

I was a curious kid.

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I always wondered what that little knob at the front of the car that had the cigarette symbol on it did.

And one day, mom or dad told me that that's for lighting cigarettes.

You push it in and it gets hot and then you light the cigarette.

And I'd never seen it in action because mom and dad don't smoke.

And so I wondered, how does it actually work?

I was a curious kid and I still remember the day that I found out how it worked.

It was a Wednesday.

We were going from piano lessons to soccer practice.

It was overcast.

I can picture the car park that we were in when I thought, this doesn't, surely it doesn't get that hot that quickly.

So we're in the car park of soccer training and I pushed it in for 3 seconds, maybe 5 seconds, and I pulled it back out and it was not glowing red hot.

It was just the kind of gray brown that it always is with the little coils.

I thought, that's not hot.

And I whacked it on my thumb and yelped in pain because it was in fact searing hot.

The smell of burning flesh.

You know the smell?

Human flesh burning filled the car.

And for the rest of soccer training, I was nursing my burnt thumb having almost burnt my fingerprint off.

I was a curious kid and I conducted an experiment that went wrong.

Well, this morning, in our passage, the teacher of Ecclesiastes is conducting an experiment too.

This month at NorthernLife, we're in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

We're going five sermons in this book.

And last week, in the first message, we were introduced to the central voice of Ecclesiastes in chapter 1, verse 1.

The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

This teacher guy, as you read the Book of Ecclesiastes, is clearly a wise guy.

He's thoughtful, he's clever, he's got his head screwed on straight.

He is a wise guy.

And in our passage this morning, Ecclesiastes 2, verses 1 to 11, the teacher conducts an experiment just like I did when I was a kid.

Now I think this experiment is unfortunately no less painful than my experiment.

Maybe not physically painful, but painful in a different way.

Now before we jump into what the teacher's experiment was, it's worth pausing for a second and observing the fact that every experiment basically has three things.

I'm not a scientist, but I've sort of worked out that every experiment has three things.

A hypothesis, a variable, and an outcome.

A hypothesis, a variable, and an outcome.

Somebody made an mm-hmm sound.

I'm assuming that was a scientist who is validating this.

A hypothesis is an expectation of what you think is going to happen.

Or if you don't know what's going to happen, it's a direction towards something that you want to find out.

A variable is all the things that you swap out in order to find the, see if the hypothesis is true, and the outcome is when you objectively reflect at the end and see if it worked.

A hypothesis, a variable, and an outcome.

So this morning, we're going to follow the teacher's experiment, beginning with his hypothesis.

Verse 1 of Chapter 2.

The words of the teacher, I said to myself, Come now, I will test you with pleasure, to find out what is good.

What is good?

That's the test, right?

That's the desired outcome.

That's the hypothesis of the teacher's experiment.

He is seeking to find out what is good.

And he's going to try all these different variables among the things on earth in order to find out what is good.

Now, that question, what is good, I've been thinking about this week, and I think it's one of the most profound, existential questions of life.

What is good?

What is the good life?

What is a life well lived?

Where's true north?

What is good?

That's the teacher's hypothesis.

So, I have a hypothesis, a hypothetical.

Imagine you had one hour left to live.

Somehow, we knew that you will see the Lord in one hour.

What would you be doing with your time?

You would not be listening to me.

I'll say that.

You would run out these doors and go do something else.

Now, imagine you had 24 hours to live.

What would you do with your time?

Imagine you had one year to live.

What would you do with your time?

Imagine you had 24 years to live.

What would you do with your time?

Now, hypothetically, imagine that you only had one lifetime on this earth to live.

What would you do with your time?

What would be the best use of your one lifetime on this planet that we call earth?

Of course, that is not hypothetical.

That is the truth.

All of us, whether we have one hour, 24 hours, one year or 24 years, we only get one lifetime.

And so, the teacher has come to realize that, and he says in verse 3, I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

He has come to realize from observing people die around him, everyone has a finite number of days on this earth.

We don't live forever.

We get one lifetime.

And so, the teacher, being wise, being clever, being intelligent, thinks, well, I might as well make this life count.

I might as well find out what is good to do for human beings during the few days of their life on earth.

That's the teacher's hypothesis.

That's what he wants to find out.

And so, he conducts an experiment.

He's going to test all the variables that Earth offers to find out what is good.

Now, two and a half thousand years later, whenever Ecclesiastes was written, today, we're still asking that same question.

Maybe we don't articulate the question the same way, what is good, what is the good life.

But it is the ultimate question.

During the few days of our life on earth, what should I be doing with my time?

That's the question we're all asking.

What is good to do in this life?

Which brings us to the teacher's variable.

Verse 2.

Laughter, the teacher said, is madness.

And what does pleasure accomplish?

I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom, and we'll come back to that idea later.

I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects.

I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.

I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasures of kings and provinces.

I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart.

I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

In all this, my wisdom stayed with me.

That's his variable, right?

Those are his variables.

He's set this experiment up in order to find out what is good.

And here he is, trying to find out what is good.

He has made a hypothesis that the good life could be found among the things of earth.

So he tries all of them.

And because he's king of Jerusalem, he has, I think, unique access to everything that the ancient world offered.

Of course, your average person, two and a half thousand years ago, can't build gardens and palaces and houses.

But he's king, so he can.

He has tried everything that the world offers.

Pleasure, laughter, wine, folly, projects, houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, slaves, herds and flocks, silver and gold, singers, a harem, the delights of a man's heart.

He says, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

He also says, I refused my heart no pleasure.

He has tried everything that the ancient world offers, trying to see, to test, to experiment, if the good life could be found in those things.

I wonder what the list would look like today.

If you were president of the United States, if you had all the money in the world, what would the list of the pleasures of earth look like?

I'm sure it would look different.

There's new drugs and technology and there's new things, but pretty much the same types of things, right?

The same categories of human experience that we seek to find the good life in.

I have a friend who tells his story of coming to faith.

He tells his story in this kind of funny way.

He says, my BC life, like my before Christ life, was sex, drugs, and rock and roll in that order.

And when he said that, I was like, okay, you're trying to paint a picture of what it means for those three things to be in order.

Maybe that was some of our BC life, our before Christ life.

Certainly, it's what the world chases.

This list of all the pleasures of earth, all of the variables that we can seek to find the good life in.

My wife and I were in Amsterdam just over two months ago.

And I think if you're looking to conduct an experiment to see if the good life could possibly be found among the things of earth, Amsterdam is a pretty good city to go to.

Of course, there's the famous or the infamous Red Light District.

I remember walking down the canals, and Courtney, my wife, had been to Amsterdam before, so she kind of knew the rough area.

And walking past and thinking, what's that weird red lantern on the side of the building in the middle of the day?

And then, oh, this is the Red Light District.

And then you keep walking and you'd walk past what we called the Green Light District, if you know what I mean, in Amsterdam.

What I mean is we accidentally walked into a weed cafe that sells coffee.

We didn't have, we just had a regular coffee.

But next to the coffee, they sell all sorts of green products.

Amsterdam is a good city to go to, if you want to see if the good life could be found in the things of Earth.

Of course, Amsterdam have that, or they had that famous sign, I am Amsterdam, but the M was the first M of Amsterdam, so I Amsterdam, and it was red, because Amsterdam, and that's, I think, captures some of the heart of maybe why people go to Amsterdam, why bucks parties from London go to Amsterdam, because it's all about me.



It's all about my desires and what I could fill my body with, the red light district, the green light district, all the pleasures of the world in Amsterdam.

I was actually in a way disappointed that they have removed the I am Amsterdam sign, because there was this grassroots campaign within Amsterdam that said that we don't want that message to define us, because we're actually not an individualistic city and a hedonistic city.

So they removed the sign, which I think speaks to something of the futility of these attempts to satisfy our desires in the things of the world.

The teacher has tried everything, everything the ancient world offers.

He has tried.

Which brings us to the outcome of the teacher's experiment.

Verse 10.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun.

Pleasure, laughter, wine, folly, projects, houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, slaves, herds and flocks, silver and gold, singers, a harem.

Meaningless is the outcome.

Chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun.

That's the outcome of the teacher's experiment.

So he had this hypothesis that the good life could be found among the variables of earth, all the

pleasures that the world could offer.

But in the end, his outcome was one word.

Meaningless.

The word, hevel in Hebrew, it means smoke, vapor, mystery.

Kind of the way smoke seems solid, as though this pleasure seems to be the good life, but then just as you try and grab it, it vanishes in your hands.

That's what he's saying all the pleasures of earth were to him.

They are smoke, mystery, enigma, they are heaven.

He found that none of it really satisfied his heart.

He couldn't find the good life among the things of earth.

And so, here's the end of our passage.

Here is the end of the teacher's experiment.

Here is the end of all the things of earth.

Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher.

Utterly meaningless.

Everything is meaningless.

Here is the end.

And we find it is a dead end.

Ecclesiastes, our passage, ends in a dead end.

It doesn't go any further.

It's a dead end.

The teacher gets to the end of his road, his great experiment, and he says it's meaningless.

It's a dead end.

It doesn't go anywhere.

And so, we could end in this dead end, this morning at church.

It's kind of a gloomy day.

Maybe that kind of fits with the emotion of the room.

But I think church is meant to be a bit more hopeful, because that's not where the story ends.

But that is the dead end of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes doesn't, in this passage, doesn't go any further.

So, we have to step back and look at the Bible as a whole in order to find the way out of this depressing dead end, this meaninglessness of life.

And there are numerous ways that we could get out of this dead end.

But one of the helpful ways, I think, is to realize that the Bible, across the entire thing, has a word to describe this dead end that the teacher has found himself in.

And that word is idolatry.

The biblical word for this dead end is idolatry.

Now, idolatry, as Tim Keller famously defined it, is making a good thing a God thing.

In other words, an inanimate thing, an ultimate thing.

And so, you notice in the teacher's experiment, nearly everything that he tried, apart from the slaves and the concubines and all that, nearly everything he tried was a good thing.

Wine, buildings, even sex, good things that God has created.

But the teacher's mistake was to make that a God thing, to load up ultimate meaning in those things.

The biblical word for that is idolatry.

And now, before we start thinking, why on earth would you do that?

Why would you confuse good things with God?

These things are so different, we do it all the time.

We have idols.

It's so easy to look at the ancient world of 3,000 years ago that had these little wooden gods with angry faces, which is like some kind of image of a dark cosmic power, and to think they're so stupid to think that this is a God.

How on earth could this be a God?

We do the same thing.

Maybe not with little statues that look like a God, but we have idols in our life.

And in order for us to try and see the idols that we have in our life, I think it's helpful to observe that every idol has two things, a promise and a price.

Every idol in the pages of the Bible and in our lives has a promise and a price.

That is to say, the idol gives some benefit, some blessing, it does something helpful, but at the cost of something.

So you see this very clearly in the sacrifices of the Old Testament in the pagan nations, that if they give a bull or a couple of bulls and some animals and birds, that is the price, it reigns, or they have a child.

It's cost and benefit, it's promise and price.

Every idol has a promise and a price.

And at first, every idol is all promise, no price.

All blessing, no cost.

And so you remember the first idol in the entire Bible, I would say, is the fruit of the forbidden tree, right?

The fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

What did the serpent say about the fruit in Genesis 3?

Two things, you will not certainly die.

That is to say, there's no price.

And the second thing he said was, you will be like God.

That is all promise.

Every idol begins with no price and all promise, from the beginning of the Bible to the end.

And so here, have a sip of this drink.

It'll lower your social inhibitions, and you'll have more fun at socially awkward parties.

Here, have a puff of this.

It'll give you a good feeling this afternoon.

Or here, log on to this website, and you won't feel so lonely, and no one has to know about it.

Even here, work late tonight, and you'll get paid overtime and overtime rates.

Every idol starts with all promise and no price.

So pick your idol of choice, all promise and no price.

Now, that is a good deal.

It is a good deal.

I bet that the teacher of Ecclesiastes had a good time in the actual moment of doing the things that he did in his experiment, because they work.

This is like a weird thing to say in church, and God won't smite me because he knows what I'm

about to say.

Idols work, idols work.

Human beings are not that stupid as to think that when they sacrifice to this inanimate object, it does nothing.

They're not that stupid.

At some point in human history, when they did things to this inanimate wooden statue, it rained, or they became pregnant, and so they made this cause and effect relationship because the idol works.

The idols in our life, they work.

It's so easy for us to sit here in 2025 and think, we're so much better than that.

They're so stupid thinking that this had a relationship with this.

I think in a dark, demonic way, powers attach themselves to the things that humans worship, and these have some kind of power in the world.

The problem with idols is the deal changes.

At first, it is all promise and no price, but then the drink wears off.

The high doesn't last.

The appetite returns, and the boss asks for more and more and more.

And the next time you go to your idol of choice, there's more of a price and less of a promise.

There's more of a cost and less of a benefit, until in the end, every idol costs everything and gives nothing.

That is the end of idolatry.

We see this in the story of Israel.

The darkest, lowest place Israel ever found themselves in was depicted here in Jeremiah chapter 7.

Jeremiah the prophet says, The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord.

They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my name, that's the temple, and have defiled it.

They have built the high places of Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire, something I, Yahweh, did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

Burning their own children in the fire.

You know what the valley of Ben-Hinom is in Aramaic?

Gehenna.

Gehenna is the word Jesus uses 11 times for hell itself.

This, when Jesus says Gehenna, he's talking about the valley of Ben-Hinom as a kind of literal metaphor for a real spiritual place.

And the essence of the valley of Ben-Hinom is the dead end of idolatry.

The place that Israel found themselves in where they were giving everything, the ultimate price, sacrificing their children in the fire to receive nothing from these pagan gods.

That is the end of idolatry.

All price and no promise.

And that is very close to what Jesus calls hell, Gehenna, the valley of Ben-Hinom, which means son of Hinnom.

And today, the place that we can see this hell on earth is in the depths of addiction.

This graph is often called the cycle of addiction.

There's pain.

There's a million pain points in all of our lives.

And then as we go through life, we have a discovery.

Oh, alcohol makes me feel better.

And then there's relief.

The problem is the alcohol wears off, the high wears off, the whatever relief that this drug, this addictive substance gives you, it doesn't last.

And so there's a relapse back to pain.

Pain, discovery, relief, relapse.

Pain, discovery, relief, relapse.

The cycle of addiction.

Now in the relapse, the relief part, we could substitute all of the idols of the world.

That's what the teacher did.

He tried sex and money and slaves and singers and buildings.

He tried everything in that discovery, relief part, and it helped for a time, because idols work.

The problem is, they wear off and the pain comes back, and the deal changes.

This graph is called the cycle of addiction, but I think in another sense, it's better called the path of addiction, because it's not an endless cycle.

Yes, the cycle has stages that repeat, but there is a definitive beginning, end, and end to the path of addiction.

And the path is, as the deal changes, it comes to cost everything and give nothing until in the end you find addiction is a dead end.

And with all due sensitivity, it's an unintended pun, but it's true that that's the only place that addiction can end in death.

The ultimate price is exacted for absolutely no benefit.

That is the dead end of idolatry.



And that's why the teacher had to hold on to wisdom.

Twice in our passage, in verse 3, he says, In my mind still guiding me with wisdom, verse 9, In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

He had to hold on to his brain or he would fall off the deep end.

He would find himself in that truly dead end.

He had to hold on to wisdom to know that this path is not leading to life and life eternal, it is leading to the opposite of that.

And so he holds himself back from the edge of death itself and turns around to tell us that it is a dead end.

All the things of earth, the cycle of addiction, the things that we find relief in, in this world, do not lead to the good life.

They are a dead end.

An idol is any good thing that we make a God thing.

Anything that whispers you will not certainly die and you will be like God.

I think there are as many idols in this room as there are desires for things other than God.

Because that is idolatry.

To take God out of his rightful place and put something else there.

There are countless idols in this room.

In my life, idolatry is a broad road leading to a dead end.

It's a broad road leading to a dead end.

And so this is really depressing and we're turning the corner to try and find our way out of this dead end.

But the first step is to discern the idols in our lives.

If we don't name what those idols are and the power they have, we have no hope of replacing them with the worship of the true God.

So Tim Keller gives us four helpful pointers in his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, to discern the idols in our life.

Firstly, imagination.

When your mind is not occupied by something intense in front of you, you're not working, you're just chilling, relaxing.

Where does your imagination go?

It goes to an idol, if it doesn't go to God.

Maybe for you it's holidays.

Maybe you have that 15-minute break at work, and you can't help your imagination but to go to planning the next holiday coming up in six months.

I would suggest maybe that holiday is an idol.

Maybe it's thinking of images you saw last night.

Whatever your mind goes to in its imagination, that might be one place to find idols.

The second tip that Tim Keller gives us is to follow our money.

Jesus said, where your treasure is, your heart will be also.

We're very, very, very, very good at financing our idols.

So check your money.

Where's your money going?

There's a good chance your money is flowing towards the idols that you worship.

And we live in a time where it's never been easier to find out where your money is going.

Just pull out your bank app and start scrolling.

You'll see where your money is going.

And that might be a way to find the idols in your life.

Thirdly, this works for religious people.

What you pray for.

What are you praying for?

And if you receive it, if you don't receive it, how do you feel?

If you're praying for something and you don't receive it and it destroys you, maybe there was an idol in there somewhere.

And fourthly, your uncontrollable emotion.

This is probably the most helpful one.

It's like a landmine.

When something triggers you and you just erupt in uncontrollable emotion, strong anger, strong fear, strong anything, it could be that there is an idol buried beneath the surface of your heart.

So I hope that's helpful.

That was, I've found it helpful in my life.

Tim Keller gives us those four ways to discern the idols.

Imagination, money, what you pray for, and your uncontrollable emotion.

The first step is to identify, to discern the idols in our life.

And then the second step is to come to Jesus.

Idolatry ends in a dead end.

But Jesus offers a pathway to life.

Enter through the narrow gate, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

For wide is the gate, and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate, and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

It's a broad road to idolatry, to this dead end.

But small is the gate that leads to life.

Of course, Jesus is talking about himself, isn't he?

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, I am, meaning Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, the only way to the Father.

And so Jesus offers us, it's like one of those cul-de-sacs, that's a dead end, but there's a little laneway, a little pathway, a narrow path at the end of the cul-de-sac to get out.

That's what Jesus offers.

When we find ourselves on the broad road leading to the dead end of idolatry, Jesus offers a narrow path out of the dead end and into life.

And the narrow road that Jesus offers is the road that he himself walked, the road that led him to the cross.

It was on the cross as Jesus died that he truly went to the dead end in our place, that he took our idols on himself.

And when he died, he defeated their power and showed it up for what it really is.

It was on the cross that Jesus said those famous words, it is finished.

And then in Revelation 21 verse six, in the end, Jesus will say, it is done.

He has said, it is done.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

To the thirsty, I will give water without cost.

From the spring of the water of life.

The gospel of Jesus is the fundamental inverse of idolatry because it's all promise and no price forever.

The deal doesn't change.

That is the gospel for all eternity.

You pay nothing because Jesus paid it all in the cross.

And in return, you are loved, forgiven, and freed in Jesus' name.

Eternal life to know God.

As Paul says in Ephesians 1, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

No price, all promise.

That is the gospel of Jesus that is extended to us today.

The narrow road through Jesus, we find eternal life.

Because to know God is eternal life.

To know God through Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, is the end that every idol tries to get to.

Remember, idols whisper two things.

You will not certainly die and you will be like God.

But they do not deliver on their promise.

They end up in a dead end because we do not become like God.

We become a shell of a human being and we will certainly die potentially quicker than we would have otherwise.

Only in the gospel of Jesus, can we find death itself is defeated and we can be with God and be

transformed to become like him the way we're meant to.

To know God through Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, is the end that every idol fails to deliver on.

It is God that we are looking for in these idols.

CS.

Lewis wrote, we are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition and all the variables of the things of earth when infinite joy is offered us in Christ.

Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he can't imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased.

He's talking about the gospel and idols.

We fall short, we are far too easily pleased with the things of earth when infinite joy is ours in Christ.

To know God is eternal life.

He is the end and the beginning of all things.

Paul says in Romans 11, Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God that God should repay them?

Here's the cool bit.

It's all cool.

This is the coolest bit.

From him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever, amen.

God is the end and the beginning and the middle and everything else.

He is the one that we are seeking in these idols that fail to deliver.

And so as we discern these idols in our lives through money and imagination and unanswered prayer and our uncontrollable emotions, as we discern these idols, we can't just uproot them or knock them off the mantelpiece because they'll grow back or a new one will take its place.

The only way to finally deal with an idol is to replace it with the true God that most fully fulfills the fake promise that the idol offered us.

And so, we're about to sing these words in a few minutes.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in his wonderful face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glorious grace.

That's the gospel.

That as we, through song, which we're about to do, through worship, through our whole lives, given to God as an act of worship, we are taking down the idols from the mental piece of our heart, from the altar of our heart, and we are putting God in his rightful place.

That as we turn our eyes through worship, through reading, through scripture reading, through prayer, we turn our eyes on the glorious, bright, shining face of Jesus, we come to find that this idol that I have been clinging to and trying to find life in is strangely dim.

Hmm, we come to find it is a dead end, because God is the only end and beginning and the middle and everything to us.

So would you like to stand?

We're coming to worship in a moment now.

And as we worship, it could either just be saying these words that we've said a few times, a few hundred times, or this act of worship could be us together as the people of God taking down the idols and putting God back in his place.

And as we do that, as we together fix our eyes on Jesus, our prayer and our heart is that the things of earth would grow strangely dim, that we would be fully satisfied in him.

So as the band come up, let me pray for us.

Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you for the depth of the riches of your wisdom and knowledge.

We could never know your mind or trace out all your paths or be your counselor.

Lord, we could never give anything to you that would make you repay us.

But you are gracious and compassionate to us.

You've given us everything in Christ.

We thank you for his death on the cross.

You've given us that broke the power of idolatry over us.

And in the resurrection, we thank you that you defeated death and you brought eternal life into the present.

And so, Lord, as your people, as brothers and sisters under God, as we stand here today, Lord, we want to tear down these idols and put you back in your rightful place, Lord.

And as we worship now, even as we sing these words in a moment, help us fix our minds, attention and our hearts' affection on your glory, on your face, that the things of earth would grow strangely dim.

Lord, help us to find the life eternal that you offer us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.