

Why Do You Work?

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[0 : 00] Please turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Recently we celebrated Labor Day.! You know one of the things when I was a little boy,! I found funny about Labor Day was that! it was the day that people really tired of themselves.

They'd go on the road, you know, busy of themselves and sweaty of themselves. And if you go to Labor Day, please don't take that as an offense. But it just seemed to me to be tiring.

And it was a day, a day off. But one of the things that I have done over the years is I would often listen to the various labor union leaders talk about the state of labor issues in the nation right around Labor Day.

And I happened to listen to an interview with John Pinder. Leading up to Labor Day, I also heard the one with O.B. Ferguson. And then I heard an interview with the Minister of Labor, Shane Gibson.

And the minister spoke on two levels. One, he spoke as the minister responsible for labor issues. But he also spoke on behalf of the government as the largest employer in the country.

[1 : 17] And it's always very interesting when you hear their perspectives. The union leaders, their philosophy has more to do with trying to get as much compensation as they possibly can for their members.

And then you listen to the minister of labor. And he is trying to get as much productivity as possible from the employees. And so when you really look at it, sometimes you even listen to – I was listening to John Pinder talking about protecting some employees who steal, you know, the union.

And he was talking about different degrees and what people get away with and all this stuff. And I'm just thinking, this is just really crazy. And you can reduce it down to this.

They are seeking to get the most compensation for the least amount of work. And then on the other side, the Minister of Labor and employers are trying to get the most productivity for the least amount of compensation or the least cost to them.

And so what you see coming out of these discussions really is a philosophy of work. You see what we can call work views. And the truth is, all of us have a work view.

[2 : 43] We may not have written it out. We may not have articulated it. But all of us have a particular view of work. And when you consider this morning, what is your work view?

How do you view work? Or to make it even more personal, why do you work? This morning, as we continue our series in Ecclesiastes, we come to a section of the book in which the preacher shares with us what he describes as four work views.

Or they can be described as four work views. And starting in verse 4 of chapter 4 in Ecclesiastes, we'll read through verse 8.

Please follow along as I read. Then I saw that all toil and all skill and work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun.

[4 : 1 0] Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you this morning for your word. We thank you for the privilege we have now to sit under the authority and instruction of your word.

We ask, Lord, that you would speak to us from the pages of the book. Would you help us to posture our hearts both to hear and heed your word today, Lord?

And Father, would you use your word to transform our lives? Lord, I ask that you would pour your spirit out afresh upon us to hear, upon me to proclaim, and help me to be faithful, Lord, in the handling of your word, for the good of your people, and for the glory of your name.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. It is what it is. I'm sure you've heard that spoken very regularly in our country, and one of the persons who say it quite often is our prime minister.

[5 : 5 0] It is what it is. And it really is a statement that I believe encourages us to not think deeply about whatever that situation is.

It is a statement that is designed to cause us to accept at face value whatever it is and not to think deeply about it.

But one of the aspects that we should never accept that it is what it is is this issue of this world and this life that we live.

The world in which we live is not what it is. And those of us who are followers of Christ need to recognize that because something has gone wrong with this world.

This world was not as it is. It was not always as it is. Something went drastically wrong. The world is not just filled with injustice and brokenness and selfishness and suffering.

[7 : 0 0] No, the world is filled with brokenness and suffering and injustice and selfishness and a myriad of other sins because of an event that took place in human history.

Man rebelled against God, his creator. And we read this in Genesis chapter 3. The theologians refer to it as the fall.

All humanity in this time space world created by God fell into sin and the effects of sin because of rebellion against God.

And in the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher is commenting on life. We see this we see these wise words coming from his pen and he's commenting on life in a fallen world.

In the previous message in this series, we looked at the issue of oppression and we saw the observations that the preacher made concerning oppression.

[8 : 0 6] And this morning we consider his words about work, work in a fallen world. And in these five verses that we read, the preacher gives us what I would call four work views or four views of work.

And what these views, when we put them together, what these work views help us to see is this. The goodness of work has been contaminated by the fallenness of man.

The goodness of work has been contaminated by the fallenness of man. In other words, work was a good gift that God created and gave to man to do before the fall.

But when mankind fell into sin, work was contaminated by sin. And so these four observations about work that the preacher gives us in Ecclesiastes are really about work in a fallen world.

So let's consider these four views of work in order. The first one is found in verse 4. And it is the view that can be described as work influenced by envy.

[9 : 1 9] Work influenced by envy. The preacher shares this view in verse 4. Look at what he says. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

This is also vanity and a striving after wind. Now clearly the preacher is using a figure of speech which we call hyperbole to make his point.

When he says, All toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. What the preacher is doing is, The preacher is really intentionally exaggerating to forcefully make a point.

And we have done this, Where sometimes you may say to someone, A family member in the house who has a habit of walking out of a room and leaving a light switch on. You may say, You know, you always leave the lights on.

And they don't always leave the lights on. And they will quickly remind you that they don't always leave the lights on. But you're trying to make a point that they do it so regularly. And they need to discontinue doing it. So the preacher is making this first work view.

[10 : 33] And he's saying, Generally speaking, People work hard and work well because they are competitively envious of their neighbor. People work hard and they work well because they are competitively envious of their neighbor.

Now what does that mean exactly? Well on one level it could certainly mean that in being envious perhaps of what a neighbor possesses or what a neighbor is able to do, We work hard and we work well in order to obtain the resources to get what our neighbor has.

And perhaps even more. That's certainly one level of understanding what the preacher is addressing in this area of envy. But I believe that the preacher is getting at something that is more fundamental.

Something that is deeper within our fallen nature. I believe the preacher is helping us to see that behind the efforts and the skill that we bring to our work is a competitive influence to outdo and outshine our neighbor who is engaged in similar work.

He's the one who's nearby. He's similarly engaged in work as we are. Now whether this is ongoing or not, I believe all of us have experienced this kind of competitive drive that has pushed us to work harder and to work smarter than those who are engaged in the same endeavor.

[12 : 06] Perhaps it was in the classroom or on the sports field. Perhaps it was in the workplace. Or perhaps in the home. Where we did chores.

And we did them in such a way that we demonstrated a competitive spirit towards our siblings. And this might even be the case for some of us this morning.

This may still be the case for us even now. The diligent studying and burning of the midnight oil is perhaps not just to do well on the exam, but to do better than friends.

Or to do better than the whole class. Perhaps getting into the office early and leaving late and taking work home and working on weekends is driven by a competitive attitude towards coworkers and the desire to grab the resulting verbal praise and the financial rewards.

And I'm sure like me, you've probably heard all of that described as healthy competition. It's just healthy competition. But the preacher uses a more sobering description.

[13 : 23] He calls it envy of our neighbor. And while we all continue happily along, when our hard work and our skilled efforts are called healthy competition, I think we need to pause when the preacher says, it's envy of our neighbor.

And it calls for soul searching. It calls for us to really search our souls and honestly ask ourselves, why do I work? Why do I work?

And why do I work the way that I work? We need to ponder this. And perhaps for some of us, immediately the lights are going on and we're able to see that we are working out of envy, an awareness, a competitive awareness of our neighbor and what our neighbor is doing.

And if so, thank God for that. Thank God that he is opening our eyes to see that because that's an opportunity to repent.

But perhaps as you consider this, no lights are going on. And it might be that this is a question that needs more consideration, needs more thought, and I encourage you to take the time to do that.

[14 : 42] Or it may be that by God's grace, your work is not influenced by envy. It's not influenced by envy of neighbor, but instead it is influenced by worship of God.

The Hebrew word for work is a word that comes from the Hebrew word for worship. And it gives us an insight into the fact that our work was intended to be done with God in view and as worship to him.

But the fall has changed work from being God would worship to earthbound toil. An earthbound toil where instead of having God in view, we have neighbor in view.

And the preacher helps us to see this. Instead of working hard and well because we're worshipping God, the preacher is saying that in our fallenness, we work hard and well because we're envying our neighbor.

And what's the preacher's assessment of it? Look again at verse 4. He says, It is all vanity and striving after wind. He's saying, Although we think we are accomplishing something, we are accomplishing nothing.

[16 : 03] What we are accomplishing is the same as a mist or a vapor or a breath. He says, It is as useless as running after the wind and trying to grab it in your hands.

He says, When you are working out of a competitive spirit, out of envy towards your neighbor, and you're trying to outdo and outshine your neighbor, he says, That's like just running around and trying to grab the wind in your hand.

He says, It's useless. It's pointless. It's useless. The second worldview that the preacher gives us about work is in verse 5.

It's the view of work prevented by laziness. Work prevented by laziness. In verse 5 we read, The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

Now this view is in direct contrast to the one that we just considered in verse 4. This person, who the preacher describes in verse 5, is not working at all.

[17 : 08] He is not envy a neighbor. He is not working at all. He has folded his arms, and he refuses to work. And here again, the preacher uses hyperbole to make the point.

He's saying, This man is so lazy, he would rather eat his own flesh. Than work to provide food for his needs. He engages in self-cannibalism.

And more than being lazy, the preacher calls this man a fool. The lazy man is a foolish man. And the point that the preacher is making is that laziness will lead to self-destruction.

It will lead to self-destruction. And I think the preacher, perhaps, is trying to help us to see that the solution for this envious man in verse 4, who is just driven by envy of neighbor, and he is working because he is so mindful of his neighbor, and wants to do it, I'll shine his neighbor.

The preacher is really helping us to see that the answer to the envious man is not the lazy man. Laziness is self-destructive.

[18 : 27] Yet so many people resort to it. And so the lazy person must ask the opposite question from those who work. Those who work must ask, Why do I work?

But the lazy person must ask, Why don't I work? Why don't I work? And clearly there are many reasons.

Beyond the reasons of sin and selfishness and a sense of entitlement to be cared for by others and feeling that certain jobs are beneath them, some people have no motivation to work due to discouragement, even due to depression.

And out of despair and depression, some people cease looking for work, and they do not work. And when the labor report is released, and you may hear this term used, they talk about discouraged workers.

And these are people who have just met with no success in finding work, and so they check out of the active job market, and they're no longer looking, and they're called discouraged. But among those discouraged workers could be those who are depressed.

[19 : 43] But you know, whatever the reason is for not working, although they're different, the solution to engage in God-honoring work is the same.

You see, it was the first Adam that caused sin to come into the world, and sin that affected work came from the first Adam. And it is the last Adam, Jesus Christ, who came into the world and who gave himself as a sacrifice for sin.

And he is the only hope for sinners and sin and the sin of laziness that is connected to work in our fallen world.

And see, the truth is that Jesus Christ is to make a difference in every aspect of our lives. We come to Christ and it is to affect our work as well. And so often, we tend to confine the transforming effect of Christ just to our spiritual lives instead of letting it be seen in all of our life.

Christ affects everything. Now, the lazy fool in verse 5 may not describe any of us fully this morning.

[21 : 02] I don't think there's any of us who are so hopelessly and desperately lazy as this man who just sit and will refuse to do anything.

But I think we need to consider our situations as a part of our fallen condition in this world and we need to look at our lives and allow the Lord to help us to see that we are perhaps there are aspects of our lives where we are like this lazy man where our arms are folded and we aren't doing that which we can do and that which we should do and it is therefore harmful to us and harmful to our families.

And in these areas we need to look to the Lord. the only one who can give us and help us with what we need to move from selfish laziness to God-centered productivity.

And then in verse 6 the preacher provides us with a third work view and it is number 3 work moderated by contentment.

Work moderated by contentment. Look at how he says it. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after work.

[22 : 26] Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after work. Despite the fact that work in this world is fallen, here we see the mercy and grace of God that the preacher is able to see that in this fallen world there is the possibility for work that is moderated or restrained by being content.

And he uses the proverb to make his point. He says, better is a handful with quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after wind. And here the preacher is referring to our reward for our labors.

He is referring to what we get in our hands. And he refers to two different rewards. One reward is a handful and the other is two hands full.

And the point of the preacher is clear. It is better to have less with quietness and with contentment than more with stress and toil.

In his Ecclesiastes commentary, Michael Eaton explains this verse well and the wisdom that it reflects. And here's what he writes. The way of wisdom will attempt much, one handful, but not too much, two hands full.

[23 : 53] And so we'll find life within its grasp, one handful, not an impossible strain striving for wind. How such a life is attained is the underlying theme of Ecclesiastes.

Those are wise, wise words. So concerning work, this is the way of wisdom and it is what we should pursue.

But sadly, this way of wisdom is not the rule. This is the exception. In our fallen world, we consciously go after two hands full rather than being contented with one handful.

and we do so for all kinds of reasons. One popular one in our context is that we're doing it for our children. We want them to have more than we had.

We want them to have opportunities in the life that we never had. And so we go after two hands full. We toil and we strive and we work hard and long to give our children this better life that we did not have.

[25 : 05] But in the process, many times we neglect to give our children the many gifts that we got. The many gifts that we got from our parents.

Gifts that money cannot buy. The gifts of a godly upbringing and learning that life does not consist in the abundance of what we possess and what we accomplish.

And we are often not able to do these things because our hands are full. Both hands are full. Full of the toil and full of going after what we think we need.

And our toiling and our striving are for things that are not eternal. And because I live in a world where I get a front seat to people's lives, I would be the first to admit this morning that there are some people in our fallen world whose realities are such that they have to toil and strive even to get one handful.

That's just their lot. That's just their reality. We see so much of it in our country. They strive and toil to get one handful just to take care of themselves. and their children.

[26 : 25] And it is yet another expression of our broken world. But for most of us this morning, that's not the case. For most of us this morning, we consciously go after two hands full.

And we do it because it is a cultural norm, not because it is a personal need. we do it because everyone else is doing it. Everyone else is going at 100 miles an hour.

And so, when we are going at that same speed, it doesn't seem like anything is different. But again, this picture is so telling. Two hands full. Hands are free for nothing else.

because it is so occupied and preoccupied with striving and with attaining.

Now, I recognize as we think through this as we try to consider what this means for us in verse 6, what does it mean to really be going after a handful with quietness and two hands full with striving and toil?

[27 : 48] I don't think there's any one size fits all. I don't think that there are any hard and fast rules that we can bring this morning that will apply to all of our lives. And this is why we need to take time and we need to really come before the Lord and we need to be honest about these words in our lives.

This is God's gift to us this morning. This is God's wisdom to us this morning. And he's telling us that there is a better way. There's a better way that we can live in this fallen, broken world where we can have enough with quietness rather than striving and going after more and more and ending up having so less.

And it's quite amazing when we consider this life that we have right here in the Bahamas. We have more materially, but we have so much less than we used to have.

and it's a paradox. But we have less, even though we would all recognize, even though the numbers would conclude that we have more as a nation.

The economy has grown and people generally have a better standard of living, but overall as a people we have so much less.

[29 : 12] we need to ask the Lord to help us to consider whether we are forgoing the blessings of contentment with one handful and pursuing two hands full with the absence of contentment.

Now again, those who run after two hands full would say, oh, we're doing it for the children. We're doing it because we want them to have opportunities that we didn't have.

But the preacher seems to dismiss that notion in this fourth and final work view that he gives us in verses seven and eight.

See, the children are sometimes used as an excuse, but the preacher shows us this man who has no children, who has no offspring.

And what we see in this final work view is the view of work fueled by greed. Work fueled by greed. Look at it again.

[30 : 21] 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 he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This also is vanity and an unhappy business. So the preacher tells us that he saw this lonely man who had no family and yet there was no end to all of his toil and he was never satisfied with his riches.

John Rockefeller founded the Standard Oil Company and in the early 1900s he was a billionaire. And they actually say that he is probably the wealthiest man in modern history considering that he was a billionaire back in the 1900s.

He was once asked by a reporter, how much money is enough? And Rockefeller is reported to have said just a little bit more.

Just a little bit more. And that was his response to that question. And really what it is, it's a moving goal post. It is a position that you can never nail down and will never be satisfied.

[31 : 49] Because whenever you ask them, no matter how much money he had at any given point, how much money is enough? Just a little bit more. Just a little bit more. But this man that the preacher saw that he describes in verse 7, he was a workaholic.

But he was not just a workaholic. He wasn't working because he loved work. He worked because he loved money. The preacher said that this man, his eyes were never satisfied with his riches.

He wanted more and more riches. And the preacher points out that this man was so consumed with amassing riches that he never stopped to ask himself this important question.

Who am I toiling for? Why am I depriving myself of all this pleasure? Why am I sacrificing in this way? I have no family. I have no brother.

I have no children. But he works. And works.

[33 : 04] And works. Not because he loves work, but because he loves money. And see, I think for us this morning, it would be quite easy not to engage this man much because he is such a unique man.

Incredibly wealthy, without family, without anyone to leave all of his wealth to. And it's easy to dismiss this man and not think about what the real point is.

The real point that the preacher is making to us is more than, oh, you shouldn't be greedy, or you shouldn't be working so hard if you don't have family to leave it for.

That's not the point that the preacher is making. The point the preacher is making is that this man's work was wrongly fueled by greed. And this morning, none of us is exempt from that.

None of us is exempt. It doesn't matter what our work is this morning. It doesn't matter how much money we earn. We can still be guilty of the very same thing that this man is guilty of, and that is work that is fueled by greed.

[34 : 21] That's our motivation for what we do. We have dollar signs in our pupils. We just see money as we go about doing whatever we do.

And this can be true for us, even when we have children, and even as we use them as the excuse for doing what we do.

And so all of us this morning, we need to solely assess ourselves and consider our motivation behind our work, and in particular, if it's excessive work. Is it greed, and is it a desire just for more money that we are pursuing?

I was talking with someone very recently, and we were talking just about this whole idea. This lady, I was talking with her this week, and she told me that she had been at this company for 17 years.

years, and I said, wow, that's a long time. And I began to commend her on how loyal she was to be at a job for that length of time, and she's a young person younger than me.

[35 : 39] And there's some people with no loyalty when it comes down to work. Somebody offers them an extra \$10, they're gone. gone. They're gone.

And the person who is motivated by money, you will never keep. It's one of the things my father taught me. He taught me, when you are going to hire someone, always find out what they're willing to work for.

He said, if they give you a price that is higher than what you are willing and able to pay, he said, don't let them negotiate it down and say, I'll take what you're going to give me because from day one, you have an unsatisfied employee.

And that was good wisdom. That has kept me to this day. Because if you take that person and they're not happy money wise, the first person to offer them the extra few dollars that you didn't give them, generally, they're gone.

Now, of course, some may learn that it's more than that and they may stay. But generally speaking, a person who is driven by money is not a loyal person, is not a person who you can actually keep.

[36 : 46] I think there are two very vivid pictures that we see in these four work views. There's this one with, I mean, they're all vivid pictures, but there's the one with this man folding his arms and basically eating his knuckles as the icon of laziness and refusing to work.

But then there's this other one in verse 8, this man who has massive amounts of wealth, but he's all by himself. He's a lonely man.

And I think it's a picture of what can happen to us when we are consumed by work, fueled by greed. We can become lonely, we can become isolated, and this can be true even when we have families.

See, this man, the preacher tells us, didn't have any family, but there are some people who are motivated in the same way, even when they have family and friends, they are still isolated.

They live in this enclosed, isolated, insulated, selfish world, all by themselves, and not enjoying the gifts in the relationships that God has given.

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