

5. The Oppression of Success

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[0 : 00] to Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Our subject today is all about the oppression and I suppose the oppressiveness of success.

We've been getting to know the preacher, the man who's addressing us in this strangely searching book, the book of Ecclesiastes. And he's a persistent preacher and a penetrating one and he's seeking to engage our minds and to make us think and to think very deeply indeed about God and about life and about the world and about ourselves.

And that's good, that's what we need above all in preaching. Not soundbites, not stories, not spiritual pick-me-ups, but something to make us think.

Now often that's not what we want, we prefer the soundbites and the stories. But that is not what we need. And the preacher is forcing us to confront the big questions, the big question.

Remember it was there, first of all, in chapter 1 and verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil with which he toils under the sun? In other words, where is the profit in life?

[1 : 20] What's it all about? What's it for? And he turns this question over and over again in his book, doesn't he? And the answer becomes ever clearer as he does so.

From the standpoint of mere human existence, life under the sun as he calls it, well, there can be no ultimate profit. It's just a vain and futile quest.

Generations come, generations go. Time passes. And in the end, everything is past. Everything's forgotten. No one remembers you.

Ultimately, no one remembers your achievements. And so, wisdom and achievement, yes, they're better than folly and indolence.

But as we saw in chapter 2, at the end of the day, the hard fact remains. Chapter 2, verse 16, the wise man and the fool, they died just the same way.

[2 : 20] In the end. So what is the point? And that's the vexing question that we can't dodge. When you think about it realistically, as the preacher forces us to, well, you can end up hating life.

That was his conclusion in chapter 2, verse 17. Or chapter 2, verse 18, hating your work, because it's all for nothing in the end. Well, there's plenty of people who would say the same in our world today, aren't there?

Last time in chapter 3, we saw yet another angle on all of this, but the same sense of futility. We are creatures of time. And yes, we may see many things beautiful in their time, in their own place, but our problem is that instinctively we're looking for more than that, aren't we?

We're trapped in time, and yet we must live as creatures who have eternity trapped within us.

Chapter 3, verse 12, God has put eternity within man's heart.

And that is hopelessly frustrating for us. We have a sense of it, we have an appetite for it, but we still can't fathom it.

[3 : 32] And we can't control time. We are victims of time. We're mortal. We'll die just as the fool. But worse than that, says chapter 3, verse 19, we die just like the beasts, from the dust to the dust.

The problem is, of course, that beasts don't seem to worry about that, do they? But we do.

Amoebas and mice, well, they don't worry about the future.

They don't have to pay into pension plans, they don't have to make wills. But for us, the fact is, we need to plan for decrepitude and death long before we even reach the prime of our lives.

Well, that's what the financial advisor is always telling us, isn't it? Of course, many of us don't, which is just storing up trouble for the future. But you see, the preacher's messages face facts.

Unless you grasp the reality about time, and our experience of it, and that God has done this deliberately to make us frustrated on purpose so that we are vexed, unless we realise that, then we will always and forever be vexed and frustrated in life.

[4 : 47] We'll be living to chase the wind. That's the great paradox, you see. Only by seeing that, only by seeing that we are in time but for eternity, and by seeing that the point of life, now in time, is to discover the truth about eternity, about the life to come, and therefore live for that, only that discovery can actually liberate us for life in time, in this world, life under the sun, our daily existence.

But when we discover that, when we see that, and you can, as the last verse of chapter 3 makes very clear, and when you find reward in it, from beginning to end, that's when you've discovered what life really is about, because you know that the best is yet to be.

And yet you're liberated to find and rejoice in the best that is now, a life to be lived with joy before God. And so now in chapter 4, the preacher goes on to show us that the world is not like that, rejoicing and living joyfully before God, but rather the world is as it is, precisely because people do not, and will not recognize this, the truth.

They live under the sun, but with no thought for God, who is above the sun. And therefore, people are living their lives in rebellion against God. That's just what Paul says in Romans chapter 1, isn't it?

They suppress the truth in wickedness. And you see, when you refuse to recognize God, and refuse to live seeking the reward that can only be had above the sun from God, then you'll inevitably be living to seek that reward yourself, through profit in this world.

[6 : 43] You'll be living for achievement, of whatever kind that is for you, for success, whatever that means to you. But that, says the preacher, is the way of oppression.

That is a terribly oppressive way of life. It's futile. He's repeated that again and again, hasn't he? It's vain. Chasing after the wind.

But more than that, as the verse which we began our reading says, chapter 3, verse 16, it's wicked. And he sees, just what we know, that the world is full of wickedness, even in the place of righteousness, there is wickedness.

Because, we've forgotten God. And more than wickedness, says chapter 4, verse 1, it results in oppression.

Because living like that, seeking success, is the absolute antithesis, it's the absolute reversal, of what God created us for, and created life for.

[7 : 50] He created us to live in harmony with God, our creator, and in harmony with our fellow people, and with all the creatures of this world. Not in competition with God, for the world. And Jesus said, didn't he, the whole of the law hangs on this.

Love God with your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. But refuse to love God, well, of course, then you'll hate also your neighbor.

And that's what leads, doesn't it, to a life of oppression, to a world of oppression, the oppression, and the oppressiveness, of a world striving for success, under the sun. And that's the message of this chapter.

The preacher shows us that this is true, simply by pointing out the world as we know it. Look and see, look and see if you can disagree with me. That's what he's saying, as he points to the oppressiveness of achievement that's all around us.

And he does it in the arena of public prosperity, and he focuses on the area of personal possessions, and then lastly, in the whole arena of popular power.

[8 : 59] And in each of these, he seeks to show us a better way, a more excellent way, in fact, the only way to life that really escapes the oppressiveness and the futility of life that is driven by a need for success.

Let's look first of all then at verses 1 to 6 of chapter 4, when he's speaking to us about the oppressiveness of the quest for public prosperity. He faces up, doesn't he, the preacher, to the realities of the world of men, and he puts his finger honestly on the truth.

The great achievement and success in our world leads to oppression for the have-nots of this world. But also, actually, he points out, ultimately, it leads to oppression and oppressiveness for the haves of this world, too.

Look at verse 1. It's a pretty good description of the 21st century world, isn't it? All the oppressions that are done under the sun behold the tears of the oppressed. They had no one to comfort them. On the side of the oppressors, there was power. There was no one to comfort them. Well, that's our world, isn't it? I don't need to convince you of that. Our TV, our newspapers, describe it day in, day out.

[10:14] Every level, it's true, isn't it? The local level, the national level, the global level. That's our world. It's just the nature of a world that is striving for success.

Power on the side of some, and tears on the side of others. No one to comfort them. No one to comfort them. Well, that is what happens in the world when you turn God's order for the world upside down.

Instead of seeking Him and seeking joy in your eternal future with Him, you're seeking success now for ourselves and doing so without God.

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, isn't it? It's more than just in our mortality that we're like the beasts. It's in our behavior too, isn't it?

That's the truth. Fear and greed. Think of the way that our modern technology lets that virus go around the world so fast.

[11:17] We've just seen it, haven't we, in the last couple of weeks. The Shanghai Stock Exchange plunges by 9%. Immediately, there's panic in Wall Street and the City of London and Hong Kong and Japan and everywhere else.

The yen carry trade, as they call it, starts to unwind. So the debt of these private equity companies and the hedge funds suddenly becomes far too expensive. And all these powerful billionaire denizens start dumping their stock to pay off their loans.

And all the share prices around the world tumble. You might think that that's nothing to do with you and me and it seems another world, doesn't it? All that world. Except, of course, when we realize that at the end of the day it's the pension fund of the bloke in the street who knows nothing about it that suffers.

It's plummeted. No comfort for him. He can't do anything about it, can he? And that's the free world. That's the civilized world.

Never mind the state-controlled tyranny of so many places, the gangster politicians in others, the militias, the warlords in other parts of the world. When you begin just to think about all the oppression that there is under the sun, well, it's hard not to agree with verses 2 and 3, isn't it?

[12:33] The dead are more fortunate than the living. Terrible, isn't it, when you hear people saying things like that, when you read descriptions and the words of people from places like Iraq or Darfur.

They talk about longing rather to be dead and for the end to come in this dreadful experience. But remember, the commonest cause of death for men under 35 in this country is suicide.

Don't forget that. Or verse 3, look at it. Better than both is he who has never been born to see all this evil under the sun. Well, if that's all there is, what we see in the world is really all there is.

Do you want to bring a child into a world like ours? For their sake, I mean, not for our own pleasure and satisfaction. Even in our own society, seems to be an epidemic, doesn't there, of childhood illnesses and ailments, especially psychological ones and psychiatric ones.

Think of all the stress that even our children face now in school. Think of all the teenage problems of teenage sexuality, of teenage pregnancy, teenage sexually transmitted disease.

[13:51] That's the one thing that we ever top the league tables in in this country. It's pathetic, isn't it? And then there's the rat race of life. Would you really want to bring a child into a world like this?

That's all there is under the sun. He's got a point, doesn't he? The preacher. It's a dog-eat-dog world that we live in. It's a bestial world. And why?

Well, verse 4 tells us the answer very plainly, doesn't it? All man's toil, and literally the word is success, comes from a man's envy of his neighbour.

That's what fuels even the best achievements, even our best successes, when the quest for success in life is all that there is.

It's terrible to say that, but it's true. If we can't get one up on nature, if we can't get one up on time, if we can't beat mortality, well, we jolly well will get one up on our neighbour, won't we?

[14:55] And that's the fuel that makes the world go round. It's true at the personal level, isn't it?

Though we may not like to admit it, keeping up with the Joneses. One of our Cornell students was speaking about this in his talk this week, and he defined that as spending money that we don't have on things we don't need to impress people we don't like.

That's quite close to the truth, isn't it? It starts very young, doesn't it? Dad! Chloe's got one of those, why can't I have one? Anybody heard that or a version of it? But the toys just get bigger as we get bigger, don't they?

That's how the fashion industry cons us out of a fortune, possibly speaking more to the ladies here than the gents. But the gadget industry, the motor trade, all the same, isn't it?

But it's pervasive and global too, isn't it? It explains so much of international politics. We all know Winston Churchill's famous quote about Russia, I cannot forecast to you, he says, the action of Russia, it's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

But he goes on, perhaps there is a key, that key is the Russian national interest. Well, that's still just as true today, isn't it?

[16:16] Not just for Russia, but for every country, every powerful regime. Envy of neighbor is the driver of the show. whether it's Iran with their nuclear ambitions, whether it's China with a phenomenal economic expansion and desire, whether it's Britain or France or America, whoever it is, envy of our neighbor and distrust of our neighbor, which always goes along with it, well, that's the great driving force in our world, isn't it?

And don't forget that the preacher, remember, is writing also, above all, to God's people. Because the Christian church are just as prone to the same vices of envy, isn't that true?

So are you, so am I. It's deep in our hearts, it's our natural inclination, because we are naturally at heart rebels. And even within the church, there can be great envy, can't there, to what others have materially or in other ways, roles, positions, whatever it might be.

It can even be so between churches. Remember hearing an appalling story from my friend Rico Tice. A few years ago, he was going around the United States promoting his course, Christianity Explored, the course that we do here.

And after a while, he became very perturbed, because a number of the places he went to, he expected a much larger number, and found that, in fact, in many of them, the only people coming to the meeting were from one church. And then he discovered that that particular church was not advertising the meeting around any other churches, because they didn't want other churches to come and get this benefit that they had, and they wanted to be one up on the other churches by having this course for evangelism.

[17:59] Absolutely upside down. That's not just envy, is it? That's hatred of our neighbor. It's oppression.

But that's what happens when we abandon God's definition of success in life. And when we seek our own, it leads always, in whatever form, to oppression.

The world rejects God's way, it rejects the Bible's way, it says it's old-fashioned, it says it's enslaving, it says it's a prejudice, especially, for goodness sake, the Old Testament. We're always being told, aren't we, dreadful things from that book of Leviticus.

I just want you to listen to something from the book of Leviticus, don't turn it up. Leviticus 19. You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor.

[19:05] I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you'll reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

I am the Lord. Well, it's not obedience to that that's made the world as it is, is it? It's abandonment of that.

It's rejection of that for our own way, the way of envy-driven success. But the result is oppression. It's tears. It's misery for the have-nots.

But also, in the end, it's misery for the have. Do you see the end of verse 4? It's just vanity. Striving after the wind. Well, what's the answer?

Well, not verse 5, a cop-out from life, stopping the world, I want to get off. No, says the preacher, the fool folds his hands. That is, he gives up nothing, gives up everything.

[20:11] He doesn't do anything. He does no work. And therefore, he ends up with nothing, having to consume himself. There are people who get so depressed with the ratries of the world that they want to opt out, give up on life.

But that's not the answer, says the preacher. That's just folly. No, the true answer, he says, is there in verse 6, a truly better way. Not consumption, not covetousness, but contentment.

Better a handful of quietness, with contentment and peace, that word means, than two handfuls of toil and chasing after the wind. True gain, says the preacher, is finding contentment.

That's the way of peace and satisfaction. That's the way of health in our personal lives and in society. Now, the preacher's not naive. He knows that we can't just change the world overnight, or even ever.

In fact, that idea of changing the whole world is born of the same arrogance as the quest for human success. It's a dangerous delusion. Many, many people have set out philosophies and visions to change the whole world and rid it of oppression.

[21 : 25] And in almost every case, they've ended up with far worse oppression and misery than there ever was in the first place. Think of Marxist-Leninism. The great thing that would liberate the people. Enslaved the people.

Think of Pol Pot in Cambodia. Hundreds of others exactly the same. No, the preacher isn't going in for fantasy politics of any kind. And in fact, the church needs to listen to that and realize that, doesn't it?

It's all very well to have campaigns like make poverty history. But we've got to be realistic. The Bible tells us that's impossible, this side of eternity.

That doesn't mean, of course, that we don't have a duty to help wherever we can and to do whatever we can. The celebration of the abolition of slavery in the 18th century is a very good example of that.

We're celebrating 200 years from then. It's right to celebrate. But of course, we've got to be realistic. Slavery was not abolished then. Slavery hasn't been abolished today.

[22 : 29] There's 10 times more slavery today than there was 200 years ago. It was a great thing, but it hasn't got slavery out of the world. We can't ever make a utopia under the sun, no matter what we do.

That's, in fact, the preacher's whole point in Ecclesiastes. Only God can do that in his time, and God will do that, he says. He will judge the righteous and the wicked, but until then, we will never solve all this world's problems.

We can never create heaven on earth. We can, and we must, of course, seek to mitigate some of the worst evil, but we'll never end all of them.

It'll be a never-ending task for us because although God created man upright, man has made many schemes, says the preacher. we're naturally always tending towards sin, and when we stop one evil, another will spring up.

Jesus himself is absolutely clear about that. The poor you will always have with you, he says. That's not an excuse to do nothing, of course, but it is realism. It's a warning that we can't do everything.

[23 : 40] But what we can do is change ourselves, can't we? So often it's the grand scheme of things that change the whole world that try and make a utopia of righteousness and justice that actually deflects us from the thing that we can focus change on and we must focus change on, our own lives and our own hearts.

The Bible never gets taken up with vague generalities at the expense of real personal challenge to change. you, says Jesus to his followers, are to be the salt and the light in this world and to this world.

You are to live counter-culturally. And that's a real challenge for us as Christian people, isn't it? Are we contented people?

Are we one handful with peace people or two handfuls with a chasing after the wind? Does contentedness or covetousness mark out our attitude to life, our life in general, our life here in the church together?

That's a question that the New Testament is always posing, isn't it? Just remember 1 Timothy 6. Paul's talking to the Ephesian church. He's talking to a people that he says, quotes, are unhealthily craving after controversy and for quarrels that produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions and constant friction.

[25 : 10] And it's in that context that he says the answer is what? Godliness with contentment. You see, contentment's not just about money, is it?

It's about the whole of life. And that's the world all around us, isn't it? Envy, suspicion, friction. And Paul says, and the preacher in Ecclesiastes says, contentment is the only answer to that.

So the question for us is, is the church a microcosm of the world under the sun? Or does the church radiate and reflect the rays from above the sun?

It's a question for all of us, for our own lives, for our life as a fellowship. In verses 7 to 12, the preacher turns our focus to the oppressiveness of the quest for private possessions.

He just amplifies the fact that even for the haves in this life, it's an empty thing, it's a vain and oppressive thing to seek success in what we might amass for ourselves.

[26 : 16] Verses 7 to 8 speak of someone who amasses success personally and yet manages to insulate himself from life and isolate himself from all the joys and the fellowship with other human beings and with God, the very things that he was made for.

Isolation from others, verse 8, literally, no other person, no second person, no friend, no brother, no son, and insulated from reality.

Do you see, never satisfied with all that he has and yet never realizing that he's actually depriving himself of all life's pressures by living the way he does. Never thinks to ask, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of my pleasure?

He's so single-mindedly focused and driven by success that he's oblivious to everything else in life, including the fact that he is actually isolated and miserable himself.

Well, the world is full of driven people like that, isn't it? Maybe you're one of them. Maybe it describes you. The sort of person who gets the bonus, gets the big detached villa with the big fence and the electric gates that swing shut immediately after you've driven through in your big car, a big sign on the top that says, keep out.

[27 : 40] Even the postman has to put his things in a box at the front so they don't have to come in and disturb your privacy, your castle. Well, I'm sure not everybody with electric gates is like that.

Help, hope, somebody here hasn't got electric gates. But many are, aren't they? It's an image, isn't it, of the modern-day Ebenezer Scrooge. Shut up in your castle with all your possessions and success.

success. But is that success? This man isn't the master of his success, is he? It's mastered him. It owns him.

It's driven him by oppression. Verse 8, there's no end to all his toil. Isn't that so common today? We may not get one up on mortality, but at least while he's alive he'll get one up on his neighbor and that's what he thinks.

But you're a fool, says the preacher, if you think that's success. I remember my father telling me about a man he once knew who looked in the paper every day, obsessed with seeing the section on wills to find out how much money all his rich and successful colleagues were leaving when they died.

[28 : 51] And he used to rub his hands apparently when he saw them and say, ha, I'll leave more than that. But no, he won't leave more than that, will he? He'll leave exactly the same amount.

He'll leave everything just like them. It's grim, isn't it? Sharing nothing in life but losing everything in death. That's the reality for this man.

What's the answer? The preacher tells us, doesn't he, in verses 9 to 12. It's living not for gain for yourself and ignoring your neighbour and despising him because that's anti-God, that's despising God.

No. Life is for loving God and therefore loving your neighbour and therefore life will be marked not by containment, not by contracting out of life, but by companionship and community.

And therefore, not by competition against your neighbour but by cooperation with him. And again, that's true at every level of our lives, isn't it? It's true for yourself. It's just misery and oppression for both if you live like that.

[30 : 06] But take two together and their toil is good for both of them even though there may be less because it's shared. But you see, shared less is actually more in terms of real success.

That's because there's more to life than things, isn't there? Jesus says, a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions or his success. No, it consists in relationships.

And the whole point of the best things, the most beautiful things in life, is that they're for sharing.

Our children understand that instinctively. They do something and they say, come and see what I've made.

Not the same until they've shared it with you. It's the same with success everywhere. Just think of the beautiful things in life. Creations, art. They're there to be shared and enjoyed and they can't be

enjoyed properly unless there's a shared enjoyment.

The picture of the miser like this man with his own private art gallery in his basement that nobody ever sees but him. It's preposterous. But it's also true as well, isn't it, in church life.

[31 : 16] It's possible to be the lonely Scrooge there too, isn't it? That's why the New Testament is so against the loner Christian. A Christian who refuses to be part of the family but the church is God's family.

It's his household. And verses 11 and 12 are just as true of spiritual life, aren't they? There are many obstacles that we face in life and to be alone puts you in real danger.

But together you will withstand an enemy. A threefold cord is not easily broken. That's why the Bible tells us that Christian fellowship is such a blessing, companionship, community.

because we need it. You need it and so does your brother. So does your neighbor. And we're to be realistic about the blessing of fellowship and relationship that we have in our Christian walk.

That's maybe a word for you if you're a Christian who contains yourself, who contracts out, thinking, well I'm quite self-sufficient. Well you're wrong. You're not.

[32 : 23] And that's not success. That's not achievement. It's not loving your neighbor either actually. It's competing against your neighbor to his disadvantage. Don't contract out of life with your neighbor.

Play your part in cooperating with the community life of God's people. That's real achievement.

That's real success. That's real gain. Finally in verses 13 to 16 the preacher makes just the same point doesn't he?

By looking at the oppressiveness of the quest for success in terms of popular power. He looks right to the top of the tree in terms of political and economic wealth and power.

He looks at the king. Surely if you get right to the chop you can see the joy of success. Well no he says even the most glittering prizes whatever they might be for you or for me they're just the same in the end.

Verse 16 Vanity striving after the wind. First one king verse 14 is born a pauper yet rises from prison to the throne but he becomes old and foolish.

[33 : 32] Trappings of office seem to inevitably do their work don't they? Power corrupts. inevitably ends up with arrogance and a loss of reality a sense of omnipotence.

Well that's the real world isn't it? The world of leaders and power. So along comes another rising up just the same way verse 15 literally says the second youth rising up to go in his place and take his palace and all the crowd no doubt welcome him things can only get better is what they're singing. but what happens? It's not just the same way in the end. Leadership is just a relentless increasing burden.

Do you see? Just like verse 8 there was no end of all the toil. Verse 16 there was no end of all the people. No sooner have you got to the top than the top gets to you.

You trample and you kill for success but then success just tramples and kills you and spits you out. We see it all the time don't we in the world of business and commerce the world of politics.

[34 : 39] The bright new leader he always thinks he's the one to break the mold. He'll lead forever he'll be invincible. But success in terms of popular power it's just another burden it's just another oppression there's no end of all the people to lead and everyone in the end a critic and his legacy we hear a lot about legacies today of great leaders those who come after him says the preacher will not rejoice in them.

I don't suppose Mr. Brown if he ever does get to number 10 downing steep will be commissioning a portrait of Tony Blair to hang above his fireplace will he? Poor old Mr. Blair brilliant in his time wasn't he?

Dazzling. But the public and political parties are very unforgiving aren't they? Very short memories. What's the answer? Verse 13 Not craving success in terms of popular power or indeed any other kind of leadership for that matter including the church remember what James says not many should become teachers you'll be judged with greater strictness by God yes and also by no end of all the people but not craving that says the preacher rather being very canny and cautious better a poor and wise youth he says who remains like that and isn't ruined by elevation to what he thought was the pinnacle of success I wonder if many politicians could echo that sentiment remember John Major in 1997 when he just lost the election there he was with his family going to watch the cricket never seen him so happy the grey man suddenly seemed to burst to life didn't he think of poor

Princess Diana she had known which she had really traded her former life for no end of all the people and no end of all the paparazzi that ultimately did kill her even if Muhammad Al-Fayed's theories are totally mad that's what happened think of all those poor once ordinary and probably very happy people elevated to the cult of celebrity famous just for being famous or being infamous probably but what's the profit we read it in the papers all the time the only people making profit are the rehabilitation clinics and the psychologists and the shrinks I don't suppose many of us face chasing after that kind of life I hope we don't but it is terribly easy to be driven people isn't it driven for success in life driven for success even in Christian terms and therefore driven into oppression but friends if that's how we're living our lives we are mirroring life under the sun as though there wasn't anything else but to the preacher he's reminded us how much more to life there really is and of the day when real success will be measured by the only standard that really matters at all the day as chapter 3 verse 17 says when

God will judge the righteous and the wicked and only if we live every day every day conscious of that and clear on that will we be living like the spider breathing the oxygen of reality that comes from above that can energize us to live now for what really matters even in our brief life in this mortal world only if we live not consuming for ourselves but being content to the peace with others not competing with our neighbors but cooperating with them in companionship in community in the church and in the world and not craving elevation over others but being cautious and canny about the realities of the fickle human heart just as realistic about the burdens of no ends of people as we are about the burdens of no ends of toil that's the answer and the only answer to living in a fallen world a world of oppression and we can't change all of it to think that is sheer fantasy it's chasing after the wind it's illusory in just exactly the same way as seeking to chase success will always ultimately elude us in this world but if we live like that with the realism that the preacher wants us to have we will change some of it and we'll do so beginning with our own hearts and our own lives and as the preacher says better to be content with one handful of what is possible and striving for two and ending up with nothing at all just chasing the wind let's live then with realism about the oppression of success and the liberty of godliness with contentment let's pray godliness with contentment is great gain lord may we know contentment and joy in all our lives and all our work because in them we find your presence and your purpose and so may we by faithful and cheerful obedience prove your good and perfect will in all that we think and all that we speak and all that we do for the glory of our saviour jesus christ amen well let's end by