

Work is Meaningless [Ecclesiastes 2:18-3:22]
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INTRODUCTION

1. We humans struggle with our work
 - a. This cartoon about a toothbrush & toilet paper illustrates this.
2. A look at data (which can still be subjective) reveals that Americans work more than most.
 - a. Americans work more than all other workers in the industrialized world.
 - b. Americans take less vacation, work longer days, and retire earlier.
 - c. All this all takes place in an economy with too many part-time, underemployed people.
 - 1) A ABCNEWS.com poll found only 26% of Americans feel they work too hard.
 - 2) That's twice as many as a same poll conducted in 1960.
3. Maybe this is why so many popular songs use work as a focus:

Working nine to five, what a way to make a living	Everybody's working for the weekend.
Work hard/play hard	That's why they call me the working man.
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.	I don't want to work, I just want to bang on the drum all day
You better work, work it girl, do that thing on the runway	Taking what they're giving cause I'm working for a living
Take this job and shove it	
4. We're continuing to study our way through the OT book of Ecclesiastes.
 - a. We've had quite a list of things that the Teacher has deemed meaningless:
 - b. Everything, wisdom, pleasure . . . and now this morning, work.
 - c. I think all of us could say Amen to that, leave early, and find a lunch buffet.
 - d. But to discover WHY work is meaningless, we'll go to the text.

2:18-23

¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²²What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? ²³All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

1. The Teacher reveals that, when we work, we earn, but it goes beyond us.
 - a. You can see this in your paycheck. Look at the lines (taxes, FICA, and the like).
 - b. You can see this in your output. Some can't afford the very products they make.
 - c. The cry of the modern Labor Movement is an echo from thousands of years.
 - d. Even if your work pay is good, the job never fully satisfies you.
2. So the Teacher gives us a pragmatic reminder: WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER.
 - a. There are never-ending time management tips to increase productivity, right?
 - 1) EXAMPLE: Don't check email first thing in the morning.
 - 2) There are plenty of hacks to make your life just a little easier.
 - b. But observe the Teacher's wisdom from VERSE 21.
 - 1) Even working smarter doesn't satisfy our longing for more.
 - 2) In the long-term, we're still working for others.
3. Verse 23 states that there's no rest for the weary.
 - a. "Even at night, their minds do not rest," is something that nearly all can relate to
 - b. A recent study says we think about work 2-3 hours a day when we aren't working.
 - c. The Teacher makes a good case: the end result is that all of work is meaningless.
 - 1) So the next verses reflect an apparent change in conversation.

3:1-8

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: ² a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, ³ a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, ⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ⁷ a

time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

1. In the midst of a conversation on work, we're offered a view of the world around us.
 - a. The Teacher believes that there's a rhythm to the world.
 - b. Birth and death, agriculture, aggression. They all happen with regularity.
 - 1) We think we're superior to those who live before, but we're not.
 - 2) A few years ago, I opened up a time capsule.
 - a) It was placed in the corner of a building in 1953.
 - b) The only thing that survived was a newspaper from that day
 - c) Everything else went to dust.
 - d) But the news items in the paper weren't much different than those of today.
 - e) Tragedy happened. People read about it.
2. Can we talk about the famous song connected to these verses?
 - a. Pete Seeger was a folk singer in the late 1950's.
 - b. He wrote this and it was later covered by the Byrds.
 - c. The song was anthem of peace using the Scriptures as its basis.
 - d. As much as the song was catchy, it misses the actual point of this text.
 - 1) In the end, the world continues to move on with or without us. Peace is irrelevant.
 - 2) So how does all of this relate to our work?

3:9-14

⁹What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

1. So IF the world is going to continue on with or without us . . .
 - a. . . . IF all human activity is pointless since it won't change anything . . .
 - b. . . . then we can now understand why our work is meaningless.
 - c. Again, this isn't the most inspiring book of the Bible, is it?
2. But there are some beautiful verses here with some deeper meanings (VS 11)
 - a. You and I have some sort of grasp on what God has made in this world.
 - 1) As people search for meaning, we rely on the **ontological** argument
 - 2) The world couldn't have been just made happenstance.
 - 3) All of this was created by someone/something.
 - b. Yet still, we can't understand exactly how it all happened.
 - 1) And the Teacher suggests that this makes it all even more meaningless.
 - 2) But don't give up on this text yet.
3. You see, here's where the Teacher gives us some hope.
 - a. If we can find a way to live in this tension of beauty and unknowing, we'll find joy.
 - b. Yes, work is meaningless, so if you can, be happy while doing it; you made it.
 - c. The eternal nature of all things ought to lead us to appreciate God.

3:18-22

¹⁸I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

²²So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

1. There was a (vulgar?) song years ago: "You and me baby ain't nothing but mammals . . ."
 - a. While over creation, the Teacher admits that we're sometimes animal-like.
 - b. The amazement of the animal world: the organization of how animals work together.
 - c. They don't have language or technology but collaborate to complete projects.
2. The only difference between man and animal? The breath of God (**Genesis 2:7**).
Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.
3. When we are dead, friends, we'll work no more. Sure it's meaningless.
 - a. But we're called to enjoy work because all of this is meaningless..

CONCLUSION

1. Since work is so critical to the American identity, how should we view it?
2. I think we can find an important lesson from **Genesis 3:17-19**.
"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."
 - a. Work isn't a curse. The fact that work is unsatisfying is the curse.
3. So we all need to come to grasp with how we will tolerate work.
4. The apostle Paul tries to provide motivation in **Colossians 3:23**:
"Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people."