

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2, 12-14; 2:18-26

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Smith

THE TRUE VALUE AND MEANING OF WHAT WE DO

1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: **2** “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” **12** I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13** I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! **14** I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. **19** And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. **20** So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. **21** For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

22 What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? **23** All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. **24** A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, **25** for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? **26** To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What are my sins? Surely every one of my actions is stained with sin. And my words, even my posture or body language, is affected and afflicted by sin. But you and I should know and should realize that our very thoughts are under siege by sinful impulses, by sinful ideas and concepts from outside of us, from within us, and from our great enemy the devil as well. We are always sinful, all the time.

Our Savior Jesus Christ came to rescue us from this very sinfulness. He has had compassion on us. He came into the world to make satisfaction for our guilt and our sinfulness. He rescued us from our sins.

What Solomon the Teacher is talking about is what comes after this salvation in our spiritual lifetime. How do I live my life, and what is my attachment to my achievements? **What is the true value and meaning of what we do?**

Solomon did a lot. He spoke **3,000** proverbs, wrote **1,005** songs. He wrote a library of books all himself, including books on plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. But he says he hated them all, because he had to leave them behind to someone who might not care, who might use them to light the fires on a cold winter night. And you know, while we do have the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which surely account for most if not all of his 3,000 proverbs, we only have two of his songs: **Psalms 72 and 127**. And as for his books, treatises, fascicles and monographs on animals and plant life? None of it survives at all.

Now, it may not have been Rehoboam his son and successor who burned it all, it was probably one of the nations that burned his city: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, or the Babylonians.

And the loss of a book that is not part of the Bible is not necessarily a tragedy. But what if was something you or created? A business, a home, a farm, or whole industry? Here are quite a few members of our congregation, past and present, who have written wonderful books for the benefit of mankind and of the church-- children's books, theological books, textbooks, histories, commentaries. Most of those authors would be embarrassed, I think, if I were to speak their names out loud, but two of our members who have fairly recently been called home to heaven, Lyle Lange and Daniel Deutschlander, made important contributions to Christian education with their writing and teaching.

I know that nothing I could even write would approach the value of what they did. And most people lead lives that do not leave paper to posterity. **What is the true value and meaning of what we do?** Solomon asks: "What do people get for all of their toil?"

Well, consider the basic and ordinary labor of life: the daily job. Whatever you may do, you do for the good of a portion of mankind and God's creation. You may plant and harvest, you might care for animals, you might cook, or clean, or repair, or sell. You might heal, or build, or haul, or defend. You might teach, or train, or raise children. All of these please God. None of these is useless or parasitic. You are not a pirate, or a thief, or an empty bag of wind.

After God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, he said "Fill the earth and subdue it."¹ Each of us plays a role, a unique role, in this act. What you do is part of a vast chain of tasks that enables the human race to subdue and care for the world we have been given.

So let's take a task that God gives to every generation and to most men and women, but not all. Few tasks are given to all. But let's take parenting as a task. Every parent knows that babies don't come with instructions. An education as a parent always continues, because you never stop learning. It seems like some of the best lessons come long after you need them. But God forgives your mistakes.

And in the same way, parents need to be patient and forgiving with our children. If my child makes a mistake, how should I react? Do I have to get as angry as my grandfather would have? Or can I help my child learn from his mistakes, and even learn to ask God's help in avoiding temptations and sins? After all, a mistake is not always the same as a sin. And an unexpected act on the part of a child may not be a sin or a mistake -- like the boy Jesus staying behind in the temple when his family was heading home to Nazareth. And what they might have been scolded or even punished for, may not really merit a scolding or a punishment. Some of the parenting lessons we learn and that we give involves "What not to

¹ Genesis 1:28

do.” God forgives our mistakes and sins: But knowing that he does, we should also make changes in our parenting.

Solomon says: When we serve God and are content, this is from the hand of God. He gives us satisfaction in our work. We often see this in ourselves when we’re unable to work, and we get irritable, frustrated, angry, pessimistic, and we nitpick other people. This is one of many evils that comes from worry.

Worry can grow into a fear or mistrust in God, that God won’t look after our loved ones, won’t preserve our life’s work. But if I serve God with a labor, whatever it might be, and moments after my death it is all undone, didn’t I benefit from it anyway? Didn’t I serve God with that labor? If God uses my life primarily to keep me focused on him and on salvation through Christ alone, then the labor of my lifetime served a good, godly purpose.

He will use our work for whatever he might need. Maybe he will preserve everything you have worked hard for, but maybe that work is more about him giving you a way to serve with the gifts that you have than about posterity. Don’t worry about tomorrow and what will happen to what you do. Do your task today as if it is a meal to be eaten, where nothing left over at all is the true victory.

God uses the life and legacy of the unbeliever to do nothing but benefit his church and his dear people. God uses the life of the believer to further the work of the church and of the family of God. Serve God with your whole heart, life, and resources, no matter what your task, and remember that **to give God glory with our lives** is the true value and meaning of what we do. Amen.