

The Oppression of Striving for Success

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our scripture reading this morning. We're studying together in the Old Testament in the book of Ecclesiastes. And we come this morning to chapter 4 and we're going to read this chapter together.

The preacher, Kohelet, is his title in Hebrew. Ecclesiastes in Greek, that's where we get the name from. It means the preacher, the one who gathers people to listen to the wisdom of God as he teaches it to us.

And the preacher is a great realist. He is looking at the world, the real world, as it actually is. Not the world we would like it to be or pretend it to be. He's observing it. He's looking at it shrewdly.

And he is forcing people, and particularly God's people. It is written to the people of God. But all people to take heed to the reality of the world, the reality of our lives.

And to ask hard and difficult questions as to how we're living. And whether that is wise and true. Whether it leads anywhere. Or whether, as so often, he concludes, it is just vanity and chasing the wind.

[1 : 14] So again, he says in chapter 4, verse 1, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed.

And they had no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors was power. And there was none to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead, more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

But better than both is he who has not yet been, has not yet seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. And then I saw that all toil and skill, or better, success or achievement, all toil and success in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

And this also is a vanity, a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is one handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after wind.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, literally no second person, either son or brother.

[2 : 37] And yet there is no end to all his toil. And his eyes are never satisfied with riches. So that he never asks, For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This also is vanity and unhappy business. Two are better than one. Because they have a good reward for their toil.

If they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will quickly withstand him. A threefold court is not quickly broken. Better, it's the third better we've come to.

Better was a poor and wise youth. That an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he himself went from prison to the throne.

[3 : 45] Though in his own kingdom he'd been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun. This verse is not translated well in our version here.

Let me read it slightly differently. I saw all the living who move about under the sun were with the second youth who was to stand in his place. Speaking now about a second king coming to replace that first one who's become old and foolish.

There was no end of all the people whom he led. And yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity.

A striving after wind. Amen. May God help us to hear and to understand these challenging words as we'll come to them shortly.

Well do turn with me if you would to Ecclesiastes chapter 4. To the passage that we read together. Which is all about the oppression of striving for success in this world.

[5 : 02] Now we're getting to know Kohelet, the preacher who addresses us in this book. In this very searching book. And he's certainly a persistent and a penetrating preacher.

He wants to engage our minds. He wants to make us think. And think deeply about God. About life. About the world. About ourselves. And that's good.

That's above all what we need in any preaching. In fact, not sound bites. Not stories. Not spiritual pick-me-ups. That's often what people want. That's often what preachers are tempted therefore to give them.

Because they want to be popular. They want approval. They want praise. But that is not what people need. And the preacher in this book forces us to think.

By confronting us with the really big questions. That actually we do need to address in life. And we saw that last time in chapter 3.

[5 : 56] Which poses for us this great paradox. That we are made as human beings for eternity. And yet we're trapped in a world of time. Which does have therefore a time for everything.

Including as chapter 3 verse 19 says. A time to die. And we will all die very starkly. Just like the beasts do. And the key to life according to the preacher.

Is recognizing that reality. Not trying to resist it. The reality that our lives are ephemeral. That they are vain. That they are fleeting and uncontrollable. And that we need to learn to live.

With mortality that we simply cannot control. We need to accept that. Because paradoxically. It is only accepting that. And making peace with that.

That will actually liberate us. For the joy that there is. Even in this fleeting life. As the last verse of chapter 3 there says. Do you see? There is a way of rejoicing.

[6 : 57] In all of our work. And seeing that as our reward. That is his reward. Not that is his lot. That is his reward. Knowing. You see that we are in time for eternity.

Let us perceive. Well as verses 12 and 13. We saw in chapter 3. That tells us. That there can be joy. As long as you live. And real pleasure.

Even in this world of toil. That is God's gift to man. Says the preacher. And we can have that in time. Because we know. That the best is yet to be. And that liberates us. For every joy that is possible now. In this time.

As we live before God. On this earth. As we live rejoicing. In the life that we have. And in the knowledge of the life that is to come. And that is to come. But you see. Our world.

[7 : 52] For the most part. Doesn't want to recognize that truth. Won't see it. Won't see that lasting reward. That real gain and profit. Can only be found. Above the sun.

And so people devote themselves to living. As if this passing world. Under the sun. Was everything. So they are driven. To seek success.

And security. Now. In defiance. Of our mortality. Desiring to strive. For success. For identity. For recognition.

In the achievements. The successes. Of this passing life. And that. Is a very oppressive way. To live.

The real key to life. According to Jesus Christ. According to the whole Bible. Hangs on this. Love God. With all your heart. And soul. And mind. And love your neighbor.

[8 : 49] As yourself. But refuse. You see. To love God. Like that. And the truth is. You will also end up living. Hating your neighbor. As well.

And that. Leads to a life. That oppresses. That leads to a world. Of oppression. Oppression. The oppression. The oppressiveness.

The oppressiveness. Of a world. That is striving for success. And for permanence. Under this fading. Passing sun. And that's the message here in chapter four. You can see that word three times there.

In verse one. Oppressions. Oppressed. And the oppressors. Oppressors. And so the preacher once again points us at the world. The real world. That we know only too well.

And he says look. Look at it. See if you can deny it. So let's walk through this chapter then. And let's see how he confronts us with the oppressiveness. Of a world filled with people seeking and striving for identity.

[9 : 48] For recognition. Through competitive rivalry with others. And through coveting riches. Apart from others. And through craving the rule over others.

And in each case. He points us to something that is a far better and healthier way. Better. Verse six. A single handful. Verse nine. A sharing outlook.

And verse 13. A sane humility. So first. In verses one to six. Then the preacher exposes the oppressiveness. Of striving for success.

In terms of achieving prosperity. Through competitive rivalry. With others. Which in the end. Leads only to a very frustrated aggravation.

Far better. He says. Than this driven competitiveness. Is a way of detached. Attached contentment. A single handful of quietness.

[10 : 45] Verse six. Not two handfuls. With all the toil. And the striving. After a vanishing wind. The preacher. Puts his finger.

On the simple truth. That the quest. For achievement. For success. Leads. To oppression. Not only. For the have nots. Of this world. But also.

Ultimately. For the haves. As well. Look at verse one. It's a pretty good description. Isn't it? Of our 21st century world. On the local level. On the national level. And also on the global scale.

Oppressions. Tears of the oppressed. Oppressed. And powerful oppressors. And that is just the nature of a world. Striving for success.

Power on the side of some. And tears. Among the oppressed. That double refrain. No one. To comfort them. No one. To comfort them.

[11 : 41] Well you see. When you turn God's order for the world. Upside down. That's what happens. Instead of seeking him. And the joy of an eternal future with him.

People instead are seeking success now. For themselves. Without him. And so it's a dog eat dog world. Out there. It's not just in our mortality.

That we're like the beasts. As chapter three reminded us. So starkly at the end. It's in our behavior as well. He's telling us. Never mind COVID. Think how much. Modern technology.

Let's the far more. Pernicious viruses. Of fear. And of greed. Spread around the world. In just a few seconds. And cause chaos. To people's lives. So you get a central banker.

In New York. Making some statement. And within seconds. The bond market. And the stock market. Has tumbled. And billions of pounds. And dollars. Are wiped off. Shares. And debt prices.

[12 : 38] And so on. And over leveraged banks. Collapse. And even governments. Can go bust. That's what happened. A few years ago. With the global financial crisis.

And the bad news is. That although the banks. Might be recapitalized. And more solvent now. There's barely a government. In the world. That is remotely solvent. So much worse.

For the world. Might be to come. Now all of that sort of thing. Seems very far removed. From the world. Of most of us. Ordinary people. Except of course.

When the truth. Comes home to roost. That the pension thought. Of the average man. In the street. Has plummeted. Along with his retirement. Prospect. Because of all these. International financial. Machinations. And when we realize. That the hopes of our children. And our grandchildren. Ever actually owning their own home. Is vanishing. Because of the rapid asset price.

[13 : 33] Inflation. Because of all the quantitative easing. That's been going on in the world. On the side of the billionaires. And on the side of their chums in government. There is power. But for ordinary Joe.

Well there is just a lot of tears. And no one to comfort him. And that's the so called free world. Isn't it? Never mind the oppression. Of ordinary people. In so many places.

Where gangster politicians. Or militias are in charge. Warlords. Many parts of the world. Or in places where there is. State controlled tyranny.

And the latter seems to be coming. More rapidly than norm. Doesn't it? Even in the so called free world. Over this last year. So under the cover of COVID. When you begin to think. About all the oppressions.

Done under the sun. Well it's hard. Isn't it? Not to begin to grieve. With verses 2 and 3 here. That the dead. Are more fortunate.

[14 : 30] Than those who are still alive. It's terrible. Isn't it? When you hear. People in terrible war torn places. When you hear them uttering.

That kind of despair. And saying. Oh. Just to be out of this awful existence. But remember. Suicide. Suicide. Is the biggest cause of death.

For young British men. Let that sink in. So oppressive. Are the evils. Of this world. And so verse 3. Better. Than both the living. And the already dead. Are those who are not yet born. Who haven't yet had to experience. The evil. The evil. In this world. It's quite a thought.

Isn't it? Actually bringing a child. Into this world. If that's all there is. To experience. The relentless rise. In. In psychological ailments.

[15:29] Among youngsters. And school stress. And school stress. And then student debt. And then the ongoing. Empty rat race of life. The preacher's got a point. Hasn't he?

It's a dog eat dog world. He's saying. It's a bestial world. Out there. That we inhabit. It's oppressive. And it's oppressing. Why? Well look at verse 4.

It tells us the answer. Doesn't it? All man's toil. Literally his success. That's how skill is translated. In chapter 10. Verse 10.

It's translated as prosperity. In chapter 11. Verse 6. All a man's toil. And success. Comes from. A man's envy. Of his neighbor.

That's what fuels. Even our best achievements. When the quest for success. Is what this life. Is all about.

[16:24] It's sad isn't it? But it's true. We can't get one up on nature. If we can't get one up on time. We can't beat our mortality. We will jolly well get one up on our neighbor. And that is the real fuel.

That makes the world go around. It's true at a personal level. However much we might not like to admit it. Keeping up with the Joneses. Is a big factor of life.

Isn't it? Somebody once put it this way. Spending money we don't have. On things we don't need. To impress people we don't like. Well. Struggling for identity.

For recognition. Through competitive rivalry. Begins very young. Doesn't it? We know it with our kids. But Lucy's got one of those. Dad.

Why can't I have one? But the toys just get bigger. Don't they? As we get bigger and older. That's why the fashion industry. Cons us out of a fortune.

[17:24] That's why the gadget industry. The motor trade. Cons us out of a fortune. But it's not just at a personal level. Is it? It's pervasive. It's global. And that's what explains so much of international politics.

Churchill's famous quote about Russia. Just as pertinent today. I can't forecast you. He said the actions of Russia. It's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

But he went on. But perhaps there is a key. And the key is the Russian national interest. Well of course. For every country. And it's just as true today for Russia.

Isn't it? President Putin is smiling. As he screws off the gas supplies to Europe. Exposes the absurd stupidity of our Western governments. That have got rid of all their gas storage.

So that in the name of greenness. We're now using electricity that's made by more coal. Than it has been in the last 20 years. And President Putin's laughing. He's not coming this week. But it's just the true of every country.

[18:25] Isn't it? Every powerful regime. Envy of neighbor drives the show. What about Iran and North Korea? With their nuclear ambitions.

Or China with its phenomenal economic expansion. wanting to overtake the Western world. And it will. Or Britain. Boasting its faster vaccine rule out.

Than the list of the European Union. But now of course we're leading the European Union. On the waning efficacy of our vaccines. Or France. With Mr Macron's small man syndrome.

Likes to strut around, doesn't he? Like a peacock. Takes a hissy fit. When the Australians don't want to buy submarines anymore. So he's getting his own back. By impounding British fishing boats. Or Scotland.

Where we suffer from small country syndrome. A lot of the time. Don't we? That drives a kind of niggardly. Nationalism. Which is very unattractive so often. Envy of neighbor.

[19:22] Distrust of neighbor. Is the great driving force. Everywhere. In the world. But don't forget. That the preacher here. Is speaking specifically to God's people.

Isn't it? The Christian church. We can be just as prone. To that same deadly virus of envy. As can you and I. Friends. It's deep in our hearts.

To be like that. It is our natural inclination. And envy. Within the Christian church. For what others have. Maybe materially.

But also in other ways. In terms of positions or roles. Within the church. That often is one of the biggest causes of resentment. And of strife. Within Christian churches.

Or between Christian churches. I'll never forget. And you'll be staggered by this. Or maybe not. Never forget Rico Tice telling me. Some years ago. That when he was.

[20 : 19] Going to the United States. To promote. The Christianity Explored course. He discovered. That churches. That they were holding their meetings in. Weren't advertising.

To other churches. Because they didn't want. Other churches to come. And find out about.

Christianity Explored. So they could have an advantage. In their evangelism. Over these other churches. How utterly.

Upside down. Could you possibly be. That's not just envy. Is it? That's hatred. Of your neighbor. That's oppression. That's demonic oppression.

But that's what happens. When we. Abandon. God's definition. Of success in life. And when we seek our own. Instead. What happens.

Is oppression. Our world. Rejects God's way. It rejects the Bible's way. Our culture thinks. Doesn't it? In our nation today.

[21 : 18] That it's just. Enslaving. That it's prejudiced. That the Bible's way. Should be silenced. Especially the Old Testament. Oh that's the worst of all. Isn't it? Even the church is embarrassed.

About the Old Testament law. The likes of Leviticus. The great unmentionable. Just have a listen. By the way. Just have a listen. To a little bit of that dreadful book.

Leviticus. You shall not oppress your neighbor. Or rob him. The wages of a higher servant. Shall not remain with you all night.

Until the morning. You shall not curse. The deaf. Or put a stumbling block. Before the blind. But you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. 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.

[22 : 13] Against the life of your neighbor. I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother. In your heart. You shall 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. Is it too much obedience.

To the book of Leviticus. That has made our world. The mess that it is. Do you think? Or is it abandonment. Perhaps. For our way. Instead.

A better way. Of envy driven success. And identity. And recognition. Well the result. Is oppression. Tears. And misery. For the have nots. But also. For the haves. At the end of the day. Look at verse 4. At the end. Even for them. In the end.

[23 : 12] It's just a striving. After wind. So what's the answer? Well it's not verse 5.

A cop out from life. Stop the world. I want to get off. No. The fool. Folds his hands. Does nothing. Gives up. And ends up with nothing. Consuming himself.

Eats his own flesh. Well some people. Are driven by the misery of life. Just to give up on it. Aren't they? But that is no answer. No. The answer. Is in verse 6.

Not in competition. And covetousness. Or in cop out. For that matter. But in contentment. Better one handful. Of quietness.

Peace. And contentment. Than two hands full. Of toil. Of toil. And striving after wind. See true gain in life.

[24 : 07] He is saying. Is not found in driverness. Or in disinterest. For that matter. But in detachment. Contentment. In what you have. Not what you don't have. That's the way to peace.

And satisfaction. In life. Personally. And in the whole of society. The preacher isn't naive. He knows. That you can't change the world overnight.

Or even ever. In fact. That idea comes from the same. Arrogance. As the quest for human success. History is offered many ways. Hasn't it? To change the world.

To rid it of oppression. And it's pretty much always led to a worse evil. And a worse oppression. Think of the Marxist revolution in Russia. To liberate the people.

Well it murdered millions of people. Impoverished many many millions more. For a long long time. Now the preacher won't have any of that fantasy politics.

[25 : 02] To change the world. And the church. Needs to listen to that too. Don't we? Before we jump on the bandwagon. Of those who want to make poverty history.

Or make any other kind of oppression history. The Bible is very clear to us. That is impossible. This side of eternity. Under the sun. That doesn't mean of course.

That we don't have a duty to help where we can. And do what we can. The abolition. Of the transatlantic slave trade. For example. 200 years ago. Was a Christian led endeavor.

A great thing. And we're right to celebrate that. But we'd be fools. Wouldn't we? To think that thereby slavery. Has somehow been abolished. There's 10 times more slavery.

In the world today. Than there was 200 years ago. 10 times more. We can't ever make. A utopia. Under the sun. No matter what we do.

[25 : 56] That's the preacher's whole point here. Very disappointing. To see the Archbishop of Canterbury. Tweeting just yesterday. As though we can. That we can do it.

It's at our fingertips. Well. Read Ecclesiastes. Only God can do that. In his time.

And God will do that. We saw it last time. In chapter 3 verse 17. He will judge. The righteous. And the wicked. But until then friends. We will never solve this world's problems.

And we need to be realistic about that. It doesn't matter how many bigwigs. And politicians. Are going to gather this week. Down the road there. For COP26. Ultimately. They are striving.

After the wind. And if history is anything to go by. Although they'll make some people. Very rich indeed. They will impoverish.

[26 : 54] Many many more. The tears of the oppressed. Will continue to flow. What is crooked. Cannot be made straight. By man. Says the preacher.

In chapter 1 verse 15. Do you remember? Because. As we'll see. In chapter 7 verse 19. Man. Has sought out. Many schemes. He is twisted.

To the core. Jesus Christ. Was utterly realistic. Wasn't he? The poor. You will always have. With you. He said. That's not an excuse. To do nothing. Of course.

But it is a realism. That reminds us. That we cannot. Do everything. Or even very much. As human beings. What we can do. Of course. Is change ourselves.

So often. The great grand schemes. To change the world. For justice. In fact. Deflect attention. From the one thing. That we are called. To do. And that is. Make change. In our own lives.

[27 : 52] To live lives. Of personal repentance. Before a God. Who is sovereign. Jordan Peterson. Actually. Is right in that. Isn't he? When he makes his quip. Before you want to solve.

The problems of the world. How about starting. By tidying your own bedroom. Well. Something in that. Isn't there? The Bible. Never gets taken up. In vague generalities. At the expense.

Of real personal challenge. To change ourselves. Jesus said. You. Are the salt and light. For this world. You. Are to live.

Counterculturally. In this world. For eternity. That's a real challenge. Isn't it? For us. As Christian people. Are we living. As contented people. Cherishing that one handful.

With peace. Or are we always chasing. That second handful. All the time. Whatever the cost.

Whatever the cost. To our family. To our marriage. To our friendships. To our Christian discipleship. Does contentedness.

[28 : 53] Or. Competitiveness. And covetousness. Actually mark out. Our attitude to life. To life in general. And to church life. It's a real question.

And that's the question. That the New Testament. Is always posing to us. First Timothy six. Paul is writing there. To an Ephesian church. That he says. Is full of people. Who have an unhealthy craving.

For controversy. And quarrels. That produce envy. Dissension. Slander. Evil suspicions. And constant friction. And it's in that context.

That he says. The answer. To all of that. Is godliness. With contentment. You see. Contentment. It's not just about money.

It's about the whole of life. And that's the world. Isn't it? Envy. Suspicion. Friction. Slander. And Paul says. And the preacher here says. Contentment.

[29 : 48] Is the only answer to that. Contentment. Contentment. In who we are. In our identity. And in what we have. It gives us recognition. In life. So here's the question.

Is the Christian church. Just a microcosm. Of the world. Under the sun. Or. Does it. Reflect. And radiate. The heavenly rays.

From above the sun. In this world. That's a question for us. Isn't it? As regarding. Our own lives. And as regarding. Our church lives. It's a real challenge.

As are the verses. In verses 7 to 12. For the preacher turns. To expose the oppressiveness. Of accumulating possessions. Through creating riches.

Apart. From others. Which in the end. Leads only to alienation. To loneliness. As those who seek to insulate. Their life through riches. In fact. Just isolate themselves.

[30 : 50] From real relationships. But far better. He says. Are the miserable riches. Of covetousness. Which is verse 8 says. Leads only to dissatisfaction.

And deprivation. Far better. He says. Are the multiplying riches. Verses of community. Of community. And of companionship. Which are truly the path.

To deliverance. And to delight. In a reward. That is really enduring. Verses 7 and 8. You see. Just amplifies the truth. That even for the haves.

In this life. It's an empty. And a vain. And ultimately oppressive quest. To just chase success. In the things that we might amass. For ourselves.

Because often doing that. Just insulates you from life. And isolates you. From the real joys. Of fellowship and friendship. With other human beings.

[31 : 46] And with God. Which is the very thing. That we're made for. As people. And what we need. In order to flourish. As human beings. Verse 8.

Isolation from others. Literally. Somebody who has no second person. At all. Hand insulated from reality. Whose eyes are never satisfied.

With what he has. Not realizing. That he's depriving himself. In the meantime. Of so much. And never yet asking himself. Well. Who am I doing all this for? He's so driven by success.

This man. That he's absolutely oblivious. It seems. To everything else in life. Including the fact. That he's just making him miserable. And isolated. But the world is full.

Of driven people like that. Isn't it? Maybe it's the person. Who gets to the top. As they see it. So they can have. That great big villa. With a big fence.

[32 : 41] And the electric gates. That swing shut. As soon as they've driven. Their big gas guzzler in. Well it won't be a gas guzzler now. Will it? It'll be a Tesla. Not even those. Cheapy. Tesla 3's. That only cost 40,000.

But the really big ones. That the big wigs have. And you can get all of that. You can have your gated house. And you can have your gates. Swinging shut. You can be safe inside. Like a modern day.

Ebenezer Scrooge. But what have you got? Someone who is. Delighting in that kind of thing. Isn't a master. Of their own success.

That success. Has mastered him. It owns him. It's driven him. To oppression. There's no end. To all his toil. It says. It's an unhappy business.

That's consuming his life. But at least he can feel. He's doing better than his neighbor. But that's not much consolation. Is it? You're a fool.

[33 : 41] If you think that's success. My father told me about. A man that he once knew. Who used to scour. The daily newspaper. In the days when people's.

I don't know if it still is. Where people's wills. And estates. Were noted in the newspaper. And he used to scour them. To see how much of an estate. Was being left. By his friends.

And compatriots. Who had died. And he used to love. Looking at them and saying. I'm going to leave. More than he did. But in the end.

He actually left. Just exactly the same. As. What every one of them did. He left everything. Didn't he? All of it. Grim existence.

To share nothing in life. And to leave. Everything like that. In death. Isn't it? What's the answer? Well look at verses 9 to 12. The preacher gives. A far better way.

[34 : 37] To live. To live sharing life. With other people. Life is not. For chasing gain. For ourselves. Ignoring our neighbor.

And despising him. Because that's ignoring God. Isn't it? And despising him. No. Life. Is given us. By loving God. And therefore. Loving our neighbor. And therefore.

It's to be marked. Not by covetousness. And containment. Contracting out of relationships. To protect our possessions. Or to protect. Sometimes our personalities. Our emotions. Sometimes we. We cut ourselves off. And we store all that up. Away from other people. Don't we? Because we don't want to lose something. But no. Look. Life is to be marked. By companionship. And community. Verse 9. 2. Is better than 1. And verse 12. 3. Is better still. Life isn't about.

[35 : 33] Competition with others. It's for cooperation. With others. And the real riches. Come when you share those things. With others. And again.

That's true of every level. If you toil for yourself. Well ultimately. He says it brings just misery. And oppression. For everyone. For those who've got. The material gain. As well as. For those who haven't. But toil together. Verse 9. Do you see. And it's good for both. They have a good reward. Both of them. Even though there's less. Because it's shared between two. It's better. It's good. In Bible maths. You see. Get this very clear. Shared less. Is more.

Shared less. Is more. And that's because. There's far more to life. Than mere things. That's why Jesus said. That a man's life. Doesn't consist.

[36 : 25] In just the abundance. Of his. Of his possessions. Or indeed. In his successes. Or achievements. Life consists. In right relationships. The whole point.

Of the best things. In life. And the most beautiful. Things in life. Is that they're for sharing. Even the smallest children. Know that. Don't they? Mummy. Mummy. Mummy. Come and see what I've made.

Look. Look. See what I've made. Sharing. And it's the same. Isn't it? For real achievements. Everywhere in life. Why do musicians play music? To be heard. By other people. And enjoyed. And shared. Why do painters. Paint beautiful paintings? To be seen. And enjoyed. And shared. With other people. There's something so perverse. Isn't there? About the private. Collectors gallery.

Down in the basement. Of his mansion. Where nobody can ever go. And see those paintings. Except him. I think the only thing. Even more perverse. Than that. Is the beautiful painting. Masterpiece. Which is kept. In a bank vault.

[37 : 21] For nobody to see. To protect its value. There's no value. In a bank vault. Nobody's seeing it. Sharing it. And you see. The same thing.

Holds true. In all of life. Holds true. In the Christian life. And in church life. It's possible. To be like. A lonely Scrooge.

There as well. But the New Testament. So against that. So against. Any concept. Of the lone Christian. Can't be. It's a contradiction.

In terms. The Christian church. Is a community. It's a family. It's God's family. Sharing God's life. In verses 11 and 12.

Here you see. A just as true. Of spiritual life. As they are. Of daily life. There are many obstacles. To face. And alone. There is real danger. But together.

[38 : 17] He says. We'll be able to withstand. An enemy. A threefold cord. Is not easily broken. But let me tell you. A lone Christian. Can be easily broken.

Christian fellowship. Is a blessing. But it's an essential blessing. And you need it. So does your brother. So does your neighbor. You need to be realistic. About the blessings. Of fellowship. And relationships. In your Christian walk. If you're somebody. Who is apt. Who tends to contain yourself. Who tends to. To contract. Out of relationships. Who tends to think. That well I'm quite. Self-sufficient. On my own.

Let me tell you friends. The Bible tells you. You're wrong. You're wrong about that. And many folk. Have been deceived. About that. I think. Particularly. Over these last 18 months.

Let me be quite clear. Online. Alone. Is just alone. If you're a Christian. Don't contract out.

[39 : 14] That's not success. You need to play your part. In cooperating. In the community life. Of God's people. For your own sake. And for their sake. It's a shared life.

And that's real success. That's real achievement. That's real gain. In life. That is what you were made for. We're not made. For the miserable riches. Of covetousness. But for the multiplying. Riches. Of community. Not for solitude. But for sharing. And above all. For showing the life of God. And showing the life of his people.

Here on earth. But finally. In verses 13 to 16. They make the same point. By exposing the oppression. Of striving for your identity. Your recognition in life. By advancing. Your popularity. Craving the rule. Over other people. Which again. So often. Just leads to arrogance. And losing touch. With our personal limitations.

[40 : 11] Far better. He says. Than craving rule. And leadership of others. Is to be cautious. About the responsibilities. That that brings. And to be conscious. Continually. Of your own limitations.

So as not to become. Like that old and foolish king. Who no longer knows. How to take advice. That's a very important word. Isn't it? For world leaders. Well. For church leaders too. Preachers now looking here. Isn't he? At the very top of the tree. The world of kings. Of national rulers. Surely to rise to the throne. To the presidential palace. That really must be. The ultimate success. But look at verse 16. No. In the end. That too. Is just a vain. Striving. After wind. Better indeed.

He says. Verse 13. To be a poor. And wise youth. Who stays that way. Than to think that. The translation.

[41 : 08] In this paragraph. As I said. Is a little bit unclear. But the point is. That this first. One king. Who rises up to the top. From nothing. Verse 14. It's a parable. This. It's not. It's not talking history. It's like a fairy tale.

He goes from prison. To the throne. This is Disney at its best. But. But. Very quickly. The trappings of office. Seem to do their work. Don't they? And power corrupts. And he ends up. Verse 13. Old. And foolish. And arrogantly. Out of touch with reality. Thinks himself omnipotent. That's. A tale. That's very close to reality. Isn't it? And so. Verse 15. Along comes another. Literally. A second youth. To stand in his place. The next leader. Who now. Everyone under the sun. Is with. Literally. They're supporting him. Again. Well that's how it happens. Isn't it? Every new president. Every new prime minister. Is a messiah.

[42 : 05] They're going to make the country. Great again. Or things can only get better. Remember that one? But what happens? Well. Just goes the same way.

In the end. Verse 16. No one. Will rejoice in him. Either. In time. His leadership. Will end up burdensome. Sapping. Verse 16.

Verse 16. Echoes. Verse 8. Verse 8. There was no end. Of all that man's toil. The more he accumulated riches. And so on. Well here. Verse 16. There was no end. Of all the people. Likewise. Burdening. This one. Who was seeking advancement. And recognition. Through his rule. No sooner have you got to the top. Than being at the top. Gets to you. You'll trample. You'll kill for success. But very quickly. Success will trample. And kill you. And we see it all the time. Don't we? In the world of business. And power. And politics. And so on.

[43 : 03] The new bright leader. Comes along. Always thinks. He's the one. Who will break the mold. He'll lead forever. He'll be invincible. The truth is.

That that kind of success. In terms of popular power. And leadership. Is just another burden. It's another oppression. No end. Of all the people. That he led. And every one of them. A critic in the end. Well that's real life. At the top. Isn't it? And his legacy. Verse 16. Those who come after him. Will not rejoice in him. Well that's the truth. And nowadays. Eventually. If enough time passes. Your statue will be pulled down. Won't it? Because you weren't woke enough. Like Winston Churchill wasn't.

When he won the war for us. So pull his statue. Down. Doesn't take long. Does it? Certainly doesn't take. That length of time.

[43 : 59] To fade away from favor. To fade away from memory. Don't hear very much at all. Now do we have the former. Prime Minister David Cameron. Or Gordon Brown. Or that much about Mr. Trump.

Or even Mr. Obama. Who gave all those. Dazzling speeches. In his time. But in fact. Well that's a pretty grim legacy. Didn't he? Chaos in Syria. And Libya. So called Arab Spring. Very quickly turned to winter. Occupied Crimea. Not a lot of rejoicing in these places. So those who do crave. That kind of power. That kind of rule. They might reflect better on verse 13. Perhaps better to remain. An unheard of. Poor and wise youth. Not craving popularity.

And power. Through rule over others. Or any other kind of leadership. For that matter. Including church leadership. By the way. James the apostle says exactly that. Doesn't he? Not many of you. [44 : 53] Not many of you. Should become teachers. Because you'll be judged. With greater strictness. Of course he means by God. But also by the no end of people. Who will judge you too. That's reality.

Church leadership. Just like anywhere else. To be careful. About craving that kind of burden. Far better to be cautious. And canny. Better.

A poor and wise youth. Who remained like that. And wasn't ruined. By elevation. To what he thought. Was going to be the pinnacle of success. I wonder how many politicians. Families would echo that. If only. If only he'd never become. A government minister. Wonder if Matt Hancock's family. Thinks that today. Would the young lady.

Diana Spencer. Do you think. Have traded her former life. For the no end of people. And the paparazzi that did. In the end actually kill her. Would she have done that. Had she really known. [45 : 50] I wonder. Or many another. Poor but happy. Normal person. Who these days. Gets elevated to the ranks. Of so-called celebrity. The people who are famous.

Just for being famous. Reality TV. And all that. But in the end. Wondering. What's the lasting profit. In this. There's profit.

Certainly. In the luxury rehab clinics. And all the therapists. That they have to turn to. I don't suppose. Many of us. Really crave. That kind of life.

Do we. But. It's easy actually. To be driven people. Driven for success in life. And often driven by success.

Our desire for success. In Christian terms. We can delude ourselves that way. And drive ourselves therefore. To oppression. Sometimes to depression. Achieving what we think.

[46 : 46] Is prosperity. What we think. Is worth possessing. Advancing what we think. Is popularity. But you see.

If that's how we're living our lives. Friends. We are just mirroring. Life. Under the sun. As if there was nothing more. And the preacher's reminded us.

Hasn't he. How much more there is. And of the day. That real success. Will be measured. By the only measure. That matters at all. On the day. When as he said. In chapter 3 verse 17.

God will judge. God will judge. The righteous. And the unrighteous. And only if we live. Day by day. Every day. Conscious of that. And clear on that.

Only then. We'll be breathing. The real oxygen. Of reality. That can actually energize us. And can motivate us. Now. For what really matters. In these passing lives.

[47 : 42] On earth. Not. Coveting. And consuming. For ourselves. But content. And at peace with others. Not competing. With our neighbor. But cooperating.

In companionship. In community. In the church. And in the world. And not craving. Elevation. Over other people. But. Being cautious. And canny. About the reality.

Of the fickle human heart. And realistic. About the burdens. That no end of people brings. Just as no end of toil. Brings it. That's the answer.

To living. In a fallen world. A world of oppression. And oppressiveness. And oppressors. We can't change it. To think that we can.

Is pure fantasy. Chasing the wind. It's just as illusory. As chasing lasting success. And achievement. In this world. But if we live like this.

[48 : 39] With realism. We will change some of it. Beginning with the greatest need. Of all. Which is in our own hearts. As the preacher says.

Far better. To be content. With one handful. Of what is possible. Than striving for two. And ending up with nothing. Just chasing the wind. Well maybe there is a word there.

For COP26. But certainly. There is a world for every one of us. Isn't there? So may God help us. Not be like old and foolish rulers.

But be wise. And take heed. And listen. Let's pray. Godliness. With contentment.

Is great. Gain. Lord. May we. May we. Know. Both. Contentment.

[49 : 40] And joy. In all our lives. And in all our work. Just because. In them. We find your presence. And your purpose.

For our lives. Here on earth. God. And so. May we. By being faithful. And cheerfully. Obedient. To your word. May we be those.

Who prove. Your good. And perfect will. In all that we think. In all that we speak. And in all that we do. For the glory. Of our savior. Jesus Christ.
Amen. Amen.