

Session 4

March 24, 2019

THE PROBLEM WITH WORK

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:9-13

Few characteristics are more asked about or more descriptive than what someone does for a living. So much of our identity is tied to our jobs.

Like many children, my introduction to work consisted of menial tasks for negligible wages. My brothers and I often joke about our cruel taskmasters (our parents!) forcing us to pick up rocks and pull weeds during summer break. We dug out stumps, cut the grass, and picked berries, all for what we considered to be a mere pittance. But by the time we were teenagers, we all had summer jobs, then moved on to “real jobs” (if you count my fulltime ministry as a real job!) and ultimately to careers. We came to realize, of course, that our parents had built into us a work ethic; a lesson not about money, but morality: work is a good and honorable and godly discipline.

But midlife brings with it all the questions and doubts that Solomon wrestles with in these texts. If there’s an example of a midlife crisis in the Bible, this is it!

The stresses of work (2:18-23). While Solomon may not have pulled weeds or picked up stones, he still worked at running his kingdom. Like the CEO of any major corporation, he saw himself as responsible for managing the affairs of his charge. In his case, his work resulted in lands and houses and vineyards and riches. Yet he was startled with the sad reality that we all must face: you can’t take it with you! Several observations underscore his lament. First was the bitterness of knowing what he had worked so hard for would be left to his successor (v. 18), and the nagging question of what type of person would take over at his parting. Would his successor be a wise person of integrity or an incompetent fool? (v. 19). The very thought of all that he had worked for “going down the tubes” made him question the value of work in the first place. Notice the strong words used: he *hated* all his work (v. 18); gave himself over to *despair* (v. 20); said it was a *great wrong* (v. 21). Second, Solomon was concerned not only about the material wealth he was leaving behind, but he was also concerned about the effort he had put into it. Hence, he lamented how unfair it was to leave everything he had worked for so honorably to one who hadn’t lifted a finger for it! (v. 21). Finally, the wise king lamented the years of stress spent in pursuing his career. His days were filled with grief, his years were filled with sorrows, and his nights were filled with tossing and turning (v. 22) ...all because of his work!

The satisfaction of work (3:9-13). At this point one might think that work is more of a curse than a blessing! Yet there is something honorable about work. Even before sin was brought upon man in the Garden, God gave Adam and Eve jobs to do (Gen. 2:15). I see in verses 10 and 11 two sets of competing thoughts. First, while God gave people work “to keep them occupied” (v. 11), there is a divine purpose for it all—even the ups and downs we encounter—when viewed through God’s perspective. Second, while God has made mankind aware of the vastness of our universe, only God sees the entire picture of it from beginning to end. Solomon finally concludes that there is indeed virtue in work, but only if the motivation for it is turned outward, rather than inward. To “enjoy the good” (v. 12), is better understood as “do the good.” Taken together, these verses indicate that only when we learn to rejoice in our labors and invest our lives in good works, will we find the satisfaction that God desires for us in our work (v. 13).