

“The Limits of Human Wisdom”
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
(Preached at Trinity, April 2, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We've been reading the sermon by Solomon, the Preacher.
Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAU - "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
 - A. The theme is expressed at the beginning
"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
 - B. The word literally refers to a vapor or mist. Something that quickly fades away, like your breath on a cold winter morning.
The word can also mean, "useless, futile, empty, vain."
 - a. The scope is universal. ALL is vanity. Solomon has in mind all that comprises a man's life. During the course of this Book Solomon will approach the subject from the many aspects of our life.
 - b. His point is not that all life is meaningless. Solomon will argue that life without God is meaningless. He'll stress the emptiness and vanity of this world; of what happens when we choose what this world has to offer instead of what God provides; seeking our own way instead of seeking God's way.
2. The first area that Solomon focuses is our earthly work, the labors that are the focus of our life.
 - A. To what advantage is it? Is there any profit in it?
Ecclesiastes 1:3 NAU - "What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?"
What "advantage?" What "profit?"
It is a rhetorical question with the expectation of a negative answer.
There is no value, all is vanity.
 - B. Remember, Solomon has a particular theme in this Book. Life apart from God has no meaning. Nothing else really matters. We are laboring in vain.
In the course of this Book Solomon will outline several reasons why all is vain.
3. The first problem with our labors is the brevity of life
Ecclesiastes 1:4 NAU - "A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever."
There are countless generations of men.
A younger generation replaces the older, and then they are replaced. An endless cycle. People come and go and are soon forgotten.

4. Solomon gives us another reason why there is futility to a life lived without God. Everything is an endless cycle of change but there is nothing new. The future is merely a repetition of the past.
Ecclesiastes 1:9 NAU - "That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun."
5. Now, beginning with **Verse 12** Solomon makes a turn in his message. He switches to the first person and the subject of wisdom comes to the forefront. The subject of wisdom rules in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The word "wise" or "wisdom" occurs over 50 times. If you add the words "know" or "knowledge" it brings the count to over 70. The Book of Ecclesiastes is truly a wisdom book.
6. Solomon is speaking from experience.
Ecclesiastes 1:13 NAU - "And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven."
 - a. Solomon gave a lot of time to the contemplation of wisdom. He set his mind to seek and explore.
 Of all the characteristics of King Solomon, wisdom was the chief.
 - b. No one has enjoyed greater wisdom than Solomon.
1 Kings 3:12 NAU - "Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you."
1 Kings 4:29-31 NAU - "Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. ³⁰ Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ For he was wiser than all men"
 Solomon affirms this in **Verse 16**.
 - c. People came from far and wide just to hear his wisdom.
1 Kings 4:34 NAU - "Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom."
 - d. But as Solomon evaluated his life and his wisdom he came to the same conclusion
Ecclesiastes 1:14 NAU - "all is vanity and striving after wind."
7. Solomon gave great energy to his study of wisdom. But it was human, worldly wisdom, not the wisdom of God. It was all vanity and striving after wind.
 - a. Spiritual wisdom is the right understanding of God and His Word. Of rightly applying His Word to our lives. It is true discernment.
 - b. Worldly or human wisdom is the practical application of knowledge.
 Worldly wisdom comes up short.
 It is based upon knowledge that can be faulty and constantly changing.
 Human wisdom does not lead to a right understanding of God and His purposes. It doesn't lead to a right comprehension of life.
 - c. Solomon possessed wisdom from God, but history would prove that Solomon ultimately turned away from the wisdom God bestowed upon him. He was given over to carnal reasoning and was swallowed up in idolatry.
1 Kings 11:1 NAU - "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women"
1 Kings 11:4 NAU - "when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father *had been*."
 - d. Solomon's wisdom came up short.

8. In **Verses 12-18** Solomon came to two conclusions in his study of wisdom.
- a. Wisdom lacks the power to change anything.
 - b. Wisdom will actually increase the sorrow of a man.
- I. Wisdom lacks the power to change anything
- A. Solomon uses a proverb to describe this truth
Ecclesiastes 1:15 NAU - "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted."
 1. He repeats it in **Chapter 7** with greater clarity.
Ecclesiastes 7:13 NAU - "Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent?"
 2. Can we by wisdom cause the clock of time to turn backwards?
 3. Can we make water flow upstream?
 4. Can humanity by wisdom stop or reverse the aging process?
 5. Can a man remove the wickedness of his heart?
Jeremiah 13:23 NAU - "Can the Ethiopian change his skin Or the leopard his spots? *Then* you also can do good Who are accustomed to doing evil."
 6. There are certain realities that all the wisdom in the world is powerless to change. That which God has made crooked cannot by human wisdom be made straight.
 - B. Solomon is writing from personal experience
Ecclesiastes 1:12-13 NAU - "I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven."
 1. Changing the path of Divine Providence is like chasing down and harnessing the wind. How can you capture what cannot be seen?
 2. We can only come to one conclusion.
Ecclesiastes 1:14 NAU - "all is vanity and striving after wind."
- II. This leads us to the second truth Solomon discovered about wisdom. Contemplating the weakness of wisdom will result in great sorrow.
- A. Solomon's wisdom was great but he soon discovered its weakness
 1. He looked at it on every side, from every perspective. He looked at all the suffering sin has brought upon this world. Sorrow and tears abound. Even as king, he was powerless to end the trials of life.
 2. The more he studied the subject the more it made him realize that wisdom was wholly inadequate to solve the problems of this world.
Ecclesiastes 1:17 NAU - "And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind."
 3. As great as Solomon's wisdom was, it was not sufficient to keep him from sin. He lacked the discernment to see the danger of taking pagan women to be his wives. He lacked the discernment to see his progressive fall into idolatry. His foreign wives turned his heart away from God.

- B. It only left him with great sorrow
Ecclesiastes 1:18 NAU - "Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain."
1. Can wisdom take away the great sadness of a mother who has lost her child? Or cure the father with a brain tumor?
 2. Can wisdom stop the approaching storm, the drought and famine?
 As much as meteorology has advanced, they can forecast a hurricane but they cannot stop it.
 And how much of what they think they know is actually false?
 We hear much about climate change. Many claim to have it all figured out. Professing themselves to be wise they have become fools. They are willing to deny every blessing God has granted in a vain attempt to solve the problem they know little about.
 Wisdom is insufficient.
 3. Can wisdom restore health when God has ordained death?
 People have given up their entire estates searching for a cure – it is chasing after the wind.
 4. It is a fool's folly to think human wisdom can solve this world's problems or end the suffering of this world.
 - a. For years man has believed that knowledge is the cure-all for the suffering of humanity.
 Public schooling costs almost \$12,000 per student. The thought is the more money we spend the better educated we will become. Has that proven to be true?
 - b. Our leaders are convinced that we can spend our way out of every problem. We are now a nation that has accrued a debt over 31 trillion dollars. That's \$94,000 per American or \$246,000 per taxpayer.
 Politicians have thrown dollar after dollar promising a better life. It's the wisdom of fools. You cannot by human wisdom fix the problem of sin. Crooked hearts cannot be repaired.

Conclusion:

1. Solomon is writing from a perspective of a life without God. No amount of earthly wisdom will solve the sorrows of this life. No amount of earthly wisdom can change the Providence of God. No amount of human wisdom will give meaning to life.
Ecclesiastes 1:14 NAU - "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."
2. But for those who fear God have discovered true wisdom, wisdom of the greatest value. Solomon himself wrote,
Proverbs 1:7 NAU - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction."
Proverbs 4:7-8 NAU - "The beginning of wisdom *is*: Acquire wisdom; And with all your acquiring, get understanding. ⁸ "Prize her, and she will exalt you; She will honor you if you embrace her."
3. James reminds us that we should pray for Godly wisdom.
James 1:5 NAU - "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

4. True wisdom is knowing God.
Jeremiah 9:23-24 NAU - "Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD."
5. True wisdom will lead us to embrace God's Providence with thanksgiving.
1 Thessalonians 5:18 NAU - "in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."
6. True wisdom seeks to know the ways of God and follow His righteousness.
Psalms 25:4 NAU - "Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths."
7. True wisdom is the discovery that human wisdom is always imperfect. True wisdom leads us to desire God's direction in all our ways.
Proverbs 3:5-8 NAU - "Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be healing to your body And refreshment to your bones."
8. True wisdom is only found in Jesus Christ. He is true wisdom.
1 Corinthians 1:22-24 NAU - "or indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."