

Education Cannot Save

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

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Introduction:

I expect you have had someone come up to you when you have been engaged in a long and hearty discussion and say,

- So have you guys solved all of the world's problems yet?
- This is, of course said with joviality, but it also makes a valid point...
 - That sometimes we can think too much of our own theories and ideas about how things ought to be done even though, if they were actually implemented, they would prove to be quite inadequate.

This is often the case with the brightest minds in academic circles.

- Dr. Morton Smith told the story of his days as a student under Professor John Murray when all the students were engaged in some theological debate...
 - Finally, one of them turned to Dr. Murray and asked for his opinion. He gravely replied that he did not consider himself to be learned enough to comment on the matter.
 - That pretty much put an end to the conversation.
- As a parent, I sometimes get a chuckle when some great study is done by the experts to conclude something that any parent already knows...
 - like the study that was done recently that concluded that children under two were actually capable of lying...
 - And of course this was to refute the long standing conclusion that they were not capable of lying.

We need to be careful about putting too much confidence in our ability to figure everything out by education.

- In the previous century, there were many who really did think that they possessed the ability to solve the world's problems.
- A lot of advances were being made in various areas of learning and technology at the end of the 19th century, and I guess it just went to our heads...
 - There were some who actually entertained the idea that they would end war at the beginning of that century—but it turned out to be one of the bloodiest ever...
 - And they spoke of ending world poverty, but instead we find ourselves on the verge of economic collapse...
 - There was the boast of the man who build the Titanic that it was so well built that even God could not sink it...
 - There were notions about resolving our social problems, but instead we see increasing crime and the breakdown of the family...
 - We thought to solve psychiatric disorders, but there is more suicide, more depression, and more anxiety and addiction than ever.

- There were those who supposed that they could improve the morals of society—but clearly things have gotten worse—there is murder and sexual immorality and theft and dishonesty.
- There were dreams of wiping out disease, but while some diseases have been conquered, new ones have come to take their place.
- I have to admit that this is not nearly as much a problem today as it was in the previous century...
 - If anything we are disillusioned as a society—
 - we have come to realise that many of the world’s problems are much too big and much too complicated for us to solve.

In a way, we, as a society, have gone through the same process that Solomon went through in our text today.

- He thought that he might be able to find meaning for life under the sun by his studies—and that he might be able to solve the problems of this world...
 - But the more he studied, the more he realised his limitations.
 - He realised that the meaning of life and the solution of how to live is not to be found in this world of sin and death...
 - And in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18, he is kind enough to share the experience of his vain quest with us that we might not suppose that we can find meaning and salvation under the sun.
- Listen as I read this text to you—Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18: I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. ¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. ¹⁶ I

communed with my heart, saying, “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. ¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

May the Lord bless the reading of His holy Word.

I. You see in verse 13 how Solomon says that he set himself to the task of figuring out all that is done under heaven—

- What it is all about—where are we going on this crazy world that Nathan Wilson has fittingly called a tilt-a-whirl...
 - a world that spins at break-neck speeds as it orbits the sun at break-neck speed?
 - What are we doing here? What is it all about?

- A. Solomon says that he set his heart to seek and search it all out by wisdom!
1. By saying that he set his heart to it, he shows that he poured himself into it.
 - He took great interest in this task—he really put his whole heart into it.
 - He was not like a professor who engaged in a study because he was able to get funded for it...
 - Solomon was sincere. He was highly motivated to sort it all out!
 - And of course, he had great resources to pour into this work...
 - Not only wealth and many wise men at his disposal...
 - for he was king over Israel in Jerusalem when the kingdom was at its height...
 - But also an unprecedented supply of personal wisdom!
 2. And this was not just a useless academic quest to gain knowledge for its own sake...
 - He was searching it out, as he says, by wisdom—
 - He was looking for practical wisdom for life...
 - He wanted to know what we are to endeavour to achieve while we are here...
 - He was a king and he cared for his people and he wanted to help them to have purpose and meaning and fulfilment in their lives...
 - He wanted to make sense of life under the sun.
- B. See how he describes his subject matter... this thing that he is trying to figure out...
1. He says that he is studying “**all that is done under heaven.**”
 - That is the thing he wants to make sense of.
 - Not so much the details, but the whole of it—what is all about.
 - This phrase “**all that is done under heaven**” is equivalent to the phrase we ran into last week—**life under the sun.**
 - We saw last week, there is this endless repetition:
 - with the sun that rises and sets and returns to the place where it began again—over and over...
 - with the rivers that keep running into the sea and never make it any fuller—always flowing, but never doing anything...
 - and with men—as one generation after another gets on the treadmill and runs and runs until the next generation comes and takes their place.
 2. He describes our task as **this burdensome task God has given to the sons of Adam by which they may be exercised...**
 - a. It wears you out as you go on in this world—
 - It is burdensome, hard work, to go on...
 - And all you get, to use the words of Pink Floyd,

- is “another day older and shorter of breath” as you run and run and run to “catch up with the sun” which runs on ahead of you so that it can come up behind you again...
- b. And notice that Solomon did not pursue this as a mere secularist—he describes this burdensome task as a task that is **God-given**...
- It is a task that we cannot really escape—
 - we have to keep on running—God made us to run and run here—
 - but we don’t really ever get anywhere—
 - we just survive for a while then we die and leave it to the next generation to do the running for us.
- c. “Solomon,” as Charles Bridges says,
- “with all his attainments, set out to figure out why is man, the noblest of God’s creatures, placed in the world to be exercised with sore travail during his short continuance. Why his unsatisfied desires—his weariness of life—his strivings and toilings—his unsuccessful search after happiness, even while all the sources of earthly gratification are spread at his feet?”
 - Solomon knew that God was behind all of this—
 - but he wanted to see if there was meaning here in the world apart from whatever way all of this may be connected to eternity.

II. The conclusion that Solomon reaches is dismal!

- A. He concludes that all of our labour and our striving get us nowhere—as far as this world itself is concerned!
- He expresses this in verse 14 as what he found from his studies...
 - He says, v. 14: **“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping after the wind.”**
1. There is that word *vanity* that we ran into last week—a mere vapour—your breath on a cold day that amounts to nearly nothing...
 - *That*, Solomon says, is the sum total of all your works under the sun...
 - a mere wisp of smoke and it is gone.
 - Don’t you see, people, we were made for eternity and but we all die!
 - Try as you might, you will never find true meaning and purpose here!
 2. All of your quests are as productive in the end as *grasping after the wind*.
 - This phrase, *grasping after the wind*, can be translated in several ways...
 - It can even be translated *vexation of spirit* (the word *wind* and *spirit* are the same in Hebrew).
 - Translated this way, it is simply to say that all of life is *frustrating*...
 - But the word translated *grasping* is akin to the word *shepherding*,
 - and this brings out the vivid imagery of *shepherding the wind*.
 - That is another way to translate it.

- Perhaps you have heard a leader who is trying to assemble a group of socialising individuals describe his task as trying to *herd cats*...
- You can't corral cats because they are too independent to conform...
 - but have you ever tried to herd the wind?
- Solomon says all of our works are like trying to herd the wind...
 - You can't make life go where you want it to go and then it is over and what did you accomplish?
 - You have laboured and now it's over and someone else will labour behind you.
 - but it is all vanity and herding wind!
 - There is nothing to show for all of our labours under the sun.

B. What are the problems in our toil under the heavens?

1. First, that (v. 15) **“What is crooked cannot be made straight.”**

- It is God Himself (as Solomon will say in 7:13) who made the world crooked.
 - Most people wrongly suppose that God is distressed about the crookedness—
 - that when storms come, He is wringing His hands...
 - that He had nothing to do with the Halifax explosion...
 - that when enemies come, He is wishing He could do something...
 - But no—the Bible tells us that God is the one who made the world crooked after we fell...
 - That He sends both storms and enemies.
 - He subjected the whole creation to vanity—
- And so there is death and suffering and disease and storms and war and we have our own wicked hearts and our addictions and selfishness...
 - And no matter how hard we try, we cannot straighten it all out.
 - We all have annoying things that we would change if we could, but we can't—
 - there are broken relationships that we can't mend...
 - there are people that we can't manage...
 - there are longings that we cannot fulfill...

2. And that brings us to the second way the problem is stated in verse 15: **“What is lacking cannot be numbered.”**

- We are never filled up—
 - We suppose that we would be if we had a bit more income, but then we get it and we need just a bit more...
 - We suppose that if only we had a spouse, we would be satisfied, but then we get one it is not enough...
 - It is the opposite of Psalm 23 for us under the sun—instead of saying, “I shall not want” as we do when we have the Lord as our shepherd,

- under the sun, we continually want and want and want.
 - “If only this relationship was right...”
 - “If only I had more time...”
 - “If only my parents would let me do this or that...”
- But the problem goes much deeper still...
 - We can’t even *number* all that is lacking in us...
 - We are lacking eternal life itself!
 - We are lacking purity and truth and wisdom and peace and joy and happiness...
 - And there are oodles and oodles of problems in the world that we haven’t even identified yet.
 - If you try to account for it all, it cannot be registered!

TRANS> Solomon’s conclusion is dismal, isn’t it?

- This is what he concluded from his quest for meaning under the sun!
 - We were not meant to live in a world in which we die.
 - We must never suppose that this world is all there is...
 - If we do, we are living a lie—a superficial lie—we are denying what we are!
 - This world is vanity and all our labour under the sun is vanity.
 - It goes absolutely nowhere apart from eternal life in Jesus Christ...
- C. Solomon concludes that even his study itself to find out meaning under the sun was worthless—just like everything else under the sun.
- His very own quest to make sense out of life under the sun was just as vain and fruitless as all of the works of men that he had been studying.
 - In verse 16-18 he evaluates the uselessness of his own study to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under the sun.
1. You see how at the end of verse 17, he concludes that this quest is also **grasping for the wind...**
 - Like everyone else, he has been as successful in his work as he would have been at herding the wind.
 - Nothing lasting, nothing substantial, has been gained by it.
 2. In fact, he explains that the only thing he has gained is grief and sorrow from this labour of his...
 - In verse 18, he says:
 - **Ecc 1:18: For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**
 - You can see how this might be...
 - People are often much happier not to think about these things...
 - Many people go through life without ever even asking what they are doing it for—they just try to make the best of it.

- As Matthew Henry says,
 - “The more you know, the more problems you see—Great scholars do little more than make themselves great mourners.”
 - A young man may enter politics or the ministry or something like that with great enthusiasm...
 - He is going to solve the problems!
 - But then as he begins to see all the problems that he did not know about—he gains sorrow.
 - As with Solomon, he sees more and more problems—and he sees that he cannot fix them all.
 - He discovers more and more how insurmountable the problems are.

TRANS> Solomon wants us to know that despite all his study,

- he could not sort out the meaning of *this burdensome task that God has given to the sons of Adam by which they may be exercised.*
3. He wants us to know that no one can sort this out...
- a. Essentially he says, “If I could not succeed, no one else can.”
 - He does this by explaining that he lacked nothing that would have kept him from success if success was possible...
 - 1) First, he says that he had attained greatness—
 - I have already mentioned this—he was king of Jerusalem at a time when Jerusalem was at the height of its glory!
 - He had virtually unlimited wealth.
 - He had trade with the whole world.
 - He had peace with all his enemies.
 - He had wise men all around him and many who came to visit him from foreign lands.
 - He had nothing to hinder him in his study...
 - 2) And not only that, but as he also says in verse 16, he gained more wisdom than all who were before him in Jerusalem...
 - than all of David’s counsellors—and all of the priests and nobles at Jerusalem—the elders and the judges—the administrators and scribes—
 - Solomon truly did exceed them all, for God gave him more wisdom than He gave to any other man.
 - In 1 Kings 3:12, the LORD says to Solomon:
 - **1 Kings 3:12: See, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you.**

- 3) And at the end of verse 16, Solomon says that with all these advantages his heart did indeed **understand great wisdom and knowledge**...
 - He not only had the ability to acquire knowledge, but he actually did acquire it in great abundance.
- 4) And his failure was not due to a lack of effort on his part either...
 - Furnished with all of these gifts, he worked very hard to sort out life under the sun...
 - In verse 17, he says:
 - **Ecc 1:17: And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.**
 - He wanted to know the difference between doing something profitable and doing something that was not profitable under the sun...
 - He set his heart to discern what would be wisdom and what would be madness and folly—
 - but he could not because he found that all was vanity and striving after the wind...
 - That was the conclusion that he reached...

b. Again, the point here is this...

- If life under the sun could have been sorted out by anyone, it would be by Solomon...
 - but the point is that it cannot be sorted out!
 - To try to sort it out is vanity—
 - You might as well try to catch the wind.

III. Now I want you to consider how useful this knowledge that Solomon acquired from his quest is to us!

- God has given the account of this to us in His word because it is useful for us to know...
 - There is nothing superfluous in God's word...
 - So what can we learn from Solomon's conclusion that we cannot do anything worthwhile under the sun.

A. It teaches us not to even try to find ultimate meaning or salvation in this world alone.

1. The matter is settled. Salvation is not to be found in life under the sun.

- Meaning cannot be found in a world where everyone dies.
 - Anyone who tries to pretend that it can is only deluding themselves.
- a. This is one of the main things that brought me to salvation...

- When I was in university things were going very well for me and that led me say, “But so what—what is the use of it if all goes the way I want?”
 - I knew that ultimate meaning and happiness could not be found in this world.
 - I knew that these could only be found in God, because He made us.
- b. I realised that trying to eke out ultimate meaning from my career or my family or my accomplishments was all worthless without the Lord.
- There is nothing but the most superficial salvation in this world.
2. But please make sure that you understand this!
- I am not saying—and Solomon is not saying—that you are not to labour in this world.
 - You are—it is the task that God has given to us.
 - We are to do what we can to survive here and to have happiness.
 - But what you must not do is live as if this is all there is!
 - You must not settle down and live in this world as if there is no God in heaven to answer to, to serve, to worship, to love, and to look to for blessing and eternal salvation.
 - And so also, Solomon does not mean that education is useless...
 - Edward Reynolds says:
 - The preacher’s purpose here is not to deter men from so noble a labour as the study of wisdom and learning, but to raise up to the study of heavenly wisdom, and the fear of God, whereby their other knowledge would be sanctified, sweetened, and made excellently useful and comfortable to them.
 - In other words, education is not a bad thing—it is an excellent thing that is man’s duty (not every man in particular, but mankind).
 - However, it is no saviour nor is it even able to supply us with meaning to life in this world apart from God...
 - Whenever these have been sought from it, it always leads to frustration and despair.
- B. Let Solomon’s findings also teach you to be patient—recognising that there are many problems in this world that you will not be able to solve.
1. Salvation is not to be found here, so get used to the idea that many things will go wrong and that everything cannot be fixed...
- There will be sicknesses that cannot be cured...
 - There will be relationships that you cannot fix...
 - There will be broken computers and broken cars...
 - There will be unkind comments and lack of appreciation...
 - There will be a continual struggle with sin...

- Get used to disappointment—you will have many longings that you will not be able to satisfy.
2. But let me say—do what you can to resolve these problems...
 - God has called us to live in this world and to strive in it.
 - But just don't ever suppose this world is all there is!
- C. God has given us this burdensome task of living here that we might seek salvation from Him...
1. It is very clear that you cannot save yourself—admit it—
 - You cannot keep yourself from dying...
 - Much less can you make this world into a place where you would even want to live forever.
 2. But the LORD has promised to save us!
 - He has called us into His kingdom of righteousness which is a kingdom in which we not only will live forever,
 - but where we would very much want to live forever!
 - God sent Jesus to establish this kingdom!
 - He sent Him into this ruined, cursed world of death to raise us up to life into a new heavens and new earth where righteousness prevails!
 - Where that which is crooked is made straight!
 - Where tears are wiped away and sorrow is turned to joy!
 - Where you will be forever delivered from your sin and corruption along with all the other members of this glorious kingdom.
 - Where mortality will be swallowed up by immortality!
 - Where even your desires will be holy and pure!
 - Where you will forever behold the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit!
 3. God subjected this present world to vanity and subjected us to vanity in order that we might seek His kingdom.
 - When Jesus came, the good news was that this kingdom was at hand!
 - If you want to enter this kingdom, simply give up on trying to make your life in this vain world...
 - And come to Jesus for forgiveness and for the life that He promises.
 - Solomon has studied it all out and there is nothing to be found here apart from God...so do not waste your time.
 - He has been kind enough to share his findings with us and we will do well to listen to him.
 - He knows what he is talking about.
 - Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness—and then you will lack nothing.
 - Then your life will be drawn into eternal significance so that even your simple service in this perishing world will not lose its reward.

Conclusion...

As I pointed out in the introduction,

- In the previous century, there were many vain men who thought that by their wisdom they could bring salvation into the world—
 - but there is no amount of learning that can accomplish that and our society has been disappointed by all the empty promises.
- Few people in our day are looking for salvation anywhere—they have given up.
 - They have resigned themselves to the fact that there is no way to save the world, and they are right,
 - but they are wrong to go on as if it does not matter that there is no salvation...
 - and to live in the desperate emptiness that comes from such conclusions.
- There is a God in heaven and He is the one who has subjected us to vanity in this world—but all with the purpose that we might return to Him...
 - Right now, He calls you to come and find life in His Son.
 - You won't find it here—you will only die—but if you come to Him you will never be disappointed.