



REFUTING EXISTENTIALISM

A GRACE TEAM UNIVERSITY SERMON

GRACE TEAM UNIVERSITY · GRACE TEAM SEATTLE

Sermon No. 2 of Grace Team University. Text: Ecclesiastes 12:13 — “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.*”

There is a creed preached on every street corner in America, though the men preaching it have never opened the books it came from. You have heard it a hundred times. *Nobody can tell me who I am — I decide that. There is no meaning written anywhere, so I make my own. Your truth is your truth, and my truth is mine. I will be true to myself, and that is enough.* Friend, that creed has a name. It is called **existentialism**, and it is the operating system of the modern soul. It was built, piece by piece, by some of the most honest and most desperate men of the last two centuries — Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus — and tonight we are going to do two things with it that are seldom done together. We are going to state it fairly, in its own strength. And then we are going to answer it out of the Scriptures, because the church of God is not called to hide from the questions of the age; she is called to answer them.

The system’s most famous sentence belongs to Jean-Paul Sartre: **existence precedes essence**. Strip it down and it means this. A knife is made from a plan: what it *is* — its essence — exists in the maker’s mind before the knife exists. Sartre said man is not like that, because there is no Maker. Man, he said, *exists* first — he surges up in the world with nothing written over him — and only afterwards, by his choices, makes himself what he is. “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.” No given nature. No assigned purpose. No heaven-written script. And because nothing is given, everything must be chosen — so man is, in Sartre’s chilling phrase, “**condemned to be free.**”

That one sentence is the whole gospel of the age, and it is a lie at the root. But mark this before we go one step further: the men who built this system asked real questions, and some of their *diagnoses* were dead right. Borrowed religion *is* dead. Despair *is* real. Death *is* certain. Excuses *do* rot the soul. A preacher who cannot grant the true diagnoses will never be heard when he disputes the prescription. So we grant them — every one — and then we open the Book, because the Bible heard every one of these cries first, and answered them better, and the answer is not a philosophy. The answer is a Person.

Our text is the last word of the oldest book ever written on this exact subject. Three thousand years before Sartre, a king ran the existentialist experiment at full strength, with a throne’s resources, and published the results. His name was Solomon, and his book is Ecclesiastes. We will hear his conclusion at the end — but first, let the sermon lay its stones in order.

I. MAN IS MADE BEFORE HE MAKES ANYTHING

The first stone is the foundation of everything: **essence precedes existence, because the Maker precedes the made.** Man does not surge up unscripted and define himself afterwards. He is conceived in a mind before he is conceived in a womb — created, named, purposed — and only then does he begin to exist, carrying a nature he did not author.

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” — Genesis 1:26

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” — Genesis 1:27

The image of God is not a prize a man wins by successful self-invention. It is the constitution of the creature, fixed before he performs a single act. David carries the doctrine into the womb:

“For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” — Psalm 139:13–14

“Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.” — Psalm 139:16

In thy book all my members were written. Against Sartre’s blank page, David sets a book. Against the self-made man, the apostle sets the workmanship of God: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”* (Ephesians 2:10). Before ordained. The works were prepared before the walker arrived. The Psalmist asks the existentialist’s own question — *“What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?”* (Psalm 8:4) — but he asks it *of Somebody*, and he receives an answer the system cannot give: *“For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.”* (Psalm 8:5).

Now weigh the rival foundation honestly, for the sermon must. The existentialist self has to be its own foundation: it must choose the values by which its choices are judged, and author the essence it then obeys. Scripture inspected that design long ago and filed its report: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9). And again: *“O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.”* (Jeremiah 10:23). A carpenter cannot level a floor with a warped level by consulting the level. The instrument that would do the founding is itself crooked — and here is the tragedy written over the whole movement: the project of becoming your own god is not a new philosophy. It is the oldest temptation in the world, in the serpent’s own words: *“ye shall be as gods”* (Genesis 3:5). Sartre, to his credit, saw it plainly: he said man’s fundamental desire is to *be God*, and called man therefore “a useless passion.” He located the primal desire exactly — and instead of recognising it as the diagnosis of sin, he enthroned it as the definition of man, and mourned that it could not succeed. The Bible agrees the project is impossible for the creature. It adds what Sartre could not say: the desire is rebellion — and the God-man he pronounced a contradiction has in fact come. Solomon summarised the whole human experiment in one sentence: *“Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.”* (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Man’s inventions — there is the entire history of self-making in five words.

11. MEANING IS RECEIVED, NOT INVENTED

The second stone: **a man does not manufacture his meaning any more than he manufactured his eyes — both were given, together, by the same Giver.**

Solomon tested the alternative with every resource of a throne. Wisdom, pleasure, wine and song, houses and gardens and orchards, silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings — and when the books were closed, this was the audit:

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” — Ecclesiastes 1:2

“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” — Ecclesiastes 2:11

Camus built his philosophy on the same discovery — what he called **the absurd**: man’s hunger for meaning colliding with the unreasonable silence of the world. But attend closely, friend, because here the refutation turns. The absurd, as Camus defines it, is a *collision* — and a collision takes two parties. A stone does not feel the silence of the world. A beast does not write essays about it. Whence comes the hunger? Solomon recorded the maker’s mark in the very machinery of the heart: God *“hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end”* (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The word rendered “the world” carries the sense of *eternity* — the ages, the long view. God set eternity in man’s heart. The meaning-hunger is not an accident of meat; it is a homing signal, installed by a Setter. Hungry men are, in ordinary logic, evidence of food. Camus located the pain exactly, and misread its cause by exactly one step: he assumed the hunger proved nothing was ever served.

And the meaning, when it comes, comes the way the life came — from outside, as a gift with an address on it. Here is the text again, the conclusion of the whole matter: *“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man”* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Note what the sentence does to the system. Man *has* a duty — he does not invent one in anguish; it is discovered, not legislated. And it is God-ward. And there is an account: *“For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”* (Ecclesiastes 12:14). That is why your choices feel heavy, friend — not because, as Sartre taught, you are legislating for all mankind in the dark, but because your choices are *recorded*, by a Witness, for a judgment. The weight is real. The system misreads its source.

It is the same with guilt. The existentialist will call your guilt a mood — bad faith, social conditioning, the stare of other people. Dostoevsky, the novelist the movement claims as its own prophet, knew better, and dramatised better: his Raskolnikov murders to prove he stands beyond good and evil, and is dismantled not by the police but by a guilt he did not believe in; his Ivan teaches that without God and immortality everything is permitted — and the lackey who overhears and believes him goes and commits the murder, and Ivan collapses into madness. (One honest note, because this pulpit does not build on misquotation: the famous sentence “If God does not exist, everything is permitted” is a later summary of Ivan’s position, popularised by Sartre — the novel’s own formulation joins both cords, God *and* the future life. The substance is Ivan’s; the sound-bite is the world’s compression of it, and we state it that way so no man can catch the preacher out.) Scripture’s word for what hunted those men is conscience — *“their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another”* (Romans 2:15). Witnesses testify to facts. Guilt is a verdict before it is a feeling — and a

verdict can be answered, appealed, and, by the mercy we will preach before we close, *pardoned*. A mood can only be managed.

III. TRUTH IS A WORD AND A PERSON, NOT A FEELING

The third stone: **truth is not manufactured inside the subject; truth is spoken by God, and truth has come in the flesh.**

Here the sermon must do justice to the grandfather of the whole movement, because he deserves it and because accuracy is a Christian duty. Søren Kierkegaard was no atheist. He was a believing Christian who spent his life at war with dead, inherited, certificate religion — with a Christendom in which a man was a Christian the way he was a citizen, by birth and by form. Against that corpse he insisted: faith must be *personally owned* or it is not faith at all. And on that insistence he was more biblical than his church. The Scripture is blunt: the sons of God are those “*which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*” (John 1:13).

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” — John 1:12–13

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” — Ezekiel 18:20

Every man stands before God in his own person; no grandmother’s faith will carry him, and no father’s guilt will damn him. Reclaim all of that from Kierkegaard, and preach it from the rooftops — it is in the Book.

But the Dane had a famous formula, and his grandchildren built a tower on it: *truth is subjectivity* — the claim that where eternal things are concerned, the decisive matter is *how* a man holds his belief, the passion of the holding. Stated flatly, friend, it cannot stand, and the Lord Jesus is the refutation of it. He did not pray, “Sanctify them through thy sincerity.” He prayed:

“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” — John 17:17

And He did not say, “I am whatever a man passionately takes me to be.” He said: “*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*” (John 14:6). Truth in Scripture is objective before it is appropriated: the gospel is a report of events — a death, a burial, a resurrection, in a garden outside Jerusalem, attested by named witnesses. Passion without the object is a fire in an empty grate; it warms nothing and cooks nothing. The prophets of Baal on Carmel were nothing if not passionate. When the young man on the campus says, “*Your truth isn’t my truth*,” ask him the bridge question: if I say the bridge is out and you say it is in, does the river care about our subjectivity? Why should the biggest truths be the only ones that bend? And then give him the promise that rides on truth being a thing outside himself: “*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*.” (John 8:32). A truth a man invents can never free him, for he would be both prisoner and key. A truth that comes to him can.

IV. DESPAIR AND DEATH ARE ANSWERED OUTSIDE THE SELF

The fourth stone — and we lay it gently, because the men under it are bleeding: **the two afflictions this philosophy describes best are despair and death, and its remedies for both are the same cruel prescription: cure thyself with the faculty that is afflicted.**

Kierkegaard mapped despair like a physician: the self that will not be itself, dissolving into the crowd; or the self that defiantly wills to be a self of its own invention — and he named its root *sin* and its cure *rest in the Power that established the self*. The Bible had conducted that therapy for three thousand years before him. Hear the sons of Korah preach to their own souls:

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.” — Psalm 42:5

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.” — Psalm 42:11

Note what the existentialist reading never supplies. The despair is *addressed*, not merely exhibited — the believer summons his cast-down soul as a preacher summons a congregation. The prescription is a *direction*, not an invention: *hope thou in God* — hope relocated from the patient to the Physician. And the Psalm does not pretend the waves stop: between the refrains the writer is still going under. Biblical hope is not Camus commanding us to *imagine* Sisyphus happy on his hill; it is hope anchored in a Person while the flood is still over the soul. Paul took the Preacher’s own word — *vanity* — and answered it: the creation “*was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope*” (Romans 8:20). Subjected *in hope*, by an act, with an expiry date. And he swept the whole catalogue of the system’s terrors into four words — “*any other creature*”:

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” — Romans 8:38–39

And death — the horizon before which the whole movement stands with clenched teeth. Heidegger taught man to run forward into his death resolutely and own it; Sartre and Camus called it the wall that cancels every project. Scripture agrees about the appointment and then does the one thing the system forbids: it reports what stands on the other side of it, and Who has already gone through it.

“And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:” — Hebrews 9:27

The horizon is not nothingness; it is a Person and an account. And the appointment has been kept by a substitute:

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” — Hebrews 2:14–15

Mark the concession in that text: men do live *“all their lifetime subject to bondage”* through fear of death — the philosophers *observed* the bondage correctly. The gospel does not scold the fear; it *delivers* from it — not by resoluteness, but by a Death already died in the prisoner’s place. That is why Paul does not imagine the grave happy; he *taunts* it, on evidence:

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” — 1 Corinthians 15:55–57

And he stakes the whole thing, with an honesty Camus would have had to salute, on a falsifiable fact: *“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”* (1 Corinthians 15:19). No philosopher of this movement ever staked his system on an event in a named graveyard. Christianity does. And the last word on death is not a stone rolled uphill forever but tears wiped away by a hand: *“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying”* (Revelation 21:4).

THE CALL — COME AND BE MADE NEW

Now the sermon comes to its errand. You have heard the creed of the age stated in its strength, and you have heard it answered stone upon stone: you are made, not self-made — your essence was given before your existence began. Your meaning is received, not invented — the whole duty of man, fear God and keep His commandments. Truth is not your feeling — it is God’s word, and it has a name and a face. And your despair and your death are not yours to cure — they have been answered outside of you, at a cross and an empty tomb.

But hear the gospel whole before we close, because this philosophy is wrong about one thing more, and it is the thing that damns: it is wrong about your freedom. Sartre called you *condemned to be free*, and every addict who ever chose again the chain he loathes knows the condemnation is real — but its name is not freedom. The Lord Jesus named the actual condition: *“Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin”* (John 8:34). And in the same breath He promised the only emancipation that has ever broken a chain: *“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”* (John 8:36). Christian freedom is not abandonment to self-legislation; it is deliverance into a given good — *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”* (Galatians 5:1).

And it is offered to you — to *whosoever* — because Christ died for all. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16). *“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8). The Lord of the text does not tell the guilty man to own his guilt authentically forever; He says, *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28). And the way in is not a leap in the dark and not an act of imagination: *“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved... For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (Romans 10:9, 13).

The existentialist is right about exactly one thing, and it is the thing on which everything turns: a man must *become*. Borrowed religion will not save him; the automatic life will not save him; the crowd will not save him. Where he is wrong — eternally wrong — is that he must become *by himself*. You cannot make yourself, friend. But you can be *made*: *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”* (2

Corinthians 5:17). The man Sartre called condemned to be free has never heard a sentence he wanted more than this one: *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”* (Romans 8:1). No condemnation — not to the resolute, not to the authentic, not to the self-invented, but to them which are *in Christ Jesus*.

Solomon closed his book with the conclusion of the whole matter, and this sermon closes where the text opened. *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.* And because that duty is no longer a vapour under the sun but a life in the Son, the last word belongs to the apostle who answered the Preacher’s bell-word forever: *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 15:58). Not in vain. Not under the sun — *in the Lord*. Come to Him, and be made new.



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