

Well-Driven Nails
Ecclesiastes 12:9-12
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 12, Ecclesiastes chapter 12.

"Hugh Latimer was once preaching in the presence of Henry VIII when he touched upon some topics displeasing to his Majesty. He was commanded, therefore, to preach again on the following Sunday, and to introduce an apology for the offence he had given in this discourse. After naming his text, the Bishop thus commenced his sermon:

Hugh Latimer! Dost thou know to whom thou art this day to speak - to the High and Mighty Monarch, the King's most Excellent Majesty, who can take away thy life if thou offendest: therefore take heed that thou speakest not that which may displease . . .

But then consider well, Hugh Latimer, dost thou not know from whence thou comest? Upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the Great and Mighty God, who is all present, and beholdest all thy ways - who is omnipotent and able to cast both body and soul into hell together. Therefore take heed, and deliver thy message faithfully.

Latimer then proceeded with the same sermon he had preached the preceding Sunday, and confirmed it with redoubled energy."¹

Over the last 2 months or so we have been considering a sermon that, if the preacher were here we might ask him for an apology for offending our sensitivities. And, like Hugh Latimer, he would preach it again to us with a doubled down energy! Some of my first words to you about our study of this book of Ecclesiastes was that it has a message we need to hear from a preacher we need to listen to. And this morning we are going to see that proven from the conclusion of this man's sermon. The Preacher's content, method, and exhortation will make known to us again that this is a message we must heed. And just to give you a head's up on our series – we fast-forwarded through chapters 5-11, but we are slowing down here in chapters 11 and 12. We will consider verses 9-12 today and verses 13-14 next week, and then we will come back one more time to consider some Biblical examples of how our worldview shapes our life as being eternally worthwhile or eternally worthless.

The hard-hitting style of the preacher in Ecclesiastes has routinely cajoled us out of our man-centered stupor. His frank realism about what is really true and meaningful in this world has at times felt like a slap across the proverbial face of our often untouched priorities and values in life. He has told us plainly that if we look to possessions and money and wisdom and pleasure and our dream life as the path to having a meaningful and worthwhile life, then we will find in

¹ Ron Prosis, *Preaching Illustrations from Church History*, pg. 162-163

the end that it has all been nothing but vanity and a chasing after the wind. This is where he started his sermon – vanity of vanities, all is vanity, and this is the first statement of his conclusion – vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity. But, hopefully, we are not the same as the first time we heard this stark reality. We have been disarmed of our skepticism about this conclusion, and we come to the end of the book with a deeper understanding of the worthlessness of life when a right understanding of God is absent from our worldview. And now we are beginning to see that this message has indeed been one we needed to hear, even if it did feel like a theological slap in the face.

At the end of a message like that we need some confirmation that what we have heard has indeed been from God, and has been delivered by someone who actually had our best interest in mind. And so, these 4 verses before us this morning are somewhat of a personal polemic in which the Preacher describes the content and the method of his sermon as he looks to call us yet again to a needed point of caution. And so, he says this in Ecclesiastes 12:9. . .

The Preacher's message is eternally relevant and effective because of its content. He gives us direct access behind the doors of his study to show us how he went about the process of putting this sermon together. As he swings those doors open in these verses we ought to use his description as a rubric to evaluate all preaching in the context of the church – from the devotional at a small group gathering to the weekly exposition from the pulpit. This text lays out a rubric of evaluation, both of the preacher's content and the preacher's method, and then the text ends with the preacher's exhortation to all the hearers of his sermon.

I. The Preacher's Content – vs. 9-11

a. The content of his sermon is described in verse 9 as having wise knowledge.

b. *Wise Knowledge* – vs. 9a

- i. So, he says that he himself was wise and also a teacher of knowledge. This is not prideful arrogance tooting his own credentials. Rather, this is acknowledgement of why his sermon should be considered. It has been delivered to the people with wise knowledge. This is crucial because his sermon has been a heavy hitter which has grappled in the ring of worldviews with the heavyweights of wealth and pleasure and worldly possessions and human wisdom. He wants us to know that he has not grappled with those as some random experimenter who happened to wander into the ring of philosophical thought. This sermon is not the product of the musings of a natural man², but rather, these are the conclusions which wise knowledge brings one to.
- ii. By wisdom and knowledge he means to point us to the book of Proverbs where we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. In other words, the content of his sermon has been more than mere facts about life or the observations of a life-savvy man. His wisdom and knowledge point to an understanding of the mind of God which is rooted in a right fear of God. He knows God and he fears God – even if during his life this wasn't always true – but now he does and he speaks through the testimony of a wasted life about what is

² Walter Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, pg. 122)

true and right about all of life from the mind of God. His sermon is full of wise knowledge.

c. *Delightful Truth – vs. 10*

- i. It is also full of delightful truth. So, in verse 10 he says that he sought to find words of delight and he wrote words of truth. Those are parallel thoughts and one should exist in preaching without the other. Truth is delightful to the Spirit-awakened soul and therefore it ought to be presented in a delightful way. This is what the preacher has done in this sermon. He has presented hard truths in ways which cause us to cherish the truth all the more. And so, for instance, the hard-hitting reality that man is not in any way in control of life's seasons is beautifully presented in the poem of chapter 3 – For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . and on down the list. Hard truth for mankind to swallow presented in a winsome and unforgettable way which then wins over our affections and draws us into faith filled acceptance of this truth.
- ii. The preacher's content is words of truth, and his method is to present those truths in words of delight. This does not mean that the natural man whose soul is not awakened by the Spirit of God is going to delight in these truths simply because they are winsomely presented, but it does mean that it behooves the preacher to delight in the words of truth as he meditates on them day and night, and then to present them in a sermon in which this delight is most obvious. This is what draws us to our favorite preachers – or it should – they delight in God's truth and that delight permeates how they present that truth to God's people.

d. *Goads & Nails – vs. 11a*

- i. Then in verse 11 the preacher likens his content to goads and nails. Specifically he says that the words of the wise are like goads, and that the collected sayings are like nails firmly fixed – or better – like well-driven nails. He is talking about the collection of wise sayings which has informed his sermon and which fills the book of Proverbs. So, this is the link between 2 of Solomon's greatest inspired works – they are the collected sayings of the wise.
- ii. And these wise sayings are like goads and nails. A goad was a sharp stick used to get an animal's attention and re-direct its course, or prod it along if it has stopped. It is the instrument of the shepherd to cut off the wandering sheep before it makes a path all its own, and it is the instrument of the farmer to prod along the donkey or the oxen as they complete some chore on the farm. So, the content of this Preacher's sermon is full of delightful truth which acts like a prod to the child of God. You've known this experience I trust. You've had a portion of the Word of God which has lodged itself in your mind and has prodded you along when you were tempted to go astray, or when you have been idle or tempted to quit. This is like the words of Jesus that lodged in the mind and heart of Jim Elliott. Jesus said in Luke 9:24 – "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." And

those words were a constant goad to Jim. He wrote in his journal in 1956 – “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” This goad of truth directed his steps into Missions work and kept him courageous in the face of martyrdom.

- iii. I wonder – do you have a text or two that has lodged like a constant goad in your heart to prod you on in your pursuit of Christ. This would be a good follow-up question at lunch today in response to the sermon. Ask someone else what passages are constant goads to their soul.
- iv. But these words of the wise which permeate this sermon of Ecclesiastes are also likened here to well-driven nails. These are the firmly fixed nails which are driven deep into strong supports. Think of the sturdy shelf which is hanging on the screw anchored into the wood stud behind the sheetrock. The shelf’s bracket would give way before the screw would ever give out. This is what the words of delightful truth are to the heart of the wise hearer. These well-placed nails set anchors upon which the heavy truths of life can be placed and find a firm grip. These wise words provide the stability upon which a right and Biblical view of the world is hung.
 1. Maybe it would help to think of the opposite. So, in Jeremiah 10:4 this same word is used to describe how pagans secure their idols of wood and stone. They nail them in place so that they don’t fall over. So, these idols made with their own hands are then secured by their own nails, which presents the myth of strength and security of the idol. This works figuratively too. So, the idols we worship which are not made of wood and stone are also established in place by nails that we place so as to stabilize them. These mental nails fix our flimsy worldview into place as we wrongly worship at the altar of things which are ultimately worthless. And so we create these houses of worship in our life using these mental nails to establish our idols as worthy of our attention. But then the storms of life blow in and completely destroy this man-made house over and over again, and so the re-building ensues.
 - a. For instance, I’m sure you have heard of the horrific murder of a mom and a 4 year old daughter which happened in our own community this past week. If you have a Biblical structure of how you view the world, this is still a hard thing to work through and understand, but it doesn’t blow over your whole understanding of all things. In other words, God’s explanation of the world and of life don’t collapse under the weight of this horrific gale force wind of tragedy. But every other man-made system of thought does. No humanistic or secular worldview can make any sense at all of that horrific tragedy. The things which seemed so important and valuable in the man-made system now don’t seem to make much sense. The mental nails which prop up our houses of false worship prove woefully inadequate for the stormy gales of real life.

2. How much better is it then to enter into the house of worship that God creates! It is held together by the well-driven nails of His truth which delights the soul enlightened by His Spirit. The actions of this horrific murderer are seen in light of God's unchanging truth which shows us the tragic result of a man who has rejected His Creator and worships the creation. He ultimately destroys himself and others as he buys into the deceitful lies of the Archenemy of God – Satan – who is nothing but a murderer and a liar. Buying into one of Satan's man-centered worldviews this man became a pawn in Satan's grand scheme to kill and destroy – and he did it in the worst of ways.
3. These man-made houses of worship by the way are like those house of mirrors which travel around with the carnival shows. Every part of the worldview hangs upon these flimsy nails of humanistic thought and they all point back to man as the answer and the hope as though we are constantly just looking at ourselves in a mirror.
4. But God's house of worship, the one that is entered into through a Biblical understanding of life – that is more like a glorious Temple which through its structure and architecture takes our breath away, minimizes our awareness of our own importance, and points us constantly to the unsurpassable grandeur of God!
5. This is what good preaching does. It takes us out of the man-centered house of mirrors and it walks us into the grand Temple which is built upon the well-driven nails of God's truth and it points our gaze ever upward to the supremely worthy God of Heaven and Earth!

e. *Given by One Shepherd – vs. 11b*

- i. This sermon most importantly had content which was given and not contrived. So he says at the end of verse 11 that these wise words of knowledge and delightful truth are given by one Shepherd. This one Shepherd is obviously the Chief Shepherd of Israel – God himself. So, the preacher has faithfully delivered what he has been given rather than contriving his own message. Notice that he does this with great personal effort. So, the message is a product of his own arduous study which was done with great care, but God superintended the process and divinely inspired this book as His Word to man through the preacher. Sermons nowadays don't have that unique quality of divine inspiration, but they do follow this pattern of speaking only upon the authority of what God has said.
- ii. This is a really important truth to know about the content of Ecclesiastes. If it has been a difficult book to spiritually swallow then your beef is not with me or with Solomon, but ultimately with God because it is given to us by Him. But it has been given to us in shepherding care and love. As a Shepherd God has spoken these words into our souls through Solomon's pen. The impersonal and far off God of verse 1 – the Creator of the

universe – is now the very immanent and personal God who is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

- iii. But this is not just important for this sermon of Ecclesiastes, but it is important for every sermon given to the gathered church. The content must come from the One Shepherd who has given to us His unalterable and eternally relevant Word. There is a strong push in preaching nowadays to untether the ship from the anchor of God's Word and float for a spell in the ocean of man's ideas. It seems more entertaining and appealing and it will draw a bigger crowd, but it has completely lost its authority. It has no true power because it is absent of the voice of the One Shepherd.
- iv. In his book *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* John Piper distinguishes between entertainment oriented preaching and Bible-oriented preaching. He says that the entertainment oriented preacher "gives the impression that what he says has significance for reasons other than the fact that it manifestly expresses the meaning and significance of the Bible. So he seems untethered to objective authority . . . His words seem to have a self-standing worth as interesting or fun. They are entertaining. But they don't give the impression that this man stands as the representative of God before God's people to deliver God's message. On the other hand, the Bible-oriented preacher does see himself that way – 'I am God's representative sent to God's people to deliver a message from God.' He feels the weight of this trust. He knows that the only way a man can dare to assume such a position is with a trembling sense of unworthy servanthood under the authority of the Bible. He knows that the only way he can deliver God's message to God's people is by rooting it in, and saturating it with, God's own revelation in the Bible. . . Therefore, he constantly tries to show the people that his ideas are coming from the Bible. . . He knows that stories and anecdotes are entertaining. People like them. But he knows even more that his lasting authority and impact is not in the extra-biblical illustration, but in the manifestly biblical truth."³
- v. The content of a sermon which exalts God and feeds His sheep is full of the words of the Shepherd. It is unalterably and undeniably rooted in and flowing from God's Word. You should never settle for less!

II. The Preacher's Method – vs. 9-11

- a. The preacher's content is coupled with his relentless method. In verse 9 he tells us that he arduously studied to compile the content of the sermon.
- b. *Strenuously Studied* – vs. 9b, 10a
 - i. He describes his sermon preparation process as weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. In other words he studied strenuously. He made careful examination of the thousands of proverbial sayings which were at his disposal, and he weighed which ones were true and which ones were not. Then he carefully arranged them into a well-crafted sermon for greatest impact. This is the human side of the equation, and it is crucial to a God-exalting sermon. There is so much that God must do to

³ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, pg. 124-125.

take the proclamation of His Word and plant them deep into the moist and rich soil of the well-prepared soul. But He will not do what He has entrusted to the preacher to do. The preacher must strenuously apply himself to the task of searching out for the truth which are the words of delight.

- ii. “In the 1800’s pastor Joseph Parker was asked about the secret for the energy in his preaching. Parker answered, ‘There is no need of explanation. If I had talked all the week I could not have preached on Sunday. That is all. If I had attended committee meetings, immersed myself in politics and undertaken the general care of the empire, my strength would have been consumed. That is all. Mystery there is none. I have made my preaching work my delight, the very festival of my soul. That is all.’”⁴ In other words, he strenuously studied and carefully compiled God’s truth for God’s people.

c. *Excruciatingly Careful* – vs. 9c

- i. This strenuous study is coupled with the great care at the end of verse 9. The preacher was excruciatingly careful to go about the process with the greatest of precision. He poured over the texts of Scripture and he examined the truth claims of the various proverbs in his possession and he carefully crafted a sermon which was given by God Himself.
- ii. The Preacher understands the importance of words because he has given himself to the revealed Word of God. He knows that concepts will flow like jello into the mold of the words which explain them. As the pigments of color on the artist’s brush enable his expression of the concept in his head, so the words from a preacher’s mouth express the hue of thought.⁵ And so, with painstaking care, the preacher’s words are carefully chosen.

d. *Sincerely Written* – vs. 10b

- i. This careful choosing of words comes out most clearly in writing. So, in verse 10 we see the sermon of the preacher coincide with the writing of the preacher. He says that he wrote uprightly. This obviously is speaking of his sermon that he has just preached. We don’t know for sure that he actually ever publicly addressed the congregation of Israel with these words of Ecclesiastes. But based on the fact that he calls himself the preacher and the book title “Ecclesiastes” is the Greek form of that word for preacher. It means to call for an assembly so as to hear a message. So, at least in theory, Solomon preached this sincerely written sermon to the gathered congregation of Israel.
- ii. And he describes his writing of it as upright, which simply points to the perfect sincerity which marked his efforts. “He personally believed and meant all that he wrote. The arguments set forth were in every case his inmost conviction.”⁶ He was not preaching a message which had not first been preached to his own heart and accepted into his own life as preeminently true. This sincerity of heart in the preacher is what David

⁴ Prorise, pg. 166.

⁵ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pg. 176.

⁶ H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, pg. 294.

Hume described when speaking of George Whitefield. Hume was a Scottish philosopher and religious skeptic who found himself rushing to hear George Whitefield preach. His friend challenged Hume about whether or not he believed what Whitefield preached and Hume replied, “No, I do not believe what he proclaims, but he does, and I want to hear a man who speaks with the authority of conviction.”⁷

- iii. This sincerity of heart and life in the presentation of the truth is essential to preaching that God uses to bless His people.

III. The Preacher’s Exhortation – vs. 12

- a. So, this preacher’s personal polemic about his content and his method leave us with little doubt that his sermon is from God and should be heeded. And in light of that he gives us a final warning in verse 12 – beware of anything beyond these. This summarizes the people’s responsibility in response to the sermon. It is a negative warning with an inherently positive counter-response. He warns us of the constant restlessness within our hearts to go beyond what God has given. Speaking specifically of his sermon the Preacher is warning his hearers about looking to the books of proverbs which were constantly being produced to help make sense of life. Of the making of books there is no end, so be careful not to drink from the ever raging river of man’s “wisdom” which is constantly rolling hot off the presses every day. If you gave yourself to the study of man’s opinion and man’s worldview as expressed in the making of books you would weary your soul and capture yourself in the prison of endless study of worthless material. This does not mean that the reading of things other than the Scriptures is worthless, but it does mean that if we are reading things other than the Scriptures to find ultimate answers then the pursuit will never end and we will weary ourselves.
- b. In fact, that is why there is a constant publishing of books. Mankind is constantly making another attempt at trying to figure out life and give it meaning and purpose. And no human generated book has ever perfectly captured it all. And so, there are between 600,000 and 1 million books published every year in the United States alone, with an estimated 130 million books produced during the history of the world. And this isn’t even counting all the other media that is produced like magazines and newspapers and music and movies – all of which are also seeking to communicate mankind’s view of the world. It is an endless raging stream which if you get sucked in you will weary yourself with trying to keep your head above water.
- c. But God’s book is different. He spoke over about a 3000 year period through about 40 different human authors and then he sealed the book through the witness of His Holy Spirit and His Word was complete. This perfect Book is the book of all books. It is the book by which all other books are judged. Rather than the raging stream of constant publishing, God’s Book is like a cool and clear mountain lake which provides the steady and unchanging nourishment for our soul.
- d. So, the warning is laid before us – be careful of wearying yourself with books that will never truly give an answer. Be wary of that hankering in your soul which doesn’t really want an answer, but actually just enjoys the man centered pursuit

⁷ Prorise, pg. 168.

of sophistry which makes you feel smart and accomplished. Rather, root yourself in the Book which gives ultimate answers and complete purposes to all aspects of life. And avail yourself of preaching which calls you to the same. Expect nothing less from your pastor or your Sunday School teacher or your small group leader than a complete dependence upon the Book of all books for the needed direction in this life.

Conclusion: This is what Jesus has died to give himself for – for sheep who will hear His voice in the preaching of His Word in the context of His Church. His voice is always worth hearing even if it acts like the crook of the shepherd's staff which yanks us back onto the straight and narrow. May the words of the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls be the constant delight of God's people at Newton Bible Church. Let's pray.