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BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

s t u d y g u i d e : p a r t s e v e n





Being Human? How to *be* Human Beings

By Jacob Harder

Being Human | The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes | (How to be Human Beings) Part 7

As we wrap up our series in Ecclesiastes, we may still have mixed feelings about this book. Maybe we are left wondering what am I supposed to do with my life in light of everything this book has said? If everything in life is just a breath, then what is life really for? Does it even matter how I live my life? The conclusion of Ecclesiastes answers with a resounding “yes!” In this study, we’ll spend some time considering what the words of Ecclesiastes are for and the life response that they lead us to.

I. Know What?

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

- Ecclesiastes 12:9-10

In the rest of Ecclesiastes, we’ve clearly been hearing the voice of “the Teacher.” But here at the end it’s not so clear who is speaking. Is this still the Teacher now speaking of himself in the third person? Or is this a different voice? Both options have been suggested by scholars and neither option is certain. But what is clear is that whoever the speaker is, his goal is to show us what these challenging words of Ecclesiastes are for and what these words tell us about what our lives are for.

The first thing the speaker wants us to know is that the words of Ecclesiastes are for bringing pleasure. It’s a shame that many people ignore Ecclesiastes because they see it as a depressing book. It’s a shame because this text tells us that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes is someone who has gone to great lengths to offer us wisdom about the world, we live in. And he doesn’t offer that wisdom as a grumpy philosopher who wants to stamp out our joy. Rather he wants to enhance our joy. In fact, one translation of vs.10 says “the Teacher searched to find words of pleasure” – words that would artfully illustrate the beauty of the world as God made it. (Go back and read the poetic imagery the Teacher uses to describe the world we live in!) And these words serve to remind us, as the Teacher has been telling us all along, that life is a gift from God for our enjoyment. We are to enjoy life as it is along with the God who gave it.

Now does that mean the Teacher has just been shutting his eyes to the darkness of the world? Not at all.

The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd. - Ecclesiastes 12:11



The second thing the speaker wants us to know is that the words of Ecclesiastes are painful but with a purpose. In order to illustrate his point, the speaker uses the metaphor of something called a goad. A goad is a staff with sharp nails embedded in it used by herd drivers to keep animals moving along the right path. If the animal stopped or went to the left or to the right, the herd driver would poke or prod the animal to urge it to keep moving straight ahead. And, according to the speaker, this is what the words of Ecclesiastes, and of all the wise, are like. They are sharp words from a loving Shepherd who wants to lovingly correct us and set us on the right path. God doesn't want us to chase after things he knows will harm us, so sometimes he needs to "goad us" by shattering our illusions and reminding us of how life really works – that life works best within the good boundaries he has created. And so the words of Ecclesiastes serve to remind us that life is not for our manipulation, but for walking on the right path.

So what are the words of Ecclesiastes for? They are for leading us to the only appropriate response towards life. What is that response?

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

-Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

What is life for? Life is for fearing God and keeping his commandments. Iain Provan offers a good summary of what this means:

Fearing God and keeping his commandments means "to live joyfully and reverently before God in the midst of what is often a complex world, believing that God himself will judge every human work. This is what the words of the Teacher and the wise are truly for...They are designed so that we may live well before God, reverencing him and bearing always in mind that the universe is a moral place in which there is accountability for the way in which we spend our days."

Craig Bartholomew says that "Living in this way enables one to rejoice and apply oneself positively to life in the midst of all that one does not understand, including and especially death."

Ultimately, then, the words of Ecclesiastes and of the wise are meant to transform our hearts and engage our lives so we will live as God intended us to, embracing the life he knows is best for us.

II. So What?

However, that's often not the effect these words have on us. Why might that be the case? Because of a dangerous propensity of the human heart that the speaker warns us about in verse 12.

Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them [the words of the wise].

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

-Ecclesiastes 12:12

This may sound like a strange warning to us. What's the problem with adding to the words of the wise? Isn't that good. And what does the speaker have against books anyway?

According to Iain Provan, the speaker is trying to show us that because the words of the wise are ultimately for transforming our hearts and lives, it would be foolish to approach these words merely as interesting material to write about. If all we did with these words was write about them, rather than letting them challenge us, we would be utterly missing the point. (That's what he means by saying that the creation of many books has no "end" or "purpose" – it is pointless and it's not what wise words are intended for.) Instead of providing the person with the foundation for living, the words of Holy Scripture become "a platform on which to construct a writing career...the raw material out of which he or she constructs beautiful idols."

This is why "adding" to the words of the wise is such a problem. It implies that the person is not allowing these words to challenge him or her, but using them as material for his or her own ends, for example to write books.



This critique might not seem very relevant for those of us who don't write books. But the danger of adding to God's wise words is not just a danger for scholars and those who write books, but for all of us.

There are two main reasons for this. One is that we live in an age of "information overload." There is so much information quickly and easily available to us. We can easily search Google for an answer. And because of that, we don't really spend time digesting and internalizing what we learn. The purpose of gathering knowledge is simply to be informed, not to be formed by it. And we can easily take the same approach to reading the Bible.

A second reason is that we live in a culture that chases the American Dream and compartmentalizes goals. And the more we fit into our culture, the more we start to say things like "fearing God and keeping his commandments is ONE of my goals in life. But I have other goals like those other people are pursuing – to retire by age 55, to have wealth and influence, to live comfortably, to be admired by others." And we begin to use the Bible to achieve our additional goals.

Therefore, the danger of "adding" that Ecclesiastes speaks of is not just a critique of those out for scholarly success, but of anyone for whom God's Word has become mere material for building their own projects.

When this is our approach, we come to God's Word not with the intent of hearing it more clearly and obeying it. Instead, we arrange it in a way that allows us to keep God's Word at arm's length while using it for our own ends.

This approach may make us feel like we have a certain measure of control over our lives. But when we don't allow God's Word to shape us as it is meant to and try to add to it instead, this has devastating effects on our hearts. It results in us having hearts that are always hungry because no matter how much we achieve on our quest, we're always left wanting more – thinking that there is something else out there we need to have; hearts that are heavy because we are concerned about so many things that we are always anxious and cannot find true rest; and hearts that are hard because we are focused mostly on ourselves, choosing to follow only the commands which suit our own interests and neglect the interests of others.

In short, adding more to our lives does not mean our lives will be fuller, but emptier.

III. Now What?

So what do we do if we find ourselves hungry, heavy, and hard-hearted and we want to change? Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 11:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

-Matthew 11:28-30

If you've neglected allowing God's Word to shape your life, the first thing Jesus tells you is to come to him. And then he calls you to take His yoke – His way of life – upon us. And His way is one of fearing God and keeping His commandments – which he did perfectly, submitting and becoming obedient to the Father to the point of death on a cross.

That's what Jesus calls us to. And when we choose to take His way of life upon us, he will change our hearts by giving them rest from our striving, lightening their load, and transforming them so they look like His.

So, what does it look like practically to open ourselves to what Jesus wants to do in our hearts? Here are just a few suggestions from David Gibson that I find exceptionally helpful.

1. Come to God's Word expecting to listen carefully and be surprised.

David Gibson says “Bible delight is born when you expect it to teach you something you did not know already. The more childlike you are toward the Bible, the more likely you are to find it having just the right words for you.”

2. Come to God's Word expecting to be challenged and critiqued.

“Remember your Creator by letting His Word dispel your illusions and confronting your folly even if it hurts – and it may often hurt. Left to your own devices, you will not choose what is right. Left to wander along myself, I'll end up going in the opposite direction to where I should be. There is no satellite navigation for our souls other than the words from our one Shepherd.”





3. Come to God's Word choosing to joyfully obey. (In fact, choose to say yes to Him before even reading the text.)

"When was the last time you submitted to God's Word and acted on what it says, even when you did not like it? Have you ever obeyed it when you found what it was saying offensive?...If we do not like what the Bible says because it confronts us, then we will always find some way of changing what it means so it lines up with the world we want to live in instead. Don't domesticate your Bible. Live in God's world."

Living your life close to Jesus means letting Him speak to you and to show you a different way of carrying life. And guess what? Walking in His way – the way of fearing God and keeping His commandments – is the very meaning of life.

David Gibson writes:

"Why do you need to be a certain kind of employee? Because you must fear God and keep His commandments. Why do you have to be a certain kind of child? Because you fear God and know that he wants you to honor your parents. Everything I do for you; I do because I do it for God first and foremost: that's the kind of person Ecclesiastes is teaching me I ought to be.

Perhaps if we were to think of doing everything for God first and foremost, it would quite radically change what we do for one another. It might make us bolder in what we say, more concerned for God's truth than one another's approval. It might make us more kind and gentler, realizing that God has commanded us to forgive one another as he forgave us. It will make us more joyful, less grumpy, and more generous. It will make us more alive."

May the words of Ecclesiastes and of the whole Bible bring about that liveliness in us. Amen!

Life Group Questions

1. Read **Ecclesiastes 12:9-14**. The speaker in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 says that the words of Ecclesiastes are meant to bring pleasure – they are meant to lead us to enjoy life as it is with God. The speaker also says that the words of the wise are like goads – they are sharp words from a loving Shepherd who wants to lovingly correct us and set us on the right path. How have you experienced God's Word in each of these ways (bringing pleasure and bringing pain) in your own life? Give specific examples.

2. Read **Mark 4:13-20**. Notice Jesus says that the Word of God is choked and made unfruitful by our “desires for other things.” In the message, Jacob talked about several desires we have that can prevent God’s Word from doing its work in our lives. What are some of your desires that have “choked” God’s Word? What would it look like to let Jesus remove those weeds in your life so His word can do its work in you?
3. In the message, Jacob mentioned three ways that we can open ourselves to Jesus to let His Word transform our hearts and engage our lives: coming to God’s Word 1) expecting to listen and be surprised, 2) expecting to be challenged and critiqued, and 3) choosing to joyfully obey. Which of these three ways do you most need to implement into your own life and why?
4. Throughout this series of messages on Ecclesiastes, we’ve been talking a lot about what it means, and doesn’t mean, to live well as a human being in the real world (see below). What has been your biggest takeaway from this series?

What is something you can do to allow what you’ve learned to have a lasting impact on how you live?

Space | How not to be Airbenders - “Everything is a breath...All the things that are done under the sun are a breath, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl. 1:2, 14). So give up chasing control and learn to embrace life as a gift from God.

Power | How not to be Superheroes - “There is nothing new under the sun...What is crooked cannot be straightened” (Eccl. 1:9, 15). So, give up the fear of not being amazing and learn to remember God’s greatness.

Soul | How not to be Islands - “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12). So, give up on climbing the ladder of self-fulfillment and choose to live in relationship – to God, to other human beings, and to the real created world.

Time | How not to be Time-Travelers - “There is a time for everything...He has made everything beautiful in its time” (Eccl. 3:1, 11). So, give up on trying to escape your current moment and learn to patiently accept it and make the most of every opportunity.

Mind | How not to be Fortune-Tellers - “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong... but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccl. 9:11). So, give up on guarantees and certain answers and learn to trust God.



Reality | How not to be Immortals - “Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals...As one dies, so dies the other” (Eccl. 3:19). So, give up on trying to escape the reality of the human condition and learn to bring the reality of God’s presence to bear on that reality.

Prayer - Pray that the words God has spoken to each person through the book of Ecclesiastes would be effective in leading them into a life of joy and reverence before God.

