

# Seclusion, Success, Striving After Wind

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's been six days since the 4th of July, and I'm hoping that's enough of a margin for me to get away with preaching a bit of an anti-American sermon.

Being half-American myself, I hope this doesn't get my citizenship revoked. What I mean by anti-American is this. I'm going to be preaching from Scripture, which really undermines not only the American way of life, but undermines the Canadian way of life as well.

The Scripture is going to, it's been hitting me where it hurts this week, and I think it might do the same for you before we're done this morning. We began our journey several weeks ago through the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament of the Bible, and this book really hasn't been an easy pill to swallow, has it?

We were joking, I was joking with a few friends yesterday about kind of, it's been like a lot of darkness, a lot of gloom, but there's been joy that we found in it. Throughout most of the book, we have this individual, this individual who identifies himself as, depending on your translation, as either the preacher or the teacher.

He takes, what he does is he's taking a long, hard look at the world, and he's determining what can we learn from the world by looking at it? What can we learn from this world around us?

[ 1 : 20 ] And the question that he's really trying to answer is found in Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 3. The question is this, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

In other words, is there any lasting gain that human beings like you and me, is there any lasting gain, any lasting goodness that we can get out of the people and out of the world around us? Is there good in this world under the sun that can't be taken away from us? And the answer to his question, as we've seen so far, has been a pretty solid no.

A pretty solid no. In fact, he answered the question in the verse prior when he writes this in Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 2. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. There's no lasting good to be had in this world. You can't hang on to anything in this world. It all slips away from you.

[ 2 : 22 ] It's like striving after wind, trying to grab a hold of it. It gets away from you. It's a futile chase. And so we're left longing for a better world. We're left finding ways to enjoy what we have before it is ultimately stripped away from us.

The preacher, he doesn't sugarcoat anything. He takes a cold, hard, honest look at our lives, ourselves, and at the world around us. This is what life under the sun is like.

It's like striving after wind. And what we're going to encounter today is a very specific example of striving after wind. We're going to encounter this specific example of trying to chase and capture what can't be held onto.

We're going to see what isn't the good life, first of all. And then second of all, we're going to learn what is. What isn't the good life and what is. So first, what we're going to learn is this, that the good life is not gained from independence and achievement.

The good life is not gained from independence and achievement. That's the anti-American message. Turn to your Bibles with me. Let's go to Ecclesiastes chapter 4.

[ 3 : 32 ] So Ecclesiastes chapter 4, if you're new to the Bible and you're using a paper copy, it's about halfway through the Bible. You've got an index in the front of your Bible that can help you find this book. If you're using one of our church Bibles, one of the blue Bibles that we have available, it's on page 555.

Ecclesiastes chapter 4. And here's who we're going to encounter in these verses. We're going to meet the prototype American. We're going to meet the independent achiever.

This is someone that you or I or the people around us, we might look at and maybe admire and label as self-sufficient, as self-reliant, as a free individual, as a hard worker, as a success story, someone climbing the ladder, or maybe if we have a little bit more insight, as a workaholic. Here's how the preacher describes him. Ecclesiastes chapter 4, 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?

[ 4 : 52 ] This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Now, here's how the preacher identifies this particular individual achiever.

One person who has no other. Now, in our culture, we just have this way of looking at ourselves. We're very individualistic, actually freakishly individualistic, if you compare us to the rest of the world and the rest of cultures throughout history.

We are the weird ones. We're the outliers. And we like to think of ourselves, I like to think of myself as like, I've got this individual identity. I've got this individual identity, who I am, in isolation from other people.

It's this whole idea that there's some sort of identity, there's something that makes me me, and that has absolutely nothing to do with the relationships in my life. It has nothing to do with the other human beings in my life. It has nothing to do with who God is.

There's something fundamental, there's a fundamental identity about myself that I need to discover. And life is all about finding out who you are deep down inside. But the preacher says that this individualism, this way of looking at yourself, it's not valid, because the very first thing he does is he identifies this isolated man by the relationships in his life, and in this case, the lack of them, right?

[ 6 : 14 ] He is one person who has no other. That's his identity. That's who he is, fundamentally. His activity? Endless toil.

He's always working. Always busy. Always important. He's making a lot of money. He's gaining prestige. But he's unsatisfied.

Not only is he unsatisfied, it says his eyes are never satisfied with riches. It means he is not satisfiable. He's not satisfied, and he never will be.

He is incapable of being satisfied. Greed and envy, they're like the grave. They can never be satisfied. They never say enough. And if you really want to pierce through all of that frantic activity, if you really want to pierce through all that busyness, if you want to get past all of that money, money, money, you could cut this man to pieces with a single question.

For whom are you toiling and depriving yourself of pleasure? For whom are you toiling and depriving yourself of pleasure? What's funny is maybe he could tell you what all his busyness is for.

[ 7 : 27 ] He could give you a reason. He could tell you what it's all good for. But that isn't the question. The question isn't what is it good for. The question is who is all this busyness good for? The answer to that question is no one.

There is no one near him. There is no one close to him. He's independent. He's successful. And he's not happy.

He's alone. This is not the good life. Now this raises the question of why this person is alone.

Because in verse 8 we see that he has no son or brother. And that may, you know, if he doesn't have a brother, that's not his fault. If he doesn't have a son, that may not be his fault. But the fact is that he has no other at all.

There is nobody else at all close to him. And so let's think for a moment about the people who are isolated from everyone around them.

[ 8 : 27 ] How do they get that way? That's a question that a few of us asked our friends and colleagues this week. Was this question of do you know anyone who isolates themselves from other people?

And why do you think they do it? And some of the responses were very telling. We learned that those who are isolated often, maybe for example, they've made choices. That people around them disapprove of.

They can't bear to face the frowning faces. They can't bear to face the criticizing words. So they cut themselves off from other people. Maybe this individual is trapped in a pattern of behavior.

They're deeply ashamed of. They feel dirty. They feel disgusting. They feel bad. And when other people try to tell them, no, no, no. You're a good person. We love you. We care about you. All that does is shine a spotlight on the shame.

They can't bear it. They push people away. Maybe they're afraid that if other people get to know them, if other people see them for who they really are, they're not going to accept me.

[ 9 : 39 ] They're not going to love me. They're not going to love me. One particular story that I found very sad was an individual who struggled with major depression, spent his days curled up in a ball on a couch, and lost his marriage over it.

Ultimately, all this is driven by a demand for security. We keep our family. We keep our acquaintances. We keep the people in our lives at a safe distance from us so that we don't get hurt. And we see in the earlier verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 4, this desire for security extends beyond a personal sense of guilt or a personal sense of shame. In verse 1, maybe he's experienced what we see, the tears of the oppressed.

Maybe this individual achiever sees himself as a victim. Maybe he sees that on the side of the oppressors, there was power. So what do you do if you're oppressed and you see that power is what rescues me from oppression?

You work hard to acquire money and prestige and power so that you can protect yourself from ever being hurt again. Maybe he hasn't experienced this evil and injustice himself.

[ 11 : 04 ] Maybe he's simply been watching TV over the last week. He's been watching the news. He's seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun, as verse 3 says, and he can't bear to look at them.

It's too much. It's too overwhelming. He can't handle that despair that he feels. The sense of where is this world going? How can these things be happening?

There's so much evil in this world. I've lost all faith and all hope. And so he throws himself into work. He throws himself into activity. He throws himself into busyness because they help him cope.

They comfort him. They keep the darkness at bay for a little while longer. Or maybe as verse 4 suggests, he is driven by a man's envy of his neighbor.

He's trying to keep up with the Joneses. He's gathering and collecting cars and houses and mountain bikes and mortgages and credit card debt in order to maintain the standard of living and the lifestyle that he is expected to have.

[ 12 : 12 ] So that he's safe from all of those little smirks and pitying glances from his colleagues who have all of those things. And oh, this poor guy. He doesn't have all the things that we have.

This craving for security, for safety from other people, and from all the harm that might come to me, and the way other people might look down on me. The craving for security from all that is what isolates this man and what drives him to achieve.

But the good life is not gained from independence and achievement. And so the isolated achiever is missing out on the good life.

He's missing out on what's better. The preacher tells us in verses 9 through 12 what is better. 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.

[ 13 : 17 ] But how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A three-fold cord is not quickly broken.

So the independent achiever, the success story, the man raking in the dough, this person is not making a good wage, is not getting a good reward for their toil.

If this person falls, if some calamity happens to him, there is no one there to come alongside him.

There's no one there to lift him up again. There's no one there to help him recover. If he lies down in the cold, if he's facing hardship and despair and depression alone, he faces it by himself.

There is no one beside him. There's no one to comfort him. No one to bring him warmth. No one to bring feeling and life back to him. If he encounters an enemy who tries to hurt him, odds are he's going to be subdued.

[ 14 : 19 ] He's going to be beaten. There's no one to stand beside him. There's no one to protect him. No one to fight with him. He craves security, and he has no security. The good life is not gained from independence and achievement.

The isolated achiever is missing out on the good life. He misses out on what is better. There's another thing the preacher shows us that is better than that sort of life.

Verses 13 through 16, he continues here. 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 poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who is 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 also is vanity and a striving after wind. So, here we have, first of all, someone who has made it to the top.

[15:27] Someone who has found the ultimate achievement. He's an old king in charge of a kingdom, but he's a foolish king. Why is he foolish? Because he no longer knows how to take advice or to listen to warning.

He's isolated from any companion. He's isolated from the people who can speak into his life. And that a youth who is poor and wise is better off than this king.

And the next few verses sort of explain why that is. Now, if you're reading a different translation than what I'm reading, you were probably, you know, just like shaking your head as you were reading this.

You're like, that's not what mine says. Mine tells a little bit of a different story. The reason for that is that the original text is actually really ambiguous. It's really difficult to tell when it talks, you know, it's got maybe these two characters, maybe even a third character thrown in.

Like, it's referring to, it starts talking about he was in his own kingdom. And it's like, which he is he referring to? What's going on here? It's a little bit confusing. And I'll get back to that in just a moment.

[16:35] Why is it written so ambiguously? It's a bit of an oddball, especially coming after some verses that are extremely straightforward. A couple of commentators whom I read, I think they have what is probably sort of the best guess, sort of the smoothest approach to this.

Here's what they say is that verse 14 refers to the old king, not the youth. So in other words, this old king was once like that youth. And he was not only poor, he was in prison.

So at first glance, right, this old king, now he's in a much better place now, right? That's what we would think. He's achieved. He's made to the top. He's not poor. He's not in prison anymore.

But he isn't better off. He's worse off now that he's king. Why? Because we learn in verse 15 that he's expendable.

There's a successor, another youth, already lining up to replace him. And who are the people siding with? They're all thronging around this youth that is going to displace this old king.

[17:44] And then when the youth rises to power, the preacher shows us in verse 16 that now he too is worse off. Verse 16 we read, There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led.

That phrase, there's no end of all the people. If that sounds a little bit familiar, it's because back in verse 8 we saw a very similar phrase. There was no end to all his toil.

Because that's what the throne, that's what the kingship has become to this youth. It's become an endless sea of faces, an endless sea of needs and ambitions, all clamoring for his attention.

The task is overwhelming. Those of you who are small business owners, how was owning a business when you were just working for yourself different from you running a whole staff of people?

All of a sudden, it's overwhelming. So many things you're having to, so many people you're having to take care of, so many needs you're having to meet, your life gets incredibly complex.

[18:44] Getting that achievement doesn't necessarily give you the security and the happiness that you were hoping to get. The life of this youth is now filled with unhappy busyness.

And it will be until he dies. And then we learn in verse 16. Those who come later will not rejoice in him. Sure, all the people were thronging around him and on his side when he came to the throne.

Future generations don't care. Future generations don't care about this guy. They don't care about his rise to power or all the social initiatives that he championed, which eventually crumble away.

This king is also expendable. Just like the old and foolish king before him. His achievement has not given him the security he wants.

It has not given him the lasting gain that he wants. He too is going to evaporate into history. All his achievement brought him was isolation. All it brought him was foolishness.

[ 19 : 50 ] All it brought him was toil. The good life is not gained from independence and achievement. Hundreds of years after these words were written, the apostle John warns us about how tempting all that independence and all that achievement can be.

And he warns us against them in 1 John 2, verse 15. And in these verses he writes this. Do not love the world or the things in the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires. But whoever does the will of God abides forever. So this independent achiever, he has become what he has worked for.

He has been working for things that pass away. He has been working for things that are just a vapor carried off by the wind. And he has become 1 too. Now he too is a vapor carried off by the wind.

[ 21 : 08 ] He's tied himself down to a sinking ship. The world that he clings to is passing away, and he is going to pass away along with it. John tells us that, instead, whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Now, if you read the rest of John's letter, you learn about who are these people doing the will of God. And John explains who they are. They are the children of God. Who are imitating their father. Who are doing their father's will. Who are doing what their father wants. In chapter 3, verse 1, John writes this. See what kind of love the father has given to us.

That we should be called children of God. And so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now.

And what we will be has not yet appeared. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him. Because we shall see him as he is. So this is what God has done for you.

[ 22 : 16 ] This is what God has done for me. For all of us who have believed in his son, Jesus Christ. God has welcomed us into his family. The good life is not gained from independence and achievement.

Instead, as we saw earlier, the good life is experienced in community. Not just any community. The good life is experienced in the family of God. The good life is experienced in the family of God.

How does this happen? How do we come into the family of God? Well, in chapter 4, verse 9, John explains it to us. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us.

That God sent his only son into the world. So that we might live through him. In this is love. Not that we have loved God. But that he loved us.

And sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. So what John is saying here is that God the Son came into our unsafe and insecure world.

[ 23 : 19 ] God the Son became the man that we know as Jesus. He left the security. He left the intimacy of heaven. He became a little baby born on a cold night. Born under threat from Herod the Great.

Throughout his adult years, he was surrounded on all sides by enemies who want to kill him.

Followers who didn't understand him. And he chose to die as a hated criminal on a Roman cross.

Why? So that he could be the propitiation for our sins. In other words, his purpose was to satisfy God's right anger against us. Because we've rebelled against God.

Because we've corrupted his world. With this obsession we have with independence and achievement. But that's not the way Jesus lived. Jesus embraced dependence on his Father.

And so he died in our place. And he trusted that his Father would vindicate him. And his Father did vindicate him by raising him from the dead.

[ 24 : 20 ] And now that he's risen, his Father has invited us to join Jesus our Lord to become the beloved children of God. And so we who believe in Jesus, we're welcomed into God's family.

What that means is, as we saw in Ecclesiastes chapter 4, when you fall, your Father is there to lift you up. When you lie down in the cold and dark, the Holy Spirit is with you to give you life and warmth.

And when you find yourself threatened by the devil and by forces arrayed against you, the Son is with you to defend you against his temptations and schemes. You are not alone in this world.

The good life is experienced in the family of God. And so John shows us what life in God's family is meant to be like. Chapter 4, verse 11, he says this, Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. No one has ever seen God, but when people look at God's family, they see the hand of God at work.

[ 25 : 38 ] They see God's image displayed clearly in us. In God's family, we embrace one another. We love one another. When someone falls down, when someone among us experiences calamity, what do we do?

We abandon our plans, we abandon our agendas, and we run to help lift them up again. When someone among us is lying down in the cold, is experiencing hardship, feeling numb, feeling depressed, we surround them with warmth, and with comfort, and with life.

When someone among us is threatened by a person with power, we step in and we intervene, even at the risk of our own necks. That's what life in the family of God is meant to be like.

That's what the preacher is directing us towards. He's directing us towards the good life. There's another aspect to life in the family of God that I want to draw our attention to here.

Because this, I think, is probably, this is probably the part of the sermon that will step on the most toes. Because this is one of the big blind spots in North American Christianity. And this blind spot is the way that we make decisions.

[ 26 : 59 ] The way that we make decisions in the family of God. Because remember in Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 13, what the preacher said about the old and foolish king. He no longer knew how to take advice.

And neither do we. We don't know how to take advice. So let me explain what I mean by this. When it comes to making important decisions, one thing I've noticed is that most church-going people, the majority of church-going people, tend to isolate themselves from the church, tend to isolate themselves from the family of God in the way that they make decisions.

So as they're thinking about a big move, as they're thinking about major financial decisions, as they're thinking about marriage, as they're thinking about career choices and career opportunities, as they're thinking about their children's education, as they're thinking about what's my role in the church, they do all that thinking on their own.

Maybe they include their spouse, which is good. But it's sort of like they keep that separate and they don't seek counsel from the church. Rather than consulting a few key, trusted, wise individuals in the church, rather including God's family in on this decision-making process, they keep the process to themselves.

And then when they've made the decision, they make the decision on their own and then they just go and report it to the church leadership or to people.

[ 28 : 30 ] A lot of times, those in leadership are left picking up the pieces of those decisions. And I have seen this happen over and over and over again.

I've seen it happen in Indiana, I've seen it happen in Langley, I've seen it happen in Squamish. So let me be direct. This kind of behavior is not love.

This kind of behavior is not love. This is not the way God's children behave. God's children are not foolish. They know how to seek out and heed wisdom and good advice from their family when they make decisions.

God's children know that good life, the good life is experienced in the family of God. Joseph Hellerman is a professor of New Testament at Biola University.

He wrote a terrific book called *When the Church Was a Family*. And he showed us what New Testament Christianity looked like, what it looked like really to be in the family of God, how when we call one another brothers, that it actually literally means it.

[ 29 : 38 ] It's not just a rhetorical message, that your relationships in the family of God are actually more fundamental to who you are than your own biological family is. that this family is more fundamentally your family than your biological family is.

And so he reminds us of what this good life looks like. He says this in his book, big decisions are best made in community in the context of the church family, especially big family decisions.

Sadly, many of us choose to ignore this principle and isolate our families from the context of relational accountability and input and decision making offered by the people of God.

So we isolate ourselves from God's family. We isolate ourselves from input. We isolate ourselves from those relationships that are going to call us into account. But we do so at great risk when it comes to the relational health and spiritual development of those we most dearly love and cherish.

If we make decisions that way, how are we teaching our children to make decisions? It really does take a village to raise a child or to nourish a marriage.

[ 31 : 00 ] But only a special supernatural kind of village will do. The surrogate family of God. The reason that I'm bringing this up, even if it's difficult for you to hear, is because I love you and God loves you and he wants you to have the good life in the family of God.

The best decisions I've made, the most life-giving decisions I've made as I look back, have been the ones that I made where I included other believers in my family.

When I brought them in, I got their counsel. I got their help. I talked it over with them. I bounced ideas off of them. They gave me advice and counsel. They heard me out. They offered their input. They're the best decisions. They're the most blessed decisions, not only for me, but for all the people around me. And the worst decisions I made were the ones where I just went out and did something and then reported it afterwards to the church leadership or to other people.

Over the last year, I have to say that my very favorite moments in this church, in this family, have been the times when some of you have come to me and you've had a big decision you're trying to think through or you have a difficult relationship you're trying to work through.

[ 32 : 24 ] Whether it's career, whether it's relationships, whether it's your role in the church. And we sat down and we talked about it and you kind of laid out what you were thinking and the issues you were going through and what your perspective was and I offered my perspective and we looked at scripture and we thought things through and we worked out a direction to take.

And those moments, you know, maybe you're tempted to think, oh man, I don't want to keep the elders of the church. You know, they got so much going on. They're so busy. You know, I don't want to bother them. Those moments weren't a burden to me.

Those moments were a blessing. Those were life-giving moments. They were the greatest blessing that I could have. Because the best thing, the thing that I want to see, the thing that the rest of the elders want to see is we want to see people who are faithfully serving the Lord, who are eagerly pursuing the Lord their God and who want to obey Him and who want to include us in the decision. The way they made that decision shows that they think of us as brothers, as family. That's an incredible blessing. I've been deeply blessed.

I won't embarrass you by mentioning you by names, but I've been deeply blessed by you. And I understand that shifting to this sort of mindset, this mindset of love, of sacrifice for one another, and this mindset of making decisions the way that Ecclesiastes calls us to, it's hard.

[ 33 : 52 ] It's very difficult for us to shift into this way of thinking. I'll be honest, it's probably harder for me than most. Because I can be quite independent and very stubborn about it.

I've had people call me out on that before. I very much needed that. But we belong together. We really do. We need each other.

Life is better together in the family of God. We're each responsible to God's family for our decisions and for our lifestyles. Often we want that independent achievement.

We think it's going to give us lasting aim, but it doesn't. Those who do the will of God are the ones who endure forever. So if this sort of lifestyle threatens our achievements, if this seems to threaten our security, then so be it.

Because we've had more than enough seclusion, we've had more than enough success, we've had more than enough striving after wind. Two are better than one. Because they have a good reward for their toil. The good life is not gained from independence and achievement.

[ 35 : 01 ] The good life is experienced in the family of God. Our God and Father, I thank you for what a blessing this church has been to me.

What a blessing my growth group has been to me. What a blessing the other elders in this church have been to me. Lord, we are not meant to live alone.

And we confess that we have absorbed too much of our culture. We have absorbed too much of the world's way of thinking.

Of keeping people at arm's length. Of keeping control of our lives. Of trying to make it to the top. Of trying to make success. And find security for ourselves. And we confess that we have sought that instead of seeking you. Into your way of living.

[ 36 : 02 ] The good life that you offer. Life under the sun offers nothing. No lasting gain. It's all taken away from us. But your life, eternal life, the good life, the true life is found in your son.

Is found in your family. Is found in your spirit at work among us. And I pray, oh God, that you would knit us together as a church family over the coming weeks and months.  
Draw us together. Bind us together. So we are a three-fold cord that is not quickly broken. Amen.  
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