

"Taking God Seriously Means Taking the Bible Seriously"

Eccl. 12:9-14

One of my favorite Bible characters is John the Baptist. First of all, his name is John and that immediately gets my attention. Jesus said John was not only the last but the greatest of the Old Testament prophets; that no one born of woman was greater. His arrival in Israel created quite a stir since he was the first prophet to appear in over 400 years and the whole nation came to hear him as he preached repentance at the Jordan River. Unlike most of the other Old Testament prophets who were largely ignored, John was a celebrity. He enjoyed tremendous success – until Jesus showed up whom John proclaimed as the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world. From that point on, fewer and fewer people came to hear John and more and more came to hear Jesus. Soon Jesus and His followers were baptizing more people than were John and his followers; and this really bothered John's disciples. Look at the Gospel of John 3:26; *"And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.'" (Jesus is stealing all our people!) John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, (or best man) who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease."* That's what I love about John and why I wish I was more like him. John's not interested in his own fame; he's only interested in Jesus' fame. *"I'm not the Messiah, I'm not the bridegroom, I'm not the Savior of the world, He is – and so He is who people need. The greater He becomes, the greater my joy becomes."* God hasn't called us to be His prophet but we all face the same decision John faced. Will I live a self-centered life or will I live a Christ-centered life? Will I live for my glory or for His, for my plans or for His; for what is right in my eyes or for what is right in His eyes? Will I increase or will Jesus increase? John chose Jesus over himself and in the following verses, he explains why. *"He who comes from above is above all, (meaning Jesus) he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. (meaning himself.) He who comes from heaven is above all. (meaning Jesus) What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. (John knew that eventually most people wouldn't believe in Jesus.) He who has received His testimony has set his seal to {this,} that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. (John 3:26-34)* Why does John say that Christ must increase and why he must decrease? Jesus is from heaven and speaks truth from the unlimited perspective of heaven, not from the limited perspective of earth as all humans – even at our best - must speak; because He was sent by the God of truth to speak the words of God – to tell us the truth about God and the truth about life. I must decrease and Christ must increase because Jesus is right about everything. He sees life as it is. He tells us the truth about who God is and who we are. If what I think and what Jesus says is in conflict, Jesus always wins. Doing what is right in my own eyes will always be a losing proposition because Jesus knows more than I and loves me so much that He left heaven to open my blind eyes to reality and I will be the greatest fool of history if I do not listen to Him. That's why John says, *"I want people to listen to Jesus rather than to me because Jesus knows what I don't."* And that is one of the major themes in the story of the Bible. Those who trust God listen to God. They believe that God knows more than they and that fearing God means keeping His commandments. And throughout the Old Testament, this lesson appears over and over. Those who trust God and listen to His commandments prosper; those who do what is right in their own eyes do not.

That's the point of every book of the Old Testament including Ecclesiastes which we've been looking at for the past few months. Solomon just takes a different road to bring us to that conclusion. Much of Ecclesiastes is dark and pessimistic. It's a book about disillusionment and disappointment; about how the things we hope will satisfy us never do: how the people we love will leave us or die: about how the work we devote so much of ourselves to doesn't change anything in the end. Ecclesiastes isn't a book of answers but of questions because it looks at life as it appears under the sun; at how life looks from a purely secular perspective which doesn't take God into

consideration. If I don't believe in God, these are the conclusions at which I will arrive. Solomon begins where many of the wise people of his day found themselves. The perspective of Ecclesiastes mirrors the perspective of the Egyptian, Babylonian and Mesopotamian literature of that period. The more wise lands observed life, the more pessimistic they became; and Solomon says, "I agree. Life is absurd. Evil does appear to win in the end. Nothing lasts." But then Solomon adds, "...as long as we leave God out of the equation. Let me show you an alternative view; a perspective that takes God into account." Ecclesiastes contrasts life under the sun with life above the sun; seeing life from a secular perspective and seeing life from God's perspective. Solomon wants us to realize that life won't make sense as long as we leave God out; that we must look outside the world to make sense of the world – which is the same conclusion John the Baptist came to. This morning we're going to look at that conclusion as we talk about how "Taking God Seriously Means Taking the Bible (and what God says) Seriously." Solomon has shown us how human wisdom is unable to make sense of life under the sun. Now he shows us how life only makes sense when we take God and His word seriously, because as the philosopher Wittgenstein said, "The sense of the world must come from outside the world." Ecclesiastes closes with the author's notes about the purpose of his book and I want us to see three things in Solomon's conclusion: first why he wrote Ecclesiastes in vs. 9-11; and second, the lesson we're to learn from Ecclesiastes in vs. 12-14. Finally we'll talk about how to apply that lesson. Verses 9-11 are like the author's notes which we sometimes read at the end of a book or at the beginning and which give us some background on how and why he or she wrote this book and the point the author is trying to make. By the way, there is some debate whether Solomon actually wrote Ecclesiastes, or whether some unnamed editor gathered Solomon's writings and put them together for us. That's why we're not sure if Solomon is speaking in vs. 9-14 or if the editor who collected Solomon's sayings is speaking but either way, the point of vs. 9-14 remains the same. I'm going to assume it's Solomon just to keep things simple. Let's look at Solomon's purpose in writing this book.

"In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly." (Eccl 12:9-10) I'm always impressed when successful people don't rest on their accomplishments or simply enjoy what they've earned but devote themselves to passing along what they've learned to others; and Solomon is at the top of that list because the world's wisest and richest man devoted himself to the hard work of teaching others; of laboring in research and gathering wisdom from a variety of sources; then do the hard work of pondering his discoveries so that he could communicate them in the most attractive and memorable way possible; when he could have preoccupied himself with simply ruling Israel and enjoying his vast riches and unlimited pleasures. Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes with why he put in the work to write it: to teach people knowledge, probably referring to his collection of Proverbs as well as Ecclesiastes in which he has sought to express the words of truth as memorably and as delightfully as possible. Solomon is a teacher and like every good teacher, he cares about his students. And so he has done the hard work of pondering, searching and arranging the proverbs of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But why? Let's read vs. 11. *"The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd."* From these verses, Solomon seems to know that he is writing Scripture and tells us three things about the entire Bible. First, notice that the Bible makes people uncomfortable. Solomon says that the words of wise men – the words he has been collecting – are like goads. A goad was a sharp stick or cattle prod which farmers used to keep their oxen moving in the direction they needed to go. Every time the ox tried to leave the path, the farmer would prick him with the goad and that is the function of the Scriptures in our lives: the words of wise men keep us in the path and prevent us from straying. They wake us up, warn us, challenge us and correct us. I was studying 2 Tim. 4 this week where Paul tells Timothy that to fulfill the ministry Christ has entrusted, he must be sober – focused and undistracted - and endure hardship. And that was like a cattle prod in my side because I realized how much work the ministry really is and how mentally lazy I often am. That's why Paul compares the minister to a farmer, a soldier and an athlete. The same hard work and focus and discipline which are required of the farmer, the soldier in the middle of battle and the athlete competing in the Olympics are required of those involved in ministry. If I compare my level of focus and labor to that of coaches, CEOs or other high level leaders in the world, there is no comparison. Paul's words to Timothy were a goad to me but it was a good pain, like the pain of working out – because I knew I needed that pain to

improve. The reason people avoid reading the Bible is because reading the Bible can be painful – in fact, should be painful; because we're not yet what we're supposed to be. The Bible is a mirror. It shows us reality and a lot of people aren't interested in reality. They just want to feel good about themselves the way they are. So why endure the reproof and corrections of Scripture? Look at the second picture Solomon gives us of the Bible. He says that masters of these collections of wisdom – people who have mastered the Scriptures, or better, who have been mastered by the Scriptures - are like well-driven nails; they are solid, stable and hold things together. Some versions say they're like well-driven tent pegs. They keep the tent from blowing away or collapsing. Why study and apply the Bible even though the process is painful? It is the only way to develop stability and steadiness. That's why Jesus says at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and {yet} it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall."* (Matt. 7:24-27) Notice, this isn't a comparison between people who read the Bible and people who don't. This is a comparison between people who read the Bible and act on what they read and people who read the Bible and forget about what they read. That's what Solomon means by "masters of these collections" people who know only know the words of the wise but who have mastered applying them. The promise is that nothing will blow them over. They will be grounded, stable and steady. They aren't overcome by circumstances. Over the years, I've seen a lot of people begin well as Christians; so enthusiastic about Jesus and committed to walking with Him. Some continued in the faith, others do not; some kept growing while others fell away. Some stayed hot while others grew cold. Some held on to their hope while others got discouraged and quit. There were as many reasons for this as there were people; but one thing I did notice. Those who were committed to hearing and doing the word of God remained strong and steady. Why? Look at the third thing Solomon tells us about the Bible. He says these collections are given by one Shepherd, meaning God. That's how we know Solomon is talking about the writing of Scripture here. God inspires the Scripture as His instruction and goad to make us wise, strong and stable. The Scriptures are the way He speaks to us from heaven. Now if you're not a Christian yet or if all this is brand new, you might not understand why Christians make such a big deal about the Bible. How can modern people follow such an ancient and seemingly, out of date book? What's the big deal about the Bible? In the story of the Bible, God reveals Himself in history and the Bible is the record of what He has revealed about Himself. God would speak to people and people wrote down what He said. God would act and people recorded those acts; and it is through those writings that He speaks today. We can't separate our relationship with God from our relationship with His word because the Bible is the way He speaks to us – and when you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. What if God only communicated with us through dreams or visions; or spoke to each of us audibly? So I stand up here and say, "God told me that you need to send Laurie and I to Hawaii for a six month sabbatical." And somebody says, "He didn't tell me that. He told me that we need to lower your salary." There wouldn't be any way to know who had heard from God and who had not. The genius of the Scriptures is that it is outside of us; something objective with which we can compare our ideas and thoughts. The fact that God's revelation was written down over 1600 years in 66 different books makes it possible for us to know the difference between God speaking to us and our own imagination. Also consider what a unique book the Bible is. There is no other book like it. If you were to gather writings from cultures separated by thousands of years, and looked for a coherent story or philosophy of life, it would be impossible to find. But the more familiar you become with the Scriptures; the more you see how coherent and unified they are; the more you see how they tell a single story with all the different strands tied together neatly in the end, the more convinced you become that the Bible, even though written by many different people from many different times and cultures, has a single author. The point that Solomon makes in his conclusion is that the Scriptures are the way God speaks and works in our lives and therefore we cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationship with the Scriptures. I can want to hear from God but if I leave the Bible closed, I've turned off my phone. You know, vs. 9-11 is Solomon's version of what Paul says in 2 Tim 3:16-17. *"All Scripture is inspired by God (Solomon says it is from one Shepherd) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (Solomon says the*

words of the wise are goads) *so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*" (Or as Solomon says, those who have been goaded by the word become well-driven nails so that they house they build won't fall down.) That's why Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. Like every other writer of the books of the Bible, he was writing what God gave him to write.

And after he explains how he came to write Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us the big lesson we're to learn from this book in vs. 12-14: taking God seriously means taking His word seriously. We cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationship with His word because the Bible is the way we know God and therefore, learning and obeying the Scriptures is the most important thing we can do with our lives. That is what will give meaning and direction and purpose to the vanity of life apart from the word of God. Vs. 12 *"But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion {to books} is wearying to the body."* "Beyond what -?" beyond the words of the wise, beyond the words of the Bible; Solomon contrasts the need to take God's word seriously with the writing and reading of other books which he admits is both endless and wearying. Solomon isn't anti-learning; after all he spent his entire life investigating and researching all manner of subjects; biology, botany and human behavior. Humans will always be learning and recording their discoveries for others. This is the way we learn. Solomon is not warning us about learning but about an excessive devotion to books rather than a devotion to the Scriptures. He is not warning us about learning, he is warning us about our priorities and what needs to come first. Devote yourself to the Scriptures first; then as you have time, learn from men. That's the lesson of Ecclesiastes. Solomon has collected the wisdom of the wisest men under the sun and shown that it leads nowhere. The questions of life remain unanswered. Life is futile and frustrating. Wisdom only leads to pessimism and despair because we need more than human wisdom. We need God's wisdom to make sense of the world and of our lives and to know what to do – which is why John the Baptist was so excited about Jesus' arrival – because He knew what John couldn't know. That's the point of the Garden of Eden story. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit so that they could become wise apart from God, they became fools because there is no wisdom apart from God. That's the point of Ecclesiastes is to make God's wisdom your priority because only the Word of God gives life; only the Scriptures can make sense of this world.

Jesus told a story about a farmer sowing seed and the effect the seed had depended on where it fell. Some fell on the road and the birds ate it up and so the seed had no other affect but fat birds. Some fell on the rocks and so the seed sprang up quickly, only to die quickly in the heat of the sun because there was no soil in which it could take root. Some fell among the weeds and as it sprouted, the weeds choked it out and the plants could not mature or bear fruit. And some fell on good soil and grew up and bore much fruit. Jesus explained that this was a story about the impact the word of God has on individual lives. Some people are like the road. The word never penetrates and they never believe. Some people are like the rocks. They quickly seem to believe when they hear and they just as quickly disappear when following the Bible becomes inconvenient or painful. Most Christians are like the weed-filled soil; they receive the word but Jesus says the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things choke out the word and it becomes unfruitful; and that is what Solomon is warning about in vs. 12; a failure to prioritize the Scriptures. Input determines output. We only get out what we put in and therefore, what we read, watch, listen to and think about most is what will determine who we are. Most of us are in no danger of the excessive devotion to books which Solomon warns about in vs. 12. But we are in danger if we are excessively devoted to anything that chokes out the word in our lives because the word is the source of life and fruitfulness and it needs an uncluttered heart in which to grow. It doesn't matter what the weed is that is choking out our time in the word; what matters is that it is choking out what God has given to bless us and make us useful. It might be work or worry, romance novels or the internet, sports or self-help books, blogs or music; a crammed schedule or sleeping too much; but whatever we are more devoted to than the Scriptures will leave us empty and barren. Is Solomon telling us not to read anything but the Bible? No, he is warning us to not to be devoted to anything more than to the Bible. A priority is simply what I do first. If I believe that God blesses those who take His word seriously because that means I'm taking Him seriously, then I will spend time listening to His voice in the Bible each day before I listen to anything else. If I get nothing else done, I will spend time with Him in the

Scriptures and in prayer so that I can be what Jesus describes as good soil which bears fruit; 30 fold, 60 fold and one hundred fold. Here are some questions to ask yourself. What am I excessively devoted to? What keeps me from spending time with God in His word? What would the right balance of time in the Scriptures and time in other pursuits look like in my life? For me to make the study and application of the Bible a higher priority each day, I would need to...(what?) It is probably a much simpler adjustment in your daily schedule than you expect.

But why do it? Why should I make the study and practice of the Bible a priority? Solomon explains in vs. 13-14. *"The conclusion, when all has been heard, (the whole point of Ecclesiastes) {is:} fear God and keep His commandments, because this {applies to} every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."* In a confusing and often contradictory book, Solomon finally states the point he has been driving at; fear God and keep His commandments. He has looked at the futility of life under the sun and living as if there is no God. He has seen the limitations of wisdom, power, money and pleasure; and all that people desire but which cannot ultimately satisfy or save us from death. He has looked at all that does not work in the world to get us to what does. Take God and His commands seriously because this truth is universal and applies to every person in every situation because God will bring every person and every act to judgment, whether public or private, whether good or evil. God alone can establish the meaning of life for He alone is in a position to judge and He judges every person. Every person and every act is significant because no action will be forgotten. Everything will be graded in the end and so there is nothing more important than we can do in life than to take God and His commands seriously. The true test of my life is obedience; not pleasure nor success nor popularity nor fame; and the meaning of my life will not be known until I stand before God and give an account of all I have done. Imagine hiring a painter to paint your entire house, inside and out while you're away on vacation. Your house really needs painting and you can't wait to see it when you return home. But as you drive up, you're surprised that everything looks the same as it did when you left. Nothing has been painted yet. As you unload the car, your painter comes out the front door beaming. "I think you're going to be really happy with what I've done in your home. When I started, I noticed that the steps up to the front door were a little rickety so I completely replaced them. Then when I began to wash everything down before I painted, I noticed that your water pressure was low and so I replumbed your whole house and put in new pipes and now the pressure is great. Then I noticed that none of your electrical outlets are up to current code, so I replaced all of them. Finally, I noticed that you still had those old, inefficient single paned windows, so I replaced them with newer energy efficient ones. I think you'll see a big difference this winter in your heating bill." Now let me ask you a question. Would you pay that painter? No. He did a lot of great things for you. He just didn't do what you asked him to do and that's the situation most people will find themselves in as they stand before God. They did a lot of fine things. They just didn't do what God told them to do. The measure of my life will not be did I accomplish my goals; but did I accomplish His goals? Not, was I successful in my eyes or in the eyes of others, but was I successful in God's eyes? And just as your painter's job description was clear, so God's instructions to us are clear. That's why Paul told us in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 that the Scriptures are all we need to make us adequate for every good work. God's will for our life isn't a mystery. Keep His commands. Do what He tells us to do. Theologians call this the sufficiency of Scripture; that the Scripture is sufficient to give us all the information we need about life and how to live. It's taken me a long time to believe that, especially in the area of the ministry. When we started Creekside, I read every church growth book I could. Every year, we seemed to copy the newest now and wow church; trying to catch the same success they were experiencing. It was a very frustrating pursuit. It finally dawned on me that God never commanded us to be successful – just obedient and that He had already given us the commands to obey. What we've seen as a result is that the more we simply focus on obeying the Scriptures, the more God seems to bless; because He's already given us everything to make us adequate for every good work. We just need to listen to Him rather than to ourselves or to anyone else. And that is true for your career, for your parenting, for your relationships, for your money, for your health – for every area which the Bible addresses. The purpose of our life is only realized when we take God and His word seriously. Early in the Old Testament, God tells Joshua, *"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."* Josh, all you have to do is what God told you and you will be a success. At the end of the New Testament, James writes the same thing, *"But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the {law} of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."* Want to be blessed in all you do? Follow

the instructions. That's why right in the middle of the Bible, Solomon writes, *"The conclusion, when all has been heard, {is:} fear God and keep His commandments, because this {applies to} every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."*

Life only makes sense and life only works when we take God and His word seriously. However, that is not good news. If every person will be judged on their obedience to God's commands, every person is in deep trouble because nobody obeys God. We all choose our plan over His. That is why the news that one obeyed for us is such good news. The gospel is that just as we were condemned for Adam's sin, we are blessed for Christ's obedience. The Son of God becomes a man to live the life we failed to live, perfectly obeying all of God's commands so that God can credit His perfect obedience to all who put their faith in Him. The blessings of both eternal life and an abundant life now are not based on our obedience but on His obedience in our behalf. What about our disobedience? Does God just sweep that under the rug? That's the point of the cross. Jesus dies in our place, paying the penalty for our sins, and enduring the punishment for our disobedience so that God can pardon us. And then Jesus rises from the dead, never to die again; as proof that God has accepted His sacrifice in our place. And because He lives, He is able to come into our life and give us a new heart and make obedience something we both want and can do rather than something we are unable to do. The story of the Bible tells us that God blesses the obedient; and there is only One who has been obedient and all who put their hope in Him as their Savior and Champion will be blessed along with Him.

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