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Alone at the Top
Ecclesiastes 4
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 4, Ecclesiastes chapter 4. We'll start reading in verse 1 – Ecclesiastes 4:1 says this.

We enter in this morning to the section of the book of Ecclesiastes which begins to represent the book of Proverbs. There will be a lot of short sections of wise sayings which don't always have obvious connections. But the general structure is still in place for the sake of asking – what good is this life under the sun. Remember that this book is delivered by the wisest man to ever live and this is his parting message to the congregation of God's people. And in this final sermon, he doesn't pull any punches. He confronts us with the bare-naked reality of life – that indeed it is worthless and hopeless, if – and that is an incredibly important if – if you remove God and His truth from your worldview. Solomon takes us to the depths of human despair in this sermon, by exposing the real truth about the meaning and purpose of life in a humanistic and secular worldview. Just a word about a worldview here. A worldview is a filter and interpreter for reality. Everyone has a worldview, and this worldview is shaped and formed in a life. A worldview tells you what is important and what is meaningful as it interprets facts and experiences. A humanistic and secular worldview may give lip-service to a creator God, but it does not actually place this Creator God as the centerpiece of this worldview. A secular humanistic worldview looks to find meaning and purpose from the stuff of life and it puts mankind as the centerpiece. It is the under the sun perspective – and Solomon looks at that perspective from every angle to make the point as obvious as he can – vanity of vanities, all is vanity. If you are going to live with the secular humanistic worldview giving you meaning and purpose and informing your decisions in life, then you will live a vain and worthless life. That is the message of this book.

In chapter 4, the preacher explains to us how this worldview affects our relationships. And if a worldview is worth living with, then you would think that it would positively affect our relationships with others. So, what does the secular humanistic worldview do to relationships? Well, according to Ecclesiastes 4 it destroys relationships and brings us to despair. But we also find in this chapter a hint of redemption.

In September of 2016 a 70-year old Kansas City man entered a bank and gave the teller a note demanding cash and warning that he had a gun. After receiving the cash the robber went and sat in the lobby and waited for his imminent arrest. When the police arrived he was arrested without incident. As they investigated the crime the man told them that he would rather be in prison than living at home with his wife. As more of the story came out, they learned that he had

a fight that morning with his spouse and he wrote the note in front of her and told her that he was going to go rob a bank because he preferred prison over her! Now that is a pretty desperate move! And I guarantee you that this man was functioning in life with a secular and humanistic worldview! Let me show you the destruction of relationships in this chapter.

I. Destruction

a. Oppression – vs. 1

- i. So, in verse 1 the preacher rehearses the oppression which he had described at the end of chapter 3. The preacher looks around in the world and he sees constant and unremitting oppressions. The breakdown of relationships looks like horrific oppression. People living with an under the sun perspective are distorted in their view of others and therefore their treatment of others. People become things to use as we look to ourselves and our stuff to interpret life and make meaning. And this leads to all kinds of oppression. This oppression is the most obvious when one person has power over another and they use that power to hurt and belittle someone else because they have to make much of themselves. So they are corrupt in their words about others and in their actions toward others because they are distorted in their view of all things. So, instead of loving and helpful and encouraging relationships, we see corrupting oppression.

b. Envious Toil – vs. 4

- i. This destruction of relationships also shows up in people's work. So in verse 4 the preacher tells us that he saw all the toil and skill in work come from envy. People are spurred along by their wrong view of life to always be in competition with one another, so as to one-up each other. This is the keeping up with the Joneses mentality that pervades so much of the American Dream. Our overvaluing of the stuff of life is a product of our wrong worldview which places way too much importance on the possessions of life.
- ii. This leads us to coveting what others have and then this compels us to work extra hard for the sake of getting ahead of those around us! It is a totally worthless and vain and destructive way to live. This envious toil looks for every advantage and destroys any relationship which threatens this "better than everyone else" worldview. This is the product of a secular and humanistic perspective on life.

c. Self-absorbed Discontentment – vs. 7-8

- i. In verses 7-8 we see a self-absorbed discontentment which also destroys relationships. So, this man has no son and no brother – in other words, he has no heir for his ever increasing fortune of money and stuff. And yet he never stops his toiling because he is so self-absorbed in his discontentment. He wants more and more and more simply because his eyes are never satisfied. And so he keeps working hard and amassing more unto himself, and the ironic thing is that his fervent pursuit of satisfaction

is the very thing which keeps him from finding any satisfaction! This is a relationship killer – this self-absorbed discontentment.

- ii. The Minneapolis Tribune told the story of a businessman who tragically worked himself to death. “When he died at the age of fifty-one, his obituary said the cause of death was coronary thrombosis, but most people knew better. At the office six days a week, often until 8 or 9 at night, his friends and family said that he had simply worked himself to death. Yet on the day of his funeral, when the company was already making inquiries about his replacement, the president looked around the office for candidates and said, ‘Well, who’s been working the hardest?’” (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 115).
 - iii. That’s the sad reality of so much of the corporate culture in the working world. They will willingly let you sell your soul and give your very life for the sake of making an extra buck. But for what end? And what relational carnage is left in its wake?
- d. Isolation- vs. 9-12
- i. Yet another relational wreckage which comes out of this man-centered worldview is isolation. That is described in verses 9-12. We will see this in a minute from the positive perspective, but just notice the negative side of being alone in these verses. In verse 9 the person who lives in isolation is not able to accomplish as much, and in verse 10 they have no one to help them when they fall down under the hard times of life. And in verse 11 the one who lives in isolation will not have someone to help keep him warm, and in verse 12 the isolated person is easily overthrown by an oppressor. These all speak to very common sense realities for Solomon’s day, and they probably refer to someone who is traveling. You know from the parable of the Good Samaritan the dangers which permeate traveling alone in the Ancient world. And so that becomes a metaphor for Solomon to speak to the isolation that our man-centered worldview produces. Because we look inward for answers we become the only person we can trust and this naturally isolates us from everyone else. And this proves to be extremely destructive and dangerous.
- e. Foolish Fame – vs. 13-16
- i. This isolation of verses 9-12 is then illustrated in verses 13-16 with the story of this old and foolish king who will no longer listen to advice. And so there is a rags to riches story of a young and wise, but very poor man who rises to power. The old and foolish king loses power to the young and wise man because he had isolated himself and refused to listen to the counsel of others. But the cycle seems to repeat itself. It is a pretty hard section of verses to follow all of the pronouns and who they are referring to, but it seems to be saying that the path of the young and wise man who becomes king will be similar to the old and foolish king who started in power. In other words, the fame they both had is a fame which will not remain. This is the nature of people who are being ruled. Fame and power

simply don't last, and yet they are the ultimate aim of so many in this world. This is what a secular and humanistic worldview points you to. You become the most important and the most worthy of other people's attention and so you clamor for their praise.

- ii. But this fame makes you alone at the top – if ever you do reach the top – and pretty soon you find yourself no longer there. Like Derek Kidner points out, “He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements.” (Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and Time to Dance*, pg. 52)
- f. So, the verdict seems pretty clear. If you are going to live with this secular humanistic worldview dominating your heart and mind, then you are going to do great damage to the relationships of life. You will oppress others and be oppressed yourself, you will work hard out of envy and covetousness, you will be self-absorbed in your discontentment which will fuel your workaholicism, you will put yourself in isolation which will put you at great risk, and you will pursue foolish and fickle fame which will soon pass away! These are the best that this worldview can produce in the relationships of your life.
- g. And this is the worldview that is being peddled by the Arch Enemy of God. Satan has been seeking to deceive and destroy the human race ever since his debut in the Garden of Eden. And the poison of this godless worldview was dripping from his deceitful tongue from his very first words. Remember – this is one of the keys to the book of Ecclesiastes. The vain and worthless life is rooted in the deceit of the Garden. This is the outcome of these truth distorting and God-defaming words which the Serpent spoke. He has been trying to reinterpret God's world and twist God's word ever since. And where he succeeds in the hearts and lives of men and women, then a life of vanity results. And relationships are destroyed.
- h. Just think of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Within a matter of minutes after their rejection of a God-centered worldview, they are at war with one another, blaming and tattling instead of owning their responsibility for sin. So, we see this oppression and envious toil and self-absorbed discontentment and isolation and pursuit of foolish fame all within a few chapters after Genesis 3. This is the product of a secular and humanistic worldview. We oppress one another and envy one another and seclude ourselves from each other because we have bought into the deceitful scheme of the Devil which minimizes God to a cosmic vending machine in the sky who is there for us to give us what we want as we go through life. This maximization of me in the ultimate purpose of life always produces relational wreckage and chaos.
- i. So, bring this home to your own heart. Work your way backwards from relational wreckage in your life to the heart conditions which flow out of a secular and humanistic worldview. You understand that you can be a professing God-fearer while still being a practical agnostic. In other words, you can give lip service to God as being the center of your worldview, while still showing in your practice in life evidence of a man-centered worldview. In fact, this is the great struggle in the process of sanctification isn't it? Having been born again unto new

life in Christ we are now in process of incremental and continual growth into being more like Christ. And this includes an ever increasing awe of God and love for Him which sees Him as He is. So, one of the ways to know if you are being a practical secular humanist is to work your way backward from relational wreckage in your life.

- j. Where are you oppressing others for your own good? Where are you contending with someone out of envy to try to get ahead of them? Where has discontentment seized your soul and made you self-absorbed? Where have you secluded yourself in isolation and become your own strong tower? Where have you abandoned wise counsel so as to pursue what you deemed as successful? You will find the answers to those questions by looking at the relationships in your life which are broken and hurting and working your way back from there to your own heart. In some way, you are at odds with that person because you are operating with a secular humanistic worldview which makes much of you and minimizes God and others. Where this is true, there is great despair in life. Relationships are so much a part of the fabric of life that if they are not in good shape, then life is miserable.

II. Despair

a. Of Life Itself – vs. 2-3

- i. This is another thread that weaves its way through this text. There is the general despair of life itself in verses 2-3. The preacher says that he might as well just die because the dead are better off than the living, and those who have never lived are better off than both the living and the dead. This is like the response of Job to his great suffering when he expressed in chapter 3 that he wished he had never been born.
- ii. This is the natural result of a secular humanistic worldview. When God is removed from being front and center, then mankind fills that vacuum and becomes god to themselves. And this always produces despair over life. It is a hopeless worldview because we cannot make life meaningful and we cannot provide ultimate purpose. This is part of Satan's scheme. He sells us this bill of goods which is so tempting and appealing because we get to take God's place, but what he doesn't tell you is where this leads. He doesn't tell you because he wants to deceive you. He wants to ruin your life. That's what he does. He deceives and then destroys. The product of his deception is destruction.
- iii. We see this all over our Facebook feeds and news websites. Lives ruined and destroyed because they have bought into the deception of the prince of the power of the air – the ruler of darkness. Suicide continues to be a major reality for so many lives – including high profile and famous lives. Yet another popular singer took his life this past week – and this is exactly what Satan wants to do with your life. He wants to sell you the bill of goods which reduces or eliminates God and his truth and which puts you at the center of life's purpose and meaning. And if you buy this, you will welcome a deadly toxin into your existence which will produce despair over life itself.

- b. Over Work – vs. 5, 8
 - i. Another area of despair is over work. So in verse 5 the overreaction to the envious workaholic of verse 4 is the self-defeating fool who refuses to work. He sees no point in trying to keep up with others so he just refuses to work at all, and this too is a destructive reality to his existence. Then in verse 8 the preacher despairs over the self-absorbed worker who never stops to ask why he is doing all that he is. The conclusion is – this is vanity and an unhappy business!
- c. Over Ultimate Purpose – vs. 16
 - i. Then in verse 16 this despair is expressed over ultimate purpose. So the very act of living becomes a despairing reality, and the core duties of life – work – becomes a hopeless and meaningless thing, and now our ultimate purpose in life becomes vain and despairing. If you can't find purpose and meaning at the top of human existence, then where can you find it? So, the young, poor man climbs the corporate ladder through his wise handling of life, but in the end the people forget who he is and move on to the next greatest thing.
 - ii. As Walter Kaiser says in his commentary, “How fickle people are! Today's hero is tomorrow's bum. While rulers tremble and diligently seek to make their thrones secure, the people clamor for change and revolution.”
(Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 74)
 - iii. If ultimate purpose in life is eluded in the greatest rags to riches story of all time, then there is no hope for the rest of us. Truly with the preacher we must say – this also is vanity and a striving after wind.
 - iv. So, let's just pause and evaluate. If a worldview is worth adopting then you would think it should provide benefit to the core issues of life – not the least of which are the relationships in which we function every day. So, does this secular and humanistic worldview improve relational harmony and joy? No, it brings destruction and despair. When you remove God from His rightful place as the ultimate purpose and therefore as the only true meaning maker, then life loses its value, meaning, and purpose, and everything in life becomes distorted and out of whack. Relationships lose their joy and rather are quickly filled with constant pain.
 - v. So, is there an answer? Is there any hope of a better way? Well, there is a hint of redemption in the text. Verses 9-12 describe some qualities of relational success which we all long for. These successes are possible in limited ways without Christ. So, those without Christ can enjoy some of these relationship successes. But this is a sneaky and deceptive hope because a secular and humanistic worldview might find some man-centered and man-dependent ways to make relationships work better – but ultimately they are doomed to failure and despair because they still have man at the center. This is what Dr. Phil offers on his program everyday – the smoke and mirrors hope that relationships can provide

ultimate purpose if we just tinker with our actions or our words in the relationship. But this tinkering will always prove to be destructive and despairing. But there is a better way. What Satan destroys, Christ offers to redeem.

III. Redemption

- a. And this redemption of relationships is hinted at in verses 9-12 as Solomon lists some of the relational successes we can all enjoy in Christ.
- b. Teamwork for Increased Impact – vs. 9, 12b
 - i. So, in verse 9 there is a mindset of teamwork which produces increased impact. It is the thought that two can do more together than two can do independent of one another. Two indeed are better than one because their toil is multiplied. This is furthered in verse 12 where to the two is added another which creates a strong cord which cannot be broken.
 - ii. A healthy and Christ-centered worldview will produce in us a desire to partner with others for the sake of increased impact. Your perspective will change from individualistic ownership to a desire for a team of people to work together.
- c. Support for Hard Things – vs. 10
 - i. Another relationship success is found in verse 10. If you are in healthy relationships as a product of a God-centered worldview then you will have someone there to help you up when you fall. The hard things will come, and a secular humanistic worldview isolates and therefore removes support. But a God-centered truth-shaped worldview looks to both provide, and lean upon the support of healthy relationships.
- d. Warmth – vs. 11
 - i. This is combined with increased warmth in verse 11. In a traveling situation this was especially needful. If you were stuck out in the cold wilderness for the night, you would be helped by a travel companion for warmth to get through the night. But this is true in a spiritual context as well. We easily grow cold and teeter on the brink of spiritual collapse when we isolate ourselves and remove the warmth of other believers. This is what is called for in Hebrews 10 – let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but let us consider one another – how to stir one another up to love and good works. This is the good relational friction of the body of Christ where one member encourages and exhorts another member. This friction creates heat which produces an impetus for spiritual growth and maturity. You don't just need the preaching of the Word to help you stay spiritually warm, but you need the one another ministry of the other members of the body around you. Some of you place way too much pressure on the preaching of the Word as your hope for keeping you spiritually warm and you are regularly disappointed. Thinking you can warm yourself at the bonfire of the sermon you shiver throughout the week until the next time you can huddle here again. The remedy to this in God's plan is the one another

ministry of your brothers and sisters. This too is a Word based activity, but it takes a different form from a sermon. It is the regular assembling of yourself with other believers for the sake of warming yourselves together as you consider one another, how to stir one another to love and good works. If your only spiritually oriented contact with other members of Christ's body is on Sunday morning, then I can tell you that your spiritual temperature is pretty low – you are cold as you shiver your way through your spiritual journey. The early believers in Acts were so dependent upon one another that they met together every day to devote themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer. In this shared one another ministry to each other, they kept spiritually hot as they generated more heat together.

e. Powerful Protection – vs. 12

- i. The final relational success is found in verse 12, and that is powerful protection. Isolation puts you at great risk of attack, but relational success will show itself in that you will be powerfully protected from the enemy. If you slowly separate yourself from relationship investment as a result of your humanistic worldview, then you will put yourself in harm's way. You will be attacked and you will be unable to withstand because you are all alone.
- ii. Some of you are drowning under the waves of spiritual defeat because you have so isolated yourself. You are all alone and you are an easy target for the enemy. You are quickly deceived and you can hardly resist the pet temptation that God's enemy brings before you day in and day out. You are easy pickings because you are relationally dysfunctional. You are relationally dysfunctional because you are living with a secular and humanistic worldview. So, the answer is a drastic change in worldviews. And that drastic change is dependent upon the Cross-work of Jesus Christ.
- iii. Consider the disciples of Jesus. Just think for a minute of his 3 closest disciples – Peter, James, & John. What do you remember of them before the Cross of Christ? Well, Peter was the self-appointed leader who always had to be out front and demanding his way. He was a relational train wreck. And then there is James and John. Remember them coming to Jesus and asking him – right after he had spoken of his going to Jerusalem to die in their place, by the way – they asked him to be placed in positions of prominence over all others in his kingdom. If that doesn't smack of relational discord – I don't know what does.
- iv. But then think of them in the book of Acts. Peter and John together stand as bold witnesses before the Sanhedrin. The three of them lead the Church in Jerusalem, and James eventually gives his very life for the sake of the truth and the Church. He who wanted to be first in the kingdom is now one of the first in martyrdom. John and Peter live out their days serving the Lord by leading His Church. And in the book of Acts we see these 4

marks of relational success in the early church. They were teaming together for increased impact, and they were supporting each other in hard things, and they were adding to one another's spiritual warmth, and they were providing powerful protection to one another against the onslaught of the enemy.

- v. So, what changed them? What took them from the selfish, self-absorbed men of the Gospels to the self-sacrificing servants of the book of Acts? Well, the radical event of the Cross of Jesus Christ happened. Their whole worldview was re-shaped and redeemed because their Lord gave His life as a ransom for them. Their hearts were made new and their loves and desires and purposes for life were now shaped by redeeming grace rather than by the slippery deceit of the serpent.

Conclusion: So, I asked you before to look for those relationships in your life that are full of destruction and producing despair. You need to trace those back to the sins of your own heart and you need to seek to be at peace with all men as much as it is possible. But the path to this relational success is the path of the Cross of Jesus Christ. You do not need Oprah's relationship advice. You don't even need the latest Christian psychologist's advice for your best life now. What you need is Jesus Christ. He is the vine, you are the branches. You can do nothing without him. Your relationship with others is simply evidence of your relationship to Christ. If you are in Christ, you are able to walk in relational success because His life lived through you will produce harmony and joy in others. What do your relationships say about your relationship with your Lord? Let's pray.