

Ecclesiastes Sermon Series – Living a life that Matters – Visions of Vanity (Eccl. 4:1-6)

**Intro:**

- 1) Have you even sat and “people watched”?**
  - a. In a store, at the park, at the beach, Walmart (people of Walmart website)
  - b. You can tell a lot from people watching
    - i. Us Weekly celebrity couple report
  
- 2) Here in Chapter 4 Solomon is “people watching”**
  - a. In this section of the letter - Solomon has moved from the philosophical to the practical
    - i. From the seat of power to the street of people
  
- 3) The movement in this chapter can be catalogued as Solomon visiting 4 groups of people and observing their life**
  - a. Good title – Visions of Vanity or Vantage point of vanity
    - i. Solomon is recording the observations from visiting different places and watching several people go through different experiences
    - ii. Notice
      1. V1 – considered, behold
      2. V4 – considered
      3. V7 – saw
      4. V15 – considered
  
- 4) Context of Ecclesiastes**
  - a. Vanity and vexation with life “under the sun”
    - i. Earthly, fleshly vantage point
  - b. Repentant letter
    - i. Notice the close – 12:13,14
  - c. One big lesson – you can live a life that matters if you do it right”
  
- 5) Solomon gives us some observations in chapter 4 that we would be wise to heed living in a fallen world**
  - a. We can see some important truth to “living a life that matters”
    - i. Let’s go people watching with Solomon
  - b. Sermon: Visions of Vanity
  - c. Text: Eccl. 4:1-16

### The Courtroom – V1-3

- 1) **Solomon opens up chapter 4 by taking us on a visit to the courtroom**
  - a. Actually – this is a return visit - previously spoke about it – 3:16
    - i. This returning visit indicates that Solomon has more to say about this matter – and we should pay attention
  - b. Moreover – the phrase “so I returned” signals a repeated investigation
    - i. IOW – this isn’t a one-time observation
      1. Lit. – to turn back to, to come back
    - ii. Like saying – I’ve seen what’s going on here before...and here it is again
- 2) **The imagery here – Solomon is peering into the courtroom to observe if justice is taking place**
  - a. Considered – to see, look, view, realize
    - i. Translated mostly – see, saw, seen
    - ii. General word for visual perception
    - iii. However – the word goes beyond a casual glance
      1. Carries the idea of observing with perception – or – seeing in order to evaluate – to inspect
      2. Denotes viewing something with a moral awareness
- 3) **What Solomon beheld in the courtroom was both heartbreaking and depressing**
  - a. He saw oppression and exploitation of the poor by the powerful elite
    - i. Oppressions – means to mistreat/to torment
      1. Carries the idea of weighing down a person with physical or mental distress - (depressing situation)
      2. 1 Kings 22:27 – bread/water of affliction – small ration
    - ii. Word goes beyond mere affliction denoting a crushing exploitation
      1. Root – to defraud, to extort, to exploit
  - b. He saw pain and suffering caused by the oppression
    - i. The innocent people were in tears over their afflictions
    - ii. No comforter – console, express sympathy – to change one’s mind
  - c. He saw those who should be able to help were not
    - i. Power – masculine noun - strength, might, ability, wealth
  - d. What we have here – an abuse of power, legal injustice, and economic exploitation
    - i. In ANE (and even in places today) – the legal system was controlled by the elite
      1. Bribery was common – Isa. 1:23
      2. So if you had money, you could get “justice”
- 4) The scene before us – Solomon is looking into the courtroom with a moral awareness and he doesn’t just see justice failing occasionally, he sees the very place designed for justice becoming an engine for oppression
- 5) **The great American orator Daniel Webster once called justice – “The ligament which holds civilized beings....and nations together.”**
  - a. Clearly the ligament was tore in Solomon’s day

**6) Devastated by what he saw – notice what Solomon concluded – V2,3**

- a. Its better to be dead than alive
- b. Actually – its better to have never been born
- c. Ever felt that way due to afflictions?
  - i. Job felt that way – Job 3:11-16
- d. These verses are not advocating for self-harm or self-destruction
  - i. This isn't nihilism
  - ii. This is a reference to the logic of lament in the ANE at the time
    - 1. Non-existence was preferable to suffering
- e. In other words – Solomon is exposing what life feels like when justice is broken

**7) Ironic imagery**

- a. In Israel – the “city gate” functioned as the courtroom (Ruth 4:1)
  - i. Elders sat there daily to judge fairly (Deut. 16:18-20)
- b. The highest place of judgement would have been beyond the gate and to the throne of the king (1 Kings 3:16-18)
- c. In Israel – as the throne goes, so goes society
  - i. Whether it was intended or not – Solomon has given a indictment against himself in this injustice
- d. Take that two way:
  - i. He has created an ungodly atmosphere in his kingdom which has promoted ungodly practices
  - ii. He is exposing his own frailty to fix the matter
    - 1. Even the wisest king couldn't solve this problem alone

## Application

**1) God's people need to take note of societal wrongs and insert godliness where it is absent**

- a. Phrase “under the sun” – from a earthly, human, man-centric perspective
  - i. Perspective void of God
- b. The reason injustice prevailed – good, godly people did nothing
- c. You and I are to actively be the salt and light of this world
  - i. Matt. 5:13,14 – Ye are – present tense – this is who you are and who you are to remain

**8) As a believer, even in the affliction, we have a Comforter**

- a. John 14:15-19, 26; 15:26; 16:7
- b. Do you know what combats those conclusions Solomon drew?
  - i. The Holy Spirit – the Comforter
- c. Interesting Greek word – Paraclete
  - i. Lit. – one who is called in, to call in or summons
  - ii. “[A paraclete] is always called in in order that he may do something, that he may render some service.” – Barclay
  - iii. General sense – a Paraclete is a person called in to help in a situation which an individual cannot cope themselves
  - iv. It's a legal term – trans. Advocate – indicating the calling in a person to testify, or help a court case
  - v. It's also a word of exhortation – means exhort/urge – a rally call
    - 1. General exhorting troops about to go to war
  - vi. It's a word indicating that the problem is not subverted, but rather you get strengthened to face it

### The Marketplace – V4-8

#### 1) Disgusted with what he saw in the courtroom, Solomon when down to the marketplace to view laborers at work

- a. Considered – viewed/seen – same word as V1
  - i. Expresses continuity
- b. Surely he would not be disappointed in the workplace, work is a gift from God
  - i. Adam worked, Solomon worked, Jesus worked, Paul worked

#### 2) Solomon saw 4 types of working people

- a. V4 – the industrious man
  - i. Solomon first ran into a hardworking, skilled laborer
    1. Right work – skillful, achievement, excellent produced by ability
  - ii. Solomon noted the man’s hands, but what about his heart?
    1. It seems the only reason this person was skilled and hard working was to compete with others around him
      - a. Envied – jealousy, rivalry, competitive zeal
      - b. His work was not purpose-driven, it was driven by comparison
      - c. The purpose of the work was not to produce beauty and blessing, but to belittle others
  - iii. Cultural insight
    1. Israel’s economy was agrarian
      - a. Success was visible and public
        - i. You field, your harvest, your livestock – everyone saw it
        - ii. Envy was a constant social pressure
  - iv. IOW - Coveting was taking place
    1. Doesn’t that happen today?
    2. Remedy for coveting – be grateful for God has given you and given them!
- b. V5 – the idle man
  - i. Solomon moved from one extreme to the other – a man with no ambition at all
  - ii. Solomon had no sympathy for the lazy – Prov. 18:9, 19:15, 24:30-34
  - iii. Conclusion – laziness is a slow comfortable path that leads to self-destruction
    1. Look at the imagery – “eateth his own flesh”
      - a. Metaphorical – self-destruction, consuming one’s own resources without replacing them
  - iv. Cultural insight
    1. Agrarian society – you don’t work, you don’t eat
    2. No real systems to sustain laziness and idleness
    3. IOW – laziness wasn’t just unwise, it was dangerous
  - v. Listen - Prov. 6:10,11
    1. Paul puts it bluntly – 2 Thess. 3:10
  - vi. The industrious man was motivated by envy, the idle man was motivated by comfort – both led to ruin
  - vii. “Do more better” by Tim Challies
    1. Def. of productivity – effectively stewarding your gifts, talents, time, energy, and enthusiasm for the good of others and the glory of God.”
    2. Matt. 5:16 - You are responsible to God to be productive

- c. V6 – the integrated man
  - i. Solomon scoped out a man whose life was balanced
  - ii. This man was productive in work, yet took time to relax and enjoy
  - iii. Did you know that its not good to be a workaholic?
    - 1. Ps. 104:20-23
  - iv. This man had one hand full of work and one full of rest
    - 1. Industrious man thought peace came through money, yet had no time to enjoy it
    - 2. Idle man thought peace came through laziness, yet It destroyed him
    - 3. Integrated man enjoyed life but knew he had to earn it
      - a. Key word – balanced – he had contentment
  
- d. V7-8 – independent man
  - i. Lastly Solomon saw a man of solitary
    - 1. Working hard – but by himself
    - 2. No relatives, no friends to help, no one around to enjoy it all with
  - ii. This man’s labor was in vain
    - 1. Even if he got to the top – no one was there to share it with him
  - iii. a 2018 study published in the Journal of leadership and organizational studies concluded that senior leadership are lonelier inside and outside of work
    - 1. Article – “why many leaders feel lonely at the top”
      - a. Half of CEO’s experience feelings of loneliness
      - b. They climb the ladder while sacrificing relationship
  - iv. Notice – this man lived an unexamined life
    - 1. V8b – “neither saith he...”
    - 2. Socrates – the unexamined life is not worth living
  - v. This man had the “what” of work but not the “why”
    - 1. Reminder – God blesses us to be a blessing to others

**The Highway – V9-12****1) Solomon the shifts his view to people on the go**

- a. Conclusion – life is full of things that overtake us – so having a friend is vital
- b. Jewish proverb – “A friendless man is like a left hand deprived of the right.”
- c. Notice this statement – “Two are better than one...”
  - i. Better – not just “nicer” but more advantageous, beneficial, superior
  - ii. IOW – Solomon is not just saying “friendship feels better” he’s saying “life works better with others”

**2) When working – V9**

- a. Basically – when there’s a helping hand, things get done quicker and easier
- b. Notice the imagery – even though there are two workers who will split the profit “...they have a good reward for their labor.”
  - i. Good reward – Desirable + wage, a return that is worthwhile
- c. Truth – you get more done together
  - i. A truth the church must rally around
  - ii. Mathematics – devil divides and subtracts, God adds and multiplies

**3) When walking – V10**

- a. Roads, paths, and travel ways in Palestine were not kept up well or paved
  - i. Easy to trip and fall
  - ii. “It was not uncommon for even the most experienced traveler to stumble and fall, perhaps even break a bone, or even fall into a hidden pit.” – Warren Wiersbe
    - 1. Pit – Ex. 21:33
- b. It’s great to have a friend to lend a hand, share the burden, and lift you up
  - i. This is true physically – but more so spiritually
  - ii. Gal. 6:1,2
  - iii. Statement – we ought to be quick to give grace and restoration rather than gossip and retribution

**4) With warmth – V11**

- a. This is not language or romance, this is travel safety language
- b. It can get about 39 degrees F in Palestine at night
  - i. In some places even colder
- c. Not bad to us, but cold for people who are used to 100-120 degree F
  - i. Cerra Punta – Casie and I
- d. Imagery here is how body warmth of a companion can help keep you warm and alive
  - i. Single person tent with multiple people story
- e. Only way for a solo traveler to stay warm is to be loaded down with extra blankets
- f. Let this be a lesson – there’s warmth in community!

**5) With watch care – V12**

- a. It was dangerous to travel alone – day or night
  - i. Most people travelled in groups for fellowship and safety
    - 1. Jesus - Luke 2:41-52
- b. Two shall withstand
  - i. Withstand – to stand firm, resist, endure
    - 1. Idea – strength is multiplied by unity
- c. Notice again the vivid imagery Solomon uses – a 3 cord rope
  - i. Called a Hawser-laid rope
  - ii. 3 takes the load off
    - 1. Interwoven strength
  - iii. Lesson – we need each other in this fight!

**The Palace – V13-16****1) The last place Solomon went to see was the palace**

- a. Two truths are highlighted here
  - i. Instability of political power
  - ii. Fickleness of popularity

**2) Here's what Solomon saw**

- a. A king who ignored trusted counselors and his leadership – V13
- b. A youth, from an impoverished situation rose in popularity to replace the king – V15
- c. Note the contrast
  - i. Youth was poor but became rich
  - ii. King was rich and became poor
  - iii. Youth was in prison and sat on the throne
  - iv. King was on the throne yet imprisoned in his mind
    - 1. Will no more be admonished – doesn't listen to warnings, instructions, or correction
- d. Moral – wealth and status are no guarantees of success, poverty or failure are no boundary for achievement

**3) Notice though the story goes on – V16**

- a. The youthful king was popular but then was replaced

**4) Truth - without wise counsel, failure is imminent**

- a. Prov. 13:20 – “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but the companion of fools shall be destroyed.”
- b. Prov. 11:14 – “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”
- c. Prov. 24:6 – “For by wise counsel thou shalt make war: in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”
- d. Wise counsel from Godly friends is vital to stability and growth

**Challenges****1) Takeaway – living a life that matters MUST involve good, Godly relationships**

- a. With Jesus and the Holy Spirit
- b. As a blessing to others
- c. Receiving and giving help and counsel

**2) As a church – we need Jesus and each other**

- a. Solomon concluded – all is vanity and vexation of spirit without good relationships
- b. “if this chapter teaches us anything, it is that we need one another because “two are better than one.”
  - i. Turn to your neighbor and say – you matter to me!

**3) Remedy for the vanity Solomon saw – Jesus**

- a. Salvation and sanctification
  - i. There's a courtroom where justice is eternally given - salvation
  - ii. You need to live out godliness in your community - sanctification