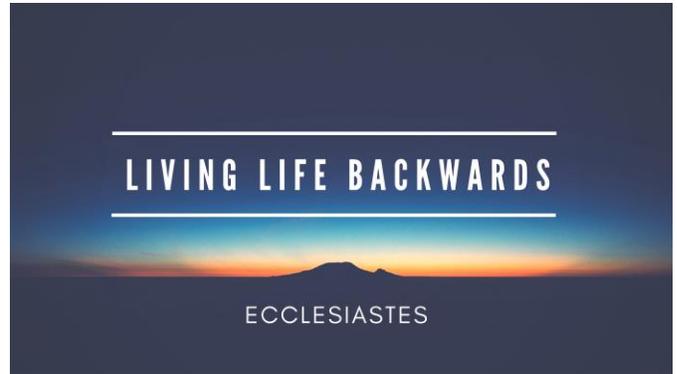


**The Christian Life:
Vain & Meaningful
Ecclesiastes 12:9-14**

Living Life Backwards, Part 11
Joe Jones August 26, 2018



Turn in your Bible to Ecclesiastes 12. We'll be finishing our series in Ecclesiastes this morning by looking at verses 9-14 of chapter 12. These are wonderful verses from God's Word. I'm going to read a couple other passages of Scripture, then we'll come to this text. As I read these other passages, listen for a theme that runs through them:

Romans 14:10-11:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

Second Corinthians 5:9-10:

We make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Revelation 22:12:

Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.

Second Timothy 4:8:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Hebrews 9:27-28:

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Now in Ecclesiastes 12, look at verses 13-14:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Let's pray together.

Lord, we pray that You Yourself would help us to hear this morning. Give us ears to hear and penetrate our hearts with Your Word, we pray, as we commit our time to You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I titled this sermon "The Christian Life: Vain and Meaningful." I think both of those words call for some defining. When you read that, it can seem as though they're contradictory. What does Ecclesiastes mean when it uses the word "vanity"? The book begins and ends by focusing on the word vanity. Ecclesiastes 1:2 opens with, "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" Then toward the end of the book, in 12:8, we read, "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*"

What does Ecclesiastes mean when the word vanity is used? Well, it doesn't mean meaningless or purposeless or empty or without significance. The word vanity in Ecclesiastes means instead "short, brief, vapor-like." What the author is saying is that all things—including our lives—pass by like a puff of smoke. We're here one moment and gone the next. Isn't life like this? Very short.

By "meaningful," I mean filled with substance or jam-packed with significance. So our lives are very brief and very, very significant. Our lives move by very quickly, but every moment, every word, every decision, every thought, every deed counts and matters, even into eternity.

So here's how I want to structure our time as we emphasize that key point this morning. I want to start by making six simple observations about words from verses 9-12, before transitioning to spend time with six of what I think are some of the most important words in Scripture, or some of the most important words that have ever been penned. All of it should highlight the profound meaningfulness of our lives and the importance of how we use our lives.

Let's start with six observations about words. The words we communicate and the words we take in are so important. We need to take care and be wise in what we say, what comes out of our mouths, in what we hear and what we take in through our ears.

1. Crafting wise words requires great effort.

When I sat down to write down this message, I had already done some work thinking through this passage. But when I sat down to write what I actually wanted to say, there was nothing there. I felt like I had nothing to say, especially with such a significant, powerful passage. What am I supposed to say to communicate this? I was blank. Maybe you've experienced that before. Good communication is tough, isn't it, even for a man like Solomon.

Look at verses 9-10:

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight.

So for the writer of Ecclesiastes, it was real labor to find the right words to say. But he found them and we have in this book a wonderful portrayal of how to think about life in our fallen world. Still today, as Christians, as the church, we need first to have something to say—and we do have something to say, because we have God's Word—but we also need to know how to say it, how to communicate to one another and to our culture the truth of God's Word.

Even as our culture bombards us with what seem to be confident messages and pithy statements like "Love wins," sometimes we don't know what to do with that. We as the church need to know how to communicate and we need to work hard at communicating the truth of God's Word to a world in great need of it.

2. Wise words are words of truth and beauty.

We could say that wise words communicate life. They make the light bulbs go on in our minds, like "Aha!" Wise words also warm up our hearts, our affections and our desires. Look at Ecclesiastes 12:10: *"The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth."* So we as Christians should seek to engage with and be transformed by words that are both true and beautiful. It's tough to find words like that or books like that, right? We should be people who are seeking out books that are filled with truth and beauty. I've never met a person who's reading books like this who isn't also being changed by them.

3. Wise words work.

Look at verse 11: *"The words of the wise are like goads."* Goads were used back then with cattle to move them along in the right direction. The words of the wise are like this. They can prod us, move us, change us and affect us, even if sometimes the direction seems counterintuitive.

I have so experienced this on Sunday mornings as we've walked through the book of Ecclesiastes. Hasn't this series been fantastic? It's been a wonderful series. As I've sat and listened, I know I personally have definitely been changed by the words spoken from this pulpit.

I'm also confident that many of you have been changed and molded and shaped by them. Sometimes you have even been prodded in uncomfortable ways in the direction of the Lord by the words that have been spoken. Words change us. You can probably think of examples of people who have spoken words to you and the direction of your life has been changed by those words. Words are so significant and we should take great care with how we use them and how we hear them.

4. Wise words endure.

It's amazing to me how the wise words Jesus spoke are still being used today in our modern world, even if a lot of people don't recognize their source. Words like, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We hear that a lot, even in our secular culture. "Judge not, lest you be judged." Even from Ecclesiastes, "There is a time for everything." Wise words endure. They last through the generations, as people recognize them for their wisdom.

Look at verse 11, where this point is highlighted: "*Like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.*" So life is like a vapor—it goes by very quickly—but wise words endure forever. It says somewhere that the word of our God will stand forever. Rather than trying to build our own legacy or build our own platform, which will die out with us one day, why not focus on passing down the eternal message of the gospel to the next generation? The best gift, the most lasting gift, we can give to the young people in this room is the enduring Word of God.

We've watched our kids get toys for Christmas or birthdays or sometimes randomly, and what do our kids do with those toys? They're fun for a while, but two, three, four days later, or maybe a few weeks later, where do they end up? They end up in the corner collecting dust. I was sitting with my daughter Lucy a couple nights ago. She's just learning how to read, so we opened the Bible and she started reading from Genesis 1. It was a powerful time for me to sit and read God's Word with her. What better or more enduring gift could I give my daughter than the Word of God? Wise words endure. As she gets older and things come and go, she will have this treasure that lasts forever.

5. Wise words recorded in the Bible are God's words.

Look at Ecclesiastes 12:11: *"They are given by one Shepherd."* Solomon worked very hard to craft words that are wise, but the ultimate reason the particular words Solomon wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes are so effective and timeless, so true and beautiful and life-changing, is because God Himself is behind these words. This is the Word of God. God's Word is an authority we should submit to; it's a perfect guide for our lives.

6. We should treasure the words of Scripture above all other words.

Look at verse 12: *"My son, beware of anything beyond these."* The words of Scripture should be treasured above all other words. Are you spending time meditating on this Book? It is such a treasure to us and it calls us to engage with it, to read it, to pray through it and to think hard about it. We are to submit to it and build our lives around it. This is the Word of God and we're called to treasure it.

So the words we use matter. Words matter immensely. In the sight of God, our words—what we take in and what we put out—are so precious. They reveal so much about us. So let's use them and hear them wisely and with great care.

Think about how many millions of words have been written over the course of human history, how many books are out there, how many authors even today are writing books about how the world works and what life is all about. If we start digging in to some of that, we might be left confused or shaking our heads at the complexities of life, especially in a fallen world.

The question we come to is can we get a simple, distilled few words that are filled with truth and beauty, that have the power to change us and that are very simple? Are there a few words that could sum up the book of Ecclesiastes and even the whole message of God to us? We have a great answer in verses 13-14. Look at them again:

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

These two verses plunge us right into the big questions of life. What is it all about? What's the point of it all? Why are you here? Why am I here on planet Earth? What should my life be about? Is there any meaning to it all? These are questions we have to think through and we need to answer. Don't hold this out at arm's length, but seriously think for yourself about these questions and how you answer them. Where do you go with these questions? Why are you here?

They're big questions and they deserve big answers. The second to the last verse in Ecclesiastes addresses this.

In Ecclesiastes we've thought through all the complexities of life in this broken and fallen world and the reality that one day we're going to die. We've been thinking through these things during this series. In light of all this, what is the end of the matter? Can we sum it all up? Ecclesiastes answers with these six words—the summary of it all, the point of it all—*“Fear God and keep his commandments.”*

It's pretty simple, right? It's not complex or hard to understand. So receive it this morning. Fear God, Christian, and keep His commandments. Can we figure out this life, with all of its ups and downs and complexities and unexpected twists and turns and the sufferings of life? No, we can't. So focus today and in the days to come on this simple reality: fear God, Christian, and keep His commandments.

To dig into this a little bit, I just want to ask and answer three questions.

A. Can we be convinced biblically that it's important to fear God and keep His commandments?

Let's talk about that. Biblically, the call to fear God is of utmost importance. We don't need to look any further than Ecclesiastes 12. Verse 13 says, *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”* Literally, this is all of man, the whole. If you want to sum up what it's all about, it's this: fear God. The essence of wisdom is to fear God.

As we zoom out a little bit to the wisdom books of Scripture—Proverbs and Job—we find this to be a pervasive theme. At the very beginning of Proverbs, Proverbs 1:7 says this: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”* Then if we go all the way to the end of Proverbs, we read this in 31:30: *“Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”*

If we go to the book of Job, the very first verse starts with this description of Job: *“There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”* Multiple times in that first chapter, Job is described as a man who fears God. Does that describe us?

In Job 28, which many biblical scholars believe to be at the very heart of the book of Job, he is asking the hard questions of what real wisdom is. Where is wisdom to be found? What is the meaning of wisdom? He comes to this conclusion in Job 28:28: *“And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’”* Do you want to

be wise? Do you want to walk in wisdom in this world with the Lord? Here it is. Fear God. Keep His commandments. Turn away from evil.

Then if we expand out to the whole Bible, we see this pervasive theme of fearing God. In Romans 3:18, the Apostle Paul is talking about what the heart of our sin problem is. If we dig down deep, deep, deep to the core of our sin problem, what would we find? He writes, *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* This is the heart of sin, what sin is all about. There is no fear of God.

In Hebrews 12:28-29 we read, *“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship.”* What is acceptable worship? It’s worship *“with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”* Here—and this is not my word, but the Word of God—we are drawn to the deep conviction that to fear the Lord is central to what it means to be a human being and to follow Christ. This isn’t something peripheral, but central to our lives.

B. What does it mean to fear God and keep His commandments?

We’ve established that this fear of God is important and something we must pursue, but what does it actually look like in our lives? First, it does not mean that we can’t enjoy life. There’s another command in Ecclesiastes that goes like this: “Eat, drink and find enjoyment in all your toil.” This is a command, not a suggestion or a principle. It’s a command from the Lord, so hear it today: eat, drink and be merry. It’s in God’s Word. When we hear, “Fear God and keep His commandments,” we might think of someone who is strict and somber and a stingy rule-keeper—maybe someone who is unhappy. Yet when we hear, “Eat, drink and be merry,” we think of someone who’s carefree, seizing the day, enjoying life—happy.

But the Bible doesn’t separate those two things out. The Bible brings those two commands together. How does it do that? Part of fearing God and keeping His commandments is learning to enjoy God’s good gifts in the world that He’s given to us without idolizing them.

We were on vacation a few weeks ago in northwest Michigan. It was a wonderful vacation. We had good food, good drink, time with siblings and parents, great conversations, relaxation, comfort, sunshine, beach, sports, books, swimming, mountain biking (which I love), watching kids play, sunsets, cool evenings. The stars out there are amazing. If you’ve been up to that part of the country, when the lights go out and it’s dark, there are countless stars. All of these are good gifts from the Lord.

One test to know if I truly fear God is this: can I learn to deeply enjoy all of those gifts on that vacation with thankfulness in my heart to God, without being controlled by those things or

prioritizing them over my worship of God? This is part of what it means to fear the Lord: to learn to enjoy God's good gifts without idolizing them or being controlled by them.

Second, fearing God means that we have a fundamental awe of and respect for God. We might not always feel this, but as Christians, we have within us a deep sense we're always carrying around that God is big and we're small, and He deserves our singular attention and loyalty. This awe of God, this high view of God, this big vision of God is something I believe we're definitely missing in our culture.

We're also largely missing this, I believe, in the Western church today. This sense of God's majesty and this reverence for Who God is—have we lost that as a church? I believe when revival comes to the church, what we'll recapture is this awe and fear and reverence for God, along with a hatred for sin. We'll realize we can no longer take sin lightly and will turn away from evil. This is what it means to fear God.

Third, fearing God means that we live life in light of the reality of God's presence. Your life is always lived in the presence of God. That is reality. But we often live as functional atheists, as if God doesn't exist, in the way we go through our lives. Yet every part of our lives—from our actions, to our words, all the way down to our thoughts and motivations—these are all seen by God Himself. He sees and knows it all.

So when we're eating dinner with our family, this is done in the presence of God. When we're at church singing worship songs, this too is done in God's presence. When we're alone with our computers or phones, this too is done in the presence of God. When we're at work, school, home, at the store, in our rooms, at church or in the hospital we are in the presence of God. To fear God means that we recognize that reality. And it is a reality for us, that the Lord's presence is always with us. This is what it means to fear God.

C. How can we become motivated to live this way?

As we've seen, it's important biblically that we are called to fear God. We've looked at what it looks like to fear God, but now we need to consider the motivations that drives us to actually go out this week and live this way in the fear of the Lord. Here's the motivation that Ecclesiastes gives. Look at Ecclesiastes 12:14. Why should we fear God? *"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* We need to let that land on us this morning. This is the truth of God's Word. Listen to it again: *"God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* Can you feel the weight of that? Not one of us will be left out.

So this book starts and ends with “vanity of vanities” and if we’re tempted to think our lives are unimportant from reading the book of Ecclesiastes, the end makes it very clear that our lives are super significant and every area of our lives is invested with importance, meaning and purpose. Your life is so significant that one day God Himself is going to judge you. Isn’t that amazing? I mean, that invests every part of your life with great meaning and significance.

Phil Ryken wrote a commentary on Ecclesiastes with the subtitle of “Why Everything Matters.” He’s arguing from this book that everything in our lives matters, from what we consider to be small to the big things. He wrote this:

At the final judgment, it will matter how we used our time, whether we wasted it on foolish pleasures or worked hard for the Lord. It will matter what we did with our money, whether we spent it on ourselves or invested it in the eternal Kingdom. It will matter what we did with our bodies, what our eyes saw, our hands touched and our mouths spoke. Whether we obeyed our father and mother will matter. So will the look we gave them and the little comment we made as we were walking away.

What we did for a two-year-old will matter. The way we made time for her and got down on her level. What we said about someone else’s performance will matter—the sarcastic remark or the word of genuine praise. The proud boast and the selfless sacrifice will matter. The household task and the homework assignment will matter. The cup of water, the tear of compassion, the word of testimony—all of it matters.

In the end, although your life is fleeting, it is not meaningless. It’s so meaningful that one day you’re going to stand before God and you’re going to give an account for all of it, because it all matters. It’s all important.

I had my annual review recently at work. Those two words give me some pause: annual review. Maybe they do for you as well. It wasn’t necessarily that I had been lazy or was doing a bad job, but just the thought of being put before a boss to be assessed can be unsettling, right? So I sat down for my review. My boss spoke honestly with me about my weaknesses and he spoke encouragingly about my strengths. And guess what? When I walked out of that room, I didn’t come out feeling beaten down or unmotivated. I actually felt this energy and joy to move into the new season of work and ministry at Crossway.

You, Christian, don’t have an annual review coming up. Maybe you do, but more importantly, you have a lifetime review coming up. And the One Who is going to assess your life is Christ Himself. Let’s get the reality of this and let’s think intentionally about it. This day is

coming. What we need to realize is that this day for Christians will not be a day of condemnation. It will not be a day when God sentences us to endure His wrath and punishment. The reason for that is because we've already passed through the judgment because of our union with Christ. Because we have this oneness with Jesus, when He died on the cross 2,000 years ago, we passed through the judgment at that time.

Therefore the condemnation of God for our sins has already been poured out and Romans 8:1 promises us, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* Listen, believer, all of your sins, all of your failures, all of your shortcomings, all of your selfishness has been completely removed by the blood of Jesus. Isn't that good news today? It's all forgiven by God, so that when the day of judgment comes for you—and it will—it will not be a day of condemnation.

Now, Jesus is going to return—this is real—and He's going to talk to you. He's going to speak very honestly with you about the sins you've committed, which are very serious offenses. We will be with Christ and He will walk us through this. This won't be to shame us, but because in Christ's wisdom and goodness, it's best for us. Look at Ecclesiastes 12:14: *"God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* In His goodness, Christ will walk us through our lives and He'll bring up the ways we sinned against Him. He'll talk us through that.

But He will also walk us through every good deed in our lives which will be amazing. This is what we don't often focus on. We should look forward to this judgment. We should be anticipating this judgment with joy. Here's why. First Peter 1:7 says there will be *"praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* He's not talking about our honoring of Christ. We will do that on the day Jesus returns. We will honor and praise Him.

What Peter is talking about in that verse is that Christ Himself is going to honor us on that day. He's going to commend us on that day. Amazing! Isn't that almost unbelievable? He's going to say to you, believer, "Well done, good and faithful servant." What's going to shine most brightly on the day of judgment? What is going to come out most clearly? It's not the strictness and harshness of Christ, but the heart of Christ's love for you. That is what's going to shine when Jesus returns and judges you.

Just like I was propelled from my annual review with joy into this new season of ministry, as Christians, we're going to be propelled with joy from judgment into an unending enjoyment of Christ in the new creation. Don't we have an amazing hope? Doesn't the Bible present us with this powerful hope as Christians? We should live in that hope and say, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

I'll finish with two quick thoughts. Maybe you're not a Christian this morning and you don't know Jesus. Maybe this is your first time at church, or you've just been coming recently. Maybe you're kind of checking things out, but you don't know what to think—or you've been thinking through these things. Maybe as we've gone through the book of Ecclesiastes, it's brought up some things in your life that have caused you to think hard about them, but you're still not quite there yet and you haven't quite embraced Jesus and committed yourself to Him.

Here's what I would say to you. If you don't know Jesus today, the judgment should be a terrifying thing for you. Again, this is real. This is coming. So today is the day to think hard about, "Where am I at with God? Where am I at with Christ? Is that relationship good? Has that relationship been healed?" If you say, "Today I know that I'm not right with God," I have two pieces of advice.

Don't look to yourself. Don't think, "Okay, the day of judgment is coming, so I need to get my life in order so that when I stand before God maybe my good deeds will outweigh my bad deeds." Don't think that way. Look away from yourself to Jesus, Who is a Savior Who can rescue you from all your sins. Look away from yourself.

My second piece of counsel to you today, if you don't know Christ, is this: ask God to change your heart until you're sure He's done that. You could do this right now. Ask God to work in your heart in such a way that you begin to trust and love Him. Ask Him and ask Him and ask Him until you're sure He's done that work in your heart—He will do it.

Christian, your life matters. So this week, as you contemplate the reality that judgment is coming and Jesus is returning, realize that the conversations you have matter. Those interactions with family members matter. How you spend your time, what you do at work, your prayer life, your life of reading God's Word, the little things of caring for those who are weak and needy, that step to share the gospel with that neighbor or to invite them over for a meal—everything, small and great, matters.

We get bombarded in our culture with messages that our lives are insignificant, meaningless and they don't matter, but the truth of God's Word is that every part of our lives matters and the judgment proves it so. Let's let our lives be marked by fear of God and keeping His commandments. What does that look like? These are lives filled with the Spirit, expressing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control -(Galatians 5:22-23). Let's live that life. That's the most joyful life. In other words, let's fear God and keep His commandments.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for how it guides us and instructs us so wisely. Lord, we would be lost and just floundering without meaning and purpose, if it wasn't for the instruction and guidance of Your Word. Thank You that You've given it to us. I pray that our lives would reflect the truth and beauty of Your Word as we go out this week. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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