Sermon Summary for 4-Feb-2010
Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 / “Where’s the Payoff?”

>> From the Bible

1:12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in
Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to
search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.
It is an unhappy business that God has given to the
children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen
everything that is done under the sun, and behold,
all is vanity and a striving after wind.
15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and
what is lacking cannot be counted.
16 I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom,
surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me,
and my heart has had great experience of wisdom
and knowledge.” 17 And I applied my heart to know
wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived
that this also is but a striving after wind.
18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he
who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
2:1 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you
with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also
was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of
pleasure, “What use is it?” 3 I searched with my
heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart
still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold
on folly, till I might see what was good for the
children of man to do under heaven during the few
days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built
houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made
myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all
kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from
which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought
male and female slaves, and had slaves who were
born in my house. I had also great possessions of
herds and flocks, more than any who had been
before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself
silver and gold and the treasure of kings and
provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and
many concubines, the delight of the children of man.
9 So I became great and surpassed all who were
before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained
with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not
keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure,
for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this
was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered
all that my hands had done and the toil I had
expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a
striving after wind, and there was nothing to be
gained under the sun.
12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and
folly. For what can the man do who comes after the
king? Only what has already been done. 13 Then I
saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as
there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 The
wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool
walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same
event happens to all of them. 15 Then I said in my
heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me
also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said
in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For of the wise
as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance,
seeing that in the days to come all will have been
long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!
17 So I hated life, because what is done under the
sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving
after wind.
18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun,
seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come
after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise
or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled
and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is
vanity. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to
despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,
21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with
wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave
everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil
for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What has
a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which
he toils beneath the sun? 23 For all his days are full
of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the
night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.
24 There is nothing better for a person than that he
should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.
This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart
from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?
26 For to the one who pleases him God has given
wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he
has given the business of gathering and collecting,
only to give to one who pleases God. This also is
vanity and a striving after wind.

>> Notes

In this passage, the Teacher gets more practical...more specific about the vanities and the frustrations that plague our lives. His search is summed up in vs. 2:3, "Until I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven." He is asking essentially, “What's worth living for? Where's the payoff?” In this passage, the Teacher sees three payoffs: insight, indulgence, and impact.

First is insight. The Teacher "applies his heart" -- he earnestly set his desires and attentions on wisdom. However, all his insight ends up being a curse. In his insight, he arrives at the inevitable conclusion that we are all crooked and lacking (See vs. 1:15). The more he stepped back and tried to make sense of the world with his insight, the more he saw futility. He's so aware of the vanity that he starts to give up on reason. He gives in to unreason, madness, folly. Life is pointless and crazy. There's no grand scheme connecting all the dots.

And so the Teacher then looks to indulgence in worldly pleasures. The Teacher was a king. And he had the lifestyle to match. He had mansions, vacation homes, not just wine cellars, but entire vineyards, artists and musicians on his payroll, and lots of servants. He had a servant for every kind of need and fantasy you could imagine. And this is not flash-in-the-pan kind of wealth either. He's smart with his treasures. His wisdom doesn't leave him. His pleasure-centered life is part playboy, part rock-star, and part philanthropist. But the Teacher comes to the conclusion in vs. 1:11 that it is all a bitter disappointment -- vanity, striving after the wind, nothing gained under the sun.

And so he leaves indulgence and turns to his final option. He thinks, “If I can't get a payoff from insight or indulgence, maybe I can leave my mark. What can I do that will last beyond myself? Is there anything I can lay claim to with certainty?” The only certainty the Teacher sees is death. See vs. 1:15. Does it matter if you're wise or foolish when the front of a bus is bearing down on you? What you worked for in your lifetime could be undone by someone else after you. As a result, we see some real bitterness and heartache in vs. 1:20. He gives up to despair. The Teacher's assessment of the payoffs in this world ends. He wanted the payoff, but what he got was vanity. He's had the ability and resources to try everything under the sun. And the only certainty he's left with is that life will end.

Where's your payoff? It might be easy to dismiss the Teacher's view of life under the sun as only applying to the secular person or the god-less. But many of the things the Teacher tries for a payoff are often held up and promoted among Christians (e.g. wisdom, hard work, ingenuity, creativity, and political prowess. Christians look for a payoff from something or someone that in itself is not bad-- in fact it might be quite good. But when you set your whole heart on these things, they are ultimately revealed as vanity and frustration. Maybe it's your marriage -- a very good thing in itself. But has your spouse's health, attractiveness, and accomplishment become what you bank your future on? Is your social standing what gets you motivated to act ? Is being on the inside scoop of your friends secrets, is that what keeps you interested in them? How about your hard work? Your great effort? Is that what puts wind in your sails? The question is: do you treasure Jesus, or just the treasures he gives you?

In vss 2:24-26, the Teacher shows us how we must see our whole life is from the hand of God. We need to see the Provider and not just provisions. God's not a genie who just gives us holy versions of our payoffs. Are you looking to the person of Christ? Do you see him as your Savior. Do you want to know Him more? Do you want to hear his Words more? Do you to want to talk to Him in prayer?

But what about this language in vs 2:26 about "the one who pleases God."? That's where the gospel comes in. You can't live a life that pleases God because you're a sinner through and through. The good news is that God looks at Jesus and says to him, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." And then Jesus, as the only one who lived a life pleasing to God, takes your sin, the vanity, and the brokenesss of this life on himself. You become God's child -- one with whom God is pleased. See Psalm 34. "Taste and see that Lord is good. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." We please God by going to him for refuge, for safety.

Finally, in vs. 2:26 we see the Teacher's assessment of the nature of Christian living. What is his closing counterpoint to this long description of futility and suffering? It is not triumphant. It is not a big, grand flourish of practices and worldviews. Rather, it is “eating and drinking.” It is the simple, understated idea that there is real wisdom, real knowledge, and real joy that comes in living a life as a child of God. But it is often in the basic and the mundane. The world would tell you need a secret plan, a grand scheme, or a heroic undertaking to counter the vanity of this life. Rather, God says that one's faith is walking through the unglamorous, the banal actions of daily life and trusting God in the middle of it.

This life is not all hopelessness and vanity. For the one who sees his life from the hand of God, there are glimpses of joy and real change. These may not be exciting. It's certainly not cutting edge or new. It may look like inviting your neighbor over coffee. It might look like giving your wife a day away from the kids. It might be just spending some time in God's word a few verses at time. Or showing up for worship to hear the gospel preached (however faltering or mediocre the sermon) and taking Christ's body and blood by faith. It might be one sentence prayers for help throughout the day. Being a Christian is difficult. God knows the doubt, frustrations, and chasing after the wind we wrestle against every day in this world. That's why we have Ecclesiastes. We can be faithful in the small things, in a few things. And in these small things, we can be content, because we see any blessing as coming from God by his grace. We don't get our life from the blessing, but we see it from God's hand alone.

>> Questions for Discussion

- Where's your payoff? What are the banks that you always withdrawal from for security? What are the wells you most often dip into for comfort? For assurance?

- What does heaven look like to you? Do you imagine yourself getting to do all those things that you've always wanted but didn't have the resources or time to do? Are you imagining a place where nothing stands in the way of you getting your pleasures, insights, and impact? Now, ask yourself this: what if Jesus were not in heaven? Would it change your view of heaven?

- What are the usual areas of your life in which you distrust God or doubt your faith because you don’t see faster change, bigger advances, or easier peace? How would seeing your dependance on God to a greater degree change your expectations for change, peace, or comfort?