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USE THAT RAZOR

Ecclesiastes 12

I was once asked to help a couple work through some issues a family was having that was creating lots of conflict. When I met with them I listened for quite some time as on one issue after another they butted heads and were not coming to resolution. They had so many different conflicts it was almost dizzying. It became apparent that to try to work through all these issues one at a time would be like playing Whack-A-Mole, the arcade game where moles keep cropping up and you have to knock them down. It would take forever to work through all the stuff, and I was not at all sure that after we knocked one of those moles down it wouldn’t come back up a little later.

At that point a 14th century Franciscan monk who was a philosopher and theologian, as well as something of an expert in logic and physics, came into play. He was born in an English town called Okham and his name was William, thus he is commonly known as William of Occam. He studied at Oxford University before he moved to Germany. He is most famous for stating a principle known as Occam’s Razor. That principle is *Non sunt multiplicanda entia praeter necessitate.* Perhaps your Latin is either rusty or non-existent, like mine. In English that comes out, “One should not increase beyond what is necessary the number of entities require to explain anything.” In other words, we should keep things as simple as possible because the simplest explanation is usually the best one. It is referred to as a razor because it encourages us to “shave off” concepts, variables, or constructs that are not actually needed to understand or explain a phenomenon or situation. This reduces the chance of introducing inconsistencies, ambiguities and redundancies, or of clouding an issue by making it unnecessarily complex.

In my session with that family there were many issues, variables and aspects. I realized I needed to use Occam’s Razor to cut away all the underbrush and get to the heart of the matter. As I looked at what was going on in that way I began to see that there was one thing that was really the root of all those conflicts. Trying to deal with all the issues one by one was going to be futile. In reality they were the results of one deeper thing that was going on, and until that one deeper root cause was dealt with there was no hope of resolving the individual issues.

I share that experience because we all deal with a complex thing called life. We have seen in the book of Ecclesiastes that it can be confounding and difficult. We need to use Occam’s Razor to cut through the tangled web of our lives and get down to the root issue. As he brings this book to a close in chapter 12 the Teacher of Jerusalem, Solomon, does exactly that. Surprisingly, he says that at the core of life for all of us is a crucial kind of fear.

Fear is often a negative thing, something that we would love to avoid. But there is another kind of fear that is beautiful. In fact, it is life giving. Even more, it is the most important thing in life. We will learn about that fear today as we look at the final chapter of Ecclesiastes. In this chapter the Teacher sums up the most important thing one can learn about life.

EXPOSITION

THE YOUNG NEED TO REMEMBER GOD

This section picks up from the end of chapter 11 where the Teacher gave some instruction aimed especially at those who are young. In verse 1 he continues this theme by saying, “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.” It is easy for the young to get so caught up in the events and desires of their lives that God sort of feels irrelevant to them. They think life is all about things like success, money, power, approval, friends and pleasure. But the Teacher wants them to know that this is a mistake.

One of the curious things about young people is they have a tendency to think that they will be young forever. Do you remember when anyone in their 40’s was old, and anyone much older than that was a coffin dodger? From your perspective their life, such as it was, basically was over. You might remember the old Beatles song about “when I’m 64.” Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64? Yeah, at 64 you may still be consuming oxygen, but you’re not doing anything useful with it anymore. Though no young person literally thinks that they will never get old, inside they kind of feel that way.

The teacher goes on to warn them about what is ahead for every human being. They need to remember the Lord “before the days of trouble come.” He was warning young people they won’t be young forever. Days of trouble come for all of us if we live very long, because getting old is hard. In verses 1-7 Solomon gives a poetic description of growing old. He talks in verse 3 about the strong men now trembling and stooping. He mentions in verses 4-5 how the elderly sometimes have difficulty sleeping and their fears increase.

In those days “the grinders cease because they are few.” In other words, you don’t have many teeth left. I hate going to the dentist. Even a routine teeth cleaning is an ordeal for me. I brush and floss my teeth diligently because a dentist appointment is out there. One day recently Laurie proclaimed that she had flossed her teeth the night before. I said, “Well, you know that I floss every night.” She said, “Yes, you’re such a Boy Scout. You’re so virtuous.” I said, “Actually I’m just terrified of the dentist.” But I also would like to keep my grinders. In ancient times before good dentistry and oral hygiene, people could expect to have the grinders disappear. Laurie says we tend to end up life the way we start out, wearing diapers, having no hair and having no teeth.

He talks in verse 5 about when “the almond tree blossoms.” What’s that about? Almond trees’ blossoms are usually white, so when it blossoms it’s covered in white up top. Guess what that suggests. Oh, he means your hair turns white. Exactly. That’s if you’re lucky. For some of us the hair goes AWOL. White hair would be much better than none at all.

He says the days are coming when desire is no longer stirred. That’s likely mostly about the fact that generally older people don’t have the sex drive they once had. But fading desire also has wider implications. I think Christmas lights are kind of symbolic of this. There are 70 homes in our neighborhood, all built around 1990. To my knowledge we are one of 4 families that bought our house new and are still in it. We’ve seen a lot of change as people come and go. I’ve noticed as people get older they tend to put up fewer Christmas lights on their house, or even forego that altogether. Partially that’s because they have less energy. And when the kids are gone there just isn’t that motivation to do the work. But that means there’s just a little less passion for something in life. People who once had the desire to make Christmas special and bring joy to others through lights in their yard, now just skip it. As you get older it’s easy to be passionate about a lot less and to just skip it. But what you’re skipping is being alive and engaged in life!

Life has an arc. In your early years you get bigger, stronger, and add capabilities on a constant basis. I’ve been watching our grandchildren change. They have grown, learned to walk, to feed themselves, to talk, and Ella is starting to learn how to read, which is down the road for all of them. That process goes on for a long time as young people keep getting bigger, stronger and more capable at many more things. But that process doesn’t go on forever.

Somewhere in your mid to late 30’s you hit a plateau, and then, ever so slowly, the pendulum starts to swing back. Instead of getting bigger, stronger, better, you begin going the other way. Professional athletes discover in their 30’s that their best years are behind them, unless their name is Tom Brady. For the most part by the time they are 40 their career is over. They aren’t the only ones affected. Have you heard of sarcopenia? Oh, no, is this a new disease? No, it’s derived from two Greek words. Sarx meant flesh, and penia meant poverty. So it means poverty of flesh. It’s the medical term for the fact that you start losing muscle mass some time in your 30’s. That process escalates in your 50’s. Many people have lost 50% of their muscle mass by the time they’re 75.

I can remember very clearly the moment when I realized that aging was taking things away from me. I was in our garage with the door open. I was working out with weights. The kids were with some friends playing in the tot lot across the street. In between sets I was reading something. I was surprised to find that when I looked to see what the kids were doing across the street and then looked down at what I was reading, I somehow could not make out the words. I thought, “What’s going on here?” What was going on was that was the first sign that my eyes were losing their ability to focus. They couldn’t adapt from long distance to focusing on small print on a page. Bifocal lenses were in my near future. It’s called presbyopia. At the age of 40 I was starting to experience sarcopenia and presbyopia. It’s amazing I have survived to my current advanced age. Instead of gaining things, I was beginning to lose them.

That’s what Solomon is telling young people. This is going to happen to you because it happens to every human being. A lot more besides sarcopenia and presbyopia starts happening, and age begins to make us weaker, our lives more narrow as it takes things away from us. It is a process that no one avoids, not even Tom Brady.

The Teacher was an old man who had lived many years. He had learned that the way to make the most of life is to remember the Lord when you are young. It is to see him not as irrelevant, but as the most relevant, most important factor in one’s life. He is the one around whom live revolves. If one does not remember this truth one is certain to end up with life being empty, meaningless and futile. Only by remembering the Lord can one have a life that is full, joyful and meaningful. That leads to the next point.

ALL NEED TO USE “THE RAZOR”

In verse 13 Solomon essentially used Occam’s Razor to explain what life is all about. He spent his life trying to make the most of life, getting the most he possibly could out of it. He tried everything, and did so to excess. He found that all of it ended in disappointment, because it was all hollow, empty. Now as he looks back on it, he sums up what he had learned about how to make the most of life, how to have it make sense and be fulfilling. There are myriads of proposed answers for that question. He cuts through them all. “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.” The Hebrew text literally said, “this is all to a person.” In other words, this is what life is all about. Young or old, male or female, rich or poor, powerful or oppressed, famous or utterly unknown, no matter what one’s situation, the answer is the same. The central point of life is fear God and keep his commandments.

That is not what our culture tells us. Karl Marx said, “Man is only free if he owes his existence to himself.” He knew if there is a Creator, then all of our lives are owed to that Creator and exist for his purpose. Marx claimed we can only be free if there is no Creator, because then we can live however we want, for whatever purposes we choose. That’s part of why there is so much militant insistence about evolution. If we are just the results of chance and evolution, there is no creator, then we can be really free. If we are created by God we will never be free of him. Ayn Rand said man’s destiny is to be a self made soul. That’s the same message. Maybe the prophet of our culture is writer Elizabeth Gilbert, whose book, *Eat, Love, Pray*, has been a huge best seller. She wrote, “God dwells within as you yourself.” In other words, the only God is you. She said inside us “there does exist a supreme self who is eternally at peace.” She claimed the highest duty is to “honor the divinity that resides in me.”

Every human being faces a choice in life. We need to use Occam’s Razor and cut through all the noise to get to the root of what’s going on. Down at the core there is a choice we must make. Our world says life is about us, we are the divine, we are the center, and our choice must honor that divinity in me by doing whatever I determine I must do to be happy. Solomon says life is about fearing God and keeping his commandments. We must choose every day, in myriads of ways, which of those is going to rule how we live. Do I live to honor the supreme self in me, or to fear God?

Let’s think about fearing God. What does that mean? It is a foreign concept to many in our society. It means nothing to them, and even seems archaic at best. To all of us it can be confusing, for how can being afraid be what is the core of life? Are we supposed to cower before God? Are we to fear that he’s going to slap us down, make us pay if we step out of line, and that determines how we live more than anything else? Is God such an ogre that we run away from him because we are afraid of him. That is the sort of Old Time Religion approach. You’d better behave or God is going to get you. It is a bit like Santa Claus is coming to town. He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness’ sake. You’re going to end up on the Naughty list and then you’ll be sorry. It might sound like that’s what Solomon was saying, but that is not the true biblical fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 8:13 says, “The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.” That sounds like being super afraid of God. We see God as holy and should be terrified like Isaiah in chapter 6. In fact, he says we should dread God, because before him we are dog poop. Dread is a powerful word. If you dread something you would do anything to get away from it or avoid it. Is that how we’re to think about God? Is Isaiah telling us to dread him, to want to avoid him so desperately that we’d give anything to get away from him?

We need to look at the next verse. Verse 14 says, “He will be a holy place.” That’s technically a correct translation, but not quite right. The word translated “holy place” has other meanings. One version translates it “sanctuary.” Another renders it “safe place.” Still another says it means “hiding place.” You don’t dread a sanctuary or a safe place. You run to a sanctuary or a hiding place. A sanctuary is a place you want to be. Years ago our family was in Fort Myers, Florida. We were in this crummy motel that was right on the beach. We went to an Italian restaurant across the street. As we finished our meal a thunderstorm roared in. It was violent and impressive and it was like somebody in the heavens had turned on a shower full blast. The rain was so hard it looked like you could drown in it. We were about to leave when one of the restaurant employees said, “Why don’t you stay here and wait it out. We’ll make you some fried pizza dough.” We agreed that was a good plan. That restaurant was a sanctuary for us. It was a place we wanted to be, one we ran toward, not away from.

How do we know that’s the sense of the word Isaiah intended? He ends that section in verse 17 saying, “I will wait for the Lord” and “I will put my trust in him,” Do you wait for what you dread? No, quite the opposite. So Isaiah must have meant something different than what we think of as fear and dread. Throughout Scripture we see that God wants us to run toward Him, not away from him. That’s not what you do with someone you dread.

Why did Isaiah use the words dread and fear? It is because those are such powerful words. Fear and dread are feelings so strong that they can dominate your life. They take over and control you and affect your decisions, actions, even your feelings. When you dread something you can’t think about anything else. It dominates your thoughts and emotions. Fear and dread are feelings so powerful that they affect us physically. They make our heart beat faster, make us sweat. I remember a flight we were on once where we were in a smaller airliner that hit turbulence, and we started bouncing all over the sky. I found that my palms were sweating, and the only reason was I was afraid we were about to fall out of the sky.

The point is that Isaiah and Solomon both said that we should have such respect, such love, such reverence for God, that it is as though we fear him because it is so powerful. It dominates our lives, it takes over and controls our decisions and our actions, our thoughts and our feelings. When we have that kind of reverence and love for God we will want more than anything else to do what he tells us to do.

Pastor and Seminary Professor, David Prince, says fear of the Lord means, “You’re in such awe of God for his greatness and his grace toward you that it controls your life in every category, every part of your life. It is the controlling reality, what governs your life.” It rules how you make decisions and determines what kind of person you are.

I read about a conversation that took place between a pastor back East and a young married couple. This pastor had officiated at the couples’ wedding, they had gone on a honeymoon and recently returned from the honeymoon. They had just begun real life together as a husband and wife. The pastor jokingly asked the wife if she had burned the first meal she cooked for them. She laughed and said she had actually feared doing just that. She said she wanted so badly to make the best meal for her husband that a wife could ever make that she was afraid she was going to make a mess of it. She felt that because she loved him so much. She said because she didn’t have a lot of experience cooking, she began working on that first dinner hours before dinner time. Again she said she worked so hard at it because she wanted it to be perfect and she was afraid it wouldn’t be. Then she found out he was going to be late coming home and she feared that the meal would be spoiled. At that point the pastor interrupted her tale and said, “You’ve said repeatedly that you were afraid. Did you fear that he might hurt you if you failed?” She said, “Oh, no, of course not,” and laughed. She looked at her husband with obvious love and affection on her face, love that was definitely obvious on her husband’s face as well, and she said, “I just love him so much that I wanted badly to do something that would make him happy.” That’s like the fear of the Lord. Fear can be a very negative thing in a marriage relationship. But that kind of fear is completely different. It’s not negative at all. In fact, it is a beautiful thing.

While Laurie and I were on vacation recently we did a little snorkeling. One day when we were done we were swimming back in to shore. Near the beach I couldn’t help but observe a husband and wife not far from me. He had a mask and snorkel that he was preparing to put on, but he was also trying to help his wife. She had a sort of inner tube flotation device that would allow her to put a mask on and put her face in the water so she could see under water without actually swimming. It was obvious she was terrified of being in the ocean. At first he tried to get her to go out in deeper water, pointing out she was totally safe. She was absolutely refusing. Then he tried to get her to put her mask on and just look under the water. Apparently he thought maybe if she could do that she would get over a bit of her fear. He was gentle and tried to be encouraging. He wanted her to just have an enjoyable experience. But she wanted no part of it. The more he tried to encourage her, the more her fear paralyzed her. I felt bad for both of them. It reminded me a bit of the first few times Laurie and I snorkeled in the past. For me there was always an element of fear. It wasn’t huge, but it was real. The fear wasn’t irrational. You’re not in your element. The ocean can be a dangerous place. But despite the fear, we went ahead, not to prove anything, not because we had to, but because we were drawn to the experience, which can be beautiful in many ways. That’s a bit like the fear of the Lord. Yes, the Lord is awesome, and in a sense dangerous, but there is a beauty in him that draws us to him, that makes us want to be with him.

Every day in many ways and many situations we face the question of what matters, of what life is about. It often feels to me like life is about me accomplishing all the things on my to do list for today. It is not uncommon for it to feel like it is about me proving my worth, showing that I am a capable, valuable person. Often it feels like it is about trying to get people to like me. It frequently feels like it is about me not having pain. Almost always it feels like life is about me getting what I want and being happy.

Solomon wields the razor and cuts through all of that. He says today, this day in my life, it is about fearing God and keeping his commandments. It is about having such powerful love and respect for God that it controls my thoughts, my actions and even my feelings. This is the most important thing in life, it’s what matters, it’s why we are here. Life is about fearing God. That is why we live. If we do not fear God as the primary motivation in everything we are and do, our lives will end up being empty and futile. We might end up like Solomon, realizing when we are old that we never found what we were chasing all those years, and that we’ve wasted the chance we had to live a life that is meaningful, fulfilling, full of peace and joy. That is a sad realization and conclusion to live. He is saying, “Don’t make the mistake that I made. All those years were wasted.”

When we have that fear of the Lord we absolutely will be passionate about following God’s commandments and instruction. Dave Stone spent some time as a missionary in the Dominican Republic. He and his family lived on a road that was not very busy, but at night it was very dark because it had no streetlights. He said the neighbors always had music playing. One night he was outside and his 6 year old son, Samuel, was playing. Samuel was kind of zig-zagging back and forth between the sidewalk and the street, in his own little world. At one point when he sensed something coming, Stone said to his son in an urgent voice, “Samuel, don’t move.” Samuel immediately froze there on the sidewalk where he was standing, though he didn’t know why. Almost immediately a moped flew by on the street. They couldn’t hear it because of the music and it had no light on so Samuel couldn’t see it. Somehow his dad detected it. When he spoke to his son, Samuel didn’t argue, he didn’t ignore his dad and he didn’t disobey him. He obeyed immediately, and that probably saved his life. He obeyed his dad because he feared him. He wasn’t afraid that his dad would hurt him. He had such love and respect for his dad and he trusted him, that he immediately obeyed without hesitation. That’s what fearing the Lord will mean for us.

A couple of weeks ago we left my lapel mic on after the sermon because we were observing the Lord’s Supper and I had to lead that. So that mic was live as we began playing the song we sang as we passed out the communion elements. That wouldn’t be a problem except that I forgot the mic was live. I began singing the first song. The problem is, I don’t sing well. Those of you who were here in the room might have noticed my singing, which definitely detracted from Laurie’s lovely voice. That was unfortunate, but what was really not good was that we also send the service out on line over the Internet. And in that video you could hear my sorry excuse for singing really well. It was embarrassingly bad, and it’s on there forever.

That bothered me. I stopped singing when I realized what I was doing. But it’s out there and I can’t make it go away. It embarrasses me and frustrates me, because I don’t want what I do to detract from people worshiping God. I also don’t like looking bad. So how do I deal with that? There’s great news. The answer is to fear God. If I fear God, what I want is to do whatever he says, and that’s all that matters. I repeat, that’s all that matters. So what if I did something that embarrasses me? Life, my life, is not about that. It’s about fearing God. So if I’m doing that and in the process I do something dumb that embarrasses me, who cares? Fearing God is an extremely freeing way to live. It gives peace and joy, it enables us to laugh at ourselves, to fail and not have that threaten us, and to make us strong and courageous. Oswald Chambers said if you fear God, you will fear nothing else, but if you don’t fear God you will fear everything else.

Why would God make such a thing about fearing him? He told us in Jeremiah 32:29. The New American Standard translation of the verse has the Lord saying of his people, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, *for their own good and for the good of their children after them*.” It’s for our good and the good of our kids!

The English Standard Version translation of Psalm 25:14 is, “The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him.” Fearing the Lord is good because that means God is our friend. Psalm 34:7 says, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them.” Psalm 115:13 says God, “will bless those who fear the Lord, small and great alike.”

We should always keep in the front of our minds the message of Proverbs 9:10. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” One scholar said that for the ancient Hebrews, wisdom meant the ability to master life. To master something is to become an expert at it. If you want to master life, if you want to become an expert at living, to be world class at living, it starts with the fear of the Lord. If the fear of the Lord is not “all” for us, if it is not what life is all about, then we will never master living. We will not be experts at it. We only become expert at living to the degree that we fear the Lord.

Seminary President Ronald Rolheiser says those who fear the Lord will, “never have contempt within us. We take nothing for granted, everything as a gift…All boredom and contempt is an infallible sign that we have fallen out of a healthy fear of the Lord.” When we fear the Lord we will be grateful, fully alive people who see life as both a great gift and a big and exciting adventure.

APPLICATION

Gary Thomas wrote in his book, *Authentic Faith*, “One of the great challenges…is that we live in a society in which so many have lost virtually all sense of the fear of the Lord.” So I want you, as you think about fearing the Lord, to remember the power of fear. Remember that’s why this word is used to describe devotion and love for God. It is because fear has the power to absolutely control us, to change how we think and feel. That’s what the Scripture wants our love and reverence for God to do. So the question is how do we increase our fear for the Lord?

ASK FOR IT

In 1 John 5:14-15 the apostle wrote, “If we ask anything according to his (God’s) will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him.” Is fear of God according to his will? Obviously yes. Then ask, and he will give it to you. Ask him to fill your mind and heart with powerful awe of his greatness and his grace to you, and to stun you with awareness of his love. Ask him to make it so thunderous that your heart would be filled with devotion and love for him.

CHOOSE IT

Repeatedly we are commanded in the Bible to fear the Lord. That command is like any other command we are given. We can obey it or ignore it, which means to disobey it. Increasing in fear of the Lord means choosing it more and more as what life is all about for us. It means having it control our decisions and our actions on a continual basis.

TAKE TIME TO PURSUE IT

I am going to suggest a couple of ways to do that. First, I challenge you to take some time every day and read 2 Corinthians 5:14-17. Read it several times, then think about all that it means. I challenge you to spend 5 minutes just thinking about those words and what implications they have for you. Think about what it means that God loves you, and what it means to have his love control you. Think about what it means to be a new creature.

Second, I’d also challenge you to take some time somewhere in nature. It might just be your back yard or at the beach. Just somewhere outside. Look for evidence of God’s character, especially his love, his wisdom, his power and his goodness in nature. Again, take 5 minutes at least. Then thank God for what you’ve seen. Tell someone about it. Praise God for what he has done.

Finally, in this Christmas season, thank God every day for what it means. Thank him for entering our world to suffer and die for us, to defeat death for us, that we might have life and that we can be free. “Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, hail the Sun of righteousness. Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings. Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the new born king.”