

## “All Is Vanity”

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” – Ecclesiastes 1:2

As the author of Ecclesiastes looks back on his life, he is convinced that the whole of human existence can be described by this single word. Vanity. He certainly isn't the philosopher to turn to if you need some cheering up.

“All is vanity,” he insists. All is meaningless, worthless, absurd. The “Teacher” as he refers to himself in verse 12, looks at the society around him 2300 years ago and sees extreme pride in human appearance and accomplishments. He looks around and sees “narcissism” – expressive self-love and self-admiration.

According to the Teacher, our world has a vanity problem, our world is having a “vanity fair” and it's only getting worse.

There's the groom who won't let his bride's overweight friend be a bridesmaid because he doesn't want her to mess up the wedding pictures.

The basketball player who draws all attention to himself when he makes “the decision” as to which team will be blessed with his skills.

The woman who thinks she's so beautiful that every morning after making herself up, she takes a self-portrait, just to preserve the moment.

The parents who believe their children are so gifted and talented that they should be able to attend the elite school of their choice.

Then there's business tycoon, Ted Turner, who said, "If I only had a little humility, I'd be perfect."

Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

According to an article in the magazine "Psychology Today," narcissism can range from an annoying tendency to a serious clinical disorder. We aren't just talking about people who imitate Narcissus, the patron sinner of self-lovers. He was the handsome young man of Greek mythology who withdrew from the world, content to gaze forever at his own reflection in a pool of water. Narcissus was pathetic but harmless.

Real life narcissists desperately need other people to validate their own worth. They are celebrity wannabes in search of their inner Beyoncé. Reality show contestants who want to be famous and will do anything to get on television. Parents of the "balloon boy," involving their child in a dangerous stunt to draw attention to themselves. White House party crashers who slip through a crack in security and then post their exploits on Facebook. They want to be admired.

So the question I think we need to ask is this: How can we spot this tendency toward narcissism in ourselves and in the people around us? And what can we do about it?

In answer to those questions, I want to make 4 points from Ecclesiastes which can be a field guide to narcissism.

1. Self-worth doesn't come from accomplishments.
2. We aren't the center of the Universe.
3. We're often blind to our own faults.
4. The journey out of vanity.

First, self-worth doesn't come from accomplishments. The teacher of Ecclesiastes in verse 13 is applying his mind "to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." He examines all the human deeds that are done under the sun, and what does he conclude?

"All is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted."

At first glance, this seems to be a completely depressing picture of human life. Its hard to accept the Teacher believes that absolutely everything is meaningless and that nothing crooked can be made straight. But remember, the true narcissist needs to be admired. He wins a trophy in the church golf league and carries it around in his car for months showing it off. They cover their walls with pictures of themselves. Their children are always the best and brightest.

The balloon of their self-esteem is punctured when the Teachers asserts that “all is vanity and chasing after wind.”

The teacher is saying we can't get our self-worth from our accomplishments. We shouldn't be admired for our human deeds. We shouldn't be admired for making a decision because its what's best for me. Instead, our worth comes completely from being children of God. Kendra and Jaylynn's worth comes completely from being baptized children of God. And that means we're all equal in the eyes of the Lord. Every single one of us.

Narcissists hate that!

(1) Self-worth doesn't come from our accomplishments. (2) We aren't the center of the universe.

In verses 18 and 19 the Teacher goes on to say . . . <sup>18</sup>I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me <sup>19</sup>— and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

He is absolutely correct in insisting that the fruits of our labors will be passed to the generation that follows. This is a great frustration for narcissists because they have a deep desire to be at the center of things. They want all the glory and are not going to be a team player.

The Teacher has learned the truth of human life is that our days are numbered and our time on earth passes quickly. Unless we're willing to be team players and pass our insights and accomplishments to our children and grandchildren, we'll find ourselves frustrated and unfulfilled.

Scripture says we're created from the dust of the earth and to dust we shall return, as we remind ourselves every Ash Wednesday.

1 Peter says, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Both the teacher and Peter have a profound insight into the transience of human life – we grow and wither like grass, while the word of the Lord endures forever. Only God remains. At the center of things. Forever.

(1) Self-worth doesn't come from accomplishments. (2) We aren't the center of the universe. (3) We're often blind to our own faults.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes concludes by asking . . .<sup>22</sup>What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? <sup>23</sup>For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

A final characteristic of narcissists is that they tend to be blind to their own faults. Because they're not team players, they blame others when failures occur. Their behavior on the

job or in the home or church is marked by temper tantrums, unreasonable expectations, and shocking selfishness. They simply cannot believe it when their work causes them pain, frustration, and sleepless nights. It doesn't seem fair to them, and they're anxious to pin the blame on someone else.

But the Teacher says, "Get used to it. Work is hard and often thankless. But this is the nature of life in the real world. You're a fool if you expect your efforts to give you the satisfaction that only a relationship with God and with your neighbors can give."

And it is precisely those relationships with God and our neighbors that lead us on the journey out of vanity.

(1) Self-worth doesn't come from accomplishments. (2) We aren't the center of the universe. (3) We're often blind to our own faults. (4) The journey out of vanity.

When we ask the question or someone close to us asks the question, "Why does life seem so empty?" – can we begin to make the changes that will give our life or a friend's life new meaning and direction? Can we make the changes that allows us to enter into truly life-giving relationships with God and the people around us?

Jesus teaches us that God – not ourselves – should be at the center of our lives and that the greatest of commandments is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He goes on to say that a second commandment is like it:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

To focus on God and neighbor is the opposite of narcissism and the antidote to vanity. But Jesus isn't asking us to despise ourselves. No, he says we are to love our neighbor as our self, stressing we should love ourselves as valuable people made in the image and likeness of God. The Teacher teaches us to live in a healthy relationship with God, with self, and in healthy relationships with the people of God around us.

Then may the peace of God . . .

WOV #738 - Healer of Our Every Ill

WOV 770 - Borne Cry