have taught that a child’s personality and character are pretty well developed by the time he is six; and by the time we are twelve, we are pretty much the person we will be for the rest of our lives.

In the days of our youth, our conscience is still impressionable. In fact, it is difficult while we are in our youth to realize how impressionable we are. Though the youth know more about modern gadgetry than their elders do, their elders know more about where the paths of life lead. Listen to the old people, ask for their advice, and they should teach you how to remember your Creator.

Furthermore, in these opening verses the Preacher challenged us to remember our Creator while we can (vv.1b-7). The day is coming too quickly when it is difficult for us to remember anything.

The last part of verse one through verse five draw a sad picture of a dying life (vv.1b-5a). It is a sad but honest picture of the man who approaches the end.

As we grow old, we often lose a zest for living. Remember your Creator *before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" (v.1b)*. The evil day is not a day when we become characterized by wickedness, but speaks of a stressful and unsavory kind of time. The waning days are not pleasant days for those who have lost the vigor of youth. Why not?

Part of the reason older folks complain is because we can't see well. Think about God *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain (v.2)*. This does not refer to a day when the light of the sun, moon, and stars is actually diminished. Rather, the problem is that we can't see the light as well as we once did. And the clouds make the day dreary and depressing. This might be similar to the reason the commentator at the football game in Pasadena the other day said that people who live in the cold, dark, winter of the northern and midwestern states love to go south to a bowl game in the sunshine. Many of us just plain decided to live here.

We need to think about our Creator before we get to the point that we can't see well, or worse, we begin to fear what we can't see. That happens *in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed (v.3)*. The *keepers of the house* might refer to the aging head of the household, the one responsible for safety. One day we realize that we are not so strong anymore. In that point in life, not a lot of us will go to work every day.

And in those waning days of life, we get to where we can't hear well. It is the day when *the doors on the street are shut – when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low – (v.4)*. On one hand, we don't hear the hustle and bustle of industry and commerce. So we shut the door, go to bed early – but are up at the crack of dawn which is signaled by the birds. And we quit going to concerts because we don't hear the music so well anymore.

In that day, we need to admit that we are winding down. *They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails (v.5)*. It is when our hair is white like almond tree blossoms. In that day, we are afraid of heights (or should be) so that we stop climbing ladders. We worry about taking trips along the way. We shuffle along like grasshoppers trying to carry a burden.

This is such a sad picture because I see it in my mother every day. It seems like only a short time ago, she and Dad were tubing down the Clarion River like a couple of kids. Now it takes about all the energy Mom can muster to get from her sitting room to the dinner table. The other day we saw some ice skaters on the news and Mom said, "I used to skate a lot. I'm not sure I could do that anymore." We call that an understatement. Pat and I have watched Mom decline a great deal since she came to live with us three years ago, and especially in the past couple of months. Her decline is sad but inevitable. But maybe the saddest part of observing this decline is the certain knowledge that I am only 25 years behind her.

The inevitable end comes into view too quickly (vv.5b-7). The inevitable end is that everyone steps into eternity. We are winding down *because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets – (5b)*. Everyone goes to an eternal home or, stated more bluntly, everyone will live somewhere forever. That is a sobering thought when we acknowledge that there are only two possibilities of where we can live forever: heaven with Christ or hell separated from every vestige of God.

And when we go, there will be mourners at the burial of our body, if there is anyone still alive who knew us. Here is an interesting trend I have witnessed by participating in many funeral services. When a person dies under the age of forty, there is usually a very large crowd of mourners. That is due to the fact that early death is unexpected and because all of the person's family and friends are still alive. When a person dies over the age of 85, typically the crowd of mourners is quite small because the family and friends have all predeceased the person.

The Preacher gave us four pictures of death. We need to remember our Creator *before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden*

bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern (v.6).

Picture one: The silver cord will snap. A cord made of silver is valuable. But when it breaks, it is rendered useless. So, too, we are valuable in passing life until we die.

Picture two: The golden bowl will be broken. Obviously, a bowl of solid gold would be of great value. But if it falls and breaks, it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was made. It will fall and break when the silver cord that holds it breaks. Maybe there is a connection in that the silver cord held up the golden bowl. When the cord broke, so did the bowl.

Picture three: The fountain pitcher will be shattered. This was the pottery pitcher at a natural spring or artesian well. It was useful for collecting water to drink or to put in your own vessel. But what good was the pitcher when it broke?

Picture four: The cistern wheel will be broken. The wheel at the cistern was probably the pulley that guided the rope that let the pottery pitcher descend into the well. A broken pulley, a broken vessel at the well is like a dead lion (9:4), it has no value. Such is death.

The silver cord will break, the golden bowl will break, the pitcher will break, and the pulley at the well will break. And so will come to pass the great and certain reality, the body turns to dust. *And the dust returns to the earth as it was (v.7a)*. This is a reference to the beginning of the human race. God described it like this: *Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (Genesis 2:7)*. That we all return to the original state of dust is a grim reminder of God's curse because of sin. After Adam sinned, God promised, *"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" (Genesis 3:19)*. That's it! After all our efforts and stress and tears in life, our bodies in which we invested so much time and money return to dust.

But the soul lives forever. The body returns to dust, *and the spirit returns to God who gave it (v.7b)*. Especially in spirit we reflect the image of God. God is a spirit and He lives forever. So do we.

Therefore, according to Solomon's conclusion, every single person will return to God who made us. That is the part about the end that should really arrest our attention. Humanity is focused almost completely on the body that is passing away with the rest of what goes on under the sun. All that seems to matter to people is what happens to this body which will cease to live, be put in the ground, and will cease to exist in this form forever. But our spirit, the real us, will be consigned to deal with God. No one escapes!

Remember the Preacher. (vv.8-12)

Here at the end, the Preacher reiterated his conclusion. *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity (v.8)*. We must give him credit, conclude that the Preacher knew. He had searched and investigated. He was painfully honest in his conclusions. He concluded that all is futile. The word "all" refers to the totality of passing life. "All" is life considered apart from our relationship with our Creator. It is indeed a journey destined for empty futility.

But along the way, the Preacher left his contributions in life. He was a wise teacher. *Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care (v.9)*. This list offers good incentive to conclude that the Preacher was Solomon. He understood the secrets and details of life far better than his peers. And yet with all his understanding, he had difficulty applying the lessons he learned to his own life.

The very good news is that Solomon was also a teacher of joy and truth. He searched for delight and told the truth. *The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth (v.10)*. Here the important truth about Scripture given by inspiration comes to bear. It was not just that Solomon learned important lessons from life. Rather, God the Holy Spirit spoke through him to offer words of delight, that is, words that encourage joy in right relationship with God. God gave those words in uprightness and in truth. So we have words that rightly, accurately reveal the truth about God and us.

In uprightness, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Preacher shared the Shepherd's truth. *The words of the wise are like goads, and like*

nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd (v.11). Scripture truth is like a goad that keeps sticking us with Holy Spirit conviction to **do** the truth we say we believe. Scripture truth is like a peg firmly fixed on which we can hang our lives. Real faith hangs on, relies on the pegs. False faith acknowledges the pegs of Scripture, claims to believe the truth pegs, but rests, hangs, builds on those pegs only in times of stress and difficulty.

Scripture truth is the word of the one Shepherd. The world is overrun by advice, recommendations, teachings that all claim to be good and useful. Only the Shepherd knows what is good for His sheep. His sheep hear His voice and follow Him.

The Preacher rightly warned of the danger of going beyond the Shepherd's words. *My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh (v.12).* The warning is to beware of those who are always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of truth (2 Timothy 3:7). The majority of people are able to read, hear, and to some extent understand Scripture. That is the conclusion of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. But that same majority is unable to receive the truth of Scripture to any spiritual change in life. God warned that *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1Corinthians 2:14).*

Remember the End of the Matter. (vv.13-14)

Looking toward the end, knowing that the inevitable is coming, it is only right for us to fear and obey God. In light of the Preacher's conclusions, thinking about *the end of the matter; all has been heard (v.13a)*, we need to think right. By the time we come to the end of the matter, we realize that Solomon has laid down many lessons from life's experience. On one hand, all the lessons in this book are the inspired truths from God. On the other hand, the end of the matter is that, "Life lived with a focus on passing things instead of the eternal God is vain, futile."

In light of that reality, do this . . . *Fear God and keep his commandments (v.13b).* Some people really recoil at that command

to fear God. It is a very important concept that most people do not grasp. I have friends who have decided they will just not accept this requirement that is repeated multiple times throughout Scripture because it does not fit well in their will to live a positive life. The irony is that to fear God is a most positive thing in life and eternity.

Maybe we need to stop and learn what it means to fear God. It means just what it sounds like it means – that we should be terribly afraid of God's power. To fear God is to truly acknowledge that God created all things with a word. It is to truly acknowledge that God controls all matters of life and the universe whether known or unknown. To fear is to truly acknowledge that God can, and does, demonstrate His awesome power through natural elements (hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, drought, etc.) And with that knowledge, we truly acknowledge that God is angry at sin which offends Him more than we can imagine.

Those are frightening thoughts, but the fear of the Lord is more personal than that. To fear God is to truly acknowledge that God can in a moment pour out His wrath against sinners in general, or one sinner in particular, through natural elements or circumstances. It means that we truly acknowledge that God will ultimately punish all unforgiven sinners by casting them into the lake of fire where they will be tormented with Satan forever. Most directly, you fear the Lord when you truly acknowledge that our majestic and almighty Creator who is offended by sin is staring at you, specifically, individually, right now.

If that thought does not cause fear in your soul, you have not truly acknowledged all of the above. That is the fear of the Lord. But that is not the whole explanation of the fear of the Lord.

To fear God is to have the previous frightening response to God's power, but it also requires us to embrace God's love. To fear God is to truly acknowledge that despite your sin and rebellion against your almighty Creator, He still loves you. It is to truly acknowledge that your Creator loves you so much that He came in the person of the One and Only Eternal God the Son and paid the price for the penalty for your individual sin. To fear God is to truly acknowledge that your Creator offers you forgiveness of all your offenses and rebellion against Him if you will but accept the payment that you could not make, but which He already made for your sins.

To fear God is to embrace your Creator's love for you that draws you to Himself and makes you His child and Him your loving Father. That relationship will be manifested in a display of reverence and respect to God. Because God is so frighteningly powerful and yet because He is so incomprehensibly loving, we show Him the deepest respect. Remember that He is able to destroy you with a word, but He won't because you are His child. So, we will respond to our Creator the way we respond to our earthly fathers, only on the divine level.

What does that look like (for those of you who have not had a good relationship with your earthly father)? When we really fear God, we desire to keep His commands. In that command-keeping though, there is no need to keep the aspects of God's commands that applied to national Israel because we ain't them. Nor is there any need to try to keep the aspects of God's commands that pictured the final sacrifice for sin, because Jesus already completed that. But at the same time, there is every need to keep the moral law of God because that is the expression of his character. No one can keep all the commands all the time, and, therefore, no one can be saved by keeping rules. However, every child of God the Father who respects Him like a father will desire to do what pleases the Father.

Why? Why should we fear God and desire to please Him by striving to keep His commands? This is the purpose for which God creates us. *For this is the whole duty of man (v.13c)*. To show love, obedience, and faithfulness to the Creator because we trust Him was the Creator's original intent for humans. Conduct flows out of worship. A true knowledge of God will result in obedience, not that obedience will lead to a true knowledge of God. Right respect for the Creator, and desire to obey Him, is the "whole of man," the sum total reason for why we exist.

And, it is very good idea to be motivated to keep God's law because this will be the standard of eternal judgment. *For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (v.14)*. God will assess every deed. Christ the eternal judge will judge every sinner according to what he or she has done because it is all written in books. John saw that the end of time will look like this: *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the*

book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done (Revelation 20:12).

Does that mean that once we are born again, we can forget about respecting our Heavenly Father enough to obey Him? Not at all. The principle that God will bring every deed into judgment applies to Christians as well. Christ the eternal judge will also judge every Christian. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Corinthians 5:10)*.

Even for Christians there will be reward for good and loss for evil. *For each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:13-15)*.

God and only God will determine good versus evil. God alone sets the standard for what qualifies as good and what qualifies as evil. Notice that there doesn't seem to be an "in between" category.

This book has quite fairly, accurately described real life. Some of us know from experience how accurate Solomon's description is, and how right are his conclusions that chasing after passing life is quite empty. We also must learn that his conclusions about God's complete control of all the events and circumstances of life are spot on.

Finally, we are wise to always bear in mind that our Creator is majestic in every way, perfectly just in judgment, and is watching us. Living life in light of God's love and justice causes the competing option of living life for passing fancies to pale in comparison.