

Prudent Living

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on November 18, 2019

This morning we are turning to the ninth sermon in our ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, Ecclesiastes is the reflection of a king of Israel near the end of his days where he ponders the meaning of life. Today's reading is from Ecclesiastes, chapter eleven, verse one through ten.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back. 2 Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth. 3 When clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. 4 Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap. 5 Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. 6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. 7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. 8 Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. 9 Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. 10 Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

In today's Scripture reading, which belongs to the section of the Bible known as "wisdom literature," Solomon returns to a theme that was central to his life and central to his writing. As Solomon begins to wrap up his thoughts on the meaning of life in the book of Ecclesiastes, he turns his attention to the subject of wisdom.

Before commenting on the verses that we read this morning, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of a few things. First, Solomon is writing his reflection on the subject of wisdom from the perspective of a wealthy and powerful king who has had a long reign that has been marked by the absence of war.

Secondly, Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone who lives under the sun, that is, in the domain of humans. This means his observations require no supernatural insight. A careful student of everyday life should arrive at the same conclusions.

Thirdly, in the previous sermon in the series I suggested that if Solomon lived in

today's culture, I am sure he would have been pursued by all the major publishing houses to write a New York Times best selling autobiography. Then, they would have insisted he write the follow up bestseller, "Nine Rules For Life: Living Like A King." The previous sermon in this series provided an outline of what this book might look like, based on the contents of chapter nine and chapter ten of Ecclesiastes.

When this book became a run away best seller, Solomon's publishers would have then pursued him for the follow up book, "Seven More Rules For Kingly Living." Today's reading would make an excellent outline for his new hit. If it were to be flushed out in just a little more detail, here is what that outline might look like, using the verses from today's reading. As an aside, on the suggestion of the publishers, I will be using Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage which is found in "The Message."

Rule #1. (vs. 1) "Be generous: Invest in acts of charity. Charity yields high returns."

Over my years in ministry, as I have visited nursing homes and hospitals, I have been amazed to see the difference in the well being of those who have invested heavily in their families and in their communities and those who have not. The difference is night and day.

I can't count the number of unconnected people I have seen, who in their latter years get a handful of visits a year, if that, compared to deeply connected people who find themselves constantly surrounded by friends and family in a time of need. It is quite remarkable. And this phenomenon is not restricted to times of crises. It applies to all times and seasons.

As experience demonstrates, people who generously give to their families, and to their communities do much better in all areas of life. Researchers in this field refer to this concept as social capital. It is based on the principle of reciprocity, which Yoga Berra summed up quite nicely when he said, "I'll go to your funeral if you come to mine."

This is how so much of life works. Out of good will, we make investments of our time, of our skills and of our money into people or projects with no promise for compensation. This is the definition of charity. And, yet, even though we have given freely, with no strings attached, somewhere out there in the ether a tab is accumulating that will come back to bless us in unexpected ways throughout the days of our lives.

This is why we should always be generous. This is why we should invest in acts of charity. Even though there are many times when we might not feel like it, being

generous is always a wise decision. In the short term it will take effort and it will involve sacrifice, but, over the long run, investing in charity will pay off handsomely.

Rule #2 (vs. 2) “Don’t hoard your goods; spread them around. Be a blessing to others. This could be your last night.

In tech blogs I have heard the question posed, whose name will be greater in one hundred years time, Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, or Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft? From a technological point of view, and from a business point of view it seems that Jobs would be the winner of this contest as his company has produced far more innovative products than Gate’s Microsoft and his business model focusing on total integration is currently dominating the tech world.

In spite of all this, the tech blog jury declared that Bill Gates’ legacy will outlast, and outshine the legacy of Steve Jobs. And why? In one hundred years time, the tech bloggers stated no one will remember Bill Gates as being the founder of Microsoft. They will remember him for being the founder of the Giving Pledge.

For those who aren’t familiar with the Giving Pledge, it is a movement started by Bill Gates that encourages the world’s wealthy to give away half of their money or more to charity. So far, 186 people have made this pledge. This number, as it stands today, represents hundreds of billions of dollars that will be used to fight poverty and disease, and improve the standard of living of the most vulnerable in the world today.

This is why tech bloggers believe Bill Gates’ legacy will be more enduring than the legacy of Steve Jobs. For ever since Bill Gates stopped working for Microsoft in 2008, he has been working full time with his foundation, and with the Giving Pledge. In other words, he has been spreading his goods around and encouraging others to do likewise. This, to him, seemed a far better use of his time than working around the clock to earn another hundred billion dollars. After all. Life is short. Just ask Steve Jobs.

Rule #3 (vs. 3-4) When the clouds are full of water, it rains. When the wind blows down a tree, it lies where it falls. Don’t sit there watching the wind. Do your own work. Don’t stare at the clouds. Get on with your life.

In Meg Jay’s book, “The Defining Decade,” the best selling psychologist stresses to young people the great importance of their twenties. The reason she wrote the book is that she has observed in her clinical practice countless young people frittering away their time, walking aimlessly through life, thinking they can have fun and not take life

too seriously because they have all the time in the world to figure things out.

As Meg tells her audience, nothing could be further from the truth. And, as she powerfully demonstrates with numerous facts, our twenties are our defining decade. If we ace them, odds are we will do very well in life. If we squander them, the repercussions are great, and they will follow us to our grave.

As a result, she offers a stern rebuke to youngsters who spend their days bouncing from part time job to part time job, partying, playing video games, and hooking up on Tinder. Instead, she calls them to take responsibility for their lives. Establish a career. Find a life partner. Stop watching the wind. Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life. Because time is ticking.

Rule #4 (vs. 5) Just as you'll never understand the mystery of life forming in a pregnant woman, So you'll never understand the mystery at work in all that God does."

Imagine, for a moment a pie chart that represents all the knowledge that exists. Then, in that pie chart imagine two thin slivers each representing one percent of the pie. The first sliver represents all the knowledge that you possess. The second sliver represents everything that you know that you don't know. And the other ninety eight percent slice represents everything else.

I was first introduced to this concept when I was in Seminary, and I find it so useful for explaining why so much of life doesn't make sense. After all, if all I know is one percent of what can be known, and that is being very generous, and if everything I know I don't know adds up to two percent, then I completely lack what is necessary to comprehend the complexities of life. In almost all areas of life, I don't have the full picture. I don't even have a partial picture. I have two pieces of a hundred piece puzzle. And that is nowhere near enough to figure things out.

Thus, in life I have no choice but to live by faith. In life I have no choice but to be humble. Because, this side of eternity, I will never understand the mystery at work in all that God does.

Rule #5 (vs. 6) Go to work in the morning and stick to it until evening without watching the clock. You never know from moment to moment how your work will turn out in the end.

According to research studies, seventy percent of people are disengaged at their jobs. This means that most people go to work for the sole purpose of getting a pay cheque.

And I know the feeling. In my summers in university, I worked at a foundry making exhaust manifolds for cars. The guys on the floor used to say, “the work is dirty but the money is clean.”

While the popular advice given to young people starting out in life is to pursue their passion and to not settle for anything less, I think the better approach would be to inform young people that most of them won't love their jobs. That is why jobs are called jobs. Because if someone didn't pay you to do it, you would never do it.

That being said, there is honour and dignity in doing a job that you don't like well. Just ask the people at the foundry where I used to work. Nobody there loved the job. Not that I knew anyway. But, we did our job well. And as a result, half the vehicles in North America had exhaust manifolds. And I paid my way through university. And the other guys on the floor put a roof over their families' heads and food on the table.

That is why we went to work in the morning and stuck to it until evening without watching the clock. Because you never know from moment to moment how your work will turn out in the end.

Rule #6 (vs. 7-8) “Oh, how sweet the light of day, And how wonderful to live in the sunshine! Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted. Take delight in each light-filled hour, Remembering that there will also be many dark days And that most of what comes your way is smoke.”

When my colleague, Todd Statham was in Africa, he gained a new appreciation for life that he had never had given his upbringing in the prosperous west. This awakening occurred sixth months into his tenure as a lecturer at Zomba Theological Seminary when he was suddenly struck by the realization that every one of his students had been impacted by a significant death in their families within the six months that he had been their teacher.

As this awareness dawned on him, after the death of one of his students; a young man in his twenties with several children at home, who had been struck by a bus after leaving class, it made him realize that as a westerner, his exposure to death was limited, and as a result, he took his life for granted.

However, when the reality of death finally registered for him, it changed his thinking on many things. First and foremost, he gained a new respect and appreciation for the life that God had granted him.

Rule #7 (vs. 9-10) “You who are young, make the most of your youth. Relish your youthful vigor. Follow the impulses of your heart. If something looks good to you, pursue it. But know also that not just anything goes; You have to answer to God for every last bit of it. Live footloose and fancy free - You won’t be young forever.”

In Bruce Springsteen’s hit song, “Glory Days,” the singer observes that for most people, as times slips away, the place they keep going back to in their minds is the days of their youth; to their glory days. For most people, Springsteen notes that their youth is the time when their most enduring memories were made.

Thus, when we get old, our reminiscing instinctively compels us to find some young person and tell them to celebrate their youth, because once it is gone, it is gone. I think that this is what Solomon is expressing here in this proverb. However, he provides a very good counter balance to his exhortation to have fun. At the same time he reminds his youthful reader to do so with reasonable limits. After all, you will have to give an account to God for every one of your youthful actions.

In closing, if Solomon were to write another best selling book today called, “Seven More Rules For Kingly Living,” which was based on his life’s pursuit of wisdom, and which used today’s Scripture reading as an outline, I am sure he would finish things off again by pointing people to the One who is the source of all wisdom.

If Solomon were to write a book today about wisdom gained from under the sun, and how we are to find meaning in life, I am sure he would finish things off again by pointing people to Jesus Christ who is the source of all wisdom and whose life provides the ultimate rule for our lives. While a great man in his own right, I believe Solomon would follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist and point us to Jesus, and tell us to “follow him.”

Therefore, as we seek to live our lives in a manner that reflects the wisdom of God, may we heed the rules of life that we examined this morning in the inspired Word that Solomon recorded in our reading from Ecclesiastes. But, more than anything, may we, as people who live under the sun, lift our eyes towards Jesus, and may we commit our lives to following him, for our salvation, and for God’s glory. Amen.