

August 4, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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WHY WORK? Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

You have probably seen the bumper sticker that is a take off from the song the seven vertically challenged people sang in Disney's movie Snow White. It says, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." That is a pretty sorry reason to go to work. But if the truth is told, probably a lot of our peers have no more motivation than that to get up in the morning, get dressed, fight the traffic and go to a JOB that they wish they didn't have to go to every day.

A few weeks ago I told you the story about one of my first jobs, working third shift in a factory. I will never forget break times in that awful place. Monday through Wednesday the older men would sit in the break room and talk about what they did over the past weekend. On Thursday and Friday, they talked about what they were going to do on the coming weekend. Their conversations were as predictable as the sun rising that morning. The only exception was when their conversation would change to discuss what they were going to do on the upcoming vacation or what they did on vacation.

I used to sit and listen to those fellows who had been working in that place, or worked a similar job, all their lives, and think that their lives sounded pretty hopeless. How discouraging it is to work from the "kachink" of the time clock when you check in to the "kachink" of the time clock when you check out. It is enough to make a fellow ask, "What is the purpose of it all?" "Why bother going to work?"

A lot of younger people are asking that question in this age when socialist candidates running for president are talking about a guaranteed wage for all people whether they work or not. Some of those candidates are claiming that guaranteed income is one of the

inalienable rights all humans have. I don't get it! When I hear things like that I conclude that either I am as dumb as a box of rocks or the person proposing the idea is. Who would work if they don't have to? Why waste a day slaving in a factory, or stressed out in an office, or putting up with rotten patients in a hospital if you can get paid to sit at home and play on the computer? Actually, millions of people in America concluded that two generations ago.

The things we read and hear about in the media today should shock us back into the reality that the result of abandoning God and His Word is sheer foolishness. God said quite plainly in His Word that if a person chooses not to work, he should not be allowed to eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). At times when I quote that authoritative statement from God to average folks, they look at me as if I have lost my mind. "God said that?" "What kind of people would enforce a rule like that?" Maybe wise people. Maybe people who understand God's principles and realize that knowing God and obeying God makes for a very orderly, decent, peaceful society.

Solomon engaged this principle of work in his great experiment about the meaning of life. In light of a life of futility apart from a relationship with God, work really doesn't make any sense at all. But inject a relationship with God into the equation and we have to conclude that work is honorable, rewarding, yeah enjoyable. Everything God requires of His people is ultimately good. When we quote Romans 8:28 (*for those who love God, all things work together for good . . .*), let's not forget that "all things" includes work.

Work Apart From God.

Here is an inescapable principle of life, one at which Solomon also arrived. You can't take it with you. The wise man learned what everyone will eventually have to acknowledge, that whatever we gain we leave to others. He concluded, *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 (v.18).*

As we know from our previous studies, the preacher had experimented in many forms of toil. He made great works, built houses, planted vineyards (2:4). He built gardens and parks, planted all kinds of fruit trees (2:5). He built pools from which to water the

forest of growing trees (2:6). He established herds and flocks more than any who had preceded him (2:7). He became great and surpassed all who were before him in Jerusalem (2:9). His heart found pleasure in all his toil (2:10). A lot of people would say he was sitting in the drivers seat of life.

But just when he was finding pleasure in all his toil, just when it appeared that he was finding happiness in life, reality set in. The word translated *toil* speaks of more than just work, but includes all the responsibilities of your life. Looking at all the responsibilities of life and considering all we accomplish in those areas (which are different for each of us), what do we conclude? Solomon concluded, *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 2:11a)*. After all his experiments and supposed joy in labor, he decided, *And there was nothing to be gained under the sun (2:11b)*.

The conclusion Solomon came to is that there is no ultimate, final, lasting gain, because we have to die and leave everything behind. Death is certain, even though we live as though we will never die. Leaving everything is also certain. A person may create beautiful works of art or music or architecture, but will leave them behind. What will become of them? A person may build beautiful houses or develop subdivisions or shopping centers, but will leave them behind. A person may build a multi-million dollar portfolio, but will leave it behind. The popular question when John Rockefeller died was, "How much did he leave to his family?" The answer: "All of it."

And sometimes we do not even know who the person is who follows, who will take over all the fruits of our labors. How frustrating it is to realize that no one can guarantee the character of others. We leave it all behind, we leave it to another, *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 (v.19)*. I wonder if it is possible that someone at some point in history might have had these words written into their will? Who knows whether my heir will be wise or a fool? Pity the adult child who hears his father articulate such a lack of confidence. And yet, we all know of situations where a man exercised diligence and wisdom, and

through hard work built up quite a nice portfolio, only to leave it to his foolish children who he forgot to teach good character.

We also know about the preacher's one son Rehoboam. He was the perfect example of this bad reality. Rehoboam became master over all of which Solomon had toiled and labored, and he was a fool. In an insincere display of wisdom, he sought the counsel of the older men. *Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" And they said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever" (2 Kings 12:6-7)*.

However, revealing that he was actually a fool, Rehoboam abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him. . . . *(2 Kings 12:8)*. *And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions" (1 Kings 12:13-14)*.

If we knew that all the fruits of our toil and labor would be wasted, squandered, managed so poorly that it was soon gone, how would we feel at this point? We would probably feel like asking, "What's the point?" It is so easy to give up. It is so easy to conclude with Solomon, *So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun (v.20)*.

The wise preacher turned away from his conclusion, from the evidence he saw and became quite discouraged. So far his great experiment with life had proven to be very disappointing. Even as he concluded about wisdom (1:12-18), pleasure (2:1-11), disciplined living (2:12-17), so too work is vain, a chasing after the wind. Or, "Why bother?" "Don't ask!" This is the point where we might ask the question, "So how does this make you feel?". . . but probably shouldn't. That is the one question never to be asked at the typical home Bible study.

How we feel is like Solomon felt when we consider how futile life really is. He said according to 2:17 "I hated life." Or in our text

(2:18) “I hated all my toil.” No wonder he concluded, “I . . . gave my heart up to despair” (2:20). This is a bit like Job felt when he said, “*I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul*” (Job 10:1). It was the attitude behind Elijah’s complaint to God, “*I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away*” (1 Kings 19:10). This was Jeremiah’s attitude when he said, “*Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, ‘A son is born to you,’ making him very glad*” (Jeremiah 20:14-15).

But even Jesus expressed great discouragement (without sinning) when *about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Matthew 27:46). And herein is the answer to the discouragement. God the Father had forsaken the Son because He was covered with my sin. Jesus demonstrated how life without God ought to be discouraging. When we forsake God in all our work, it should be futile, like striving after the wind. Solomon finally came to this conclusion according to verses twenty-five and twenty-six.

When God is absent, it is very difficult to face the unavoidable divestment at the end of life. Solomon knew that *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* (v.21). Then there is this other bumper sticker we have seen: “Retired and enjoying my kids’ inheritance.”

On one hand, this same wise man recommends that the parents work diligently and wisely to leave an inheritance to children (Proverbs 13:22). On the other hand, we are leaving an inheritance, the fruit of all our toil, labor, wisdom, knowledge, and skill to someone who did not work for it. In human terms, this is not right, not fair – a great evil. We know that it is expected, and a nice gesture. But how is it fair? On a practical note, children should not despise their parents if they need to eat up the inheritance in a nursing home. What did any child ever do to deserve being handed an inheritance?

Verse twenty-two brings us face to face with a very hard question. What do we get from all our labor? *What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?* (v.22). In other words, “Why bother working, if we get no lasting reward from it?” Read the preacher’s conclusion and picture a farmer toiling and striving under the sun. The Hebrew word behind *toil* highlights the dark side of labor. It speaks of the grievous, unfulfilling part of work. In a parallel fashion, *striving* is that longing, that desire for things to be better or even right. Notice that the striving is in the heart. Toil and striving do not always take place under the hot sun.

And so you pour your life into your job only to come to the end, get your gold watch, and wonder what of value was accomplished. When it is all said and done (and granted, more is generally said than done), what is the end profit? Several years ago, I wrote the book titled, “True Worship.” Some of you might remember it. It flowed out of a series of sermons I preached with the same theme. Counting the hours of sermon preparation, the hours of rewriting and reshaping the sermons into book form, the hours of editing, not to mention the actual printing, a good chunk of life was invested in that venture. About four years after the book was published, I found copies of it for sale on Amazon for .25. That is a discouraging reality. When it comes to writing of books I agree, “All is vanity and chasing after the wind.”

Why work when in the end all you have to show for it is heartache, headache, and nothing but futility? *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* (v.23). Work is often not a pleasant experience. Most people go to work five or six days a week, entering into less than ideal work settings. Maybe you have to work a menial or sometimes meaningless tasks. When the day is finished, what has been accomplished, what lasting value is there in your work?

And making matters worse are the people you work with, people who will often make the work place quite uncomfortable. They are often critical of others which makes you realize that when you are not in the room they criticize you too. Often your co-worker is lazy or incompetent which forces you to do extra work to cover for him or her. It is not unusual to have a subordinate who disrespects you and your position of authority, and who, therefore, argues with

you and creates opportunities to humiliate you, even though you try to be kind. If you work for a large corporation, you never know if this will be the year or the month when you will be handed a pink slip and you are summarily dismissed with hardly a “thank you.”

Stepping into that kind of environment every day makes you wonder if working is worth it. Worse is that after you leave work you can’t rest because of work. The preacher knew that *even in the night his heart does not rest (v.23)*. You lie in bed replaying the conflicts in your head. You think about what you should have said. Or you plan on what you will say tomorrow.

The preacher was right again: *This also is vanity*. What a sad, ugly, hopeless picture we can draw by drawing fair and accurate conclusions about work. Where is the hope? What is the point in it all? Solomon is glad we asked.

A Wonderful Alternative.

While we are neck deep in the unsavory circumstances of our job, we should enjoy God’s blessings. This is the best thing according to Solomon the experimenter. *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 (v.24)*. This is the first positive statement in the book up to this point.

We ask, “Why bother working if there is no lasting value, and we have to leave the fruit of our labor behind?” Solomon replies, “Work for the joy of it!” Ultimately, enjoying God’s blessing is the best thing. God’s plan is for a person to work and enjoy the fruit of his work while we live. This compliments well our knowledge that we cannot enjoy God’s material, physical blessings after we are dead. The problem that causes guilt is when we are enjoying God’s blessings more than we enjoy the God who gives the blessings. We must view everything we have as a direct gift from God. No, you did not build it, gain it, earn it alone, all by yourself. If God did not give you breath, talent, opportunity, you would have nothing.

This is especially truth regarding God-given opportunities and gifts of spiritual blessings. Paul reminded us, *Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1*

Corinthians 15:58). Realize that work, labor, toiling in ministry is God’s plan—and abound in it. Our work *in the Lord* is never futile, empty, chasing wind. The phrase “in the Lord” describes the kind of work, the author of the work, the environment of the work, the results of the work. In short, it speaks of all the work we do in our relationship with, fellowship with our Lord. All labor, secular or sacred, is impacted by our relationship with the Lord. Therefore, all work for the Christian is ministry.

This is God’s plan, God’s will. *This also, I saw, is from the hand of God (v.24)*. “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” *For apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment (v.25)?* It really is not “YOUR” job, or “YOUR” work, or “YOUR” business. It belongs to God just like you and I belong to God. Life is not about you and so work is not about you.

This is especially true for the believer, who is responsible to live out the strength and wisdom Christ gives as we are attached to Him. Jesus taught, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)*. This is more than a spiritual principle. Without strength and grace from Christ, we literally cannot do anything. You woke up this morning and are attending this meeting this afternoon only because God is gracious.

So enjoy and appreciate what Christ gives you to do. Appreciate God’s Sovereign choices, as He distributes His blessings. *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 (v.26a)*.

God gives special gifts to people who please Him. Some of those gifts are things like wisdom, the ability to put knowledge about God into practice. His gifts include, knowledge, the ability to perceive and ascertain truths about God. Then there is joy, that deep, genuine satisfaction that comes from serving God instead of self and sometimes instead of others.

Ultimately, God will give the fruits of the sinner’s labor to people who please Him. Sometimes this happens in life. Ultimately, this will happen in the last days. The meek really will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). This idea is hard to grasp. It is a “wisdom” principle.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind (v.26b). Generally, it is true that people who order their lives according to God's principles will enjoy wisdom, knowledge, and joy. Sometimes it is true that God will take from sinners to give to His saints. Sometimes it appears that saints lose and sinners win. That is temporary, because in the end the sinners lose everything and this is *vanity and a striving after wind (v.26b)*.

Take God out of life, and there really is not much worth living for. Notice how people without God must continue to move from job to job, house to house, town to town, lover to lover, because they cannot find satisfaction. Life for so many people is like a safari hunt. The fun is not in the capture of the prey but in the hunt. And once the goal is achieved, the prey captured, dissatisfaction sets in and around they go again. Only when our identity is with Christ will we find any joy while living in this life. When who we are and what we are is determined by Christ, we are living in light of eternity. That is joy and the abundant life.