

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **Fear God and Keep His Commandments**

*Ecclesiastes 12:9-14*

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# Fear God and Keep His Commandments

## Scripture

Today we come to our last lesson in the book of Ecclesiastes. In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes urges his readers to demonstrate their fear of God by keeping his commandments.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14:

**<sup>9</sup> Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. <sup>10</sup> The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.**

**<sup>11</sup> The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup> My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.**

**<sup>13</sup> The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.**

**<sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:9–14)**

## Introduction

Bob Morey has an apologetics ministry in southern California. He was asked by an atheist to prove the Bible's truthfulness.

Bob responded, "You prove the Bible's truthfulness to me every time you speak."

Shocked, she asked how this could be true.

He asked her, "Do you fear God?"

"No," she said.

"Well," he said, "you just proved that Romans 3:18 is true: 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'"

Then he asked, “Is the gospel foolishness to you?”

“Yes!”

He explained, “Well, you just proved 1 Corinthians 1:18: ‘The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.’”

He continued, “Do you want to live your own way instead of living according to God’s way?”

She snapped, “I don’t want God’s way—I’ll do as I please!”

He responded, “Well, you just proved Isaiah 53:6: ‘Each of us has turned to his own way.’ Every time you speak you confirm the Bible by saying what it said you would say.”<sup>1</sup>

Atheists do not want to obey the teaching of the Bible, although even their unbelief confirms the truth of the Bible!

However, sometimes believers do not obey God’s commandments. They call themselves “believers” and “followers of God,” but they do not obey his commandments.

The Old Testament people of God certainly failed in that respect. For example, at Mount Sinai they heard God’s law, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image. . . . You shall not bow down to them” (Exodus 20:4-5). A few weeks later, while still at Mount Sinai, the people of God made a golden calf and worshipped it (Exodus 32:8). And throughout its history Israel continually disobeyed God and turned to worship other gods.

Ecclesiastes was written at a pivotal time in Israel’s history. Israel was at the crossroads of a booming international trade. Fortunes could be made—and lost—overnight. People focused on making money and storing up wealth. The temptation to forget the God who had saved them from misery in Egypt and who had preserved them through the ages was great. They continually forgot God and his commandments.

Before we get into our final lesson in the book of Ecclesiastes, let us briefly review the message of Ecclesiastes.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill White, Paramount, CA, from a personal conversation with Bob Morey in September 2001.

## Review

The Preacher opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11).

His theme is simple: *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”<sup>2</sup> It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher’s theme is that everything in life is meaningless. However, the Preacher does give a corrective. He says that everything in life is meaningless *apart from God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don’t live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

After an opening statement of his theme (1:3-11), the Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity (1:12-6:12). Then, to help us know how to live for God in this world, the Preacher showed the difference between wisdom and folly (7:1-11:10). He ended, appropriately enough, by talking about death and dying (12:1-7), before restating his overall theme again that *all is vanity* (12:8).

In the final section in Ecclesiastes (12:9-14), the writer of Ecclesiastes, known as Qoheleth or the Preacher, now states emphatically how we are to live our lives. He urges his readers to demonstrate their fear of God by keeping his commandments.

## Lesson

Similarly, in today’s lesson, we are urged to demonstrate our fear of God by keeping his commandments.

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<sup>2</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

## I. The Preacher's Discipline (12:9-11)

First, observe the Preacher's discipline in Ecclesiastes 12:9-11.

Some scholars believe that an editor added these words in the final section. However, I am not convinced; I believe that the Preacher wrote these words.

In verses 9-11 the Preacher tells us the reason for writing Ecclesiastes, the method employed in writing Ecclesiastes, and the value of Ecclesiastes. Let's note the Preacher's discipline in writing Ecclesiastes.

### A. *The Reason for Writing Ecclesiastes (12:9a)*

First, note the reason for writing Ecclesiastes. The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 12:9a, "**Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge . . . .**"

The Preacher seems to promote himself and his own wisdom when he says, "**Besides being wise, the Preacher . . . .**" Perhaps that is the reason that some people believe that an editor wrote the conclusion. They don't think that the Preacher could be so self-promoting.

However, I suggest to you that the Preacher is not promoting himself. Instead, he was saying in a rather humble way that he had discovered the source of true wisdom. He had discovered what the Psalmist said about wisdom in Psalm 111:10, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This is also what Solomon said about wisdom in Proverbs 9:10, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." You see, the Preacher had discovered that all true wisdom is found in reverent awe of God.

So, because he had discovered that all true wisdom has its source in God, he **also taught the people knowledge**. That is, he taught the people how to live a meaningful life.

If you have discovered true wisdom, if you have discovered

the fear of the Lord, then you will also want to share that knowledge with people. Do you? Do you feel compelled to tell others about how they too can live a meaningful life?

*B. The Method Employed in Writing Ecclesiastes (12:9b-10)*

Second, note the method employed in writing Ecclesiastes.

How did the Preacher teach the people? In two ways.

First, by **“weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care”** (12:9b). **“Proverbs”** is a broad term. It included not only what we think of as proverbs but also parables, riddles, and sayings. When the Preacher wrote his book, there was a lot of wisdom literature that existed in Israel. So, as he came across **proverbs** he first *weighed* them. That is, he put them in the balance scales, as it were, to see whether or not they reflected true wisdom. Next, he *studied* them, examining them carefully. And finally, he *arranged* them by setting them in a certain order. And all of this the Preacher did **with great care**.

Verse 10 tells us the second way the Preacher taught the people knowledge: **“The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”**

The **“words of delight”** refers to words that were aesthetically pleasing. Think of some of the lines that are still **words of delight** for us:

- 1:2 – “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”
- 1:5 – “The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.”
- 3:1 – “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”
- 11:1 – “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.”

But the Preacher was after more than **words of delight**. He was after more than entertainment. He had a serious message to de-

liver. So, his words were **“words of truth.”**

This is understandable because the Preacher wants us to know how to live a meaningful life. Only **words of truth** can point us to the One who is Truth, and who gives us not only eternal life but also an abundant life now (cf. John 10:10).

*C. The Value of Ecclesiastes (12:11)*

And third, note the value of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 12:11: **“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.”**

The first thing the Preacher tells us is that **the words of the wise are like goads**. A goad was an ancient cattle prod. It was a long stick that had a sharp point. It was used to prod cattle to walk where they were supposed to walk. You may recall what the Lord said to the apostle Paul when he confronted him prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the *goads*” (Acts 26:14). So, the Preacher’s words are designed to prod us to walk on the right path and do the right thing.

Further, the Preacher tells us that **like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings**. The **nails** that the preacher has in mind here are tent pegs. Tent pegs are hammered into the ground to keep the tent stable, to keep it from blowing away in a storm. So, **the collected sayings**, if followed, will give stability and security to a person’s life.

The Preacher’s words and collected sayings **are given by one Shepherd**. This most likely refers to Jesus. The phrase **“one shepherd”** is used only twice in the Old Testament, both times in the book of Ezekiel (34:23; 37:24). There it refers to the promised son of King David, the shepherd king. In the New Testament, the phrase **“one shepherd”** is used only once, and Jesus uses it to refer to himself (in John 10:16).

The Preacher is claiming divine inspiration by saying that his

words **are given by one Shepherd**. They are not merely his words; they are the very words of God. Therefore, we must pay careful attention to what the Preacher is saying to us.

## II. The Student's Duty (12:12-14)

Now we come, in the second place, to observe the student's duty in Ecclesiastes 12:12-14.

First we shall note the Preacher's commands to his students. And then we shall note the motivation to obey the commands.

### A. *The Commands to the Students (12:12-13b)*

So, first, note the Preacher's commands to the students. There are three commands to the students.

#### 1. The First Command is to Beware of Wisdom That Is Not from God (12:12)

The first command is to beware of wisdom that is not from God. The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 12:12a, **"My son, beware of anything beyond these. . . ."**

The phrase **"beyond these"** refers to the words and collected sayings that do not come from the one Shepherd. In other words, the Preacher is saying that only teaching that comes from the one Shepherd teaches us how to live a meaningful life.

The Preacher says, **"Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh"** (12:12b). People write books and people study books; there is almost no end to the production of books. In fact, I read that about 2 million new book titles are produced each year. The vast majority of books are merely entertaining. Some, however, do try to teach people how to live meaningful lives. However, even those books that are written by wonderful Christian authors are not inspired and inerrant. There is only one book that is inspired and inerrant: the Bible.



So, beware of wisdom that is not from God.

2. The Second Command is to Fear God (12:13a)

The second command is to fear God. The Preacher says in verse 13a, **“The end of the matter; all has been heard.”** In other words, he is saying that his conclusion is that we are to **“Fear God.”**

Now, what does the word **“fear”** mean in this context? The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* states that “the biblical conception of fear embraces a much wider dimension than our common English word, which simply denotes some sort of dread or terror. While this meaning forms an essential part of the scriptural picture, it is by no means the primary significance, especially when the fear of God—an awe-inspiring reverence—is referred to.”<sup>3</sup>

*Easton’s Bible Dictionary* elaborates on the fear of the Lord by saying that it “is in the Old Testament used as a designation of true piety (Proverbs 1:7; Job 28:28; Psalm 19:9). It is a fear conjoined with love and hope, and is therefore not a slavish dread, but rather filial reverence.”<sup>4</sup>

The Preacher has already urged us to **fear God** in the earlier parts of his book. For example, we are urged to **fear God** in:

- 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.*”
- 5:7 – “For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but *God is the one you must fear.*”
- 7:18 – “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, *for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.*”

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<sup>3</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 781-82.

<sup>4</sup> M.G. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

- 8:12 – “Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that *it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.*”

God is the almighty Creator; we are mere creatures. God is eternal; we are here today and gone tomorrow. God is holy; we are sinners. It is only fitting that we should stand in reverential awe of the eternal, almighty, creator God.

So, as one commentator rightly said, “To fear God is to take God seriously, to acknowledge him in our lives as the highest good, to revere him, to honor and worship him, to center our lives on him. As Paul said to the philosophers in Athens, ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).”<sup>5</sup>

But *how* do we keep this command to **fear God**? We **fear God** by putting into practice the next command.

### 3. The Third Command is to Keep His Commandments (12:13b)

The third command is to keep his commandments. The Preacher says in verse 13b, “. . . **and keep his commandments.**”

We demonstrate our commitment to God by keeping his commandments. If we really take God seriously, if we really acknowledge him in our lives as the highest good, if we really revere him, if we really honor him, if we really worship him, if we really center our lives on him, we will **keep his commandments.**

Jesus put it this way in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

#### *B. The Motivations to the Students (12:13c-14)*

Finally, the Preacher gives two motivations to his students to obey the commands that he has given us.

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<sup>5</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 309.

1. The First Motivation is to Remember that Obedience is God's Design for Us (12:13c)

The first motivation is to remember that obedience is God's design for us. The Preacher says at the end of verse 13, **“. . . for this is the whole duty of man.”**

Interestingly, in the original Hebrew text the word **“duty”** is not there. So, the passage literally reads that fearing God and keeping his commandments **“is the whole of man.”** In other words, it is not just our duty to obey; it is our *essence* to fear God and keep his commandments. God created us to stand in awe of him and to keep his commandments. That is God's design for us.

2. The Second Motivation is to Remember that Judgment Awaits Us (12:14)

And the second motivation is to remember that judgment awaits us. The Preacher says in verse 14, **“For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”**

Nothing will be excluded from God's judgment. **Every deed, including every secret thing, whether good or evil,** will be brought to God for judgment.

Of course, if you are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation, then Jesus has already paid the penalty for every sinful deed of yours. But, if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation, then you will have to pay for every sinful deed of yours.

## Conclusion

God's judgment is no longer a threat to Christians. So we do not seek to keep God's commandments because we dread the coming judgment. Rather, we fear God and keep his commandments because we are grateful for his grace that saves us from that judgment. May that be true for everyone here today. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher, which we have been studying for the past half year or so.

Everything that the Preacher wrote was divinely inspired to show us how to live a meaningful life.

We have learned that we can live a meaningful life only when we live it in a right relationship to you. So, help us to beware of wisdom that is not from you. And then enable us to fear you and keep your commandments out of gratitude to you for your grace to us.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, fear God and keep his commandments!