

Last week, after the service a perceptive young man approached me following the service. He had a question, and began by saying, “You know pastor how you have been saying that nothing matters?” I stopped him right there and apologized, “I think I must have miscommunicated.”

That is not what Solomon is saying in Ecclesiastes.

He is not saying that nothing matters. He is saying that nothing lasts.

In Ecclesiastes, he is looking at life and seeing that all is *hebel*, a breath of wind, a bit of smoke.

It is here today, really here, rich and meaningful, and then gone.

Is this actually true? Is it true of everything.

Is everything vanity and chasing the wind?

In fact, this question has become so significant to Solomon that in chapter 4:1-3 he has been wondering

If maybe it's better to not be born than to experience all the wickedness in the world.

It's a terrifying question, but one worth asking. What is of lasting value in this world?

There are two thematic gold nuggets we have discovered with Solomon thus far in his investigation.

The first is this: Life is not gain. It is a gift.

The second is this: Nothing lasts but everything matters.

Do you understand this? Every moment that God gives you is important. Don't waste it.

We are going to discover another thematic nugget this morning.

The text we are in today reads like the Proverbs.

Solomon is still testing out wisdom to see if it works in this world in order to find ultimate meaning.

Three times in this passage he tells us again that it is all vanity (*hebel*) and chasing the wind.

This can become discouraging. We can begin to think that he is saying that nothing matters.

I. What about skillful labor?

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6

Now Solomon looks at a man who works hard so that he can keep up with those around him.

This is too often the reason people work in the United States.

They look around and they see what others have, and now they want that.

I could look around at the houses that others have, their cars, their vacations...

That could make me feel like I should have more. Some people do that.

I could think that I'm poor. It could make me discontent and want to work harder.

That's a sad reason to want to work.

It is all a matter of perspective.

The house I live in is an amazing house.

If nearly anyone from the 19th century would see it, they would be impressed.

We have four bedrooms! One in the basement. Cushy furniture. Running water. Electric lights.

Seriously. I'm not kidding. A refrigerator with a freezer with ice! Whenever I want it.

I have two cars and a 30 year old truck named Ed! I could go anywhere!

Can it get any better? I don't think so.

25 years ago, I showed a photo of my house to a group of pastors in Russia.

One of them said, "You have a yard!!!"

Most of you here, do you know that by any objective measure you are materially wealthy?

And to live in this country. What an amazing place, filled with opportunity and freedom.

You can buy what you want, do what you want, live where you want. Wow.

Then Solomon turns and looks at the fool. (vs. 5)

He folds his hands, does no work, and essentially consumes himself.

This is what laziness does. It certainly is no better than overwork or work for the wrong reasons.

The fool, in his laziness, ends up consuming himself.

When I was in college, my roommate used to wake me up in the morning by reading loudly **Proverbs 6:9-11**.

Are you working? Why?

The Bible tells us why we should work. Do you know what it says? **Ephesians 4:28**

One of the themes you hear in modern society is that we should try to leave a legacy.

This becomes a reason to work hard, to accomplish things.

This means slightly different things to different people.

Sometimes it means making people remember you.

Other times it means that one ought to make some lasting difference in the world or your family.

However, we really do not have much control over any of that.

Professor Michael Horton tells pastors that they are not here to leave a legacy in their ministries.

We have no legacy. Christ has the legacy.

Pastors come and go. It is the work of Christ that remains and continues.

This is true in your life and family as well.

Work hard. That's good. Enjoy working hard. God made us to work, among lots of other things.

But do not think that your work will last. Only God's work lasts.

Verse 6 is very good advice. Don't let your work keep you from thinking deeply about life.

Take time to pray. Take time for a walk or a ride on a bike. Look at the trees. Hear the birds.

Enjoy this world that God has made and placed you in. If you don't, you're just chasing the wind.

II. What about accumulating wealth?

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8

Here's a guy who has no close relatives, so he throws himself into his work.

He thinks he is building something, gaining something. He always wants more.

We might call this ambition. We value it in this country. We praise it sometimes.

But he never asks himself, "For whom?" How sad. *Hebel*. Vanity.

G.K. Chesterton writes, "There are two ways to get enough.

One is to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less."

Well, not that I mean to criticize Chesterton. But the getting more and more actually doesn't work.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 Some of you need to commit these verses to memory.

David Gibson writes, "It is possible to know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Are you toiling for yourself, building what you think is your future?

III. It is better to have a friend.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

"Two are better than one." These words of Solomon sometimes are read at weddings.

This is such that we often cannot read these words without thinking of marriage.

They certainly apply to marriage.

But Solomon is not writing about a married couple. This is not about marriage.

This is about how you and I need others around us. If you have a friend, you can get through anything.

How does this work? The text tells us.

1. There are so many situations in life where two people can do something better than one. (vs. 9)

Think about a construction site, folding bedsheets, giving a dog a bath, paddling a canoe...

2. When there are two of you there is someone to help if you fall. (vs. 10)

This is why you don't go hiking in the mountains without a partner.

You don't go canoeing in the Boundary Waters alone.

3. When there are two there is someone to comfort you and encourage you. (vs. 11)

My mom is of the opinion that people seek out counselors and psychotherapists

because they lack a good friend. Sometimes that is true.

Sometimes when we are sad, discouraged, or troubled, we just need someone to be with us.

Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

What about the rejoicing?

Think about an old saying, "Any friend can share your sorrows and failures,

But it takes a true friend to share your joys and successes."

Real success is when you have a friend who will enjoy it with you.

4. When there are two you can withstand an enemy. (vs. 12)

Warriors refer to this as a companion “having your back.”

A friend is fortification against an opponent who wants to hurt you.

A friend is proof against temptation. A friend helps me not to sin.

But what is this cord of three strands, a threefold cord?

Do you know how a rope is made? Usually, three smaller ropes wound together.

A rope made this way can hold far more than its component parts alone. The binging strengthens it.

And it could be that these three strands here refer to me, a friend, and the Lord God.

It reminds me of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name,

I am there in their midst.” This is not just about prayer.

When there is you, a Christian brother or sister, the Lord is with you. Nothing is stronger.

All this to say, you need others. You need at least one other as you go through life. You need a friend.

If you are married to that friend, so much the better. But you cannot do this alone.

Our three elders and I have had to work through some challenging issues these past two years.

What would I have done without them? Doug, Dale, Jerrold, you are a gift from God.

John Fahlberg and I spent two and a half weeks together on a trip to Kursk, Russia years ago.

I will always cherish that memory. It can never be taken away. It will last forever.

Do you want to know my most prominent memory of you John during those days?

How much he missed Sandy, all the time, every day.

I will never forget those rides back from camp on the blue bus with Norm Twedt.

One time we had Karl on the phone navigating us around bridges washed out by floods.

Another time we spent four hours in Sac City getting a tire fixed.

We spent the time at the biggest popcorn ball in the world.

Without Norm the popcorn ball would have been meaningless, vanity.

I have had a week in the Boundary Waters with several of you here.

Reid, Clif, Ted and Tavin, Sean and Jake, Caleb, Heather, Shade, Aden, Solomon, Payden...

Pete and Doreen have been my right and left hand in these trips,

though we have never been in the same adventure group. I always need them as leaders.

Even in the wilderness that I love, the week would not be worthwhile without you.

Recent trips to Pine Ridge have been amazing and memorable,

Not because of the work that we did, but because of the people who were there.

I will forever appreciate being with my dear friends working together under the sun.

All the money and success in the world cannot buy moments like these.

IV. What about political power?

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

In these verses Solomon thinks about an old foolish king “who no longer knew how to take advice.”

One wonders if he has a particular king in mind.

Maybe this is a warning to himself. Or is he writing a subtle warning to his own son?

We might think of a president or a leader, or even a boss at work or an owner of a farming operation.

And there is the heir, the son who follows him and all the people who are his employees.

This king, leader, business owner might like to think of himself as the guy who runs a tight ship.

He’s a shrewd businessman. He’s an efficient manager. He serves his investors.

But there is a fatal flaw in his government, in his business operations.

You can see it in verse 16. His people, those who serve him, who follow him...

They don’t like him. He wasn’t thinking about them. And this too is “*hebel* and chasing the wind.”

Little did he realize, they were the most important part of all he was doing. And he didn’t care about them.

This king thought it was about power, but it never was. It’s always about people.

What is his point?

And here is the third golden nugget, from Ecclesiastes 4: People are more important than success.

1. Life is not gain; it is a gift from God.
2. Nothing lasts but everything matters.
3. People are more important than success.

Whether it is your wife, a brother or sister, kids or parents, a good friend, people here in this church.

It is the people in life that make it truly meaningful.

Not the money you make or have.

Not your career or the jobs that you do.

Not your political views, aspirations, or efforts.

It is the people right next to you that God has put in your life that fill it with blessing and meaning.

Do you know who they are? These people?

Friends, family, brothers and sisters in Christ?

Do you understand what they do for you and the gift that they are?

Do you tell them just how valuable that they are to you?

Do you appreciate them as gifts from God?

Shortly after God made the first man, He looked at Adam and said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

Man or woman, it is not good for you to be alone. God did not intend for you to live this life alone.

Jesus spent his life with people.

Everywhere he went he was surrounded with His disciples, unless he was praying to His father.

He sent them out in pairs. Have you ever thought about that?

The Apostle Paul almost never travelled alone. He always had companions.

The Devil is constantly trying to separate people. He tries to get us to argue and quarrel with one another.

We think that it is essential that people agree with us... about theology, politics, family issues.

When people do not agree our society tells us to abandon them.

When people don't get along at work, they quit.

When family or church conflicts arise, people leave and don't come back.

When couples disagree, they begin thinking about dissolving the marriage.

It is a disaster. We cripple ourselves emotionally and forsake opportunities to grow in maturity.

I read an article this past week in a very liberal publication written by a woman who had cut off her parents.

There were political and emotional reasons. She did not agree with them about some moral issues.

A counselor (not a Biblical one) told her that if she didn't feel safe, she should cut them off. She did.

Seven years later she discovered how much she had lost.

She has now reconnected, not agreeing about everything, but learning to love and be loved.

This is how we grow. This makes life meaningful.

Sure, there are some relationships that have to end.

Physical abuse can and maybe should end a relationship.

Sometimes a person is not safe to be around. That happens.

Sometimes a church must dismiss a false teacher or a sinner who will not repent. But rarely.

Before ending a relationship, a person needs to get godly counsel.

For the most part God wants us to apologize, to think about how the other person feels.

I have found that people in this world don't often enough say, “I'm really sorry.”

We are often more interested in being right or thought of as righteous than valuing the other person.

This is the reason for **Philippians 2:1-5**. Consider others more important than you!

A movie that I loved years ago is called “Young Sherlock Holmes.”

I recommend it. It does have some scary moments.

Early in the movie young Watson asks Holmes, “What do you want to be when you grow up.”

Sherlock Holmes' answer, “I never want to be alone.”

Just so. It is the people around us that help make life worth living. These relationships matter.

And if Ecclesiastes 3:11 is true, they will last forever.