



Sermon – March 10, 2019  
David Allen

*A Visit to Vanity Fair*

Father, thank You for meeting with us here in these moments. You're the reason we're here. Father, we don't show up for any other reason because we are Yours. We need You, God. We want to worship You. We want to honor You with everything that's within us. We want our praise to be from the inside out because we know that You look upon our heart today. So may the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be pleasing to You, God. You're our strength, our redeemer. We love You, God. Father, as we open our ears that we may hear, open our hearts that we may receive what You say to us in Your word. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church today, to me today, God. Call me to obedience. We rejoice in Your truth. In Jesus name. Amen.

Good morning Central Baptist! Pleasure to be with you today. I bring you greetings from Southwestern Seminary where your pastor is a PHD student in preaching and I am his supervisor. So I thought you might like to have a brief report on how he's doing. And I'm very happy to report to you today that he is a solid C- student. And so no worries. Nothing to worry about. He's doing very well. He's finally completed all of his seminars. He's at dissertation state and he's writing on his PHD dissertation. You can be very proud of him. He's doing a very, very good job. And so at his invitation, I have the privilege of being here with you today and it is certainly an honor and a joy to be here.

When I snap my fingers, through the magic of time travel, we are going back three millennia to a little sliver of land about a 150 miles long, 75 miles wide in the area of the middle East. And when I snap my fingers, we'll be there. And we're here. Across the thick, lush grass of the palace lawn, fall the shadows of trees transplanted from distant forests. Fish pools fed by artificial streams of perpetually ruffled with Golden Scale darting to water cave to water cave. In the beautiful royal gardens, flowers spangle their rainbow colors everywhere. Trees brought back from foreign forests are planted across the palace lawn. Peacocks brought back from India strut the walkway. Deer stalk the parkways. In the royal stables I hear the neighing of 4,000 horses standing in blankets of Tyrian purple chewing their bits over troughs of gold. In the royal garage, 1,400 chariots just waiting the visit of a dignitary to be brought out on parade. His palace would make the homes of the lifestyles of the rich and famous look like pauper's houses. In the royal cellar, thousands of flasks of the world's finest wines waiting to be uncorked at his weekly wild,

extravagant parties. His financial portfolio is no less impressive. Gold, 600 million dollars. Silver, 1 billion, 20 million dollars. He is a shipping tycoon. His ships traverse the ocean bringing back countless priceless treasures that adorn his palace walls. He is a true renaissance man. He's a musician. He has written over 1,000 songs. He is a philosopher. He has constructed and written more than 3,000 proverbs. He is also a scientist as a true renaissance man. He has written books on zoology, ichthyology, ornithology, and his favorite subject, botany. 700 of the most beautiful women on the planet call him their husband. 300 more his concubines. All 1,000 awaiting at his beck and call to provide him his slightest sexual whim and his wildest sexual desire. He shops at only the finest bazaars and dines at only five-star restaurants. Everywhere he goes he's followed by more paparazzi than Elvis, Princess Diana, and Michael Jackson all combined. He is Plato, Aristotle, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Hugh Hefner all rolled into one man. His mother, the beautiful and ravishing Bathsheba. His father, the great king and warrior and sweet singer of Israel, David. You know his name. His name is Solomon.

Today is the day that he has promised us a preview of his last and his latest book. In fact, he's provided all of us a copy of his book. It's called Ecclesiastes. You've got a copy with you today at his bidding. In just a moment, I see it now, the palace doors are opening and the royal entourage is making their way down through the royal gardens to the platform. I see him in his gaunt, royal robes, his gaunt form. He looks a lot older than I remember him the last time I saw him. As he approaches the stage and the podium, we all stand in honor of the king. And as he steps to the podium, microphones are thrust into his face. And we lean forward on the edge of our seats as we are awaiting the words of King Solomon. He looks around from left to right, surveys all of the crowd. And then he lifts his head toward heaven and he closes his eyes and he lifts his hands toward heaven and he calls out with a loud voice, "*hābel hābālīm hābel, hābālīm hakkōl hābel*". Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What did he say? Did I hear him right? The man for whom the world was not enough, the man on whom the world exhausted itself, the man who has everything, all of the money, all of the women, all of the fame, all of the popularity, who has everything you could possibly want. And yet he describes his life with this term vanity. Oh my goodness, Solomon, what in the world is going on when you use that word in chapter 1, verse 2 five different times. Vanity of vanities. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

Vanity is an interesting word, is it not. The word that's used here is not a reference to that piece of furniture in your grandmother's bedroom. Nor is it a reference to someone who stands in front of the mirror for 30 minutes every day primping themselves. That's a usage of the word, but that's the, not really the meaning of the word here. No. Vanity. Nor is it really what Carly Simon sang about. You walked into the party like you were walking up to a yacht. Your hat strategically dipped below one eye. Your scarf, it was apricot. You had one eye on the mirror as you watched yourself gavotte and all the girls dreamed that they'd be your partner and you're so vain. So Carly Simon sang about Warren Beatty, they say, I don't know. No, that's not really the concept either. It's all a part of it. It's all tied up in that. But the Hebrew word for vanity, the word *hābel*, translated vanity, is a word that has many different meanings depending on its context. But the root meaning is perhaps best described as vapor, smoke, a wisp. It's just a moment and then it vanishes away. Breath, wind, there's a transience to it. It's what's left after you pop a soap bubble. That's the meaning of the term. Vanity. It's a term that describes that which is transient. It's a term that describes that which is fleeting. It's a term that describes that which is passing. 38 times do you find that word in the book of Ecclesiastes. 38 relentless salvos of pessimism pour from the

pages of this book as Solomon describes life as he's lived it and life as he's observed it. And he says, it all under the sun, another phrase that's used many times in this book, looked down from the horizontal, not the vertical, perspective. Leaving God out of the picture. Horizontal only, everything is transient, fleeting, and passing meaningless. It is vanity. The word connotes that which is absurd. There's an absurdity to life that arises from the contradiction between two undeniable realities. What do you have in life? You have wolves but you also have lambs. You have weeds, but you have roses. You have sharks, but you also have kittens. You have tornadoes, but you have gentle breezes. You have ugliness, but you also have beauty. And so there's a certain contradiction, a certain absurdity in life. It's also a word that describes the irony of life. There are some things that happen to you in your life that are inequitable and that don't make sense. The evil prospers and the good guy dies young. The cheater is the one who gets the high grades and you don't when you play it right and are honest. The embezzler gets the Lamborghini. That's the way it works. The action of life does not yield expected results. There's a certain irony in life. And the longer you live, the more you discover that that is absolutely true. Vanity of vanities, Solomon says.

There's also the incomprehensibility of it all. The limitation of human reason to penetrate the mirk of life. You cannot control it. You can't control your life. You want to. You want to be in control and you try, but things happen. The doctor calls and says, "Come to the office. I have your test results." And you have stage 4 cancer like what happened to my wife several years ago. That's the way life is. There's a certain incomprehensibility about it all. God has put enough rationality in the universe to make faith reasonable, but He's left enough out to make faith absolutely essential. Have you lived long enough to discover that? And then it's a word that describes the futility of life. You will die. The people who bury you will die. And the shovel that is used to bury you, will turn to dust. If Jesus tarry's His coming, we're all headed to the grave: you are, I am, we all are. One day, you know, I could die today. May have to have my funeral here at the church. And then, you know, you all will go over to somebody's house and eat potato salad. And you'll talk about me. You'll say, "Yeah, you know, wasn't he from Georgia?" "Yeah, he was." "Didn't he teach over at Southwestern?" "Yeah, he did. You know he preached over there at Central; last sermon he ever preached before." "Yeah." And then the conversation will turn to, "Oh my! I've got an appointment at the salon." And, "Yeah, you know I've got to go by the grocery store before I get home." And somebody else says, "How 'bout them Cowboys last year? And what do you think the Rangers are going to do this year?" And they all leave the house and I'm forgotten. That's what Solomon says life is like. Now some of you are students and you are so young and you don't believe life is like that. Because of your idealism and God bless you for it. But I would be, you would be wise as a student to pay careful attention to what Solomon is saying in this book. There's a futility of life. It doesn't matter whether you're Mother Theresa or Osama Bin Laden. You're going to the same place in terms of physical death. And then the word describes the randomness of life. Just no rhyme or reason to it all. I had to learn a new word when my girls were teenagers. They're grown now. Sitting around the dinner table, I made a comment and one of my girls said, "Dad that's so random." I said, "Well I have a PHD in linguistics, but I've not ever heard you use that, you know, what are you talking?" I had to learn a new vocabulary with teenage girls around the house. The randomness of life, no rhyme or reason to it. It seems meaningless, it's really not. But it does seem that way. And so the book of Ecclesiastes begins like fingernails being dragged down a chalkboard. Just sends a shiver up your spine. Solomon needs to be put on anti-depressant pills. He's got a bad case, a serious case of the blues. He's like

a New Orleans blues man on the docks of the mud-slung Mississippi as he sings. Said, “I search for wisdom, but the girl done turned up wrong. Yes, I search for wisdom, but the girl done turned up wrong, gave me mighty fearful contusions. Make me toss all night long.” That’s Solomon. Life is supposed to be a symphony. Instead, it’s a cacophony. Life is dull, depressing, disappointment, a disaster. Do you see that tattoo on Solomon’s forearm as he speaks? Do you see that tattoo on his neck as he’s addressing us today? That tattoo is the Hebrew word *hābel*. It’s on his body. It’s his key word. Vanity. There’s the disappointment of pursuit and the satisfaction, dissatisfaction in the enjoyment of life. In 1972, the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl. And the MVP was Duane Thomas. The leading sportscaster of the day interviewed him after the game and said, “Duane how does it feel to play in the ultimate game.” And I’ll never forget his response. He said, “If it’s the ultimate game, why do they play it again next year?”

Solomon searches for meaning and purpose in life like you do. And basically throughout Ecclesiastes, his search is in five different areas. He introduces us to that search early on in the book in chapters one and two. The first place he searched for wisdom, or searched for meaning in life, is wisdom, philosophy, intellectualism. You see it in chapter 1, verses 16 through 18. Solomon said, verse 16, I have amassed wisdom far beyond all those who were over Jerusalem before me. My mind thoroughly grasped wisdom and knowledge. I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind. For with much wisdom is much sorrow, and knowledge increases, as knowledge increases, grief increases. Now be careful. This is a university town. And I too believe in education. I teach. I have a PHD and I teach in a seminary. I believe in education. Solomon’s not knocking education per se. But what he is saying is, education alone will never bring you meaning and purpose in life. If you put all the eggs, your eggs in the basket of education, you will never find true meaning and purpose in life. Education cannot get you there alone. It’s a wonderful thing. It’s a good thing. You ought to get as much of it as you can; I certainly agree and believe. But education alone will not do. Have you ever met somebody who’s educated beyond their intelligence? An uneducated person will steal a watermelon out of a box car on the train. You educate him and he’ll steal the railroad. Education does not change moral character. And wisdom and philosophy, do you see that sign at the end of the road of wisdom and philosophy? Do you see it? Do you see it? That sign has big words printed on it. Dead End. Dead End. Alone. Apart from revelation. Apart from God. Wisdom, intellectualism, will never get you there.

Then Solomon sought to find meaning and purpose in life in wine. And so he became something of an alcoholic and so in chapter 2, verses 1, 2, and 3, he said, “I said to myself, go ahead, test you with pleasure, enjoy what is good, but it turned to be futile.

<sup>1</sup>I said to myself, “Go ahead, test you with pleasure. Enjoy what is good but it turned to be futile. <sup>2</sup>I said about laughter, “It’s madness and about pleasure, what does it accomplish?”  
<sup>3</sup>I explored with my mind the pull of wine on my body and how to grasp folly.

Solomon sought pleasure in alcohol. He thought, if I can drink this, snort that, shoot this, smoke that, somehow it’s going to bring me meaning and purpose and peace and all that I need in my life. And Solomon drowned himself in alcohol every week. The Bible says he had wild, extravagant parties. All of the entertainers and all the rock stars and all the great politicians and everybody came to his parties every weekend. 10’s of thousands of dollars every weekend on his wild,

extravagant, drunken parties. And yet at the end of every needle and at the bottom of every bottle, there was an abyss of insanity that Solomon experience. And he discovered there is no meaning and purpose in wine. And he lost out in alcohol.

Then he tried work. He said, “I’ll become a workaholic. So chapter 2, verses 4 through 7:

<sup>4</sup>I increased my achievements; I built houses, I planted vineyards, I made gardens and parks, <sup>5</sup>and planted every kind of fruit tree; <sup>6</sup>constructed reservoirs to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees.

And so forth and so on. He became a workaholic like some of you; throwing yourself into your work. Workaholism, thinking that that’s going to bring meaning and purpose in your life. Work is good, the Bible says. He that will not work shall not eat, the Bible says. But the workaholic does not find meaning nor purpose at the end of it all. At the end of the day, the five o’clock whistle blows, you come home, and it’s vanity.

And then Solomon tried the fourth way to provide meaning in his life. He sought wealth. He became the materialist. Happiness through money, he thought. So he said in verse 8 of chapter 2:

<sup>8</sup>I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces.

And he became the richest man who ever lived. Thinking he would find peace through little green pieces of paper being passed back and forth among us. And yet there was no meaning, no purpose to be found in all of the wealth of the land that he amassed and that he possessed. And then Solomon said, “Well, I’ll seek it in women.” Sex. Hedonism. And so in chapter 2, verse 8, he says, “I had many concubines.” Yes, he did. 700 wives and 300 concubines. All of the sex he could possibly want at the drop of a hat, 24/7, all of his life, a thousand of Miss Universes as his wives and concubines. And yet in the midst of it all, it brought no fulfillment, no happiness, no meaning, and no purpose in his life. Solomon sailed the high seas of human experience and he made many charts and many notes and he took his digital camera along with him. And he made snapshot after snapshot and photograph after photograph. Here’s Solomon the bookworm, click. Here’s Solomon the gourmand, click. Here’s Solomon the playboy, click. Here’s the Solomon the professor, click. And he put all of that together and he made a collage of it all and yet the world promises more than it delivers, Solomon discovers. The cover of the book is a lot more interesting than the pages of the book. And the more Solomon was gratified, the less he was satisfied. Did you hear that, A&M University students? The more he was gratified, the less he was satisfied. Therefore, he concludes in chapter 2, verse 17:

<sup>17</sup>Therefore I hated life, for all is vanity.

You ever get to the point where you feel like you just hate life? A lot of non-Christians are at that point. But a lot of Christians get to that point too. The routine, the monotony, the frustration. Even the young student and the old business man and everybody in between can get to the point where they hate life. And Solomon says in verse 17, all is *hābel*. It is vanity. You think if you can do it, buy it. If you can learn it or go there, it’s going to provide you meaning and purpose in your life. But you have not, you cannot, and you will not find meaning in that way. Apart from

God, your search for meaning, you're a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. *Häbel!* Emptiness. A wisp of smoke. A vapor. What's left after you pop a soap bubble. That's where you are. And some of you are here today and some of you especially who are here in a crowd this size and you don't know Christ as your Savior and you are listening intently because you know, even though I don't know you, I am describing your life to a "T". You see, I don't know you, but the problem is not whether I know you or not, the fact of the matter is, God knows you. And He knows what Your life is like. Solomon's been down all the roads you've been and some you've not yet been. And at the end of it all, his search left him nothing.

We see it in our American culture in many ways. Allow me to illustrate it to you. We see it in our literature. Chesterson said in his work, George Bernard Shaw, "is vanity, life if dust and love is ashes." The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, we are bubbles of nothingness on a sea of emptiness. Mark Twain, man lives in a world where he's honored for an hour and then he's forgotten forever. Thomas Gray, our hearts are muffled drums beating funeral dirges to the grave. Maybe you'd rather discover it in our music. So listen to Elvis Costello as he sings, nonsense prevails, modesty fails, grace and virtue turn into stupidity. What shall we do with all this useless beauty? Or maybe Bob Dylan is more to your taste in his song Idiot Wind. Now everything's a little upside down. As a matter of fact, the wheels have stopped. What's good is bad, what's bad is good. You'll find out when you reach the top, you're on the bottom. Or maybe Metallica is more to your taste. Fade to Black. Life it seems will fade away. Drifting further every day. Getting lost within myself. Nothing matters; no one else. I've lost the will to live; simply nothing more to give. There's nothing more for me. Need the end to set me free. Or may you'd rather hear it from Courtney Love's band. And the song Use Once and Destroy. It's the emptiness that follows you down. It's the ache inside when it all burns out. Or maybe you're a Bono fan. You want to hear it from U2. I still haven't found what I'm looking for. Or perhaps Lady Gaga will explain it to you in her song Vanity. The lyrics of which are so filthy that I have to edit out much of it. Midnight at the glamor show on a Sunday night. Everybody drink a lot of whiskey and wine. We dance like no tomorrow, we're on burlesque time. But everybody's gotta work tomorrow at 9. Touch me, touch me baby. But don't mess up my hair. Love me, love me crazy. But don't get too attached, this is a brief affair. Vanity. Pictures in magazines and movie screens. Vanity. There is a camera, so many beauty queens. Vanity. It's so good to be fabulous and glamorous. We love ourselves and no one else. Vanity, vanity, vanity. Or maybe you'd rather hear it from Christina Aguilera's song, Vanity. The lyrics of which your teenage girls listen to are also so filthy that I had to edit them out. I'm not cocky, I just love myself. Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who's the fairest of them all. Never mind, I am. Yeah, I am. If I were her, I would kiss me. Every day I see myself, I love me even more. It's me I adore. I'm she best for sure. V is for vanity. Every time I look at me, I turn myself on. Yeah, I turn myself on. V is for vanity. Thank you mom and daddy, because I turn myself on. Yeah, I turn myself on. Let us not forget who owns the throne. And then at the end of the song, at the time her five-year-old son, Max, is heard on the album answering her question, "Who owns the throne?" And little five-year-old Max says, "You do, mommy." No Christina. I've got news for you girl. You don't own the throne. He owns the throne. The One we same about earlier this morning is the One seated on the throne.

Well we could go on and on with some music. How about the advertising industry? Calvin Klein. When we baby boomers were young, he sold us Obsession. And then as we got a little older he sold us Eternity. And then, more recently, he's selling us Escape. And now to our children in the

world of post-modernism and our grand-children, he's now selling Contradiction. You see the development of a meaningless life, even in advertising. MasterCard. There are somethings money cannot buy, for everything else, there's MasterCard. But the most egregious one of all, and this is a good company, by the way, but I'll never forget it. 21 years ago, the advertisement on television, it is perhaps our most impressive safety feature ever. A Volvo that can save your soul.

Vanity of vanities, says Solomon. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Ecclesiastes deals with the monotony of life. We all face the appalling inference that nothing in life seems to matter. No Matter what we do, no matter who we are, no matter what grades we earn, no matter what jobs we work, it just all doesn't seem to make sense in the end. And yet we turn to the end of the book. And at the very end of the book, you find these words repeated again in chapter 12 in verse 8. And the book is bookended, Ecclesiastes is bookended by these words again in chapter 12, verse 8. Everything, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Like book ends of the book. But did you notice, look carefully. Solomon gave you a copy today. Look carefully. Ecclesiastes does not end in verse 8. There is a final paragraph in the Hebrew text, verses 9 through 14. And because of time, I do not have the opportunity to give an exposition of those verses. So I'll quickly address your attention to the last two verses which are the key verses in the entire book. And which is the key to understanding the meaning of the book of Ecclesiastes. And you find it in Ecclesiastes chapter 12, verses 13 and 14.

<sup>13</sup>When all has been heard, hear the conclusion of the matter, this is it: fear God and do what He says because this is for all humanity. <sup>14</sup>For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

You see, what appears to be a conglomeration of all kinds of pieces of threads that don't match up in the tapestry, and everything looks confusing, and yet at the very end, above the sun, and under the sun without God, that's what you get. But God said, that's not the end of the story. Above the sun there is God who puts meaning and purpose in life. And that meaning and purpose comes through His Son, the Lord, Jesus Christ and a knowledge of Him. And you find meaning and purpose in life when you find Him who said in John 10, I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly. His name is Jesus. When you put New Testament glasses on and read these verses, you discover that Solomon is pointing to Jesus. Here's the end of the matter. Fear God and do what He says. Two imperatives followed by two motives. Fear God and keep His commandments. The first motive, this concerns every person. Most important thing in your life is whether you're fearing God or not. Fear God. Second motive, do what He says. The motive for that is God will bring every deed into judgment. Visible or hidden, good or evil, top to bottom, start to finish, everybody stands as a Christian at the judgment seat of Christ or as a non-Christian at the great white throne judgement. And God has designed it that you cannot be a no-show. You can skip that class tomorrow. Well, it's Spring Break. You can skip it next week. But you cannot skip the judgment. Cannot be a no-show at judgment. Literally in Hebrew it reads, God you shall fear. Inward devotion followed by external worship. There is the key. Fear God, you fear nothing else. You don't fear God; you'll fear everything else. Mark it down. Keep His commandments. Fear God. That's the point of departure. Keep His commandments. That's the path of travel. There's the secret of meaning and purpose in life for those of us who know Christ. This mitigates the pessimism and hallows the contents of the book, the dim obscurity and the murk of Ecclesiastes and life. Suddenly the mist lifts and the clouds disperse and the beautiful sunshine of the Son of

God shines on the pages and shines on our lives and we find meaning and purpose in life when we come to know Christ as our Lord and as our Savior.

Title of the message today is a visit to vanity fair. Don't stay too long at the fair. In the 1950's, Billy Barnes wrote it and sang it. Have I stayed too long at the fair? I wanted the music to play on forever. Have I stayed too long at the fair? I wanted the clown to be constantly clever. Have I stayed too long at the fair? I bought me blue ribbons to tie up my hair. But I couldn't find anybody to care. The merry go round is beginning to taunt now. Have I stayed too long at the fair? The music has stopped and the children must go now. Have I stayed too long at the fair? Oh, mother dear, I know you're very proud. Your little girl in gingham is so far above the crowd. No, daddy dear, you never could have known that I would be successful, yet so very much alone. I wanted to live in a carnival city with laughter and love everywhere. I wanted my friends to be thrilling and witty. I wanted somebody to care. I found my blue ribbon all shiny and new. But now I discover them no longer blue. The merry-go-round is beginning to taunt me. Have I stayed too long at the fair? There's nothing to win and there's no one to want me. Have I stayed too long at the fair?

Don't stay too long at the fair. Come to Him who created you and who redeemed you. His name is Jesus. He died on the cross for your sins. And who made it possible for you to rightly be related to God through Him. His love for you is so great that He died on the cross. And if you will meet His condition of salvation, which is repentance of sin and faith in Christ, God will save anyone, everyone, anywhere who meets His condition of salvation. And so today if you are here and you're not a Christian, I call you to repent and come to Christ. Or if you are here today and you are a Christian, but somehow things have gotten out of order, you maybe during this time of response, when the pastors are here, perhaps you want to come, maybe not to speak to them, but just kneel at the altar. Talk to the Lord and get that *hābel*, get that vanity gone and discover the joy of your walk with God once again.

Heavenly Father, thank You that it's not all vanity. That it's not all emptiness, mist, smoke, a vapor, what's left when a bubble is popped. Father thank You there is more. You've give us more. There is a way out of our darkness. A way out of our sin. And it's through Christ Jesus. And Father I pray that every person in this building would know Christ today. And those that don't know Him would come to know Him. And Father as those pastors are here at the front to greet any who come, I pray that during this time of response we would do business with You. Thank You, Father that You give us the joy of Christ in our lives. In Jesus name we all pray. Amen.