

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 16:	<i>The Conclusion</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 12:9-14</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, May 26, 2013</i>

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Next Lesson:	<i>Combined ABF in Auditorium (summer kick-off)</i>



TEACHING TIP

Next Sunday, we will enjoy a combined ABF hour in the auditorium as we launch our summer schedule. Here's what we have planned:

First Four Weeks (combined)

- June 9 — Pastor Keith will start a series entitled, "Back to the Basics: Connecting the Christian to Christ"
- June 16 — Dr. Les Ollila
- June 23 — Pastor Keith
- June 30 — Pastor Keith

Last Six Weeks (electives)

- We will have several teachers teaching 2-week electives.

Please remind your class/table that next week will be combined in the auditorium.

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION

"In conclusion..." Those are words that every listener loves to hear. We have followed Solomon on quite the exhaustive and exhausting journey, and now we come to the end. We learned what we already knew—that life merely lived "under the sun" is futile; but we also discovered the alternative—to live life "in the fear of God." In the Teacher's final paragraph, he provides a fitting synopsis to the entire book, which is summarized in one propositional statement, "***Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.***" In order to drive that home, Solomon rehearses his authority, his purpose, and his message.

THE TEACHER'S AUTHORITY (vv. 9-10)

*And moreover, because the preacher was wise,
he still taught the people knowledge;
yea, he gave good heed, and sought out,
and set in order many proverbs.*

*The preacher sought to find out acceptable words;
and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.*

This Teacher is well qualified to write a 12-chapter book on the meaning of life and to share with us the “whole duty of man.” His words ring with authority, and that authority is certified in verses 9-10.

1. His character (v. 9a)

Literally, the first half of verse 9 reads, “In addition to [the fact] that the Teacher was wise, he also taught the people knowledge.” Two characteristics of the Teacher are mentioned here—he was wise, and he taught the people knowledge.

Solomon himself possessed wisdom or “skillful living.” In response to his request for wisdom and knowledge, God granted that to Solomon in great abundance (2 Chronicles 1:7-12). Solomon’s ability to discern truth and skillfully apply it to various situations was astonishing.

But, commendably, he didn’t keep that knowledge and wisdom to himself. While the language here suggests that it is possible to be wise without gracing others with that wisdom (i.e., being a wise man and not a teacher of wisdom), Solomon joined the ranks of Moses (Deuteronomy 6:1ff), David (2 Samuel 1:18; cf. Psalm 34:11; 51:13), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:7-9), Ezra (Ezra 7:10), and many other Israelite leaders who diligently taught their people “knowledge.” The contrast in this verse with “the people” indicates a recognized responsibility (i.e., perhaps an official class of “wise men,” cf. Daniel 2:24; Matthew 2:1).



Application: Could it be said of you, as it is of Solomon here, that “_____ are wise”? How is your life demonstrative of that (cf. James 3:13-18)?
open discussion

2. His concern (vv. 9b-10)

Solomon’s concern, stated in a word in the first half of verse 9 is fleshed out in verses 9b-10. He is concerned that his subjects learn “knowledge.” One writer elaborates on this term.


The Preacher’s concerns were pastoral, not professional. Accordingly the knowledge he taught must be understood as more than accumulation of facts. It is closely related to discipline, skill and righteousness (Prov. 1:1-6; 12:1). Its starting-point is the ‘fear of the Lord’ (Prov. 1:7). Although taught by men such as the Preacher, and acquired by effort (Eccl. 2:21), it is nevertheless a gift of God (Prov. 2:6) and morally conditioned: ‘to depart from evil is understanding’ (Job 28:28).¹ Ultimately it is fellowship-knowledge, that comes in the context of knowing a person (Prov. 2:5).²


To help accomplish the impartation of this kind of knowledge to “the people,” Solomon employed the use of “many proverbs.”³ These proverbs were, according to verbs 10, “acceptable,” “upright,” and “truthful.” The word “acceptable” is better translated “delightful” (cf. 5:3; 12:1). Balancing that goal is the “uprightness” (or accuracy, correctness) with which Solomon wrote (cf. John 1:17). “His words are not so *pleasing* that they cease to be *upright*.... To be upright but unpleasant is to be a fool; to be pleasant but not upright is to be a charlatan.”⁴ The third term, “truthful,” affirms that his greatest concern was that his teaching carry the power of divinely-revealed authority.


The verbs in verse 9 depict the earnestness with which Solomon concerned himself. These verbs can simply be translated (ESV) “weighing,” “studying,” and “arranging” (KJV—“gave good heed,” “sought out,” “set in order”; also “sought to find” and “write” in v. 10). Solomon is modeling for us here how we ought to be pursuing knowledge and wisdom (cf. Proverbs 2:1ff).

The first (literally ‘weighed’, a rare word) points to careful evaluation, indicating his honesty, caution and balance; the second to thoroughness and diligence [in his study]. The third, arranged, points to the skilful [sic] orderliness of his presentation and reminds us that there is an artistic element in his work (as in all preaching and writing).⁵

Application: In this concluding section, Solomon seems to combat the “vanity” of life “under the sun” (v. 8) with the blessing of truth-filled teaching. Solomon’s personal example and testimony in these verses provides us with the following applications: (1) we will never live our “under the sun” existence well if we are not interpreting it in light of the pleasant, upright, and true knowledge from God; (2) we should diligently exercise ourselves in the study of God and His word (cf. Proverbs 2:1ff), (3) we are wise to encapsulating truth in memorable maxims, sayings, outlines, etc., and (4) we are tremendously helped to write out what we are learning.

 What are you doing to personally “weigh,” “study,” and “arrange” Biblical truth? *open discussion*

 What are some Scripturally-true wisdom-sayings that have been beneficial to you? *open discussion*

 How has writing about your own Bible learning (i.e., journaling, note-taking during personal Bible study, taking sermon notes, etc.) helped you or others? *open discussion*

Transition: When Solomon shares with us “the whole duty of man,” he does so with a ring of authority that we are wise to listen to. Secondly in our passage, we consider the Teacher’s purpose in writing this book.


THE TEACHER’S PURPOSE (v. 11)

*The words of the wise are as goads,
and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies,
which are given from one shepherd.*

This verse expresses three key purposes of Solomon in his writing.⁶


1. To stimulate

Solomon says that “the words of the wise are as goads.” A “goad” (cf. 1 Samuel 13:21) was a “stick with an iron point used to prod animals.”⁷ This indicates that one of Solomon’s purposes in writing this book was to stimulate “the people” to think and then to respond. Sometimes we “kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14), but their poignancy has a way of breaking our stubbornness and stirring submission.

 **Application:** How has this book challenged your thinking and stimulated you to action? *open discussion*

2. To stabilize


Solomon also asserts that the “collected sayings” (i.e., a better rendering of “masters of the assemblies”) are like “nails fastened” or (lit.) “planted nails” (i.e., “firmly embedded nails”). This indicates that Solomon desired to stabilize and strengthen people by means of this book. Having wrestled himself with the instability of living merely “under the sun,” he desires to establish people upon the bedrock of truth.

 **Application:** How has this book grounded you and stabilized you? *open discussion*

3. To shepherd

Solomon declares that all these wisdom-sayings are ultimately “given from one Shepherd.” This “Shepherd” is probably not Solomon (for his title “Teacher” has been consistently applied), but God (cf. Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1; in Psalm 95:6-7 the concepts of Shepherd and Creator are combined as they are in Ecclesiastes 12:1, 11). Thus, Solomon beautifully affirms biblical inspiration (cf. 2 Peter 1:21).⁸ God alone is the source of true wisdom (cf. Proverbs 2:1ff; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 2:3).

In referencing the ultimate authority of the Shepherd, Solomon gently maintains that “the purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes is not to drive us to despair, but to shepherd us into the presence of God.”⁹

 **Application:** How has the Shepherd’s ever-present authority and care become a comfort to you through Solomon’s book? *open discussion*

Transition: Solomon concludes his book with some final statements regarding his authority and purpose in writing this book. Lastly, he summarizes his message in verses 12-14.

THE TEACHER’S MESSAGE (vv. 12-14)

*And further, by these, my son, be admonished:
of making many books there is no end;
and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*


*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:
fear God and keep His commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.*

*For God shall bring every work into judgment,
with every secret thing,
whether it be good or whether it be evil.*

Solomon’s summarized message contains three components.

1. Caution (v. 12)

In verse 12, Solomon cautions (“admonished” = “warned”) against any kind of knowledge that is not based on the revelation given by the “Shepherd”¹⁰ (Jeremiah 8:9). Solomon is not at all opposed to knowledge and learning (cf. vv. 9-10); instead, he’s opposed to man-based (“by these” is better “beyond these [Shepherd-revealed truths]”), man-made (“making many books”), and man-centered (“much study”) instruction. As one translation puts it, “My son, avoid anything beyond the scriptures of wisdom.”¹¹ Such godless education carries no finality (“no end”), but instead fatigue (“weariness of the flesh”).

 **Application:** Review Colossians 2:8-23 regarding going beyond the wisdom of Christ and entertaining human philosophy. Why is such philosophy to be rejected? Because it robs us of our sufficiency in Christ (vv. 9-10) and is man-made, elementary, empty, deceptive, and enslaving (v. 8).

2. Conclusion (v. 13)

Literally, Solomon writes in verse 13, “The end of the matter, everything having been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” This, then, is Solomon’s climax and summary. In one succinct statement, he condenses man’s entire responsibility¹² in his “under the sun” existence into two parts—fear of God in one’s heart and obedience to God with one’s life. Notice here that like James in the New Testament, Solomon inseparably joins both faith and works (cf. James 2:14, 17, 26). Since we’ve considered these points elsewhere, we’ll now simply turn to two commentators for explanation.

Explanation 1

The fear of God is the realization of his unchanging power and justice (3:14). It delivers from wickedness and self-righteousness (7:18) and leads to a hatred of sin (5:6f.; 8:12f.). If it is the 'beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10) it also is the end, the conclusion; no progress in the believer's life leaves it behind. Nor is the testimony of the New Testament any different (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1)....

The reader is urged to keep his commandments. The order of the two points (fear...keep) is significant. Conduct derives from worship. A knowledge of God leads to obedience; not vice versa.¹³

Explanation 2

To obey God is to be truly human. Throughout his book the Teacher has investigated the situation of 'ādām. Now, surprisingly, he affirms that the whole of humanity consists not in its mortality or ignorance but in its dependence on God....Humanity sought to become like God in disobeying him, but instead they lost the one thing that made them truly human....

Everything Ecclesiastes has affirmed up to this point—the sovereign freedom of God, the limits of human wisdom, thoughts on the use and abuse of wealth and power, and the brevity and absolute contingency of human life—all lead to the command to fear God....For us the "meaninglessness" of life which the Teacher so ruthlessly exposes would seem to lead to despair or nihilism; for him it is an incitement to true piety. The insignificance of all that is done under the sun leaves him awestruck and silent before God. His inability to control or predict the future provokes him to dependence on God. The futility of attempting to secure his future through wisdom or acts of religion

(e.g., making vows) leads him not to impiety but to an understanding of the true nature of obedient trust.

Seen in this light, to "keep his commandments"...is the deepest expression of humble acceptance of what it means to be a human before God. Solomon as the Teacher, in his address to his aristocratic colleagues, has anticipated perhaps the deepest mystery of the gospel: The just shall live by faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:16–17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38).¹⁴



Application: What strikes you from the above explanations about what it means that the "whole duty of man" is to "fear God and keep His commandments"? *open discussion*

3. Consequence (v. 14)

Throughout his book, Solomon has complemented grace (2:24-25; 3:12-13; 9:7-9) with judgment (3:17; 11:9). Here, he does the same, but add the reminder of God's judgment upon "every secret thing" (cf. Psalm 90:8; 1 Corinthians 4:5). Previously, this rehearsal of judgment had served to balance our rejoicing (cf. 11:9); now, it serves to motivate our righteousness (cf. 2 Peter 3:11-14).

When all is said and done, the certainty and finality of retribution give life the meaning for which David's oft-times foolish son had been searching. Whatever may be one's portion in life, accountability to the God, whose ways are often mysterious, is both eternal and irrevocable.¹⁵



Application: Why do you think Solomon ends on this note? *open discussion*

CONCLUSION

“Twentieth-century man...is supremely troubled about being ‘thrown into existence’ and asks why is there something rather than nothing. Probably the twentieth century, at least in the Western world, is the most bored epoch the world has yet seen. ‘Stop the world, I want to get off’ is a popular cliché....

“To such a world Ecclesiastes has something to say. He does not come as a formal philosopher; it is a word from God he has to share, despite his reflective low-key approach. He does not present half-a-dozen arguments for the existence of God. Instead he picks up our own questions. ‘Can you cope with life without having any idea where you are going? You don’t have all the answers to life’s enigmas, do you? Your neo-pagan view of life doesn’t give you any hope of achieving very much, does it? Nature will not answer your questions, and you are bored by it anyway. History baffles your attempts to understand it. You don’t like to think about your own death; yet it is the most certain fact about your existence.’

‘What would it be like,’ asks the Preacher, ‘if things were utterly different from what you thought? What if this world is not the ultimate one? What if God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him? What if one of his supreme characteristics is his utter, incredible generosity, his willingness to give and give and give again, his utter acceptance of us just as we are? Could it be,’ asks this provocative and seemingly negative Preacher, ‘that the barrenness and hideous purposelessness of life stems only from the fact that you will not believe in such a God?’

We leave the Preacher there. His message is not complete, for he lived before the full light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He saw ‘afar off’, and still leaves us with some questions. How *can* God accept us in such a way? What is the explanation of the hideous mess of this world? On what grounds can he feel confident that some future judgment will put it all right? Is there not a missing link in all this? The missing link is Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is in Christ, the Saviour and sin-bearer, that God says to us: ‘God is

reconciled to you...You be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor. 5:18ff.). He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man whom he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

‘Some...sneered...Others said, “We want to hear you again.”...A few...believed.’”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ “If you won’t be good, you can’t be wise” (Jim Berg, *Secrets of the Good Life: Studies in*

² Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 173-74.

³ “His medium was *many proverbs*. The ‘proverb’ (*māšāl*) had a wide range of meaning. It could include such things as Jotham’s fable (Judg. 9:7-15), the riddle of Samson (Judg. 14:12ff.), the witticisms concerning Saul and David (1 Sam. 10:12; 18:7), the ‘proverb of the ancients’ (1 Sam. 24:13) and Nathan’s parable (2 Sam. 12:1ff.). Its techniques abounded in crisp sayings (1 Kgs 20:11; Jer. 23:28; 31:29), parallelisms (Prov. 18:10), comparisons (Prov. 17:1), numerical sequences (Prov. 30:15ff.), acrostic patterns (Ps. 37; Prov. 31:10-31), allegories (Isa. 5; Eccl. 12:2ff.), aphoristic questions (Amos 6:12) and similar devices, all geared to piercing the crust of indifference” (Eaton, 174).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Concerning the “goads” and “nails,” consider the following commentaries:

“Two shepherd’s tools are in view: one used to motivate reluctant animals, the other to secure those who might otherwise wander into dangerous territory. Both goads and nails picture aspects of applied wisdom” (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr., electronic ed. [Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997], Ec 12:11).

“Like ox goads and firmly planted nails, Solomon’s teaching, like the words of other wise people, provides a guide and stimulus to godly living (cf. Acts 26:14 for an illustration of goads) and a secure basis for living (cf. Jer. 10:4 for a usage of nails)” (Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes” In , in , vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 1006).

“The two words speak of the twofold effect of the Preacher’s words, which stimulate to action and establish teaching in the memory” (Eaton, 175).

“The words of the wise are like goads, i.e., they help guide one along the proper path. (A “goad” is a long, pointed stick used for prodding and guiding oxen while plowing.) Moreover, the words of the wise provide moral and intellectual stability like nails firmly fixed” (Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008], 1209).

“The words ‘goads’ and ‘well-driven nails’ serve a two-fold purpose in describing the intent of the Preacher. The goads were sharp pointed sticks used to drive an animal in the direction required by its keeper. The purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes is not to drive us to despair, but to shepherd us into the presence of God.... The aim of the Preacher is to nail or screw the truth into our minds—to secure it firmly in our memory and understanding. The Psalmist says, ‘Your word have I hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you’ (Ps. 119:11). We can also picture the shepherd driving in his tent pegs, making his sheepfold secure” (Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary [Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005], 153-54).

⁷ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

⁸ “Although his words are the result of his own reflections, at the same time they come from God. There is here, therefore, a doctrine of inspiration. The Preacher (or his editor) is conscious of his own activity (v. 10) with regard to both the form (v. 9) and the content (v. 10) of his work; yet he contends that the finished product is the word of God as well as the word of man. There are different kinds of inspiration within Scripture. Some involve a high degree of personal involvement and reflection on the part of the inspired writer; at the other end of the scale is the writer who records a revelation presented by an angelic messenger, which may totally bewilder the recipient. Wisdom-inspiration is undramatic in its mode; the work of the Spirit and the

reflection of the writer form an inseparable continuum. Wise men as well as prophets ‘moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (2 Pet. 1:21)” (Eaton, 175).

⁹ Winter, 154.

¹⁰ “It could appear that the Preacher has now lapsed into his negative mode. But this is not the case. Here is an admonishment to heed the Shepherd’s words above all the writings of man. Novelty and knowledge may often walk hand in hand, but novelty and wisdom are to be found on opposite sides of the street.... ‘For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables’ (2 Tim. 4:3-4)” (Winter, 155).

“Because of the peculiar value and authority of the words of the wise—of which this book was an example—Solomon warned his son (cf. “my son” in Prov. 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15, 19; 23:26; 24:13, 21; 27:11) and all his readers not to seek answers beyond those God had given through the wise” (Glenn, 1006).

¹¹ James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (1926), quoted in Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

¹² “The four-fold repetition of כֹּל (*kol*, ‘all’) in 12:13-14 suggests that Qoheleth is emphasizing the ‘bottom line,’ that is, the basic duty of man is simply to fear and obey God: After ‘all’ (כֹּל) has been heard in the book, his conclusion is that the ‘whole’ (כֹּל) duty of man is to obey God because God will bring ‘all’ (כֹּל) acts into judgment, including ‘all’ (כֹּל) that is hidden, whether good or bad. See D. Barthélemy, e.d., *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project*, 3:596” (*The NET Bible*).

¹³ Eaton, 176-77.

¹⁴ Duane A. Garrett, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 345.

¹⁵ *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Ec 12:13.

¹⁶ Eaton, 178-80.