

June 16, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## WHERE IS THE PROFIT? Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

We are born into a culture that prizes wisdom and hard work that leads to financial gain, which affords multiple experiences, possessions, and positions, which offers pleasure, which brings satisfaction, which we eventually find is not actually true.

My highschool history teacher often said, “The future belongs to those who prepare for it.” I believed him. My highschool guidance counselor said, “Get a good education so you can get a good job.” I tried to buy into that idea but flunked out of college. Early in life a friend who sold mutual funds told me I needed to prepare for retirement. That made sense so I have tried to be diligent in that area. My father-in-law said, “Buy land because they aren’t making any more of it.” Okay, that made sense, so I followed his advice.

Now I’m sixty-five and in many ways I have done all the things that supposedly wise people recommended I should do in order to prepare for the future. After all the future belongs to those who prepare for it. Only, there is something none of the wise people emphasized very much. Once you have made all the preparations necessary to own the future, you suddenly discover that the ultimate future is death. We work, we try to be wise, we invest, we prepare for what? All our efforts lead to a goal that is actually very short-lived.

In his introduction to this passage, Douglas Sean O’Donnell quoted a poem by Mary Oliver titled *The Orchard*.

“I have dreamed of accomplishment,  
I have fed ambition.  
I have traded night of sleep for length of work.  
Lo, and I have discovered how soft bloom  
turns to green fruit.

Lo, and I have discovered all winds  
blow cold at last.

And the leaves so pretty, so many,  
vanish in the great, black packet of time.  
in the great, black packet of ambition,  
And the ripeness of the apple is its downfall.”

(Mary Oliver, *Red Bird*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2008, 20-21; Quoted by Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Phillipsburg, N.J.: Puritan and Reformed Publishers, 2016, 16.)

Solomon’s musings at the end of life describe that “great, black packet of time and ambition.” Everything we do in life contributes to the ripening of the apple. But the apple is ripe for only a short time before it falls to the ground and rots.

That is a fair description of life. The root problem with life is sin. Everything about life is infected by sin and, therefore, is winding down, rotting away, breaking, and deteriorating. So why bother to prepare for the future? Why bother to make some profit of it all when we know it is destined to end futility?

Solomon’s conclusion at the end of his assessment of the futile life reminds us that superceding the vanity of life is the Creator who made all things perfect, pronounced it good, and determined that it would bring Him glory. Sin changed all that. But sin cannot thwart our Creator’s goal to gain glory through what and who He makes. The wonderful news is that Solomon was well aware of His Creator and His plan for us to live righteously. That is only possible when we are in right relationship with God the Son, which is only possible through faith in His finished work of providing atonement for our sins through His blood.

There is hope in this vain life. That hope is in Christ alone.

## What is Gained Through Vain Toil (vv.2-3)?

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity (v.2).* That is not a very positive opening to our text. Yes, that is true. And the statement is true. All is vanity in a sinful world. This is the overall theme of the entire book. Therefore, our text begins with the harsh reality of *hebel* (vanity) (v.2) and ends with the same harsh *hebel*. “*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity*”

(12:8). The Hebrew word speaks of that which is meaningless, empty, passing, frustrating or even absurd. At various points in the book all of those definitions will fit the word use.

Sadly there is no way out, no escape from between these two bookends. This is the right and fair assessment of the impact sin has had on God's perfect creation. To ignore the reality or deny that it is true by painting the rotting fences with the whitewash of noise, lights, and entertainment does not change the fact that the fence is rotting.

However, standing in stark contrast with the inescapable emptiness of the sin-infected life is Christ. All is not vain with Christ. Jesus announced the good news, *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10). That news came in the context of the Good Shepherd discourse. It is the great promise from the Shepherd to the Sheep. This is not a promise for wolves or thieves or those who are outside the Shepherd's fold. The promise of life abundant does not apply to sinners who are unaware of their sins or who refuse to acknowledge their sins. This is not a promise for people who zealously try to escape the reality of life's vanity by being consumed by pleasures and entertainment—the lies Satan offers to distract from reality. Abundant life is found in a right relationship with the Shepherd.

Solomon was aware of this kind of fulfilling righteous life. He taught that the Lord blesses the dwelling of the righteous (Proverbs 3:33). He learned that the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day (Proverbs 4:18). He knew that blessings are on the head of the righteous (Proverbs 10:6) and that the hope of the righteous brings joy (Proverbs 10:28). He taught us that the righteousness of the upright delivers them (Proverbs 11:6); and when it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices (Proverbs 11:10). That sounds like a pretty positive, productive kind of life.

That righteousness is found only in a relationship with Christ by grace through faith. Paul, the theologian taught us, *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction* (Romans 3:21-22). That is the

good news everyone who lives in a life of empty futility needs to hear.

Without the hope of righteousness in Christ, we are left to wonder along with Solomon's conclusion, "What is the net profit in life?" (v.3). We too will wonder, *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun (v.3)?* By now most of us have learned all too well that the essence of life is that we toil under the sun. Toil is a good word to describe the daily reality of life. The word speaks of work or labor. But more than that, it often carries with it ideas like (AV translations) mischief 9, misery 3, travail 3, trouble 3, sorrow 2, grievance 1, grievousness 1, iniquity 1, miserable 1, pain 1, painful 1. And so Moses used the word to describe life: *The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away* (Psalm 90:10).

Toil is what we try to escape. We apply wisdom and technology to make life easier, to ease the toil. We look forward to days off, vacations, and finally retirement when we will escape much of the toil. We buy lottery tickets hoping to escape the demands of toiling. We vote for politicians who promise us pay without toil (which is a pie in the sky impossible promise).

None of these things really relieve us of the work, misery, pain, sorrow, and such of life because toil is inescapable. God defined this toil as the consequence of sin. When Adam brought sin crashing into God's perfect creation, God pronounced the enduring consequences of sin. *And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 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 3:17-19). And that is the way it is.

Living in that kind of world caused Solomon to wonder what we actually gain in the long run from all that sweat, agony, misery, and work. Indeed, what do we gain? There is a very basic formula that we expect to work out in life: Effort expended wisely = profit. A man will not stay in business very long if he does not aim to make a profit. Almost every goal, every intent, every purpose in human living

anticipates profit. That means that we expect to be more knowledgeable, more skillful, wealthier, healthier, and generally just better off in our latter years because of diligent labor.

But sadly we discover that most of the time it ain't so. Eventually, we come to the conclusions Solomon stated later in this second chapter. *"I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me"* (Ecclesiastes 2:18). *"Because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil"* (Ecclesiastes 2:21). Solomon's conclusion was that the man who works diligently and wisely gains reward only to see his reward go to someone who did not share his labor is the victim of *hebel* (**vanity** which in this case means absurdity). And don't expect things to change any time soon.

#### **Around and Around We Go (vv.4-8).**

Nature itself adds to the feeling of emptiness because it is so monotonous (vv.4-7). Consider for example, the generational cycle. *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever* (v.4). We tend to remember the "good ol' days" apart from an honest recollection of all the trouble that came with them. We look forward with hope in the future generation to continue what we started to create some more "good ol' days." But the reality is that generations keep passing by one after another.

I vividly remember being a child and wondering when I was ever going to grow up. How I longed to be 16 so I could buy a car and gain a little independence. At 16 I longed to be 21 so I could be considered a bonafide adult. At 21 I wanted to be 30 so that someone would listen to what I said. At 30 I wanted to be 40 so that people would believe what I said. At 50 I wanted to be 21 again.

A young father watches his first child being born. In a very short time, he watches the child graduate and then marry. Soon he rejoices at the birth of his grandchildren, and at about the same time buries his grandfather. As he approaches retirement, his grandchildren begin to graduate and he lays his parents to rest. Suddenly it dawns

on him that he is at the end of the generational progression. Before long his children will lay him to rest. All is vanity!

Then there is the cosmic cycle. *The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises* (v.5). If we would take the time, we could take great pleasure watching a beautiful sunrise or marveling at the artistic colors of a sunset. But if we do that every day, even that will become monotonous 365 days every year. It is all so predictable – which is good. If the sun does not appear over the eastern horizon as we anticipate, we are going to have a bad day (precluding clouds of course).

There is also the atmospheric cycle that reminds us of the monotony of life. *The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns* (v.6). We generally know from which way the winds will blow. And when the wind changes, we often can tell that it is going to bring a change in weather. No one can stop the wind, no one can see the wind, it just keeps blowing.

Finally, Solomon mentioned the hydrological cycle. *All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again* (v.7). We never stop to wonder why the sea does not overflow, unless of course we are concerned about global warming which will cause the polar icecaps to melt and overflow the sea. Generally we are content to understand the process of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and back to evaporation. It just keeps happening continually until we die. And we can be pretty sure it will continue to happen after we die. Our passing won't have that big of an impact on global monotony.

As a result, the vain life offers no satisfaction. In fact, everything causes weariness. *All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it* (v.8a). Even the best experiences of life become monotonous. Even the best games, most exciting rides, great shopping, and vacations become boring. Now we are hearing that the Millennials have grown weary of Facebook and are turning to other venues in social media. A decade ago we wondered what could ever replace multi-billion dollar Facebook.

We are never satisfied. *The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing* (v.8b). Age reveals that nothing on earth is fully satisfying. How sad that when people who have experienced

all that life has to offer become so disenchanting that they end their lives. They need to hear that there is hope outside of this vain life.

### **Nothing New; Nothing Remembered (vv.9-11).**

In his view of vain life, Solomon concluded that there is nothing new under the sun (vv.9-10). He learned, *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us (vv.9-10).*

Oh, but he was so wrong! Technology is always giving us something new. It is true that brilliant minds are continually learning more about the universe and even our bodies. It is true that inventors are constantly creating new ways to accomplish work, even employing AI to replace undependable humans in the work place.

Buckminster Fuller created the "Knowledge Doubling Curve"; he noticed that until 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every century. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today things are not as simple as different types of knowledge have different rates of growth. For example, nanotechnology knowledge is doubling every two years and clinical knowledge every 18 months. But on average human knowledge is doubling every 13 months. According to IBM, the build out of the "internet of things" will lead to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours. (<http://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>).

That sounds like a lot of "new." So how can Solomon be accurate with this conclusion? Technology is new every day, but responses to technology are not new. How we use all the new technology is just the same old same old.

First, we need to remember that this book is wisdom literature which establishes general principles of wisdom, the way things are in a broad and general sense. In general, the wicked are punished while the righteous are rewarded, the diligent prospers while the lazy man suffers, the wise stay out of trouble and the fools don't. Therefore, also, in that general sense, regardless of the technological, educational, internet kind of environment, human nature and responses remain the same. Ditch diggers still dig ditches even

though they might use an excavator instead of a pick and shovel. Farmers still harvest grain even though they now use a \$500,000 GPS-guided combine and not a simple scythe.

"As for those who do not work with their hands, even if they are part of the new division of a new company selling a new product that was newly invented, what they actually do isn't so new: an owner is still an owner, a manufacturer is still a manufacturer, and a salesman is still a salesman. The computer salesman who sells the latest gadget follows in the same line of work as the Spanish merchant 550 years ago who sold the newest silk from the Far East." (Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Phillipsburg, N.J.: Puritan and Reformed Publishers, 2016, 16.)

There is nothing really new and, worse, there is no remembrance. *There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after (v.11).* Again, we want to cry out, "Now hold on there Solomon! What about all the stuff remembered in history books?"

How can Solomon conclude that there is no remembrance of things past when the world is full of historical accounts? The Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum, is made up of 19 different zoos, museums and galleries containing 155 million different objects, specimens, and works of art. The Library of Congress is the world's largest library with nearly 110 million items in almost every language and format stored on 532 miles of bookshelves. Only a fool would conclude that there is no remembrance.

Maybe not. Solomon was a pretty wise guy. It really is true that most of the lessons of history are forgotten. In spite of the incredible amount of history recorded, it is comparatively a very small amount of all that has happened. Even you and I are able to remember a relatively small percentage of all that has happened in our lives. Sit down and try to write an autobiography of your life and realize that you can only recall a few pages of the thousands of pages that have made up your life. We all soon discover that the only thing we seem to learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

But in contrast, here is the good news. God remembers everything. Or maybe you don't think that is such good news. It is true that our Creator in heaven keeps a perfect record of every detail

of every person's life. One day He will open the books and every person will be judged according to his or her works – all of them – none forgotten, none lost. John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote, *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).*

Even the detailed deeds of believers will be brought to light. Remember that *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).* Solomon's conclusion was dead-on when he learned from God, *For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:14)*

Life lived for the rewards that can be enjoyed in life is futile. It is difficult to fully enjoy the fruits of our labors in a life plagued by the sin principle, in a body subject to the effects of sin. Life lived in light of a perfect eternity is the wise choice. Rather than experiencing the frustrations and disappointments that come from thwarted expectations in life, keep your focus on eternity in which God's people will be richly rewarded and never frustrated. Eternal profit is the only guaranteed profit. My history teacher was right: The future really does belong to those who prepare for it.