

Let me start with a question: Who are you? There are many things that may come to mind. You may be a father or mother, a son or daughter, a brother or sister. You may be an engineer, a doctor, a policeman, or stay-at-home mom or dad. You may be a musician, rock climber, or a long-distance runner. You may be a coffee person or a tea person. All these things say something about who you are, but do any of these things really get at the essence of who you are? Amidst all the things that may be true about you, what's the truest thing about you?

We're starting a new series today called, "Worth It." This is a series about who we are, about our identity, and about the basis of our worth and value. And as we explore this, we're going to look at God's Word and ask, "What does God say is the truest thing about me? What does He say about what I'm really worth?"

Maybe you're wondering why this even matters. Maybe you're one of those folks who thinks if we keep peeling the onion pretty soon, we'll be left with nothing. But these are important questions. If one of the most important parts of your identity has ever changed, you know what I'm saying. Maybe you had a job you loved. You worked hard and felt like you were doing something that mattered. Or maybe you were in a relationship you'd always dreamed of having. You never imagined you could feel so loved and connected. Or maybe you finally achieved the financial goals you worked so hard for.

Then something happened, and it was all gone. Stuff happens. Your employer decides to downsize, and you're let go. That relationship goes south. The stock market crashes. All of a sudden, who you are is no longer who thought you were. Who are you then?

Years ago, I was working as a youth pastor. I loved my job and felt I was doing what I was made to do, but I also needed to finish seminary. So, I resigned and moved my wife and four-year-old daughter to Denver. I was a full-time student, but to help make ends meet, I also waited tables. All of a sudden, I wasn't a pastor. I was a 30-year-old student and a waiter. And, honestly, it was hard for me. I had to redefine my identity.

These questions of identity matter because how we view ourselves impacts the way we live. Eckhart Tolle wrote, "You find peace not by rearranging the circumstances of your life, but by realizing who you are at the deepest level." I'd add you'll not only find peace, but you'll find meaning and purpose. Everything we do has a sense of identity behind it. How we see ourselves matters.

Ecclesiastes: Everything is meaningless

Today I want us to look at the book of Ecclesiastes. It's found right after the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. It's considered Wisdom Literature, along with Proverbs and Job. These books reveal the collected wisdom of generations of God's people and invite us to consider what it means to live wisely. Ecclesiastes is a good place for us to start because it chronicles a person's search for meaning and significance. At the start of the book he says,

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

He identifies himself as the son of David and king of Israel. For this reason, many believe this is Solomon because Solomon was David's son, and he became King of Israel. Others say it's someone writing in Solomon's name. He calls himself "the Teacher," so that's what I'll call him.

Then he gives his thesis for the whole book: "Meaningless! Meaningless...Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." What he's saying is many of the ways he sought to find meaning and significance under the sun were worthless. Ultimately, they didn't satisfy. They were a dead-end street. He goes on and reflects on some of the ways he looked for a sense of meaning and identity that ended in futility.

You are what you know

The first one is the search for knowledge. If your sense of identity and worth is about attaining knowledge, then the truest thing about you is "you are what you know." He says further in the chapter,

I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief. vv. 13-18

Notice this quest for knowledge isn't just some little hobby for him; this is an all-consuming passion. It would have to be because his subject is so comprehensive. He says he wants "to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heaven." I'd say he's quite ambitious! He didn't leave anything out in his quest for knowledge. He turned over every rock to see what's there. This Teacher is also far from humble; he wants us to know how qualified he is to comment on this. He says, "I've increased in wisdom more than anyone before me... I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge"

This is one of the roads people take to find meaning today. Knowledge is power, we're told. The first time this phrase was recorded was in a tenth-century book, quoting Imam Ali. He said: "Knowledge is power and it can command obedience. A man of knowledge during his lifetime can make people obey and follow him and he's praised and venerated after his death. Remember that knowledge is a ruler and wealth is its subject."

We see this thinking today. We need an advanced degree. We need to read more books. We need to take this online course. We must do whatever we can to increase our knowledge to get ahead, and if that means spending \$250,000 on a college degree, by all means.

And what did the Teacher discover? He's very honest about his conclusions. He says it's a "heavy burden God has laid on men." He's talking about the frustration of trying to make sense out of life. We humans are stuck with an unfortunate predicament. God placed within our hearts a desire to make sense out of our world; we crave some kind of coherence and order, but we can never figure it all out; we never get that last word to complete the crossword puzzle. Have you ever felt that? How do you make sense of some guy who walks into his workplace and kills as many people as he can before he shoots himself? What do you do with that? This is why he says twice; it's like "chasing after the wind." It's an impossible task. T.S. Elliot said, "All of our knowledge brings us nearer to our own ignorance."

The Teacher expresses his frustration this way, "What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted." He's saying that something is fundamentally wrong with this world. It's crooked. It's like trying to count something that's not there. In essence, he's saying that with all of our knowledge, we can't really change anything. Modern technology creates new opportunities, but it ruins the environment in the process. Law enforcement tries to limit the availability of drugs, but in doing so, they make prices and profits go up so that dealers get richer. Prisons breed crime instead of reducing it. The Teacher is forced to conclude: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

Now certainly as followers of Christ, we value both wisdom and knowledge. We don't opt for a mindless faith. We love God not just with our hearts but with our minds. But when we believe we

are what we know, we end up empty-handed and full of despair. If you know anything about many of the great intellects and philosophers, you know how true this is. Men like Nietzsche and Hemingway were gloomy men. One of the great philosophers of all time, Jean-Paul Sartre, said, "The meaningless absurdity of life is the only incontestable knowledge available to man." When we come to this conclusion, it settles like dust on all of our so-called knowledge.

You are what you enjoy/experience

To make wisdom and knowledge the truest thing about you is a dead-end street. We're more than just what we know. And this discovery propelled the Teacher down a different road. If we really can't know anything for sure, then we may as well have as much fun as we can. As one screenwriter put it, "What I want is a good time; the rest is propaganda." So, the Teacher turned towards a different path — one that defines our identity as "you are what you enjoy."

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. vv. 2:1-3

This is another familiar path. While few people admit it, there are lots of us who define ourselves in terms of having fun and experiencing pleasure in one form or another. Browse through a few magazines and see what they're really selling you. They're not selling you a car; they're selling you the good life. They're not selling you good wine, but the exciting life portrayed by all the beautiful people in the ad. They don't show you the frustration of the guy in the car when he loses his job, and his company calls in his lease or the loneliness of the young woman in the ad who wakes up with some guy sleeping in her bed and can't remember what happened the night before.

So, the Teacher takes us to a party. There's laughter. The wine is flowing freely. He said to himself, "Self, why not have a good time? You deserve it. You've been pushing hard. Take a break. Have some fun. Life is short." His intention wasn't to just get wasted on booze. He saw this as kind of an experiment. That's why he said he's still guided by wisdom. It's like he thought, "You know, I need to experiment with these things. Maybe I can discover the secret of life through just letting go and having a good time." As a philosophy of life, this is called hedonism, which says the pursuit of pleasure is the primary goal of life.

But you can only party so much. Pretty soon, you realize that when you laugh at everything, nothing is funny anymore. And whatever thrill your seeking has diminishing returns, and you need more and more to stay entertained. Proverbs says, "Even

in laughter the heart may ache, and rejoicing may end in grief" (Proverbs 14:13). You're more than what you enjoy or experience.

You are what you do

So, you head down another path. It's far more productive. It's not "you are what you enjoy," but what "you are what you do." Here on the San Francisco Peninsula with Silicon Valley just down the road, we're good at this. We define ourselves by our careers. Our job isn't just about making money; it's about who we are. I guess that's not really anything new. I mean how did we get last names like Smith, Baker, Archer, or Miller? What do you think those people did for a living? What would your last name be if your profession defined it?

I just returned from vacation. Sometimes vacation is hard for me. Do you know why? Because I'm not doing what I normally do to find worth and identity. These days I think about this a lot. I turn 63 this week. I've been a pastor for almost 40 years. Who am I? Am I Mark Mitchell or am I Mark Pastor? And what will happen to my sense of worth and identity when I'm no longer a pastor?

Listen to what the Teacher discovered about this,

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. vv. 4-6

He says he built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens and parks with all kinds of fruit trees. He made ponds and learned how to irrigate forests for growing trees. There was probably some rationalization in this, like, "Maybe I can do some public good here. Everyone could enjoy the parks and gardens. Someday I'll make an endowment out of it." But when he was brutally honest, he admits he really did this all for himself. He says, "I built houses for myself." He's all about "me, myself, and I," and he concludes all this is meaningless as well.

Don't get me wrong. Work is a good thing. Providing for our families is a good thing. God created work. God gave us talents and interests, so we can provide for our families and make this world a better place. But we've elevated a true thing to the truest thing about us, and that's a problem. You're more than what you do. Because, sooner or later, we can't do what we used to do. Who are we then? What are we worth then?

You are what you have

This naturally leads to one more dead-end street in this search for significance and worth — "you are what you have."

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far

than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. vv. 7-9

He bought slaves. He had livestock, silver, gold and the king's tribute from conquered lands. He even had his own entertainment center. How contemporary is this? As one who still hasn't figured out how to stream music, this isn't my problem. But he had male and female singers. Forget about streaming; he had live music! He also had a harem so he could enjoy the "delights of the heart of man."

Of course, today this "you are what you have" mentality looks a bit different. It might be the car you drive, the jewelry and clothes you wear, or the neighborhood you live in. We live in one of the hardest places in the world to own a home, so many of us define ourselves by whether rent or own. When we say, "you are what you have," it's all about consumerism and materialism. Consumerism is the cultural force that encourages the creation of identity based on the consumption of stuff. Materialism reinforces this by convincing us our value is equal to the value of our possessions.

How does this "you are what you have" thinking impact us? I can think of three ways:

First, it breeds selfishness. Notice, again, in verse eight he says, "I amassed silver and gold for myself." For who? "For myself." Building our identity on the foundation of what we have means we'll often be focused on ourselves.

Second, it breeds insecurity. If you are what you have, you'll always worry about losing what you have. Your life will revolve around keeping it.

Third, it breeds pride. I love how he says in verse nine, "I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me." Wow, really humble guy, isn't he? But, even though we're far more subtle about it, our pride in what we have leaks through.

And it's not like we're getting any wiser about this as a society. A recent study compared college freshman today with those in 1969. In 1969 42% of college freshmen went to school so they could be well-off financially. Today, in a study of nearly 220,000 college freshmen, 78% said that was their goal.

All is meaningless

But some time passed for the Teacher. And one day when the singers had the day off, and it was quiet around the palace, he took a walk in the dusk of early evening.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. v. 11

Somewhere along the line he discovered, "you are what you know," and "you are what you enjoy/experience," and "you are what you do," and "you are what you have" is just chasing after the wind. There's nothing to say that any of these things can't be

taken from you. There's nothing we can know, experience, do, or have that can supply our true worth and identity.

I recall a conversation I had with a Giants pitcher when I served as their Chaplain. This was a young man who had it all. He had wealth. He had fame. He had three World Series rings. He had it all, but he knew his best days were over, his career was coming to an end. He came to me and said something like this, "I've always found my worth and identity in being a baseball player. Is it possible for me to change? Is it possible to start finding all that in God? Can God actually be the source of my worth and identity?"

The Futility of Life Without God

You'll be glad to know the writer of Ecclesiastes would answer those questions in the affirmative. At the end of chapter two, he comes out of the fog, and it's like he gets a ray of light and says this,

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. vv. 24-26

This may sound like he's returning to a philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry" but he's not. Notice God is now very much a part of the equation in what he says. He says a couple of profound things about God to help us find our true identity.

First, he says true satisfaction; true enjoyment is a gift of God. By themselves, what you know, enjoy, do, or have is meaningless. These are foundations for our identity that crumble. But, if you understand these things come from the hand of God, and even the ability to enjoy them comes from Him, then you'll be able to see them as part of who you are, but not the truest thing about you. God desires the good things of life to contribute to our enjoyment; but only if we understand that meaning and significance don't come from what we have, do, enjoy, or know. It comes from God. It comes from receiving simple pleasures as a gift from God's hand.

Second, he says this gift is given to those who please God. He says, "To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness." You see if you think you can find wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, and I'd add a sense of significance and worth apart from being in right relationship with God, you'll

come up empty-handed in the end. These gifts only come to those who please God.

Who is it that pleases God? Notice he mentions "the sinner," who ironically, in the end, hands everything over to the one who pleases God. But we're all sinners. God says in his word, we all fall short of pleasing God, no matter how hard we try (Romans 8:8). And that's where the Gospel comes in — the good news. You see the Gospel says God loves us even in our sin and brokenness. The Gospel says he loves us so much he sent his only Son to die for us. The Gospel says we become pleasing to God through faith in Him who not only died for us but was raised up for us. We put our trust in Jesus, and he cleanses us from our sin, and he begins to work within us so we become people who can please him in all we do. And so, our worth comes from listening to the voice that matters most — the voice of a God who says, "You're worth it. You're worth my Son. You please me. Not because you're so good, but because you're mine." The truest thing about you is you're a beloved child of God.

Leo Tolstoy, one of the greatest novelists of all time, made this discovery. After he wrote, *War and Peace*, he wrote a book called, *A Confession* in 1879. It tells the story of his own search for meaning, worth, and purpose in life.

Tolstoy rejected Christianity as a child and left his university seeking pleasure. In Moscow and Petersburg, he drank heavily, lived promiscuously, and gambled frequently. His ambition was to become wealthy and famous, and he did, but nothing satisfied him. In 1862, he married a loving wife and had 13 children; he was surrounded by what appeared to be complete happiness. Yet one question haunted him to the verge of suicide: "Is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death, which awaits me?"

He searched for the answer in science and philosophy, but he found people weren't facing up to the big questions of life, such as, "Where did I come from? Where am I going? Who am I?" Eventually, he found only the peasant people of Russia were able to answer these questions through their Christian faith, and he came to realize that only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ do we find the answer.

One hundred and fifty years later, nothing has changed. In the Gospel, the voice that matters most says, "You are my beloved child. I created you. I redeemed you. And I want to spend eternity with you." That is the truest thing about you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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