

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 4:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 3</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 2:18-26</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, February 3, 2013</i>

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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 3:1-11</i>

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



TEACHING TIP

In your weekly preparation, you may want to take the Word document and edit each paragraph into shorter, bulleted lists. Reading the full paragraphs will give you a sense of the lesson’s flow and how to move through it, and then editing it into a bullet format will help you move from point to point more easily without getting lost in the middle of a paragraph.

Just a reminder of our current context: we’re “exploring the darkness” of chapters 1-6, considering this theme—**life merely lived “under the sun” is futile**. In these chapters, this sobering reality is driven home by:

- the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)
- the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)
- the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-26)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-9)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-9)
- the finiteness of humanity (6:10-12)

INTRODUCTION

In America, there certainly seems to be disconnect between how people talk about work and how they engage in it. Consider, for example, the following work-related quotes:¹

- “I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by.”
- “I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.”
- “I always arrive late at the office, but I make up for it by leaving early.”
- “We often miss opportunity because it's dressed in overalls and looks like work.”
- “I'm on a government watch list. But I'm not interested, because government watches only work twenty minutes out of every hour.”
- “If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be 'meetings.’”

Now, examine the following work-related statistics:²

- Americans work an average of 8 hours and 16 minutes a day, totaling 1,778 hours a year. Between 1970 and 2006, the average number of hours in a working year skyrocketed by 200.
- Almost 86 percent of men and 67 percent of women work more than 40 hours a week, with over 10 million Americans working 60-plus hour weeks.
- 70 percent of American children live in households where all adults are employed.
- The United States is the only industrialized country in the world that has no legally mandated annual vacation. Furthermore, while at least 134 countries have laws setting the maximum length of the workweek, the U.S. does not.
- 1 in 3 Americans doesn't use his vacation days, and 30% of those who do don't relax during vacation; many workaholics experience severe “leisure sickness” on their time off.

- 27 percent of workers have not taken a personal or sick day in the last few years.
- 60 percent of workers take a 20-minute or less lunch break.
- 10 percent of American employees bring work home with them a minimum of every other day, and 24 percent confess thinking about work when at home or being social.
- In 1983, a 12-step program called Workaholics Anonymous was launched to help people compulsively addicted to work, and it currently services over 50 recovery communities worldwide.

It certainly seems then that, while Americans may say they don't like to work, they are apparently addicted to it.

Truly, “there is nothing new under the sun.” 3,000 years ago, the great philosopher-preacher Solomon began a quest for meaning, significance, and fulfillment in life lived “under the sun,” and his journey took him through the workplace. And yet, even there, the same conclusion bitingly echoed—**life merely lived “under the sun” is futile.**

Today, we're going to trace how Solomon got to that conclusion and follow him throughout the workplace. And since any thinking person can recognize that people are addicted to work because of the *profit*, we're going to start our analysis there. Looking at what we *earn* in the workplace, is it really as “futile” as Solomon declares? Well, let's trace his findings about employment and its earnings.

MATERIAL EARNINGS ARE PASSING (vv. 18-21).

Solomon was a hard worker. 1 Kings 1-10 records his great building projects that he initiated and administrated during his rule. He was no slacker, and he uses the term “labor” (Heb. *'ā-mēl*) 10 times and “business” (Heb. *'in-yān*) 2 times in these 9 verses. In fact, in verses 18, 19, and 20 he uses the redundant phrase (lit.) “my toil for which I had toiled.”³ This phrase communicates two aspects of his labor.

First, it highlights the rigorousness of his labor. The Hebrew word speaks of the “trouble” (BDAG) of “exerting oneself” even unto “weariness” (Gesenius); “to put forth considerable effort and energy towards a task” (DBL). The phrase’s repetition of the term accentuates the extent to which he exerted himself.

Second, the wording represents the fruit of his labor. “In each case, it functions as a metonymy [using a part to represent the whole] of cause (i.e., toil) for effect (i.e., fruit of labor).”⁴ This “fruit” is clearly referred to by the word “it” in verses 18 and 21, and again pictured in verses 24-26. Psalm 105:44 uses this phrase in this way.

So, Solomon was definitely a hard worker, and he had earned much “fruit” through his labor. Nevertheless, when he considered “all [his] labor which I had taken under the sun” (vv. 18, 20), he “hated” it (v. 18) and “cause[d] [his] heart to despair” (v. 20).



Why was Solomon so severe in his analysis, especially in light of all that his work had accomplished? See paragraph below.

The reason is that he recognized he had to “leave [all his earnings behind] unto the man that shall be after [him],” his successor (v. 18). His material earnings were transient, fleeting, passing away—at least from his clutches—and his successor would inherit all that he had worked for. In verses 18-21, Solomon explains why he was so depressed by these considerations.

1. The successor is untested (vv. 18-19).

Solomon apparently didn’t know who would succeed him at this time, and he could only wonder whether or not that successor would build on and continue what he had started. Solomon reflects, “Who knoweth whether [my successor] shall be a wise man or a fool?” And yet regardless of his untested character, Solomon mused, “He have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun” (v. 19—

personal prepositions italicized for emphasis). Solomon’s concern was that everything he had worked hard and wisely to earn, his untested successor would lose through unwise oversight.

Illustration: Solomon’s ponderings have been repeated in many a CEO’s and president’s mind. Statistics tell us that while roughly 90 percent of U.S. businesses are family firms (approximately 17 million), only a little more than 30 percent of them survive into the second generation, 12 percent into the third generation, and 3 percent into the fourth generation.⁵

Solomon knows exactly how to interpret these statistics—“This is also vanity” (v. 19).

2. The successor is unentitled (vv. 18, 19, 21).

Not only does the untested nature of his successor trouble Solomon, but the unentitled position of that successor vexes him. Solomon knows that he will “leave” his earnings behind (v. 18) for another man to “rule [or have control] over” (v. 19) as his “portion” or inheritance (v. 21), even though he “hath not labored therein” (v. 21).

Solomon, on the one hand, earned his “fruit” through “wisdom, knowledge, and equity [or skill/profitability]” (v. 21); his successor, on the other hand, hadn’t been tested for that same character. So, a simple sense of fairness recognized that he wasn’t entitled to what Solomon had rightfully earned. Nonetheless, although untested and unentitled, he would inherit it. Again, Solomon mutters, “This also is vanity and a great evil” (v. 21).

Illustration: Consider the following anecdote.⁶


When I was a boy we often went to a local shop that never seemed to close. It was open early in the morning until as late as possible in the evening, seven days a week! The only time the proprietor was seen outside his shop was at the crack of


MENTAL EARNINGS ARE PUNISHING (vv. 22-23).

dawn, when he took his dog for a walk. On rare occasions, he was joined at the counter by his wife, who made it clear to everyone within earshot that she had other interests. The shop was there throughout my childhood and into my early twenties. One day, the man collapsed and died while serving a customer. His wife took over the shop and announced that she was selling up, and was going to spend the money doing all the things he had denied her over the years. She even showed me the brochure of the world-cruise she had booked!

Are there not countless stories of widows, sons and daughters inheriting businesses that have lovingly and sacrificially been built up by a man's labors, only to bring the whole edifice down with a short period of time through incompetence, irresponsibility, lack of interest, or simply having different priorities.

Application: Kidner rightly notes here that “on his own principles, the man of the world [i.e., ‘under the sun’] should hardly object to this, provided they [i.e., ‘the fruits of his labor’] last his time; yet he does mind, for he shares our inbuilt longing for what is permanent.”⁷ That’s what has driven Solomon’s quest, and that’s what drives his dissatisfaction with the transience of his earnings.

 Who was Solomon’s successor and what happened to Solomon’s earnings? Solomon left the kingdom divided to Jeroboam and his son Rehoboam, both of whom squandered their opportunities (1 Kings 12–14).

 How have you personally witnessed or experienced the impermanent nature of one’s achievements or earnings?
open discussion


Transition: When Solomon considered the material or monetary profit from his work, he saw that it was passing and thus futile. Secondly, he turned his attention to the mental earnings of labor, and recognized that he was only punished thereby.

The workplace really does seem to be a ruthless “catch-22”:

Work can become a consuming thing. It takes up our time, our energy and our interest. For some, it may be motivated by a desire to contribute to the well-being of others—but there are those who believe it to be the only means by which they can gain position and respect. Whatever our non-materialistic motives for work, it is a stark fact of life that we all have to earn a living.⁸

Perhaps with this cruel irony in mind, Solomon asks in verse 22, somewhat sarcastically, “What hath man of all his labor?” If even what he has earned he one day won’t have (vv. 18-21), then what does he really get from “all his labor”? Here, Solomon refers more to the mental or psychological earnings of the workaholic. Perhaps, in spite of the fleeting income, work “under the sun” can still merit him some sense of satisfaction mentally. This is what Solomon explores next.

1. *The effects*

 What words does Solomon use to describe the effects of work? See next paragraph.

Notice the effects that Solomon uncovers in verses 22-23—“vexation of his heart,” “sorrows,” “grief,” and “no rest” (vv. 22-23). The word “vexation” is the same word used in the phrase “vexation of spirit” (lit. “striving after wind”); it refers to unmet longings and aspirations, frequently accompanied by anxiety. “Sorrows” is usually rendered “pain” or “suffering” (cf. Lamentations 1:12, 18; Isaiah 53:3, 4), and “grief” refers to that which causes vexation or frustration. Indeed, there is “no rest” for the workaholic.

2. *The extent*

These effects are experienced both “day” and “night” (v. 23). He can’t get away from the punishment that work “under the sun” inflicts upon him mentally and physiologically. Throughout the day, he’s exhausted and frustrated by the rat race, and at night, he’s anxiously trying to figure out how to beat the system.

So, when we become unbalanced in the workplace, laboring not just to make a living but to work for work’s sake, we endanger our health and peace of mind.

Illustration: In recent years, many studies have been conducted on the growing problem of workaholism. Wikipedia defines and describes this social problem:⁹

Workaholism is an addiction, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and it's not the same as working hard. Workaholic's obsession with work is all-occupying, which prevents workaholics from maintaining healthy relationships, outside interests, or even take measures to protect their health

A workaholic...is popularly characterized by a neglect of family and other social relations. Similarly, people considered to be workaholics tend to lose track of time—voluntarily or involuntarily....Experts say the incessant work-related activity masks anxiety, low self-esteem, and intimacy problems....Poor health is another warning sign. Because there's less of a social stigma attached to workaholism than to other addictions, health symptoms can easily go undiagnosed or unrecognized, say researchers.

The negative physiological earnings of work described here by Solomon are substantiated in many modern studies.¹⁰

- Workaholic marriages crumble at a 55 percent rate.
- Workaholics are 67 percent more likely to suffer from a coronary heart disease than people who work 7-8 hours a day.

- Chronic overtimers face a 61 percent increased risk of a job-related injury or illness over those without such habits.
- Workaholics frequently complain of headaches, migraines, stiff muscles, and other stress-related symptoms.
- Workaholics often suffer from “leisure sickness” (symptoms ranging from migraines and headaches to exhaustion and an overall flu-like feeling) when actually trying to relax. Their bodies grow so accustomed to the stress that the very act of alleviating it leads to physiological discomfort. An estimated 1/3 of migraines and 1/6 of tension headaches come about because of the body's inability to enjoy its time off.

Application: Whether it’s the severe symptoms of workaholism or the inevitable frustrations of just working hard, the incessant toll that work exacts upon one’s mind and body is to Solomon more “vanity” (v. 23).



How have you personally witnessed or experienced the punishing physiological earnings of work? *open discussion*

Evaluate how you feel about your work. While troubles will inevitably come and frustrations will undoubtedly be known, does your regular experience echo what Solomon writes here? Are “anxiety,” “pain,” and “frustration” terms that summarize your labor? Is your sleep at night restless because it’s agitated by the toil of the day? All of these are symptoms of work done “under the sun,” the solution to which will be discovered in our final point.

Transition: We saw first that the material earnings from work are passing, and secondly that the mental earnings from work are punishing. We learn finally that the meaningful earnings from work are providential.


MEANINGFUL EARNINGS ARE PROVIDENTIAL (vv. 24-26).

In these verse, Solomon actually pulls back the curtains a bit to reveal the light, but only for a time (i.e., they close again in 3:1, but will be thrown open toward the end of this book). So, let's just consider this one ray of light that greets us here and learn from it how to find meaning in our work. These verses contrast the righteous and the wicked (categories introduced here), and that's where we will start, too.

1. *To the righteous, God gives fulfillment in his work (vv. 24-26a).*

Solomon encourages us that in relation to our labor, “there is nothing better...than [to] eat and drink and...enjoy good” (v. 24a). However, such ability both to eat and to enjoy must come from God (vv. 24b-25; cf. 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7). While the KJV offers one rendering,¹¹ it is preferable to translate vv. 24b-25 as, “This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God, for who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” (NASB; also ESV, NET, NIV).

This is indeed what God does for the “man that is good in His sight”—He “gives” him “wisdom and knowledge and joy” (v. 26a).¹² Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, this term “good” is used to identify this man with the “righteous” (9:2) who “fears God” (8:12-13) and does moral “good” (12:14). So, regarding this group of people—i.e., those who live “in the fear of God”—God enables them¹³ to be fulfilled with the earnings of their labor.


 How do we know both from these verses and from the broader context that Solomon is not advocating hedonism here? See paragraph below.

Solomon is not advocating hedonism here, for he already exhausted that pursuit and found it lacking (2:1-11). Rather, he's exhorting us to accept and enjoy life as it comes to us from the “hand of God.”


[This is] an “animated affirmation” that mankind has no higher good than to synchronize with God's beneficent purposes for him....The earthly realm is essentially good and meant for our enjoyment (cf. Gen. 2:9). Similarly, human endeavour is to be enjoyed. So the Preacher reverts to the orthodox Israelite view of the created realm: God “brings forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart” (Ps. 104:14f). [So, the Preacher] recommends not licentiousness or scepticism, but contentment. Its New Testament parallel is 1 Timothy 4:4; 6:6-8[, 17].¹⁴

2. *To the sinner, God gives futility in his work (v. 26b).*

On the other hand, “To the sinner [God] giveth travail [or ‘this business’]—to gather and to heap up—that he may give to him that is good before God” (v. 26b). God gives the sinner the (lit.) “business” (same word as in 1:13; 2:23; 3:10) of gathering and storing up, only so that those earnings can be given to someone who pleases God (cf. Proverbs 13:22). Solomon depicts their God-given job as amassing wealth to give to the righteous.

 What are some Old Testament examples of this “business”? See paragraph below.

Throughout the Old Testament, we can see examples of this in Israel's spoiling of Egypt (Exodus 12:35-36) and their plundering of Canaan, to name just a couple.

 Life often seems to disagree with this statement. In what sense, then, is it still true? See paragraph below.

However, in life, the opposite seems to happen (cf. Psalm 73:1-16). So, we acknowledge with Kidner that this is “for the righteous...a crowning vindication, but no more. Like the meek, who are promised the earth [Matthew 5:5], their treasure is elsewhere and of another kind [2 Corinthians 6:10].”¹⁵

To summarize, Solomon speaks generally here about the sovereignty of God, in which God even temporally rewards those who fear Him with profit and joy in their employment and judges those who reject him with futility in their labor. So, Solomon concludes that this “business” of the sinner—viewed temporally here and eternally in the rest of Scripture—is “vanity and vexation of spirit” to him (v. 26).

Application: Through the lens of verses 24-26, we discover that the solution to the futility of work “under the sun” may not be to get a new job or cut back a few hours. The solution is found in your orientation to God, or to state it in the inverse, “The problem is not with the things, but with the thinking.”¹⁶

When God is introduced into the equation (after being absent in 1:16-2:23), light dawns and fulfillment (“wisdom, knowledge, and joy”) is found. We learn that He is sovereign, that He is involved, and that He deals appropriately with both the righteous (i.e., those who look for Him) and the wicked (i.e., those who don’t). In that context, we can labor with hope and assurance.

It is no surprise that Solomon had been in the dark until this time, for according to 1 Kings 11:6, “Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord.” So, as a sinner, he had found only futility in his labor. Had Solomon walked before God with a blameless heart, like his father David—had he been rightly oriented to God’s sovereign oversight of his life and labor—then, he would have been in a position to receive God’s enabling grace to experience and enjoy fulfillment.

Solomon had perceived the blessings of this life as products of his own labor, and thus they were fragile and would pass away. But, “when we see them as being from the hand of God, they take on a new dimension. They are stripped of their vulnerability and we do not become afraid of losing them.”¹⁷ Rather, we can simply enjoy them, in the moment, for as long as God allows us to, knowing from the more complete affirmation of Jesus in Matthew 7:9-11, that God loves to “give good things to them that ask Him.” Joy will

come, then, not when it’s pursued for itself, but “as a gift as we live unto God.”¹⁸



How does one “eat, drink, and enjoy life” “from the hand of God”? Cf. Matthew 7:11; 1 Timothy 4:4; 6:6, 8, 10, 17, 18; Philippians 4:12-13. *open discussion (a key here is going to be adjusting the way you think about your work and how it pertains to your relationship God...the following prayer¹⁹ may help you adjust your thinking)*

Dear Lord, As I pray to you now my mind is full of my work. Its pleasures and pains, its stresses and rewards are burned into my brain. Quiet my soul for these few moments and hear my prayer as one of your workers in the world.

*My work is hard, Lord. I need Your counsel and comfort:
when things fall apart,
when I'm confronted with evil,
when my co-workers' needs are too great,
when I'm tired to the insides of my brain,
when work is not appreciated.*

*My work is necessary, Lord. I need Your gifts and Spirit:
when things are developing well,
when I'm making positive changes,
when society is made better because of what I do,
when I'm working efficiently and effectively,
when I'm honored as a valuable worker.*

*Every day of my work:
I want to remember that You are my God,
I need to know that You're there with me,
I count on Your blessings for my successes,
I want to thank You for the chance to work in this place,
I need courage and conviction to see myself as Your worker.*

For Your gifts and Your grace that come to me as a worker, I praise Your name and thank You for being my God. Amen.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament builds upon Solomon's solution with more clarity. While we ultimately struggle with "toil" "under the sun" because of the curse upon our sin (Genesis 3:17-19), "God [through the effective 'work' of His Son] will one day deliver the redeemed from this plight in the future kingdom when man's labor will no longer be toilsome, but profitable, fulfilling, and enjoyable (Isa 65:17-23)."²⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://bit.ly/11fjirF>

² <http://bit.ly/X8kuSc>; <http://bit.ly/11fp3l7>

³ “The term “toil” is used in a pejorative sense to emphasize that the only thing that man obtains ultimately from all his efforts is weariness and exhaustion” (*The NET Bible First Edition*, Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

⁴ *NET Bible*.

⁵ <http://bit.ly/WBfUfZ>; <http://bit.ly/11f3PE1>

⁶ Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 44-45.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 35.

⁸ Winter, 43.

⁹ <http://bit.ly/WxMyfF>

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/X8kuSc>; <http://bit.ly/11fp3l7>

¹¹ *NET Bible* note #115 in verse 25 explains the issues involved in translating this verse.

¹² “Wisdom, as given by God, he evaluates highly. It enables a man to walk without stumbling (2:14), it gives success (10:10), preserves life (7:12) and protects (7:12), enables successful toil (2:21) and discriminating judgments (7:23), is required for all great human endeavour (9:15) and gives strength (7:19; 9:16) and joy (8:1). Knowledge is not simply the acquisition of facts; it includes experience of life. Joy is the soundly-based, reasonable exultation in God and life’s blessings (cf. 2:1–2)” (Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983], 88).

¹³ “The phrase ‘the hand of God’ is often used to connote the favor or grace of God (2 Chr 30:12; Ezra 7:9; 8:18; Neh 2:8, 18)” (*NET Bible*).

¹⁴ Eaton, 86-87.

¹⁵ Kidner, 36. Also, “The Christian’s view of eternity makes it easier to understand (for the opposite seems to happen in this life) but for the Teacher it must have been sheer faith” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994], Ec 2:24–26).

¹⁶ Winter, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 78.

¹⁹ <http://bit.ly/UE3LcC>. Also, consider *Before You I Kneel (A Worker’s Prayer)*, a song by Keith & Kristyn Getty.

*Before You I kneel, my Master and Maker
To offer the work of my hands.
For this is the day You’ve given You’re servant;
I will rejoice and be glad
For the strength I have to live and breathe;
For each skill Your grace has given me;
For the needs and opportunities
That will glorify You great Name.*

*Before You I kneel and ask for Your goodness
To cover the work of my hands.
For patience and peace to shape all my labor,
Your grace for thorns in my path.
Flow within me like a living stream,
Wear away the stones of pride and greed
‘till Your ways are dwelling deep in me
And a harvest of life is grown.*

*Before You we kneel, Our Master and Maker;
Establish the work of our hands.
And order our steps to seek first Your kingdom
In every small and great task.
May we live the gospel of Your grace,
Serve Your purpose in our fleeting days,
Then our lives will bring eternal praise
And all glory to Your Name.*

And, this is another Worker’s Prayer:

“Lord, Jesus Christ, I offer You today all my work, my hopes, my sorrows and joys. Grant me the grace to remain close to You today, to work with You and to do all that I do for Your honor and glory. Help me to love You with all my heart and to serve You with all my strength. Help me, Lord, to give a full day’s work for a full day’s pay. Help me to respect the property of others, to be honest in dealing with those involved in this task, and to put forth effort with personal interest. Give me the spirit of charity that I may contribute to the happiness of all those with whom I work, and when the job is done, grant us all a peaceful rest.”

²⁰ *NET Bible*. For a fuller theology of work, visit <http://bit.ly/UE4Cdh>.