

Series: Ecclesiastes
Sermon: The Vanity of Toil
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:18-26
Teacher: Ryan Brown
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Ecclesiastes 2:18-26 (ESV)

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 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.*

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.*

"Here's one of the great frustrations of our existence. We are born with a longing for permanence, a deep desire to do something that will endure or to make something that will last. Yet the under the sun reality is that we will spend our whole lives working to gain something we cannot keep."

-Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, p. 60-70

1. The Vanity of Work

- The Fruit of my labor will go to another (18-21)

1 Kings 14:25-28 (ESV)

²⁵ *In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. ²⁶ He took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house. He took away everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made, ²⁷ and King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king's house. ²⁸ And as often as the king went into the house of the LORD, the guard carried them and brought them back to the guardroom.*

○ **The work itself is toil (22-23)**

- Cursed Work

Genesis 3:17b-19 (ESV)

^{17b} *cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

- Work that advances the curse

Ecclesiastes 6:7 (ESV)

All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 (ESV)

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.

- Ignorance
- Intention
- Environment

"These verses are an oasis of optimism in a wilderness of despair. As such, they marked the turning point in Ecclesiastes--not just on the subject of work, but for the argument of the book as a whole."

2. The Value of Work

- **Work as Gift**

“When we accept in a deep way that we are going to die, that reality can stop us expecting too much from all the good things we pursue. We learn to pursue them for what they are in themselves rather than what we need them to be to make us happy. Death reorients us to our limitations as creatures and helps us to see God’s good gifts right in front of us all the time, each and every day of our lives. Instead of using these gifts as means to a greater end of securing ultimate gain in the world, we take the time to live inside the gifts themselves and see the hand of God in them.”

- Gibson, David. *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (p. 45). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

- **Work as Blessing**

1 Corinthians 15:58 (ESV)

58 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.

Conclusion

“The major problem is that we find too much of our identity or our sense of worth and what we achieve. We see our work as being valuable only if the results are big enough or long-lasting enough. If a successor should squander the inheritance we pass on to them, we feel as if our efforts were wasted.

“This is a very common way of looking at things --and it is thoroughly opposed to the gospel of grace and to the Lord's sovereign wisdom. The Lord is not waiting for us to achieve great things so that his Kingdom can advance. *Beloved, we are God's children now* (1 John 3:2). He already receives us as beloved children, regardless of what our labors might achieve.”

- Rogland, Expository Commentary: Ecclesiastes, p. 1046

1 Peter 1:3–5 (ESV)

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* ⁴ *to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,* ⁵ *who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*