

You Can't Take it With You

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

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Billy Graham was fond of saying, *"You'll never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul."* That is, until now, because I came across a picture of one this week. As we continue to journey with Solomon in his search for satisfaction as recorded in the Book of Ecclesiastes, we come face-to-face with this truth: *You can't take it with you.*

Last weekend we discovered: *We will never find our purpose in life if we put the pursuit of our pleasures, projects, possessions, prestige, or performance above God's priorities.* The more Solomon pursued these things, the more he lost perspective on the purpose of life.

After the service last weekend, Grayson Doran, who is 17-years-old, told me he wrote a poem while he listened to the sermon. I was blown away when he sent it to me.

*"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,"
Says the King Solomon. Killing my sanity.
When I needed some grace beyond measure,
I was always looking for some more pleasure.*

*I found out that all my possessions,
Became pure and utter obsessions.
I needed the Lord to hit me with a rod,
But I was too focused on being my own god.*

*Pastors say that sin is abhorrent,
But life gives it to me in a torrent.
When you think your sin is out of reach,
It always comes back like a blood-sucking leech.*

*I was the one searching for laughter,
But I found out there was none thereafter.
If I become one to do drugs or to do beer,
I would find out that no pleasure was near.*

*I've often tried to find out what would make me glad,
But when I found the answer, I wish I already had.
You see God is the one that can give us pleasure,
And He's also the one that gives grace beyond measure.*

*Trust me when I say that the search ain't worth it,
Continue living in it, you'll be in a pit.
Find hope and pleasure in the One who made you,
That way you'll know the way to happiness that is true.*

Here's our main idea today: *We can't find our worth in our work, but we can worship God by how we work.* When Solomon tried to find meaning in what he did, he concluded work is not worth it. If you're looking for worth, work doesn't work.

Let's stand and read Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 together: ***"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."***

Remember that Solomon had been searching for satisfaction ***"under the sun,"*** which meant he was doing so without God in the picture. His conclusion in the first part of verse 18 is quite strong: ***"I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun..."*** The word ***"all"*** means everything, and ***"hate"*** means he *"loathed his labor."* The word ***"toil"*** can be translated as, *"backbreaking labor, sorrow, affliction, and trouble."* This noun and two related verbs are used collectively ten times in this paragraph. If we live our lives without the Lord, our labor will be loathsome. Apart from God, your work is empty.

Next, he gives us two facts we must face.

Facts to Face

1. When we die, we'll leave everything to someone else. Solomon spells this out in the second half of verse 18: “...*seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.*” As the saying goes, “*He who dies with the most toys...still dies.*”

2. There is no way to know if the person will be wise or foolish. We see this in verse 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.*” Solomon didn't like the idea that he did all the work, but another person would get all his wealth. The thought of leaving the fruit of his labor to a fool was maddening to him. Psalm 49:10 says, “*For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.*”

I wonder if Solomon was dealing with some regret for spending so much time building his kingdom while not taking time with his kids to help them build their lives. Actually, with 700 wives and 300 concubines, it's likely Solomon had hundreds of children but there's no record in the Scriptures about his relationship with them or how he trained them for life and leadership.

Perhaps Solomon saw some character defects in his son Rehoboam and feared the worst. In the early chapters of Proverbs, he used the phrase “*my son*” 23 times as an appeal for his son to heed his words, to turn from wickedness, and to seek wisdom with all his heart. Solomon was right to worry about handing over all he had spent a lifetime building to his son, because Rehoboam ended up wrecking his kingdom in just five years, losing more than 80% of it.

In 1 Kings 12, we read how King Rehoboam foolishly rejected the wise counsel of his older advisers. Instead, he chose to mistreat God's people by raising taxes and increasing their tasks. As a result, they revolted, causing the kingdom to be divided, plunging both Israel and Judah into decades of idolatry and immorality.

1 Kings 14:21-27 provides a sad summary of Solomon's successor: “*Now Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem...And Judah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and they provoked him to jealousy with their sins that they committed, more than all that their fathers had done...In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. 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, and King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze...”

Rehoboam lost everything his father had built. This affected the safety and security of the nation as they had to make shields out of a cheaper metal because all the shields of gold were stolen.

Are you aware that 240 billionaires from around the world have decided not to leave all their money to their heirs by signing on to the “Giving Pledge,” agreeing to give more than half of their income to charity? Some of them indicated they’re doing so because they don’t trust their kids to be wise with all their wealth. Perhaps they’ve been reading Ecclesiastes.

Just this week, the New York Times reported that 93-year-old media mogul Rupert Murdoch is engaged in a legal battle against three of his children to ensure that his eldest son and chosen successor will remain in charge of his empire when he expires. The reason for this is that he doesn’t trust the other three with his vast resources.

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Fickle Feelings

Next, we see Solomon moving from facts to feelings. One of the questions Ecclesiastes forces us to ask is this, *“How does this make you feel?”* While we shouldn’t do serious Bible study based on our emotions, this book forces us to feel the despair of living life under the sun. One commentator writes, *“Solomon’s gloomy confessions sound real because they are realistic.”*

After sharing the facts about what may happen to his shekels after he dies, Solomon puts some strong words to his feelings in verses 20-23. This all makes him feel...

1. **Foul.** Verse 20 says, *“So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors.”* To *“turn about”* refers to *“changing by going back.”* To *“despair”* means, *“to lose hope.”*
2. **Futile.** Verse 21 expresses how empty it was for Solomon to *“leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not work for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.”* The word *“evil”* is used of a *“calamity.”*

3. **Forgotten.** Verse 22 adds, “*What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?*” This rhetorical question is designed to help us see how most everything about us and our work will be forgotten. The word “*striving*” refers to “*chafing of heart.*”
4. **Frustrated.** Verse 23 shows that work makes him miserable: “*For all his days are full of sorrow...*”
5. **Frantic.** Verse 23 adds, “*...and his work is a vexation.*” No matter what kind of work you do, worry comes with it. The word “*vexation*” has the idea of anger, making us think of 1:13: “*It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.*”
6. **Fatigued.** Verse 23 ends: “*Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*” The idea is there is no rest for the weary. You spend your days working at your job and spend your nights tossing and turning as you lie awake thinking about your work. Solomon was not able to refuel or recuperate because work had become all-consuming to him.

Listen. When we worship our work as an idol, it will always leave us feeling empty. One writer in the Wall Street Journal called money “*an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness.*”

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Focus on Faith

Next, our text moves us from facts to feelings to faith. When Solomon considers work in light of the worthiness of God, everything changes! This is the first significant time in Ecclesiastes that Solomon focused on faith in God. Up until now, most everything he had experimented with had been “*under the sun,*” as he searched for meaning on a horizontal and human level.

As he focuses on faith in God, his entire perspective changes by moving from despair to delight. This is a good lesson for us: *When the Lord is brought into the equation, the light goes on!*

As I read verses 24-26, notice the references to God and to enjoyment and joy: “*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.”*

1. The Lord gives delight to the labor of those who please Him. The phrase, “*nothing better*” means this is the most we can hope for in this life. That which is good is a gift from God and He gives us the power to enjoy what He has given us. Verse 25 provides the proper perspective: “*For apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*”

This healthy view of work is reflected in other passages in Ecclesiastes:

- 3:13: “*Also that everyone should eat and drink and **take pleasure** in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.*”
- 5:18: “*Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and **find enjoyment** in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.*”
- 8:15: “*And I commend **joy**, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be **joyful**, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.*”

We’re not to make work our end, but rather to see our work as a means to an end – to experience the gift of God’s goodness and to bring glory to Him. The person who is not looking for ultimate meaning in their work is the one who will be given the capacity to find enjoyment in it. Psalms 84:11 says, “*The Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.*” We could say it like this: *The wise person puts work in its proper place by seeing it as a platform to live out God’s grace for His glory.*

1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” Colossians 3:23-24 is a good challenge for us to see Jesus as our boss, no matter who we report to at our job: “*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*”

Those who see their work as a way to worship God will find joy in their jobs.

2. The Lord gives despair to the labor of those who don’t please Him. The end of verse 26 tells us things don’t turn out so well for those who worship their work and just live for themselves: “*...But to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God...*” The word

“business” refers to a burden or task. Work is wearisome for the one who refuses to worship the only one who is worthy. For those who are not rightly related to God, their work is reduced to the dehumanizing task of **“gathering and collecting.”**

Solomon summarizes the emptiness of this approach at the end of the verse: **“This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”** You will waste your life if you try to find your worth in your work because it cannot possibly give it to you in the first place. Only God can give your life meaning and purpose as you offer up your work as a way to worship and serve Him.

Genesis 2:15 tells us that work *is* part of God’s purpose for mankind: **“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”** Adam’s work was to cultivate and care for the world he had been given. However, Genesis 3:17-19 shows that Adam’s fall into sin led him to being frustrated by weeds and weariness: **“Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you...”**

Interestingly, God works out his justice and often transfers privileges and responsibilities to those who please Him. Jesus said it like this in Matthew 13:12: **“For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”**

Let’s go back to the passage we ended with last week because I want to point something out. Jesus tells the story about a self-made man in Luke 12:19: **“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”** This man, like Solomon, was living out a hedonistic lifestyle. Listen for what comes next in Luke 12:20-21: **“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”**

When you consider what you have, and all you have worked for, it’s important to ask this question: **“When you die, whose will they be?”**

Action Steps

Let’s consider some ways we can put this passage into practice.

- 1. Find your ultimate satisfaction in God alone through a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.** I like how the Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the question: *“What is the chief end of man?”* Check out this simple yet profound answer: *“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”*

I appreciate this statement from John Piper: *“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”* Are you satisfied in Him today? Is He enough, even if you lose your job or your health?

- 2. Stop worshipping your work by expecting it to provide what only God can.** However challenging your job is, your work is meant to be a gift from God. Don’t expect too much from your job because in the end, it will go “poof.” Speaking of that, we hurt for Deere employees who lost their job this week, and for all who are unemployed right now.
- 3. Strive to leave an inheritance for your family.** Proverbs 13:22 says: *“A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, but the sinner’s wealth is laid up for the righteous.”* The New Testament does not speak of a physical inheritance but rather a spiritual inheritance. In fact, in Luke 12:13-15, Jesus downplays the importance of an earthly inheritance, explaining that it can lead to greed and an obsession with wealth: *“Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.’”* While it’s good to give some finances, it is far better to store up treasures in Heaven and to pass along a legacy of faith to the next generation.
- 4. Invest in that which will outlast you.** You can’t take it with you, but you can send it on ahead! We see this in Matthew 6:19-21: *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

One of our four values is for each of us to give what God has given to us. I’m reminded of how one of our Edgewood members put Edgewood in his will, and this gift paid half of what owed on our facility mortgage. Just a

couple months later, the whole amount was paid off! If you're not giving, it's time to start. If you're giving some, it might be time to give more. If you're not supporting a missionary, we have some Edgewood members like SW and the Langworthy family who are ready to go but need support to get there.

- 5. Find a ministry to serve in because your serving will never be in vain.** Ministry matters to the Almighty. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, ***“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.”***

John D. Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil, was once the richest man in the world, being the first billionaire. When he died in 1937, his net worth was estimated to be approximately \$340 billion in today's dollars. Every action, attitude, and connection he made was intentionally crafted to increase his wealth.

But at the age of 53, his entire body became wracked with pain, and he lost all his hair. In total anguish, the world's lone billionaire could buy anything he wanted but could only eat soup and crackers.

According to an associate, “He couldn't sleep, wouldn't smile, and nothing in life meant anything to him.” His highly trained physicians told him he would die within the year. That year passed slowly and painfully. As he approached death, he awoke one morning with the faint understanding that he would not be able to bring any of his fortune with him to the next world.

The man who dominated the commercial world suddenly realized he had no control over his personal life. He informed his accountants that he intended to devote his assets to hospitals, research, and charity work. The most astonishing aspect of Rockefeller's narrative is that when he began to give to what would outlive him, his body's chemistry changed dramatically, and he recovered.

He was expected to die at the age of 53, but he survived to reach 98 years old. Before he died, he wrote these words in his diary: *“God taught me that everything belongs to Him, and I am merely a conduit to carry out His will. My life has been one long, happy holiday since then; full of work and play, I let go of my worries along the road, and God was wonderful to me every day.”*

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