

What Are You Working For?
Ecclesiastes 2:18-26
Sunday, May 8th, 2022
By Ryan Perry

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 2:18–26

[18] I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, [19] and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. [20] So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, [21] because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. [22] What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? [23] For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

[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, [25] for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? [26] For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Pray

As I read this passage out of the book of Ecclesiastes, you might have been thinking to yourself, “is he really going to preach this text on Mother’s Day? It’s so depressing and such a downer on a day that should be filled with happiness and joy as we remember all the hard work that our Mother’s have done in raising us, and all of the selfless moments that wives have put in to the process of caring for and nurturing for our kids.”

Yet, as I reflected on what a day like this is all about it felt like this was the exact right passage to preach from. This is a day that is about celebrating the work and labor of love that mothers have done and are doing with their children. It’s labor that most mothers would say is rewarding, but it is also a labor that can be hard, wearisome, and frustrating.

It can also be anxiety inducing, can lead to despair, and if one is not careful, it can easily become a labor that is all encompassing and consuming in a way that God never intended. It can become both the source of a mother’s validation and it can be the thing from which she tries to derive her happiness.

But before all the non-mother's tune out the rest of this message, the truth is that this description of motherhood applies to all of the work and toil that has been given to us in this life.

Whether you are a mother, father, doctor, factory worker, secretary, engineer, teacher, IT person, builder, coach, student, volunteer, community member, or a friend you have tasted both the rewards and the hardships of your labor and work. And you have at the same time been tempted to make it the source of your hope, happiness, and validation.

All of this to say that I believe the words of the author of Ecclesiastes who is more than likely king Solomon, are very fitting for Mother's Day while also containing a message that everyone of us needs to hear and heed.

And the message is this: Everything we do for any other reason than the pleasure of God is fleeting and won't last. It is, as Solomon calls it, vanity or a vapor that is here today and gone tomorrow.

So with this message in mind, I believe that Solomon who is called "The Preacher," has four things he wants to communicate to us in these 9 verses. The first three are meant to warn us about the things that we shouldn't be working for, while the fourth will orient our hearts to the one true purpose for which we should be doing and pursuing all things.

So let's begin by looking at "The Preacher's" first warning for us this morning.

1. Don't be living to leave a legacy (V. 18-19)

Now, before I get into this point, I want to start by defining the term legacy. And to do that I want to read to you from an article on ramseysolutions.com that describes the idea of a legacy. It says:

"A legacy is an enduring impact that you make on those who outlive you. Most of the time, it comes as (or includes) a gift, such as an inheritance, a family business or property. But it's not limited to possessions or money. A legacy is an opportunity for you to change the world for good!"

Leaving a legacy is like tossing a rock into a pond. There's an initial splash followed by ripple effects that continue on once the rock has disappeared. You might have a small rock to throw or a big boulder, but each one of us will leave something behind us. It's up to us to decide how far those ripples will travel!"

On first listen this sounds great, doesn't it? Who doesn't want their life to have positive ripple effects that carry on for generations? Who doesn't want to leave an inheritance of Christian values or wealth that will help future generations succeed and hopefully be faithful to Christ?

We all want, on some level, for God to use us to have an enduring impact on the world, whether big or small. And I want you to know that this isn't bad. In fact, scripture and Solomon himself actually affirm this desire.

The words of Solomon in Proverbs 13:22a say:

[22] A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children...

Or the Psalmist says in Psalm 112:1-2

[1] Praise the LORD!

***Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!***

***[2] His offspring will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.***

So yes, leaving a legacy of godliness and faithfulness, and maybe even money, is good because, by God's grace and power it will hopefully have positive ripple affects on our children and hopefully on their children.

But I'm also here to tell you that scripture presents this as a general principle, but not as a guarantee. Scripture doesn't give us a guarantee of how future generations will carry on our values or how they will handle the things that we leave to them.

Solomon "The Preacher" understood this which is why he could write on one hand this principle in Proverbs 12:6:

[6] Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

While also saying in Ecclesiastes 2:18-19:

[18] I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, [19] and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

He understood that leaving a legacy may have positive ripple effects on future generations, but you can't guarantee it. And because he couldn't guarantee it, he realized how foolish he was in living as if his kingdom, his values, and his work were going to last forever.

Because we know the end of the story. We know that everything that Solomon and his Father David before him built were basically destroyed within one generation as Rehoboam was unwise and the kingdom of Israel was torn in two.

Now maybe you are here, and you feel pretty good about how you have lived your life. You have a nice nest egg to leave to your kids, you have the ability to give to a lot of causes, and you are fortunate enough to have kids that love Jesus and want to live the same way.

Or maybe you are here, and you feel the pangs of financial regret, or maybe you feel the heartbreak of wayward children and your asking, “where did we go wrong?”, or maybe you have that feeling that your life isn’t going to mean much when you are gone.

No matter which side you fall on, Solomon wants you to warn us that putting any hope in our enduring legacy is vanity. Because you can’t guarantee how it will be carried on and the truth is that once we are gone, the memory of who we are and what we have done will eventually fade away.

It won’t endure forever, so don’t be living for or be putting your hope in leaving a legacy. It won’t last.

Warning number 2.

2. Don’t be living to make a name for yourself (V. 20-21)

Ecclesiastes 2:20-21

[20] So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, [21] because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

If there is any person throughout scripture who was revered for his greatness during his earthly life it was Solomon. I mean this dude had everything, did everything, and was wiser than any other person in Israel and all the surrounding countries. Look at what he writes of himself in Ecclesiastes 1:16 and 2:4-9

[16] I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

[4] I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. [5] I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. [6] I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. [7] I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. [8] I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. [9] So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

Also, in 1 Kings 4:34 it says:

[34] And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.

If we were to try to compare him to more modern figures Solomon is basically a combination of Elon Musk and Gandhi. People wanted to be him, and they came from all the nations to be around him and to learn from him.

And yet, despite all the wisdom, knowledge, and skill that Solomon used in building his kingdom, and despite all the fame that he had amassed, he says in Ecclesiastes 2:20 **that he gives his heart up to despair when thinking about all that he has done.**

Now that seems strange right?

But he knew something. He knew that it wouldn't last. He knew that he would die, his name and fame would pass away, and that his kingdom would pass to someone else who hadn't done anything to deserve it. **In fact, it wasn't until the advent of modern archeology that we even found any evidence outside the Bible that Solomon had ever existed. His greatness didn't last.**

For us today this should provide a sobering warning. You might be a mother who finds her validation in being a great mom, and maybe other mother's look to you for advice on how to raise wonderful kids like you did. You might be really good at your job and you enjoy the accolades that come from people when they say **"great work."** Or maybe you have a gift of wisdom and discernment and deep down you really love when people want to hear your thoughts on any given topic.

But in the end, this validation and praise is vanity. It's a vapor that no matter how hard you try to hold on to will fade. Other moms will stop seeking your advice, someone else will get the accolades at work, and eventually people won't want to hear what you have to say.

Because your name, your glory, and your status, no matter how great they are, are not eternal. They won't last forever and therefore should not and cannot be what we live for, long for, or what we put our hope in. They will fail us. As it says in James 1:11

[11] For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich (prideful) man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Don't be living to make a name for yourself.

3. Don't let your labor become an idol (V. 22-23)

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

[22] What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? [23] For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

How many of you in this room experience stress on a semi-regular basis? Stress for many of us feels like a normal and inevitable part of life. Just think about everything that happens on a daily basis. Each day there can be an overwhelming number of things that we need to think about, keep track of, and do that can all be catalysts for stress, anxiety, and worry in our lives.

Stress is and has become a regular and normal part of our daily existence. But why? What is it that is causing us so much stress? What is it that we are all so worried about?

According to a post on psychologicalhealthcare.com there are actually some common very things that we all get stressed over and worry about. And these should come as no surprise to many of us. They are as follows: **money and the future, job security, relationships, and health.**

We stress out about whether or not we have enough money for today or become consumed with making sure we have enough for tomorrow. We fret over if we are in the right job, if it pays enough, and if we will be able to keep it so that we can provide for ourselves and our families.

Parents stress about their kids, singles can be consumed with whether or not they will meet someone, married couples fret over whether or not their spouse is meeting their needs, and there are times where we long to have that one person that really understands the depths of our souls.

And finally, we worry about our health. Are we going to remain healthy our whole lives or are we going to end up with a disease or have some tragedy happen to us or one of our loved ones? **(I freely admit that this the area I struggle with the most.)**

So we work, toil, and strive after these things as if they are the ultimate goal of our lives. We work super long hours because we need just a little bit more money or we need the promotion that will secure our future. We endlessly pour over our finances in the hopes that we will have enough to live a comfortable life when retirement comes.

We spend our days trying to figure out how to raise our kids so they will turn out right. We become consumed with where we will find our spouse, or about how our marriages can fulfill us. We quietly search and long for that one person who can make us feel seen. And we obsess over our health, either mental or physical, in the hopes that we can live just a little bit longer without emotional or physical struggles.

Or maybe for some of you there is the opposite reaction. These things are important to you, but they feel so overwhelming that they paralyze you. So instead of striving after them you sit on the couch bingeing Netflix hoping that they will just go away.

Now, I'm not saying that these aren't good things to think about and pursue. God has called each of us to be good stewards of the jobs, money, relationships, and bodies we have been given. Jesus makes this point in the parable of the talents when he says in Mathew 25:20-21:

[20] And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' [21] His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

Our God wants us to do good be good stewards or managers of the things he has placed in our care. But the problem for many of us is that our jobs, money, relationships, and health have become ultimate in our lives. They have become what consumes our thoughts, energy, and they become the focus of everything we do. **And in so doing they have become idols.**

They become things that we unknowingly worship as if they will bring significance to our lives. Or we obsess over them in a way that leads us to worry, doubt, and in the end check we maybe out because they are too overwhelming. This is what an idol does. Our lives end up being run and ruled by them.

But Solomon wants us to see that all of our striving and all of our toiling over these things leads us to days that are ultimately full of sorrow, vexation or frustration, and worry that gnaws at us and even disturbs our sleep (23).

They don't and can't bring the ultimate fulfilment that we desire. Money and jobs don't last, relationships at times fade no matter how good they are, and our health will fail us, guaranteed. And in the end our striving, toiling, and stressing out over these things as if they are an ultimate sources of significance and fulfilment is vanity. They too will fail us and will led us to a dead end path.

So then if these are Solomons warnings to us this morning: To not be living for a legacy, to not be making a name for ourselves, and to not make our labor an idol. Then what is the solution to this seemingly fruitless and unfulfilling toil that has been given to us in this life? Where do we then find purpose in it all?

4. Be living and working for the pleasure of God (V. 24-26)

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

[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, [25] for apart from him who

can eat or who can have enjoyment? [26] For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Do you see how this shift of focus changes everything? Solomon takes us from the fleeting reality of our toil in this life to now saying that we should eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our work. But why can he now say that when before he was saying that he hated his work and it led him to despair?

Because his focus is no longer on finding significance from the work itself. Instead, he realizes that his significance comes from living, eating, drinking, and working for the pleasure of the almighty God who isn't fleeting, isn't fading, isn't a vapor, and therefore will never let us down.

In fact, the inherent promise in **verse 26** is that when we work to please God, he will give us pleasure, joy, wisdom, and knowledge, and everything that we truly need on a daily basis.

You don't need to be worried about having an impact on future generations. You don't need to be consumed with getting praise and validation from others. You don't need to stress out about your job, money, the future, your kids, your spouse, your marriage, or health.

Because not only will our God provide exactly what we need in the areas, but he is pulling back to curtain of our world to show us that he and he alone is our only ultimate source of joy and fulfillment. **And that his pleasure and glory are the ultimate purposes of our work.**

Paul writes something similar in those famous words in 1 Corinthians 10:31: *[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

So if you are a believer here this morning. If you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross. If you are a son or daughter of the living God. My closing challenge to you is to examine what you are living for. Are you endlessly stressed out and worried about this life as if it can give you significance, purpose, and happiness? Or are you working for the pleasure of our triune God who is our only real source of life, joy, and peace?

Because only one will actually last and only one can give you the forever life, joy and fulfillment that you desire. As the poet C.T. Studd wrote:

"Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last"

Let's Pray.