

“A BETTER WAY”

This passage shows the Preacher continuing his quest for meaning, as we can see by the frequent repetition of the phrase “I saw.” We are meant to picture him looking around at everything in the world, trying to find some way of making sense of this life. And as he continues his quest in these verses, he observes that there is a better way to live this life. Much of what he has to say here explores the relationship between our work and our dealings with other people. The Preacher has already had quite a bit to say about work, some negative things and some positive things, and he continues in the same vein in these verses. As we look at this passage today, I want us to take it in three sections, sections in which the Preacher sets a contrast between two kinds of people. First, he sets a contrast between the competitor and the drop-out and then talks about a better way to live. Second, he sets a contrast between the rich miser and the person who has friends. And third, he sets a contrast between the person who rises to the top by heeding good counsel and the person who stands at the top and rejects all advice. In each section, the Preacher declares that there is a way that is better than the alternatives.

We begin by looking at the first set of contrasts, those found in verses 4-6. This section differs from the other two in that here the Preacher presents two extremes and then settles upon a happy medium between the two as the better way. The extremes are given in verse 4 and 5, while the middle way is given in verse 6. The first extreme is that of the competitor. The Preacher sees that many of our accomplishments are a result of the fact that we are trying to outdo our neighbors. Our pride makes us competitive. We

want a better house, a better vacation, a better car, a better television set than what our neighbors have, so we plunge ourselves into our work so that we can have more and more. As we read this, we get the picture of a person who is married to his work, a workaholic, the kind of person who lives for his job. And the Preacher is telling us that that the thing that motivates this kind of person is envy.

Because of our pride, it is difficult for us to see others living happily and doing well. And this is especially true when we ourselves are not doing so well or are not very happy. It is so easy for us to be jealous and resentful. But the Lord calls us to rejoice when our neighbor flourishes, and even to do whatever we can to help him flourish. To that end, we would all do well to pray the prayer suggested by one commentator: “Let me feed, and foster, and nourish, and cherish the graces in others, honouring their persons, praising their parts, and glorifying thy name, who hath given such gifts unto them.” [Bridges, 83]

Our pride and envy can cause us to make an idol out of our work, but that is only one extreme. At the other end of the spectrum is the drop-out, the idler, the unmotivated person, the person who fails to do anything productive with his life. As much as the Preacher is against the competitor, he is just as much against the drop-out. This is the person who opts for the life of inactivity. The Preacher calls him a fool, because he folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Derek Kidner explains the meaning of this verse in these words:

“[The fool’s] idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect.” [Kidner, 46]

The slacker wastes away to nothing. He has nothing to show for his life. And this is a serious deficiency, because the Bible tells us that the Lord holds each one of us accountable for what we do with our lives in this world. Jesus taught this in the parable of the talents, in which he likened the day of judgment to the day on which a master returned from a long journey and gathered his servants to see how they had used the funds that he had entrusted to them. The servants who were productive and fruitful received a word of commendation from their master, while the servant who was not productive received words of condemnation from him. What a sad thing it would be to have the Lord Christ, on the day of judgment, condemn you as a wicked and slothful servant for wasting your life away. But what a glorious thing it would be to hear him speak these words to you: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” [Mt. 25:21]

The Preacher clearly rejects the two extremes that he describes in verses 4 and 5. Neither the competitor nor the slacker has it right. So in verse 6, the Preacher sets forth a better way: “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.” The better life is the simple life, a quiet life and contented life. The Preacher is not saying that this is a perfect life. He is not being nostalgic or sentimental,

thinking back on a golden age that has passed us by. We should know by now that this man would never contend that it is possible to live an idyllic, problem-free life in this world. He is simply saying that there are more than two options for us when it comes to this matter. You do not have to choose between being a workaholic and a slacker. There is a third way. And it is the better way.

This brings us to the second contrast in our passage, the contrast that the Preacher makes in verses 7-12 between the rich miser and the person who has friends. The miser has nobody to share his wealth with. Even if he did, he would have no time for them anyway. He is single-minded in his pursuit of riches. He will never be satisfied. The sad irony to such a man's life, as the Preacher points out, is that he does not even realize how alone he really is. He never even stops to consider the fact that he does not have anyone with whom he can enjoy his wealth.

Set in contrast to the miser is the person who lives and works in community with others. Unlike the miser, this person is a part of something that is bigger than himself. He is not merely living for himself. His life is bound to the lives of others. He is not alone. Consequently, when he stumbles, there is someone there to help him up. And when he faces hardship or trouble, there is someone there to help him face up to it. He may not have as much as the rich miser, but his life is far richer.

The contrasting pictures in these verses remind me of the contrast between George Bailey and Mr. Potter in the classic movie "It's a Wonderful Life." If you have seen it you know that even though Mr. Potter owned almost everything in the town of Bedford

Falls, he was a miserable man. He was all alone. At one point in the film George Bailey describes him as “a warped, frustrated old man.” By way of contrast, George lived in a drafty old house and barely had enough to make ends meet for his large family. But George had something that Mr. Potter lacked. He had friends. And at the point in the story when George finds himself in a real bind, it is his friends who save him.

Now I am not suggesting that each one of us can be like George Bailey. He is a fictional character after all. But there is something about his life that should ring true for every Christian. A Christian is by definition a person who lives in fellowship with other Christians. As much as we hear people talking about having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” we need to realize that that relationship is never a private one. Jesus is not the exclusive possession of any one Christian. Instead, all of those who put their trust in Christ have a common share in him and in all of the benefits that are found in him. That is what the New Testament word “fellowship” means. It means having a common share in Christ and the life that is found in him. This is why the Bible speaks of individual Christians as members of the body of Christ. God knows that it is not good for us to be alone. He said so when he first created us. We were created for community. And one of the great blessings poured out upon us in Christ is that we are made to be a part of the new community that is being formed in him. And this is not just a benefit that is there for you when you feel like you need it. It is a constant necessity. We need one another. This is why the author of the letter to the Hebrews gave this command: “And let us consider how to stir up one another in love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is

the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” [Heb. 10:24-25] The life of Christian discipleship involves a commitment not only to Jesus Christ, but to his body, to the church. If you are a Christian, you have social responsibilities within the body of Christ. As Charles Bridges writes,

“Oh! let us ponder well the deep responsibility of our social obligations. Are we discharging them as unto the Lord - for the honor of his name, for the edifying and increase of his Church?... The time is short. Opportunities are passing away. Happy those, who have been fellow-helpers upon earth!” [Bridges, 92]

If you profess to be a Christian, you have a responsibility to the body of Christ. The church is certainly not a perfect community, not by any stretch of the imagination. Not even the best church can make that claim. But just because it is not perfect does not mean that we can write it off altogether, not any more than we can write off the family or the state because they are imperfect.

The last contrast in our passage is between a lowly youth who knows how to listen to advice and an old king who will not accept any advice. The Preacher says that this youth started out at the very bottom, but he ended up on top. He went from prison to the throne, much like Joseph in the book of Genesis. And the secret to the youth’s success seems to have been his willingness to take good counsel, since the old king with whom he is contrasted is described as a man who no longer knew how to take advice. This reminds

us of the book of Proverbs, where one of the repeated themes is the importance of listening to wise counsel. As Proverbs 12:15 puts it, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

The Preacher says that this youth was “better” than the king. He chose the path of wisdom rather than the path of folly. And it paid off. He rose to the throne. He ruled over a great kingdom. He attained the height of fame and power. But his fame will not last. He will one day be forgotten. That is what the Preacher means when he says that “those who come later will not rejoice in him.” The wise youth chose the better path, but in the end it brought him to the same place as the old and foolish king.

As we have noted before, the Preacher’s view of life is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. He does not deny the goodness of the created order, which is the temptation that afflicts the pessimist. But neither does he deny the fallenness of this world, which is the temptation that afflicts the optimist. He shows us that there is a better way to order your life in this world. There is a way to live that is more in tune with the order and meaning that God has woven into his creation. At the same time, he continues to maintain that nothing in this life will last. It is all vanity, vaporous, a mist. Nothing in this life can satisfy our longing for eternal significance. C.S. Lewis noted this when he wrote,

“Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world.

There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy... There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality." [*Mere Christianity*,]

This is what the Preacher means by his frequent refrain, "This also is vanity and a striving after wind." He is not saying that you should stop caring about your life in this world. On the contrary, he tells us that there is a way to live that is better than the alternatives, and we should by all means pursue that better kind of life. It is better to live a simple, contented life than it is to be a compulsive competitor or a lazy drop-out. It is better to cultivate community with friends and family than it is to accumulate mountains of riches and possessions all for yourself. It is better to listen to wise counsel than it is to always do everything your own way.

But the thing that the Preacher will not let us forget is that even if we choose the better way, we will still come to the same end as everyone else. Why does he keep pressing this point? What is God saying to us through this portion of his Word? He is telling us that he is our only hope. God is the only answer to the eternal longing that we have within our hearts. God is the only one who is able to satisfy the desires that are stirred within us by the things of this world. This is why Christ prayed for his church

with these words on the eve of his crucifixion: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me before the foundation of the world.” [Jn. 17:24] As he approached the cross, Jesus’ prayer for his church was that we would be able to see his glory. He prayed that prayer because he knows that the only thing that will satisfy us is a vision of his glory. As John Owen once wrote:

“Only a sight of [Christ’s] glory, and nothing else, will truly satisfy God’s people. The hearts of believers are like a magnetized needle which cannot rest until it is pointing north. So also, a believer, magnetized by the love of Christ, will always be restless until he or she comes to Christ and beholds his glory.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 2]

What is the Preacher telling us? He is telling us to be productive with our lives, to be content with what the Lord gives us, to find comfort and help in relationships, and to live wisely. But he is also telling us that none of these things will ever be enough for us. When we read the Preacher’s words in the context of the entire Bible, we will hear him telling us to look to Jesus Christ, and to him alone, to satisfy the longings of our hearts.