

# WHAT MONEY CAN'T BUY

By Steve Zeisler

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"There is nothing new under the sun," says Solomon the wise in the book of Ecclesiastes, summing up his observation of the human experience. The oldest story is as up to date as the newest. Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Abel, were given tasks to accomplish, and, like their parents, were instructed to reign over God's creation. Cain became a tiller of the soil, Abel a tender of flocks. Both were hard-working and productive in their assignments, and both brought their produce to God. Although their offerings, livestock and crops, were regarded as honorable sacrifices by God (both grain and animals are mentioned in Leviticus as acceptable in the laws governing sacrifice and worship), there was a critical difference in the attitudes of the brothers. Abel came with a heart of gratitude, offering what he had produced as a steward of God, and he received favor from God for his labors. Cain did not make his offering with the same attitude and consequently did not find favor with God.

There were two brothers in a family who lived nearby when I was growing up. One fell in love with Jesus at a young age. He works as a plumber, is married with six children, and has much joy in what he does. As a matter of fact, he has been known to sing hymns to himself as he works. He has an enviable family life. They go to ball games together and sit in the bleachers; they have much joy and laughter in their home. This man works hard, laughs hard, eats heartily, and sleeps like a rock at night. His brother, however, although much more successful outwardly, is a restless wanderer. His family has suffered as a result of his dissatisfaction. He has not included God in his life

In many ways, the life story of these two brothers mirrors the life of Cain and Abel. Abel experienced joy and love because he was rightly related to God; Cain suffered restlessness and guilt because he did not seek the things of God.

The book of Ecclesiastes has much to say about work and prosperity. Like Abel, we can experience work and productivity as worthy before God and delightful to experience, or, like Cain, we can experience disapproval, anger and restlessness. Solomon observes both conditions. Someone has said, "It's pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness. Poverty and wealth have both failed." "I don't care too much for money," said the Beatles song, "money can't buy me love." What is it that brings satisfaction from the effort of work and enterprise, and the accompanying gaining of wealth?

## I. WISDOM FOR WORKERS

There are two main sections in our study today. The first, beginning in verse 4 of chapter 4, talks about work; about the acquisition cycle. The second concerns stewardship of money and possessions acquired. It has always been God's intention that we should work (making a home and/or making a living). Being made in God's image we find satisfaction in productivity. We delight in the growth of children, of orchards, dwellings, knowledge and friendship. We rejoice when the broken is repaired and chaos is tamed.

But, as Solomon observes, work can be experienced very negatively, as well. Ecc. 4:4:

And I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry [envy, competition] between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

There is some hyperbole here. Solomon does not mean to imply that every human enterprise comes about by envy or competition. But it is surely true that a large percentage of the things which people engage in are done in order to best their neighbor. We strive with all our might to be better and do better than others. Man is

extremely competitive. Solomon's first concern regarding the working world therefore is to ask how relationships can be included in this arena. Rather than striving and seeking to best and surpass everyone else, how can we be inclusive in our work. How can we relate to our neighbors in a helpful rather than a competitive fashion? He has a number of things to say about this.

## **BALANCING WORK AND REST**

Verses 5 and 6, however, speak of those who opt out of this kind of competitiveness:

The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

Some find the competition and rivalry of work too stressful. But rather than finding a way to work in a positive vein, they quit altogether. Such a man, "consumes his own flesh," says Solomon. Like muscle which feeds on itself and gradually disappears unless it is exercised, the unproductive man who sits with his hands folded gradually uses up everything which has been given him; he wastes away.

I once lived on the fringes of a hippie commune of people who were living a counter-culture lifestyle. Some lived this way out of personal conviction, while others did so simply because they were lazy. They felt that life owed them a living, so they sat with their hands folded, taking in the sunshine, doing drugs, etc. Solomon describes this lifestyle as foolish. Man is supposed to work and pay his way.

But there is another use of hands, described in verse 6, which speaks of a lifestyle of "two fists full of labor." This is the man who works slavishly, 24 hours a day, with scarcely a moment set aside for rest. Solomon does not recommend this, either. What he does advocate is "one hand full of rest." In other words, one hand full of work and one hand full of rest. Balance and rhythm is what he is advising. We must appreciate both labor and leisure.

## **THE SCROOGE SYNDROME**

Verse 7 raises another consequence of Solomon's word on rivalry and the working place.

Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.

Ebenezer Scrooge is the embodiment of this figure whom Solomon describes here. Scrooge was so focused on amassing money and wealth that he soon surpassed all of his rivals. If ever he had a brother, sister or colleague, they had all been lost to him---all, that is, except Jacob Marley's ghost. The question that hangs in the air for someone who lives this way is, "Why am I doing this? Why have I allowed my competitiveness and envy to land me here?" Harry Chapin's song *The Cat's in the Cradle*, tells of the father who had no time for his son although the boy sought his companionship. Finally, when he was an old man, the father tried to reestablish a relationship with him but the son had grown up to be like his father; he had no time to relate to anyone.

There are answers to this question. There are reasons to work. If you are working because you want to bring joy and opportunity to people you care about, then you know the answer to the question, "For whom am I doing this?" You are doing it because you desire to be a blessing to those whom you love. It is important that we ask if God has called us to do what we are doing. Is he being honored by what we do, or are we denying ourselves things which he wants to give us in order to have what is not worth having ultimately? Someone has said, "The majority of men devote the greater part of their lives to making their remaining years unhappy." Ask yourself why you are doing what you are doing. There are good and valuable reasons to work, but many do so only out of rivalry and envy. We live in a society that is characterized by loneliness and isolation. Let us be

sure we are working to enhance life.

## COMPANIONSHIP

How can our work be related in a proper sense to good relationships? Solomon continues his observations in verse 9:

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

Even as he observes life "under the sun," Solomon sees that we are much better off if we have taken the time to include others and make someone else successful at the same time we ourselves are becoming successful; to have a partner, a companion who shares the experience. Most likely he is thinking of one's spouse. A healthy marriage in which life is shared is the first step away from competition and loneliness for most people. Obviously, a shared life in marriage is not automatic, nor is it the only kind of partnership that will be satisfying.

There are three important observations here. First, when you fall, there will be someone to pick you up. Young people especially have a problem with this. If they are successful, talented and strong, they feel they can succeed at everything and never fall. But a fall is inevitable eventually when they are faced with something they cannot accomplish or prevent. If they have excluded everyone from their circle, there's no one to pick them up and help them in a time of failure.

Next, Solomon asks who can stay warm at night sleeping alone. This metaphor speaks of marriage, but not only marriage. In the ancient world, travelers stayed outdoors or in a tent at night. They huddled together and gathered the animals around for warmth. The world of our emotions is implied here. What about the times when your heart is cold, when the world is dark, when you are failing inwardly, when you lack the confidence to make it by yourself? That is when you need someone next to you to warm your spirits and light your path. It's hard to be warm alone.

Third, Solomon talks about enemies. The day will come when someone will attack you. If you are successful, you will have envious enemies. If you are unsuccessful, you will be a target for the takeover artists of the world. But if you have a brother, or more than one, when you are attacked, "a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart."

Solomon began by saying that rivalry creates productivity for many. They want to best others, and they become wealthy by doing so. But this is an inadequate basis for entering the working world. We ought to find a balance: one hand full of work and one hand full of rest; to find a companionship that will keep us from being Scrooge-like; to find a way to include others so that they too are successful.

## II. WISDOM FOR STEWARDS

Next, we will see what Solomon has to say about those who have acquired some of this world's goods. Chapter 5, verse 10:

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much. But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

The man who loves money is a fool, says Solomon. Money is a very poor lover. Riches and wealth have a

certain power, but they do not have the power to return love. The one who loves money will be sorely disappointed. The Bible everywhere testifies to this fact. As stewards, we will have some of this world's goods and be responsible for them, but we ought never to love them.

## **THE VANITY OF LOVING \$**

Solomon shares some of his observations about the down-side of the love of money. When your goods increase, those who consume them increase also, so what is the advantage to the owner? Have you noticed this? The fact that you have more than you once had does not seem to do anything more for you except bring an increase in the number of people who want to consume what you have. I'm the world's worst car mechanic, but when I was driving an old VW I could keep it tuned up. I can't touch today's high-tech cars. Instead of one person repairing your car today, you need ten or more specialists---computer experts, paint specialists, phone repair people for your cellular phone, etc.

The more you have, the more you are required to have to keep things in repair. The heavyweight champion of the world is a very rich man, but he has an entourage fit for a king of people who want to help him spend his money. Money increases, and so do those who want to consume it. The man who buys a cabin in the mountains as a place of refuge for the week-end spends so much time working out his affairs he does not have time to use it. Instead, his dissolute nephew and his friends go there and enjoy it every week. They have the time to do so, while you are left working to pay the bills ("what is the advantage to the owner except to look on?").

The working man sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich man rewards him with a restless night (verse 12). Many would agree with this observation. We would do well to ask how we sleep at night. Do we sleep badly because we are worried about money and possessions? Derek Kidner has written, "Whatever burdens were laid on Adam at the fall, there was a rough mercy in the sentence, 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.' We offer an unconscious comment on it by our modern exercise machines and health clubs, for it is one of our human absurdities to pour out money and effort just to undo the damage of money and ease."

Verse 13 begins a mini-drama in which we are introduced to three people whom Solomon observes (repeats the verb "to see") in turn.

There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun:

Verse 18 introduces the second person:

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting:

And third, in 6:1:

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun...

## **NOTHING LEFT**

5:13:

There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil---exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So, what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

The first person is the man who has paid great attention to his wealth. He has hoarded it and guarded it with great care. But then, after he has fathered a son, and he makes plans for him, a serious reversal takes place---a natural disaster, a bad investment, whatever, and his fortune is wiped out.

Solomon is relating here a truth that is even bigger than the experience of the one who has a fortune and loses it. He tells us this parable because he wants to make a point that is true for everyone: all of us will eventually lose all of our possessions. No matter how well we have guarded all the goods which we have accumulated, on our last day on earth we lose it all anyway. The Egyptians hoped to take their riches with them so they buried their pharaohs with great wealth, but the Scriptures declare that we take nothing with us. We are born naked and we die naked. The day is coming for all of us when everything we have ever accumulated will be lost to us. We enter another world empty-handed, taking with us only the character, the personality that has been created in us. If we do not have a perspective that allows us to let go of everything, if we do not place our hope in something greater than what we own and control, then we will become like the man in this story, who "throughout his life eats in darkness and with great vexation, sickness and anger."

## **THE GIFT OF GOD**

Verse 18 introduces our second subject:

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Here is someone who works hard and is rewarded with success, riches and opportunity. He has joy in his labor; "this is the gift of God" (verse 19). This is the key ingredient. We can be about the work we have been given to do, receive whatever recompense we are due, whatever goods accrue to us, and have it all be from God so that we are grateful to him. We find ourselves to be stewards of what he has given us so that we sleep well at night and work hard the next day, precisely because God is at the center of it all. That is what distinguished Cain from Abel. For one man and his produce God had regard; for the other he had no regard.

## **RICH AND HAPPY**

Here is our third man. 6:1:

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men---a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a sore affliction. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they may be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things, and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things---do not all go to one place?"

This third man is not like the first man who lost everything in a devastating tragedy. Here is a man who, speaking in hyperbole, lived two thousand years, and fathered a hundred children. His riches and wealth do not fail him. He has everything one could ask for yet, tragically, he has no joy in life; his soul is unsatisfied. Even his funeral service, no matter how lavish and well appointed, is lacking because of the bitter attitude which he had throughout his life.

Satisfaction comes, not in possessing the things of the earth, but in knowing the One who created them. Satisfaction in all of our enterprises comes ultimately from knowing that God is pleased with us, that we have served him in the work he has given us to do, and that we have been faithful stewards of the goods that became ours. We should ask our Father what he wants done with those things and give him the right to

command us. Then we will experience his approval.

## **APPROVED BY GOD**

Everything depends finally on your attitude toward God. Cain discovered this to his dismay. Your circumstances may be fulfilling, difficult, rich, poor, or very ordinary, but they are not the key element. What is of supreme importance is the love and approval of God. Jesus said that we can use the riches of this world to make friends for eternity. Our stewardship of our possessions can delight the heart of the Lord, advance his kingdom on earth and secure riches and welcome for the steward in eternity. But they will not do so without our choice to be faithful.

Whom does you resemble, Cain or Abel, in your dealings? Are you good at what you do? Are you successful and prosperous? If you have a portion of this world's goods to offer to God, do you find yourself accepted and embraced by him, or do you hear his warning that things are not right in life? Be a steward. Take seriously the responsibility to work and to give to the glory of God. He has the right to have access to what is yours.

Here are our marching orders for this day, from 1 Timothy 6:17:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches but on God who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

*Lord, we ask you to give us enterprise in our world, homes that we may fill with life, and work that we can do to your glory. And as we are given this world's goods, help us not to love them but to serve you, to be stewards of what we have. Make us a people who are rich in good works so that we may indeed take hold of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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