

Making Change, Part One

Less is More

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Define what does matter:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

1. Cut Back

2. Clear Out

3. Pay Off

West Valley Church
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Making Change¹ Part One: Less is More Ecclesiastes 4:6

Good morning everybody! A lot of you were with us last month for our sermon series called "Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Busy World." We talked about making regular time in your life – an entire day even – to honor God and to restore your own life. To do that, there are things you will have to let go of and leave undone, and trust God to provide for those tasks and for your life through the other six days of the week. Right? It's a trust issue.

So starting today we want to move into another area of our lives that we need to trust God with. This brand-new series is called "Making Change."

I am more excited than I can even describe, as we're starting this series. I say this with all sincerity, that I really believe that for so many of you what God could do in your heart in the next four weeks through this message series can propel you in a direction that literally will change your life, could change your children's lives, and could change lives of people around you because of what God does in your life. I believe this message series has the potential to bring about *that* kind of change.

At the same time, I believe that for many of you this might be one of the easiest message series to shake off, to say, "You know what, I don't need that. I don't want that. This isn't for me." Please: resist that temptation and make a commitment to be here all four weeks to have your heart open to what God might want to do, to believe that God has something better for you. Here's what we're going to talk about: Today, week number one, we're going to talk about **Less is More**. Then we're going to talk about **Stress is Bad**. Then in week three we're going to talk about **Giving is Good**. Then, lastly in week four we're going to talk about **Tomorrow Matters**. I'd like you to consider with me making change in these areas of our lives.

So today we're going to dive into this idea that "Less is More," because if you're like me I've been programmed to believe that more is always better. Growing up, I thought if one is good than two is better. If one dollar is good, two dollars would be better. If one car is good, two would be better. If one kid is good, three boys would be better (at least on most days). If one is good, than more is better. In a lot of things, we think if one is good, two has got to be better.

I remember when I was a kid growing up in Salem, Oregon, I had a friend named Tom. We lived like half a block apart from the time we were 3 or 4 all the way through high school. Like boys can be, Tom and I were pretty competitive with each other. We'd turn anything into a competition; who can jump the most fences, who can make the most baskets, who

¹ Utilizing a series by Craig Groeschel, Life Church: Making Change.

has the most baseball cards, who can eat the most slices of pizza – all kinds of things. We played a lot together, and you never knew when the competitive bug would hit, but one of us would say “I can do more than you...” and we’d be competing for all we were worth – if one was good, two was better, as long as I did more than Tom.

Well, we had a neighbor who had a pretty big sized shed near his fence, and he’d let us climb up on it and sit on the roof. So one day we were sitting up there talking, and the fruit tree next to the shed had branches that were all over the roof of the shed, and wouldn’t you know it, the competition began when one of us said, “I can eat more than you!” and we were off to the races. Man they tasted good, which made the competition all the more enjoyable. Did I mention that it was a plum tree?

I honestly can’t remember who won. In fact, I really don’t remember much else about that story. At least not that *day*, but that *night* I remember some things pretty vividly.

Plums contain a compound called “sorbitol.” That compound, combined with them being high in fiber, allow the fruit to become a natural “cleanser,” and I don’t mean like soap. It’s more of an “internal” cleansing...

If Tom and I had run in a race that day, I couldn’t tell you who won; all I can tell you is we *both* had the runs. Less is more, my friends. More is not better!

As we talk today about the theme that sometimes “Less is More,” we’re really only going to look at one verse, primarily, today. Now, most of the time I like to use a lot of verses, but in keeping with our theme for today, if there’s only one verse and you internalize and you memorize that one verse, and you know that one verse for the rest of your life, then we could make an argument that less is actually more.

Now, I’ll mention some other Scriptures, but in your notes, in the spirit of the theme, there is one verse. The verse is found in Ecclesiastes 4:6. Now we’re going to memorize that verse together this morning using a method that makes it really easy – I teach this in our 102 class. We’re going to take that verse in small bites and commit it to memory. Ready? Say the reference with me: Ecclesiastes 4:6. Now recite the entire verse:

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Now: repeat after me: Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful....”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful with tranquility....”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls...”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing...”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Great. Let’s say it together:

Ecclesiastes 4:6

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Good! Hopefully you have it nearly memorized. So before we apply this Scripture to our own lives, I want to briefly give you the context in which that single verse is written. It would be bad preaching if I simply took one verse and started talking about it – you wouldn’t know if I was taking it out of context or not. So now that you’ve memorized this verse, let me explain what’s behind it before we learn what we get out of it.

Ecclesiastes is a genre of Scripture called “Wisdom Literature.” Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and even Song of Solomon all fit into that genre. The book was written sometime between 450 and 200 BC.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is traditionally thought to be Solomon, and there’s some good evidence for that, but in the book itself he simply identifies himself as “the Teacher” or “the Preacher.” In fact, that’s what the word “Ecclesiastes” means.

The author is sharing his story of trying to find meaning in this life, so he explored all kinds of things that people consider meaningful, and he found them all to be meaningless when it’s all said and done. So he used the word “meaningless” a lot. This is also where you will find that famous passage about “there is a time and a season for everything,” or, as some of you ex-sixties-hippies will remember, the song by the Byrds (“To everything, turn, turn, turn...” How many of you know that song? I’m going to pretend I don’t!) Eventually, The Preacher determines that to find joy in God himself, and to live as God instructs, is how we find the most meaning in life. It’s a very realistic look at life.

So, the verse we are learning from today comes in a section of three verses that say this:

“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. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.” (Ecclesiastes 4:4-6, niv)

One Bible commentator and scholar, Derek Kidner, calls this passage "The Rat Race"² because the Preacher is arguing that our work is driven by envy. When that’s the case, it has a twofold result: The first is the fool who folds his hands—the picture of laziness or idleness—and he goes on to ruin himself. I highly doubt if this describes anyone here but if we could put this in contemporary terms, it's the stereotypical mentality of the welfare state. Believe me I've seen the impact of this in my own extended family; it's not good. But please hear me – I’m not saying that welfare is bad. When Shelly and I started having children, I was a youth pastor and didn’t make enough money to live on, and Shelly stayed home with the babies. So we qualified for WIC (Women and Infant Children). At first we thought we shouldn’t use it, then we realized – we pay for it with our taxes, and we legitimately qualify for it – so we enrolled. It helped us out tremendously; with it we were able to get cheese and milk and cereal and bread. So I’m not saying welfare is bad; I’m saying those who abuse it are bad. That’s the picture that the Preacher is giving us here.

The second picture is one of the workaholic—the one who has two handfuls of toil and is chasing after the wind because he's driven or greedy or materialistic. This person might be the one who works 70 to 80 hours or more a week and some of us have done exactly that. But more than that, it’s the person who thinks, “if one is good, two is better.” No matter how much they have, they could always have more. This imbalance between being lazy and being driven is due to the corruption of our work. In Genesis two, Adam was working in the Garden tending it but doing so in the rhythm of Sabbath – that even the Lord himself rested on the Sabbath. Adam worked and worked hard but it wasn't a burden and he rested because there was balance. But in Genesis three, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God cursed the ground: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (you can find the story in Genesis 3). Work became hard and toilsome.

I’ve had some hard jobs in my life – bucking hay, cutting wood, I even had a job the summer after Mount St. Helens blew, cleaning ash off the roofs of the warehouses in an industrial park in Portland. I thought I knew what hard work was. I was talking to Shelly’s dad about that, and then he told me he was 15 when he was sent to work on a ranch in Northeast Colorado. All summer and all winter, all by himself, all day long, he would ride along miles and miles and miles of fence lines, checking them and fixing them and stringing them. Supplies would be airdropped to him every two or three weeks. All he had was a horse and a gun. So he said to me, "When you've strung barbed wire across miles of fencepost with your bare hands for hours on end out in the middle of a heat and dust storm, or in three feet deep of snow, then you can complain about hard work." I stopped complaining (but I cursed Adam!).

² Scott Wenig, *The Potential of the Church: A Spirit-filled church is the answer to the problems of the world.*

Okay – so in *that* context, the Preacher says (say it with me?):

“Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.” (Ecclesiastes 4:6, niv)

Why is one handful better? Because if I have one hand and someone needs a hand up what can I do? I can give them a hand up. If I have one hand full and someone needs something, I can do what? I can offer something to someone who is in need. Because why? Say it with me. “Better is one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after the wind.”

What I want to do is really focus on why less is more: less of what doesn't matter. Why? So I can experience more of what *does matter*. If you'll look in your notes, what I want you to do is look at the question, the statement. I want you to work for a minute to try to define what *does matter* to you, to think about your life and ask yourself, “What really matters?” Pick three things that matter most to you:

“Define what does matter:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____”

Let me tell you what no one will put on there. Probably nobody will say what's really, really important is how much money they have in the bank, right? Nobody will say his or her leather sofa. Nobody will say their granite counter tops that they finally got. Nobody will say the number of Instagram followers they have. Right?

When you define what matters, what you'll often recognize is so much of our lives are spent pursuing things that really *don't even make that list*. We tend to think whatever I don't have is what I need, because we think more is better. Today we're learning that Less is More.

Better is one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after the wind. I want to keep this really, really simple. I want to give you three thoughts, if you're taking notes in the app or your worship folder. The first thing we're going to learn is to...

1. ***cut back***

We're going to cut back. Shelly and I have started watching a show on HGTV called “Bargain Mansions.” This woman, Tamara Day, is in Kansas City and she buys these dilapidated mansions that were built in the 1910s to 1930s, and she remodels and updates them and turns them into these beautiful modern homes. What's really interesting is, originally these houses have only one closet, and the closet is about this big. Why is that? Evidently, in 1920 if you were a man you probably had a suit, if you went to church or had that type of a job. You had one, maybe two, nice shirts. You had some jeans and a couple of shirts to wear, maybe a nice pair of shoes and a casual pair of shoes, and that was about it, okay. Ladies, I have no idea what you wore but evidently it would fit in the closet next to those few things. One little closet. Fast-forward: Tamara Day remodels and builds in these massive walk-in

closets. Not one little closet but big closets everywhere.

Some of us, we step into our walk in closet filled with clothes and say, "I've got nothing to wear," right? It's crazy.

Some of us have so much stuff in the closet that it doesn't fit in the big walk-in closet so some of it is in the garage. We're guilty – we store stuff in our garage. What is a garage made for? A car. But the car won't fit! Some of us have to put stuff in the attic. There are some of us who have so much stuff in the closet, and in the garage, and in the attic that they rent a storage place for stuff. You pay somebody else at another place to put your stuff that you don't use, and you don't see, and you probably forgot it's there. They're paying to store stuff.

Alison Stewart, a former reporter and news anchor, spent three years investigating America's unhealthy obsession with stuff. Her book, *Junk: Digging Through America's Love Affair With Stuff*, examines the private lives and profitable businesses associated with our craving for more stuff. Stewart explains that junk business is big business: it generated more than \$24 billion in revenues in 2014. The United States is home to somewhere between 49,000 to 52,000 self-storage units. That's about 2.3 billion square feet of storage.

Reality TV shows focusing on junk took off in the early 2000's. Here's a partial list of stuff-based reality TV shows: *American Pickers*, *Auction Hunters*, *Auction Kings*, *Buried Treasure*, *Flea Market Flip*, *Hoarders*, *Junk Gypsies*, *Junkyard Wars*, *Pawn Stars*, *Picker Sisters*, *Storage Wars*, and its spinoff *Storage War Texas*.³

But we have to remember, "Less is More." Better is one handful with tranquility than a bunch of stuff, and toil that goes with it. We need to understand the principle that Jesus taught us. Jesus was telling a story about a guy, and at the end of the parable Jesus said:

"Your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions." (Luke 12:13-21)

We know that up here, but we often don't live it here. Your life does not consist of the abundance of stuff. The most meaningful things at the end of your life will never be stuff, and yet we tend to just accumulate, accumulate, and accumulate. That's why I really want to encourage you to consider cutting back on your consumption – to make it a conscious effort to cut back.

What I want in my life, honestly, is less stuff and more friends. I want less stuff and more time with family. I want less stuff and more experiences. In order to get this I want to cut back on consumption, because I know deep down that so often less is actually way more.

The second thought, if you're taking notes is we're going to...

2. ***clear out***

We're going to clear out. I've told you this story before, but I'll never forget this lesson I learned from someone in our church (I learn so much from you guys). One time we were at Vintiques at the fairgrounds looking at all the cool old cars, and we saw Gary Riddle. Gary

³ Alison Stewart, *Junk: Digging Through America's Love Affair With Stuff* (Chicago Review Press, 2016)

and Ena are really great people, and we started talking, and I asked Gary if he wished he had one of these old cars. And he said, "No, not really. There's so much work involved with maintaining them and storing them. *And everything you own ends up owning a piece of you.* I'd rather not give a piece of myself to a car."

That's great advice, my friends. Clear out, because less is more.

Now, I want to acknowledge for a moment why this is so difficult for so many people, and it really, really is. For some of you, you didn't grow up with much and so you feel like you have to conserve things. Why? Because we don't want to waste, and we might need something one day. I acknowledge that. Then, there's the whole other end of, "This is just sentimental. We got this back when such and such happened, or long before we even had kids we had this such and such, or someone I love gave us this," and so I acknowledge all those things, but at the same time your life does not consist in the abundance of stuff. Better is one handful with tranquility than two with toil and a chasing after the wind. Our son Ryan has a rule for himself: he doesn't buy another article of clothing unless he's willing to give one article away. That's a great example!

But we have so many choices that we walk into our closets and can't make a decision. There are too many options! I don't know if any of you have ever eaten at Cheesecake Factory. Anybody ever eat at Cheesecake Factory before? No matter what you think about that place ... I think the food's really good, but man I have a hard time ordering there. If you've ever been there, there's like a 73-page menu. I'm exaggerating slightly, but there's every kind of food. I can't decide. There are so many options. If I go to an Italian restaurant I know what I want. If I go to a Mexican restaurant I know what I want. If I go to an Asian place I know what I want. When I go to Cheesecake Factory I'm so overwhelmed because there's so many options.

But when you cut back and when you clear out it brings freedom for your soul. Suddenly it becomes easier to choose, and there's not a drag on your life. You're able to connect to life and people so much better.

Finally number three, we're going to...

3. *pay off*

How many of you would agree that financial stress is absolutely and completely no fun at all? I have never, ever heard a single person say, "Man, my debt helps me feel so much peace. I am so thankful for high interest rate credit cards. I feel so close to God every time I see how much I'm paying in interest. I feel so much better. My debt brings me joy." I've never heard anyone say this. What I *have* heard over, and over, and over again is, "Man, it makes me feel really stressed out. I worry about it all the time. You know, we have fights about money. This isn't helping us. I'd give anything to be able to go back and not to end up in the place that I am right now."

That's why we're going to pay off. We're going to talk more specifically next week about the heart behind doing this, so we'll be motivated to honor God in paying things off. But I tell you, what's fun is being debt free. You may say, "Well, I could never get all the way there." Then at least just make a few steps in that direction. It feels good. Then one day you pay off

a car and it's, "No more car payment, yes!" and then you're getting momentum and one day you've got no student loan payment, and then some years later you don't even have a house payment. Could you even imagine the freedom of going around every day without a house payment? I'll tell you what, *that* is fun. Stress is bad. Eliminating is incredibly freeing. Better is one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after the wind.

I'd say it this way, "Better is a car that's paid off than a brand new one with really big payments that stress you out. Better is a smaller house than fighting over the payments of a really, really big one. Better is to have financial margin and to be able to help others than living paycheck to paycheck wondering what would happen if you actually didn't get a paycheck." What are we going to do? We're going to cut back, we're going to clear out, and we're going to pay off, because less is really, really more. Better is one handful with tranquility.

Now, I am not telling you that you shouldn't have anything. I'm certainly not saying you shouldn't have anything nice at all. In fact, because you don't have a lot of junk you may actually have a few really, really nice things. I would argue all day long that it's better to have *some* nice stuff that you own than a *bunch* of junk that owns you. That ought to set somebody free. It's better to have something you love, something you use, something you enjoy than a bunch of stuff that clutters up your life. Better is one handful. I'm going to argue all day long that the richest people in the world are not those who *have the most* but those who *need the least*. Let me say it again. The richest people in the world are not those who have the most but need the least.

If you've been on one of our trips to Guyana, you know what I'm talking about. Those folks have far less than we do, but they have what they need. And they are content!

Listen guys, you have one chance to get this right. You have one ridiculously short life. What are you? You are a breath that appears for a little while. You're a mist that vanishes away. (Psalm 144:3-4) You blink – your kids are going to be grown. You blink again and you're going to be gone, "Where did my life go?" Life passes. Please understand that your life is too valuable, your calling too great, and your God too good to waste your life on meaningless things. You serve a good God who has given you breath, and gifts, and a purpose. Your calling is special. You were not put on this Earth, during this time, to accumulate stuff for yourself. You were put here because Giving is Good – to make a difference in the lives of other people.

When you recognize that your calling is too great, your God is too good, life is really, really short, then you will refuse to waste your life on things that do not matter. Why? Because Less is More, Stress is Bad, Giving is Good, and Tomorrow Matters. "Better ..." Say it with me. "Better is one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after the wind."

If I can say it this way, "Better is one handful, and an intimate relationship with my children than two handfuls and they grow up and I don't even recognize it. Better is one handful, some really good friendships or a great small group than the pursuit of things and no real spiritual community. Better is one handful and some experiences like family vacation than two handfuls and no time for each other. Better is one handful and a strong marriage than

busy, busy, busy accumulation of stuff and no intimacy. Better is one handful and the ability to make a difference in someone's life than two handfuls and being consumed with yourself. Don't miss this. Better is one handful and the ability to glorify and praise your God and bring Him honor in everything that you do in the way that you love than two handfuls in toil. Because Less is More, Stress is Bad, Giving is Good, and Tomorrow Matters.

Pray