

**“Wisdom, Work & Worship”**  
**Ecclesiastes 2:12-26**

**Intro:**

- Coaching... One more week: at practice... shoot a little bit.. video game: Learn about their culture. . . . Pregame our varsity has brought in DJ Love. I kid you not, that’s what they call him. (My teammates in college: “t-luv”) All these rap songs that I have never heard because I typically unplug from all of that because while the beats are pounding, the lyrics are what we could call “less than edifying.” But it’s good for us to not have our heads in the sand when it comes to our culture, so I’ve looked up and listened to a couple of the songs that are kids & college kids & adults have on play and repeat. Why? Two reasons:
- Our culture is screaming this at us! & This is what the Preacher was screaming before Jesus even arrived.
- Listen to the lyrics from Drake (aka “Drizzy”) in his song “Headlines.” Regarding Pleasure in Alcohol, Success & Fame: “Drinking every night because we drink to my accomplishments.”
- Regarding wealth: “I be yelling out Money *over everything*. Money on my mind... I guess it’s just me, myself, and all my millions.”
- Regarding Power: “The real is on the rise... now it’s something they know. They know. They know.” The real of course, being himself.
- Noticeably absent from this chart topper is explicit references to sex, but it’s a guarantee that

**FCF: Today’s rap songs were the laundry list of the preacher almost 3,000 years ago! The Preacher has some more wisdom to pass on to us this morning and he is going to teach us a lot about wisdom, work, and worship. The first piece of instruction he would give us is to:**

**I. Realize death equalizes the value of wisdom (2:12-17).**

- Verse twelve marks a change of subject. He continues to take us on his quest to find meaning and satisfaction in life. He moves us from the previous experiment with pleasure in verses 1-11 of ch. 2, to know considering the pursuit of wisdom over folly.
- You may remember in chapter one that he raised the issue of wisdom... (rework)
- Verse 12. “For what can man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.” – He seems to be claiming that his royal position and all that he had experience qualify him supremely for anyone else and all who succeed him. In effect, he’s saying, if anyone has the answer to this question, it’s me!

***The Value of Wisdom:***

- Verse 13: “Then I saw (again, he is an empiricist and experientialist; what did he see?) that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.”
- Wisdom is living life according to God’s intentions.
- “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...” (Proverbs 1:7)
- We need wisdom. We should ask God for wisdom. The early Christians, who were studs, were described as those full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Just check how Luke describes Stephen and others in Acts 6.
- Pic: more gain in light than darkness (Illus.: walking in the dark, stump your toe??)
- First part of 14 has a proverbial ring to it: “The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.”
- So there is legitimate value in wisdom, but...

***The Vanity of Wisdom: Death is the Great Equalizer because the wise and foolish both die.***

- It’s almost like he sets us up... Hey, there’s value in wisdom (Longman)...
- Check 14-15: “And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.” What happens? They die. Whatever profit, whatever value wisdom holds for us is immediately equalized by the reality of death.
- The wise, the fool, they *both* die. But he moves from the general to the particular in verse 15...
- Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this is also vanity.’
  - The Preacher is in a dialogue with his heart, trying to reason all this out at the very core of who he is.
  - Isn’t this how we come to some of life’s most significant realizations? Oh that’s true for them.. Oh, wait, that’s true for... me? It’s true for me. Ex. Ex.

- His use of “vanity” better understood here as not that which is empty or fleeting, but that which is “a maddening affront to reason,” because even the value of wisdom over foolishness is “turned on its head.” (Enns)

We see the theme of death surfacing again and again in Ecclesiastes.

- Unless Jesus returns soon, 100% of us will all die.
  - Pastoral Argument: Own up to your own mortality. We try to push it back as far as we can. No amount of anti-aging cream is going to keep us from the consequences of the curse. I just found out that companies are targeting 20 year olds for their anti-aging products. Wow! Listen, it doesn't matter how much cream you use, how many times you work out every week, not that I'm saying we should get our swole on, it doesn't matter how many times you pass up dessert, though I'm certainly not saying we shouldn't watch our diet. I'm just saying that death is knocking on all of our doors and one day the door is going to open, and then what? Thank God for the gospel!
- “Death is the great equalizer because no matter how high you ascend, you'll eventually descend six feet under.” (Chandler/Driscoll)
- Death puts the wise and the foolish on equal footing. How? Because both the wise and foolish die, added to that...

### **Death is the Great Equalizer because we will soon be forgotten.**

- Verse 16: “For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.”
- We were introduced to this theme in 1:11: “
- He continues in verse 16: “How the wise dies just like the fool!” Do you think there is tone of despair here? Absolutely. So much so that he says in verse 17... “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.”
- He is distressed and grieved by this reality. . Now let me make a theological observation here...

### **Excursus on Death in Ecclesiastes & the Bible**

- The Preacher is focused on these earthly pursuits apart from the reality of God's eternal plan. Of course, God clearly spells out the realities of heaven and hell and the new creation that is to come, but death is predominantly the end of the game for The Preacher.
- And to be fair to him, the OT has a less developed view of heaven and hell. That doesn't mean it's not there... the ideas of justice, judgment, the coming Kingdom, eternity with God are all there.
- Even the Preacher gives us glimpses along the way, and the book ends with this powerful statement on the point of life and even speaks of the coming judgment.

Perhaps all is not lost by the prospect of death. Perhaps, thinks the Preacher, we can find some value in death by passing on our wealth to those who come after us. Maybe that's a way to “beat death,” (Enns) but as soon as the thought comes to mind, he declares in **verse 18-19**: “I hated all my toil...” These verses bring us to our second truth this morning...

### **II. Realize death equalizes the value of work (2:18-23).**

So what is he saying? All the hours, all the sweat of your brow, all the forethought, all the strategizing, all of the paychecks, possessions, IRAs, 401ks, stocks, savings, bonds, piggy banks, *all of that...* you do not

### **Death is the Great Equalizer because we cannot control our possessions.**

- For someone who could control so much in his life. Remember, this is the king. If he wanted throw a party, if he wanted concubines, if he wanted a new development project (reword), all he had to do was call the shots, snap his fingers, and it was done like that
- But now, he's viewing the end of his life, the vanity of death, and it dawns on him, everything I've worked for, all of my assets, could end up in the hands of a fool.
- It was the unpredictability of it all that seemed so cruel, so absurd, so vain to the Preacher, and it caused him to despair.

- Verse 20: “So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled...”
- That is strong. This is the same person who “applied his heart” in this passionate quest for meaning, satisfaction, and a deep, abiding reason to live in this world as we saw in chapter one when. Now he is saying his wholehearted pursuit has been short-circuited once again, so much so that he’s given his heart up to despair. Why?
- V. 21ff “Because sometime a person...”
- You can work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill. You may be as competent and as successful as they come. In fact, you can put your heart and soul into this. You can be the hardest working cat on the block, but in the end, the Preacher says our “days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation”
- He says, “You can be a workaholic...but in the end it’s ‘nothing more than pain and grief.’” Even in the night his heart doesn’t rest. He knows something is not right. He does not have peace.

### Work Life

- Pastoral Application: Do you try to find ultimate meaning and lasting satisfaction in your work?
- Do you find your identity in your work? When people ask you the question: “What do you do?” Do you say, “I am a designer; I am an accountant; I am a lawyer.” As if your identity is wrapped up in what you do. I mean, I’m not trying to get too technical with the expressions we use in everyday life, after all there is some truth in saying, I am a pastor. That is part of who I am, but my work does not define me as a person. What you do is not who you are. I am first and foremost a Christian. Jesus defines me....
- Does your work define you? Or to be more specific, does your success and productivity at work define you?
- *Confession:* I struggle with this... so many times I find myself delighting more in what I do for God than in God himself. I feel more valuable and more important if ministry is good, rather than the fact that Jesus is good. (clean up...)
- Maybe it’s not the work itself but the fruit of those labors? The \$ in the bank. The ability to travel, to eat where you want to eat, the ability to maintain a certain type of lifestyle.
- All of this may drive many us to be a workaholic. It’s not enough to put in a 40-45-50 hour week. We need to go 60-70-75 to stay on top of the game, to keeping building our clout in the workplace....

### Idolatry & Worship

- So by this point in the journey, The Preacher has told us about his quest to find that which profits and provides satisfaction in life. He’s looked at pleasure. alcohol. accomplishment. industry. possessions. power. money. silver. gold. treasure. sex. entertainment. wisdom. work. and he has concluded that it is all vanity and a striving after the wind.
- I don’t know if you’re watching this, but he is derailing and short circuiting all of our pursuits by saying, “I’ve done it. It doesn’t work.” (Chandler)
- But here’s the great danger, we can read that, and intellectually sign off on that, but at the end of the day, it’s only the grace of God that is going to keep us from chasing these very same idols day in day out, week in week out in our lives.
- As **John Calvin said, “Our hearts are idol factories.”** We have an uncanny ability to produce idols by elevate the pursuit of achievement, recognition, pleasure, wealth or sex above our desire and love for God. And you ask, “Tanner, how do I know if something is an idol for me. How do I know when I am worshiping my work, worshiping a relationship? Well...
- **Idolatry is taking a good thing and perverting it into an ultimate thing.** So ultimate that would might say, “**My life would be complete, if I only had \_\_\_\_\_.**” (you fill in the blank... that thing you’ve set your heart, your affections on.. that relationship, that promotion, that possession). We take the good things God makes and we make them ultimate, so ultimate that if I don’t have enough money to buy that new car, my life is less meaningful. If I lose that person’s approval, my sense of worth goes with it. If don’t find Mr. or Mrs. Right, then my life will be less than fulfilling.
- [What is your greatest nightmare? What do you spend your time thinking about? Set your affections on?]
- So think about this, the idols in our life have a controlling influence in our life. Our sense of worth and identity and purpose is all jacked up if it is taken away. And what does that mean: It means that whatever your idols are, these counterfeit gods, have become a functional Savior and functional Master in your life...

- Some of you may be thinking: “The Preacher had all these possessions to leave, I ain’t got jack!” Well, the pursuit of wealth may be as great of an idol for you as the one who has it all. That’s the depth of idolatry.

**The Point: Rather than worshipping wisdom and work, enjoy life as a gift from God.** (Which brings us to our 3 and final encouragement...)

### III. Enjoy life as a gift from God by living for his pleasure (2:24-26)

- Some call these passages “carpe-diem passages.” The Preacher will provide this counsel seven different times throughout his address in Ecclesiastes.
- “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” There is certainly a tone of resignation here, but I don’t believe we shouldn’t read a negative tone into the passage [as some scholars do], because he goes on to say, “This is from the hand of God”
- Verse 25: “for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment.”
- 1 Cor. 4:7: “For what do you have that you have not received?”
- The provision of the necessities in your life: fall on your knees and give God thanks. But what about enjoyment? Fall on your knees and understand that everything we truly enjoy and the ability to experience joy is dependent and necessarily connected to God.
- Joy and enjoyment is a gift of God.
- We have an opportunity every single day we live to glorify God by enjoying each day as a gift.
- Christians of all people should enjoy life in this fallen and imperfect world. It doesn’t matter if everything at work is haywire, the kids are driving you bananas, the Pats just lost the Super Bowl... enjoy each day. How? As a gift from the hand of God.
- Now, here’s how he finishes it in verse 26.
- “For to the one who pleases him God has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

#### Living Life to Please God

- Last week, in light of the vanity of finding pleasure in worldly pursuits, Jon encouraged us to pursue pleasure in God as the only source of ultimate and lasting joy. In other words, the focus was on finding pleasure in God. This week in light of verse 26, I want to encourage us to make the aim of our lives the pleasure of God. Rather than finding pleasure in him, verse 26 pushes us to do what we do whether its eating or drinking or working or worship with the ultimate aim and motivation to please God. The Bible tells us to live our lives to please God and glorify him.
- **“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10 ESV).**
- One of my mentors in seminary unpacked his philosophy of life in ten words. You ready? “All that matters in life is that you please God.”
- So, here’s the million dollar question: **“How do we please God?”**
- **FAITH.** It’s faith... Just believe.
- **“And without faith it is impossible to please God...” (Heb. 11:6)**

#### Application to Close:

What? What about obedience & doing his will. Yeah the one is dependent on the other. They necessarily flow from the other. What do you mean? You know those songs we sang? God, wasn’t impressed if it wasn’t in faith... You know those prayers? God wasn’t please if it wasn’t flowing from faith. You know that drive to church (why did you have to go there?), Faith. You know when you punch the time clock tomorrow. Faith... Enjoy life as a gift from God by living for his pleasure. How do we live for his pleasure? Faith.

Do you know Christ? Faith... Turn from trusting in these functional saviors that pose as the real thing, but cannot offer lasting and ultimate satisfaction. Drake said, “The real is on the rise.” He was wrong. The real has already risen. Life is found in Jesus... not in the cravings of our culture, not in the cravings of our heart, apart from him. If death is the great equalizer for the Preacher, death meets its death in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. So what do we need to do? If you are exploring Christianity today, let me encourage you: don’t procrastinate. Believe in Christ and live. If you are a believer wrestling with the variety of idols in your heart, believe in Christ and live.