

# Sermon on Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

by pastor Dirk M. Boersma

**Preached at:** Emmanuel American Church, Denver on December 30, 2007

**Title: Live deeply: fear God.**

- Live consciously
- Fear God
- Rest in Christ

**Occasion: New Year's Eve service**

**Goal:** Convince Christians (and others) to live consciously by living / being in Christ.

**Liturgy** (from the 'Book of Praise' of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches)

**opening:** Ps 48, 1.3.4

**confession of faith:** Hymn 1b

**reading:** Ecclesiastes 12

**before sermon:** Ps 97, 5.6

**text: Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

**after sermon:** New Hymn 19: "Day of Judgment Day of Wonders"

**thanksgiving:** Hymn 50, 1.4.6.7

*I pray this sermon will serve to make your love for God grow  
and lead you to a deeper dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Praise him for his grace!*



Congregation of the Jesus Christ,

I was tempted to say 'December 31<sup>st</sup> is just another day on the calendar' and just preach on something else, by continuing the Catechism sermons on the Lord's Prayer, for example.

Why would December 31<sup>st</sup> be different from September 25<sup>th</sup> or February 2<sup>nd</sup>? If you want to think about the passing of the years or the meaning of life, any day is good.

Why do we get these feelings that things are passing, and that years are going so fast at the end of the year?

It's natural because God has created us that way. He has submitted us to the rotation of the earth every 24 hours, giving us a rhythm of day and night. He created the week structure for us by giving us a day of rest on the 7<sup>th</sup> day.

He created the seasons with their coming and going of plowing, sowing, and harvesting. And after four seasons, the year is over.

God has created us to live in the space created by these timelines.

He wants us to count the days and years and be mindful. We don't live like the beasts, oblivious of what is going on, but he wants us to think about the meaning of the years and the events that mark the years.

Newspapers and magazines publish overviews of the year. You see a lineup of major events that have shaped or characterized this year.

It looks as if the shocking, painful events seem to dominate more and more. The shooting in Arvada and at Virginia Tech.

A shocking event like the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan seems to squeeze itself into this lineup, shattering hopes and shaping expectations just before the year is over.

Do you make your own overview of this past year? What are your memorable events? What shaped your life this past year? What will you remember: that was 2007 for me?

## 1. Live consciously

Whatever the outcome, it begins with thinking.

Just like Ecclesiastes, the wisdom teacher. He thought deeply about life. What is the meaning of it all? What is the essence? Why are we here? And how should we live?

He wrote a book about it.

What we read tonight is the conclusion.

### *A conclusion of what?*

His conclusion is candid. Meaningless!

As if to make sure we wouldn't miss it, he repeats it:

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” (Eccl 12.8)*

This is like a oneliner, used in politics: it sticks, it is burned in your memory, you won't forget it. It is short and powerful.

*“The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails— given by one Shepherd.” (Eccl 12,11)*

The sayings of the wise are like a prodding stick, stirring up action. They are like nails that fasten a poster to a pole. They are difficult to remove.

'Everything is meaningless' is his conclusion after he investigated and considered everything. He writes

*“I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. [13] I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! [14] I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (Eccl 1,12-14)*

The conclusion covers the whole book. This is what it's about: the Teacher did research, tried out everything, to consider it, because he was on a quest to find out what sense it made.

### *Think!*

Now before we go to the conclusion, let's notice the attitude the Teacher had toward life.

It is one of observing and thinking deeply about life.

The first thing that strikes me about his book is not the candid conclusion, but his attitude: do not live without thinking. Live consciously. Think about what is going on. Observe, analyze, draw conclusions. Ask yourself the difficult questions.

Why is this necessary?

We are tempted to go with the flow. You get up, go to work, do your things, listen to what people talk about, run some errands, return home, make and/or eat dinner, watch the news perhaps, and watch some more television, and without knowing it, you have not even spend one minute thinking.

Sure, you've used your brain but you can do all these things without giving a single thought to the meaning of it all.

That's the pull of our society. It is busy, first of all. And it is geared toward keeping us occupied and happy. It is not geared towards serious thought.

You have to make an effort to think about your life, the world, the meaning of events, and the sense it all makes.

This is important. The Bible tells us not to live an empty life, going through the motions, following the crowd, doing your job and retiring in Florida at the end. There is much more to life.

So do not live an empty life!

You may not be able to follow the same approach as the Teacher, investigating and trying out just about everything. You and I don't know what it means to live in a palace, to fight boredom, to have enormous parties and hundreds of women, like Solomon did. You can't try out being a millionaire, not even for a day.

But God calls you to have this attitude: think! And try to find the meaning God has laid in it. Don't let it come over you as a wave, standing in the surf of world history. Don't be like a dog or a horse, which have to accept life as it comes to them. You are a human being, a person God created with a mind and a soul, and you are called to search, to think deeply, and to live consciously.

## 2. Fear God (and obey him)

And then what do you find when you live like this?

It's rather disappointing. That's another reason so many people don't live consciously: they can't face the deeply disturbing conclusion: it's all in vain. It's empty.

Life is a cycle: it goes up and down. The Teacher puts it bluntly in chapter 1:

Generations come and generations go - the earth remains.

The sun rises and sets, and comes back up at the same spot.

The cycles of nature seems so endless and therefore meaningless:

*"All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again."*

Things are incredible tiring and boring:

*“The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.”*

*“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” (Eccl 1,3-9)*

And there are many other things that support the Teacher’s observation:

Life is short. You work hard but others will enjoy what you’ve accumulated. You toil for the wind’, he says (chapter 5).

There is oppression, evil, injustice. Poor people lose.

OK, there is wisdom and it is better to be wise. But that has its drawbacks, too: lots of wisdom lead to sorrow; knowledge is not always a blessing. And foolishness can destroy everything. On top of that, both fools and wise people die.

It’s all meaningless.

That’s not an encouraging conclusion, is it?

I think many people know this or have the gut feeling. That’s why they don’t even bother thinking about life. They don’t expect to find any meaning. That’s why they live like there’s no tomorrow. They’re just in it for the fun, or they go through the boring routine of daily work in order to pay their bills.

***Pretty true!***

So is this all?

This could have been his final conclusion.

The Bible is very candid about life on earth.

And you see it confirmed in today’s events. Just watch the news and sniff the atmosphere:

Pakistan and Iraq – does it make sense to fight for democracy? Years of work get destroyed by one madman with a bomb. The country plunges into chaos.

Existentialist philosophers could make the same observation.

People in the world can definitely identify with the observations of the Teacher. (that gives us an opening when we talk to them!)

But what counts is not your observations, but what you conclude in the end: what sense does it make? How should you live?

Can you live as if there is no meaning? Does it not matter what you do any more? Many people today share this idea and live accordingly.

***Which way does he show?***

Here the Teacher shows us a different way.

He makes us aware that our view is limited: all the things he is speaking about are happening ‘under the sun’.

But there is more: God is there. He is our creator and has given our life a purpose. He opens a window on eternity that shows us purpose and joy instead of meaninglessness and despair.

The purpose ended up out of sight and out of our reach because of sin. We wonder as we wander in this life because our minds are blinded by sin.

But God sent Jesus to bring the meaning of our lives back within our reach. He gave us the light of his grace and of his sovereign reign.

The book of Ecclesiastes is more than an observation of what happens on earth. When the Teacher shines the light of Christ on our lives he draws this conclusion:

*“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man.”*

This is the solution, the way out.

He had mentioned fearing God a few times in his book already. He gives you hints. Now he presents this as his final conclusion: Fear God, respect him, and obey his will.

Because he is your creator. Your life was his idea. You live in his world. He created you in order to obey his will. And in the end, he will judge everything and everyone.

Many peoples’ lives may seem senseless but all our lives end in the same place: before God’s judgment seat. If that’s the end, the only way to live your life wisely is by fearing God, by living according to his will.

### ***Fear is not ‘being afraid’***

When we read about judgment, we almost automatically associate it with fear. We don’t obey God fully, so we see the judgment hanging over us like a dark cloud.

But fearing God does not mean being afraid. This is not what motivates Christians.

Fearing God means respecting him, and living consciously for him. It means that in every decision you face, you ask what his will is and strive to obey it.

We live joyfully, we serve the Lord eagerly and we try to understand how God wants us to live. This is serious business because we know that God will judge.

You can see this in the way Paul quotes this verse in 2Cor5,10.

*So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. [10](#)*

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

We make it our goal to please him. There is no fear in Paul’s mind, but reverent submission. He takes God and his will seriously, does not brush over sin and ignore how serious it is. A Christian cannot ignore the true character of sin: that it is rebellion against God and is an attempt to throw him off his throne.

Since you have been saved by Jesus Christ your eyes have been opened for what is really going on: you discover that you live your life right before God and that you must spend it for God.

### ***What about 2007?***

How is this for a criterion to measure 2007?

We may be tempted to measure our progress towards the goals we set: getting a job, enjoying life, getting pregnant, graduating, making money.

But the most important standard to measure whether it was a good year, is this: did I fear God? Did I follow his will?

What was my life about? Was it about God? Did I live before God and for God?

When you did, you may look back at 2007 with joy. And you can leave it in God's hands.

### **3. Rest in Christ**

Still, we have these words about judgment that are hard to swallow.

*“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 it is good or evil.”*

Is this not meant to scare us?

Even if we try to live for God, will our sins not make us look back with trepidation: God is judging me! ?

### ***In the end: Jesus!***

This judgment will be the opening of all the books. The books that contain every single thing we've done, good and bad, and the book of life. Everybody will find out whether his or name is written there. Everybody whose name is written in the book of life will be excited about the outcome of the judgment.

### **The good**

Before we think of judgment as negative, something to be afraid of, think about the surprising discovery we will make. So much of what we believe is invisible now. We see as if in a mirror, through a dense fog.

We may see only the questions we have about the difficult things we experience: the loss of loved ones, the question ‘what difference did my work and my family life really make?’, your broken hip and weakened body – you only see the pieces of your life.

But in the judgment God will shine his light on your life and reveal how much sense it made in his plan. You'll see the finished piece of art that he was weaving with the light and dark strands.

Looking back at your life you'll be amazed at how he showed his power in your weakness. How he saved you from pride, how he drew you closer to himself and made you discover that relying on Jesus was the only right response.

So many things will come out that show the power of his grace in your life, things that may hardly draw any attention now, or don't get our attention because other, urgent or painful things keep our minds and thoughts occupied.

When you live like the Teacher says: ‘Fear God and obey his commands’ you are in for a surprise. You may not see the hidden good you’ve done, but it will be brought to light. Everything done in the Lord Jesus and for him will remain, will count for him, and will be rewarded. The ways you have served others and did not want everybody to know – like Jesus said: do not let your good deeds be known to man so that they praise you; you have your reward already. If you don’t show off and you don’t even count it yourself, the final judgment will show that God has not forgotten it.

Ecclesiastes is very honest about the senselessness of life, and we might have low expectations of what will show up on the X-ray of our lives after it’s over. But God will show how much sense it made because we lived our lives in Christ.

When the light of truth will shine on our lives and on what you’ve done in 2007, you will be surprised at the beautiful things that will show up. What will stand out then is what Jesus has done in your life and how he worked through you. It will be evident and unmistakable, while we wonder now: ‘Was this good? Did I have pure motives to help that person? What difference did it make? Was such a small thing really meaningful in God’s kingdom? Could I not have done things that have more impact on the world?’

## **The bad**

And the things that were really sinful will come out, too. We will discover how much we needed Christ and how much he meant to us, that he covered all those sins with his blood. In the final judgment, we will eventually see how good and gracious and sufficient Jesus our savior is, we will see how much we needed him and in what profound and adequate way he was and is our redeemer.

And we will praise God all the more once we see ourselves in our need and see Jesus for who he really is.

And yes, the many sins we’ve committed will show up. Is that not something to fear? All the things I tried to hide, the things I’m ashamed about, the many ways I missed opportunities to serve others, all the ways I brought God’s anger over me.

How can you face it?

This is the secret of faith: Jesus is the answer.

Remember: who will be the judge? He is. Our savior and king. The person we’ve relied on all our life is the one handing down the verdict.

It is comforting to know that the God whom you know is the one who judges you.

And how do you know him? As the savior who has removed the curse from your life. You will be safe in the judgment when you are found to be in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, because we will be confronted with everything we’ve done, flee to Christ. Paul continues in 2Cor5: “Therefore, we urge you: ‘be reconciled with God!’”

God will not brush over our sins, therefore we should not throw them over our shoulder and ignore them, but turn to Christ when our need for him has become apparent.

Be in Christ – that means more than ‘know that you belong to Jesus’.  
It goes deeper: really BE, live in Christ, every day. At the beginning of each new day and each new year. And at the end, when you look back and turn the page, put the book of last year away.

You can face it in Jesus. Commit your life to him, turn it over to him, lock, stock, and barrel, and you will see what it means to fear God and obey him. And when it will all be over you’ll be able to look back with peace in your heart.

That not the fake peace of superficiality but the profound peace of a redeemed heart because Jesus has taken away the curse and makes your life beautiful, God-centered, and God-fearing.

Amen