



Living with the End in Mind
11 – The Generous Life
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We're continuing and near wrapping up our series in Ecclesiastes this week. We are in Ecclesiastes 11. There are 12 chapters and we're giving one week to each chapter. Next week, we will wrap up with Chapter 12.

I'm grateful for the Book of Ecclesiastes for all its scripture of course, but about 10 years ago was a time that the Lord really called me to Ecclesiastes and a time, in my mid-30s, I thought I was old. In a sense of hurry and even maybe chasing, the Lord called me to calm and to enjoyment of life. Hopefully, through this series, you've received some of that as well. As we study through Ecclesiastes, there is so much wisdom as we dig through it. And a lot of information too, right? In 12 chapters... We started in the fall and here we are on the brink of spring and still working on this. So, a lot to take in.

With that said, it's important for me to try to keep things simple. With so many things, I can overthink things. Are there any of you that tend to over think things? Do any of you know someone who overthinks things and it drives you a little crazy?

Let me give you an example. This picture right here. What game are these kids playing? Tug of war. Shouldn't it be called war of tug? Follow me. The tug of war would be the temptation to get involved in a war that is already taking place. Like the tug on you will to be in that war. But war of tug would be like a conflict or competition where the opponents are tugging against one another. War of tug. Tell me I'm wrong. The problem with that though is someone may say, "Hey, do you want to play this game of tug of war with us?" I'd say, "Sure, but first, don't you think it should be called war of tug?" And then proceed to explain why I'm right, because I am, that it should be called war of tug. Eventually they would, with a blank stare, say, "Can you just grab the rope and pull?" We can tend to overthink things when really, we can boil things down and I believe it's the same with scripture.

Ecclesiastes is a long book with a lot of information. When we study scripture, we should read it, interpret it, and understand what God is trying to communicate to us through that specific passage in scripture. And then we should figure out how God wants us to apply it to our lives. As we read and we study and we understand, it's important to get into the details of it, but when it comes to application, I believe we should keep it simple. Because we study and we study and we can understand things, but at some point we have to grab the rope and pull. Jesus taught that. He said the most important thing is that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And also to love your neighbor as yourself. And he said about these things, This sums up the law and the prophets.

Now the law and the prophets were rules for living. And it was important for them to know the law and know the prophets. But this is all very simple though. Love God and love people.

So, as we study and we get all this information, particularly through Ecclesiastes, I think this applies here. We can get into the details, but we need to understand when it comes down to application, we need to grab the rope and pull.

Now, with Ecclesiastes, having really studied through it particularly about 10 years ago, at a certain point in my life, I really kind of came up with what I believe is almost a summary statement of Ecclesiastes. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. He wrote a lot of other wisdom writings as well. I think we can kind of summarize, in keeping things simple, the message that we can get all through Ecclesiastes – With God, life on earth will be hard. Be wise, recognize blessings, and enjoy. First things first with God. Solomon is very clear about that. The most important thing is that you keep God central and recognize God. Keep God central to everything in your life. That's the beginning of wisdom. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. We read that in some of his other writings. Understanding that God is central.

Life on earth will be hard. And that goes for all of us. Amen? Christian, believer, no matter where you live, what time you've lived in, no matter the generation, no matter what, life on earth will be hard. Harder for some than others we'll say. But regardless, life on earth will be hard. That's just a fact.

Be wise. This is because wisdom is a commodity. It's a measurable thing. It's something of use, advantage, or value. And it can be measured. It can't be objectively measured with a number, there is no number of wisdom, but we recognize when someone has a lot of wisdom and when someone doesn't have a lot of wisdom. And when someone doesn't have a lot of wisdom, they can get more wisdom. It's measurable. And how can one get more wisdom? Let's look at James 1: 5 – ***If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given to him.*** You see how simple that is?

Now, we pray for a lot of things in our daily prayers and with groups and here at church. There are things that we ask for – healing, provision, things with our jobs, things with our kids and our family – but in your daily prayers or in any prayer, when was the last time you just simply asked for more wisdom? None of us have achieved ultimate wisdom. We always have more that we can get if any of us lacks wisdom. We always have room to grow in our wisdom. Be wise.

Recognize blessings and enjoy. These kind of partner together for good reason. We studied earlier in Chapter 6 that blessing and an enjoyment of blessing is kind of two-fold blessing. First of all, we need to recognize that each one of us has been blessed. Last fall, Jimmy Dodd from Pastor Care Ministries, spoke to us and talked about this. If you're listening to this right now, if you are sitting in this room, if you can hear or see me online, then you have wealth and possessions. From a worldly perspective, you have wealth and possession. We have all been blessed. Let's go even farther than that. A few weeks ago, in Chapter 9, Scott taught us that a living dog is better than a dead lion. So, if you have breath in your lungs and a beating heart in our chest, you have blessing. We all have something to be grateful for and recognize as blessing.

Enjoyment. The first step is in order to enjoy your blessings, you must recognize that you have been blessed. I like to run or bike for exercise. In the heat of the summer, this can get pretty uncomfortable, especially here in the Ozarks where the humidity is like 800% and at 98 degrees outside, that gets pretty uncomfortable. Sometimes there is a breeze, which can be nice, but if I'm running or riding with the breeze, it feels like I'm standing still, and I'm thinking that breeze might feel pretty good if it would go the other way or when I turn around and go back, that breeze could feel pretty good. But if I'm running with the wind, I can't even feel the wind and that gets uncomfortable in the heat of summer.

Then I get back to The Landing and next to Lake Taneycomo, which if you don't know is a very cold lake. And there is a breeze that can come off of Taneycomo. After a run in the heat, running with the wind and feeling like you are in an oven, it feels good to just stand there next to Taneycomo with the breeze coming off of it, and just feeling that cold breeze just blow over you. It's restoring, it's refreshing. That's the enjoyment of blessing.

Solomon uses the illustration of chasing after the wind. When we are chasing after blessing, when we have blessing, but we want more, when there's something we think we want, we chase after it. That's being in the 98 degrees, running with the wind. But then the enjoyment of blessing is just standing still and letting the wind, that same wind with a little cool air on it, just rush over you. That is the enjoyment of blessing. I'm not talking about standing still like complacency. God calls us to strive to work and serve God and others, but he also wants us to enjoy. That stillness is the enjoyment of God's blessing. Chasing after more because that cool breeze if I turn around and I start running with that breeze, it's not enjoying it. Can't even feel it. That is chasing after the wind and that is vanity. Vanity is the word that Solomon uses, which means worthless, trivial, hollow, pointless. To enjoy, you must recognize blessing.

Now what are the ways that we can be blessed? What are some things that we can stand in and enjoy the cool breeze of? This could be a long, long list. I'm going to list some things here, but I want you to kind of think through some other ways that you can be blessed and that you have been blessed so that we can recognize these things.

Some of the first things we think of are money and possessions because Solomon talks about those a lot. It seems that it's the first thing that comes to our mind but there are so many things that are far less superficial than money and possessions in ways that we can be blessed.

We can be blessed with family.

We can be blessed by the service of others – remember, leader love month. So many people that serve us each and every Sunday and so many of you that participate in that.

We can be blessed in our business.

We can be blessed in relationships, loved ones around us, those who love us.

We can be blessed in our health.

We can be blessed with occupational success.

We can be blessed with recognition, people noticing.

We can be blessed with attribution, people giving credit for the things that we've done.

We can be blessed in our marriage.

We can be blessed in our birth origin. Where you were born. Do you think about that much? If you were born in another time, another place, another geography, to another family, your situation could be very, very different. That is something we can be refreshed by – the blessing of our birth origin.

We can be blessed by opportunity. Have you ever been given opportunity by someone that really changed your life?

We can be blessed by the patience of others with you. Boy, do I need people to have a lot of patience with me a lot of times.

We can be blessed by forgiveness from others. Boy, do I need people to forgive me. Those are a blessing.

We can be blessed by generosity. We're going to talk about generosity today. Have you ever been blessed with the generosity of someone else? Someone has given you something or done something for you in a generous way. And you just stand there and enjoy the cool breeze of that generosity. What a wonderful blessing that can be.

Many in this church have experienced the generosity of their church through the benevolence ministry, a ministry that meets the physical needs for those that times are rough for them and they need help for the moment. Your church is here for you in that. The great thing about that is many people who take advantage of the benevolence ministry are ones that turn right back around, when things change for them, and they want to be the first ones to bless others.

Our missionaries certainly have been blessed by generosity, by your generosity, by the way that we support ministries and other missionaries in ministries around the country and around the world. They have been blessed by the generosity of this church. How about you? Maybe you have experienced generosity that has been a blessing to you.

I want to do something here, the same thing Jesus did a lot, and flip the script. Often times, Jesus took a typical script and flipped it. He said, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." He said, "Whoever saves his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it. So, in that, as we talk about generosity, we want to ask, have you ever been blessed in being generous. Being generous can be a blessing. That's what we're talking about in Chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes this morning.

Let's look then at another list – ways that you can be generous. Obviously, that list is going to sound a lot like the first list – ways that you can be blessed, ways that you can be generous. Of course, money and possessions is one of the first ones we think of. It's something that Solomon talks a lot about in his writings – money and possessions. But also, again, there are so many things that are far less superficial than money and possessions.

There are things like service. You can serve others.

Wisdom. Some of you have a lot of experience and a lot of wisdom in your life experiences. You can share that with others. You can be generous with the knowledge that you have and the wisdom that you have that you can share with others.

Intellectual property. How about that one? A lot of creators among us, creating content and are very gifted at that. You can be generous with your intellectual property.

Your time. Speaking of commodity. Something that is absolutely limited and measurable.

Your abilities. Either your spiritual gifts or your other talents and gifts and the way you can serve others and be generous with your abilities.

Patience and forgiveness. We can be very generous with patience, which is one of the hard ones, right? We can be very generous with forgiveness, another very hard one. There are so many things. Again, the list could go on and on, but I think a simple definition of generosity or things that can be generous can be anything that creates a cool breeze in which someone else can stand and enjoy. Are you a cool breeze in which someone else can stand and enjoy? We can be generous, and we can find blessing in being generous and that's the point this morning.

There's something else that costs you nothing and is of little effort. When we talk about words and actions, we say talk is cheap. Words cost you nothing and it takes very little effort. You can be very generous with your words and encouragement and honor, speaking high value over people and acknowledgment for the things that others have done and the things that they have done for you, even. So many ways that we can be generous.

Now, let's turn to Ecclesiastes 11. We're not going to cover every single verse because we want the time to cover the main points that the Lord is making through Solomon.

1 Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return. This is an illustration of being out at sea and you have your bread, which is pretty important because it's your sustenance, right? What we're encouraged here is just cast it out on the waters. Let's not be careless, but don't hold so tightly to it. And what does it say? After many days, you may receive a return. That's a picture of blessing coming back to you.

This is a message we find throughout scripture and it's a repetitive message that we get in scripture that you give and subsequently receive. A couple of examples of that repetitive message are first in 2 Corinthians 9: 6, which says, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. And whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. This is a writing of Paul to the church of Corinth, commending them for their generosity and their gift giving. He's pointing out that when you give, it tends to come back to you. Whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

And then we have King Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes and the writer of much of the other wisdom writings in scripture. You may know that when Solomon was a young king, God came to him and said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." I'm sure a lot of things come to mind what you might respond to God with in that situation. Solomon said, "I want wisdom." But he went farther than that. He could have asked for wisdom so that he could be respected, so he could accomplish great things, become the greatest king because of that wisdom, so he could be revered. But he asked for wisdom so that the people would have a good leader, so that he could lead the people well. He was generous in his request because he was asking for the sake of God's people themselves. And what did God do? He turned around and he gave him ultimate wisdom, but also blessed him with possessions, with money, with prestige, with all of those things. And so, the second example of cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days.

Now, the message that we're giving here is that God loves blessing generous people. We're not saying that there is a cause and effect here of give and get. Jesus says it is better to give than to receive, but it is not that we give so that we can receive. This is a tendency, much like the other wisdom writing. Like in Proverbs, we read a lot about things that are tendency, not promises such as this. And there are two different messages that you might subscribe to and the first one you will never hear at Woodland Hills. There is a very important distinction. The first message is "You give, you're generous. God recognizes your generosity and therefore gives back to you." Do you see that pattern? You see, the problem with that pattern is that story, that message starts and ends with you.

The other message that you will hear and this is the one you hear here at Woodland Hills. "God calls us to be generous. We want to be obedient to God. You are obedient to God. Then God loves blessing generous people." The end doesn't matter. You and I are in the middle of this story. That message starts and ends with God. We are simply called to be obedient. So, how do you know if you subscribe to the first or the second. You have to check your motive. The motive becomes very clear after an act of generosity.

The two different motives can look like this. The entitled giver is on the lookout for the reward. That's the write a check, send a check, and wait for the phone call. That's the give and wait for the thank you. That's the recognition for an act of generosity. That's the, "I'm going to serve this person or this organization and then I'm going to scroll looking for the props, looking for the recognition. That's the entitled giver.

The generous giver is on the lookout for the next opportunity to give. You see that. God calls us to be generous, we are generous, and it doesn't matter from there, but God loves blessing generous people.

The generous giver is on the lookout for the next person that they can bless. Whom else can I serve? Whom else can I build up? Whom else can I encourage? This is a heart of stewardship. Stewardship is simply managing something for someone else.

Psalms 24: 1 says ***The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.*** That's everything. I don't know if you know that means everything that exists.

So, you came into this world with nothing. Even if you inherited great riches from your birthday, you take nothing with you. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The generous person considers himself a temporary placeholder for God's blessings. You receive and you give. You manage things well for God and you're generous. This takes me back to this word. I know I've shared it with you guys before, but it's this word *deserve*. It's one of my favorite words, not because I think entitlement is good. Early on in our marriage, my wife, Kari, and I started laughing at this word because we would hear it from time to time, we would find ourselves saying it. When you really dig into the scripture and understand what we deserve, there is a common denominator that we find in Romans that each of us deserves death, primarily. That all have sinned and the wages of sin is death. Yes, a physical death, but also a spiritual death and rejection from God, a separation from God, which is a spiritual death. That's primarily what each of us deserves.

When you start with that, everything else is gravy, everything else is a blessing, right? So, the next time one of your kids says, "Mom and Dad, I think I deserve the next iPhone." Just say, "No, you deserve death. Let's start with that."

2 Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. This is addressing the issue of how much do I give? How many times do I give? To how many people do I need to give? Again, we're not just talking money and possessions. We're talking generosity and all of these ways that you can be generous. How much do I have to do this really? There is another pattern that we're finding here. In the same way that when Jesus was asked, "How many times do I have to forgive someone?" He said, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus didn't mean 490 times. He meant just keep doing it. You're missing the point. That's what Verse 2 is saying. Give a portion to seven or even to eight. There is not a number. What we see is that number is growing because there is a seventh person and then there is an eighth person. And then guess what? There should be a ninth person. You continue as a generous person, looking for the next person to serve, looking for the next organization to give to.

2 Corinthians 9: 7, when we talk about how much and to how many people, it says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart. Not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver." That's why you hear some people cheer when we say that we receive an offering here at Woodland Hills. because God loves a cheerful giver. It's not out of compulsion. Giving and being generous isn't something that you have a box and that you check off and you're done. It's an ongoing process.

Let's look at Verse 4. This is a verse that if ever there was a verse about keeping the end in mind or living with the end in mind... **4 Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.** This is an illustration of a farmer watching the weather. The point here is if you are watching the weather too much and not down there digging in the dirt or reaping what you sow, then you are never going to get any farming done.

I'm a planner. I love planning and having a plan. Any other planners? I like to plan things out and I like to be organized with what's going to happen. Do what I can do to control the controllables, right? Some of you are not planners. My wife makes fun of me because I like spreadsheets. So much. I love spreadsheets. Who doesn't love spreadsheets? We're done having kids, but if we were going to have another one, I think for the next one I really might consider the name Excel because it has a lot of meaning to me. Some of you can identify with that. Some of you are planners like I am and some of you are just plain sinners. And that's okay; God is quick to forgive. But in that planning, I can overthink things, I might over plan things and pay too much attention to the wind, to the rain, figuratively speaking. Sometimes, those of us that can over plan might find ourselves saying this expression:

It's not a good time for me to _____.

How many times do we say that. With young people, we hear this a lot. It's not a good time for me to get married. It's not a good time for us to have kids. And so many other things. That's probably some of the more common ones that we hear. I do want to say that God wants you to discern whom you marry. God wants you to seek his will about marriage and about having children and look for wisdom in

those decisions. But again, we can be thinking and planning and sometimes we just need to grab the rope and pull with these big decisions in life. New job, new career, new degree, you name it. It's not a good time for me to _____. It's not a good time for me to be generous. If you are waiting for the right time to be generous, you've already missed many opportunities. There are a lot of them in your rearview and you've missed out on them. There is never a perfect time for anything.

Young people, seek out a couple that's been married 30, 40, 50 years and beyond. Ask them when their fondest memories are. You may find someone that has had a lot of success, a lot of wealth and possessions and they've been married for a long time. When you ask them when were their fondest memories in their marriage was? They are going to say right when they were starting out. When they had nothing.

My wife and I were just reflecting yesterday. When we first got married, we had a lot of Hamburger Helper. And often times, we just had Helper. They were some good times. Then we contemplated having kids... again, I'm a planner. She's a planner too. She's a planner and I'm like a planner plus. As we were planning about having kids, we thought we had it together. We knew how this was going to go. Who remembers the book *What to Expect When You are Expecting*? Oh my gosh. I called that book What to be paranoid about when you're expecting. There is no greater expert on parenting than someone who has not yet had a kid. You've got to grab the rope and pull. Jump in. There is never a perfect time.

5 As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. I love this because we know how the bones come into the woman with child. We know how a baby is born in the womb. Solomon did not have the benefit of that knowledge. But that's not what he's talking about. You do not know the way the Spirit comes into the bones. We don't understand how God puts a soul in that baby because none of us have the mind of God. We don't know. And that's okay. We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him or are called according to his purpose. We know it's going to be good, and we don't have to know how he's working all things together.

You know that I'm a simple person and when I shower, I need three things. I need water, a bar of soap, and shampoo. If I just had one of those last two things, I could still get it done. And I need about three minutes.

My wife, not the same. When I walk into the shower, there is a tower of various products that I don't recognize. There are several other items that look like they came from the Great Barrier Reef. I don't know what they are. I step in and it looks like a chemistry lab to me. There are so many different colors and containers and everything. I'm thinking *Oh my goodness, this looks dangerous. Do I need to be wearing eye protection in here?* I don't know how those things work or what she uses them for or anything, but you know what I do know? She looks pretty and she smells nice. I don't know how all that stuff is working. I don't know what kind of chemistry is going on in there, what kind of reactions or whatever else, but I know she looks pretty and she smells nice. So it is with the way that God works things together for good. We don't have to understand all that. We don't need to. We just need to know that God's going to make it look pretty and smell nice.

The caveat is in the workings of God and the way he works all things together for good. You may not get to see the pretty or smell the nice, but remember the story starts and ends with God. You are just called to be obedient in the middle.

Especially, when it comes to money, I believe generosity should be a three-step process – discern, give, and repeat. We don't discern and give and then try to retain control of the blessings that God has given that we have passed on or the ways that they are managed and things like that. That takes place in the discerning of who you're being generous to. Give and then repeat. Look for the next opportunity to be generous.

9 You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see... which is youthful impulse. But Solomon is encouraging this. What we know is the youthful impulses can be good. The desire to make money can lead you to provide for yourself and your family, to be a productive member in a community and society. The youthful impulse to be social can lead you to meet a spouse and foster relationships and develop a community around you. The youthful impulse to be influential is how God develops leaders.

Youthful impulses can be good but look at how he finishes this verse. **...but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.** So, we know then that youthful impulses can also lead to destruction. The desire to make money can manifest as a love of money. The desire to be social can lead to a dependence on the approval of others. The desire to be influential can lead to a hunger for power and more influence. You can discover blessings in proper pursuit of youthful impulses, but you can find judgement in improper pursuit of youthful impulses. And we know, from what Solomon tells us here, God will bring you into judgment.

The great thing is that with the gospel of Jesus Christ in place, judgement looks very different. There will be earthly consequences and that's why life on earth will be hard, so be wise. With wisdom, we can avoid certain consequences. There will be consequences, but judgment by God, while you are yoked with Christ, looks very different. Those who are yoked with Christ will receive no condemnation. Condemnation is being deemed guilty and worthy of punishment. For those who are with Christ, there will be a judgment but there will be no condemnation.

That leads us to grace. This word grace is the boundless measure of forgiveness offered by God. Remember we said we can be generous with forgiveness and others can be generous in forgiveness to us. We say that through our Lord here.

2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but as patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." That's the generosity of God. All deserve death, all can come into his grace. God has called us to a life of generosity, but you can't be more generous than God has been. Let's study the scriptures, let's know the wisdom that God desires us to live in. But let's also be ready to grab the rope and pull.

Father, we love you and we're grateful for how generous you are to us. Most of all through the peace that we can receive with you through Christ. We're grateful for so many blessings in our life that we can stand in the cool breeze and enjoy. Lord, help us to slow down and enjoy the so many blessings that you've given each and every one of us. And more so, help us to be in the middle of your story. As you call us to be generous, may we be generous. And we know that you love blessing generous people but, Lord, the outcome does not matter. We don't need to know how you're working all things together. We know that we just need to be generous.

Father, we love you and we're grateful. It is in the name of Christ that we pray, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.