

Ambition

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[0 : 00] Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good gifts to those who ask him?

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. For this is the law and the prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide, and the way is easy, that leads to destruction.

And those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life. And those who find it are few. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.

Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thorn bushes? So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

[1 : 10] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock, and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand, and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

[2 : 23] On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two handfuls full of toil and a striving after wind.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, neither son nor 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. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

[3 : 39] 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. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.

A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this is also vanity and a striving after wind.

[4 : 46] Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near, to listen, is better than to offer your sacrifice, a sacrifice of fools.

For they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.

For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few, for a dream comes with much busyness and a fool's voice with many words.

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow, it is better that you should not vow than that you vow and do not pay.

Let your mouth lead you, not in sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake.

Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

[5 : 46] For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. But God is the one you must fear. Every day you and I make choices.

Whose opinion will I listen to? Whose advice am I going to value? What is going to be important to me today? What will my priorities be?

They may be small choices. Who am I going to hang out with at school over lunch? They may be big choices. Our ambitions.

The whole direction that my life is going in. And yet behind the countless choices that you and I take every day, there is really only one choice in life.

And that is because there are only two paths we can travel down in life. We can follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Or we can follow the world like everyone else.

[6 : 46] It's just what Jesus says in that reading we had from Matthew chapter 7. I put it there at the top of the talk outline on the back of the service sheet. As he says, The choices that you and I make in life matter.

The ambitions that we have for our lives matter. And if we have children, the ambitions that we have, of course, for our children.

And Ecclesiastes helps us to make the right choices by showing us that we live in a world where sin and the effects of sin have ruined everything.

You and I live in a world that is groaning. Everything in life is vanity. Like a breath. It is short.

It is fleeting. It doesn't last. It is not substantial. And yet, of course, the reality is that you and I find it so hard, don't we, to believe it.

[8 : 05] So hard to believe it. So just keep a finger in Ecclesiastes 4 and turn to the end of the book to chapter 12, page 675.

You may remember we said in our first talk in Ecclesiastes that the book is written by someone called the preacher or the pastor, either King Solomon or someone speaking on his behalf.

And yet there's an introduction and a conclusion written by someone else. And here we see something of the purpose of the book, chapter 12, verse 11.

The words of the wise, like goads, and like nails firmly fixed, are the collected sayings. They are given by one shepherd. Goads are the kind of things you would use to prod and steer animals to go in the right direction.

To stop them going the wrong way. That is the point of Ecclesiastes. Given by the one shepherd.

Who is the one shepherd in the Bible? God himself.

[9 : 19] And unlike so many other things in the book, such as wealth and toil and pleasure, things which are simply here today, gone tomorrow, these words, like nails firmly fixed, are something you can build your life on.

I take it that you don't want to go about that next DIY project with nails that are going to buckle and to give way under pressure.

And you don't want to build your life on things that are going to give way either. And today's passage, chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5, tells us the two things we need to do if we are going to make the right choices in our lives and go down the right path.

I put them there on the outline. Firstly, we need to observe our world. Secondly, we need to guard our steps. Firstly, observe your world.

Looking out of the train the other day, there was a tower block in Bermondsey ready for demolition. And you could see that all the front doors had been removed, that the windows had been removed. [10:33] No doubt inside, all the kind of fixtures and fittings and the electricity cables and all those kinds of things had been removed. And it was covered in that sort of green netting, waiting for the day when the explosives would be set off and the whole thing would come crashing down.

Now, I take it that is obviously not the kind of building that you would invest in. You wouldn't kind of think to yourself, would you? Well, that's a good kind of long-term prospect. I think I'll buy, I'll snap up one of those flats while they're going cheap and call it home and move in.

And I think Ecclesiastes chapter 4 really has a similar purpose. If we are so invested in this world that it's home, if we are chasing after the things which everyone else is chasing after, then just stop and think again.

Firstly, it's a world of oppression. Verse 1, Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

[12:06] Oppression. The abuse of power. People exploited because of their poverty, perhaps, or their sex, or their nationality. It may be modern slavery arriving at Heathrow Airport.

A few weeks ago there were warnings that slavery is alive and well in London. It may be the oppression of zero-hours contracts. It may be the kind of half-life of the Amazon warehouse operative.

Or perhaps the fear of the city worker that they will lose their livelihood if they don't hit their targets. It might be the refugees or victims of war or persecution that are the stuff of news reports.

Striking, I think, our passage begins with oppression and it finishes with oppression. Chapter 5, verse 8. If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter.

Don't be surprised when you look at the news and it's full of stories of injustice and suffering. That is the world in which we live. Indeed, verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4, the writer almost seems unsure, doesn't he, whether it's better to be dead or alive.

[13:25] You may think to yourself, hang on a moment, that seems almost too bleak, even for the writer of Ecclesiastes. It's just worth noting, it's not his last word on the subject.

I've put chapter 9, verse 4 on the outline. But he who is joined with all the living has hope. For a living dog is better than a dead lion.

So he seems to say in chapter 9, it's better to be at least alive because you have hope. So maybe that his point here in chapter 4, verses 2 and 3 is simply something like this.

What kind of life is this? The oppressed. The refugee. The Amazon warehouse operative. Living their half-life. It's barely any existence at all.

A world of oppression. A world of envy. Verse 4. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work comes from a man's envy of his neighbor.

[14:29] This also is vanity and a striving after wind. Here is the rat race with envy as the main motivation for work.

The scramble for wealth and power and status. Doesn't that describe your workplace? Someone said to me just last week, having read ahead into chapter 4, that is exactly my workplace.

I was reading recently about a survey that was carried out amongst business executives. And they were given a choice. Would they rather earn £150,000 a year in an industry where the average was £175,000 a year?

Or would they rather earn £75,000 a year in an industry where the average was £60,000 a year? Well, I thought to myself, I think the answer is fairly obvious.

I think I would take the £150,000 rather than the £75,000. And yet, the majority of those surveyed said they'd rather earn less and be above the average.

[15:34] Envy. Getting ahead. I need to do better than others. Now, of course, one option is to drop out altogether.

Verse 5, the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Where does that get you? You don't prosper economically or physically or psychologically.

Perhaps the answer is verse 6. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Someone said to me the other day, short, not here, someone else, someone said to me, surely as a Christian, you should do your work to the very best of your ability.

I said to them, I can think of many good reasons why you might decide not to do that. Yes, of course, we're to do our work for the Lord Jesus and in a way that honours him.

[16:34] But part of that may actually be deciding to do a less demanding job. For example, because you have other responsibilities. Because, as the verse says, you don't want both your hands to be full of toil.

You don't want life to be simply governed by work. We want to give time to other things. We want to give time to our families. We want to give time to be able to do more gospel ministry.

And yet, of course, in practice, we find it so hard, don't we, to break the cycle of endlessly striving after the next thing.

A world of oppression, a world of envy. A world of toil, verses 7 and 8. 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.

[17:43] Here, if you like, is the compulsive moneymaker, the workaholic. Even on holiday, there's no end to their checking emails. As they spend their time and energy amassing money and power, yet they never derive any pleasure from it.

If they do have a family, they have certainly left home emotionally. Sadly, perhaps one day physically as well. There was an interview in the paper recently.

You may well have seen it with the entrepreneur Elon Musk. And the article began, here is a man who should be on top of the world. At the age of 48, 49, whatever it is, he has started four billion dollar companies.

PayPal, Tesla, SpaceX and SolarCity. And yet he was saying in the interview that as he reflected on the launch of his most recent car, he felt nothing but misery.

The interview explained how he'd been through three divorces, how he lives on his own. And he simply said this, how do you make yourself happy in a situation like that?

[18:57] It's verse 8. There is no end in 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.

Next, a world of loneliness. Because we might think, verses 9 to 12, surely here there is hope. Surely here there is hope in friendship, in companionship.

Let me read them. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 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.

Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. How can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold called is not quickly broken out.

These words are often read at weddings, but actually all the pictures in these verses, in terms of the ancient world, are taken from the world of travel. If you stumble as you're walking along the road, it's good to have someone who can pick you up.

[20:04] At night in the days before Airbnb, it's easier to keep warm if there are two of you, than if you're on your own. If you're attacked, you stand a better chance of holding off robbers, if there are two of you, than if you're on your own.

And three, obviously, would be even better than two. And yes, companionship and friendship are part of God's good creation design. Just as we said last week, that although the whole world has been devastated by the tsunami of sin, and God's curse on our world, and yet there are still vestiges of God's original good creation.

Food, drink, for some perhaps a job. They enjoy the holidays or a day out. And clearly, friendship and companionship comes into that same category.

And yet there's a big but here, isn't there? Verse 10. People talk about the loneliness epidemic of our culture.

Whether it's the growing number of people living on their own, almost 8 million people. Whether it's the elderly, who are shut away in their care homes, with no one to care for them really, or just on their own, sort of hidden, out of sight.

[21 : 27] Or the loneliness of social media, where we hide our true selves behind an image of someone we are not. Or the growing number of suicides among middle-aged men.

It all points, doesn't it, to the relational poverty that pervades our society. A world of loneliness. And a world of vanishing power.

It's often said that every political career ends in failure. That's why, of course, they write their memoirs, to try and redeem their reputation.

And David Cameron surely is no exception. In verse 13, there's a king, a leader, who won't listen to others.

Notice verse 14. And his had been a rags-to-riches story. A glittering career, full of promise. But he is then replaced, verse 15, by a mere youth.

[22 : 33] One who, in turn, is wildly popular. He rides high in the opinion polls. And yet, actually, he's not going to have the legacy which he looked for either.

He will be replaced by someone else, soon forgotten, and their achievements never mentioned again. And, of course, it's not just in the political world.

Many of us will have seen exactly the same thing in the world of business as well. In every area of life, you can reach the pinnacle of human glory, influence, and power. Everyone will think you're wonderful, but then it's all gone, forgotten, in a moment.

Observe your world. Can you see what our preacher is doing? He's saying this, observe your world before you dance to its tune.

Before you chase after and invest yourself in all the things the world says are important and significant, just stop and think.

[23 : 45] Do you really want to set your ambitions on this world? Do you really want to buy into its values? Do you really want to move into that block of flats that's ready for demolition?

Because remember what we saw three weeks ago, our world is groaning. We groan. This world is scheduled for demolition on the day the Lord Jesus returns at the end of history when there's going to be a whole new creation, a whole new heavens, a whole new earth.

And that, of course, means that if our ambitions are going to be focused on that day, then as well as observing our world, we also need to guard our steps.

And that's chapter 5, verses 1 to 8. These verses are about fearing God. Verse 7, God is the one you must fear. We saw last week, it's a big theme in Ecclesiastes, having a right view of God, having a right regard for him rather than simply paying lip service to him.

I guess whether we are a follower of the Lord Jesus this morning, or whether we are simply looking in on the Christian faith, the danger that we can be so caught up with life that actually we never really take Jesus seriously.

[25 : 02] Perhaps we're amongst the oppressed. Perhaps life is really hard, hard, and we can be so caught up in just survival that we don't really listen to Jesus seriously.

Or perhaps we're at the other end, so to speak. We're amongst the single-mindedly ambitious. And again, life is so busy, we don't really take Jesus seriously.

So what does it mean to guard our steps? Well, firstly, to listen. Chapter 5, verse 1, guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. I wonder how carefully you came to church this morning.

Not how carefully you crossed the road, not how carefully you rode your bike, or even how carefully you drove your car. But have you been careful to come in listening mode and engaging mode rather than autopilot?

[26 : 10] Because it's quite possible, you see, to come to church and not really to listen at all. Verse 2, Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.

For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few. For a dream comes with much busyness and a fool's voice with many words.

Perhaps we don't listen because life is busy. We're so preoccupied with what the rest of the day holds or what the coming week has in store for us that although it may look as if we are listening to the sermon, actually kind of mentally and emotionally, we're completely miles away.

What really captures our hearts and kind of screams at us this is the important stuff is elsewhere. Work, exams, perhaps bringing up successful children, perhaps having the right group of friends and so on.

And yet, of course, they're all vanity. They're all here today and gone tomorrow. Or perhaps we don't listen because actually we're just too busy speaking.

[27 : 21] You know, we come to church, it's wonderful catch out with friends, seeing what the last week has held. Perhaps we've got conversations we want to have with people. And yet, we never really stop to engage with God and listen to him.

In other words, it's too easy to lose sight of the fact that we come to church primarily to hear God's word, to listen to his voice.

I take it there should be nothing casual about that because each one of us in this room, we are all thoroughly messed up people. We live in a thoroughly messed up world where the temptation is to live like everyone else.

What you and I desperately need to hear is God's word, God's voice. That's why it's so helpful, I think, to take notes. It's why we produce a sermon outline to encourage active listening during a talk.

So listen. Secondly, change. Verses four to six. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it because he has no pleasure in fools.

[28 : 32] Pay what you vow. It's better that you should not vow than you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin and do not say before the messenger that it is a mistake.

Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? Because, of course, the aim of every sermon, every Bible study, is change.

It is transformation. In other words, it's not just accumulating information, but it changed life. I've put some words from 2 Timothy chapter 4 on the outline.

Let me read them. You see, what is the faithful pastor to do? Well, this is what the apostle Paul says to Timothy. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is the judge, the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Those three words, rebuke, reprove, and exhort, they're all change words, aren't they? So, reprove, correcting, rebuking, showing where we got things wrong, exhorting, encouraging, they're all change words, which means that God's aim for every sermon and every Bible study is change and transformation, individually, but also corporately, as a local church.

[30 : 05] Which means, of course, we need to be intentional about change. Verse four, when you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it. We vow to God, I guess, don't we, in what we sing.

We've sung already this morning, every day is a good day to pray to Jesus, every day is a good day to read his word, that Sunday morning, what about Monday morning?

Or we're about to sing, this life I live is not my own, for my Redeemer paid the price. But then, who am I living for on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday?

We vow things by what we sing. I take it, it means that not every song will be an appropriate song for us to sing. We mustn't join in and just get carried along by the crowd.

Or perhaps we've been very moved by God's word, our hearts being stirred, that there's some sin we've been convicted of or a new desire to change in some way, and yet the busyness of life can so quickly snatch it away.

[31 : 17] So that needs to be that carefulness about the way in which we respond to what we hear. It's one reason we put questions for further discussion on the outline to generate discussion afterwards so we can begin to respond to God's word seriously.

Many I know spend time on Sunday evening or Monday morning just going through their notes again, reading through the passage again, doing so prayerfully, considerably, or perhaps doing that in their prayer triplets when they meet in prayer triplets.

Others do exactly the same thing with their children and their Sunday club material Sunday evening, going through the passage again, showing a seriousness about the way in which we respond to God's word and praying it through together.

I wonder if you have recently had one of those dreams where you kind of wake up and for a brief moment you're still there. You know, wherever the dream was, you are there.

You're not in your kind of bed in your boring house wherever. You really are there and your kind of mind is full of whatever was happening in your dream. But I guess it's never long, is it, perhaps a few seconds or so before you suddenly think, oh, I'm actually, do you know what, I'm just at home and you kind of reorientate yourself and you think, yep, it's Wednesday morning and I'm going to get up and just get on with life and so on and the dream is soon forgotten.

[32 : 44] Well, church can so easily be like that. We're caught up in everything for a moment and then things are quickly over and we just get on with life.

Guard your steps. I take it that whether you and I are careful to listen to God's word, I take it that whether you and I are intentional about change is a good barometer of whether, verse 7, we really fear God or not.

And I take it it's a good indicator of the wisdom of the choices that we all make in life.