

Chasing after the Wind

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Ecclesiastes 4.1-12 | March 26, 2017

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I. Introduction to this Study

We continue our Lenten series in the book of Ecclesiastes, Chasing After the Wind, a common refrain throughout the book describing the futility of running after worldly things.

This week, we're chasing after the wind of achievement.

II. Connecting with One Another

In Greek mythology, the gods punished Sisyphus for his craftiness and deceitfulness, condemning him for eternity to roll a massive boulder to the top of a hill – only to have it roll back down to the bottom.

Have you ever felt like Sisyphus? Why?

III. Study the Text

- a. Before engaging this week's text, spend some time reflecting on the three previous weeks, where we addressed the futility of wisdom, pleasure, and wealth. What struck you in those studies and/or sermons? (To recap, turn to Ecclesiastes 1.12-18, 2.1-11, and 2.12-26)

How has recognizing the futility of wisdom, pleasure, and wealth prompted you to chase instead after the disciplines of solitude, fasting, and simplicity?

- b. Read Ecclesiastes 4.1-3.

These verses are perhaps the most difficult to engage in all of Ecclesiastes.

Solomon writes that it would be better to have never been born than to experience the horror of oppression.

Have you ever had the same thought? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment? Why?

- c. Commentator William Brown writes of these verses, "What defines this polarity is the possession of power. The inequity of power is the root of all oppression, the sage observes. Hence, it is incumbent upon society to protect the weak from the strong, otherwise the polarizing power of power reigns, leaving no mediating ground within the human community."

What do you think he means? Is it "incumbent upon society to protect the weak from the strong"? Where does the church fit into this need?

- d. Philip Ryken writes, "Depending on our place in society – our position of privilege, our place of influence, and our God-given authority – it is our duty to fight against oppression in the church and in the wider world."

What forms of oppression do you see in our world? What privilege, influence, and/or God-given authority do you have to fight oppression?

- e. Time permitting, read these passages that communicate how Jesus will one day judge the righteous and the wicked: Genesis 18.25, Matthew 25.41-46, Acts 17.30-31, and Revelation 21.4.
- f. Read Ecclesiastes 4.4-6.

Try rewriting these verses in your own words:

verse 4:

verse 5:

verse 6:

- g. Verse 4 states, "all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another."

As we've seen in previous weeks, Solomon's judgment is uncompromising. Here he is convinced there is no room for healthy competition.

Do you agree? Why or why not?

- h. In his book *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*, Timothy Keller writes, "One of the reasons work is both fruitless and pointless is the powerful inclination of the human heart to make work, and its attendant benefits, the main basis of one's meaning and identity. When this happens, work is no longer a way to create and bring out the wonders of the created order, as Calvin would say, or to be an instrument of God's providence, serving the basic needs of our neighbor, as Luther would say. Instead it becomes a way to distinguish myself from my neighbor, to show the world and prove to myself that I'm special. It is a way to accumulate power and security, and to exercise control over my destiny."

How does your work "brought out the wonders of the created order" or "serve the basic needs of your neighbor"?

Conversely, how can your work "show the world and prove to yourself" that you're special?

- i. Reread Ecclesiastes 4.5-6 (time permitting, turn to some similar passages from Proverbs: 6.6-11, 10.4-5, 12.24, 19.15, 20.13, and 24.30-34).

As we've seen already in Ecclesiastes, seemingly contradictory ideas are often engaged openly. Does verse 5 contradict verse 4? Why or why not?

- j. Read Ecclesiastes 4.7-8.

It's been written, "Singularly driven, the loner in Solomon's eyes has willfully sacrificed all forms of relationship upon the altar of the ego. Yet this individual is dominated by a taskmaster, albeit of his or her own making."

Are there any biblical or fictional characters (from music, movies, plays, or literature) that this describes? How do those stories turn out?

Has this phrase ever been true of your work life?

- k. Read Ecclesiastes 7.9-12.

Solomon concludes in these verses that the challenges of work are resolved not in solidarity, but rather in community. "The sage finds relationless work, like all-consuming, Sabbath-less work, to be futile and dehumanizing. It is vanity. Only in community do work and reward find their integral connection. Community, thus, is the 'reward' for toil. And in community, one finds true rest and support."

When have you see this to be true in your own life?

- l. Similarly, in Matthew 18.20, Jesus declares, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Echoing Solomon's conclusion, Jesus points to the importance of Christian worship as a communal event (the word *liturgy* means a "work of the people"). "Community is critical: an individual can no more worship alone than he or she can meaningfully work alone. Worship is by nature collaborative."

How does that reframe our Sunday morning rhythms? How about our Bible studies, small groups, etc.?

IV. Pray

- a. Lift up yourself and others you know who are driven by achievement, that their work would instead be driven by bringing out the wonders of the created order or serving the basic needs of our neighbor,
- b. Ask God to open your eyes to the oppression of others around our world, and equip you to use your privilege, influence, and authority to bring it to an end,
- c. Pray for the ministry and mission of Good Shepherd, that we would be driven not by mere achievement, but instead by faithfulness to Jesus.