

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I remember reading about one of those very old pithy epitaphs that someone found on a weathered grave in a Scottish graveyard. It said, “*Here lies Tammas Jones. Born a man. Died a grocer.*” Apparently Tammas lost something priceless in the space between the dates on his tombstone.
- B. The Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes began his book, “*Meaningless. Meaningless. Everything is meaningless.*” What else could Tammas Jones expect but to die defined by his small, little job? But the Teacher is not so hopeless as he sounds. Today we’re going to look at two passages that point us to **two life investments that are *not* meaningless: faithful friendships and reverential worship.**

Turn to **ch. 4**. The Teacher begins chap. 4 pointing to three kinds of people who go it alone in life. The first has no choice. **4:1**, “*Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:*

I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter...
 The oppressed who have no one to comfort them. Isolated in suffering.

Then he points to the person who isolates himself out of envy. **V.4**, “*And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*” Life is very lonely for the person who is driven by someone else’s success or approval. Life becomes competition and people are used. Isolated by envy.

Thirdly, is the person consumed by greed. **Vv.7-8**, “*Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:*

*There was **a man all alone**;
 he had neither son nor brother.*

*There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
'For whom am I toiling,' he asked,
'and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?'
This too is meaningless—a miserable business!"*

Here is a person who works himself to death and yet can't tell why there's no joy in his life. Isolated by greed.

Where **v.8** says, "*There was a man all alone,*" the Heb. literally says, "*There is one and not two.*" Now the alternative to that is in **vv.9-12...** Those verses apply to anyone. We often apply them to marriage. Today, let's apply them especially to our relationships as the people of God. **To live a life that matters...**

I. ENTWINE YOUR LIFE WITH OTHERS (4:9-12)

"*Two are better than one.*" Up in v.8 the phrase, "*There was a man all alone*" is literally, '*There is one and not two*'. Now the contrast: "*Two are better than one.*" There are **four reasons**.

A. "*Because they have a good return for their labor.*" We've just read about people who are envious or greedy—only to end up empty-handed. Here's the contrast. He's not saying that business partnerships are better than sole proprietors, nor that marriage is better than singleness. He is saying that if you want a meaningful life, partner with others in life's labors—in the hard work of living. This can be applied in lots of ways, I'm sure, but let me apply this to our life together as God's people. You can't grow strong in your faith on your own. We're not meant to distribute the Bread of Life by ourselves. There is a strength in praying together that we don't have when we pray alone. Good deeds are far more potent in God's kingdom when we do them together. "*Two are better than one.*"

B. **V.10...** If life is to amount to more than smoke, we must be committed to helping one another back to our feet when we

fall. That means we step into someone else's mess instead of keeping a safe distance. We treat their wounds the best we can. We slowly help them to their feet. We let some of our work go that we might be with them.

Illus.: Once, years ago, I sat with a friend in a small support group in the psych ward of a hospital. I'd met her at the gas station and she called to ask if I'd come. Next to us were two women, unrelated. The one was desperately depressed and suicidal. The other, who was clearly a Christian, had stood by this woman for years, despite all the despair and sorrow. **Two are better than one.**

- C. **V.11...** The Teacher here may have been thinking about people on a journey through the cold winter Palestine night. But I don't think that staying warm when the temperature drops was his only point. There are other kinds of cold and dark. We call this "a cold, cruel world" for a reason.

Illus.: Recently, one of our godly men learned of a person who was desperately depressed and alone. He quietly organized a group of young adults who went to that person's home. They cleaned and visited. They prayed and listened. They warmed up that person's lonely and cold life with their kindness and self-sacrifice. **Two are better than one.**

- D. **V.12...** Life is dangerous, especially for the people of God. Ephesians tells us we live in a spiritual war zone, fighting against spiritual enemies we cannot see. We're told to stand our ground but sometimes we feel incredibly vulnerable—to sin and temptation, to Satan's attacks, to our own human weakness and despair. So we need to stand with each other, to defend each other. To help each other armor up. To pray together. To share Scripture. There is nothing quite like knowing you are not in the fight alone.

Illus.: I've told you this story before. *One night years ago a couple demanded a meeting with me and another person with whom they were very upset. They also insisted on having an elder present and another couple for their support. They had gone through a painful loss and I felt then (and now) that I had done a good job making sure they were cared for by the church and a counselor, but they were hurt and angry that I personally hadn't done more. I don't think I have ever taken such a tongue-lashing, and I had to take it with witnesses.*

*A few days earlier someone had given me one of those little WWJD bracelets that was still sitting on my desk. I kept glancing at it while they scolded me. What would Jesus do? The only verse the Lord brought to my mind was 1 Peter 2:23, "**When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate.**" These people who were so angry with me were in no way like Jesus' enemies. In fact, they were His beloved children. I am by nature incredibly defensive but I knew I had to be silent even as Jesus had been. So I sat there saying almost nothing, feeling like a punching bag. When they were finished I was wrung out. But the evening wasn't over. I'm a pastor so, naturally, I had a committee meeting waiting for me.*

It was about 9:30 p.m. when everyone left. I was bone-tired and shaken. As I walked out of my office into the dark foyer I noticed a light on in the church library. I went to shut it off and found Tom there. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I heard you had kind of a rough meeting," he said.

"Yeah, it was," I agreed. Tears came to my eyes. When I regained my composure I asked, "Have you been waiting all this time? How did you know how long I'd be?"

“I didn’t,” Tom said, “but I would have waited here all night to be sure you were alright.” And he hugged me. [PG]

SUMMARY: Don’t do life alone. Don’t leave others alone. Learn from this wise Teacher what lasts, what matters in life. *“Two are better than one.”* And *“A cord of **three** strands is not quickly broken.”*

Now to **Eccl. 5:1-7**... If you want your life to have meaning...

II. PRACTICE REVERENT AND ATTENTIVE WORSHIP

- A. Notice the first and last lines of that section: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.” Worship, whether her in church or on our own, requires us to watch our steps. And the last line of v.7, “Therefore fear God.” We have grown so comfortable—and safe—in God’s presence, through Christ, that we forget just where we are. When Moses met God on Mt. Sinai the Bible says, *“The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’”* We general hasten to add that we don’t need to be afraid of God, but maybe we overstate that. The Pulitzer Prize winning author, **Annie Dillard**, wrote, *“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”* [Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, pp. 40-41.]

B. Even though the ways we worship God have changed, the Teacher's counsel is timeless: "Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools." He is thinking of people who'd go up to God's temple who were spiritual motor-mouths. It wasn't necessarily *what* they said but that they said all kinds of religious stuff without engaging their minds and hearts. It was like God could walk away and they'd never even notice. I suppose these Jews were reciting Scripture and singing Psalms but it was just so much religious yammering as far as God was concerned. In our house, we call that *having the blurts*. People forget, as the Teacher puts it, "*God is in heaven, and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*"

V.3 says, "*A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool.*" What he means is when you have a lot of concerns on your mind those concerns blabber mindlessly all night in your dreams and yet in the morning, nothing has changed. In the same way, a fool blabbers on to God without saying anything important or sincere, so nothing changes. **If that's how it's going to be, we'd be wise to just listen and say little.**

C. There's another kind of worship talk that can get you in trouble: **vv.4-6... Vows were solemn promises to God that, in response to his grace, the person would give God some kind of offering.** But then nothing would happen. The treasurer would come, "*Ahem, uh, about that pledge, brother,*" only to be met with some excuse or delay. *Illus.:* I was reading in Jeremiah this week. Disaster had come to Israel. Babylon had conquered them. One group of refugees, under the military leader Johanan, came to Jeremiah and said, "*Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do. We will*

obey the LORD our God.” Ten days later Jeremiah got a word from the Lord. “*Stay here in the land and don’t be afraid of the king of Babylon.*” So guess what. They said to Jeremiah, “*You’re lying.*” And they fled to Egypt ... where the Nebuchadnezzar eventually came and conquered. They made a vow to obey but when the time came to trust God, they refused to keep it.

When we don’t fulfill solemn promises we’ve made to God that is fraud. Evidently, God doesn’t just shake his head and say, *Oh I never expected much from him anyway.* God calls that a sin. And if we’ve sinned like that, we need to confess and repent of it.

We should make serious promises to God. **If the sacrifice of fools is mindless chatter, the sacrifice of the wise is a promised response to God in gratitude for his grace.** I’ve mentioned before the wise word I heard when I was young: *There are promises you make that, once you’ve made them, they make you.* Those are the promises that please God. *Lord, I promise that I will set things right with my sister. I promise that we will start loving our neighbors in very tangible ways. We promise that we will give a greater part of our income to you. We promise that we will meet with others to pray.*

- D. So that brings us back to the point of all this: v.7, “*Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.*” When we revere God, through Christ, we *will* listen when we come to worship. We *will* say what we mean and do what we promise.

Conclusion:

“*Here lies Tammas Jones. Born a man. Died a grocer.*” Every day in the *Trib* there is one highlighted obituary. I don’t usually

read them because the headline tells me enough. An “officer remembered as a ‘kind soul.’” A “sports junkie who started a golf tournament.” An “attorney who had an ‘ability to make the deal happen’.” Maybe those headlines don’t do the people justice but I can just about hear the Teacher whisper, “*Meaningless.*”

I know that Jesus Christ has brought meaning to my life and hope for our eternity. But in this life—in the space between the years on our tombstones—here are two things that will make our lives deeply meaningful, two things enriched and strengthened by our relationship with Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit:

- **Entwine your life with others.** “*Two are better than one, and a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*”
- **Practice reverent and attentive worship.** “*Guard your steps when you approach God. Go near to listen, not to blabber words you don’t mean. Keep your promises to God. Fear God.*”