

## All You Need is Love – Ecclesiastes 4: 1-12

Over the last three weeks the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, who we are calling the teacher, has been trying to help us see the meaninglessness of a life lived 'under the sun'- that's a life lived without reference to God and without eternity in view. The teacher is a believer; he knows that human beings have been made in God's image, that all the good things in life are gifts from God, and that God has made himself known to human beings not least, as we saw last week, by placing eternity in our hearts; that sense that this world is not all there is and that we were made for something more.

And his purpose in writing this book is to help people who are living life 'under the sun' (or those people who are tempted to do that) to recognise the futility of that worldview. So the teacher has explained that whilst things may feel new to us there really is nothing new under the sun; whilst pleasures may give us a temporary delight, they don't last; and whilst our efforts at work may help us accumulate great wealth and may bring us success and renown, ultimately it's all meaningless because when we die our wealth will go to someone else and all our greatest achievements will be forgotten by time. Even time itself, as we saw last week, is fleeting. We never seem to have enough of it, it goes too fast and we can't catch up with all the things we want to do. And ultimately of course, time runs out. For those living a life 'under the sun', a life lived without reference to God, death renders everything meaningless, a chasing after the wind; just a foggy vapour.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, that is a dark and depressing realisation for those who ignore God and so people today, as they have through the ages, go to extraordinary lengths to try and drown out that gnawing sense of pointlessness and meaninglessness. Some search for power, some for success, some for pleasure but I suspect the one aspect of life where people generally place their greatest hopes is on love. Love, after all (according to the Beatles at any rate!) is all you need. And they aren't the only ones saying that. I suspect that if you took any list of the top 40 songs at any point since the charts began you would find that the vast majority of those songs are about love; either seeking it, enjoying it or missing it.

Marriage may sadly be going out of fashion, but love isn't going anywhere. People are desperate to find someone to love, someone to care for them, someone to make them feel special, unique, treasured and cherished. They're looking for someone to share their lives with, someone to support them in times of need, to comfort them when they're upset, to shelter them from the storms of life and to keep them warm when life gets cold.

It's that deep desire for love that's behind the explosion in the number of dating apps and websites as well as the use of online porn. Of course you'll never ever find love, let alone affection, in pornography and the effects of watching porn can be devastating both to the individual and their family, but this desire to be loved intimately by another is a driving force nevertheless.

And this search for love and intimacy isn't just within sexual relationships. As family life and extended families have become more fragmented, people have started to look for affirmation through online communities like Facebook, through clubs and societies and even through work. But whether it's from partners, from friends, from employers, even through the supermarkets we use, people today want to feel loved.

And I don't think it's hard for us to see why. A little later in the service we will say the creed together and we will affirm that this world was created by God, a God who is an eternally loving tri-unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So since we are made in God's likeness we are hardwired to need love and community. That's why when God created the world the one thing that wasn't good was that man was alone. And so God created Eve for Adam so they might enjoy love and community and fellowship, between them and their children, just as the three persons of the Trinity have for all eternity. And although God may have started with one man when called Abram to himself, what he wanted was a people; a family beyond number to share in his love and community. That's why, incidentally, when we become Christians we are

drawn into the family of the local church. Real Christians do not exist in isolation unless they are in solitary confinement in places like North Korea or Saudi Arabia because they are following Christ.

And God's design is that the relationships in our human families, in the church, in the institutions of the state and in business, should be marked by love and compassion and kindness. We are to love one another deeply from the heart. We are to serve one another as Christ served us. And if we have power or authority over another we are to make sure we treat the weak, the humble and the poor with love and respect and kindness, because God is a God of loving justice who cares about the least in our world and who will hold all of us to account.

But when the teacher looks around the world, and the world hasn't changed very much at all from his day, what he sees is anything but love. To make the point he gives us three observations on our broken love-shy world, showing us that where there should be love, instead, we find something rotten.

## **Something Rotten**

### **1: Oppression and exploitation instead of loving leadership v1-3**

In verses 1 to 3 the teacher sees great oppression by the powerful and it makes him weep. Perhaps he was thinking of ungodly kings oppressing their people or ruthless landlords squeezing every last cent out of their tenants or business owners exploiting their workers, or perhaps all of the above. Today I suspect we could add to that list factory owners using slave labour to make huge profits at great human cost: People traffickers offering freedom but selling people as sex slaves: Husbands using their physical power to dominate and abuse their wives: Priests or youth workers or celebrities using their influence to sexually exploit those in their care: Governments or communities neglecting parts of their society because of their race or creed. These kinds of stories are in our newspapers or on TV screens every single week. You don't have to look far to see this kind of oppression going on.

And it should make us weep for the helplessness of those who are oppressed. You see, they have no comforter; they have no way out; and they have no power to change the situation. Power corrupts and many in positions of power today have been corrupted and the poor and the oppressed have no one to comfort them.

Their situation is so appalling and so hopeless that the teacher declares that they would be better off dead than having to endure life like this. Even the sight or thought of oppression like this is so bad that he says that better off still is the one who has not yet been born because they haven't seen a world where such corruption and oppression takes place.

Instead of loving leadership, we look around the world and see the poor and the marginalised being oppressed and exploited.

But there's more. Coming back to the theme of work, which is something the teacher does time and time again in this book, he sees there's something rotten behind much of the work we do. What is it?

### **2: Envy instead of loving partnership (v4-6)**

Now the teacher isn't saying that every bit of toil or achievement springs from envy, he's exaggerating the case to make the point that much toil and achievement is motivated by wanting to get one over on someone else.

And he's right isn't he? Envy is something that most of us struggle with much of time. We want to win, we want to advance, we want to be well thought of, we don't just want to be someone; we want to be someone more important than them.

If someone in our road or department at work gets a new car or a promotion or has a nice holiday, don't you start longing for that as well and thinking that you deserve it just as much or even more? One writer

put it like this: “*we can bear to be outclassed for some of the time by some of the people, but not too regularly or too profoundly.*” It’s the rat race; that’s what the teacher is describing here. And rats don’t collaborate. Rats will climb and trample and bite and kill one another to get what they want. They are ultimate individualists, and so often are we.

So instead of working together as a team, as true colleagues, we end up as competitors who want to claim just a bit of the glory for ourselves. And eventually our envy distorts our relationships and distances us from one another.

For this the teacher has 2 solutions. The first is to give up and do nothing- and perhaps you’ve known people who take that route. But that he says is a solution for fools. The phrase ‘*ruin themselves*’ literally means to eat their own flesh, to do damage to themselves because of their lack of effort.

The other option is better: contentment with what we have. “*Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.*” We have to fight envy because it destroys loving partnerships and leaves us distanced from our colleagues and our neighbours and friends.

But the teacher makes a third observation of rottenness and it’s the curse of loneliness.

### **3: Loneliness instead of loving fellowship (v7-8)**

The man in verse 8 is a workaholic. He has toiled away and accumulated much wealth but he has no one with whom to share it. If a problem shared is a problem halved, then joys shared means our joy is multiplied, but that isn’t an option for this man. He has no one with whom to share the spoils of his labours. And so he asks himself: “whom I working for?” And sadly he doesn’t have an answer because he has no one. He has no son or brother and we can assume there is no other close family member either - this man is all alone. And so the teacher is right to call it meaningless. What’s the point of having all that wealth and to be on your own?

Now I guess there are lots of people like that today. Some are lonely because they have never married and have been so focused on work that they have never had any time for friends.

Some, I suspect, have been married or might even still be married and yet have put so much effort into their work, always being at the office, always taking on that extra job, always signing up for overtime with the thought that money will buy them happiness at home, that their marriages have broken down and they have lost the ones for whom they thought they were working.

Some are married to people like this – victims of spouses who put work or sport or hobbies before their marriage.

Some are lonely now because people they have loved have died or moved away and they have struggled to make any connections with people outside the small circle friends and family they once had. That’s a tragedy and we need to be looking out for neighbours and colleagues like that.

You see loneliness is not good. As I said at the beginning, you and I were made for friendship with God but also for friendship with one another. And life, even a life lived under the sun, loses some of its joy and meaning if we are on our own.

As the teacher looks around the world he sees something rotten, but he also sees something better. And that’s what he describes in verses 9-12.

### **Something Better... (v9-12)**

You see not every use of power leads to oppression or exploitation: not every partnership is fuelled by envy: and there are many, many people who know that one of the greatest joys of life is sharing the good gifts of God with someone they love and care for. And that’s what the teacher describes here.

In verse 9 he describes the benefits of a partnership. *“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour.”* Perhaps it’s because many hands make light work, to coin another phrase, or because having someone alongside encourages you to keep going when you are tired or because an extra brain means you avoid making crazy decisions. Even self made businessmen like Lord Sugar need advisers and people alongside because partnerships are productive, and the teacher knows that.

But there’s more here too. Verses 10 and 11 describe two people going on a journey and the benefits that come as they travel together. In those days journeys were often fraught with danger. Long journeys often meant travelling at night when the temperature was cooler; perhaps sleeping outside because 3000 years ago the number of places available on airBNB was very small!

If you were travelling alone and happened to fall down a ravine or fall into a pit you’d be in serious trouble. But if you had someone with you, they could help you up and help you on your way.

If you were forced to spend the night in the open country when the temperatures plummeted, the two of you could sleep near each other and keep each other warm.

And if you were unfortunate enough to be attacked by bandits, with someone else by your side you had a far greater chance of staying alive. Greater productivity, helpful co-operation, comfort and warmth, and safety and security: four things that flow from true companionship.

Now I’ve preached on these few verses a number of times at weddings, and these words make perfect sense when we are speaking about the love between a husband and wife but there’s no need to limit it to just that context. The benefits of true companionship are just as applicable to close friends or loyal colleagues or faithful business partners or comrades in arms or brothers and sisters in Christ. Whilst the language in the last phrase about a cord of three strands not being quickly broken could justifiably be used to describe a marriage between two Christians, with Christ as the third strand strengthening their bond of love and fidelity, I suspect the purpose of the writer was simply to point to the fact that love and friendship between people provide a great deal of comfort and strength even to those living life ‘under the sun’. We are not designed to function as individualists. We were created by a God who has eternally existed in a loving community so that is where we will find the joy and the strength to face life’s challenges. I’m sure that has been your experience with your spouse, with close friends, perhaps even with some great colleagues at work. Love may not be all we need, but it is impossible to truly flourish without it.

The problem is of course that even the strongest human relationships, the most passionate love stories and the best partnerships don’t last. The teacher may tell that a cord of three strands is not quickly broken, but it can still be broken because our human relationships are just as frail as we are. Lennon and McCartney wrote many of the greatest songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but spent years not speaking to each other. Charles and Diana had a fairytale wedding but it was all a sham. And even if our friendships or marriages or partnerships survive the rigours and challenges of life they will still be broken by death, and many of you have experienced that.

No, what we need isn’t something better than perverted power or envy fuelled partnerships or sad solitude, what we need is the best. What we need is the relationship you and I were made for.

### **Something Best**

The Westminster confession put it this way: *“the chief duty of man is to love God and enjoy him forever,”* and I think that sums things up beautifully. You and I were made to know the God who made us, not just intellectually but spiritually and emotionally, and one day physically when we see God face-to-face in the new creation. That is the world we were made for. That is the relationship we were made for. And friends, nothing else can ever come close.

The best human marriages, wonderful though they are, are meant to point us to the eternal marriage of Christ with his church, his people. The level of joy and intimacy we feel on our wedding days, or the

closeness that we feel when we are with our best friends, those things have nothing on the joy and peace and the contentment that we will enjoy for ever when we see Jesus face to face.

In that day the God of all comfort will comfort the oppressed and end all oppression forever. In that day the God of all peace will take away envy and greed and jealousy and the things that cloud our human relationships and allow us to enjoy one another's company as we were made to do. And in that day there will be no more loneliness, for God's people will be brought into his eternal kingdom of joy where human divisions and irrational fears are wiped away for good.

The reason we know that there is something wrong with the world, the reason we know that there is something wrong with our relationships is because we were made for something best, something glorious, something perfect.

So what should we take away from this passage? Let me give you 4 very quick things:

1: Firstly let's be realistic about the state of the world. We should never close our eyes to the oppression and exploitation that we see. We should never wave it away and simply rejoice that it won't always be like this. Oppression and exploitation should grieve us and it should stir us to action. Let us make sure it does.

2: Let's be realistic about the state of our own hearts. Our relationships, whether at home, at work or at church are often marred by our envy of others. Let's ask God to search us and show us where that is the case and ask him to help us be content with what we have. The apostle Paul said that "*godliness with contentment is great gain.*" As those with an eternal inheritance in Christ that cannot fade or perish we should be the most content people on the planet. And we dishonour Jesus when we are not.

3: Let's be realistic about what our human relationships can do. I'm sure there are so many marriages ending in divorce and separation and so many friendships which end up breaking apart because we assume that these relationships can fulfil our deepest needs. They can't.

However much you love your wife or your husband or adore your closest friend, that relationship can never satisfy you in the way that a relationship with the Lord Jesus can. And if you expect them to meet your deepest needs not only will you be disappointed, but the level of expectation you put on that relationship will almost certainly cause it to break. Enjoy your relationships; invest time and energy in them but be realistic about what human relationships can do.

And here's the final one:

4: Be realistic about the height and depth and breadth of God's love for you, and don't settle for anything less than plumbing the depths of that love more and more each day. Don't settle for better, seek the best: seek the relationship you were made for. Spend time meditating on the beauty of the love of God shown to us most perfectly in the death of Jesus on the cross. Reflect on what it cost Jesus to win our forgiveness; meditate on his suffering, those nail prints caused by God's redeeming love and let the love of God fill your heart and transform your life. Seek that, enjoy that, and no matter how much of your life is marred by grief or how many of your human relationships fail or falter, if your heart belongs to God, if you seek him with all your might, then you will find greater joy and peace and contentment and satisfaction than you ever imagined possible. Because that is the relationship you were designed to have. Let's pray...