

Sermon Series: Finding Meaning: Wisdom from Ecclesiastes

To be used with: Session 4

Sermon Title Possibilities: The Problem with Work; Looking at What You Do

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:9-13

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study *The Problem with Work*.

Introduction: A young man eager to make it to the top went to a well-known millionaire businessman and asked what was the number one reason for his success. The businessman answered without hesitation, “Hard work.” After a lengthy pause, the young man asked, “What is the second reason?”

A correlation exists between work and success. But herein lies a problem. In a national survey of 180,000 American workers, 80 percent indicated a dislike for their jobs. That’s a sad commentary, especially since people spend so much of their life at their jobs and those who dislike their work are rarely successful at it. It’s a lose-lose situation.

Solomon had a similar experience. After delighting his senses with pleasure and testing the capabilities of his mental capacities, he turned to his work.

1. He looked back at his labor to find frustration. (2:18-23)

Like with the other experiments, he studied his toil intensely. He made a close and complete examination. He disdained his work for two reasons.

- There was no permanence to his efforts (v. 18). He could not take it with him. He would have to leave it all behind. The Jewish proverb is correct: There are no pockets in shrouds. The American aphorism agrees: You’ve never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul.
- He had no control over what he accumulated or accomplished after he died (vv. 18-19). He would have to hand his life’s work over to someone else. He did not know what they would do with it. They very well might squander it all.

Consequently, such knowledge of what would happen to his life’s work resulted in several emotions.

- He hated all his toil (v. 18). Interestingly, he used the word *hate* about his experimentation with wisdom (v. 17). It depressed him that his life’s work would come to an end with him.
- He was in despair (v. 20). This word means “to be void of hope” or “to be without hope.” As he looked at his work, it led to hopelessness.
- He was full of sorrow (v. 23). Sadness and mourning were associated with this reality.

- He was vexed (v. 23). This realization provoked him, leading him to anger.

Solomon looked back at his work and was beside himself. He had to be asking, *What's the point?* Here was a man who had labored hard and long and accomplished great feats and had amassed a fortune, but realized that it must be left to someone else who did not work for it. They would enjoy the fruit of his labor. It did not seem fair or right.

The same reality confronts all people. All our possessions, financial accumulation, and social standing may add value to our sense of self-worth while we are alive, but their power ends with our dying breath. The title of John Ortberg's book, *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*, is a fact. Ortberg wrote, "Life, no matter how we play it, will not go on forever. When the game is over, it's all going to end up in the same place. As an ancient Italian proverb put it: 'Pawn and king alike, they all go back in the bag.'"

2. He looked within his heart to find eternity. (3:9-11)

Solomon turned from looking back at his work to looking within his own heart. Deep within his heart lay a spiritual longing, an eternal capacity that prompted him to probe, to question, and to search.

When my daughter was six-years-old, she asked some serious questions about life and death and eternity. It began by her saying that she was sad. I ask why? She said she missed her Pepa. She never met her Pepa, my dad. He died before she was born. But she yearned for him just the same. I explained to her that Pepa was in heaven and someday she would see him. She springboarded into a series of questions about death and heaven and hell. Here was a child probing and questioning and wondering. From where did that wonder come? It came from the eternity that God had placed in her heart.

Within all of us is an eternity—an extension of time, as far back and as far forward as one can imagine—that creates a desire to know the eternal significance of what we do and wants to know about tomorrow. And since that is true, since we will not find out about tomorrow without God, our pursuits must be of him. Meaning we are not ready to handle life until we are ready to face death. When we get eternity securely in place, it is remarkable what it will do to time on earth.

3. He looked outside himself to find joy (3:12-13).

Looking at his work and at eternity led Solomon to gaze outside himself with a new perspective. Since he could not expect permanent changes to come out of his work, the best he could do was to enjoy the fruits and find some satisfaction in the work itself. Seven times Solomon advocated the wholehearted pursuit of enjoyment (2:24, 3:12, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:7-12:1). Warren Wiersbe wrote: "Solomon is not advocating, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!' That is the philosophy of fatalism, not faith. Rather, he is saying, 'Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God.'"

Enjoying the time God has given us, no matter how difficult that may be, is a key. We need to enjoy the minutes as they come. Anne Ruth Schabacker offers a fitting reminder: "Each day comes bearing its gifts. Untie the ribbons."

Conclusion: Maybe you are having the same experiences as you look at your labor. Do you find your work frustrating? Have you stopped to consider the eternal ramifications of your work? Will you pursue your work with joy?

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