

### Labor Day: Reflecting on God's Gift of Work

They are calling it the Great Resignation. In April of this past year, 4 million people quit their jobs. According to the Labor Department, that is an all-time record. The question that many people have been discussing is why? Why have so many people quit their jobs? I'm guessing there may very well be people here today who quit their job this past year too. This just happened to occur on the tail end of the pandemic. Why? What's the connection? A lot of people started to work from home. Many liked it and many didn't. In one article I read, the person who quit their job said that they loved working from home so much that when they started to call people back into the office they weren't interested. They didn't like the commute. They didn't like the long hours. They wanted more money. More time. More flexibility. Time with their kids. Time to travel. But the overarching theme that I hear from all the articles I read on this is that people are looking mainly for happiness and they want more time to do the things they always wanted to do, before time runs out.

So I thought that since this major change has happened in our country and it's Labor day weekend, it would be good to look into the bible to see what it says about work. I'm guessing there are more than a few people in this room who at times felt dissatisfaction in their job, felt under appreciated, felt they deserved more money, desired more vacation time or just less time working in a week, and wanted more flexibility and time to do what they wanted to do. Is that true for any of you? Whether you have been at your job for the past 40 years, or you quit your job recently, my goal for this sermon is to answer the question that apparently everyone is after: How can I find more happiness in my work and in my life? This section from Ecclesiastes gives us a very unique perspective on work.

So we are looking at chapter 5 of Ecclesiastes and our opening verses say this. "If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; . . . The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields." (vs. 8-9) The first topic that is mentioned here is injustice. He says, don't be surprised by it. We say this all the time and we know it, "Life isn't fair". But when things are unfair in our life, especially in the workplace, we get upset. We complain. We are shocked that such an injustice could happen. But in the workplace there is competition. Someone is going to get the promotion and someone isn't. Someone gets the good job and someone else doesn't. That can lead to some people being more poor and others having more money. And so a life isn't fair attitude is what the writer here in Ecclesiastes is saying. In fact he blames himself for it.

While it isn't mentioned explicitly, we believe that King Solomon is the one who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon lived around 1000 BC. He is King David's son and he reigned at the height of power and control of the Israelites. The country flourished under him. He was absolutely rich. He is also the one who the Lord gifted with great wisdom and says that he was the wisest person who ever lived. And it seems that he actually blames himself for the injustice that he sees in his own country. When he says, "The king himself profits from the fields." He's talking about himself. He is the king. He was getting money from taxes from all the people. And he says, "This is just the way it is and the way it will always be, when one person benefits another person is oppressed. And the oppressed are left unhappy, shouting, "Life isn't fair." So, it would make sense, then, that those people who do take the money and are on the positive side of this injustice would be happy.

So then King Solomon talks about them. He says in vs. 10, "Whoever loves money never has enough." King Solomon states the obvious. "Money can't buy happiness." Another general truth. How many times have we heard that? But do we believe it? Again, I appreciate that this wisdom comes from a person who is filthy rich. Throughout his long life he's been observing himself and other wealthy people. He's seen this. And we see it too. A person thinks, "If I can just have this, then I'll be happy." Then some other need comes up. "If I can just have this, then I'll be happy." And it's not just that there is no end to a desire for more money, but his observation is that it seems that more money, and possession and wealth can actually multiply the problems, not the happiness.

So in verse 11, it says this, "As goods increase, so do those who consume them." He states the obvious yet again. You've had your eye on a bigger house. You got your bigger house, but now you have to pay more in property taxes. You have to buy a bigger mower. You have to pay more to heat it and cool it. There are more things that need fixing. So the more you get, the more it costs you and the more responsibility you have, the more stress you have. In 1 Kings 4, there is this paragraph that talks about the ridiculous amount of daily provisions needed to take care of King Solomon's household and palace, for his hundreds of wives, concubines, children, servants, guards, animals. He understands this concept well.

In vs 12 he says this, "The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep." By a laborer he's talking about a common laborer. Someone who works hard but probably doesn't make that much money. But he says, "That guy sleeps well every night, because not only did he work hard, but he's not worrying about someone breaking into his home and stealing from him because he doesn't have anything to steal. But the rich person? With more responsibility, there can be more stress and more worry.

What is King Solomon telling us? So far he has said, when you are oppressed and poor and shouting out "Life isn't fair" you are unhappy. But then he says, when you are on the other side of that, those with riches will soon find out that "Money can't buy happiness." King Solomon continues on with this depressing dissertation and again states the obvious, "Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart." Not only are we in this lifelong struggle to find happiness but we are also up against the clock. Eventually we die. There is a story about Alexander the Great, who when he died he wanted his hands unwrapped and seen so that people could see them with nothing in them. He wanted to remind the world that this man who had had so much during his lifetime, would leave the world in the same way as a poor beggar: with nothing.

So what's the real problem. Is it really that we don't make enough money? Solomon says you won't find happiness there. What if we have more time to do the things we always wanted to do? Solomon reminds us that time runs out. What if I find a job that is more

fulfilling? There will always be good days and bad days? The real problem is in me and it's in you. It's called sin. If you remember back to the garden of Eden. God created Adam and Eve in the garden and told them to work it. Work was a gift from God. It was something that they would enjoy thoroughly for eternity. But after Adam and Eve sinned God told them what the consequences of sin was going to be in this world. And he said to Eve that there would be pain in childbearing and to Adam he said that work would become work. That is, that which was supposed to give us joy would become a curse. From that day, work became work.

Allow me to read from Genesis 3. Again this is after Adam and Eve ate from the tree. And to Adam God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:17-19) The curse was more than just thorns and thistles for farmers to deal with, otherwise the curse would be reversed with a little weedkiller. Included in this curse is everything Solomon mentioned, injustice, greed, poverty, stress, dissatisfaction in your job, bad bosses, lazy employees, the list goes on and on. Maybe we can boil it down to two things: 1) there is a deep desire for happiness and fulfillment in our work and in our life and we struggle to get there. And 2) we are running out of time before we die.

Did you hear that last consequence of sin? "For dust you are and to dust you will return." For the first time mankind is up against the clock. We were supposed to live in a perfect world where we would be happy forever, but now, we are stuck in an imperfect world full of curses, and in time we die. As we look at the rest of the bible we realize that this isn't just talking about physical death, but eternal death in hell. That's why in this chapter God made another promise. He promised to send a Savior. He wanted to undo this curse to give us joy and happiness. But he wasn't content to give you joy just for the few years of life that you have in this world. He came to give you eternal joy. But in order to do that it was going to take work. Not work for you or for me, but work for our Savior. So on the first Christmas day he went to work as a baby and for the first time ever there was someone who was perfect, who wasn't personally sinful. Throughout his whole life he worked to fend off temptations. He worked to not fall into the sin of greed. He did that because he valued your soul and my soul more than all the riches in the world. And when he went to the cross that's when the curse was broken. He declared you to be holy. And now death is simply the doorway to eternal life. He promises you heaven, not because of your work, but because of Christ's work. There in heaven we are going to revert back to the way God originally intended. We will work, but we will thoroughly enjoy it. We will get up early excited to use the gifts that God has given us. We will finish a day of work in heaven with a feeling of fulfillment. You are going to look forward to going back the next day. You won't get tired or frustrated.

While it's a blessing that we look forward to the day when there is no longer any sin in heaven, where we will experience true happiness, for now we still live in an imperfect world. How has our work life today changed because of Jesus death on the cross? The first thing is that a Christian should never feel like you are running out of time, because you have an eternity to do everything you've ever wanted to do. There are no regrets for us. You have an eternity to do those things, and, frankly, you'll enjoy it more in a perfect world anyway.

And because of Christ we know view work differently. Look at this verse from Ephesians 6. "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people." We aren't serving our boss. We aren't even serving ourselves. We are serving God. A Christian finds joy in working because we know we are serving our God using the gifts he's given us. That is where true satisfaction in our work comes from. You have used your gifts to glorify God at work or at home or wherever you are.

Think about that as I finish up the rest of Ecclesiastes 5. But for the last paragraph of this chapter, you can almost imagine King Solomon pausing, thinking, and smiling as he remembers throughout his life a few exceptions to the rule of the misery that is typically associated with work. "This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot." (Eccl 5:18) In a world where work has been cursed, how do you find satisfaction and joy in your work? We already know it's not in the money that is made, or in the toys we can buy with the money, or even in finding a job that we think might make us more happy. Rather true happiness is found in knowing that your Savior worked for you to save you from eternal death in hell. Happiness is found in knowing that we aren't up against the clock before we die. Happiness is found in using the gifts and the time that we have now in this world to be able to serve God wherever you find yourself. Whether you are a brick layer or a doctor, a secretary or a day trader on wall street, we use our unique gifts to praise and thank our God for what he has done.

The same is true not only in your work but in the possessions that you have. Whether you have a lot or a little, we can be happy. How? Verse 19 says, "Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God." If a person recognizes that they were this close to spending an eternity in hell, everything else in life is a blessing, icing on the cake. Because he didn't just send us his son 2000 years ago, he also gave to us food and clothing, a home, a job, family and friends and so much more. So let's enjoy those things that he's given to us now, none of which we deserve.

So if you want to be happy where are you going to find it? In another job, in a bigger house, with more money. He'd laid down these general truths that we already know are true. "Life isn't fair." "Money can't buy happiness." "We came into this world with nothing and we leave with nothing." But here is one more general truth to add to our list. True happiness is only found in Christ. Amen.