

Wisdom A Limited Dividend

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Date: 11 October 1989

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Bring you up to date on what we're doing. We've been working through the book of Ecclesiastes in the heart of the Old Testament. And it's a very interesting book, a very provocative book, and I commend it to you, even though we cut little bits out of it and ask you to look at them from week to week.

The part that we've cut out for today is this page that you have in front of you called Better.

And what happens, it seems to me, is that the way life is constructed is that we are in a box.

And that box that we're in is what is defined in Ecclesiastes as being under the sun.

We're caught within the time-space framework of our lives, and we have to live it here.

And the whole book is written with tremendous discipline to say this is all that can be said as long as you're in the box.

[1 : 33] Now, it is basically, I think, a picture of the Christian faith that with Christ the lid is blown off the box. But what Ecclesiastes tries to do is say, well, if you look at life under the sun, within the box, this is all you can say about it.

And what I want to deal with today is that there's a lot of things in which it is possible in our world to say this is marginally better than that.

And that the advice for us in living our lives is that we will live on this earth in a marginally better way if we know what is better and what is worse.

Now, it doesn't mean that we know what is best. And the fundamental problem of Ecclesiastes, when he says that God has put eternity into our hearts, it means that somehow we are aware that there is the best, but it's not here and it's not available, and we spend most of our time trying to achieve it, you know, saying that I want nothing but the best.

Yes, we are, as it were, on a quest for the best, and we go after it. Just to give you an example of kind of Ecclesiastes thinking, there's a lovely write-up on California, and California, as you know, is today where we're all hoped to be tomorrow.

[3 : 19] And they describe the good life in this Newsweek article. He says the number of swimming pools in California is 647,000.

That's part of the good life. They hold 12.9 million gallons of water. Write this down so you can remember the time. The biggest cash crops are milk and cream at 2.08 million annually.

2.08 million annually. And illegal marijuana at 3 billion annually. So you can see the number of millionaires is 5,462, and the number making more than 5 million a year are 431.

Of course, that would be disappointing to me. To get to the stage of earning that much money and know that there's 430 other people doing just as well. That would spoil it.

But that's the box, and there's no way out of it. He says that there are... The number of motor vehicles in a four-county, Southern California area is more than all the cows in India.

[4 : 48] That's another very helpful thing to keep in mind. That there are 1.6 million custom license plates. That there are board-certified plastic surgeons.

Nationally, there's 2,800. California has 560 of those. And Los Angeles has 184. So you can see that California is trying to break out of a situation in which the only choice is that life can be marginally better, and they're trying to make it into the best.

And that's what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about. How do you do it? How do you do it without blowing the top off the box? And you can't do that. It talks about the other side of California life, that the average number of earthquakes is 11,000.

Suicides on the Golden Bridge, 822 since 1937. You know, the golden gates, isn't it? That's the sort of dream that we would see those golden gates and jump off them, 822.

The percentage of Californians under 65 with no health insurance is 21.6. Average speed on the Los Angeles freeway in 1988 was 35 miles per hour.

[6 : 14] Projected speed in 2010, 19 miles per hour. And they go on like that to talk about it.

Well, you see, this is the predicament of our humanity, is that we are caught in the box. And though we want the best, the only way we can do it is by mutual deception and illusion.

And that that's what we meet together for, is to encourage one another in certain illusions. And that's how we live our lives, is by promoting this for one another.

And so what the book of Ecclesiastes has to tell us is what choices there are within the box.

I was impressed by, this is just a quotation to help you as we come to look at this scripture passage or passages, where Chuck Colson talks about year zero as 1945, and no one could predict the consequences that the void at the heart of the nation would produce.

[7 : 29] You know, now that's what the way Ecclesiastes describes it, is vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What Chuck Colson is talking about is the void at the heart of the nation, which is saying exactly the same thing.

What happens when man finds himself caught in this inescapable box? And so he says, this is what's going to happen.

He said, we don't know. We didn't know in 1945 what was going to happen, but philosopher Pascal had foreseen, three centuries earlier, the chilling consequence.

And he argued that in a spiritual vacuum, men can pursue only two options. To imagine that they are gods themselves, that's option number one, and it's widely accepted.

The number two option is to seek satisfaction in their senses. You know, that's the only source of satisfaction.

[8 : 39] And I think I've mentioned to you before that our preoccupation with sexuality is ascribed by some to be because we consider death to be absolutely final.

And sexuality is the only celebration of life we have to exercise against the inevitability of death. And so the people need to find that sensual fulfillment, apart from which life has no meaning at all in our world.

So that he says that Pascal predicted by these statements the route that would be followed in East and West in the aftermath of World War I.

So you get that, you get the picture that life in the box can only be managed by deception into thinking that you are a god.

You know, I'm the only one here that matters. And the other possibility is just by sort of self-titillation, I suppose, the enjoyment of our sensual experiences.

[9 : 59] So that's what happens. You know that there's a positive comparative and superlative that I learned in school, I guess.

And you get... And... So that... You have the condition, the positive condition.

You have something better than that, which is the comparative, and the superlative is so that you get good, better, and best. Well, this isn't quite the same as that because the positive is bad.

So what do you do? What you have to do in this world is try and see what is better than the worst. Not what is better than good, but what is better than the worst. And that's really what Ecclesiastes is trying to define as it looks at this.

The mystery of human existence, according to Ecclesiastes, is that we want nothing but the best. Only the best is good enough.

[11 : 08] And yet, it's not available. We can't get it because we're caught in the box. Well, look then at the passages and see what it says.

And these are the ones written on that sheet in front of you. There's nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

You can't get out of life more than it can give. You know, the... And we want to know why that should be.

I mean, even... I would even be prepared to say on the basis of this verse that when you go and buy a 649 ticket, you are saying that there's got to be something more.

And maybe this is the way to it. And it only costs \$5? I don't know. I'm making a point of not knowing. Yeah, so...

[12 : 19] The... But that... You know, and what Ecclesiastes is saying is that's not going to happen. And the only thing that's going to happen is that you will find that it's better to eat and drink and find enjoyment in your work.

That's about the limit to which you can go with this life. That's as far as you can go. You can't go further than that.

If you go to Ecclesiastes 3.22, you get there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work for that is his lot who can bring him to see what...

what will be after him. And... I mean, human beings are enormously self-centered. I mean, we all are. And so that Ecclesiastes puts the finger right on this and says, you don't know because your world is right here.

And that's all you can know. You're caught in that situation. And anything beyond that is... self-deception.

[13 : 34] He goes to Ecclesiastes 4.3, better than both is he who has not been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

And... that is... that really says that probably it's better to live in our complacency than it is to become acutely aware of the profundity of evil in our world.

You know, because it's too much. We don't know what to do with it. And so we, in a sense, anesthetize ourselves to it. And again, we use the box to hide it because we can't tolerate the problems that exist outside that box.

And so it's better, you know, and he says, in effect, it'd be better to be dead than to have to be wide awake and fully aware of all that's wrong with our world.

We couldn't tolerate it. And he says that's the practical reality. In Ecclesiastes 4, verse 6, again, better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil striving after the wind.

[14 : 50] And we... and that's one of the wonderful statements. I mean, it's a magnificent statement, isn't it? Better, a handful of quietness. You know, would I ever love to be able to go around to you on Friday afternoon and give to each of you a handful of quietness that you could enjoy for the weekend?

You know, if we could give that to one another, what a gift that would be. And what a wonderful exchange. But the fact is that our hands are locked, full of toil and striving, and we can't receive a handful of quietness.

Hard to do. We'd be better if we could, but the problem is that, of course, we know better than we can be. And so that there's a bit of frustration in that very verse.

He says in 4.9, two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. We happen to live in the brave new world where one is better than two because I can't trust anybody else.

and the only person I trust is myself and so I think I can make it. But he says the practical reality is that you are really dependent upon some relationship that is meaningful to you and that your life is really dependent upon the cultivation of a relationship with another person.

[16 : 13] we are, as human beings, other person centered. We need that relationship. It's better. We may not have it.

We may long for it. We may desire it. We may find it impossible. But it's still better and we have to live with that reality. Better is poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will no longer take advice.

Now that's the kind of thing that should be stitched in embroidery and put in all the boardrooms of the land where the chief executive officers and his consultants meet to show you what happens to what once was a poor and wise youth that has now become an old and foolish king.

And it's the stubbornness that comes to us. And, yeah, I... You know, I'm in a church where the particular application of this that I'm confronted with is better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish rector who will no longer take advice.

You know, that that... Or a minister who will no... I mean, that's the problem in lots of churches, not ours. But I... But... But that happens, but not just there.

[17 : 47] But it's the kind of thing that happens to us and it tells you where you should invest your money. He gets on to the subject of religion. There's a verse that isn't in there and it's chapter 5, verse 1, which is another better.

And it says, to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice of fools. And he's pointing at the kind of...

the worship in our lives. and that so much of our worship he characterizes as the sacrifice of fools.

And the thing that disturbs me a lot is that lots of pagan, non-church-going people can look at lots of church activity and say, with terrible clarity, that is the sacrifice of fools.

And... and... the reality that should be at the heart of our worship is not there. The reason... one of the reasons is that somehow in the realm of religion we switch Ecclesiastes 5.5 around.

[19 : 05] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. And... you know, a lot of the preaching of the gospel is vow now and pay later.

You know. And... and... you know, that... lots of people get caught in between those two. You know. They've made the vow but they've never made the pay.

You know. I mean, that's... they've never sort of come to Jesus is Lord. You know. And so that's what again that's what the man in the box can see.

And that's why you know he doesn't quite understand what you mean when you say that the top is blown out of the box. In Ecclesiastes chapter 6 verse 3 here's a picture of prosperity an Old Testament picture anyway.

A man begets a hundred children. Terrifying thought. And... he lives many years so that the days of his years are many but he does not enjoy life's good things.

[20 : 21] And nobody's there to bury. You know. And that's... that's it.

He says it'd be better if he was stillborn. you know. And again you see that again he's emphasizing the fact that in a life which contains all that this life contained presumably there wasn't any margin at all.

He would have been better off to have been stillborn than that experience of life. That's heavy stuff. You know. I mean he's not he's not being optimistic or he's saying this is the way it is.

So that when you go to again in Ecclesiastes 6 verse 9 better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. You know that there is really no option in escaping into daydreams and you know to deliberately help people to build their own illusions around their own lives is no real help to them because it's better to see things as they are than to wander off into a totally artificial world.

You know I mean that's really a reference to television. you know that you see a glorious life with your eyes but you know after you've done it for three or four hours you wake up I mean you come to you were awake all the time you're stiff at least I am and you suddenly have to get back to reality you know because you realize that you you've been absorbed with and given hours of your time to a totally artificial situation that has no residual benefits in your life very often and so he says better the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire the electronic wandering of desire again in chapter 6 verse 11 he says the more words the more vanity and you know how

[22 : 47] I mean I meet lots of people and for whom the vacuum in their life is filled by words you know they simply will not shut up and they keep talking to fill the void in their own lives and talking the same nonsense over and over again because they haven't got any new ideas particularly and the more words the more vanity and you're not improved by Ecclesiastes 7 verse 1 is the last one I'm going to do don't think I'm going the rest of the way through a good name is better than precious ointment now you in Vancouver would never know about this because your burial customs are different than back in Toronto when somebody's dead it's off to the crematorium and that's it but in Toronto you get laid out in a funeral home for two or three days and all your friends and neighbors come in to admire the art of the embalmer and what he's been able to do with precious ointments and how wonderful it is that you look better than you've looked for years and what a delight that is to you and to all your friends but he says that the residual of your life would be better if it was produced not by precious ointments but by a good name and the day of death is better than the day of birth and of course that's true because when on the day you're born people think isn't that wonderful there's just no limit to what might happen in that little life and in the funeral home there's the awareness that all that's going to happen has happened and I wonder if there's any significance to it so that there is a sobering about the day of death in terms of the accumulation of wisdom there is an understanding and an insight and an awareness of reality which you don't get on the day of birth so

Ecclesiastes hammers away at us and cuts and fractures and breaks down all the proud pompous nonsense with which we surround our lives and it cuts through all that the last one Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 13 I have seen the example of wisdom under the sun and it's not on the paper there so don't I mean it the only thing that's there is the end of it which is 9 16 but beginning at 9 13 it says I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun and it seemed great to me there was a little city with few men in it a great king came against it and besieged it building great siege works against it but there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his nobility remembered the poor man he says later in that same passage the words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools which is a very apt description and

I'm not being disrespectful but it's an apt description of the political process the words of the ruler among fools he doesn't know what he's saying and they don't know what he's saying and a great noise is generated without any light coming into the situation and the other picture that he gives is that is the kind of political process wisdom is better than weapons of war and you know but the fact that wisdom is better doesn't mean that a machine gun isn't more effective as you get is one way the shouting of a ruler among fools and the way of violence the weapons of war the resort to violence is another way but he said that the poor man the poor wise man is not remembered and it's my contention that I would like to leave you with is that

Jesus Christ comes among us as the poor wise man wiser than the political process wiser than the process of violence but disregarded and ignored among us we just ignore him and the most wonderful thing I think that can happen to us is the recognition that the city has been saved the enormous debt that this city owes to the man Christ Jesus is I think absolutely incalculable in terms of every institution by which this city runs but as far as the city is concerned he is the poor wise man that is ignored and and I think that that's that's why we're confronted with a world which is in a sense in some ways the worst of all possible worlds and it's the best of all possible worlds too but there is there is the possibility of something better and taking hold of that which is better is done because you have faith in that which is best and that which is best is the most profound longing of the human heart but it's only made available to us by God in Christ when the box is smashed and we're set free and that of course is the scriptural view of life is that you live under the sun in a world of vanity but it's

God's purpose that in that you should break out of that into another reality a reality which starts with the poor wise man whom we ignore the man Christ Jesus Amen