

REMEMBER TO FEAR
THE LORD
ECCLESIASTES 12



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T . M . M O O R E

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Remember to Fear the Lord
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Ecclesiastes 12: Introduction

Solomon has been urging his son, Rehoboam, to consider the folly of his ways and turn in trust to the Lord. He won't always be young, and the things that enthrall him now will soon enough pass away.

What really matters is living for the Lord, giving oneself entirely to Him, so that the promises of His Word become the focus of our daily lives. Then, though we grow old and must die, we will live in the peace, rest, and joy of the Lord forever.

Solomon brings this important book to a close by calling all his readers to make sure they have their hearts set in the right place: Fear God, and keep His commandments!

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Remember...

Pray Psalm 71.1-3.

In You, O LORD, I put my trust;
Let me never be put to shame.
Deliver me in Your righteousness, and cause me to escape;
Incline Your ear to me, and save me.
Be my strong refuge,
To which I may resort continually;
You have given the commandment to save me,
For You *are* my rock and my fortress.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.1.

Prepare.

1. What does it mean to “remember” our Creator?
2. What does Solomon mean by “difficult days”? What makes them “difficult”?

Meditate.

In this final chapter Solomon presses his point with vigor, urging his son to think ahead and consider carefully the days to come, so that he does not squander the precious years of his youth.

The word *remember* is significant. In Hebrew it carries the idea of “pay attention to” or “fulfill your responsibilities with respect to” and not just “keep in mind”. No one can expect to know a full, contented, and peaceable old age who, when he arrives there, has only a squandered youth to remember. Paying attention to God now, in all the daily details of life, will bring the wisdom needed for the present, and the sense of satisfaction and a “job well done” for the latter years of life.

Solomon’s mention of God as Creator, rather than as the Almighty or Lord, seems to be of some importance. By referring to God in this way he calls Rehoboam to go back to the beginning, to the days when God made men upright (Eccl. 7.29), and to configure his life according to the original purposes and intents of the divine economy.

In our day, the idea of God as Creator has all but been eradicated from common knowledge. In His place, chance, matter, and time have been substituted as the origin and defining direction of all things. Is it any wonder that our day is characterized more by uncertainty, violence, oppression, and despair than by the good and upright plans of the Lord?

Reflect.

1. How would you explain the importance of *remembering* God as Creator to a young person? Why must we remember Him as Creator?
2. Solomon implies that one who seeks only pleasure in his youth will discover that pleasure is hard to come by in old age. What does this suggest about pleasure as a goal in life?
3. Is remembering the Lord a source of pleasure? What kind of pleasure? Why should we seek this

pleasure rather than the pleasures of the flesh?

When the years of promise arrive, the good have pleasure in them. They have pleasure in enjoying the promises, since they have acted exactly in accordance with the promises. In a similar way, those who are prone to amusement and only recognize what can be experienced with the senses have not pleasure in the time of hunger, but only in the time of excess. The righteous have pleasure even in the times of retribution. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 340.9

Lord, help me to remember You at all times, all day long, so that I...

Pray Psalm 71.9-13

Seek the Lord's Presence and help for the day ahead.

Sing Psalm 71.9-13.

Psalm 71.9-13, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

Lord, cast me not with age away; as strength decreases, with me stay.

My enemies against me speak; they lie in wait my soul to seek.

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

O God be not too far from me; my ever-present Helper be!

Consume and shame my enemies; let them reproached and humbled be.

Refrian

2 All Good Things...

Pray Psalm 71.16.

I will go in the strength of the LORD God;
I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.2-4.

Prepare.

1. Which aspects of growing older does Solomon allude to here?
2. Why is he leading Rehoboam to think about this?

Meditate.

I suppose Solomon could have just said to Rehoboam, “Look, son, some day you’re gonna get old...” Instead, he cast that idea into a poetic narrative, piling on metaphors of what it’s like to get old, so that the *experience* of old age would be more vivid and memorable for his son.

Our sight (v. 2), our sure hands and strong arms (v. 3), the teeth we take for granted (v. 3), our hearing (v. 4), and the inclination to indulge everyday pleasures (going out, listening to the creatures – v. 4) – all these will one day be in decline. Better to prepare for that day now by remembering your Creator, fixing your delight on eternal verities rather than the fleeting pleasures of the flesh. In His Presence – “under heaven” – are joys and pleasures that no amount of bodily decline can eradicate (Ps. 16.11).

God delights in poetry and uses it frequently, throughout the Scriptures. Why are we so obtuse and uninterested in this neglected art? One reason, as Czeslaw Milosz explained in *The Witness of Poetry*, is that so much modern poetry simply isn’t accessible. Or good.

But poetry can bring more reality to our experience by associating unfamiliar things – like getting old – with familiar things – stars, sun, moon, grinders, windows – so that we make associations that enrich our understanding and experience of life.

How easy it is to take for granted the things we experience each day – our senses and the glories of the world around us. Like all Biblical poets, Solomon has a way of using poetry to remind us that there is glory in everyday experiences and things. We might even be able to discern something of God’s will for our lives, if only we pause long enough to reflect, and in our reflections, to remember our Creator.

Reflect.

1. Getting old can sometimes affect a person’s attitude toward life. How does remembering the Creator help us to cope with the changes involved in getting older?
2. How does poetry – such as we find in verses 2-4 – help us to personalize the experience of getting older?
3. Is getting old an excuse for no longer trusting and obeying God? Explain.

When a man has the pain of reviewing a misspent life, his not having given up sin and worldly vanities till he is forced to say, I have no pleasure in them, renders his sincerity very questionable. Then follows a figurative description of old age and its infirmities, which has some difficulties; but the meaning is plain, to show how uncomfortable, generally, the days of old age are. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 12.1-7

The older I get, Lord, the more mature I should be growing in You. Help me to make progress in knowing You today, so that I...

Pray Psalm 71.17-20.

Seek the Lord for revival, and for an opportunity to share His strength and love with someone today.

Sing Psalm 71.17-20.

Psalm 71.17-20, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

O Lord, I praise Your righteousness Who me from youth have taught and blessed.

Forsake me not when I am old, 'til I Your mercies all have told!

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

Your righteous deeds are great and true. O God, there is no one like You!

Though many troubles I have seen, You will revive my soul again!

Refrain

3 ...Must Come to An End

Pray Psalm 71.1-3.

In You, O LORD, I put my trust;
Let me never be put to shame.
Deliver me in Your righteousness, and cause me to escape;
Incline Your ear to me, and save me.
Be my strong refuge,
To which I may resort continually;
You have given the commandment to save me,
For You *are* my rock and my fortress.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.5.

Prepare.

1. Which aspects of getting old does Solomon have in view here?
2. How is Solomon using the phrase “eternal home”?

Meditate.

Solomon’s catalog of aging, cast in verse, continues: unfounded fears, graying hair, tired legs, and the diminishment of sexual desire. All these come with getting old. But they don’t have to be an occasion for regret – unless, of course, merely indulging our flesh has been our way of life.

When Rehoboam is staring down the well of old age and death, on what will he rely to carry him into a peaceful and blissful eternity? His strength? His fleshly pleasures? His sexual potency? By the time he gets old, Rehoboam will have come to see that all the ways of the flesh decay, decline, and disappoint; thus, we are not wise to make these the source of our pleasure and purpose in life. Look to your Creator while you’re still young (v. 1)! He’ll put all these things in a proper perspective so that, when they begin to fail, you’ll still have a real and unfading Source of joy.

Talking about death is difficult for people these days. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews explains that the fear of death looms over every unbelieving soul, spoiling life for the present (Heb. 2.15). Unbelievers try to euphemize death – “passing away,” “crossing over,” “going to the Great Beyond.” This is whistling one’s way through the graveyard. One day one of those stones will have our name on it, too. Are our contemporaries ready to die? More than that, are they ready for what waits beyond death and the grave? Are we?

Unbelievers may not like to talk about death, but we do them no favors by acceding to their fears. Rather, like Solomon, we need to hold those fears out and remind our friends that even death has no victory over the one who lives “under heaven”.

Reflect.

1. What’s the difference between joy and happiness? How would you counsel a new believer to make sure he was seeking joy above all?
2. As people age, their bodies change, and their capacities can diminish. Does this mean their time of

remembering the Creator and serving Him is through? Explain.

3. Solomon returned to the Lord in his old age. It's never too late to come to the Lord. How should this encourage us about older friends or family members?

Things that used to be a regular part of life now become threatening: almond tree blossoms: Hair turns white. grasshopper is a burden: This may refer to the halting step of the elderly as they hobble along on their canes. desire fails: This is generally understood as a reference to a vanishing sexual desire. Then comes death: eternal home. Earl Radmacher (1937-2014), NKJV Study Notes on Ecclesiastes 12.5

Lord, I pray today for my elderly believing friends, that they might continue to remember You and serve You well. Help me also to...

Pray Psalm 71.21, 22.

Even though we may be getting older, we should always be seeking to increase – in the Lord, in our Personal Mission Field, in our great salvation, in good works of love. How will you seek to increase today?

Sing Psalm 71.21, 22, 3.

Psalm 71.21, 22, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

Increase my greatness, comfort me, and unto You shall praises be.

Your truth I will exalt full well, O Holy One of Israel!

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

4 Culture-Weary

Pray Psalm 71.8.

Let my mouth be filled *with* Your praise
And *with* Your glory all the day.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.6-8.

Prepare.

1. Which aspects of culture are suggested in these verses?
2. Why are these items of culture paired with “dust” and “spirit”?

Meditate.

The metaphors in this section of Solomon’s poetic narrative appear to relate to culture and work. Some day the pleasures of gold, silver, and honest work (drawing water from a well) will all be in the past and will lose their thrall. If Rehoboam makes these his aim, trusting in things for meaning, purpose, and happiness, then dark days await him, indeed.

One day all the things Rehoboam pursued for happiness will be turned to dust; he’ll be in the grave, and his spirit will stand before God to give an account of his stewardship. Verse 8 is what the fool can expect to hear, while the righteous will be greeted in eternity with, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Advertisers advocate retirement. They think people should be happy to have had work, but glad when it’s finally done. Retirees have so many plans, so many things they want to do. Ah, yes: retirement! The best time of life. No?

Some retirees die shortly after they’ve stopped working; everything they’ve lived for is gone, nothing much excites them now, and they have no reason to continue in this life. When asked what he would do after he retired, Alabama football coach Bear Bryant answered, “I’ll probably just die.” He did, three months after retiring.

Solomon’s quotation of “Vanity of vanities” in verse 8 creates a nice *inclusio* for the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole (cf. 1.2), as well as an ominous warning of the eternal displeasure of God that awaits those who neglect Him and follow their own course in life.

Reflect.

1. Why are culture and work so much a part of human life? How can we keep these from becoming idols?
2. How should they regard culture and work who live “under heaven” rather than “under the sun”?
3. Why is it important that we always keep in mind that one day we will give an accounting of our lives to God?

What could be said more clearly than that the matter of the flesh, which he styled dust because it springs from the seed of man and seems to be sown by his acts, must again return to the earth because it was taken from the earth? At the same time he points out that the spirit which is not begotten by intercourse between the sexes, but belongs to God alone

in a special way, returns to its creator. John Cassian (360-432), Conference 8.25

Thank You, Lord, for the gifts of work and culture. Help me always to use these so that...

Pray Psalm 71.4-8.

Pray for the Lord's protection and guidance, and that He – and nothing else – will be your hope throughout the day ahead.

Sing Psalm 71.4-8, 3.

Psalm 71.4-8, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

From wicked hands redeem me, Lord, from all who wrest and break Your Word.

My hope, my confidence from youth, my praise forever reaches You.

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

While many see in me a sign, I shelter in Your strength will find.

Lord, fill my mouth with endless praise and with Your glory all my days.

Refrain

5 Words of Truth

Pray Psalm 71.12.

O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me!

Read Ecclesiastes 12.9, 10.

Prepare.

1. How does Solomon describe his literary output?
2. The word “upright” here (v. 10) points back to Ecclesiastes 7.29. What is Solomon saying about his writings?

Meditate.

Rehoboam would not be able to deny Solomon’s claim in verse 9. He would have recalled the visit of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10) and her own astonishment at his father’s wisdom. The Book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs were undoubtedly in wide circulation by this time. Doubtless many people found delight and truth (v. 10) in Solomon’s writings, which he “pondered and sought out *and* set in order” and strove to make “acceptable” and “upright” – that is, to recapture the original purpose of God for men (cf. Eccl. 7.29).

Rehoboam would have had to agree; and yet, by continuing to rebel against these words, he would have shown himself to be a fool, committed to a course of vanity and feeding on the wind.

Like the writings of Solomon, the Bible has a long track record of proving itself true and reliable. It’s important that believers have some basic understanding of all the wonderful, blessed ways the Bible has moved and empowered people to do good works of charity, culture, and moral exemplariness. Even unbelievers will have a hard time denying the Scripture’s power when we hold up familiar accomplishments for their consideration – such as the invention of the hospital, the creation of the university, giving impetus to art and music, the launching of the scientific revolution, the abolition of slavery, popular education, prison reform, and more. Not to mention the many ways Scripture has transformed your life as a believer.

Unbelievers cannot deny such solid contributions on the part of those moved and guided by Scripture. But by acknowledging these, and yet refusing to consider the Bible seriously, they set themselves outside the worldview of Scripture, resigned to a life of vanity and folly “under the sun”. What will they cling to for truth, guidance, and hope if they refuse to consider the “well-driven nails” of the Word of God (v. 11)?

Reflect.

1. What good has the Word of God accomplished in your life?
2. Why is it important that we should be aware of the many ways Scripture has shaped the course of human history?
3. If an unbelieving friend should ask your advice about where to begin reading Scripture, what would you tell him? Why?

The Preacher devotes special care to write acceptable words—pleasant words, words of grace—and words of truth. The truth referred to here is the truth from God. Earl Radmacher (1937-2014), NKJV Study Notes for Ecclesiastes 12.10

Thank You for Your Word, Lord, and for all the ways You have used the Word to change my life, especially...

Pray Psalm 71.17-20.

To whom will you declare the Word and works of God today? Ask God to revive you, and to increase your strength as His witness.

Sing Psalm 71.17-20, 3.

Psalm 71.17-20, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

O Lord, I praise Your righteousness Who me from youth have taught and blessed.

Forsake me not when I am old, 'til I Your mercies all have told!

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

Your righteous deeds are great and true. O God, there is no one like You!

Though many troubles I have seen, You will revive my soul again!

Refrain

6 Painful, but True

Pray Psalm 71.19, 20.

Also Your righteousness, O God, *is* very high,
You who have done great things;
O God, who *is* like You?
You, who have shown me great and severe troubles,
Shall revive me again,
And bring me up again from the depths of the earth.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.11, 12.

Prepare.

1. To what does Solomon liken the words of the wise? Why is this a good way of thinking about such words?
2. What is the ultimate Source of the words of the wise?

Meditate.

Here is Solomon's claim for divine inspiration for His writings. We should always remember that, while God's Word is fixed and sure, like well-driven nails, sometimes taking that Word to heart can seem a painful goad. He's not apologizing for this, mind you; rather, Solomon is simply telling his foolish son that our Shepherd doesn't tell us what we *want* to hear, but what we *need* to hear.

We may not like what His Word has to say, but that won't change the certainty of it. We can "kick against the goads", like the apostle Paul was doing, but we cannot overcome them. We may think to look elsewhere than Scripture for "wisdom" that is more congenial to our tastes – and certainly there is no shortage of such "wisdom" to be found – but that will only lead to more weariness and vanity. Unless our lives are grounded in, circumscribed, and guided by the Word of God, we are in danger of drifting into folly (1 Cor. 4.6).

Many contemporary preachers and teachers insist on tip-toeing around the hard teachings of Scripture. They know these words can be painful and hurtful – words like *sin* and *repentance* and the *Law of God* and *self-denial*; so, in the interest of "not offending" anyone, they focus on other thoughts and ideas, thinking to attract "seekers" to the truth and to keep the "faithful" coming back for more. They only want to use the Shepherd's staff to serenely lead their flock, and they have set aside the rod by which He has to knock some sense into the sheep from time to time.

But the Good Shepherd has given us both kinds of words, and we must use them well, as Solomon was here.

We are not wrongly judging people when we talk to them about such matters as sin, repentance, death, self-denial, taking up our cross, the judgment of God, daily obedience, and eternal condemnation. Of course, we always want to put these within the framework of God's redemption – the Good News of Jesus and the Kingdom of God; and we always want to be careful to speak the truth in love. But truth can hurt, even as it heals, and that is precisely what God intends.

If we shield people from the goads and nails of the Word of God, how will they ever have a decent opportunity to come to their senses?

Reflect.

1. Why should we expect the Word of God to cause us pain sometimes? What should we do when that happens?

2. I can imagine that Rehoboam, by the time he'd read this far in his father's missive, was getting a little irritated and maybe feeling a bit bruised. Do you think Solomon understood that? How did he intend these verses to further his point about wisdom?

3. As in chapter 1, Solomon referred to himself as the "Worship Leader" (NKJV – "Preacher"), rather than by name or title. Why? To which season of his life was he pointing? Ultimately, Whom was he seeking to honor?

"The words of the wise are as goads." Even the Lord Jesus goaded Saul when he was a persecutor. Consider how salutary was the goad that made of a persecutor an apostle, saying, "It is hard for you to kick against the goad." Ambrose of Milan (333-397), Letter 15, To Constantius

Goad me by Your Word, Lord, and I will repent! Nail Your Word fast to my soul, and I will...

Pray Psalm 71.21-24.

Where do you want the Lord to "increase" your "greatness" today? In knowing Him? In your witness? To whom will you talk today about the righteousness of the Lord?

Sing Psalm 71.21-24, 3.

Psalm 71.21-24, 3 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

Increase my greatness, comfort me, and unto You shall praises be.

Your truth I will exalt full well, O Holy One of Israel!

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

My lips with joy and praises ring; to You, Redeemer, praise I bring!

I praise Your goodness all day long; Lord, humble all who do me wrong.

Refrain

7 The Whole of a Man

Pray Psalm 71.1.

In You, O LORD, I put my trust;
Let me never be put to shame.

Read Ecclesiastes 12.13, 14.

Prepare.

1. What “matter” is Solomon bringing to conclusion here?
2. What motivation stands behind this conclusion?

Meditate.

What Solomon says – translated literally – is “Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is *the whole of a man.*” It’s not a little bit of God and some of the world. It’s not as much of God as makes me feel OK, and then whatever else I choose. *The whole of what it means to be a human being* can be summed up in fearing God and keeping His commandments – loving God and loving our neighbor.

And count on it, son: God sees and knows everything about you, and He weighs it all on His eternal scale of justice. You will one day be judged by the God you have scorned. Does it not make more sense to seek the Lord, serve Him with gratitude and joy, and look forward to the day of judgment with confidence and peace?

So, in a sense, we’re all doomed. For who can fulfill what Solomon outlines here? Only One: Jesus. And in Him, we are all God intends for us to be.

In poetry, these verses would be called the *envoi*, or the summation of the whole poem. Here again we encounter two ideas which many believers today find rather distasteful: Fear God? What’s to fear? Well, *God!* We fear God when we truly know Him as He is, and for what He is capable of doing to wretched sinners. We rejoice in the mercy of God precisely because we know what we really deserve at His hand.

And keep the commandments? Bring up the subject of God’s Law to a contemporary believer, and the chances are he’ll listen politely, then inform you that he’s “not under law, but under grace”. That, however, is not a Biblical view. The Law is a means of grace to form us into the people God redeemed us to be – holy and righteous and good (Eph. 2.10, Rom. 7.12).

We don’t keep the Law to earn our salvation; Jesus has done that for us already. We keep the Law out of gratitude to God and in the desire to please and serve Him, and our neighbor, in love (Matt. 22.34-40). What Solomon says to his foolish son, hoping to bring him to his senses and lead him to embrace life as God intends it, he says to us as well.

The Good News is that, in Jesus, and because of Him, all of what God intends for us, we may increasingly know.

Reflect.

1. Would you say that your life reflects “the whole of the matter” as Solomon summarized it here? Explain.

2. Can we truly love God if we don't fear Him? Explain.

3. The Law without Jesus is damning. Claiming Jesus without keeping the Law is misguided. How can these both be true?

What could be briefer, truer, better for the soul to know? For this is all a person is—a keeper of God's commandments. Not being such, he is, so to say, nothing at all, because instead of being constantly reshaped to the image of the truth, he remains bogged down in the likeness of shadow. Augustine (354-430), *City of God* 20.3

Thank You for Jesus, Father! Thank You for Your Law! Let Jesus and Your Law flourish in me today as I...

Pray Psalm 71.1-24.

Recall all the blessings of God, with which He has blessed you throughout your life. Renew your commitment to Him, and to declaring His Word. Praise Him for the privilege of knowing and serving Him, today and every day.

Sing Psalm 71.1-24.

Psalm 71.1-24 (*Solid Rock: My Hope is Built on Nothing Less*)

In You, O Lord, I refuge claim; O let me never be ashamed.

In righteousness deliver me; incline Your ear and hear my plea.

Refrain, v. 3

A Rock of habitation be; command Your Word to rescue me.

My Rock and Fortress ever be!

From wicked hands redeem me, Lord, from all who wrest and break Your Word.

My hope, my confidence from youth, my praise forever reaches You.

Refrain

While many see in me a sign, I shelter in Your strength will find.

Lord, fill my mouth with endless praise and with Your glory all my days.

Refrain

Lord, cast me not with age away; as strength decreases, with me stay.

My enemies against me speak; they lie in wait my soul to seek.

Refrain

O God be not too far from me; my ever-present Helper be!

Consume and shame my enemies; let them reproached and humbled be.

Refrain

But as for me my voice I raise to sing in hope and constant praise!

With saving grace my voice will swell Your never-ending grace to tell.

Refrain

O Lord, I praise Your righteousness Who me from youth have taught and blessed.

Forsake me not when I am old, 'til I Your mercies all have told!

Refrain

Your righteous deeds are great and true. O God, there is no one like You!

Though many troubles I have seen, You will revive my soul again!

Refrain

Increase my greatness, comfort me, and unto You shall praises be.

Your truth I will exalt full well, O Holy One of Israel!

Refrain

My lips with joy and praises ring; to You, Redeemer, praise I bring!

I praise Your goodness all day long; Lord, humble all who do me wrong.

Refrain

For Reflection or Discussion

1. Growing old should be a time of fruitfulness, not retirement. Explain.
2. Why do so many people *not* look forward to growing old? What can you do to affirm and encourage elderly believers to continue seeking and bearing fruit for the Lord?
3. How is the Word of God like “well-driven nails” and a shepherd’s goad? Why should we welcome each of these functions of the Scriptures?
4. How would you explain the “whole of the matter” to someone who asked you what it means to be a Christian?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from Ecclesiastes 12? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.