

Date of sermon: 9/25/2021  
Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke  
Bible passage or verse: Ecclesiastes 4:1-12  
Title of Sermon: The Potential of the Church  
Series: The Bride - #3

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**4** 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; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. **2** And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. **3** But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. **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. **5** Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. **6** Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. **7** Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: **8** 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! **9** Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: **10** If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. **11** Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? **12** Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

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CS Lewis, in his book, Mere Christianity, says, "Humanity's unwillingness to serve God and to live for Him is the key to understanding history." Lewis goes on to say this. He says, "Tremendous energy is expended, great civilizations are built up, excellent institutions are devised, but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaws always bring selfish and cruel people to the top, and it all slides back into misery and ruin." I'm concerned, as you are, I'm sure. Some people are eternal optimists, and they say, "Oh, it's gonna turn around." I'm not so sure. I am very concerned where our country is at. I told one dear friend the other day. I said, "You know, it's like just constant grief for me sometimes." I open the news, and I read and I hear about things, and I hear about people being fired, and I hear about contentions and contentious things, and I think, "God -- my children, my grandchildren are gonna live in a world that's very different than the one I grew up in." As soon as I say that, I can almost hear the teacher, Solomon, say, "Time-out, son -- can you step aside and let me preach?" Because I think, if Solomon were to stand here tonight, he would say, "My dear friends -- what you're facing today is nothing new. It's not new at all!" Kingdoms have risen, they have fallen. Tremendous energy has been expended. Great civilizations are built up. Excellent institutions are devised. But each time, something goes wrong.

What is it? It's sin. And as much as we say that, we somehow, maybe -- I'm not sure what it is. You can devise the answer and tell me. But somehow, we are pretty convinced that it's worse today than it's ever been. Until you read the Bible. And when you read the Bible, again, the teacher said: "I saw the oppression that was taking place under the sun." What the teacher is going to tell us is that what you and I are facing today is nothing new. Sin has a tragic outcome. It's called rebellion, and it's not new. And it always takes force or shape in three ways: Oppression, corruption, and interestingly, isolation. No matter what happens, the teacher is telling us that what goes on in a country, in a village, in a group of people, sin comes in. That's what CS Lewis said. When people turn away from God in their rebellion, sin seeps in, the garbage rises to the top -- not the cream, the garbage -- and that is, individuals who are involved in oppression, corruption, and it ultimately leads to isolation. But rather than dropping you off the cliff and saying it's just all gonna be horrible, the teacher ends in a way that brings hope.

But before we get there, let's look at the problem. He's telling us that if you were to look around, and it doesn't matter the season, it doesn't matter the generation, it doesn't matter the epic of time. There are three fundamental outcomes of rebellion, and the first, he says in this text, is the destruction of oppression. "I looked and I saw the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed--

they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors--they had no comforter at all." Justice, in other words, wasn't to be found. The strong had all the power, the rich. It seemed like the elite were making all of the decisions, and everyone else was just kind of getting by, paying their way. Who are these people? The definition of oppression is this: Oppression is malicious or unjust treatment, or the exercise of power, often under the guise of governmental authority or cultural opprobrium. You look around today, it's like -- yeah. That's today. Oh, it is here, yes, but it's -- Haiti. Cuba. Yemen. North Korea. Soon to be Taiwan. No matter where you look. What is oppression? It's malicious, it's unjust. It's the weakest. It's people, millions of people who are being treated as mere objects. Slaves. Tragically, while people who are making millions condemn slavery in our country and make millions off of it in another country. Strange, isn't it? Often under the guise of governmental authority.

In our day, maybe one of the most abusive was Saddam Hussein. And when soldiers went into Iraq, one soldier that I had talked with, when the invasion went into Iraq, he said he made his way into the country, and he would go from building to building that were once prisons of torture. But Saddam has cousins, and he has brothers, and he has friends. And the teacher, Solomon, was saying that when sin enters into a country, into a person, it always breeds oppression. It always breeds unjust treatment, exercise of power, abuse over people. We're not treading in any country or territory that we haven't gone before, he says. That's what happens when rebellion sets in. It leads to an unjust culture, the destruction of oppression.

It also, as we read on, leads to the damage of corruption. He said, "And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor." What happened? Work got corrupted. There are two forms of corruption, he says in the text -- in work. One, out of envy, he says, "The fool folds his hand." Now, to be honest with you, I don't that kinda fits anyone here tonight, but my guess is that we would understand this under what we would call the welfare state. It's the individual who believes somehow, for some reason, that they don't need to work, they don't deserve to work, they shouldn't have to be called to work -- they should simply be cared for, by you. Their theory is, "You know what? You work! I'll take it." That's what he describes. It's a corruption that happens in the mind, happens in the heart. "The fool folds his hands" -- verse 5 -- "and ruins himself." But there's another form of corruption that he talks about here, and it's the next one. It's called greed -- workaholicism. He says, "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil, chasing after the wind."

There are two forms of corruption that can happen when it comes to work. One is the fool, who says, "I don't need to. Work is for somebody else. I shouldn't have to work. My mom and dad -- you brought me into this world, you need to take care of me until I die. I shouldn't have to leave the house. I shouldn't have to pay rent. I shouldn't be expected. I mean, Mom, Dad, you want me to pay rent? What kind of sick parents are you! Don't you understand? You're the one who decided to have me, not me. If it was up to me, I'd have never been born! And since I am, and it was your choice, you take care of me." That's a fool. It's the corruption of how we see work. But there's another corruption here, and that's the person who's never content. They're always chasing after something, always believing that the next deal, the next million, the next whatever the case may be, is somehow gonna satisfy them. That too, he says, is a great corruption. Where does it lead? Both of them lead to a culture of corruption. Do we have that today? Oh, yes. How many millions of dollars do companies spend today trying to keep people from stealing from them? How many companies spend billions of dollars in our country making sure that somebody doesn't hack their internet system and close down an oil pipeline? Or reallocate some money. Or steal a bunch of titles of property.

How many ads have you heard in the last three months of somebody that's gonna steal your property, somebody that's gonna steal your bank account? How many of you know somebody -- I do -- that in the last six months has had identity theft or money literally stolen straight out of their bank account? I do. Sadly, they're all in our church. Really wonderful people. You see, the teacher would say, when sin enters into the world, corruption always comes with it, and it always twists. By the way, listen to this one -- it always twists that which is beautiful and God created. That's what corruption did -- envy stepped in. You name the beauty that God created -- sexuality, they twisted. Femininity, they twisted. Corruption

always takes. It doesn't -- see, corruption is never creative. Satan has never created. He's never created anything. He only takes that which is beautiful and twists it.

When I was younger, I had a good friend who taught me how to work. I didn't like it at the time. He was a seed farmer -- he had these boxes, and he was gonna put fresh seed, his seed in it, and it had to be pure to be sold. And so, he would shake the box, and I would vacuum it out. And I'd vacuum that thing out, man, with just the most powerful vacuum in the world, and I'd be thinking, "I'm done! I'm getting out of this box." And I was finished. And lo and behold, he'd come over and look at that box and shake it again, and find 10,000 seeds that I hadn't picked up. And I hated it. I thought, "If I have to do this the rest of my life, I'm gonna lose my mind." But something happened in those days. I didn't know it. Something set in where God was teaching me something: the beauty and the value of work. And it's never left me. But you see, in our culture, we're getting to the point where 50 percent of those adults in this world are no longer working. They could. Well over 40 percent of the population that could be working are no longer working. Many of them could. But we've twisted work. And it's become something for somebody else to do. Or, sadly, work has turned into an idol. The teacher would say, the tragic outcome of rebellion is that it leads to a corruption where the enemy is always twisting that which God said was beautiful.

Lastly, he talks about a man that is alone. Isolation. "There was a man that was alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil." In other words, he went to work every day. Made a lot of money. Yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. Because one night he sat at home and he thought to himself, "Who am I gonna give this to when I die?" I know of a man -- he's a multimillionaire. His entire family hates him and he hates his entire family. I often wonder what he thinks at night when he's at home. His health is not good. I wonder what he thinks about all that money that he's gonna have and I wonder if he ever misses a conversation with his daughter. I wonder if he ever misses having his son stop by and saying hi. He's rich. He's got all the money you'd ever want. And then some. But he's alone. He virtually has to hire people to step on his property, because no one would go there out of friendship. See, that's not new. Solomon said there's people out there that are alone. They have all kinds of people around them. Some of them even have tons of people working for them. But they ask, "Why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This, too, is meaningless."

There was a book that was written, oh, a number of years ago, entitled *Bowling Alone*. Kind of a funny book. Putnam identifies something that I didn't know. I grew up bowling all the time. It was just a huge passion of mine. And so, when I saw the title, I was intrigued by it. Putnam identifies that bowling has significantly increased in the United States in the last ten years. I didn't know that. But here's his observation. It has not increased in leagues; it has not increased in teams; it has increased in people bowling alone. Now, that seems strange to me. When I was a kid, I did bowl alone. I bowled all the time. Actually, I was on TV a number of times. It was something -- this is a little-known secret that I don't let too many people know. It was an area where I was sponsored and on kind of the circuit of the pro-bowlers' tour. I bowled alone a lot, because I was down at that bowling alley more than I was at my house. But it was because I was focused on something. Putnam says no, this is the social thing. People are so disconnected that they are increasing in going to movies alone and increasing in bowling alone. Why? Because we're isolated. We have more technology in the world, we're on the internet all the time, we have the screen telling us about everything. We have podcasts galore. And the tragedy is, increasingly, we have no friends. The tragic outcome of rebellion leads to this. And the teacher would say, "My friends, what we're experiencing today, what Putnam has identified, what CS Lewis has identified, is nothing new. Rebellion leads to oppression, corruption, and isolation." And you say, "Pastor, what does the church have to do with this?" Look at his answer. It's remarkable. "Two are better than one. Because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him. Pity the guy who's isolated. But two who are drawn together, they can keep warm. And if they're overpowered, they can defend each other." Do you know notice what he did? It's masterful. What he said is that there's a divine power for the community of the church to do good. Is the church here? Not directly. But when you look at the people of God, when you look at the nature of God, what he's trying to introduce to us is that the problem of the world is going to be solved by the community of God's people.

The most severe problems of the world -- corruption, oppression, and isolation -- the church, the people of God, is the very answer for that.

To isolation: two are better than one. That's what he says. When the two come together, they're gonna find a strength, they're gonna find an encouragement, they're gonna find an inspiration -- two are better than one. And by the way, oppression? Not a problem. Because when you face the oppression -- and you will in a fallen world -- the two can stand up against it. One can defend the other. They can partner together, and there will be a sense that in the strength of the community, there will be a capacity and an ability to stand up for the injustice of this world. Corruption? Where was the corruption? It was in work. Notice here -- notice that the two working together do what? Bring a good return for their work. There's a divine power for the community of the church to do good. In fact, what the teacher would say is this -- community is the counterweight for the corruption and the sinful destruction of the world. It is. Community -- the church. Where do we see that? Well, let's make our way -- you don't have to turn there -- we'll look at this passage coming in the future, but Acts chapter 2 is the introduction of the church. That song that we sang tonight was such a beautiful -- out of the resurrection of Christ and out of the victory of Christ. What did He form? The church. For what purpose? The sins of the world. The corruption, the oppression, and the isolation that comes from sin. And Jesus so was convinced that the church was gonna be the solution and it was gonna be the answer that He says, "I'm gonna become the head of the church. I'm gonna set myself up as the director, the commander of the church, and we're gonna march like an army into this world, because this world is filled with all kinds of corruption, all kinds of twisting of work, and the church is gonna be a mirror of how to work. The church is gonna be a mirror of what is just, and the church is going to be an answer for all of the painful isolation that is gripping people's hearts."

You see, the community of the church is the counterweight to all of our problems. Why? Because the church reflects God. The three who are one. The church, the many, who are one. And God sent His church into this world fully aware that when sin gets its grip, it will always lead to oppression. It will always lead to corruption, the twisting of the beauty of God. And it will always lead to isolation. What's happened over the last two years? People have been locked into their homes, buried onto TV, buried on the internet, disconnected from people, suicides going through the roof. Depression is going through the roof. Meds that are treating both of those are going through the roof. Corruption. Internet theft. All of those are at a peak, and we kind of feel like, "Man, this is horrible! Where's it gonna go?" Same place it's always gone. It's gonna go to the point where, if God doesn't intervene, the whole house crumbles. But the teacher didn't say, "Well, run for the hills and save your life." He didn't say, "Abandon ship!" What he said is, come together as the community. Two are better than one. They have a good return for their efforts. What he said is, this place of unity, this place of community is going to be a place that God blesses. He always has. It's gonna be a place that God shows up. What kind of place is it? Acts describes it as this. A place where they devoted themselves together. A place where they ministered together. A place where they sacrificed together. And what was the net result of that community of believers? Good deeds of the church created good favor. They met needs. They rescued the oppressed. They defended those who were experiencing injustice. They sacrificed and met the real needs of people. What was the net result of that? Good deeds created good favor, which gave them the opportunity to share the good news. And do you remember one day? Just one day! Church had a good day, and the Scripture says that what? Three thousand people came to Christ.

You see, there is a divine power for the community of the church to do good. And when we capture this, says the teacher, we will begin to see the potential for the church to thrive in this fallen world. It's going to be dark. The corruption will probably increase. The oppression and the control of government is probably going to increase. And you can be depressed and you can be discouraged, and I fight that off sometimes, and you can grieve -- or as the teacher says, there's a solution when the people of God face this kind of season. What is it? Be the church. What happens? Together we can defend the oppressed. We can. Jesus, when He was walking around with His disciples, He healed the sick. When Jesus was walking around with His disciples, He fed the hungry. When He was walking around with His disciples, He defended the outcasts. And my friends, the church can do every one of those. We can. We are sent into this world to pray that God would heal the sick. We are sent into this world to feed those

who do not have food, to meet their needs. The church at one point used to believe this, and we created hospitals. We absolutely believe in the natural healing of Jesus, and we also believe, as the church always has, from the first century all the way through when the church ran to the city, when the black plague came, and when the bubonic plague came, what was the church doing? The church was the one that was running to the city. The church was the one that was running to the desperate places. The church was the one that was running to save those who were being wrecked by Katrina. The church was the one running to save those and to rebuild the homes of Ida. The church was the one. We can still do that today. Together we can defend the oppressed. We can huddle around people. Why? Because one arrow can be broken, but when you bind them together with ten, it has a strength far beyond the one.

We don't have to defend the world. God hasn't given us that assignment. But what we can do is look around and say, "In our city, in our influence, what God is bringing into my life -- who is it that is sick, that I can be involved in helping become whole? Who is it that is hungry that I can help feed? Who is it that is an outcast that I can help welcome?" I'm looking into seeing how our church can be a part of resettling Afghanistan refugees. Through no fault of their own, many of them, to be quite honest with you, spent 20 years helping our country, and if they were to stay there, they're absolutely assured to be dead. And so, they were brought over here. And now they're brought over here and they virtually have nothing. And we could say, "Well, the government'll take care of 'em." But the church has never said that, my friends. The church has never said, "I'll let the government take care of them." See, the people of God said, "No, let us."

Back in Acts, they met together. They ate together. They sacrificed together. They met needs as they were presented. And what happened? The good deeds created good favor, and it gave them the opportunity to share the good news, and 3,000 people came to the Lord in one day. Together, we can defend the oppressed. And together we can liberate those trapped by corruption. And what is the ultimate liberation? It's not teaching them how to work -- as much as I believe in that. My friend, we've been entrusted with the gospel, and it will release people from the bondage of death and corruption that Satan wants to bring into their life. The most powerful thing this church owns is the collective nature of the gospel that we get to proclaim to our city. It is the most liberating, it is the most powerful resurrecting power of Jesus Christ. It takes a dead person and brings them into life. What difference does that make? My friends, in the last two days I've done two funerals. Precious people. Too young to die. But neither of those funerals, as hard as they were, were filled with desperate grief -- they were filled with hope. You know why? Because I know where both Jim and Debbie are. I know where they're at. I know who has embraced them. I know the joy of Heaven that we just sang about. I was just sitting there singing that song that we were singing tonight, thinking, "Yes, and they're already there! I know two people that used to be, by the way, Saturday night friends. And they're now in the presence of Christ!"

You see, that's what the teacher is telling us. We've been entrusted something. We can liberate those who are coming into corruption. We can steward the gospel. Sometimes I imagine -- I wonder what I would be doing if I never came to Christ. I wonder if I'd be alive. I wonder how destructive I could have become. I wonder how obsessed and driven with greed -- because I remember going to college. My number one goal when I went to college was -- it was real simple. I will get rich. That was it. What do you do when you wanna get rich? You go into business with a minor in accounting. I want to be around money, I want to get more money, I don't wanna be on poverty -- I always wanna have a ton of cash in my wallet. I have successfully graduated from college. You can open my wallet, and I -- never have money in my wallet. Ever. And I usually have broken credit cards. Not broken because I had too much money on them -- they don't have anything on them. They just sit in my wallet, and they just get cracked.

I wonder sometimes. Do you? I wish you could come to my office. I wish you could sit in my office, because if you did, you would hear of the liberating power of the gospel. You'd hear a story of a lady that a group of people prayed for. She was enslaved by addiction. Ruined by addiction. Imprisoned because of addiction. Every friend around her was either using her for illicit things, selling her stuff, or

buying stuff from her. To listen to her talk today is simply a story of the redemption of Christ. But it's not just her. There was a whole church -- a group of her friends who loved her and never gave up on her.

And if you could sit in my office, you'd hear of a young man. His wasn't addiction of drugs and alcohol, but he had addictions. It gripped him. It'd keep him awake at night. Sometimes he would never sleep, and he'd go to work the next day having spent the entire night on the internet. Couldn't turn it off. It would grip him and he would be obsessing over, and the next thing you know, it would be 2:00 o'clock, and then it would be 4:00 o'clock, and then it would be 6:00 a.m. And then, the following day, he would pound energy drink after energy drink after energy drink just to make it to 5:00. And then he would crash, and he would wake up at 1:00 in the morning, and he would start the cycle all over again. He'd come to grips with the reality that, "I'll never be married. No woman would ever want a person like me." And then God came into His story. But it wasn't just God -- it wasn't. He had friends. He had a church. And they prayed.

My friends, together we can liberate those trapped by corruption, because we've been entrusted with the gospel. And we have a God who hears our prayers. And we have a God who for whatever reason has told us when He sees a church unified over things, He obligates His blessing. I don't really fully understand prayer. And I really don't fully understand group prayer. All I know is that God says, "When I see my church unified, when I see my church together," He says, "When I look at that, it naturally draws the power of the living God." How do I know that? All the way through Scripture, God seems to affirm the synergism of community. Two are better than one. They have a better return for their labor. They can keep each other warm. When somebody comes up against them, they can defend it. We can liberate those, and together, we can invite people to connect.

I do not have a romantic view of the church, by the way. I've been a pastor for 41 years. I do not have an unrealistic view of the church. My back has more scars on it than if I went through a war. I just happen to love the church and believe in it. I happen to believe that it's the most powerful organism that God has ever put together, and that when people get invited into it, they can find their place, they can find encouragement. They can grow. They can be strengthened. They can use their gifts, and they can find their place, and they can find friends, and they can be encouraged, and they can have significance like they've never had before. And if I could invite you here on Tuesday night, you'd see. You'd see 60, 70, 80 high-schoolers running around. They don't care what high school they come from. They don't care if they're home-schooled, private-schooled or not. They come and they have friends, and they're led by a group of people that are as diverse as they come. Some are married, some aren't. Some are older, some are younger. And when they come -- not perfect -- they find people who are interested in them. They find folks who have surrendered their time and talents to the Lord and said, "God, can you use me?" And you're gonna see people who make lifetime decisions at that group and will be changed forever.

If I could bring you here on a Wednesday night, you're gonna see young men who are 22 hanging out with kids, and you're gonna see people who are 72 hanging out with kids. And these two people that on any given day have nothing in common. Nothing. But this guy listens to music, it's southern gospel, Gaither Vocal Band, praise Jesus, hallelujah. When this young man's 22 and he listens to his Christian music -- it makes Led Zeppelin look quiet! This guy thinks Gaither should be illegal! This guy thinks his music should be illegal! They really don't have much in common, other than they're on the same team. And they care about the same kids. And they believe in the power of the Word of God. And they've sacrificed their life to make a difference for Christ. See, that's why I love the church. Where else do you get that? Where else do you get married and unmarried, younger and older, who are setting aside all the things that they care about and think are important to connect, to be on a team. To make a difference. The reality is, God says, "There's nothing new under the sun." When sin gets ahold of a country, it brings oppression, corruption, and isolation. The teacher will tell us it's always been that way, and God says, "I have a solution. Two are better than one. A strand of three cannot easily be broken." And the church has a divine potential to thrive in this fallen world. It does. It's time, my friends, to look to the future and say, "I don't care about COVID. Of course it's real. I don't really care about the destruction of our country -- of course it grieves my heart." It's time to be the church. Because the

church has been entrusted with what? The assignment of God and the power of God and the potential of God to be the very answer for what the enemy wants to do to our country. When you see oppression, the church can defend it. When you see corruption, the church can free it. When you see isolation, the church has a solution. The church has a divine potential to thrive in this fallen world when we give ourselves to the power of community. Is it easy? Not at all. Because sometimes I have to hang out with this kid and listen to his music that makes me want to throw up. And once in a while, I go to Gaither Vocal Band concerts with my mom, and it's so cotton-pickin' loud, I have a headache for three days. But the reality is, in this beautiful thing called the church, we get to kind of set aside all those things that we think really matter, and so we say to each other, "You're on my team. I'm on your team. How about if we go into this dark, corrupt, oppressed world and be the church. Because Jesus said, 'That's the answer.'"

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