

## WISDOM ABOUT WORK

Intro: It appears to me that our society is moving now like a ship without compass. In this generation reverence for God has been replaced with reverence for science. And for that we are paying a dear price. Someone once said that when men quit believing in God, the problem is not that they don't believe in anything, they start believing in everything! And so we live in a world of experimentation. And we witness a persistent press on the part of people to find meaning and happiness in life in everything but what God has said. And it seems to me that it is this that makes the book of Ecclesiastes such a remarkable and relevant book to study. Because this ancient sermon meets our culture head on. And it packs a powerful message for our God-alienated land. It gives us a message of warning and encouragement from the ultimate scientist and philosopher--Solomon!

Solomon teaches us that the key to a meaningful and happy life under the sun can never be achieved apart from God. Last week we noticed how approaching life apart from God leaves the world mysterious and meaningless; it forces us to seek happiness in this life per se, in things like money, fame, education, pleasure. And when we get through we come up with a fist full of wind! We are logically led to the despairing cry of pessimism that opens this book, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity".

And yet, Solomon moves from that point to show us the value of a life of faith in God. He urges us to see that the world is the creation of the Almighty and Sovereign God of heaven. And that he controls the events of life. He has made the world intentionally vain that we might look above it to Him who created it. And finding in Him what we could never find in the world itself. Fearing Him and keeping his commandments is the duty of all of us, and in the doing of it we will find meaning and happiness in life. But more than that he gives us the specific advice we need to get started, guideposts for living that will keep us going in the right direction. Today we're going to look at some of that advice.

If there is a word that preoccupies the modern mind it is "work". Americans are indeed a job-oriented people. A great part of our lives is filled with working! And I know some people that that's about all they do is work! Work, work, work! 12-14 hours per day. They don't work to live. They live to work! "Americans worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship." And usually all of it is the outgrowth of a materialistic outlook toward life--the belief that working will make you rich and being rich will bring you pleasure and finding pleasure will make you happy!

Unfortunately there is also a spiritual version of the workaholic--the "church"aholic! Sold on the line, "I'd rather burn out than rust out" they feel obligated to be engaged in some spiritual task every waking hour of the day. They lay heavy guilt trips on themselves for taking a day off and on everybody

else who dares do so. What results is an over-committed, hassled, grim-faced, tight-lipped believer who will probably not be able to persuade anyone that his life is worth living.

And then there's the third category. He is the complacent lazy bum who fears, heaven forbid, that he might overextend himself and who accomplishes nothing. He whines and complains about what a poor lot in life he has and how he has been discriminated against and mistreated; while the real problem is that his get up and go has gotten up and gone; and rather than be characterized by industry and initiative and use the abilities God has given him blames everyone else for his plight and looks for what he considers to be well-deserved handouts!

Is life a job? Is fatigue next to godliness? Is a handout preferable to a workout? Solomon effectively answers all these questions with his "wisdom about working!"

## **I. THE VANITY OF LABOUR UNDER THE SUN**

### ***A. Some things that make labor vain.***

*Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 2:18-22)*

Solomon stresses three key points:

- 1. Left to another, v. 18**
- 2. The beneficiary may quickly waste or lose that which has been gained in years of toil, v. 19**
- 3. Work has its own attending worry, anxiety, and pressure, v. 23**

### ***B. Reasons why labor may be vain:***

*Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. ...Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune. (Ecclesiastes 4:4-8)*

*Here Solomon stresses two more points:*

- 1. Excessive work is often the result of a "keep up the Jones' attitude", v. 4**

**2. Many are so busy working they deprive themselves of the simple pleasures of life and then discover there is no one to benefit from their labor, v. 8**

***C. 6:7-9 Labor is vain when it becomes tied to the goal of living for pleasure***

*All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied. ...For what more has the wise man than the fool? What does the poor man have, who knows how to walk before the living? (Ecclesiastes 6:7-9)*

Finally Solomon stresses:

- 1. There is vanity about living for our appetites, v. 7**
- 2. The appetite of the wise man is never satisfied nor is there any advantage to the man who has little, v. 8**

## **II. GUIDEPOSTS FOR LIVING--WISDOM ABOUT WORK**

***A. Idleness is not the answer to the vanity of labor.***

*The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. (Ecclesiastes 4:5)*

*Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks. (Ecclesiastes 10:18)*

Idleness is indeed the devil's workshop. It is a sinful waste of the precious gifts of time, talent, mind-power that God has given us. A man who lives by the principle of idleness deserves the hardship life brings and we shouldn't bail him out!

***B. Learn the value of working hard***

*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. (Ecclesiastes 9:10)*

Try to spend and then end each day with a feeling of accomplishment. Make a list of what you want to do and get busy. Make some long term goals for yourself and accomplish them. There'll be no goals in the grave!

***C. Prepare for an uncertain future***

*If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good. (Ecclesiastes 11:3-6)*

A person who pursues the philosophy of "as much as possible for as little effort as possible" is headed for trouble. The fields of the righteous can dry up like those of his sinning neighbor. Therefore, we need to be provident and responsible in the use of what God has given us. Work not only for today, but also for tomorrow.

**C. Yet, learn also the value of rest and enjoyment of what you have!**

*Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:6)*

*Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. (Ecclesiastes 6:9)*

*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor.*

*Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:10,24)*

*I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13)*

**Conclusion:** The summary of it all then is that fearing God and keeping his commands once again brings real meaning and fulfillment to life. Through applying the Lord's will we are protected from making goals out that which is destined to disappoint. Yet through his exhortations about work we are protected from the loss of being complacent and instead derive the fulfillment from working hard in a measure that preserves our sanity and perspective. Through obedience to God we discover the way to a truly happy life and more importantly to a life that will be rewarded at the judgment.