

Living a Meaningful Life

Working Together

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

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Scripture

A *New York Times* article on people who are sick of too many hours at work tells the story of Diane Knorr, a former dot.com executive. “The first time I got a call way after hours from a senior manager, I remember being really flattered and thinking, ‘Wow! I’m really getting up there now,’” she said.

But gradually, her work and family life became a blur with hours that were hard to scale back.

“If I leave at 5 and everyone else leaves at 6:30, I might look like the one who is not pulling her weight,” she said.

In college, Diane Knorr set a goal of making a six-figure salary by the time she was 49. She reached it at 35, and “nothing happened; no balloons dropped,” she said. “That’s when I really became aware of that hollow feeling.”

The *New York Times* article noted that Diane Knorr eventually quit her job and started a non-profit organization.¹

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes comes back to the topic of work.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 4:4-16:

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.

¹ John Schwartz, “Sick of Work,” *NewYorkTimes.com* (9-5-04).

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

¹³ Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴ For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:4-16)

Introduction

If it had not been for Bernie Madoff, the most famous white collar criminal in America right now would probably be Marc Dreier. If that name is not ringing a bell, it's because Dreier's \$400 million Ponzi scheme was blown off the front pages by Madoff's arrest just a few days after Dreier's arrest.

Last week Steve Kroft of *60 Minutes* on CBS ran a fascinating interview with Marc Dreier. Dreier has degrees from Yale and Harvard, and with the ego of a successful trial lawyer, he told friends that he was going to become a billionaire. He started his own law firm that he said would revolutionize the business of law. He hired the best attorneys, paid them top dollar, and kept all the profits for himself as the firm's only partner. At the pinnacle of the scam, Dreier employed more than 250 lawyers, and had high profile clients like Bill Cosby, Andy Pettite, Maria Sharapova, and Justin Timberlake.

"The idea for the law firm was very viable," Dreier told Kroft. "But it needed much more money to get off the ground than I anticipated, much more."

And so in order to get more money he scammed money

through false impersonation, fraud, and deceit off wealthy investors. He eventually owed \$400 million to various investors.

Dreier says that he used most of the \$400 million to expand his law firm, but also to finance a lifestyle designed to create the illusion that he already was a billionaire. He owned an \$11 million ocean-front compound in the Hamptons, an art collection that included a Picasso, three Matisses, and 12 Warhols, and also a 120-foot yacht with a full-time crew of ten.

“How did you end up becoming a crook?” Kroft asked.

“I can’t remember the moment in which I decided to do something that I knew was wrong,” Dreier replied. “I had an ambition that I needed to feed. I think I fell into the trap of wanting to be more successful than I was.”²

The Preacher lived during a time in which there was a tremendous boom in the economy. There were undoubtedly people like Dreier and Knorr living at that time. In today’s text the Preacher wrestles with selfish and unaccountable ambition.

Given all the trouble there is in the world, the Preacher was tempted to think that it might be better not to live at all, and he said as much at the beginning of chapter 4. But then he made several observations about working in this tumultuous world.

Lesson

In today’s lesson we learn that since working alone is futile, we ought to work together with others.

I. Live with Contentment (4:4-6)

The first observation is that we ought to live with contentment. The Preacher shows this by pointing out three different approaches to work.

First, there is the competitor. We see this in Ecclesiastes 4:4:

² See <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/06/03/60minutes/main6544658.shtml?tag=contentMain;cbsCarousel>.

“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.”

The Preacher has already told us that work is a gift from God (e.g., 2:24). But like all of God’s blessings, work can also be distorted by sin. The Preacher observes that so much of toil and work **come from a man’s envy of his neighbor.**

In 1503, Julius II became Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. He immediately began a building program to beautify the Vatican. In 1509, he commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo reluctantly agreed to paint the fresco, though he insisted he was a sculptor only.

Shortly afterward, the Pope commissioned Raphael to paint the frescos in the papal study. Raphael was eight years younger than Michelangelo and had become a master painter at age seventeen. At age twenty, he moved to Florence and for four years studied under Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and others.

During the work at the Vatican, a rivalry erupted between Michelangelo and Raphael. Michelangelo later said of Raphael, “All that he ever knew of art he learned from me.” That was not quite true, although Michelangelo did help in Raphael’s development as an artist. Michelangelo envied the easier work given to Raphael and the kind treatment Julius showed him. Raphael was envious that Michelangelo had received the most honored spot to paint, and he had to settle for a lesser area.

Their envy toward one another degenerated until they refused to speak to one another. And all of this took place while they were supposed to be working “for the glory of God.”

Second, there is the drop-out. This second approach to work shows the opposite approach to the competitor. The Preacher observed that although some people are extremely competitive, there are others who do not work at all. The Preacher said in verse 5: **“The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.”**

Some people simply don’t want to work. They just **fold** their **hands** and do nothing. But eventually doing nothing is just as de-

structive. A person becomes complacent and unwittingly self-destructive. Doing nothing erodes a person's self-respect.

I love the way commentator William P. Brown summarized these two opposite approaches to work. He said, "As toil can be all-consuming, so idleness is self-cannibalizing."³

Both of these approaches to work are wrong. It is wrong to work so hard so as to become envious of others. And it also wrong to become so idle that you accomplish nothing at all

Which of these two approaches describes you?

And third, there is the contented one. The Preacher suggests an alternate way to the two previous approaches to work. He says in verse 6: **"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."**

This beautiful picture suggests "contentment." It is learning to be satisfied with one handful, rather than pushing for more and more so that you can get two hands full.

You can find story after story of people who have made it their goal in life to make a lot of money. And when they make that money they discover that money never satisfies.

The Preacher is not opposed to hard work. No. Not at all. Rather, he is suggesting that you work hard, but be content with what you have. Find your satisfaction in the provision of God, like the little girl who misquoted Psalm 23 but spoke better than she knew. Instead of saying, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want," she said, "The Lord is my Shepherd; that's all I want." And as commentator Phil Ryken says, "Most of us want so many others things in life that it is hard for us to say that, but whether Jesus is all we want or not, the truth is that he is all we need."⁴

So, we ought to live with contentment.

II. Lead with a Teachable Spirit (4:13-16)

The second observation is that we ought to lead with a teach-

³ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 50.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 112.

able spirit. I want to note this observation at the end of the chapter before coming to the heart of the passage in the middle.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 4:13-16, **“Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king’s place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.”**

This “rags to riches” story is about someone who rose from obscurity to royalty. It is not exactly clear who the Preacher had in mind when he told this story at the end of chapter 4. The story is a little hard to decipher, but it seems that the Preacher told the story of a young man who rose to power unexpectedly, taking the place of the king who ruled before him. Though the young man had been born in relative poverty, he rose to the highest office in the land. This new king ruled over a vast kingdom. There seemed to be no end to the people who followed him. Yet even the new king could not rule forever. Eventually, he also passed away, and others followed him, and the young king was finally forgotten.

Let me say briefly that one lesson we should note is that fame is fleeting. The Preacher wants us to understand that no matter how popular a leader is, the day will come when someone else will succeed him and his fame will fade away. We are reminded not to put too much stock in earthly position.

But the main lesson I want to draw your attention to is the one the Preacher highlights. He stresses the importance of leading with a teachable spirit. Notice again how he put it in verse 13: **“Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.”** Apparently, in earlier days the king took advice, but eventually he **no longer knew how to take advice**. This tragedy is repeated again and again, in the culture as well as in the church.

The story is told of a man in his pastor's study. Leaning forward anxiously in his chair, the man's hands were on his knees and his eyes were wide with anticipation.

"I can't stand to listen to anyone else preach," he told his pastor. "Do you think that means that God is calling me to preach?"⁵

We always need to lead with a teachable spirit.

III. Work with Others (4:7-12)

And the third observation is that we ought to work with others. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 4:7-12, **"Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 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."**

The Preacher talks about someone who is apparently single. He has no son, and not even a brother. He is working only for himself, not for the benefit or the blessing of another.

This man works long hours and even deprives himself of pleasure. He has no-one with whom to share his life's labors.

Ellen Goodman told the tragic story of a man who worked as hard as the man the Preacher has just described. When he died at the age of fifty-one, his obituary said that the cause of his death was a coronary thrombosis, but most people knew better. At the office six days a week, often until 8 or 9 at night, his friends and family said that he simply worked himself to death. Yet on the day of his funeral, when the company was already making inquiries about his replacement, the president looked around the office for candidates and said, "Well, who's been working the hardest?" But the zinger line was delivered by the dead man's wife. When a friend said, "I know how much you will miss him," she said, "Oh,

⁵ Adapted from an original cartoon by Mary Chambers, *The Best Cartoons from Leadership Journal*, Volume 1 (Broadman & Holman, 1999).

I already have.”⁶

There is a better way to work. The Preacher tells us in verse 9a: **“Two are better than one.”** It is better to work with others rather than to do so entirely on our own and for our own well-being. The Preacher is really talking about all of our relationships. God has designed us to be in community with other people. This has been God’s way since the beginning, when God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Togetherness is better than loneliness. Connection is better than competition.

The Preacher gives several reasons why working with others is better than isolation. *First, two are better than one because they are more productive in their work.* The Preacher said in verse 9b: **“because they have a good reward for their toil.”**

Second, two are better than one because they can help one another in times of trouble. The Preacher said in verse 10: **“For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”** In 1823, Dr. H. P. Hallbeck, a missionary of the Church of England in South Africa, reported that from the top of a neighboring hill he observed lepers at work. He noticed two lepers sowing peas in a field. One leper had no hands and the other leper had no feet. The leper who had no hands was carrying the leper who had no feet on his back. The leper without feet carried a bag of seed and dropped a pea every now and then, which the other leper pressed into the ground with his feet. And so they overcame their individual disabilities and worked together. Two are indeed better than one.

Third, two are better than one because they can keep each other warm. The Preacher said in verse 11: **“Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?”** In ancient times, travelers used to lie together so that their body heat would help keep each other warm.

And fourth, two are better than one because they can protect each other. The Preacher said in verse 12a: **“And though a man**

⁶ James Limburg reprints Goodman’s column in *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 61-63.

might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.” In ancient times, a person traveling alone was much more likely to be robbed than a person traveling with a companion.

Conclusion

Two really are better than one. The Preacher teaches us that since working alone is futile, we ought to work together with others.

The Preacher adds that **“a threefold cord is not quickly broken”** (4:12b). The Preacher is simply saying that whereas two is better than one, three is even better than two. This is especially true for believers if the third person is God himself. Of all the persons to work together with, the best by far is Jesus.

Jesus said that we are not simply his servants but we are his friends (John 15:15). He is the friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19). And it is only when we have Jesus as our friend that we are able to live a truly meaningful life—even in life’s difficult times.

Joseph Scriven was born in 1819 of prosperous parents in Dublin, Ireland. At the age of twenty-five he decided to leave his native country and migrate to Canada, partly because of the accidental drowning of his fiancée the night before their wedding.

From that time Scriven developed a totally different pattern of life. It is said that he gave freely of his limited possessions, even sharing the clothing from his own body, if necessary, and never once refused to help anyone who needed it. Because of his lifestyle Scriven was respected by people but considered to be eccentric.

Upon learning of his mother’s serious illness and unable to be with her in Dublin, he wrote her a letter of comfort and enclosed the words of a poem that he wrote.

Some time later when he himself was ill, a friend came to call on him and happened to see the poem scribbled on scratch paper near the bed. The friend read it and asked Scriven if he had written the words. Scriven, with typical modesty, replied, “The Lord and I did it between us.”

Here are the words of Scriven's poem, which we now know as the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus":

What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our Refuge;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
In His arms He'll take and shield thee;
Thou wilt find a solace there.⁷

Jesus is the friend we need most of all. Have you become his friend by putting your trust in him? Two really are better than one when one of the two is the Best One of all. Amen.

⁷ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green's MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher teaches us that working alone is futile. So often we try to grab all we can with two hands. And so often we discover—too late—that all we end up with vanity and a striving after wind.

The Preacher also teaches us that we should learn to be content with your provision, and also that it is good to work with and for the benefit of others.

O Lord, help us to learn how to balance all of life's competing time demands so that we can indeed glorify you in our work.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.