

With a View from the End
Ecclesiastes 12:13-14
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

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

You've heard the statement that hindsight is 20/20, and while that statement isn't completely true, it certainly points to an important principle. Looking at things from the end allows us to see more clearly. Take a runner for example. If they want to win the 100-yard dash at the Olympics in 2020 they cannot just wake up the day before the Olympics and decide they are going to run and win. Rather, they are already working and training with a view from the end. They are motivated every day by the hope and the goal of holding a gold medal in their hands as their crown of victory. They train today knowing what type of shape they will need to be in, in order to win in 2020. A view from the end of something greatly clarifies our understanding of the present. And such it is with life. So, we will look at the end of our Preacher's sermon in the book of Ecclesiastes this morning and we will see how he calls us to view life from the end so as to live life now in a worthwhile way.

Here's the end of the Preacher's sermon, Ecclesiastes 12 verses 13 and 14 says this . . .

Like a good preacher, he ends his sermon with this climactic and clinching statement. The whole sermon finds its point and purpose in these 2 verses. All of its tensions are resolved here, and all of the worthless realities of life that have been expounded in this sermon, are answered here in these 2 verses. This conclusion is meant to give us the whole of the matter. To do so, the Preacher uses the Hebrew word for "all" or "every" 4 different times in these 2 short verses. So, he says that "all has been heard" and "this is the whole duty of man" and "God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing." By using that word four times, he is emphasizing the finality and universality of his conclusion. This is it. Here is what you need to hear. Here is the bottom line – the whole duty of man. With those 4 uses of the word for "all" or "every" here at the end of his sermon, the preacher is making three main points. He is saying that all man-centered worldviews end in vanity, and all of life is worth living if we fear God and keep His commandments, and all of life matters in the end. This is such a fitting end to this sermon which has so often stripped us bare of any kind of hope. Up until the very last point he is telling us again and again – vanity of vanities, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. But vanity doesn't get the final word here – God does.

I. All Man-Centered Worldviews End in Vanity – vs. 13a

- a. The first main point to be established from this text is that all man-centered worldviews end in vanity. That has been the goal of this preacher's sermon. He has spoken the truths we don't like to hear about the ways in which we approach life which are ultimately worthless. And to do this he has taken on the big dogs of

worldviews. He speaks these things not as an ivory tower philosopher who has simply mused over these things, but as a hardy traveler who has traversed most of life's paths. From his vast experience and his unsurpassed wisdom, Solomon speaks into our hearts this morning with a view from the end of his life. So, here we have the best and brightest of humanity who has the greatest of opportunities to experience it all and his conclusion is still – it is all vanity! That is the end of all of mankind's attempts to understand and make sense of life absent of a right view of God. Their end – their conclusion is always vanity. So, let's just take a moment and consider some popular philosophies that have come down through the centuries from the best and brightest of humanity. These worldviews are attempts by mankind to make sense of and assign purpose to life in this world.

i. *Utilitarianism*

1. Consider Utilitarianism. This is the philosophy, or worldview, which says that the greatest good can be found in whatever brings the greatest overall benefit to everyone. It is a form of thinking which produces “the end justifies the means” types of thoughts. This human wisdom would make purpose in life by how useful you are to the good of others and by how you used the things in life to bring good ends, even if you're using of them was immoral or unethical at the time.
2. Consider the end of Utilitarianism. This has been considered by Solomon in this sermon. Not in its specifics, but in its generalities. This man-centered worldview has no answer to the many bewildering injustices which fill the landscape of life. In these unstoppable injustices the greater good, from man's perspective, is trampled under the foot of stronger human oppressors. And on top of this injustice, the ultimate end for all mankind is death and then what good is the ultimate good then? Solomon has argued that there is no universal good when we are all in the grave. Utilitarianism's end is vanity.

ii. *Epicureanism*

1. Consider Epicureanism. This is the worldview which claims that life is about self-pleasure and specifically about removing all pain and suffering and fear from life. So, you live the most meaningful and worthwhile life you can when you can get rid of pain and fear and live in the ever flowing stream of self-pleasure.
2. But consider Epicureanism's end. Mankind, according to the preacher, can never find lasting satisfaction in temporal pleasure. He should know, he has tried it all. He's been there, done that, and has the t-shirt. The end of Epicureanism is that it produces a vain and worthless life. The pursuit of pleasure alone doesn't pay in the end, only in the immediate.

iii. *Empiricism/Rationalism/Positivism*

1. Consider Empiricism and Rationalism and Positivism all together. Combined they tell us that knowledge and purpose and meaning in life can only be found through experiential, scientific, and rational methods. In other words, you must be able to test it empirically and find it to be true through scientific and rational methods.
2. But consider the end of this worldview. What about the unknowable and unsearchable patterns and seasons of life which defy man's ability to scientifically or empirically or rationally figure it all out? If we are honest we must admit that we can't know it all. The conclusion of the matter is that it is vain and hopeless.

iv. *Absurdism*

1. Consider Absurdism. This is the worldview which tells you that mankind cannot actually find meaning and purpose to life so just stop searching and be happy in your ignorance. Embrace the absurdities and just be happy.
2. But the end of this has already been given by the Preacher. Its end is absurd because man has eternity placed within his heart, and he is always looking to figure it all out. If you give up on finding meaning you are giving up on one of mankind's core values, and this is absurd and vain.

v. *Nihilism*

1. Consider Nihilism. Here you are told that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or truth. It is a philosophical acceptance of many of the points that Solomon has made in this sermon. Nihilism goes beyond absurdism in that it doesn't say that man can't find out the true meaning and purpose of life, but that there is no meaning or purpose to life. We just exist and that is all there is to it.
2. The end of Nihilism is absolute depression, pessimism, and unhindered immorality. Vanity of vanities.

vi. *Existentialism*

1. Next consider existentialism. This is the worldview that tells us to make meaning through our existence. Instead of just being meaning finders we are to be meaning makers in that we create our own destiny and captain our own ship. Soren Kierkegaard said it this way – "Be that self which one truly is."
2. But the problem with this self-centered worldview is that life doesn't work that way. There is nothing but constant frustration, if we are truly honest, because the world doesn't fit into my own personal meaning that I have made in my own little existence. You

simply can't squeeze that universal meaning into the small jar of your own life and still get the lid on. It's all vanity.

vii. *Secular Humanism*

1. And then consider the one that I have referred to the most often in this series on Ecclesiastes because I think it is the one which is most prevalent in our day – secular humanism. This worldview tells us that life's meaning is found purely on human terms and made up by secular realities. The here and now stuff of life gets to be the puzzle pieces that you put together to make the most of your life on this spinning globe. Each human being gets to decide what is true and what is truly meaningful and where value resides in life. This is what you will hear from famous philosophers like Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins.
 2. But the problem with this worldview is its end. When we place true meaning and value at the hands of each individual what ends up happening is that we never actually find a true meaning or value or purpose to life. The individual becomes the authority which simply means that no one is truly an authority on these things that matter most. It is vanity and a chasing after the wind!
- b. So, the end of all of these man-centered worldviews is what – vanity of vanities – all is vanity! Our man-dependent search has come up empty and hopeless. Mankind is simply unable to make it all make sense! But God! That is the beauty of these final two verses of this sermon. But God. Mankind is empty handed and hopeless, but God. He has it all figured out because he is the Creator and Lord of it all and the One Shepherd of his people. The end of the matter with mankind's systems is vanity. But the end of the matter with God is a life worth living.

II. **All of Life is Worth Living – vs. 13b**

- a. In fact, that has been the main theme of this sermon. It is not that life is worthless, but rather, the whole sermon is leading you by the hand to this glorious truth – everything matters. Life is not worthless, but rather it is eternally worthwhile. This has been the constant question of this sermon – what is the gain for man under the sun? What profit is there for us to live this life? Well, here the answer finally comes. The profit is God himself! We get to live in His world for His ultimate purpose with the knowledge of our final account being taken by Him. This makes life worth living. But this will only be true for you personally if you heed the two commands of verse 13. And it will only be true for you to the extent that you do indeed heed these commands. So, all of life is worth living, if we fear God and keep his commandments.
- b. Before we get into those two imperatives – consider that the Preacher does not point you to himself as the final answer here. He who was so capable a searcher and so capable a philosopher comes to the end and sums it all up by pointing away from himself. In his exasperation and lack of real answers he points his hearers to God. He alone can provide final and complete and whole answers! And so, we are called here in verse 13 to view all of life through the clear lens of God.

We are to be drawn to God as we accept His role as God over all things and as we then accept our role of humble and obedient slave – saved by grace. Here our life finds the purpose it was made for – heart and life worship of God!

c. If We Fear God

- i. So, all of life is worth living if we fear God. Now listen, Jerry Bridges wrote a 267 page treatise on what it means to fear God and how to know that joy in your life. So, I don't presume to take the next few minutes and lay before you the fullness of the fear of God – that is an impossible task. We are all on a lifelong journey of growing in our understanding and practice of this fear of God. To understand its connotations in Ecclesiastes 12 just simply consider the broader context of the book. Solomon has been wrestling with the man-centered and man-generated answers to the hardest questions of life. He has looked to every humanly possible experience to give him a deeply satisfying joy in life. And yet, everywhere he has turned, he has come up empty-handed. And now here, at the end he sums it all up and says that you have heard everything else, and it is all worthless. But hear this – fear God! Fear God enough to set aside your individual autonomy and to place yourself in humility before the Living God of the Universe who sees all and knows all. Recognize and rejoice in the fact that this is His world and your life is one that He has given, and ordained, and ordered, and is in sovereign control over. This inherently provides meaning and purpose to life because we are no longer like a row boat being tossed on the stormy waves of life without an anchor and without a compass. Now, with God in His proper place as Creator and Lord and Savior we have tethered our ship to the tug boat that is going to push us through the stormy seas into the safe harbor of eternity.
- ii. This fear of God is so adequately described by A.W. Tozer whose large view of God and small view of man propelled him into Christ-honoring ministry for decades. He said that the most profound word in the human language is “God.” And the most profound fact in all of human knowledge is contained in the small sentence, “God is.” And the most profound experience we can have consists in the recognition that “God is here.”¹
- iii. This is the basic tenet which Solomon is putting before us here. God – the most profound and universally undefinable reality in the entire universe. God is – the most unchangeable and unalterable fact in all of the universe, and God is here – the most fear-provoking reality in the entire universe. These are the first steps leading into the grand hall of the fear of the Lord. Putting God in His proper place in our understanding of all things, and letting Him define and interpret all things and submitting to His presence with a constant awareness of His majestic holiness.
- iv. This fear of God is found all throughout the Bible – from Genesis to Revelation. And it is best understood in two ways. Often you will find in

¹ As quoted in Albert Martin, *The Forgotten Fear*, pg. 63.

the Bible the right response to God of fear which looks like a dread and terror kind of fear. This is the fear of those who realize their sinfulness as they are confronted with the thrice Holy God and His impending judgment. This is the fear which drove Adam and Eve to hide from God when His manifest presence was approaching. Some have said that if we are in Christ by faith and know the forgiveness of God then is there any place in our lives for this kind of fear. Well, John Murray has well said that “it is the essence of impiety not to be afraid of God when there is reason to be afraid of God.”² So, this ought not be the dominant fear in the life of the Christian, but it ought not be absent if indeed we are walking in unrepentant sin with which our Father is greatly displeased.

- v. The second way in which this fear of God is found in the Scriptures is the response of awe and reverence and respect and honor. It is the heart that is overwhelmed by the knowledge of the presence of God and is captured by the great forgiveness of God and is awed at the great love of God and is amazed at the Divine Providence of God. This heart of fear is overwhelmed by a right view of God and an ever-increasing right view of God and its constant refrain is “glory to God in the highest!”
- vi. Psalm 111:10 says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.” So, this fear of the Lord is something we are to put into practice. God is indeed the all-powerful and thrice Holy and redeeming God of the Bible, but we must obey the command of this text and operate every moment under this truth. We won’t fear God if we are not intentionally running our life through the grid of a worldview which places God in His rightful place. This fear of God then is exercised in that we increase in understanding God to be Who He is and in tandem with that, we see ourselves for who we are.
- vii. This fear of God is to the worthwhile life like what the alphabet is to higher learning. If someone is pursuing a doctorate degree they do not move on from the alphabet as though it was a foundation they stand on but no longer employ. Rather, they constantly function in ever increasing proficiency and skill with the alphabet they learned in their Kindergarten classroom. The same is true for the believer and his growth in the fear of the Lord. This is not something we move past, but something we ever grow further into. It is the beginning of knowledge and no understanding in life is complete or right if it is absent of this right view of God and this complete reverence for God.
- viii. And in the context of the book of Ecclesiastes we can say that our greatest joy in life is not that we get to answer every question to our own satisfaction. Solomon, when he writes these words here in chapter 12, still has many unanswered questions about the how’s and the what’s of life. The end of the matter for him is not to get all of the answers. The end of

² As quoted in Albert Martin, *Forgotten Fear*, pg. 28.

the matter is to be satisfied in an omniscient and omnipotent and holy God. This is his greatest joy – to fear God and to keep His commandments because God is God and he is not.

d. And Keep His Commandments

- i. Of the many more things we could say about this fear of God, consider that it is linked inseparably with the command to obey. And this order is important. True and sincere worship of God will produce obedience to God. If you have it any other way then you do not have true worship. If you rightly fear God then you are ascribing to Him all of the glory due to the One who rules and reigns over all things as the Supreme Being. You are realizing and praising God for the fact that in Him we live and move and have our being. That our very next breath is able to be had because He has allowed it to be so – this kind of fearful reverence of God must produce an obedience to God. If it doesn't then that ascribing of glory with our lips is nothing more than religious duty being fulfilled. If we don't obey, then we are showing that we didn't really and truly believe everything about God that we just ascribed to Him in worship.
- ii. In other words, our conduct – that word from your mouth, that touch of your phone or tablet, that choice to imbibe in that entertainment, that response of your heart to the words and actions of others, that choice you make with the use of your time – all of this is connected to and flows out of our worldview and ultimately out of our worship. As we understand what is important we then assign value and it is these things which we deem as valuable which guide our actions, words, and plans for life. So, if we tell God that He is really important to us, and we do that in really public ways, but then in private we speak and act and plan in ways which disobey Him and disregard His Word – then we have shown the insincerity of our words. We don't actually worship the God of Heaven, but we worship the god of self.
- iii. Did you know that the first time the fear of the Lord is used in the Bible, the actual term; it is used in a negative context? Abraham says in Genesis 20:11 – “There is surely no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.” Abraham linked their lack of fear with his own fear that they would act in sinful and God-dishonoring ways. This black thread is found throughout the Bible as people disregard God in their hearts and then disobey Him and dishonor Him with their actions. As Romans 3:18 says to describe the depravity of man – “there is no fear of God before their eyes.” All of the chaos and confusion of a sinful world can be traced back to a de-throning of God as God and an enthroning of self as God. Out of this worldview and out of this worship come all kinds of evil.
- iv. Our conduct is rooted in our worldview. Or to be more clear – our conduct is derived from our worship. So, we must fear God and we keep His commandments because keeping his commandments is the natural offspring of truly fearing God. And this, the text says, is the whole duty of

man. The word duty is not in the original by the way. It simply says – this is the wholeness of mankind. This is the whole matter for them. The word duty has been put into the text to convey the gravity of response which sits upon our hearts at the end of this sermon. But be careful not to view this as a duty to be performed and checked off of a list so as to earn the favor of God. Rather, view this as the wholeness of your existence. This is the conclusion of the matter for you. This is the meaning and purpose and greatest joy of your life – fear God and keep His commandments. In faith, accept what God has told you about Himself and the world He has created. By faith walk forward in humble trust that what He has called you to in each situation is indeed the best thing you could do. By faith make His Word and His way supreme in your thinking and in your planning and in your doing. By faith in God set aside the things that you will not have answered in this life and commit yourself to live according to what you can know – God and His Word. In short – fear God and keep His commandments!

III. All of Life Matters in the End – vs. 14

- a. Then, the last truth presented in the Preacher’s conclusion sums it all up. He tells us in verse 14 that all of life matters in the end. So he says, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Notice that he giving you a reason to fear God and keep his commandments. You should daily pursue this fear of the Lord and obedience to Him because when it all ends, everything you thought and everything you did and every word you said, all of it will matter to God.
- b. This is such a different picture than what we saw before in this sermon. We could easily have assumed that nothing in life matters because it doesn’t matter what you do, it is all vanity. But here, the clarifying voice of the conclusion lets us know that it does indeed matter. It matters to God because in the end He is going to take into account every deed and every secret thing, both the good and the evil. Notice that everything matters to God, and that every secret thing is going to be exposed by God in the end. God is the Lord of big things and of small things. In fact, this focus of God on the small things is repeated throughout Jesus’ ministry. He lets his disciples know often that nothing on earth is too small to matter in eternity. So Jesus says that every idle word will matter in the judgment, and the death of a lowly sparrow matters to God, and a cup of cold water is important to Jesus, and the repentance of one sinner captures the attention of the heavenly throng.³
- c. And every secret thing is exposed by God. So Moses says in Psalm 90:8 that God has put our secret sins in the light of His presence. For the one who has rejected God and has gone their own way, this is a terrifying reality. One day, though they seem to be getting along fine right now, one day, they will stand before a thrice

³ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and Time to Dance*, pg. 107.

Holy Creator God and give an account of their rejection which will result in their being cast into the Eternal Lake of Fire.

- d. But there is hope for that day which rests upon God's own work through His very Son – the Lord Jesus Christ. We need not fear the Day of Judgment as those who have no answer for our sins and as those who will face ultimate condemnation. Rather, we know this all-seeing gaze of God on that day will not be the gaze of condemnation, but rather the gaze of acceptance as we are viewed through the redeeming blood of Christ. For those of us in Christ through faith by grace, we can know that on that Day of Judgment we will be acceptable and righteous before the King of Kings because we wear the righteousness of Christ. We also know that gaze of acceptance today, and so this knowledge of a God who sees all and knows all is a great comfort to us. It draws us, in reverential fear, closer to God rather than propelling us further away from God. Knowing that one day yet future will be the day of reckoning for an unjust and unholy world, we are joyfully propelled into great obedience of our Lord no matter the cost because we know that in the end He will sort it all out.

Conclusion: So, as we close simply consider the Christian who is willing to die for the sake of obedience to Christ. Rather than fear man who can only kill the body, they choose to fear God who cast both body and soul into Hell. At the moment of their last breath they are confident in a worldview which looks beyond the here and now stuff of life, and is compelled by the greater eternal realities of the fear of the Lord. You will never faithfully obey and fruitfully serve our Lord if this kind of fear is absent. Brother or sister – what are you doing to develop this fear of God in your heart? Do you want to see God bring a revival of His work to our church and into your heart? This is at the core of all revivals – it is a concentrated outburst of the fear of the Lord in the Lord's people where they actually live out in every waking moment an earnest comprehension of the greatness of God. Being ever more aware of God and His glorious greatness and unsurpassed grace they can't help but give themselves to obedience in every way. This true reverence of God cannot be manufactured or conjured up, but it can and it must be sought. Beloved – let it begin with us. Fear God and keep His commandments! Let's pray.