

Being the Underdog in a Dog Eat Dog World

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- [0 : 0 0] Greed is good. Greed is good. That's a quote from a movie. The movie is Wall Street.
- It's a 1980s movie featuring Michael Douglas and that's his famous quote from the movie. And certainly in the world of business and politics, they try and hide that greed is good, but it's pretty much run by the saying that greed is good. And it's true in a sense, if there's no God and you don't believe in a God, then greed is good because how else are you going to get the stuff that you need? How else are you going to get the stuff that you want? There's no one else going to do it for you. You've got to go out and do it for yourself.
- But there's a problem with greed in that it's ugly. Not sure if you've ever seen pigs eating, but it's quite something to behold. They normally run squealing to get first to that food trough, pushing other pigs out the way, make sure they get as much as they can, and in fact, they overeat so the others can't get any food. Pigs are like most animals. They're concerned with getting what they need and doing whatever it takes to get it. They don't worry about morality, right or wrong, or the damage or pain they cause in getting what they want.
- They think with their eyes and they think with their stomachs. And in our passage today, the writer of Ecclesiastes looks at the world of man and his ambitious striving for success and sees that when people are just in it for themselves, they behave hardly better than animals. And the results are injustice, oppression, and alienation.
- The passage today looks at the world around us and says it's a dog-eat-dog world out there. It's an ugly world full of people that behave like animals. And it raises some profound questions that requires how we as Christians are to navigate our way in a broken world because we find that we are faced with the same problems in our time. Problems of injustice, problems of oppression, problems of alienation, people not getting on. And it looks at how this greed and ambition and success plays out in the world of business and politics and relationships. So we're living in a dog-eat-dog world where people behave like animals. And the first thing that we're going to look at today in our passage is what being the top dog in politics is all about. Being the top dog in politics.
- [2 : 4 0] And the main conclusion that this wise teacher makes from looking around him at the world is that, yes, it's a dog-eat-dog world out there, meaning that man left to his own devices without any reference to God is nothing more than, doesn't behave any better than the animals that we see.
- Especially when it comes to how he treats his fellow man and how he strives for success. So, I know we just read from chapter 4, but if you're in Ecclesiastes, then just look back a few verses. This whole passage actually starts in chapter 3.
- And we'll actually start with chapter 3, 16. But I just want to draw your attention to verse 18 and 19 there. Chapter 3, verse 18, the New Living Translation says, I also thought about the human condition, how God proves to people that they are like animals.
- That's the import of that verse, whatever your translation is. My NIV says, as for men, God tests them, so they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals, verse 19. The same of fate waits them both.

As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath. Man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. Now, he's not saying that we should be like animals.

[4 : 00] He's looking at the world and going, well, we are like animals. Especially, as we look in Ecclesiastes, it's life under the sun, meaning life without God. So, what are people like when they're like animals in the world of politics?

Well, he sees two things that are really ugly and really horrible and make life really difficult for everyone. So, chapter 3, verse 16. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness.

And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. So, he wants to look for justice. He wants to find justice, but he just sees wickedness.

He sees trouble. He sees problems. He sees people doing bad things instead of doing the right thing. Then, in chapter 4, verse 1, that's where our passage began today. And he says, again, now he's looking around.

He's looking around at him in the world. He's looking for good things to base his life on. Again, I just saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun.

[5 : 11] Chapter 4, verse 1. And behold, the tears of the oppressed. And they had no one to comfort him. And on the side of the oppressors, there was power. And there was no one.

To comfort him. Well, these issues of injustice and oppression. We know about them all too well in South Africa, don't we?

You know, it's like we haven't learned our lesson. Man, as a political being without God, is going to continue making these mistakes over and over. We all know about the problems that were caused under apartheid.

And all the injustice and the oppression that followed. And all the damage and all the pain. And in many ways, we're still dealing with the fallout. Of what people who were supposed to be living as Christians actually chose not to.

Use Christian principles in their government and hurt an entire nation. But then, when the government changed, we all hoped for the best.

[6 : 14] And here we are. We were lulled into a false sense of security, thinking it would be different under the new government. But the new government is as ungodly as the old one.

The same thing that's happening in Ecclesiastes, possibly written by Solomon. 1,000 years before Christ, that means 3,000 years ago. He's looking for these things.

He can't find them. We are in exactly the same position in a world that's run by men without God. The new government is as ungodly as the old one.

If anything, it's worse. Because at least under part-end government, it was in some sense guided by biblical standards. Now, I need to put that in inverted commas.

Because in many senses, it wasn't guided by biblical principles. But in some senses, it was. The new government that rules our country is not Christian at all.

[7 : 13] By their own admission. They're in fact Marxists. They only think about life under the sun. They only think in terms of man. And what he can do.

And what he can expect. And what he can get. And so, we can expect, because of that kind of thinking, even more tyranny. Even more oppression.

And even more injustice and corruption. So, that's the lay of the land. We need to realize where we are in South Africa. We're using Ecclesiastes to look at the world around us as well. And go, okay, well, what's it like? Well, it's not good out there if you don't have Christian people in politics.

In leadership. Now, when it comes to politics and thinking through how Christians should interact with the world. Christians tend to think more with our knees than with our brains.

You say, okay, how do you think with your knee? Well, because Christians have what I call a knee-jerk reaction. Against when the church starts speaking about politics and culture and how the world around us behaves.

[8 : 19] They go, whoa. We don't want the church to get all political. But if God himself addresses these issues in his word, then we need to take the problems that this world faces seriously.

And we need to come up with biblical solutions. And so, Ecclesiastes here is saying, we are going to feel frustrated with corruption and oppression and injustice. These are realities in our world, and we all feel it in this country.

But to do nothing about this, in other words, to not get involved at all, is not what God wants. Because injustice and oppression impacts us.

It's meant to impact us. We're meant to feel it, and we're meant to take action on it. At least we need to be compassionate for people suffering under injustice and oppression.

In chapter 4, verse 1, he sees the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter. Well, in the New Testament, it tells us about how Jesus has sent a comforter to his people.

[9 : 31] To comfort us, yes. So that we can comfort others. And that doesn't mean they don't cry. It's part of that. It's drawing alongside them.

We'll look at that in a second. But it's looking at the things that are causing oppression and injustice and going, Oh, hang on. People need to live in comfort. You're making them uncomfortable. Something needs to be done.

At the very least, we need to be compassionate for people suffering under injustice and oppression. Not turn a blind eye, as we did easily under the apartheid government.

It's not our problem. It's their problem. But it's easy to do that in our new government. The government must sort it out. But they're the problem. So how can they sort it out? Better yet, we can take action against oppressive and unjust political systems.

So they're doing bad things. We give comfort to the people that they're hurting. And we take action against them. But they're still there, causing problems in people's lives.

[10 : 38] They're being a bully in the playground. Yes, you can help the person being bullied. You can bandage up their scrapes and scraps. You can try and stop the bully from doing his thing.

But best of all, we can ensure that because we are Christians, there are no oppressive and unjust systems of rule in our land. That would be the best option.

Get rid of the bully. And make sure he's not there to do any bullying. Make sure the playground is a nice place for everyone to play and be in. Make sure the cypher is fun and enjoyable for everyone.

Not only for a limited few. So it means getting involved in politics because we are Christians.

Now this is important for us to hear, especially in this year when we have our elections coming up. And we've got to decide. If we want to have politicians that carry on the legacy of corruption and injustice and oppression, or are we going to elect politicians that know the God of the Bible and politicians that don't automatically strive for power and control?

[11 : 55] So we've been given a chance, an opportunity, to put people in positions of power and authority that won't carry out injustice and that won't carry out oppression.

So it's an important task lying ahead of us in the elections this year. Ecclesiastes in chapter 3 and 4 doesn't give us all the answers.

It asks a lot of questions. And so we've got to move out of Ecclesiastes to find some real handy answers. And one area I want us to look at.

So turn with me to Romans chapter 12. So just turn to Romans chapter 12. And Paul is writing to the church at Rome.

And he's telling them exactly how to interact with the broken political system around them. So Romans chapter 12 and verse 14.

[12 : 55] He's writing to the church in Rome.

Rome is not the friend of Christians. Paul himself is going to get killed, martyred by the emperor Nero. And already at this stage where he's writing to them, they've probably gone through persecution already, like all the churches were in the New Testament.

So how are we supposed to interact with this oppressive government? What are they supposed to do? Must they rise up and overthrow their oppressor? Is that what freedom is about? Must they just take it? Must they do nothing?

Because politics has got nothing to do with the Christian church. Because the Christian church is only about having your souls saved and go to heaven when you die. Well, Paul says it's neither of those.

So chapter 12 and verse 14. Bless those who persecute you. Bless them and do not curse.

[14 : 04] Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Identify yourself with people who are getting oppressed and hurt.

Be with them. Help them. Feel what it's like for them to go through that. Don't stand back and pretend that nothing is going on. It's not happening to you, so it's happening somewhere else. Live in harmony with one another.

Don't fight back. Do not be proud. But enjoy the company of the lowly. So these people who live like animals, who want nothing to do with God, are higher.

They are proud. They think they can do what they like. They're the highest authority that they know. No. Paul wants people, especially Christians, to enjoy the company of the lowly.

To enjoy the company of the lowly. Don't be conceited. Don't think of yourself more highly than you should. Don't be arrogant. Don't be proud. Or what happens when people hurt me?

[15 : 12] Verse 17. Well, you are not to repay anyone for evil. Rather, carefully consider what is right in the eyes of everybody.

Do the right thing. Get involved. Don't fight back. Don't fight evil with evil. But don't stand back and do nothing. Get involved. If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone.

Do everything you can to not be disgruntled, dismayed, but particularly to fight evil with evil.

If it is all possible on your part, live at peace with everyone. Don't avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head.

[16 : 21] The writer to Ecclesiastes says something quite similar in his passage. When he's looking at, in chapter 3, don't turn back there now, I'll just read it. He looks at, in the place of judgment, there's wickedness.

But in verse 17, he says, God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked. For there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.

We saw that last week. Leave space for God's vengeance. What are we to do then? Verse 21, back in Romans chapter 12, 21.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. So that's a pretty good charter for how Christians should be involved in the world around them when it comes to the world of politics.

It's a call to be involved, to expect pushback, but nonetheless to consider what the right thing is to do and to overcome evil with good. You might want to turn back to Ecclesiastes chapter 4 again.

[17 : 28] So that's looking at the world, looking at being a top dog in politics. They want to lord it over us. We, as Christians, in a sense, don't allow that by repaying evil with good.

Now, can I just say this is not easy. I don't have all the answers worked out on this. And, of course, what's needed is for us to help each other to do that because we want to repay evil for evil.

It's natural to want revenge. I'm going to want to do it. I'm going to need Christian help to say, hey, we don't do that. Let's consider how we can support good Christian governance or at least good governance in our country.

Well, the next thing that the teacher in Ecclesiastes looks at, that the writer looks at, he's looking at the world of politics and he concludes that it's meaningless.

So, have a look at chapter 3, verse 22. Yes. 3, verse 22. Man is an animal.

[18 : 46] There's injustice everywhere. So, what's left? So, verse 22. I saw that there's nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work because this is his lot.

For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? So, we need to look at being the top dog in business next. The world of business.

Because that's where people get really greedy and really pig-like as well. Both in the world of politics and in the world of business. So, the best thing you can do, according to that verse, is enjoy your work.

Because establishing justice is going to be too hard in a world that's only interested in living like animals. And getting what they can and not even giving anything back. But, we see that work itself is wrought with problems.

So, now we're in chapter 4, verse 4. He's looking at labor. He's looking at work. He's looking at toil, really. He says, I saw, chapter 4, verse 4.

[19 : 49] I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless. A chasing after the winds.

Hmm. So, work itself is problematic in the world of man when men do things without reference to God.

All they want is to get what other people have. This is a jealousy and covetousness at play here. Jealousy kind of principle.

Keeping up with and overtaking the Joneses. And using every trick in the book to get there. Not worrying about social norms or right or wrong or good or bad. Now you think, okay, well we don't live like that.

But, one of the places that the Christian witness suffers most in the world is the workplace. Because of the way that Christians try and reach the top. It's often no different from the unchristian world.

[20 : 50] And there's many who can testify to being caught out by corrupt business dealings. And the person purported to be a Christian.

The solution in this section is to live with wisdom when it comes to work. Well, one option is to not do anything.

Verse 5. The fool folds his hands and ruins himself. So, your one option. If work is so bad and you're just running after people, maybe we shouldn't do any work at all.

Well, you're going to find yourself running into trouble there very quickly if you don't bother to do any work at all. That's going to catch you out quickly. Rather, verse 6, better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

What's he saying there? Well, you can fold your hands and then you'll have to, in some translations it says, your hands will start eating themselves or you'll have to eat your hands because there's no food around.

[21 : 55] And then it goes on, better one handful of stuff with peace than two handfuls of trying to get it at all costs and then losing everything. In other words, don't kill yourself working.

Enjoy a bit of stress-free living even if it means not having as much. The point is here is work hard but don't be a workaholic. There's nothing wrong with running a business.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with running a business. Leadership in business is important as needed as Christian politics. We've got them in our church, which is great. The point here is not to work hard but not to be a workaholic.

Don't be a slave to your job. But this is for everyone. A slave to making money. A slave to getting that deal. A slave to trying to impress your boss to climb the corporate ladders.

Nothing wrong with doing that but don't be a slave to that. Don't chase after it like it's the only thing that's going to give you meaning because it's going to run out.

[23 : 01] It can't do that for you. Christians, you are a Christian first. If you're married, you're a husband second. Christian men.

You're a father third. You're a boss or you're a worker fourth. Everything must be done in line with you being a Christian.

My dad was a doctor. Oh, he worked hard. I hardly saw him. And to this day, my brother, he's close. He's in his late 40s now.

He struggles with not having his dad around. He's in his late 40s. It's years later. And because he wasn't there. Now, I love my dad.

He's a great guy. Everyone has their issues. But it's a known fact. Especially if you're a doctor. But there's many other professions where you can run around trying like crazy to work and you leave your family behind.

[24 : 00] It's a deadly disaster for your family. Don't do that. Do not underestimate the damage you do to your family if you neglect them because you're so driven to work and to achieve and to earn.

And so what you find, just like in the world of politics, like in the world of business, if you're running after stuff outside of God's will, outside of being a Christian, there's nothing left for you to get but money and power and influence.

And no one is going to give it to you, so you've got to go and get it. All that does. And you want to lead. You want to be the top dog. You want to have that influence and that power so you can get more.

All that leads to is the same problems. Abusive and broken relationships. There's a danger for Christians who are successful in business because the same spirit is there but in subtle ways.

Typical warning signs will be things like always expecting that your opinion matters more than others. And let's be honest, you've climbed the ladder, you've got a certain amount of respect earned, that's fine.

[25 : 13] But always expecting that your opinion matters more than others. Never acknowledging that something you've said could have done or hurt someone. Not taking time to listen to others. Often belittling or shaming others.

Quick to anger when you don't get your way. Having the last say in any conversation. Thinking you're always in the right. So this is this kind of spirit of superiority that doesn't quite work its way out in Christian lives as it does in non-Christian lives, but it kind of looks like that.

Striving to be at the top, thinking that you will get what you want, is completely opposite to how Christians should live in the world of business and politics because it's completely opposite to how Jesus rules and acts in those areas.

And so, our last point, we need to look at how Jesus is the only real way out of the cycle of ambition and pride and greed. And in particular, how Jesus became the lowest of the low so that he could lift others up.

So we're living in this dog-eat-dog world. Now we need to consider what it's like to be the underdog. But if you're a Christian, it's how the underdog actually is the top dog.

[26 : 24] So the gospel teaches us that the only way that God wants us to be the top dog is to be the underdog. To be like Jesus. And so turn with me to Philippians chapter 2.

That was our reading from this, after the Old Testament reading today. So turn to the New Testament, Philippians chapter 2. Philippians tells us how Jesus came to change the world.

Not from the top down, but from the bottom up. So chapter 2 verse 3. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves. Not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.

In your relationships with one another. Have the same mindset as Christ. And you know verse 6, 7 and 8. That beautiful early Christian hymn potentially.

[27 : 45] Not just a poem. But how he humbled himself. Took off everything that he had. Became obedient to death on a cross. So here the problem of being the top dog in politics and business is addressed.

Because Jesus himself experiences injustice and oppression. But he doesn't do it just for himself. He does it for us. And he's got to do that.

Because each one of us has hurt and abused other people. This is not just for the top dogs who are at the top. It's for everyone in between. We've got to have some sort of payment made for the injustice and the abuse and oppression that we've meted out in our lives.

Yeah, it may not have been on the same scale as the politics of old South Africa or the politics of new South Africa. But we all try and rule the roost at our home.

In our relationships. In our interactions. We all try to be the... Have the last say. Have that little quote. Never admit that you're wrong. Always make someone feel like they're not quite getting it.

[28 : 51] So Jesus comes. Gets injustice. Embodies injustice.

Embodies oppression in his body. On the cross. By the Romans. By his own people. So that a new way of living.

A new way of being in this world. A new way of doing politics. A new way of doing business. A new way of handling relationships is available to people for the first time in history. So that we can break the people who've received Christ as he is.

The lowest of the low. So that we then can break the cycle of revenge and oppression and alienation. Christ gave us a new way of living and of leading.

We can still achieve. He wants us to lead. He wants us to achieve. But not by oppression. But by service. And we still think service is not a leading word.

[30 : 01] But it's a powerful word. Because Christ served us. And he's lifted us up. He's lifted millions up. Through the power of the cross.

The resurrection. And the spirit. And so if you do the same. And so if you do the same. You'll be lifting so many people up.

In beautiful and good and wholesome ways. In humility. In humility. Oh let me just make a point.

We can achieve. Not by oppression. But by service. Just think. What South Africa would be like. If we elected leaders. That had this. This mindset. Can you imagine. Wouldn't it be such a good place.

Yes. Yes. We'd be way better. If we had leaders that did this. You're going to the polls. You're going to decide. The next leaders of this country. Are they living up to this kind of standard?

[31 : 02] Oh we don't expect that of them. Well then you're going to get. What you vote for. Christ opens a new way of leading. In business.

And being a boss. That isn't bossy. In humility. We've got to consider others. Better than ourselves. So in the Christian workplace. In the Christian home. There's no space for superiority.

For abuse. For shouting. For manipulation. For taking from others. Just because you can. Makes it possible. To relate to each other.

In a new way. In your relationships. Have the same mind of Christ. But to be like him. You've got to be totally changed. By him. That's the only way. To get out of this.

Endless and futile cycle. Friends. Of the Ecclesiastes type. Of existence. Where everything is futile. Nothing gets better. Oppression is always there. Because people are living like animals.

[31 : 58] And hurting and maiming each other. And ripping each other apart. It's only Christians. Christians. Who can make any kind of change. In that area. But only if you are totally changed.

By Christ. We have actually got a good. The Bible study series. The home group series. Is actually. All about.

This topic. Actually. About how Christians are to engage. With their world around them. So. Do come to those home groups. It's going to make a. It's going to make a big difference. For us as a church. As we think collectively.

How we can better engage. With the world. From the. From the point of view. Of the gospel. From this kind of passage. So.

Jesus is the only way. To bring a new way. For people to relate to each other. In politics. At the personal level. In business. Where others are lifted up.

[32 : 53] And change. Is possible. So you end in Ecclesiastes. Change is not possible. But if you end in Philippians. I'll just read verse 12. From chapter 2.

Therefore my dear friends. Now that you know what Jesus is like. As you have always obeyed. Not only in my presence. But now much more in my absence. Continue to work out your salvation. With fear.

And trembling. For it is God. Who works. In you to will. And to act. According to his good purpose. Change can happen.

It does happen. When Christians stand up. And push back against oppression. Against injustice. Against abuse. And let relationships flourish. Let's pray and ask Jesus to help us with that.

Lord Christ. We are your people. You've come to this world to save us Lord. And you humble yourself.

[33 : 53] To a point that we still struggle to understand. In fact we can't really grasp it. But you call us to live that same kind of life. And strangely Lord.

That doesn't bring us down. But. Well it does in humility. But it also lifts us up. To serve you. And to serve others. With generosity.

Make the change in us Lord. Here at St. Mark's. Help us to make the change in South Africa. Speak to your people in this country. And may all begin to see.

That there is a new way. Of living in this land. That doesn't involve hurt and abuse. But goodness and blessing. And life. Amen. Amen.