

His Work is a Vexation
Ecclesiastes 2:18-26, 4:4-8
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Introduction

Do you remember Newman the mailman in the show Seinfeld? George, another character, asked him once, “Aren’t those the guys that always go crazy and come back with a gun and shoot everybody?” “Sometimes.” Jerry asks, “Why is that?” Newman answers: “Because the mail never stops. It just keeps coming and coming and coming, there’s never a let-up. It’s relentless. Every day it piles up more and more and more! And you gotta get it out but the more you get it out the more it keeps coming in. And then the bar code reader breaks and it’s Publisher’s Clearing House day!!!” You can understand Newman’s frustration that his work didn’t seem to accomplish anything - mail just keeps coming all the time; no matter how much gets delivered the day before, there’s always more. Maybe you feel like that in your career, in your workplace. If you work at a hospital, you’ll always have more patients; people will always get sick, they’ll always have accidents. It’s relentless in a similar way to the mail. If you are a salesperson, there are always more clients, more people to call, new accounts to close. I feel this acutely as a pastor – there’s always another sermon to write, there are always people who need to hear the Gospel, and there are always people who are hurting and need counsel. Work can feel discouraging, work can make us feel like we are not accomplishing much, that we’re perhaps wasting our lives, it can make us go “postal” some days.

Leonard Woolf was the husband of the author Virginia Woolf, and also a publisher and an author himself of over twenty books. That sounds pretty successful to me, but here’s how he summarized his life’s work:

“I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played Ping-Pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.”¹

That is a depressing thought since for those of us who work full-time, it takes up the largest chunk of our days. Do we live to work or work to live? Are we just working for the weekend, as the old 80’s song went. And what’s waiting for us at the end of it all besides a gold watch and hopefully enough money to live off of in retirement?

We’re going to turn to Ecclesiastes to wrestle with some of these questions. If you’ve been with us so far, you might be thinking, “that book does not feel like it will cheer us up from that depressing introduction.” But hold tight. Our last two sermons looked at Solomon’s quest for meaning and fulfillment; first he looked into wisdom and then he looked into pleasure. Neither one held any ultimate answers for him. Let’s see how he does with the concept of work.

His first thoughts are (surprise!) not positive as he explains that

I. Work Can Leave You Sorrowful and Restless (2:18-23)

18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to

¹ Leonard Woolf, quote in *Wireless Age* (September/November, 1998).

despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Have you ever heard the name John Hervey? He was the son of British royalty, himself the 7th Marquess of Bristol, who inherited 35 million pounds in his 20s back in the 1970s. That equates to many tens of millions of dollars today. His fortune increased as it was invested in oil and real estate projects that did well. But John spent his money on yachts, sports cars and escorts, and he developed an uncontrollable drug habit in which he spent huge amounts on cocaine and heroin. He spent time in prison and rehab, and by the early 1990s, he was penniless and died of organ failure related to his drug use.² Solomon describes worrying about who will inherit his fortune after he is dead – will they be wise or a fool? And that has been a legitimate concern for every person who has ever had an inheritance to leave – they could turn out to recklessly destroy their lives like John Hervey; or like Solomon’s actual son, Rehoboam, who was a terrible king and helped split the kingdom of Israel (see 1 Kings 12). In verse 18, Solomon says that the uncertainty of not knowing the worthiness of his heir made him hate his work even more than he already did, and verse 21 says he resents people who receive inheritances who didn’t earn it and won’t truly appreciate it.

Despite what the ancient Egyptians thought as they buried their Pharaohs with all their treasures, money does not go with you to the afterlife. As the old saying goes, “You’ll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.” So as hard as you work for all your money, you will have to leave it here. But what’s the point of working hard, accomplishing a bunch of stuff and gaining a lot of possessions when you know that you’ll just die and your kids will inherit it, and they might be lazy good-for-nothings? That’s when work goes from labor to toil, and satisfaction in my job turns to vexation and sleepless nights. You have to ask the question: why am I working so hard when I won’t really get the benefit for very long?

Solomon doesn’t stay relentlessly negative, though, as we see that

II. Work May Bring Enjoyment for Those Who Please God (2:24-26)

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

We have our first “carpe diem” passage in Ecclesiastes! Seize the day by eating, drinking, and enjoying what you do. Now when you first heard verse 24 – “*he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil,*” did you think of the old slogan: “*Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die*”? But that’s not what the Preacher is saying. There’s a difference between doing those things fatalistically because we are going to die, you might as well enjoy something before then. No, he’s saying that, yes, knowing we will die someday, we still need to find purpose and pleasure in eating, drinking, and working. God gives us those things to fill us. This is the first time in the book that Solomon has mentioned that things come from the hand of God. James 1:17a says it even more strongly: “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*”

Here's how commentator David Gibson explains it:

² <https://www.gobankingrates.com/net-worth/debt/people-inherited-fortunes-then-blew-away/>

“Your life is on loan for a short while, and one day God will call time and take it back, just like the library will recall that overdue book on your shelf. So embrace life for what it is rather than what you’d like it to be. Live it before God with reverence and obedience. This is the pathway to joy, even though as you walk it, there will be mystery and pain. Have some nice food. Enjoy a good wine if you want – but be sure to *enjoy* whatever good things come your way.”³

And here we have the first place where Solomon divides believers and non-believers: believers are the ones who please God, so they are given wisdom and knowledge and joy. Sinners who don’t know or follow God won’t be able to keep the things that they gather. I’m not going to drill down on those ideas because we’ll spend time on them later in this book. But now we turn to chapter 4 where Solomon comes back to the theme of work and again draws negative conclusions:

III. Work Done With the Wrong Motives is Empty and Unsatisfying (4:4-8)

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. ⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. ⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. ⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

There’s an interesting thought in verse 4: the reason that we toil and work is because we are envious of our neighbors; we want to keep up with the Joneses. Obviously, that’s not the only reason that people work, we have to feed our families and many jobs are very fulfilling. But I think that Solomon is pointing out that sometimes it seems that the only motivation for us to work hard is to make ourselves feel as good as, or better than, the people around us. Greed is one thing, but Envy is perhaps worse, because it doesn’t just stop at wanting a lot; it wants a lot more than others. The last of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:17) is: “*You shall not covet... anything that is your neighbor’s.*” But that’s one of the hardest commandments, and once envy gets a hold of our hearts, it works its way out to take over our lives and dominate our priorities. If I want a luxury sports car like the guy down the street, I will stop giving generously, stop helping people, start working overtime, and bend my whole life to this one desire, until I can afford the car of my dreams. Solomon reminds us what we already know: disappointment and unhappiness await when we feed the envy monster.

Verses 5 and 6 contrast the person who is lazy and refuses to work with the overachieving Type A; these are the two extremes of human nature when it comes to work. The imagery of hands are used to drive his point home: the fool who has not worked has nothing to eat except his own hands (v. 5) while the workaholic has his hands full all the time in meaningless striving - they have to carry a big house and big payments on their extravagant lifestyle. Neither one of them can just fold his hands in quiet contemplation, which seems to be the picture of the person who has worked an honest day and is content with what they have.⁴ We need to learn to live modestly, with contentment, and we will fare better than the sluggard or the workaholic.

Verse 8 points out the even more extreme of the workaholic who doesn’t even have any family that he’s working for, who will share what he gains. I’m reminded of Ebenezer Scrooge, of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, who is just a miserly old man with no family to share his riches with. And don’t forget that overworking can cost you your close relationships. How many marriages have broken up because one of the spouses works all the time and cannot spare time to cultivate the marriage? How many people have alienated themselves from their children or their parents and siblings because they threw

³ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of End* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), p. 67.

⁴ Adapted from Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 98.

themselves into their work? It's not just the millionaire CEOs who chase profits and new accounts. I remember hearing a very "successful" pastor say that his biggest regret in life was rarely being home to have dinner with his family because he was too busy with meetings that were building his church. If you want to be reminded of what working all the time does to your family, give that old song "Cats in the Cradle" a listen sometime.

Conclusion: A Theology of Work

Now that we've talked through our verses, I want us to step back a little bit and think about the nature of work. Is work a good thing, something that God gives us to help us and bless us? Or is it a curse? When was work first given by God to human beings? Genesis 1:28 is often called the "Creation Mandate" – *"God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'"* God gave human beings these commands – the first part is to have children and populate the earth and the second part is subdue the earth and have dominion over the other creatures. That second part is where we get our positive view of work. God has given every one of us talents and abilities that we use in some way to subdue the earth, it's part of our calling.

Now, you might hear the word "subdue" and the phrase "have dominion" and think "Oh no, that's people ruining the environment, being cruel to animals, imposing their will on mother nature." But that's not what God was commanding. The Hebrew word for subduing is "*kabash*" and is not meant to be violent, but gentle.⁵ He was giving instructions for first Adam and Eve and then to their descendants to every generation to find ways to work the earth, to get crops and food, and make it livable for humans and creatures. Having dominion over the animals means ruling over them in a sense, but God always calls those in positions of governing others to do so in a way that benefits them. The bottom line is that God gives every person some way to work and make meaningful results from this world that will benefit themselves, their families, their neighbors, and their communities. That could be farming, which would be the most literal version of subduing the earth, but it's not limited to that: it's anything that is a legitimate job: teaching, writing, running a business or a restaurant, government, delivering mail, athletics, construction, science... anything that promotes human flourishing. Dan Doriani said, "Through our work the naked are clothed, the hungry fed, the sick healed. Through our work we please our Maker and love our neighbor."⁶

And when did God give this Creation Mandate – before or after the Fall? The implications of the answer to that question are that if it was given after the Fall, then work is curse, a punishment for humans sinning. But if it was given before the Fall, then it was not a reaction to sin; it was God's provision and blessing for humans even before sin existed. And, of course, the Fall didn't happen until Genesis chapter 3, but the Mandate came in chapter 1. Work is God's gracious blessing to give human beings meaningful work that gives us purpose and dignity. Every one of us can point to a time where we achieved something that was hard work, and we felt great afterwards; we felt that we had accomplished something and had become better people because we worked through it. God wants us to feel that way, He wants us to pursue work that makes us feel alive and productive, whether or not we get paid for it. We should not look down on work as drudgery and punishment. Martin Luther helped restore dignity to all kinds of work at a time when the Church taught that the sacred work of the clergy was more godly than common labor. He would say things like, "a poor milk-maid milking, if

⁵ William Edgar's article "The Creation Mandate" found at thegospelcoalition.org.

⁶ Dan Doriani, "The Power – And Danger – in Luther's Concept of Work" article, found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-power-and-danger-in-luthers-concept-of-work/>

done in faith, is more glorious than the conquests of and triumphs of Caesar or Alexander” and “The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” Your work in the world is just as godly and sacred as my work writing a sermon and organizing the church.

Did the Fall of Adam have any effect on human labor? Yes, Genesis 3:17-19 records God’s punishment for Adam after he disobeyed: “...cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground...” In other words, your labor becomes hard work now. You don’t get to stay in the Garden of Eden and have a wonderful paradise where you tend the garden and everything responds easily to you. You will have hard labor because the earth is now under the curse as well; it will not respond easily to you, it will be difficult to subdue the earth now. But you are still called to it.

We have some NT verses on this subject: Colossians 3:23-24 - “*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*” Think about that the next time you have a performance review at work or need some motivation to get up and go to work. 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 is pretty blunt - “*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*” That’s not a rebuke of housewives or people who stay home and work hard; that’s a rebuke of those who reject work as either unspiritual or don’t see value in working. Who would rather others feed them than earn it themselves. How about the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, where the men who had ten and five talents multiplied them and pleased their master, but the one with one talent buried it in the ground and was sternly rebuked? God wants us to be faithful and productive with the talents and abilities that He has given us.

Work is a wonderful, godly, dignified area of our lives. But, as we’re seeing with Solomon’s search for meaning and fulfillment in life, when we make work our idol, it fails us every time. When we build it up as the ultimate achievement we can have in life, worthy of sacrificing our relationships and compromising our principles, we take it from its place of a good response to God’s designing us the way He has designed us and elevate it to a place that it was never meant to occupy.

Transition into Communion: We work to achieve something. We work to help others and glorify God. But there is one area of our life where we can never do enough work to make anything happen. And that is in the area of salvation. Most religions say that you have to do a bunch of stuff, good works, in order to earn spiritual marks, in order to be worthy of being rewarded in the afterlife. Christianity is not one of those religions. It says that you cannot do any works in order to make yourself worthy. Because you are a sinner and have separated yourself from the grace of God, you must pay the penalty for those sins, and that penalty is death, eternal separation from God in hell. But there is one way that you don’t have to pay your own penalty for your sins – you can have someone else pay the penalty for you. But it has to be someone who is perfect, who doesn’t have any of his own sins to atone for, who has done the work that you could not do. And that person is Jesus Christ, the perfect God-Man who did the work of redemption – living a perfect life and dying a sacrificial death in our place. And that is what we celebrate when we come to the table of communion...

Benediction - 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 – “*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.*”