

Worthless Wisdom
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 1, Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

What is the meaning of life? Why are you here? Why do you have life? What does it matter? Why does anything matter? Here's some human wisdom for you to answer that question:

- What is the meaning of life? To be happy and useful. - *Dalai Lama*
- There is not one big cosmic meaning for all; there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person. - *Anais Nin*
- Each man must look to himself to teach him the meaning of life. It is not something discovered: it is something molded. - *Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve*
- Whatever we are, whatever we make of ourselves, is all we will ever have - and that, in its profound simplicity, is the meaning of life. - *Philip Appleman*
- The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity. - *Leo Tolstoy*
- What is the essence of life? To serve others and to do good. - *Aristotle*
- There is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself. - *Erich Fromm*
- Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone-we find it with another. - *Thomas Merton*
- Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal. - *Jean-Paul Sartre*
- The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away. - *William Shakespeare*
- The fact that life has no meaning is a reason to live - moreover, the only one. - *E. M. Cioran*

Would any of those answers satisfy your desire to know the meaning of life? I'm not even sure what some of them mean – and others of them are just answers of surrender. The philosopher realizes that he cannot find an ultimate meaning for life which makes sense of it all, and so he just says – well – life is about serving others and doing good. That's like a fish in a fish bowl that keeps swimming to the top looking for an escape – and then one day just gives up any hope of escape and settles in to live his best life now inside the fish bowl. We have to do better than that! That is what Ecclesiastes is all about. It is God's inspired Word to help unsettle you with the harsh realities of life – so that you are finally ready to hear what the point of all life really is. This makes the book a difficult one to read, but a necessary one to study. It is essentially a sermon by a preacher we should listen to because he has a message we need to hear and he is

asking the question we are all asking – what is the gain for mankind in this life? Or to state it more succinctly – what is the point and the meaning of life?

Our text this morning describes the search of the preacher to answer that very question. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says this . . .

So, here we have it – the most intensive search for the meaning of life by the wisest of men and it all comes down to this one epic conclusion – it is all vanity – a striving after the wind! There is no better man to do this search. If you want to know the meaning of life, then this is the man you put on the case, and this is the sermon you want to hear. Wisdom was a hot commodity in Solomon’s day. There are still records of other wise men who lived around Solomon’s time who philosophically mused about life and spoke all kinds of proverbial statements of wisdom. But, here is the wisest of them all. Many had flocked to hear Solomon in the past, and so now, at the end of his life, he calls for one last meeting. He has one last message. One last wise communication from the wisest of all men. And do you know what his message is? Wisdom is worthless! That would be kind of like your grandfather calling the whole family together in his final days to pass on to you his life lessons – and once you are all gathered he looks you all in the eyes and says to you – life is worthless and pointless. You can imagine the shock which settled in the hearts of the first hearers of this sermon. But remember – mankind doesn’t do well with very much reality. And this is reality without any clothes on – as bare as can be! To understand why Solomon would say that everything is vanity, and in particular, that wisdom is worthless, let’s investigate these verses. We’ll start by looking at the search and then we will look at the result of the search.

I. The Search

a. Diligent

- i. Solomon describes his search for meaning as being a diligent – all-in kind of search. In verse 13 he says that he applied his heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. Then in verse 17 he rehearses again that he applied his heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. In other words – he has fully devoted himself to this process. He gives his heart to the task. This does not simply point to an emotional or passionate search, but to a whole-life type of search. There is no word in Biblical Hebrew for the mind or the brain – so the word heart is used to talk about understanding and thinking and deciding. So, with his mental and emotional and volitional faculties, Solomon devotes himself to diligently seek an answer to the meaning of life.

b. Comprehensive

- i. This diligent search is also comprehensive. He uses two very similar verbs in verse 13 to describe what he did. He applied his heart to seek and to search this thing out. It was deep and it was wide. The diligence of heart is coupled with a comprehensive search. He left no stone unturned, no question unasked, no possibility unexplored, no occupation untried, no experience unexperienced. As he says in verse 13 he set out to explore all that is done under heaven. It was a comprehensive search. In verse 17 he

says that his search was so comprehensive that he looked at both wisdom and madness and folly. He looked at both sides of every part of life – the wise way and the foolish way - he wanted to know them all to see if any of them gave any hint at the meaning of life. It was a comprehensive search.

c. *Competent*

- i. It was also a very competent search. In fact, it was so competently done, that we cannot argue with the findings. If anyone had the wisdom and knowledge necessary to bring happiness and meaning and satisfaction to his life – it was Solomon. There was no one wiser or more knowledgeable about life under the sun. In verse 14 he says that he has seen everything that is done under the sun. His search was competent and complete. Nothing was missed. Then in verse 16 he says to his heart – “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” This seems like an incredibly arrogant statement, but it is a statement of fact. Turn back with me to 1 Kings 3 – 1 Kings chapter 3.
- ii. We find Solomon in the early part of his reign in 1 Kings 3. The kingdom has just been established in his hand and he is just getting his feet wet in the river of ruling over God’s people. Verse 3 tells us that he loved the Lord and he was walking in the ways of David, but he was sacrificing at the high places, which was clearly against the will of God. It was while he was at one of these high places – at Gibeon – that God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said – “ask what I shall give you.” You know the story – instead of asking for great wealth or the defeat of Israel’s enemies, Solomon responds in verse 6. *Read vs 6-12.*
- iii. God is pleased with the request and he gives Solomon a wise and discerning mind, so great that none before or after him would have the wisdom and discernment that he had. So, when he says in Ecclesiastes 1 that he surpasses all who have come before him in the area of wisdom – he is exactly right. In other words – there is no one that mankind would rather have on the case of trying to figure out the meaning of life than Solomon. He is the perfect scientist to put in the laboratory as we wait for him to emerge with his results.

d. *Wise*

- i. And the guide on his journey is wisdom. So, stay in 1 Kings 3, but back in Ecclesiastes 1, Solomon says that he set to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. So, wisdom was the guide to the journey as he sought after the meaning of life. But what kind of wisdom was this? Well, in 1 Kings 3 we see that this was a God-given wisdom, but it was exercised in a man-centered and man-dependent way. So, look at verse 14. Solomon has been given the greatest wisdom and discernment by God that any man would ever receive. It was a wisdom which would help him discern what was right, especially in his ruling of the people. But in

verse 14, we learn that this wisdom by itself was not a guarantee to Solomon living a life which was pleasing to the Lord. In other words, God gave this great gift to Solomon, but then he called Solomon to live his days in fear of the Lord by walking in God's ways, not in his own.

- ii. So, what happens? How does Solomon use this great gift of unsurpassed wisdom? Well, right away in chapter 3 we read the story of the two women who claim the same baby and we see in his handling of this perplexing situation a glimpse of his great wisdom. Indeed – he shows that he is wiser than any before or after him. News of Solomon's great wisdom spreads throughout the world, and so in chapter 10 we read of many leaders in the world seeking for Solomon. The Queen of Sheba comes and admires his great wisdom as she has all of her tough questions answered by his great wisdom. And then in 1 Kings 10:23 we read this summary statement – *read 10:23-24*.
- iii. So, obviously, the gift given by God was legit. He was indeed the wisest man and wisest King to ever rule. But this wisdom was not a guarantee of faithfulness to the Lord. And so in chapter 11, verse 1 we read of his rebellion against the Lord. His foreign wives and many concubines led him into the worship of idols. Verse 6 says – “So Solomon did was was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done.” So, what kind of wisdom is Solomon talking about in Ecclesiastes? Well, it is a God-given wisdom that is exercised in a man-centered and man-dependent way. He had turned from fearing God and walking in His ways. He had turned from applying the wisdom of God in accord with the Law of God. He became a law unto himself and he took the great gift of God and he used it with an absence of fervent commitment to the One who gave it to him. So, the wisdom in Ecclesiastes 1:14 is the great wisdom God gave, but it is used by Solomon in a man-centered way rather than a God-centered way. And what this relegates Solomon to is the greatest thoughts man can think without a right view of God. So, it is the greatest wisdom man has ever known, but it is absent of a right view of and fear of God. And it is with this wisdom that he sets himself to the diligent and comprehensive search for the meaning of life. Being the wisest and wealthiest man on the planet he figures he can figure this all out.

II. The Result

- a. But what does he find? Vanity of vanities – all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. In verse 13 he describes life as an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to busy with. That word for busy in verse 13 has more the idea of oppression or heavy weight than it does of busyness. So, it is not just that we are busy with a meaningless task, but we are weighed down by it and oppressed by it – and this is something God has given to us, Solomon says. So, his wisdom is not absent of God completely – he still knows that we are put here by God, but he is looking at it all with a man-centered wisdom. What do we as

mankind actually gain out of the whole deal? What is the point? Well – it is all vanity and a striving after the wind. The point of life is as good as taking a lasso and trying to loop it around the wind and wrestle it to the ground! That’s about as pointless as you can get. I mowed my lawn yesterday and I was thinking as I was mowing about this text. There are few things in life that seem quite as pointless to me as mowing the lawn. But, trying to lasso the wind – now that is pointless!

- b. Solomon summarizes the results of his search in verses 15 and 18 with two proverbial statements. In these two statements he makes known to us the absolute worthlessness of wisdom to help us figure out the why’s of life.
- c. *Wisdom is Powerless – 15*
 - i. In verse 15 he says – What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. In other words – there is no hope of fixing life. Life is full of crooked things and of things that are lacking. The lacking things are so great and vast that we can’t even count them. The things which are crooked are so far bent that we cannot hope to begin to straighten them. In other words, when Solomon took the great wisdom given to him by God and he operated in life with it in a man-centered and self-dependent way – what he found is that he was powerless to do anything which actually really brought any true solution. So, just think back to the first test case in 1 Kings 3. These two women who are both claiming the same baby. What did Solomon’s wise handling of that situation actually accomplish? Basically it exposed who was right and who was wrong and it sent them on their way to live with the results. But this wisdom offered no solution – no true fix to their crooked and empty lives. His wisdom helped them settle their dispute, but that was just the tip of the iceberg of their problems. They needed much more than that to actually have lives which meant something. Solomon is expressing what so many have down through the ages. Leonard Woolf was a British publisher and political theorist and he said this about his life:
 1. “I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played Ping-Pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.”¹
 - ii. Or, the infamous atheist, Richard Dawkins “has concluded that human existence is ‘neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous: indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.’”² Wisdom – even the greatest wisdom ever known to the human existence – must agree

¹ As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 39.

² *Ibid*, pg. 40.

with those sentiments. This is especially true when you consider the end of it all. That is what will bring Solomon to hatred of life in chapter 2. In verses 12-17 he will make the point that it doesn't matter if you live wisely or foolishly in this life because the same event happens to us all – we all die and are forgotten. At that point it doesn't matter if you knew the best way to do life or not, you were still going to end up in the grave. And if your worldview is limited to the here and now stuff of life, then it is worthless. As Walter Kaiser says – “The problem calls for a solution greater than the sum of all its parts.”³ It is all vanity – an attempt to lasso the wind! Wisdom is worthless in that it is powerless.

d. *Wisdom is Vexing – 18*

- i. Wisdom is also worthless in that it is vexing. So, the second proverb given in verse 18 says – For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. This is true because wisdom is powerless. This self-centered and self-dependent use of the good gift of God with which Solomon has set out on this quest for the meaning of life only yields mankind helpless and hopeless. This kind of wisdom is powerless to change anything, and yet it continues to give you a better understanding of the problem. The more you know about life and how it works, the more you know about the depth and complexity of the problems which face mankind. This is partly why the election cycle bothers us so much. We have to spend 6-8 months listening to empty platitudes and simple solutions to really big problems. We inherently know that all of their nice and easy fixes will not be nice, easy, or truly fixes! That is vexing!
- ii. It is similar to the experience of a child. They want so badly to grow up and have independence and the responsibility of adulthood. They want to know what their parents know. They want to be privy to the private conversations dad and mom are having. But when they get old enough to know those things they find out that it simply brings more sorrow and more trouble into their lives. Increased knowledge brings increased sorrow. It's also similar to the experience of ministry in the local church. Looking at leadership from the outside in it looks like the problems are easily identifiable and the solutions are pretty simple. But when you actually get into leadership and become aware of things, you realize that you didn't understand before the depth of the problems and therefore the needed depth of the solutions. Apart from God it can all seem very hopeless, vexing, and deeply troubling.
- iii. It is no wonder that Solomon says in verse 13 – It is an unhappy (or literally, evil or bad) business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. Solomon has explored it all with the greatest wisdom ever known to man and he has only found it all to be more troubling and more

³ Walter Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 54.

problematic! The New Testament actually agrees with Solomon's assessment here. Mankind has been put under the curse of God which does make things futile. So, Romans 8:20-21 says this:

1. For the creation was subjected *to futility*, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, *in hope* that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20-21 ESV)
- iv. This futility of life has indeed been given to us by the will of God. Not to make us hate God or hate life, but to show us the ridiculousness of going our own way and making "meaning" with a life that is absent of the fear of the Lord. The curse which was placed upon mankind in Genesis 3, and under which all life is futile and meaningless is exactly what was needed to awaken us to a greater reality – a greater hope that someday we can be set free from this bondage to corruption.

Conclusion: Just think for a minute about the Fall in the Garden. It was a competition of worldviews. Adam and Eve had been given so many good gifts, and the Serpent came along and tempted them to take those gifts and seek their own gain by using those gifts apart from the will of God. So, the piece of fruit which became the center of temptation was placed in the Garden with clear instruction by God. Don't eat of the fruit because if you do you will surely die. But then the serpent came along and tempted Adam and Eve to disbelieve the Word of God about the fruit, and the battle of worldviews commenced. Would they operate under the view that God was right and His Word was to be trusted, or were they going to take the more immediately appealing path of eating the fruit right now? They had to interpret their reality – what they were seeing and experiencing - through some kind of lens. Would they interpret this reality based on faith in the Word of God which pointed to then and there type of truths or would they operate based on sight and the lure of the immediate based on here and now realities. Well, you know the rest of the story – they made decisions absent of a fear of the Lord and fixated upon here and now things, instead of being guided by the eternal truth of God.

This is exactly where Solomon was in 1 Kings 10. He had been given the great gift of unsurpassable wisdom, and now he has to choose how he is going to interpret life and therefore act in life. He decides to take the gift of God and use it in a self-centered and self-dependent way, absent of the fear of the Lord. And we have just explored in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 where this ends up – it ends in complete vanity. The message of Ecclesiastes is rooted in the Garden of Eden. It is the extrapolation of that worldview which forgets God and chooses to take the fruit of here and now things regardless of the Word of God. This kind of wisdom offers great gain to mankind right now, but as Solomon found out – in the end, it is absolutely worthless. And this is true because the way of man which forgets God is bound by the curse of God. And this is an act of God's mercy. The vanity and futility of life under the curse is there to show you that your way is not good. It is empty and hopeless and in the end completely useless! Even if you have the greatest wisdom ever known to mankind – it is still all hopeless and useless.

But thankfully, there is a wisdom that is greater than Solomon's wisdom. It is not a wisdom that you or I possess, but it is a wisdom which comes down from above. It is a wisdom which is able

to bring ultimate answer to ultimate questions. A wisdom which provides a powerful way of escape from the futility of life. A wisdom which gives meaning to all things. A wisdom which takes us from self-condemnation to justification before a righteous and holy God. A wisdom which interprets reality with such clarity and truth that mankind is able to be restored to meaningful living. Wisdom which looks foolish to the wisest of men in this world, but the truest of wisdom nonetheless. And this wisdom has a name – His name is Jesus!

Speaking of himself in Matthew 12 Jesus said – something greater than Solomon is here! He is greater than Solomon because he never once walked according to his flesh. He never interpreted his reality with a wisdom absent of a fervent commitment to God. And because of this he who knew no sin could become sin for us. The way out of the curse is not through human wisdom applied to this world – that is nothing but futility and vexation of spirit. The way out of the curse is through Jesus Christ becoming a curse in our place on the Cross. In the folly of the Cross, the wisdom of God is made gloriously known. And if you are in Christ by faith in his finished work on the Cross, then your life can have ultimate meaning in Him. In Christ you can now walk in the wisdom which is from above and your life can be worth living because true meaning has returned in and through Christ Jesus our Lord. The message of Ecclesiastes is that human wisdom is worthless because it is powerless and vexing. But divine wisdom in Jesus Christ has the power to radically change everything about you. Do you know this kind of wisdom? Do you know this depth of purpose for all things in your life? Do you know Jesus? Let's pray.