



Ecclesiastes

(6) Right and Wrong Attitudes Towards Work

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6

Galatians 5:16-26

Matthew 6:25-34

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
February 18, 2018

Our subject this morning is work. The little section in Ecclesiastes that we are going to look at this morning has to do with work that is motivated by envy and it includes two little proverbs that deal with how much we should work.

This is a subject that should be relevant to all of us because we all have to work. The very young do not work, but they don't listen to sermons either. But it does not take long before our little ones are given chores and pretty soon they are in school where they do school work and home work. And all of this work is preparing them for adulthood a large part of which is spend working. Working is a big part of life. God has designed things so that we need to work, not only to be able to buy the things that we need, but also to have a meaningful life. We are made to work. We are made to accomplish things. We are made to be productive. There is more to life than work, but work is an important part of life.

It is also an area in which there are many problems. Many of the problems in any society have to do with work and the fact that some are more successful at work than others. Some work hard and get rich. Others work hard and never rise above the working poor. Some have trouble finding work. Some are lazy and do not want to work. Some are workaholics and work too much. Work and economics are related and there are a lot of problems having to do with economics. Some people

are very very rich. Some people are willing to work but can't find jobs. Some people can't get jobs that pay enough for their basic needs. Some people are not able to work. Most people agree that everyone should be able to find work that they are capable of doing that pays the bills but reaching that goal has proved to be illusive.

Many of the problems arise from inequities. Some people end up with more. Some people end up with less. Just like work, inequities are part of life. God has made all people equal in terms of inherent worth and value as human beings, but he has certainly not made them equal in terms of giftedness, energy, ambition, or opportunities. Some people are born with gifts and abilities that will not end up making them much money. Others are born with gifts and abilities that will end up making them a lot of money. Some people have plenty of gifts, but not much drive. Some people have drive, but their gifts do not equip them to make much money. So, some people are rich. Some people are in the middle. And some people are poor. And there are a lot of problems that arise from these inequities even though inequity is natural and normal and the way that God has designed the world.

Verse 4 deals with one problem that arises in the context of inequity. "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind." Now we have to remember that this is wisdom literature and one of the things that means is that many of the statements are generally true, but not necessarily true in every situation. So here the author of Ecclesiastes is not saying that absolutely all toil and skill at work is motivated by envy. Sometimes the motivation is greed. And sometimes the motivation is the desire to please God and support one's family. There are godly people in the mix of workers who really do want to please God in and through their work. There are worldly people in the mix of workers who are content with their lot in life and are not interested in how they compare to others.

But, and this is Ecclesiastes' point, an awful lot of people are driven in their work by envy. The Hebrew word is a word with a wide range of meaning and so we do not need to think of envy only in the narrow sense, but we can include ideas like jealousy, rivalry and extreme

competitiveness. Ecclesiastes is saying that many, many people are motivated in their work by a dissatisfaction with how they compare with others who have more than they do.

Strictly speaking, envy is resentment of others because they have something that you would like to have. So, your fellow church member just bought a new car. You know that he can afford it because he has a really good job and you feel a little resentful because you put in more hours, get less vacation and you can't afford such a car. It is the resentment that makes it envy and it can lead to hatred. But there can be other reasons to be driven by competitiveness. It can be pride. Many people are driven in their work by pride and so they work and work and work so that they compare well with others as far as their material possessions or status are concerned.

What Ecclesiastes is talking about here is work that is motivated by comparing ourselves with our neighbors. And his claim is that an awful lot of work falls into this category. "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor." This, he is saying, is a huge reality in the world. People strive to get ahead because they want to compare well financially with the people around them. Their main concern is not to have enough for their needs, but to have as much or more than their friends and acquaintances. Envy and jealousy and rivalry all have to do with comparisons. Enough is not measured by my needs or even legitimate wants, but by how I compare to other people. What the author of Ecclesiastes saw when he looked around him is that vast numbers of people were driven in their work by a desire to have as much or more than their neighbors. Today we would speak about keeping up with the Jones.

Ecclesiastes is saying that this is a reality and it is empty. "This also is a vanity and a striving after the wind." Working hard just so you compare well to the people around you is as meaningful as "striving after the wind." Striving after the wind is a metaphor for something that is futile and silly and pointless. He is saying that working hard just so we can compare well with other people is working to achieve something that does not matter. And there is no end of quotes from people, who do better than most as far as wealth and status is concerned, who say that

their lives are empty and meaningless and sad. “When you get to the top, you find that there is nothing there.” In the context of Ecclesiastes, what possible significance could it have that your house was slightly nicer than your neighbor’s when in a few years you will both be dead, and nobody will know or care that you ever lived, let alone that you outshone your neighbor for a few moments?

So many people are working for goals that mean nothing! That is what Ecclesiastes is saying. People are motivated by envy of their neighbor and so they are striving after the wind. In the context of the book as a whole, this is another instance of the vanity of life under the sun. Huge numbers of people are motivated in their work by envy or rivalry and they are blind to the fact that their work is vanity and a striving after the wind. What they are striving for in their lives is comparing well with their neighbors and that goal ultimately is pointless and empty.

But not all fall into this category. In verse 5 he mentions another wrong attitude towards work. “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” Here we have a little proverb. The imagery of folding one’s hands refers to laziness – an unwillingness to work. There are a number of proverbs in the book of Proverbs that use the same imagery and help us to understand its meaning. Proverbs 6:10–11, ¹⁰“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.”

Here the folding of the hands to rest is associated with staying in bed when you should be working, and it results in poverty. This is what the author of Ecclesiastes is talking about in our text when he says, “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” This fool is lazy and refuses to work.

Such a person eats his own flesh. This is not to be taken literally. The idea is that the lazy fool destroys himself. Refusing to work is self-destructive. We are made to survive and thrive through working and a life of idleness leads to the opposite of surviving and thriving. Eating one’s own flesh is a graphic picture of self-destruction. Those who are unwilling to work harm themselves. There is something about laziness that causes people to shrivel up and die even if they stay alive physically due to the compassion of others.

This is a helpful proverb as we think about work from a biblical perspective. Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that we were designed by God to be workers. We are made in the image of God who is described in Genesis 1 and 2 as a worker and we read there that no sooner did he create mankind than he gave him work to do. God put Adam in the garden to work it and keep it. This is our task as human beings. We were put on the earth to work. It is an important part of the meaning of life – developing and caring for the creation to the glory of God. This is an important part of who we are as human beings. And that means that working belongs to thriving as humans. We cannot be what we were meant to be as human beings without working. By working we develop our talents. By working we develop virtues such as perseverance and patience and self-control. By working we take care of our needs and the needs of loved ones. By working we contribute to the functioning of society. All of that leads to personal growth. We are born with a lot of potential. Work is a huge part of the way that we realize our potential as human beings.

So, work contributes to the flourishing of the self as well as the flourishing of our families and society. But laziness has the opposite effect. And the author of Ecclesiastes uses the rather grotesque picture of eating one's own flesh as a powerful image for self-destruction. Laziness leads one to ruin. It leads to the shrinking of one's humanity. Instead of one's potential as a human being developing, the potential wastes away so that the lazy person becomes so much less than he/she could otherwise be. "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh."

The author of Ecclesiastes here is echoing the rest of Scripture here on the vital importance of work. It can be done for the wrong reasons such as envy of our neighbor which is vanity and a striving after the wind, but being lazy is certainly no legitimate alternative, "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh."

Then in verse 6 we come to the way that we should think about work. It is another proverb. "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind." This proverb is saying that it is possible to work too much. "[T]wo hands full of toil and striving after the wind" is compared with one "handful of quietness." It is comparing

two ways of working. “[T]wo hands full of toil and striving after the wind” sounds like a person whose life is all about his work. Both hands are full of toil. Working like this is “striving after the wind.” There is no gain real gain in it. The things that are gained from being a workaholic are not worth gaining.

Why do people work too much? What drives the workaholic? There can be many things. Sometimes it is greed. He just wants more and more money and things. Sometimes it is envy and rivalry as we have seen from verse 4. Some people work too much because they want to make sure that they compare well to others. Sometimes it is that their jobs are too much a part of their identity. Their sense of value and significance comes too much from their work. Sometimes it is because they are fixated on a worldly idea of success. Sometimes they are on a treadmill of getting ahead in their career. There are many reasons that people do not have a healthy work/life balance. This proverb is saying that it is not good to pour one’s whole being into one’s work. Work is important. Work is necessary. But overwork is empty and futile. It is “striving after the wind.” The gains that one receives from overwork are no real gains. They are empty and futile gains like having more money than you need just for the sake of having lots of money, or like meeting some worldly definition of success.

The contrast in the proverb is “a handful with quietness.” “[T]wo hands” symbolizes one’s whole life revolving around work. “[O]ne hand” symbolizes a life where work is important but is more measured and calm. A life that is all about work is a life of go, go, go. A life that is more balanced is a life that is much less frenetic – a life in which there is a time to work and a time to refrain from working and go home and spend time with your family and friends and enjoy your evening and have time to help your brother or go to a prayer meeting or Bible study.

What a wonderful phrase that is: “a handful with quietness!” There is a calmness about it. God intends for us to work. Work is an important part of our task as human beings. We cannot flourish without it. But God has not designed life to be hectic. Life is not intended to be work, work, work. There are other things that are important besides work. There are other things that are important besides money and stuff and

getting ahead. It is not good when something designed to be part of life becomes all of life, or most of life. God gives us space to work and space to rest. He gives us time to be productive and time to enjoy the fruits of our labours. He gives us a time to give our attention to working and making a living and he gives us time for rest and worship and fellowship. A life without work is an impoverished life. But so is a life with too much work.

These three verses are really another take on the theme in Ecclesiastes that we have already encountered a number of times and will encounter again. Here is the version from 2:24, "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...."

So, Ecclesiastes has given us two extremes and a middle way in these verses about work. Work is futile and empty if it is too important to us and if it is motivated by how we compare with others. But on the other hand, being lazy is self-destructive like eating your own flesh. What is commended is "a handful of quietness." Enough work, but not too much. God has not created us to be idle. But neither has he created us to be workaholics. There is a time for work. And there is a time for the rest of life. God's will for us is not frenzy, but diligence with calmness.

Now we need to see what the New Testament adds to this theme. We need to consider what difference Jesus makes to this theme. Jesus taught that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. That means that the Old Testament is incomplete on its own. Jesus' coming, and his mission makes a difference for every theme and every topic in the Old Testament. And so, we need to ask ourselves how does Jesus and what he accomplished by his life, death and resurrection fill out our understanding of this theme of work as it is taught in these verses? What difference does Jesus make to how we understand and apply these verses?

There are a number of ways. First of all, salvation in Jesus Christ gives us resources that enable us to deal with our tendency to compare ourselves with others and to be preoccupied with wanting to have what others have and wanting to have a higher status than others. Consider what Paul teaches in Galatians 5. In verse 19, Paul mentions a list of the

works of the flesh and included on that list are enmity, strife, jealousy, rivalries and envy. The works of the flesh are the works of our sinful nature and those works of the flesh are responsible for our tendency to compare ourselves with others and be jealous or envious of those who have more than we do. So, when the author of Ecclesiastes says that “all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor,” he is saying that much of the time our work is driven by the works of the flesh – that is the works of our sinful nature.

But Paul addresses these works of the flesh in the light of the gospel. So, he says in Galatians 5:15, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” And he says in 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control....” And then he says in verse 24, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” And he ends the chapter saying, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

All of this flows from Jesus and his mission. The Old Testament prophesied that through his ministry the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon the people of God. And Paul in Galatians 5 is teaching that by walking by the Spirit believers will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Jesus through his Spirit enables his followers to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. Because of Jesus Christ and his saving work on our behalf, believers are able to think and act very differently about our relationship with our neighbors. In Christ, we can crucify the desire to compare ourselves with others and to be envious or jealous of the success of others. The fruit of the Spirit is love. And love we are told in 1 Corinthians 13, “does not envy or boast.”

The gospel strikes at the heart of envy and rivalry and wanting to outshine others, because the gospel gives us the mind of Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for others. By the example of Christ and by the power of his resurrection, believers are enabled to put to death the lust for wanting to outshine others and to begin to love others and serve others and rejoice when they rejoice rather than resenting their successes and blessings.

That leads to a whole new motivation for work. Instead of being driven by envy or rivalry in our work we can be driven by the desire to please God by being generous with the fruits of our labors and with the time we are not working because we are no longer desperate to keep up with the Jones or to outdo them.

So, when we look out our text in the light of Jesus, we learn that Jesus came to break the power of envy and rivalry in our lives. On the basis of what he did in his life, death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the followers of Jesus so that we are assured that if we walk by the Spirit we will “not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

But there is another way in which Jesus is related to the verses in Ecclesiastes that we have been focusing on this morning. And here I am thinking especially about verse 6 which says, “Better a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.” This verse is commending a measured approach to work as opposed to a frenzied attitude towards work. It is commending the attitude of calmness and quietness.

Jesus also commends this attitude of calmness and quietness when he tells us not to be anxious and the reason that he gives is the fact that God is the Father of his followers. One of the great truths that Jesus brought to light and prominence is the truth of adoption – that is the truth that in Christ believers are adopted by God – God is their Father. The OT refers to God as Father a few times, but OT believers did not generally think of God as their Father. But due to Jesus and his revelation of God, the fact that God is the Father of believers is a prominent theme in the NT. And one of the great implications of the fact that God is our Father is that we are not to be anxious because God cares for us as a Father does his children.

We see this in Matthew 6:25-34 where Jesus commands his disciples not to be anxious. “Verse 25, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.” This is the attitude that Ecclesiastes 4:6 commends when it says, “Better a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.” But notice the reason that

Jesus gives for us not to be anxious. Matthews 6:32, “[Y]our heavenly Father knows that you need” all these things.

You see, the wonderful truth that God is the Father of the followers of Jesus is a truth that should govern our attitude towards our work and life in the world. We work because God has called us to work. It is an important part of a life lived to the glory of God. But at the same time, it is our heavenly Father who meets all our needs – whether that is for the things that we need to survive and thrive physically, but also for our spiritual and psychological wellbeing. If God is our Father and loves us as his children, there is no need for us to compare ourselves with others in order to feel good about ourselves. We matter to our heavenly Father. That is more important for our significance than anything else in the world. There is no need to compare ourselves with others.

And so, in Christ and as children of our heavenly Father we can live and work with a quiet and contented spirit. Envy and rivalry make no sense ever, but especially not if God is our Father. Being a workaholic makes no sense ever, but especially not if God is our Father. And so, trusting in our heavenly Father let us demonstrate the truthfulness of this proverb, “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.”