

Date of sermon: 8/7/2021
Speaker: Pastor Jeff Pouch
Bible passage or verse: Ecclesiastes 12
Title of Sermon: The Beginning of Wisdom

1Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"—**2**before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; **3**when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; **4**when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; **5**when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. **6**Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, **7**and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. **8**"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"

9Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. **10**The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. **11**The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd. **12**Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. **13**Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. **14**For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

How are you motivated? Are you the kind of person who's motivated simply by someone telling you Pouch can't do something? I know lots of folks that, like, you just tell 'em, "You can't do it," and it's gonna happen. Maybe you're the kind of person who's motivated by a challenge, a puzzle, or something that just seems unsolvable. That alone is enough to motivate you to get you going. Maybe you're the kind of person who just kind of needs an incentive. I've got a buddy who works for a company that -- they incentivize very well, and they say, "If you hit these marks, we'll send you to Hawaii. If you hit this number, we will send you to -- you know, the Bahamas." Maybe you work at a place that says, "If you don't hit these marks, I'll send you to Siberia!" And that is motivating as well, right? We all -- whether we're parents, whether we're coaches, whether we're teachers -- we've all experienced that task of trying to motivate a child or a player or a student to develop a skill or to do something we've asked them to do. But we also know that everyone is motivated differently.

Now, I know I've shared this before -- but in my infinite parenting wisdom, I have employed some strategies to motivate my children to obey, specifically related to cleaning their room. I've actually said this -- I'm not proud of it, but I have actually employed this strategy. I have said, "If you don't pick the stuff up off the floor of your bedroom, I will collect it, I will bring it out to the street, and I will burn it! Because if you treat your stuff like garbage, I'll treat your stuff like garbage!" I have also said things like this: "If you just please, please, please clean your room, I'll take you to Dairy Queen for Blizzards." I have both threatened and bribed my children to get them to obey. And honestly, I've gotten results. Parenting class will be after church tonight -- I'll be leading that. I've got results! I've threatened, I've bribed, I've tried a myriad of things to get my children to obey. But wouldn't it be great, wouldn't it be amazing if obedience didn't have to be motivated externally, but instead, it would be an extension of the relationship itself.

Now, what do I mean by that? What if obedience were a direct result of the way my children saw me as their father? What if your students in class were motivated to obey simply because of your role as their teacher? What if the athlete on your team executed your plan to perfection simply as a result of their trust and respect for you as the coach? No bribes, no threats, just complete and total respect for your authority and the role you played in their lives. Wouldn't that be incredible? Wouldn't that be amazing

to ask your child to do something, and their response was simply, "Yes, Father. Yes, Mother. I will do what you have asked me to do because I have respect for you, and I trust that you have my best intentions in mind, so I shall obey"? I mean, who wouldn't fall over in amazement if obedience came simply because of the relationship and it was motivated internally, not forced upon someone externally?

Well, I believe this is what Solomon is getting to at the end of Ecclesiastes. What we're gonna do today is, we're gonna put a bookend on the Book of Ecclesiastes. Maybe some of you made it through college by reading the first and last chapters of every book that you were assigned. Maybe you did a little bit better, and you read, like, the first and last sentence of each paragraph -- that's what they teach you when you're trying to skim. Well, that's what we're essentially going to do with Ecclesiastes. We looked at the first chapter, and we asked ourselves, what exactly is Solomon trying to say? And what did he say to us last week? He said life is temporary and fleeting, so focus on eternal things, because if you focus on temporal things, you will only have temporal joy. So don't focus on things under the sun, get your focus up over the sun onto God's will and God's desire. Focus on eternal things, and you will have eternal joy.

Well, today we have a different question we're going to wrestle with. It's not: What is Solomon trying to say? The question for today is: How in the world are we supposed to live life focused on the right things? Last week was what -- today is how. How do we focus on eternal things? So, we are gonna read the last few words of Ecclesiastes chapter 12, and we're gonna draw a conclusion. Solomon says in verse 13, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter." "All has been heard! I've told you everything I have come up with as I have pursued wisdom, as I have pursued the answers to life's most vexing questions. For 12 chapters, I've given you everything. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. This is my crescendo. Here it is. Are you ready? Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil."

Just like a parent trying to motivate a child to clean their room, or a coach trying to get the most out of her players, Solomon is trying to motivate his audience. Solomon's trying to motivate us to live the wise life, to live with wisdom in a broken world. So, he tells us to fear God. To fear God. Now, some of you might be thinking, "Well, that sounds kind of harsh. I mean, who wants to talk about fearing God? I prefer to listen to what Jesus said, because Jesus said the greatest commandment, the first commandment is that we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. I would much rather talk about loving God than fearing God. Fearing God sounds so threatening and heavy-handed." So, which one is it? Do we go with Solomon's conclusion, or do we go with Jesus himself? How do we reconcile Solomon's command to fear God with Jesus's statement that we should love God with everything we have? Well, maybe some of you might be tempted to reconcile this apparent contradiction by commenting that -- well, Solomon wrote in the Old Testament. Solomon wrote during the time that the angry God was in control. The God of wrath. The God who likes war and the God who likes opening up the ground and swallowing up people. You see, Solomon talks about fearing God because Solomon was living under the Old Testament God. And Jesus, of course, He's the kind God. He's the loving, gracious, wonderful God. He's the God of the New Testament. So -- that's how we break the tie, right? Because we have these two Gods.

Friends -- yes, there are two testaments, but there is only one true God. There is no such thing as the Old Testament God of wrath and the New Testament God of love and grace and mercy. That is not how we are going to reconcile this non-contradiction. But what we are going to do today is talk about what it means to fear God. To fear God is simply to live in submission to His power and His authority. To fear God is to stand in awe of His greatness and bow in humility to His holiness. That's what it means to fear God. The best example comes from Scripture itself. The best commentary on Scripture is always Scripture. And there's an unbelievable story in the Book of Isaiah, when Isaiah has this vision of being in the throne room, being in the very presence of God Himself, and he sees the angels worshiping God saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!" And what does Isaiah do? What does Isaiah say? He says this -- when confronted with the presence and the glory and the holiness of God, Isaiah says this -- "Woe to me, I cried; I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!" Isaiah wasn't traumatized or paralyzed by fear. He simply hit the floor in reverent worship, because he realized he was in the presence of a holy God. He realized

that he was in the presence of a Being greater than himself, so he bowed in humble submission. You see friends, fearing God does not mean being afraid of Him. That is a key distinction as we talk about this phrase, "fearing God." To fear God does not mean that we cringe and we cower at the mere mention of His name. But sadly, when we think of the word "fear," we often equate fear with being worried or being threatened, or being terrorized, or anxious about some imminent threat of danger.

Think about the things that people are afraid of. Maybe even think through some of the things that come to your mind when you think of things that freak you out. Well -- what do we list? Snakes. Heights. People have a fear of being rejected. People have a fear of the unknown -- like embarking on another school year, or maybe there are some things that we aren't sure of. And that creates worry, right? We feel threatened because we don't know what's gonna happen. But friends, this has nothing to do with the nature of God. God has no desire to harm you, to wound you, to terrorize you, to reject you or threaten your safety. God is not sitting up in Heaven waiting for you to make a mistake so that He can smite you. When it comes to having a healthy fear of the Lord, we must begin with understanding God's very nature. Friends, God is inherently good. He is the embodiment of love, mercy and kindness. He is the superlative of every good thing we could ever say about him. There is no evil thing in His nature, because if there was, He would instantly cease to be God. How is God described in the Scriptures? He is described as a good shepherd, as a good Father. He is described as a refuge in our time of need. He is described as a firm foundation. You see, there is safety in the presence of a good God, so to fear Him has nothing to do with being afraid of Him. It has more to do with being in awe of Him. So, to fear God is to understand His power and His authority. To understand that He is the Creator and you are the created. That He is the shepherd. He is the One in charge. He is the leader. And He is the One to be followed. And if He is the shepherd, what does that make me? What does that make you? It makes you and me the vulnerable sheep that are only safe under the Good Shepherd's watchful eye.

When I think about how to illustrate or how to explain what a reverent fear of God is like, I think of the way I react to electricity. I think everyone should have a fear of electricity. Now, I have a fear of electricity, but when I walk into my living room and flip on the light, I don't duck behind the couch for cover because I think electricity's gonna get me! But I also don't take a knife and shove it in the outlet, do I? I think everyone should have a fear of the Niagara Falls. Now, they're never gonna ask me to be the marketing campaigner -- "Come be afraid of Niagara Falls." It's a national landmark, right? But I think everyone should have a fear of the Niagara Falls. This is a place that people flock to by the millions, to just stand at the edge of this imposing, beautiful, majestic waterfall. I think everyone should have a fear of Niagara Falls. Why? Because you don't go kayaking in the Niagara Falls. Because electricity and the Niagara Falls have a power greater than you or I could ever sustain. A few years ago, when Sierra was in fourth grade, we took advantage of that national parks' deal where you get in free if you've got a fourth-grader -- smart thing. And we went to the Grand Canyon. And I had never been there before, and I was -- I mean, I was awestruck. It's such an imposing canyon -- it's unbelievable how vast -- I had no idea how big and how vast the Grand Canyon is. And I stood at the edge and I felt really, really tiny. I felt very small at the edge of this vast expanse. You know where I stood? I stood behind the railings. I stood behind the sign that said, "Stop! Do not walk beyond this point." Why? Because I have a respect for the power of gravity! Now, if I were to ignore those signs, and I were to try to get that perfect selfie or make some stupid TikTok video, and I were to go beyond the railing and go beyond those signs, and were I to fall to my death, should the headline the next day say, "Harsh, Mean Gravity Takes the Life of Salem Pastor"? No. It should say, "Knucklehead Pastor Ignores the Signs and Falls to His Death." I think everyone should have a fear of electricity and of the Niagara Falls, because both of those things have a power that you and I can simply not sustain.

At the Grand Canyon, those signs and those railings -- they were put there to protect me, because I needed to have a reverent respect for the power of the canyon. You never touch a downed power line, right? You don't kayak in the Niagara Falls, because that power will overwhelm you. That power is greater than you. So, to have a reverent respect for the power of God -- what does it do? A reverent fear of the Lord motivates us to keep His commandments. See, God's commandments are there to keep us safe, not to threaten us or restrict us. I don't know how many times I've heard -- and maybe you've heard the same thing -- that people that are maybe skeptical, or maybe antagonistic to Christianity -- they will say things like, "Oh, man, I don't read the Bible. I don't read the Bible, because all the Bible is

Tok-tok, it's just a big rule book. It's just a book full of rules telling us what you can and can't do. And they're just written down to ruin your life." Well, no -- I disagree. I think God's rules are there to protect us and provide for us. To keep us from harm, not to inflict harm on us.

A few years ago, I read a story about these two teenagers. They lived in California, right near the local swimming pool. One day it was nearing a hundred degrees and they set off to go swim, and when they got there -- big sign that says, "Pool Closed." They look at each other, and they're like -- "Well, pool says it's closed, but -- that fence looks really easy to hop. Let's go." So, they hopped the fence, they're throwing their towels and their flip flops off to the edge, and they're bookin' it for the swimming pool. There's another sign, one of those tent signs that says, "Keep Out." And the boys are like, "Ha booking! Just try to keep me out! I'm goin' swimming! It's hot." There's one more, like, little red tape set up right by the diving board. As the first boy pushes past it, gets to the edge of the diving board, reaches the height of his swan dive, and it was then that he realized that the pool had been emptied for cleaning -- and that boy that day became paralyzed. Were those signs set up to ruin those boys' fun that day? No, those signs, those rules, just like God's commandments, were there hoping to keep them from harm, not to inflict it.

In the Book of 1 John, there's a great line that says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and they won't be burdensome to you." "If you love me, you will recognize that my commandments are there for your good." One of my favorite stories that illustrates this is the story of Abraham and Isaac. An unbelievable story of a man, Abraham, who was given a promise by God, that "I'm gonna give you a son, and this son is going to be the father of a great nation, and I'm going to bless all the nations through you and through this son." And through a miraculous act of God, Abraham does have a son, and he raises Isaac, and he loves Isaac, and if ever there was a helicopter dad, I'm sure it was Abraham, wanting to protect his son, knowing what was ahead of him. And then one day, God says, "Abraham, I want you to do something. I want you to take your son, your precious son, and I want you to sacrifice him to me. I want you to take him to the top of that mountain and I want you to offer him up to me. And I want you to keep my commandment. If you love me, you'll keep my commandment."

I'm sure that was a sleepless night for Abraham. But early that next morning he packs up, takes his son, and they march up to the top of the mountain. Abraham binds his son, and he draws his knife. And he's about to plunge it into his son when, at the last minute, the angel stops his hand and the voice of God says this line -- "Abraham, now I know that you fear me." It doesn't actually say, "Now I know that you love me." I think it's so much more powerful. "Now I know that you fear me. Now I know that you trust me." Abraham didn't have all the information. Abraham had no idea what God was up to. He just knew that God was God and he wasn't. He knew that God was the One in charge and he needed to obey him. He was given a command, he was given something to do, and Abraham just knew -- "I'm supposed to honor God." God loves it when His children act in obedience, and God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Abraham trusted the authority of the One who created him. You see, a reverent fear of the Lord leads to obedience. Lack of fear of the Lord leads to disobedience. When I think of parenting, I have watched parents over the years. I was the last of my little peer group to get married and have kids, so I got to watch how all my friends parented their kids, and -- we all have different parenting techniques, and I've shared some of my wonderful ways of parenting already today, but -- one thing I do know is, no child will ever obey a warning of discipline when a parent tells a child, "I'm gonna count to three," and then they count to three hundred. No child will ever obey when a warning of discipline is given, and rather than counting to three, the mom counts to three hundred. We've seen that before, right? "Billy? Stop it! Billy, you're being naughty. You stop it right now, Billy! Billy! I'm gonna count to three, Billy! Who loves you, Billy? Mommy loves you, Billy! But I'm so angry. I'm angry, Billy! I'm counting to three, you better stop it! Who wants a tickle? Billy want a tickle? I'm gonna count to three -- one -- Billy -- Mommy loves you, Billy." I mean, like COME ON! That kid owns you, Mom! That kid is never going to obey when a warning or a threat of discipline is offered and yet never followed through on. See, there is a connection. There is a connection between the command given and the threat of discipline.

I have a buddy named Steve, and he told me a story that has stuck with me for -- I heard this probably 35 years ago. He told me a story -- he has two children, and these kids used to play a game when he would

come pick them up from the babysitter. They wanted desperately to be the first child to get to Dad and give him a hug. So it was always a race who can get to Dad first. One day, Steve knocks on the door at the babysitter's; the door opens just in time for him to see his five-year-old push his three-year-old down the stairs so he could get to Dad first. Steve says that he rushes past the five-year-old, down the stairs, picks up the three-year-old, is cradling the three-year-old in his arms, and he says, "All of my parental love and compassion and tenderness was being poured out on my three-year-old. And then I looked up the stairs, and all of my parental wrath was about to be poured out on my five-year-old." And here's the line that stuck with me. He said, "In that moment, nobody could ever persuade me that my love for either child was different." You see, there is a connection between the discipline of the Lord and the love of the Lord. Without some level of fear of consequences, there is no motivation for obedience. And this is where Solomon takes us with his final verses. It is wrong to pit love against wrath, because sometimes discipline is the most loving thing we can do for someone. Justice and love are intrinsically connected. They are not polar opposites.

Listen to what Solomon says in the final verse. "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." God's justice brings meaning to everything we do. God's justice gives meaning to everything we do. Last week I was really careful to define a phrase for us. I was really careful to define the phrase, "Under the sun" because I believe it is the key to avoiding the misinterpretation that Solomon might think life is pointless and meaningless. Life is not pointless and meaningless. Pursuing temporal things under the sun is pointless and meaningless. But these verses show us, these final words show us that life isn't meaningless. In fact, everything we do has meaning. Everything we do has meaning because God sees everything we do. God sees everything we do, so I believe that we need to live intentionally and in alignment with God's desires. What are we supposed to do? We are supposed to fear God and keep His commandments. And if we do, judgment day will go well for us. But if we reject God's authority and ignore His commandments, the accounting of our life will be unpleasant. Isn't it quite simple? You see, there is more to fearing God than simply respecting His authority. That's not enough. To just say that fearing the Lord is respecting His authority isn't enough. We must also be aware of the fact that God will bring all of our deeds into judgment, and the judgment of God is not something we can avoid. He sees everything, and He will hold all people accountable for the way we live our lives. And we want Him to. We intuitively want God to exact justice. And the reason why I say that's because every single one of us hates when we see injustice. We hate it when we see a guilty person go unpunished. We hate it when we see an innocent person wrongly accused. "Social justice" has become a major buzz phrase in our culture today, and it should be something that we're all talking about. Because justice is something that's hard-wired into all of us. We want to see the guilty punished, we want to see the innocent vindicated. Why? Because justice is one of the attributes of God! If God is just, and we are created in God's image, doesn't it logically follow that each one of us would have a justice meter that's running inside of us? We want justice to be done. The problem is, most of the time we want justice done for them! We want mercy done for us, right? But we've got to come to terms with the fact that I'm not perfect. I have made mistakes. Oh yes, I have repented of them. But God sees everything we do, and He will hold us accountable for the way that we live our lives.

A good parent holds the line at three and disciplines disobedience, right? And it's no different with God. And when God exacts His justice, that doesn't make Him unkind or unloving. We wouldn't consider an earthly judge good if he were to wink at a murderer and say, "Ah, you know what? I'm one of those cool judges. I'm not one of those harsh judges that likes putting people in jail. I'm cool, so -- don't do it again, promise? Promise? I'm just gonna let you go, 'cause I'm cool that way." We wouldn't celebrate that! We would cry out moral indignation! An earthly judge should act justly, and even more, our Heavenly Father, the just judge, will act in accordance with His nature, and He will bring into account every deed that you and I have done, whether it's in private, whether it's hidden, whether it's good or whether it is evil. That doesn't make Him harsh. It just makes Him just. So, why does everything we do in this life have meaning? Why does everything that we do in life have meaning? Because God, the just judge, will bring everything under the sun into account. And if, one day, we are going to be judged for everything we do, then everything we do every day matters. Which brings us back to our main point. To fear God is to submit ourselves to His authority. And when we submit ourselves to His authority, we are motivated to keep His commandments, which then puts us in good standing when our deeds are judged. Right?

It's quite simple. And that's what Solomon calls the "whole duty of man." "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." This is it! That's all you have to do! Fear Him. Submit yourself to Him and His rule, His authority. Obey His commandments, and you'll be fine! So, Solomon boils down his entire teaching in Ecclesiastes to six words: "Fear God and keep his commandments." Really? I mean, that's all I have to do? What about study my Bible? What about be a good dad and be a good husband? And I think Christians are supposed to tithe, right? I'm also told I'm supposed to use my spiritual gifts to serve in the church. What about work hard and provide for my family? All I have to do is fear God and keep His commandments? That seems like I'm getting off too easy. All those things I listed are good things. And I ought to pursue them. But each one of those things is something done "under the sun." Right? Everything done under the sun is temporary. But what Solomon is trying to do is, he's trying to reorient our focus off of all the things that we're supposed to do. I'm gonna do all those things if I fear God and keep His commandments, right? He's making this really, really easy for us.

Ecclesiastes wasn't the only book Solomon wrote. He also penned Proverbs. I find it super interesting to note that Solomon ends Ecclesiastes with a statement to fear God and keep His commandments. And how does he start Proverbs? How does he start Proverbs? Proverbs 1:7, he says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." How do we live the wise life? Well, you live the wise life by fearing the Lord. The wise life is the one lived under the authority of the Almighty God, because we are squarely underneath His protective care, underneath His protection, and even under His discipline. See, don't think of God like as cosmic watchdog who's waiting to catch you do something wrong so that He can punish you. Instead, see Him as a school-crossing guard, keeping you safe from danger by showing you the way that you ought to go. The wise life is the one lived with our eyes firmly focused on God; the obedient life is the one lived with a healthy, reverent fear of the Lord; and the abundant life is the one lived knowing that all things will be brought into account by a perfect, holy God who can never act unjustly. There are so many things that we fear to a greater extent than we fear God. We fear illness, we fear death, we fear other peoples' opinions of us -- and all of these things create anxiety and worry. But I have good news -- you will never be more at peace than when you fear the Almighty God.

Copyright by First Baptist Church, Salem OR (August 7, 2021). Please do not copy without written permission of the copyright holder.