

The End of the Matter

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Grace Church | June 30, 2019

Today is our last week in the book of Ecclesiastes, and it is incredibly fitting. The preacher does a stand up job recapping everything for us. But I want to set the stage quickly for you. As I read and studied our passage this week, it reminded me of a specific time in my life.

I had just finished high-school, and took a gap year before entering college to work at a ministry whose goal was to reach teenagers with Christ. This ministry was very serious—we took pledges of morality, we lived on a campus together to develop spiritually while we worked, we had nights of worship several times a week and high levels of accountability. There were many flaws in their ministry model that I see now, but nevertheless I grew to love Jesus in many ways. In this year of my life, however, what shaped me the most was not the ministry experience I was a part of. It was something I did not expect.

You see, I had started going to a church in town. A small church, they met in a dance studio. I didn't know much about it, but when I visited, I was struck. There was something about the way the Word of God was preached and proclaimed. Week after week as I went and heard the Word of God, I began to experience what I will call a gospel awakening.

What does that mean? Well, for me, it meant that all of a sudden, the good news of Jesus, the truth of Gospel, the glory of his person (who he is) and his work (what he has done), actually hit my heart. This was something I knew, I believed, I had grown up understanding: Jesus is good and he died for me. But at this small church in Tyler, Texas, the Word of God began to awaken the far corners of my heart that I had no idea were cold and dead.

Here is what was so surprising to me about this. The whole year that this was happening to me, guess what book of the Bible we were working through, Sunday after Sunday? Leviticus. The Mosaic Law. For a whole year—verse by verse by verse, we marched through Leviticus. Command after command showed me a few glorious things that I had never let sink into my heart: that God is supremely Holy, that Christ was the sacrificial lamb torn to pieces to fulfill God's holy Law, and that God is pleased with my obedience in Christ.

Consider those three things I learned from Leviticus. This was my gospel awakening, when I went from knowing and believing to feeling and loving. Two of those concepts you might expect. The holiness of God: that every command and do this, don't do this, I learned of God's supreme holiness. The sacrifice of Christ: that every bloody sacrifice I read and every thought of me inability to fulfill God's law led me to trust in Jesus who was put to death for me. We will see both of these concepts in our text today.

But that last concept of my learning might be foreign to a gospel awakening: God is pleased with my obedience in Christ. I found this lesson as God laid out his rigorous mosaic law in Leviticus and was pleased when his people obeyed him, even though he knew they would fail so often. It is this concept that I want to begin to draw out from our text this morning. My prayer is that it might begin, solidify, or confirm a process of gospel awakening for us. God is pleased with your obedience in Christ. Remember this as we move forward today.

So then, what has Leviticus to do with Ecclesiastes?

Well, this morning the preacher will end his book of wisdom by reminding us that the wisdom of God he has been teaching us is TRUTH. **Read 9-10.** Everything he has expounded up to this point: every ounce of wisdom and knowledge, are words of Truth. In the midst of a confusing, fallen, complex, world that we live in, God is not silent. Through the preacher he has peeled back layers of reality and shown us what is true and what is not.

And anytime God expresses himself, anytime he reveals himself: whether in the Mosaic Law of Leviticus or the Proverbial wisdom of Ecclesiastes, TRUTH is spoken.

Psalm 119:142 reminds us:

Your righteousness is righteous forever,
and your law is truth.

His law is truth, says the psalmist. His wisdom is truth, says the preacher. What am I getting at? I am getting at the idea here that we must be very careful to not treat our study of Ecclesiastes, as it comes to an end, as simple sayings for a happier life. No, this book is truth, it is Law, says the preacher. Here we have seen a way to view the world, and instructions on what to do in light of it.

So what is the truth we have learned in Ecclesiastes? In chapters 1-2 we learned of the vanity and vapor of our life—we can chase after riches, wisdom, and work, but they pass away with life. We learned in chapter 3 that time itself is outside of our control, and in God's eternity he has a purpose for every moment of our life. In chapter 5 we learned that since God is in control and we are not, we should enter in to worship him with a healthy reverence and awe. In chapter 7 we learned to look ahead to take lessons from the graveyard, in chapter 9 we learned to enjoy the things of earth as good gifts from our good creator, in chapter 11 we learned to cast out our gifts and our life as an investment in the kingdom of God, and last week we learned to age well in Christ by remembering our creator in our youth before it is too late.

This is the truth of Ecclesiastes, in all nine weeks we have journeyed through it. This is God's truth. We have learned to stare into the sun of reality and then look past reality into the echoes of the eternal. We have learned what it looks like to try to understand this world and also acknowledged all our limitations in doing so.

I think we can sum up the truth of Ecclesiastes, the teaching of the preacher, with these statements.

Life is a vapor, eternal life is not.

God is in charge of life, you are not.

Life is a gift, enjoy it and do not hoard it.

Let's leave those words on the screen if we can. When the preacher in our text mentions "words" or "truth" or "teaching" this is what he means. These are his words, summed up.

This is the frame for our text this morning. The preacher has reached his conclusion. He is preaching to us, saying: "Remember everything I've taught you! He has said all he needs to say, now he asks us: *will we listen?*"

If the preacher is calling to mind all he has taught us, and reminding us that his words are **true**, then I think we see three things about this truth from our text that will help us digest all we have learned in the last nine weeks. What is the last reminder of the preacher? What should we remember about the truth he has given us?

Truth is delightful. Truth is sufficient. Truth is given for awe and obedience.

Truth is delightful.

Read verse 10 again. The preacher is telling us that everything we have learned in Ecclesiastes is not created to make us law-abiding, wise stoics. Here is the flavor of God's truth he has been teaching us: this truth is inherently *delightful*.

My prayer is that you have seen in Ecclesiastes the freedom of this reality. This is not a doom and gloom book, but a book of sharp reality that brings *delight*. Understanding that God is after your joy and pleasure and delight in him can bring a lens to your life that you were previously missing.

Many Christians live as uncreative grouches. They hate art museums, they dislike literature, they only turn on the radio to drown out any other noise. But did you know that the Bible is full of language of *delight* in beauty? I am not saying you need to have the same tastes as the broad culture, or find the same things stirring, but what I am saying is that if you primarily view God as cold, calculating, and stoic—you are missing the profoundness of truth. What is your capacity for beauty?

Again, Psalm 119 is helpful for us. This is the longest psalm in the whole scripture: and it is full of joy. The word *delight* is used more than 10 times. And what is the psalmist finding delight, or pleasure, in? The Law of God, the truth of God.

"How sweet are your words to my taste!

Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psa. 119:103)

Friends, truth is delightful not just because it is right, but because it is beautiful. Look around at the world God has given you. Why do you think poetry exists? Music? Art? Because our God is a God of delight, and his truth, his wisdom, yes, his gospel, is of the highest and profound beauty. When he speaks, it is not dull and dim life that flows from his words. No, his words create light, beauty, art, goodness.

Sometimes it's hard to feel this beauty, I get it. The world can seem very dim at times. But when you truly encounter God, when you get a true glimpse of his truth, it hits not just your head but your heart. Ask this question: why do you love God? Is it because of what he has done for you? Or is because of who he is? When you imagine Christ—does your heart spring a little within you? Do you imagine the truth about him: how he lived a perfect life, died in your place, as just convenient? Great, thanks Jesus, now I can be free from sin and escape hell. Or do you see Jesus' person and work as *beautiful*, as delightful?

A good barometer for this is how you approach the Bible. These are the very words of God, the words of truth. Are they delightful to you? The truth of God can turn a dustbowl into a rainforest, a valley of bones into an army of able-bodied. The truth of God is the very thing which, if you are in Christ, has taken you from death to life. It's your food, your drink, your very life. And it is a good, sweet, food, because it showcases a sweet Christ.

In the midst of a fading world, Ecclesiastes teaches us that true delight and true joy is found in the Words, wisdom, and truth of God. This Word, this truth, will never lose its lustre or its beauty.

"All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever."

Every single time God speaks, he is exercising a reality of truth: it is full of delight. Take a look at the truth of Ecclesiastes again:

Life is a vapor, eternal life is not. Delight in the fact that your pains are coming to an end, and chasing after the wind is not your future. Your future is bright and beautiful in Christ.

God is in charge of life, you are not. Take delight in the fact that this complex and mysterious reality we live in is not yours to control.

Life is a gift, enjoy it and do not hoard it. Take delight in every single thing God has given you with open hands, for it is better to give than receive.

Truth is Sufficient.

The preacher is reminding us not just of the flavor of his teaching, but also the power of it. Truth is inherently delightful, but then the preacher moves to remind us of another concept he has been hinting at. Truth can also be painful sometimes. **Read 11.** What are goads? Goads are driving sticks, they are used for cattle or sheep to prod them along. They don't feel that great. The truth of God can hurt, it can be sharp and upset our sensibilities: but it has a purpose. The purpose of its sharpness is to ground us.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, as the truths of God, are like nails firmly fixed. They anchor us, root us, set us fast.

Have you ever used a nail gun? That's what I think about here. Those things are really powerful, they use air to literally shoot nails in. There is no steady hammering, there is a sort of finality to using a nail gun. You press it up to the surface, you pull the trigger, and whatever you are nailing, if done right, is fixed fast. The power of the tool brings a finality to it. You don't have to worry if you've nailed it just right—you trust the power of the gun.

God's truth is like a nail gun—with more power and punch than we could ever deliver. And what is its purpose? To fix us firm to him. To nail us down, not letting us go. To make us firm. God's truth, the truth of Ecclesiastes, is like a nail driven with indescribable force into a wall or board. It's not going anywhere. The finality and firmness of the truth should lead us to understand the sufficiency of truth. **Read verse 12.**

Do you see the logic? The truth I have given you, says the preacher, is firm and solid and fixed. There is no need to go outside of it for anything else. There is nothing more firm than the truth of God—so when you understand it and believe it, it should be enough. It is sufficient. Beware of going outside of it, looking for something else or some other kind of answer. “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh”. Why look elsewhere? I've shown you the reality of life and the truth of God—quit acting like there is more searching to be done. So the preacher finalizes this idea of sufficiency with the beginning of **verse 13**: “the end of the matter; all has been heard.”

The preacher is warning us to remember and be satisfied with the truth we have learned and believed. He is leading us to ask ourselves this question: are we a people satisfied in the sufficiency of God's revealed truth?

Here is a reality of life: sufficiency is not popular. The new age of enlightenment has given us a desire always to ask questions, but not a desire to find answers. To say to a modern man: “My questions have only spawned more question” is noble, wise, and intelligent, but to say to a modern man: “I have found the answer to life” is offensive, arrogant, and small minded. We love questions, but hate answers.

Doubt is the religion of modernity. Always challenging, always questioning, never answering. Recently, Rob Bell, formerly a well known evangelical pastor, released a film called *The Heretic*. In it, he aimed to show that our modern idea of Christianity has lost its way, primarily because it is too dogmatic. At one point in the film, he says “I actually think Jesus would be absolutely mortified that someone started a religion in his name”.

There it is: the spirit of the age, friends. No religion, no rules, no finality, no truth. But into all of this confusion, God is not silent, is he? He has shown us that his revealed word is entirely sufficient for all the truth we need. Why? Because this word, this scripture, this truth, this book of Ecclesiastes even, is given by *one great shepherd!* This shepherd *loves* his sheep, cares for his sheep, and shows his sheep the way and path of righteousness. We do not serve a vague, uncertain God who appears to us in an indistinguishable glob of cosmic goop, we serve a God who took on flesh to reveal to us the finality and sufficiency of his word. This word became a man and *acted* finally on behalf of God to save sinners. This good news, this gospel, is the final word in the universe. There is no going beyond it, around it, above it or below it.

Let Rob Bell and Oprah and everyone else make books and books and movies and scripts and act out the eternal loop of the search for meaning. Let the philosophers and the skeptics and the new atheists restlessly search for meaning and purpose and truth. Let the sexual revolution bend and twist and disorient the meaning and message of God-instigated anthropology. Let liberal theologians and institutions make the sufficiency of scripture only a footnote in their theological encyclopedias and flounder when their ethics are strained and their systems are flawed. Let the whole world be uncertain and unsure and full of searching. But you Christian, can put away your searching. Your life is not meant to be lived seeking after the answer: you have the answer.

God has created you, gifted you with life, put you in this world he is in charge of, and shown you his sovereign grace in the gospel of Jesus. You are not built to seek for the answer, you are built to seek after the depths of the answer you have already found. The one Shepherd has come, spoken, lived, died, and was raised. The end of the matter: all has been heard.

Look again at the review of truth of Ecclesiastes.

Life is a vapor, eternal life is not.

God is in charge of life, you are not.

Life is a gift, enjoy it and do not hoard it.

Will these truths be sufficient for you? As they reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ: which is eternal, God-ordained, and a gift of grace, will the gospel be sufficient enough for you? Will God’s truth be enough to live your life in light of? Will your searching end today? I pray the answer is yes.

Truth is given for awe and obedience.

As the preacher expounds upon his conclusion, we have seen the flavor of his teaching: it's delightful. We've also seen the power of his teaching: it's sufficient. But now he ends his weighty book with the *purpose* of his teaching.

We've seen reality clearly in Ecclesiastes. We have learned that life is a vapor, a breath, and that death is certain and comes when we might not expect it. In this book we have also seen plenty of points of action: enjoy, rejoice, invest, remember. This action is what the preacher wants to sum up here. This is final, closing, call to action.

Verse 13. Fear God, and Keep his commandments. What is striking is that the preacher tells us this is the “whole duty” of man. That is significant. We can sum this up as awe and obedience.

The first command to us is to fear God. I truly believe that if you have been awake for the last 9 weeks in Ecclesiastes, or even awake so far today, this action will make sense to you. If you have yet to realize the complexity and intricacy of the world you live in is outside of your control, you are not really awake here. If you can look face to face with the passing of time, death, aging, and the vanity of life and not stood in awe of God who holds all of it in his hands, you aren't really looking.

One author sums up fear of the Lord like this: “that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law.”¹

Ecclesiastes teaches us that God is in total control of this crazy world. We should relate to him then, as humble children, with reverent awe and fear. We bend our knee to him, with affectionate reverence, as a child fears his good father.

And what do children who have an affectionate reverence do? They obey. To call then, to fear God and to obey God are intrinsically linked. We obey God because we have an affectionate reverence for his position in the world compared to ours.

But this is not the end of the story just yet. These two calls to actions, to fear and obey, must be viewed rightly. What is the lens by which the preacher closes out his sermon? Judgement. **Read verse 14.**

If you think this theme has arisen from nowhere, then you haven't been listening carefully in the book of Ecclesiastes. This book has been teaching us to live in light of reality, and the reality of reality is that it is coming to an end. What comes afterward is not “the great unknown”. What comes after reality is judgement. Ecclesiastes has been hinting at this for most of the book. Remember last week, in chapter 11:9? Rejoice in your youth, but remember God will bring you into judgement.

¹ Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs*

And what does judgement consist of? Look again at verse 14. God will bring *every deed* into judgement. Every single deed, good or evil, will be brought into the light. Nothing will be hidden from the eternal eyes of God. This thought reminds us that there is a record of eternity that is kept in Heaven. God is the sovereign scribe: every action of yours, minute and substantial, is recorded. The divine DVR. When you leave this world, you will face God for judgement and he will replay your tapes in detail.

Think about what this means. Remember when we translated the primary word of Ecclesiastes? It's the Hebrew word *Hebel*. We said that it means breath, vanity. Some translations, however, translate that word as "meaninglessness". I think this is terribly misleading. Why? Because Ecclesiastes is showing us that while the physical world is fleeting and failing, it is not meaningless. Your life, rather, is of eternal significance. Every single action and every single thought and every single deed of yours will be brought into judgement. When your life ends, it's not as if the record is wiped clean and you get to start over. The coming judgement reminds us that human beings are made up of heavenly matter. We will not cease to exist at our death, rather we will give an account. Every second of your fleeting life has eternal meaning.

Judgement, however, may be one of the most misunderstood concepts in all of Scripture. We fear it, but not with a holy, righteous fear, we often fear it with a sense of dread. We don't think of judgement with a wide enough perspective. I want us to see the two-fold nature of judgement in view here. I was pointed to this passage by another preacher as I prepared this week. And it completely changed my perspective. This is 1 Corinthians 4:5:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

The language here is strikingly similar to Ecclesiastes, and it calls us to live in light of the end. We are not to pass judgement on anyone prematurely—this means we are to err on the side of giving our brothers and sisters the absolute benefit of the doubt. Why? Because it is God's job to bring the hidden parts of the heart things to light, not ours. When that finally happens though, when judgement day comes, what happens? Each will receive his commendation from God.

Now, do not get this confused. This word sounds like condemnation, but it is an entirely different meaning. Yes, when judgement comes, there will be condemnation for some. God will judge the unrepentant as still in their sin, and condemnation will be sure. But there will also be commendation.

Commendation is the opposite of condemnation. It is praise, reward. It's saying "well done". The Scripture is clear for us then that on the day of judgement God will over our lives, and not only will there be evil, there will also be good. There will be things of which he says: "well-done!". Ray

Ortlund calls this the “divine high-five”. As you enter into glory, full of awe and wonder and righteous fear, God will commend you for your obedience.

Judgement is coming. Every moment of your life matters, because it is to be weighed and measured. All your actions will come into the light.

Just a few weeks ago was the commemoration of D-Day. On that day 75 years ago, Allied troops stormed the beaches of Normandy and achieved a decisive victory. The stakes were insurmountably high. Every action of theirs mattered. They needed wisdom, perspective, and purpose to succeed. Some soldiers acted more valiantly than others. Some had more opportunity to—some died before they got the chance. But every single soldier and every single life played a part in the plan of victory. The plan laid out by Eisenhower and his peers was sound, it was followed, and it succeeded.

Think of judgement day like this, friends. If you have never repented of your sin and trusted Christ’s work for you, you are not the soldier of God—you are his enemy. This was all of us before we trusted Christ. May today be today you switch sides, the offer is open and it’s not too late. But if you are in Christ, God has made you fit for the ministry of war in this strange world. He is your commander, and he has a plan that will not fail. You may get a chance to play a bigger part, or maybe your part is small, but each part is significant.

And when you get to that day when your part is played, and the end has come, what happens? The commander reviews the battle with you. He has a tape and record of all the actions you took, every shot you fired, every thought of your heart. As you go over the tape, you see many times where you failed miserably. Your aim was bad, your heart was soft, you shied away when you should have trusted the plan. Maybe even there was a time where you abandoned it all together and cursed your commander. But for all this, there is no condemnation from your commander. Why? Because the battle is over. The war has been won. Victory was already achieved. He is far too perfect and noble a strategist to let your failures and your cowardice get in the way of his victory. No, he assures the victory himself, no matter your failure. You play a part, but he is the hero.

So what left is there to do? Well, remember your commander has taken a record of every one of your actions on the battlefield. There were times where you failed, yes, but there were times when you trusted. With faith in your commander and his plan, you were brave and valiant. You took pride in obeying his orders and commands. You aimed straight and hit the enemy and encouraged your comrades and stayed true to the mission. All these moments are also in view. Maybe there are many, maybe there are few. But they are there. And what does your commander do? He commends you. He tells you: well done. I’m proud of you. Come and rest and enjoy our victory.

Christian, if you are in Christ then you are a new creation. You are not defined by your failure, and because Jesus nailed all your sin to the cross when he died, you will not stand in condemnation on that. But God has not just granted you forgiveness. By his divine Grace, God has made you one with Jesus and given you everything you need for life and Godliness. He has given you a set of

commands too, and he has given you the Holy Spirit as the indwelling power to obey those commands. In Ecclesiastes we find a lot of them. We find that they are delightful and good, sufficient and powerful, and we find that should cause us to stand in awe and in obedience.

Here is the closing note of Ecclesiastes. God is wise, you are not. But he was shown you his wisdom in his revealed Word and in the Word made flesh. So we remember what I learned from Leviticus, we can learn now from Ecclesiastes: **God is pleased with your obedience in Christ.**

This is not works-based righteousness, this is at the heart of the gospel. As you have become a child of God, you can bring your broken, flawed, failure of a life before him, and on the day of judgement he will view your flawed obedience as a father views the artwork of a toddler. "Daddy, look what I made!", you will say. You are trying to please him. He knows it's flawed, but he sees it's beauty. He sees a son, a daughter. If you are in Christ, on that day when your life ends he will wrap you up in his arms, go over the events of your life, and say: you are forgiven when you failed, and I'm proud of you when you obeyed.

If this doesn't wake you up to the goodness of the gospel, I don't know what will. Only the work of Jesus can do this. Only the work of Jesus can make us alive to God in order to obey him. This changes everything. With every moment of your fleeting, vain, vaporous life, you can make God proud. He will give the grace to do it, not of your own power. Wake up, O Sleeper! God is kind to you in Christ and you have a clear charge: fear God, and obey his commands. This is the end of the matter, all has been heard.