



## Search the Scriptures

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# The end of the matter—found

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### Ecclesiastes 12:12-14

The preceding verses set before us the Word of God as truth. It is divinely inspired, infallibly written, and as the Word of God, to be relied upon. God is our faithful Shepherd. In that connection the text continues:

*And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of the making of many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh* (Eccl. 12:12).

The concern of the text is not to disparage books and study in themselves, but to contrast the divinely inspired Word of God over against the writings of men. “And further, by these...” could better be read, “More from these,” that is, what goes beyond the Scriptures, further or more than that Word of God, which comes from men, their writings of human wisdom outside of Scripture. Man labors to obtain wisdom, learning, and

understanding. Such knowledge is necessary for labor and skills in this world. The text is not disparaging education or learning. Math, science, history, the technology of the earth have a necessary and useful place. But it is of man, fallen man.

A limit must be drawn, a warning or admonition must be given. Of these books and the making of them there is no end. They may not supplant the Word of God, the Word of truth. Nor, where they depart from that infallible rule in unbelief, with the vain philosophy of men, are they to be received. They belong to this world and the vanity of man who walks after his own imagination. They may accurately describe some state or process in the creation. But such learning in the wisdom of men can never arrive at spiritual truth, for it is corrupted by sin.

For the same reason, much study of that wisdom of

this world, and its learning “is a weariness of the flesh.” It is like all other toil of man under the sun. It is rooted in the vanity of this present life. As with any labor under the sun, it wears out the laborer. It may hold the promise of great things, but in the end, it too shall pass away with the world. The truth that God has given abides forever.

*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man* (Eccl. 12:13).

In verse 8 the objective observation or theme of the book was set forth again, “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.” (Eccl.12:8). Now the Word of God addresses the subjective conclusion or spiritual response to that observation, the subjective theme of the book. God as the Lord of the whole creation governs all things according to His counsel and wisdom. The creation shows the beauty of God who made it, but also His judgment, for the whole of the creation has been subjected to vanity because of sin.

The conclusion addresses us with a universal calling, literally: “God fear. And His commandments keep.” The emphasis falls upon where one stands before God. The fear of God is the reverence of faith that acknowledges God and His word, trusts in Him, and walks humbly before Him. In that fear we also keep His commandments by faith, holding them in our hearts and, walking in them as before His face. We are to remember our Creator in the light of His word of truth and His works under the sun.

That calling is “the whole duty of man” or, as the word duty is in italics, “the whole of man.” It is his fundamental calling. The calling to fear God, holding His word by faith and walking in obedience to His will, is the calling that confronts all men and all mankind. It is the call to repent and believe. That calling that is proclaimed with clarity in the gospel also confronts man under the sun through the creation now subjected to vanity. “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead: so that they are without excuse” (Rom 1:19, 20). The manifest truth that all is vanity under the sun renders unbelieving man—the fool—without excuse, testifying as it does it of God, His work under the sun, and His judgment.

The very nature of that truth, of vanity under the sun, the transitory character of life where no treasure abides and man himself dies, stands as a warning to

fear God. Man is not in control; God governs the life of man. He will also judge.

*For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil* (Eccl. 12:14).

This concluding word of God also gives a reason for that exhortation. It is both a warning and a comfort. God will bring every work of man into judgment, including that which is secret or hidden. The fool will not hear this. He thinks God does not know. Walking after the imagination of his own heart, he strives with God and the boundaries of life set by God in the creation. Spiritually, a fool who will not have God in his knowledge is given over by God in sovereign wisdom and judgment to the folly of heaping and gathering, to a walk after the folly of sin. Standing under the wrath of God, he foolishly works his own destruction and brings himself into judgment. That which is secret is not hidden before the eyes of God. God is the One who evaluates what is good and evil in His sight. Man is not the arbiter of judgment nor the standard, but God who is righteous. And not only that which is external but also that which is hidden in the heart will be judged.

Concerning Ecclesiastes 12:14, we may note that the text speaks of “every work” that is, it has in view each one particularly or individually. The more normal expression in Scripture is “works,” plural, viewed as an organic body of works that are the fruit of one’s spiritual life and walk (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6-8; Rev. 20:12). Every work includes “every idle word that men shall speak” (Matt. 12:36). “Every work,” therefore, is not just deeds and undertakings, but all our activity as it proceeds from the heart, out of the mouth, and is found in the labor of our hands.

Concerning this judgment of every work, we must note that it is God in Christ who renders judgment and that the standard is God’s righteous judgment revealed to us in the principles of the law of God that we as sinners imperfectly apprehend. It is not our self-assessment of our own work, but God’s judgment. That judgment includes not only the external, but the “secret” or hidden things (Eccl. 12:14), that is, the internal root of our activity, our motives, thinking, and willing, as well as what is done out of the sight of others.

It is a judgment of “whether it be good or whether it be evil.” The question is not whether it be part good and part evil, a matter of percentages or degrees. The Word of God does not divide our works into parts. They are either good or evil in God’s sight. In themselves all our works, as they are wrought through the flesh, also in our seeing and hearing, and therefore thinking and will-

ing through the flesh, are all stained with sin. Hence our Heidelberg Catechism says, “But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Because that the righteousness which can be approved of before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin” (LD 24, Q&A 62).

Good works are imperfect works, individually and as a body of works. Because of this defilement, in that sense, all our works are evil works. That God judges works to be good is a matter of His saving grace in Christ, founded on Christ’s imputed righteousness to the believer.

“These works as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, for as much as they are all sanctified by His grace” (Belgic Confession of Faith, Art. 24).

“But what are good works? Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory; and not such as are founded on our imaginations or the institutions of men” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 33, Q&A 91).

Ecclesiastes 12:13 points us in the same direction. The one doing good is one who fears God in the reverence of faith, holds God’s Word in his heart to keep it, and seeks to walk in it. Good works are works that are acceptable to God by Jesus Christ, the fruit of faith wrought in the love of God. The wicked do nothing but evil works in the sight of God, and when the believer walks after his own sinful flesh and not out of faith, he also walks in sin in evil works. Such was David’s walk in his sin of adultery and murder. These were evil works for which he was called to repent.

To one who walks therefore in the fear of God and

holds His word by faith, the promise of the gospel, the forgiveness of sins, and the grace of God shines upon his pathway. Living before that judgment of God now in repentance and forgiveness, not only for his evil works, but also for the sin that defiles his good works, he has assurance in that day of judgment—an assurance that is not in himself but in the mercy of God. His way is blessed, as has been repeatedly shown in the course of the book. Even in this life under the sun, in the midst of the present vanity, the child of God’s portion in this life is a good gift of God and a blessing to him. Though he is oppressed in a world of sin, his treasure is not in the things of this world that passes away. Although walking in God’s commandments does not seem good in the eyes of the world under the sun, for it is mocked and persecuted by a wicked world, yet doing so by faith is the way of true spiritual blessing and contentment.

The vanity of things under the sun cannot give an answer to sin and death. They can only show the need to be reconciled to God. In the grace of God, the way of a child of God is one lived as before the face of God who is his heavenly Father for Christ’s sake. Better is a little, a small portion in this life, with the fear of God (Ps. 37:16).

Ecclesiastes is a book written by one who is old and who in his course of life has explored every work of man under the sun and weighed its meaning and fitness before God. The preacher “still taught the people knowledge” (Eccl. 12:9). It is a book to be pondered. It addresses in particular the young person who is starting on life’s pathway, as instruction from one who has “been there,” so to speak, and can give wisdom and counsel from experience. It is the light of the Word of God upon the things under the sun.