

Sermon for July 31, 2016 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18-26 (AAT)

Theme: Wise Words from a Wealthy Man.

- 1) Pursuing worldly wealth is pointless.
- 2) Happiness is found in Godly contentment.

“Absolutely pointless!” says the preacher. “Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.” . . . I hated everything I had worked for under the sun. I have to leave it to the man who comes after me. And who knows if he will be wise or foolish? He will take control of everything under the sun for which I worked and used my skill. This also is pointless. Then I started to despair of everything I worked for under the sun. Here is a man who has worked hard with intelligence, knowledge, and skill only to turn it over to one who didn’t work for it and so it belongs to him. This also is pointless and a terrible tragedy. What does a man get for all his work and striving with which he wearies himself under the sun? All his life is painful, and his work is troublesome. Even at night his mind can’t rest. This also is pointless. There is nothing better among men than eating, drinking, and finding satisfaction in your work. I also saw that this comes from God’s hand. Without God, who can eat and enjoy himself? To anyone who pleases Him He gives wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure. But to one who lives in sin He gives the job of gathering and collecting wealth only to turn it over to one who pleases God. This also is pointless, like trying to catch the wind.

“Absolutely pointless!” says the preacher. “Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.” . . . What kind of person do you imagine making such a statement? Do you picture a frustrated worker - doing all he can to get ahead in life, only to have problem after problem prevent him? That’s the first person I would imagine saying these words; but they aren’t from such a man. They come, rather, from one of the richest, wisest and most successful people that ever lived: King Solomon.

Humanly speaking, he was a man who had it all: fame, fortune and power. Everything he set his mind to succeeded. His negotiations and trade policies made Israel so rich that he made *silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones.*ⁱ His people loved him. Almost every world leader respected him. He built one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world.

It is he, this wildly rich and successful man, who says: *Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.” . . . I hated everything I had worked for under the sun.* What in the world would lead Solomon to say such a thing? Was he going mad? No, as we will see, he was actually starting to express true spiritual wisdom - a wisdom we would do well to listen to. Let us, then, consider the reason behind Solomon's rant, under the theme: **Wise Words from a Wealthy Man.** 1) Pursuing worldly wealth is pointless. 2) Happiness is found in Godly contentment.

Part One: Pursuing worldly wealth is pointless.

Our sermon text is taken from Ecclesiastes - a book of the Bible that King Solomon wrote late in life. Let me tell you a little secret: I love this book. Why? Because it is wonderfully depressing - showing us how meaningless life is without Christ! And why is that a good thing? Because it directs us to strive for the one thing that is truly important: the salvation God offers us through faith in Christ Jesus.

King Solomon was the wisest man there ever was. At first Solomon used his God-given talent to glorify the LORD and lead people to him. Later on, however, Solomon started to misuse his wisdom to sinfully pursue fame, fortune, and carnal pleasure. He succeeded at almost every worldly pursuit - thinking all these things would bring him true happiness. But they didn't. Why not? Because, as Solomon grew older, He came to realize that everything on this earth is temporary - as the Scripture say elsewhere, *the world is passing away.*ⁱⁱ Nothing lasts forever, therefore nothing really matters.

This truth lead Solomon to exclaim: *I hated everything I had worked for under the sun. I have to leave it to the man who comes after me. And who knows if he will be wise or foolish? He will take control of everything under the sun for which I worked and used my skill. This also is pointless. Then I started to despair of everything I worked for under the sun. Here is a man who has worked hard with intelligence, knowledge, and skill only to turn it over to one who didn't work for it and so it belongs to him. This also is pointless and a terrible tragedy.*

As the old expression goes: "You can't take it with you!" Everything you work hard to attain on this earth will be left behind when you die, as Job once confessed: *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart."*ⁱⁱⁱ And then what will happen to everything you worked for while on this earth? Someone else will get it. And what then? Will the son, daughter, friend or relative treasure what you left them as much as you did? Will they wisely or foolishly handle the wealth you left them? History is filled with examples of children wasting their parents' inheritance. So many companies fall from their heights of success after an exemplary CEO retires or dies. And why is this the case? Usually because the person who takes over never worked hard for the wealth he inherited. How can he, then, have the same passion for it as his predecessor?

This led Solomon to ask *What does a man get for all his work and striving with which he wearies himself under the sun? All his life is painful, and his work is troublesome. Even at night his mind can't rest. This also is pointless.*

All the earthly things we work for and care about: are they really worth the pain, toil and sleepless nights in the end? Are they truly worth sacrificing our relationship with God to get? If we're honest with ourselves, we have to say: no, they aren't.

But someone might say: at least we will have memories, and that's something! But what good are memories when I grow old and begin to forget? And even if I don't forget, how will my memories of the good things I once had, but do not have any more, actually benefit me? If anything, they make me more miserable as I begin to long for the things I am no longer able to have!

Solomon's point is clear: outside of Christ, everything we work for and strive after on this earth is pointless. None of it can offer true happiness, peace and security. None of it will save my soul from hell? I mean, think about it: Will all my toys, gadgets, and experiences have a positive impact on God when He raises me on the last day? Will He say to me: "Good job Michael, I am impressed that you used everything I gave you to experience so many things in life! I am so happy you used the gifts I entrusted you with to selfishly get more and more!"? No, that certainly will not happen. What good is it, then, for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?^{iv}

Oh, what a blessing it was when aged Solomon finally saw this depressing truth! Why do I say that? Because the LORD led him back to what truly matters: not the Packers or Brewers, not our stock portfolio or financial legacy we leave for our children. The only thing that truly matters is the LORD and our relationship with him; as the Bible says: *the man who does the will of God lives forever.*^v

Part Two: Happiness is found in Godly contentment.

This is why, after speaking about the pointlessness of striving after "things," Solomon writes: *There is nothing better among men than eating, drinking, and finding satisfaction in your work. I also saw that this comes from God's hand. Without God, who can eat and enjoy himself?*

The LORD who created this earth still stands in control over it. He determines when and where people will live and what blessings they will have. Everything we have and are is from the LORD, and how blessed we are when we acknowledge this fact. Why? Because then we won't worry about our life - what we will eat, drink or wear. Rather, trusting in God, we will seek first his kingdom and righteousness, believing that he will continue to provide everything else we need.^{vi} This will cause us to look at everything we have with thanksgiving. Instead of complaining we will enjoy the earthly blessings God gives us (whether they be many or few).

Without God's aid it would be impossible for us to have this mindset. Like the rest of the world, we still have a sinful, selfish nature inside of us - one that wants to be its own god and master of its own fate. And, if it were not for the Holy Spirit's aid and counsel, we would be like the rest of the world - living only for ourselves and striving for more. But God, working through his word, calls us to repent from such striving. By the power of his Gospel, he leads us to seek him out and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, life and salvation. And when we look to Christ in repentance and faith, then God is truly pleased with us.

And, as Solomon says, *to anyone who pleases Him [God] gives wisdom, knowledge, and pleasure* - not in the earthly sense of allowing us to be healthy, wealthy and wise. Rather, the LORD gives us these gifts in a spiritual sense. Through the Gospel, he reveals his true nature to us: who he is, how he saved us, and the glorious future He offers us through faith in Christ Jesus. God gives us the spiritual wisdom to apply his divine knowledge to our lives. We don't have to fret or worry about life on this earth. We can thank God for what we have (even if it is only a little) knowing that he will keep his promise to take care of us. We can live in joy of knowing that, even though the world might consider us and our work of little consequence, God loves us

and considers our station in life very important. Why? Because he put us where we are and works through us to glorify His name.

“But,” Solomon says, *“to one who lives in sin He gives the job of gathering and collecting wealth only to turn it over to one who pleases God.”* Now, someone might say, “I disagree with Solomon. There are many godless people on this earth who are wildly successful. How does this jibe with what he says?” Because, nothing they have will go with them when they die. No, everything goes back to God. He will use what they left behind to accomplish his will of saving his elect. And, even though His followers might suffer trial, hardship or want, they will, in the end, inherit the new heaven and earth God will create for them on the Last Day.

Brothers and sisters in Christ - a lot of people pay a lot of money to hear the insights, wisdom and secrets of the rich. Today, you have heard the advice of one of the richest and wisest men that has ever walked this earth. Take his encouragement to heart: the pursuit of worldly wealth is pointless. True happiness can only be found in the heart of the person who believes in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, thanks God for everything, and trusts that, whether wealthy or poor, the LORD will work in all things for his eternal good, just as he promised. This is the secret of Godly contentment. This is the secret to finding true happiness, joy and meaning in your life on this earth. May the LORD grant us his grace to take these truths to heart, and live in them. Amen.

ⁱ 2 Chronicles 1:15 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 1 John 2:17 ESV

ⁱⁱⁱ Job 1:21 NIV84

^{iv} cf. Mark 8:36 NIV84

^v 1 John 2:17 NIV84

^{vi} Cf. Matthew 6:31-33