

WORK & WORRY

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



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Ecclesiastes 2:17-23
Matthew 6:25-34
3rd Message
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This study is the third in a series comparing Koheleth's perspective in Ecclesiastes and Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount. The subject considered here is work.

In the beginning, human beings were called to an important mission. Honoring their Creator, they were to tend a bountiful garden, discover mysteries and wonders prepared by God, marvel at beauty, protect life, and give order to abundance. However, through disobedience we are cut off from the Lord, and our quest has become a grind. We have jobs, but no mission. We eat in order to work, and work to be able to eat, but the circle is going nowhere.

Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised to find that Koheleth, observing what work is like in the world under the sun, laments—cries out against meaningless toil. In his famous phrase, our work is “chasing after the wind.” (Ecclesiastes 2:17)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also speaks of work—sowing, reaping, storing in barns, laboring, spinning, and covering. But his take on the subject is different; establishing a context that makes work purposeful. “But seek first, his kingdom and his righteousness and all of these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

Let us hear first from the Koheleth, the Searcher:

Ecclesiastes 1:17 , 2:12-16

¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom...

^{2:12}Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done. ¹³I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. ¹⁵Then

I thought in my heart, “The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?” I said in my heart, “This too is meaningless.” ¹⁶For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

Koheleth's first concern is the work of the mind. “I applied myself to understanding wisdom.” (v. 17) This is the work of scholars, researchers, teachers, artists, and explorers trying to understand the way things are. Yet even geniuses will find that they are not transformed. They don't become stronger. Their bodies deteriorate at the same rate as those who are lazy and foolish. They will die right on time, along with everybody else. The grim reaper is not impressed with smart people.

Then the Searcher considers bodily labor—the work of fingers, shoulders, backs, and legs:

Ecclesiastes 2:17-23

¹⁷So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²²What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the

sun? ²³ All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

This paragraph ends with a description of an exhausted man at the end of a long and grievous day. Yet, even in his great weariness, he cannot sleep because he is anxious about the troubles that await him in the morning. We recall the language of Genesis 3—the ground cursed, painful toil, thorns, sweat, and dust.

Our observer may seem like an old curmudgeon. Many young people reading these words will find them too pessimistic, but they should not turn away too soon. If Koheleth were to give the commencement address for the class of 2010, it would not be all weariness and despair. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Koheleth is an advocate for enjoying youth while you're young. He observes, "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

But true to his main premise, he would also say you are not special. You may think technology and enthusiasm make your generation unique—they don't. You will not be spared the hardships of a broken world.

Is the Searcher a pessimist or a realist? Those who work here know Silicon Valley to be a stress-filled place—angry bosses, snaky company politics, unjust incentives, arbitrary decision-making, endless demands, and no time for what really matters. Others long to have back the job that once burdened them because joblessness is even more terrifying. Koheleth's cry resonates. "All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest." (v. 23a) Hard work and anxious nights.

This paragraph in Ecclesiastes ends with anxiety, as does the message from Jesus in Matthew 6, however, Jesus commands us not to worry and explains why.

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more im-

portant than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the pagans [unbelievers] run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

This teaching is profound and transformative. It deserves a lifetime's contemplation, but for our purposes in this study, I want to focus on three phrases.

The first is this: “unbelievers run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.” (v.32) The phrase ‘your heavenly Father’ was given to us by Jesus. His model prayer begins, “Our Father in heaven...”¹ No one had prayed this way before. The Sovereign of the universe, dwelling in heaven is also a loving Father, familiar with our hurts and hopes. Unbelievers run at a desperate pace, and do not know to turn to him for care. “Your heavenly Father knows what you need” (v. 32) is an extraordinary announcement.

Therefore, we must not try to gain for ourselves what God will give us. Our jobs do not convey status—we are already children of God. Our work does not supply our needs (pay the rent, educate the kids, repair the car)—our Father supplies our needs. Our dithering cannot accom-

plish anything. Wilderness meadows are more beautiful than Solomon, and our lifespan is determined by the Lord, whether we are anxious about it or not.

Let me also comment on some potential misunderstandings of this teaching. First, that God will supply our needs does not suggest miracles, most of the time. Usually God meets our needs by teaching us how to think and act. He opens doors and guides us toward what is best for us.

Further, the fact that he is our heavenly Father means that all of his other children are our siblings. The Lord's care is often mediated through our brothers and sisters. In some settings we offer the help or instruction needed by another and at other times we are the recipients. Needed provision is no less supplied by God because he uses people to deliver it.

Finally, our Father's care does mean life can be worry free. "Each day has enough trouble of its own," Jesus said. (v. 34) You can count on a day full of difficulty and confusion every day. But we do not have a life time of troubles descending all at once, insisting that we fret about the future. Crippling worry and sky darkening anxiety, are poison and the antidote is the certainty of our Father's care for us.

A second phrase for our consideration, "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (v. 25) Popular culture, of course, insists on the opposite perspective. You are what you eat or wear. Expensive clothing, exotic cuisine, and palatial dwellings are the very measure of significance.

Jesus' challenge reminded me of an old rhyme:

*Into this world to eat and sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish
And leave behind an empty dish.*

Life is more important than food. Eating macaroni and cheese leads to three things—physical energy, stored fat, and waste. Same deal with filet mignon. Food can be a hobby, an addiction, a gift, or a source of pleasure. It can

give rise to table fellowship and many other good things, but it is not a life purpose. Human beings are greater than their digestive systems.

Yesterday more than a dozen folks from our recovery ministry were baptized and were lifted from the water and clothed with Christ. No one asked whether their closets at home contained expensive fabrics or denim and tee shirts. Life is more important than food and the body is more important than clothes.

A third phrase to consider, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." (v. 34) He is changing the metaphor here. We are seen earlier to be children of a heavenly Father, now we are seen to be servants of a King. Jesus is Lord—not Caesar, not mammon, not Baal, not me. Seeking his kingdom first means that we bow our heads, bend our knees, and obey.

John Stott put it this way.

*"Such a desire will start with ourselves, until every single department of our life—home, marriage and family, personal morality, professional life and business ethics, bank balance, tax returns, life-style, citizenship—is joyfully and freely submissive to Christ. It will continue in our immediate environment, with the acceptance of evangelistic responsibility towards our relatives, colleagues, neighbors and friends. And it will also reach out in global concern for the missionary witness of the church."*²

When Jesus' kingdom and righteousness become our great ambition then the questions of food, clothing, and shelter find their proper place. They are added as a matter of course.

As a child, I remember wanting a cowboy outfit for Christmas. I hoped that wearing cowboy clothes would make me as cool as the cowboys on TV. Perhaps kids today aspire to be videogame assassins. Whatever the dreams, we know that in the real world clothes don't confer an identity. The outfit is secondary to the identity. Become a soldier, with all the attendant discipline and responsibility, and you will be given a uniform. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the needs of daily life

are thrown in for no extra charge.

In this study, the last verse we read in Ecclesiastes was verse 23—with work being wearisome, anxiety ridden, and absent meaning. Here are the verses that follow:

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

²⁴A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Because he has constrained himself to write from an “under the sun” perspective, Koheleth can only speak wistfully of the gifts of God. He observes that some people find such satisfaction in the loving presence of God, that the resentments and pressure of work are replaced with satisfaction. For them, nights aren’t filled with sleepless worry. Koheleth can observe such lives, acknowledge that they come from God, and long for such experience. But apart from divine revelation, he cannot show us how to get there.

Jesus can and does. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” (v. 33)

May God grant that we will heed our Lord’s call. And that our lives will be distinctive enough to offer hope to those who do not yet believe.

NOTES:

¹Matthew 6:9-13

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

¹⁰your kingdom come,

your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²Forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.”

²*Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 170 © John R. W. Stott 1978

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