Living with the End in Mind: We, Not Me

Ecclesiastes 4

February 2, 2020

You are not what you think you are; but what you think, you are. Who do you spend most of your time thinking about? The Preacher of Ecclesiastes assumes that your thoughts revolve around yourself. We are constantly asking ourselves questions. How am I doing? Where am I going? What will I do next? Why am I working so hard? What am I living for? What am I achieving or failing to achieve? Our primary focus is usually self, which brings with it much unhappiness.

The Preacher wants to give us new questions to ask. He gives us a question to free us from ourselves: How are *we* doing? We, not I. That’s Ecclesiastes in a nutshell. We, not me. If you can live in this world in such a way that the people that God has placed in your life are your constant concern and dominant focus, then you will find happiness. The word he uses is “quietness” (6). It simply means rest, peace of mind and calmness of soul. It’s a word to capture the deep well-being of those who know their place in the world, content with the boundary lines of their life and able to enjoy the fruits of their labors with a cheerful heart. The way to arrive in that place of rest is to live for we, not me.

The Preacher is adding more detail to how we are to live a wise and faithful life under the sun. So far, he has highlighted the desire to get ahead of creation and thwart death itself. Now in chapter 4 he highlights the innate desire to get ahead of our neighbor rather than living gladly with the responsibilities that he or she places on us.

In chapter 3 the Preacher taught us to realize that this world is not a place where we can have it all, know it all, and be remembered by all for all time. Instead, we must learn that the life you have today comes from the hand of God as a gift, something you do not deserve. So embrace life for what it is rather than what you’d like it to be and enjoy whatever good things come your way. This is the pathway to joy.

Chapter 4 add a new layer to this picture. AS you enjoy, share. Share what God has given you with others. In fact, this is intimately connected to what it means to know God as taught in the 2 great commandments (Mark 12:29-31).

The Preacher tells us that we have to share what we enjoy because there are two ways to live in the world. You can either hate your neighbor and destroy yourself (4:1-6), or you can love your neighbor and so love yourself (4:7-16).

1. Hating My Brother, Destroying Myself (4:1-6)
   1. Oppression is an expression of the love of self and the hatred of others (1-3)
      1. He observes the oppressions that are a constant part of this wicked world under the sun.
         1. The oppressed weep, but they have no comforter.
         2. The oppressors exercise their power, but they have no comforter either.
         3. It all seemed so bleak that it would appear to be better not to be born into such an evil world.
         4. As believers, we have to come to terms honestly with the world as it really is.
         5. Allowing ourselves to dwell on the atrocities of this world becomes unbearable.
         6. The death of defenseless children is one of the worst evils in our world. The smallest coffins are the heaviest.
      2. When Jesus was confronted with the pain of this world He was moved.
         1. Before He healed the blind and deaf man, He groaned (anastenazo) (Mark 7:31-37).
         2. When He faced the heard heartedness of the Pharisees, He groaned (Mark 8:12).
         3. This is the same word used in Romans 8:22, where creation “groans” under the trauma of the curse that God has placed on it.
   2. Envy is an expression of the love of self and the hatred of others (4)
      1. Envy is so subtle. Any friend can share your sorrows and failures, but it takes a true friend to share your joys and successes.
      2. We envy others successes because they cause us to feel worse about ourselves.
      3. Our flesh loves to focus on others’ shortcomings because it makes us feel better about ourselves.
      4. Sometimes we pretend to love someone else just so we can get what they have.
   3. Laziness is an expression of the love of self and the hatred of others (5)
      1. Laziness is a way of hating your neighbors because you have nothing to give them.
      2. A lazy person erodes his self-control and capacity for care, and even his own self-respect.
      3. Workaholics are warned that on their deathbed they will not wish they had spent more time at the office. Ecclesiastes warns us that certain people on their deathbed will wish they had spent at least some time at the office!
   4. Frantic busyness is an expression of the love of self and the hatred of others (6).
      1. So many today are feverishly running from one thing to the next and all the while trying to mask a dissatisfaction with life, because they’re always working for tomorrow.
      2. Manic busyness is endemic in Christian ministry today.
         1. We must remember that we’re not here to leave a legacy. Christ is the legacy.
         2. We are not to be the savior to those around us. We should instead point them to the Savior!
      3. Parents, we must be careful not to wish our lives away because we have small children at home. One day we will look back on these days as some of the best days of our lives.
      4. Quietness is the antidote to frantic busyness.
         1. Stop chasing the wind!
         2. Stop thinking that the future will be better and easier.
         3. Stop thinking that if only things were different you would be a better person.
         4. Live the life you have now instead of longing for the life you think you will have but which you cannot control. Rest and peace are more important than wealth and success.
2. Loving My Neighbor, Loving Myself (7-16)
   1. The exposure of greed (7-8)
      1. This person has made it to the top of his profession, but he lives there alone; utterly alone; no children, no family; no friends.
      2. This person has made an idol out of riches which cannot satisfy him.
      3. It is the love of money that is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10), and it is the love of money that isolates us from every healthy relationship.
   2. The antidote of generosity (9-12)
      1. There’s no better way to defeat the love of money than to use it to serve others.
      2. Give it away regularly, gladly, generously, and you will be happy.
      3. Our entire motivation for earning an income should be to have more to give to others.
      4. For the Preacher, the value of life is not what you earn, but whom you relate to.
      5. Life lived in community and mutual interdependence is better all around for everyone.
      6. We, not me, is always going to be better for me than only me. That’s how we’re designed to flourish.
   3. A final caution (13-16)
      1. Advancement often brings with it the loss of self-awareness, as our achievements cause us to forget where we have come from (13-14).
      2. Advancement always brings greater toil, but no greater thanks (15-16).
      3. This should cause us to remember that achievement in this world is often disappointing. If we make our chief aim glorifying God and serving others expecting nothing in return, we will enjoying the life that God has chosen for us.
   4. Application:
      1. To expose areas of laziness, ask yourself whom you are feeding off of and who is doing the work so that you don’t have to. How can you give back to those around you?
      2. To expose restless striving, ask yourself who it’s all really for. What tasks and jobs might be set aside so that relationships can flourish?
      3. Remember, you may not have as much as you might like, but you know that you have more than you deserve. As one hand holds, your other one gives.

Conclusion:

1. Which of the oppressive behaviors do you need to focus on changing? Envy? Laziness? Restless striving?
2. Who are the “we’s” you should think about more often? What can you do to nurture those relationships?