



Ecclesiastes (7)

The Importance of Community

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Colossians 3:1-17

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In the few verses that we are going to look at this morning, the author of Ecclesiastes brings before us something else that that is vanity under the sun. The whole book is grappling with the fact that there are lots of things about life that seem to be empty and useless and meaningless. In the earlier chapters he has been struggling with the fact that life as a whole seems meaningless because we all die and both we and what we have accomplished in life are soon forgotten. He does suggest a few times that life is ultimately not futile because there is a God in heaven who will judge all that we do, but since the final judgment, beyond this life, was not yet clearly revealed in the OT, it was still somewhat of a mystery how death did not erase all meaning from life.

In chapter 4, he has brought to our attention a number of observations about life that are hard to accept about life under the sun. He is making observations about life in this world about things that contribute to making life difficult to understand. He mentions the fact that many people suffer because they are oppressed by people who are more powerful than they are. Then in verses 4-6 he speaks of work and how so many people do not live worthwhile working-lives because they are working for the wrong reasons such as envy or wanting to compare well with others, or because they are lazy and don't want to work, or because they work too much so that their whole lives revolve around their work. Work is an important part of our lives and it is an important part of the way that we are to find meaning in our lives and yet the work-lives of so many people are meaningless and empty because of laziness or because of meaningless goals.

Well in today's verses he brings before us another way that some people live meaningless lives, but he also gives us some biblical wisdom in an area that is very important for us in order to live lives that are worthwhile and significant. Let's first look at the way some people live meaningless lives. In verse 7 and 8 he writes, "Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business."

So, he sees a solitary person. He has no other. He has no son or brother. He has no one but himself. And so, he does nothing but work. He has no family to distract him and so all he does is work. And the riches pile up. But they do not give him the satisfaction that he had hoped for. And yet, he keeps on working for more. And Ecclesiastes tells us that he does not even ask himself "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" Ecclesiastes' point is that he piles up his riches, they do not give him any satisfaction and he does not realize that he is living a miserable and pointless existence. "This also is vanity and an unhappy business."

And the author of Ecclesiastes here hints at the fact that his life would be much more meaningful if he were working to share his wealth with other people. Now he is not saying that all single people are this way. It is possible to be single and have other people in your life. It is possible to be single and to work hard in order to share what you make with other people. A single person can also be a generous person who does not make his/her whole life about making money. These verses are referring to people who are single and solitary and whose life is all about making money and so do not ask the question "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?"

The vanity and emptiness that Ecclesiastes is pointing out here is working only for yourself – working only to pile up riches rather than working to serve and benefit other people.

I think that married people can fall into this unhappy business as well as single people. A married couple can work to pile up their riches and have little interest in serving others with their money. In fact, there are

many couples today who do exactly that. This is the reason that many couples today choose to have no children or a very small number of children. I'm not talking about couples who can't have children or can't have as many as they would like to have or who perhaps have some other legitimate reason for a small family. I'm talking about couples who have few or no children because they want to be rich. They don't want a larger family to hamper their lifestyle. That way of looking at life is little different from the person in the text who is only concerned with his riches and does not work in order to serve other people with what he earns.

But there are single people like this as well. There are more single people today than there ever has been. I read somewhere that a very high percentage of living spaces today are occupied by one person. I forget the exact percentage, but I remember being struck by how high it was. Now there are many reasons for this. Many who are single would love to be married. Some of it is due to the fact that a person's education can take a very long time. It is certainly not the case that every single person is selfish.

But many are. We live in an age where individualism is pervasive. For many people life is all about themselves and their money and their pleasures. And so there will be many people who fit the profile of the person described in Ecclesiastes 4:7-8. "[O]ne person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This is not an uncommon scenario in our society. And according to Ecclesiastes, "This also is vanity and an unhappy business."

It is vanity to live a life that excludes other people so that one can focus exclusively on making money and getting rich and working at one's career without distractions. That is what Ecclesiastes is saying in these verses. A work-life that is not motivated in large part by a desire to serve others is an empty life. To have a meaningful work-life we must be able to answer the question that Ecclesiastes poses in verse 8, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" A meaningful work-life will be able to answer that question with a reference to people

in your life. For married people the most obvious answer will be their husband or wife or children as the case may be, as well as people outside the family, people who need help. For singles it will be various people whom you are serving in one way or another. His point is that meaningful work involves working to serve other people in some way. But his observation was that many people around him were living solitary lives that were focused on riches and he is saying that there is no real gain and satisfaction in that.

Now in verses 9-12 he elaborates on the idea that human lives are much better if they are lived with other people in them. The person in verses 7-8 has no one else in his life. He is a solitary figure. Verses 9-12 give a number of reasons why it is much better to have other people in your life. Verse 9, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil." Notice how this verse contrasts with the two verses that come before it. The work of a solitary person who works to pile up riches for himself is vain. It is empty and there is no real gain. But when two are working together "they have a good reward for their toil."

The good reward here is not so much the fruit of their labors, but the relationship itself. The verses that follow spell out the "good reward for their toil." In verses 10-12, the Preacher gives us three examples to illustrate why two are better than one. Verse 10 says, "For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up."

Now for us falling is not such a big deal. Most of our traveling is done by car. Most of our walking is done on sidewalks. In the world in which Ecclesiastes was written, when you had to get somewhere, you walked. You walked on dirt roads or paths. Dealing with unevenness and ruts was a part of daily life. Falls would have been more frequent and injuries from falls would have been more frequent, and if you fell and injured yourself when you were far from home, you could not dial 911. It was much better, then, to travel with a companion.

This illustrates a principle. Life is precarious even in our day with sidewalks and cars and 911. There are lots of ways that we run into trouble. Things happen. We get sick. We get injured. We get laid off. We get discouraged. Job 5:7 says, "[M]an is born to trouble as the sparks fly

upward.” Ecclesiastes is saying that two is much better than one when you run into trouble. Other people in our lives are able to help us in significant ways when we experience problems and setbacks. They can pick us up when we fall. They can put things into perspective for us. They can listen to us when we need to talk about what we are going through. They can come alongside and lend a hand. So, two are better than one when we face the inevitable troubles in life.

Another way that two are better than one has to do with keeping warm at night. Verse 11, “Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?” Now what this sounds like to us and what it sounded like to the first readers of this book are very different. When we read of two lying down we think of a man and a woman and a bed and the potential for sex. In the world of Ecclesiastes, people did lie together to have sex, obviously, but many times they lay together just to keep warm. Two people travelling together, for instance, would have to sleep under a tree and under their coats. They might lie together under their coats simply to keep warm. In a world without central heating two people lying together to keep warm would have been much more common. And that is what Ecclesiastes is speaking about here.

This is not an application of two being better than one that resonates with us, although it is still true that sharing a bed with your spouse is one of the joys of marriage. But the principle still applies to us. If we share with one another both parties are better off. I suppose that the best application of this principle for us is that there is a kind of warmth that comes from togetherness. There is a psychological warmth that comes from being with other people. There is a time to be alone; but there is also a time to be with other people. Enjoying fellowship with one another is something that warms our hearts.

The third example of two being better than one is when one is being attacked. “Verse 12, “And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.” As Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us, travel in the ancient world was a dangerous business. There were lots of lonely places and it robbery was not uncommon. And while we, in our part of the world, are somewhat safer,

I think we will feel the same way about walking in a lonely place where we feel vulnerable. We feel much safer if we are not alone.

And then comes a little proverb that sums up the point of these verses, “[A] threefold cord is not quickly broken.” We see this principle in every piece of rope that we buy. Ropes are always made of strands because many small strands are much stronger than one big strand. The little proverb is summarizing the point that human beings are stronger together than they are alone.

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.” Life together with others is more rewarding compared with the solitary person who lives to make more and more money for himself and is not invested in the lives of other people. That is the principle that these verses teach.

Now in the context of the whole book, the point of this section is that many people live vain and empty lives because they are concerned only about themselves. Many people live solitary lives because they are interested only in themselves. Many people live meaningless lives because they are only interested in money and wealth. This is what the author of Ecclesiastes observed, and he understood, and he wants us to understand, that there is no real gain from living this way. It does not satisfy. It is an empty and futile way to live.

One the other hand, it is much better to share your life with others. It means that you have to share your money and your time, but you are much richer for it. There are sacrifices, but the reward is much greater. These verses picture lives of interdependence. The examples that they give of two being better than one are examples of people who are dependent on one another. Other people can help you when you fall. Other people can help keep you warm. Other people can help you fight off an attacker. You give up something when you have other people in your life. You are sharing your life with others. You give up some of your money. You give up some of your time. But, Ecclesiastes is saying, lives that are intertwined with the lives of other people are much richer, more satisfying, more significant. There is much more of gain that is really gain.

Now this perspective is not unique to the Bible. One of the observations that biblical scholars have made about the wisdom literature of the Bible is that much of it is not unique to Israel. Similar truths are found in the wisdom literature of other nations. One of the scholars who wrote a commentary on Ecclesiastes pointed out that the little proverb, “[A] threefold cord is not quickly broken,” or something close to it, is found in a in another ancient text. The wise men of Israel were not the only ones to see the wisdom of friendship and community and the emptiness of a solitary life. And that is still the case today. There are plenty of secular writings that deal with the meaning of life and which make the same point that selfishness leads to an empty life while a life which is intertwined with other people is a much more meaningful life. So, this perspective is not unique to the Bible. The world knows this as well.

The point that the author is making in the context of the whole book is that life is more meaningful if it is shared with other people. He is pointing out the emptiness of a life that is lived for the one’s self and he is saying that having friends and family makes for a much more meaningful and worthwhile life. This is a partial answer to the question of the meaningless of life. But it is not the whole answer in the context of the whole book.

Remember how, in the first two chapters, the Preacher had been dwelling on the meaningless of all of life because of death. He had begun the book with that saying, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-4).

The overarching problem is death. Life is meaningless because of death. What Ecclesiastes says in our text for this morning makes life more meaningful, but it does not deal with the fact of death. And so, it is a partial answer to the dilemma, not the complete answer. The complete answer to the problem of the meaningless of life is the fact that what we do in life matters to God and that a day is coming beyond this life when God is going to judge us for how we have lived. This is what Ecclesiastes hints at along the way and it is this thought with which he closes the book. That is the overall perspective of the book.

But within this overall perspective, an important part of the answer to the problem of meaningless is our relationships with other people. The meaning of life has to do with relationships, first of all our relationship with God, but within that context, our relationships with other people. And what these verses in Ecclesiastes that we are looking give us is a spectrum ranging from vanity towards meaning – a spectrum from emptiness to fulfillment. On the vanity end of the spectrum is the solitary man whose life is centered on himself and on the worthwhile end of the spectrum is the life that is lived with family and friends. The author of Ecclesiastes is telling us that the more that our lives are interconnected with other people the more meaningful they will be.

Now we need to consider this perspective in the light of the gospel. What difference does Jesus make to our understanding of this passage? How is this passage incomplete without Jesus and the gospel? And the answer is that one of the great purposes of Jesus' mission is to enable his people to live together in deep community. Jesus came on a mission of reconciliation, first of all, reconciliation with God, but flowing out of that reconciliation between people. A huge part of a life lived to the glory of God has to do with depth of our relationships with other people. Jesus came to save us from our sins and the effect of sin is separation – first from God and then from other people and that separation is rooted in selfishness. The one of the first things that we notice after the fall is that Adam and Eve were blaming each other and then soon after you have Cain killing Abel and the alienation between human beings was off and running.

Life as God would have it be lived is life where satisfaction and meaning come from putting others before ourselves. Life as God designed it is service to others, first God and then other people. We are to love God first and then our neighbor. Love is the opposite of selfishness. It is putting others before ourselves. And the deeper the love, the deeper the community. And the deeper the community, the more rich and meaningful our lives are.

Listen to the way that Paul exhorts the Colossians in 3:12-15 and notice how these verses reflect the truths that we have observed from our text in Ecclesiastes 4. ¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and

beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful."

These verses are Paul's exhortation to Christians. He is speaking to people who have been raised with Christ. These people he says, "have died and [their] life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

And Paul is calling these followers of Christ to deeper community. All the words and phrases in this exhortation has to do with relationships within the body of Christ. And the word that sums up all the rest is love.

This is one of the great purposes of the gospel: to enable people to experience deeper community, to enable people to live together in love. And if we think of this in the light of our text in Ecclesiastes, we see that this life of deep community that is possible through the power of Christ in the gospel, makes for a life that is not empty and vain, but rich and worthwhile and satisfying.

So, God enables his saved people to repent of the selfish life of the solitary person who has no time for other people and who lives for making money. But he also enables us to put into practice the good reward that comes from the principle that two are better than one.

Let's look at the three ways that two are better than one that are mentioned in our text in Ecclesiastes in the light of the gospel. First of all, the idea that if one falls his friend will lift him up. The new life that is ours in Christ enables us to be part of this helping dynamic either as one who receives help or as one who gives help. This is part of the lifestyle that Christ died to enable his people to live. And so, think of your life and the lives of the people around you. Are you a helper? Are you willing to ask for help and receive help or are you an "I can do it all by myself" kind of person?

Then keeping one another warm. Christ also enables his people to live the kind of life in which there is warmth in giving and receiving fellowship. We are protected from the elements enough that huddling

together under a blanket just to keep warm is no longer a thing. And our culture is too sexualized for it to be a thing. But I think the psychological application is a legitimate application in our day and age. There are a lot of people left out in the cold. There are a lot of people who are lonely and who long for the warmth of fellowship and companionship. There are plenty of people in our church who are alone or who live far away from loved ones. This verse is a call for us to invite them to share the warmth of our company through hospitality and including them in our lives.

And then protecting of one another. Our text says that two are better than one when you are attacked. Thankfully we are not as vulnerable to physical attack as were the people in OT times, but I suspect that we are more in danger of spiritual attack. We live in a context of constant and ferocious spiritual attacks and temptations. And two are better than one there as well. This is an important part of parenting. This is an important part of the oversight of elders. This is an important part of encouraging and exhorting one another. The application for us is deep involvement in the life of the church and in the lives of our fellow believers.

This kind of lifestyle is not easy. This kind of lifestyle goes against the grain of our sinful fallen nature and the ethos of our society. Sin leads to separation. Holiness leads to deep relationships, first with God, but then also with people. That is part of the message of the whole Bible. The verses that we looked this morning are part of that message. And Jesus Christ and his gospel give us the power for its implementation.