

Ecclesiastes 12:1

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Date: 14 February 1982

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[0 : 00] Well, we're still involved with the Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Let us read again the first verse of Ecclesiastes 12.

Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, for thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

And then you get a long metaphor describing the decapitude and the troubles and pains and aches and frustrations of that, at least the generality of aging and elderly people experience.

Now, you can, if you like, and I think quite properly describe a hospital as a sad place.

It's a sad place, a hospital, certainly in that every hospital it ever was has borne eloquent testimony to the fact that disease and injury and death belong inescapably to this sinful race of earth.

[1 : 39] It's a sad place if you only look at the blood and the bondages and the unusual collection of suffering and prostrate and listless and maybe even unconscious people which the hospital contains.

And when you set that picture in contrast with the picture of vigorous and active and industrious life, think of a school playground, for example, which can be seen over the hospital wall.

That's the picture of vigorous and industrious life is the normal state of human affairs. What goes on in the hospital is, from many points of view, quite abnormal.

So you can say that the hospital is a sad place, full stop. But that, I suggest, is to take the most superficial possible view of what a hospital stands for.

And I suggest that you really must judge a hospital, not by its ominous admissions register, but by the record of its successful discharges, its many successes.

[3 : 30] You may very well leave some cherished part of your body behind you when you take the exit door from a hospital.

Or at least you may have to count the days that you spent in hospital. In one of its wards, you may have to count those days in terms of the tubes and bags and splints and syringes and the prodding and poking and mauling, if you want to speak that way, to which you were exposed during your stay in hospital.

But the real measure of a hospital's performance lies in the direction of assessing how much worse your condition would have been if you hadn't gone there.

And in the direction of considering the record which a hospital has of saving life, prolonging life, reducing pain, and generally relieving the unhappy effects of disease and accident.

So it depends, like everything else, totally on your point of view. Now, much the same, I think, has to be said about Ecclesiastes chapter 12.

[5 : 11] If you only look at this chapter's graphic analysis of the old age with the disabilities and pain and the aches and indignities and frustration and prostration of old age and the unavoidable appointment that old age has with death and the doleful accompaniments of death which are so vividly portrayed, then, of course, it's misery all the way.

But that surely is less than a fair assessment of Ecclesiastes chapter 12.

Because its central concern is that people should remember their creator in the days of their youth in such a way that the evil days of old age will be, in a real sense, revolutionized.

They will be compensated for their bitterness, their anguish, their otherwise unrelieved atmosphere of tragedy by the gracious help and compassion and strength of the Lord, who is to his people, old or young, a great God and a saviour.

Ecclesiastes chapter 12 is, in essence, a presentation of our great physician's antidote to the multiplying problems of life which rush to meet one as life comes on to its later stages.

[7 : 00] These problems, it makes a point, are quite impossible to handle in respect of our own strength.

And then man goes to his long home and the mourners go about the streets. The evil days are coming. Yes, but says the writer, the preacher, don't stand still and do nothing about them. Don't let these days catch you unprepared. Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth before the evil days come.

And the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them. And if you remember your creator, that will make the critical difference.

If we seek the Lord while he is to be found, if we call upon the Lord while he is near, that will make the critical difference. Now, this 12th chapter is essentially a piece of prolonged advice to youth to consider old age and death as things that are not by any means to be approached, to be faced without having the Lord with us.

[8 : 32] Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth, because these days are coming when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them. It's advice which young people especially need.

Not for a minute. Not for a minute do I think that the sacred writer intends to say that young people are intensely, that young people are by nature further off from God, or that they are further from having thoughts about God than older people.

Well, after all, they've got a common problem, the old and the young, in our sinful race. We have all been born in sin and shitten in iniquity.

We have all become alienated from God. We are not only strangers to God, we are, says the apostle, each in his own way, each in her own way, enemies by wicked works.

Bent on selfish ways, bent on self-willed behavior where God doesn't enter into the calculation.

[9 : 48] And that is true also in a religious culture, where things that seem to be religious are possessed and professed, and yet there may be self-will in control.

We have a very good example of self-will taking control of a man who is right at the center of a religious culture.

In the case of the rich young ruler who went away sorrowful after his conversation with Jesus and listening to Jesus' advice about getting rid of his riches and helping the poor, he went away sorrowful for he had many possessions.

And here was a young man in whom there was taking place a very considerable struggle. There were those deep, deep promptings and deep feelings in him on the side of following Jesus wholeheartedly and serving the God whom he had portrayed and obtaining eternal life, as he said. But these were in in these were in in in in savage conflict with a heart that would not surrender the possession and pleasure of riches.

[11 : 20] the Lord knowing what was this young man's real idol required him to surrender that idol and in the in the issue he found that too much to do.

And of course we cannot be real Christians unless we do make a full surrender. in certain in certain evangelical circles that is almost the that is more almost the the equivalent wording for being converted full surrender.

I know it's applied very often in a context of sanctification but it's also very much used in the context of the initial giving oneself to Christ.

and it's perfectly possible and this is a subject I'd like to give a little attention to this morning it's perfectly possible to play a pretend a spiritual game with the Lord as if if there were really nothing and no one whom we put before Christ.

That's exactly what the rich young ruler was doing. But you see the acid test is whether in actual practice whatever our ideals and whatever our idealisms whether in actual practice we are willing when it comes to the crunch we are willing to put Christ first.

[13 : 06] Of course if we're not willing really and truly and practically and in our hearts to put Christ first then our Christianity whatever it is is only a make-believe and it is only it's only a shall.

Frances Ridley Havergal saw very clearly the issues at stake in her own personal life and saw these issues early in her life and she's speaking from a standpoint in one of her poems one of her hymns she's speaking from a standpoint which must be reached if we are genuinely to receive Christ as Savior and speaking from a standpoint where it is fully understood that the dangers of disloyalty the dangers of unfaithfulness to Jesus are present every day well the verse I have in mind is the verse that I think we quoted in the prayer the dearest idol I have known she said but ere that

idol be help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee now there you've got in the first place the realization that an idol that is to say something that comes between us and Christ can be very precious indeed to us taking control of our mind taking control of our emotions and our affections and our heart and our will the way that this young man's treasure took hold of him let us not think of the idols which threaten our being saved

Jesus was saying to this man if you don't do it as this idol then you don't have eternal life that's all about it let us not think of the idols which threaten our being saved our becoming real Christians the idols which threaten to commit as if we are real Christians are ready to a life of poor and third rate and unfruitful Christianity let us not think of these idols as being repulsive like for example the horrible Hindu goddess Sivwa Satan certainly frightens people out of the kingdom but much more often he plays the part of the angel of light and entices men never to go into the kingdom in Francis Ridley Havergill's famous verse we also get the penetrating recognition that there are many idols which threaten to claim our lives entirely and that these idols moreover are set within a graded scheme of values in relation to our affections remember the apostle John spoke about more than one idol he said at the close of his first epistle my little children keep or guard yourselves from idols and Havergill is talking about the dearest idol there are other idols less precious less dear she's talking about them but she's talking about the dearest idol I have known help me to tear it from thy throat and worship only thee and she's recognising that some idols are relatively easy to give up there are some things that stand between a person and

Christ that are relatively easy to set aside for his sake and our Lord was pointing this out when he said that it was far better to pluck out our right eye speaking metaphorically of course far better to pluck out our right eye and cut off our right hand and he said cast them from us most treasured and valued parts of the body it was far better to do that than that possessing this eye or possessing this hand we should be cast into hell because it figures as a stumbling block to us and what Francis Havergill knew very well from our own experience was that there's a tendency in us to play games with God it's a horrible thought but it's very very true to what you and

[18:29] I do to play games with God over this question of surrendering ourselves to the Lord and jettisoning our idols for the sake of Jesus Christ a person and it doesn't matter whether he's old or she is old or young a person will do anything that's what Jesus is saying that's what Havergill is saying a person will do anything apart from divine grace anything rather than surrender and cast away the ultimate idol the ultimate treasure in the shrine of his or her heart anything the rich young ruler for example he wasn't put off by public opinion in he's going to see Jesus there are many people who wouldn't for the life of them be seen going inside a church or they wouldn't for the life of them be seen in what looked like earnest religious conversation with an evangelical the rich young ruler wasn't afraid of public opinion he wasn't afraid of losing the approval of his fellow

Pharisees by being seen in the fellowship of Jesus and holding very real and very earnest spiritual conversation with Jesus he'd got carriages young fellow and he was ready to submit to Jesus at least in a formal way as one whose teaching was preeminently important for spiritual peace and progress and achievement obtaining eternal life good master good good good good good good thing shall I do that I may have I want it eternal life and the whole impression I think you'll agree is that of someone who is in dead earnest but when it came to the real crunch as we say and when he was asked by the lord to sell all that he had to give up the stately home and the posh car or the equivalent and the elite society in which he moved and the top class style of life which he enjoyed it was too much to sell it all and to give it away to poor people was more than this young man could take you'll observe that he wasn't attracted to a rake's life his wasn't the ambition to have wine women and song he was outwardly very decent

Jesus said to him thou shalt do no murder if you want to get into eternal possess eternal life well you know the commandments thou shalt do no murder here's examples of them thou shalt do no murder thou shalt not commit adultery thou shalt not steal thou shalt not bear false witness honour thy father and thy mother and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself and the young man saith to him and he wasn't he wasn't being dishonest all these things have I kept from my youth up in other words nobody can honestly charge me with being a rake but like I yet and then came the bombshell Jesus said unto him if thou wilt be perfect go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven and come and follow me well when the young man heard that saying he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions well you see one thing that our lord was doing was showing this young man by a particular test case he might have used another a particular test

case that had to do with his possessions that real religion has got to do with the heart it is not to be measured by outward conformity to certain conventions and his inability his total unwillingness to surrender his possessions was intended by Jesus to start this young man realizing that there was a whole inner realm of spiritual commitment to a way of life which was incompatible with being a disciple of Jesus which he hadn't even suspected but the special point that I'm getting at is this that there were no doubt many things that the young man could have suffered was ready to suffer many things that he was ready to part with many things that he was ready to put up with in order to be a disciple of Jesus

Christ many in other words relatively powerful and attractive idols that he would have traded away gladly to obtain eternal life and to belong to Christ but there was this ultimate one that he would not let go but of course we learn that with the Lord Jesus Christ it must be all or nothing now he doesn't ask all of his disciples to get rid of all their possessions certainly he asks all of his disciples to help those in need so far as they are able and he asks all of his disciples to put all that they are and are possessed to a good and Christian use but he doesn't ask all of his disciples to part with everything yes they've got to be ready to give up everything that he asks them to give up they've got to be like Abraham he was asked by God to give up his son Isaac his nearest and dearest and Abraham was willing through his tears and through his pain he was willing and in the end having met the test and passed the test Abraham was given back his Isaac and that's the only way friends that our Isaacs are really worth having and that there will be a blessing to us namely after we have surrendered them without reservation and without qualification to the Lord Jesus Christ but the real danger is this that we will try to play a horrible kind of game and of course it's a fruitless game with the Lord keeping him at a distance while pretending to surrender every idol not unlike the story of the family you remember the sort of thing that used to put shivers up your spine when you were a child the story of the family in the sleigh in some arctic country which was being chased by a pack of wolves and they were a long way from home and what they were doing in order to buy time was jettisoning one valuable article after another you know to halt the wolves sufficiently long it was hoped for safety to be reached but whereas running away from wolves is a matter of common sense and a matter of a proper desire for self preservation running away from the

[27 : 11] Lord and keeping the Lord at bay as it were is the most foolish thing imaginable because in him and in him alone there is happiness and life and eternal life and what Francis Ridley Habergill shows very plainly is that it's only with the Lord's help whatever ideals we may have however earnest we may be whatever religious studies there may be in our heart and I believe that young people have more of these than most other people it's only with the Lord's help that we can part with every last idol which stands between him and us and come to terms with the gospel help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee and that of course suggests that having idols isn't an innocent pardonable pastime it's the greatest when you come to the core of the matter it's the greatest of all crimes for an idol is never content with a little bit of your life an idol is the front runner of seating himself and it wants a lot and it will not be content with anything but the lot and that means nothing less than the throne of God himself in our personal lives and

Habergil is making the point very clearly that Jesus made that apart from God's gracious help which we must beg for there's not the slightest chance of our getting rid of the dearest idol because it's the same thing it's the very same thing as breaking loose from the bondage of Satan who is the prince of this world and no man ever got rid of him in his own strength it is easier said Jesus going on educating his disciples from that unhappy that pathetic incident of the rich young ruler it's easier he said for a camel to go through the eye of a needle and for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God the disciples were amazed and they said who then can be saved you see the disciples of yesterday are like the disciples of today and the disciples no doubt of tomorrow salvation we tend to think of it as an easy thing well it isn't easy who then can be saved and Jesus replied with man it's impossible you can't in your own strength get rid of your idols the things that that come between you and Christ you'll not do it you'll never do it nobody's ever done it with man this is impossible and then there come the happy words that with

God all things are possible even this getting rid of that last and most precious idol from God's throne the dearest idol I have known what e'er that idol be help me to tear it it will be painful help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee so when the preacher says remember thy creator in the days of thy youth before the evil days can be certainly means get rid of the idols in God's strength in the Lord's strength and he's saying for one thing he's saying more than that but he's saying for one

thing what John says in his epistle little children may guard yourselves from idols let us pray oh Lord our

God we pray thee to bless thine own word we thank thee for the teaching of the old testament and the new testament coalescing around this one thought that we must get rid of everything that comes between us and thee and the teaching that it is only with thy gracious help the help of Christ and his holy spirit that we can tear pluck the idol from the throne of God and worship him alone we pray thee Lord that we may be willing to give up everything for Christ and that we may truly surrender to him and jettison even the most precious things that stand between us and him in order that we may be real Christians in dependence on his grace and be possessors of the life everlasting we ask it for his sake Amen