

**The Bonfire of the Vanities**  
“Labor’s Folly”  
**Ecclesiastes 2:12-26**

**Introduction**

- [Slide #1]
- “Tumble outta bed  
And stumble to the kitchen  
Pour myself a cup of ambition  
Yawnin’, stretchin’, try to come to life  
Jump in the shower  
And the blood starts pumpin’  
Out on the streets  
The traffic starts jumpin’  
With folks like me on the job from 9 to 5”<sup>1</sup>
- Of all the experiences life has to offer, our work, what we do, is just about one of the most maddeningly frustrating experiences there is. I bet if we were to do an informal poll right now a majority of us would say we dislike or hate or loathe our work. Even if you’re one of the fortunate few who actually likes what you do there are days when the sound of the alarm clock in the morning is about the worst sound imaginable.
- For most people, the end of the weekend is painful. It happens about 8pm Sunday night, the drug called *weekend* begins to wear off and the thought of another 9 to 5 brings on a sickening feeling in the pit of the stomach. We endure five or six more days of tedium just to make it to another weekend. And this goes on *ad nauseum*, day after day, week after week, year after year.
- It’s called “labor” and “the grind” for good reason. Take the optimism of youth, season it with a few years in the work world, and watch the humanity, the dignity, the joy of life slowly ground and crushed out of the person.
- Someone once said, “The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education, and culture is disappointment.”<sup>2</sup> Add to that the fact that most of us hate our work and you’ve just found the ultimate recipe for despair.

**Transition**

- Do you know what Qoheleth, *the Teacher*, says in Ecclesiastes 2:12-26? Been there, done that. [Slide #2]

**Proposition**

- **Your work will never fulfill you**
- Author **Leonard Woolf** said it like this. “I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same if I had played Ping-Pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession

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<sup>1</sup> Dolly Parton. *9 to 5*.

<sup>2</sup> John Cheever, *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 2.

that I have in a long life ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.”<sup>3</sup> **Your work will never fulfill you.**

- To think we might be able to find ultimate meaning, purpose, fulfillment in what we do, in our work, is abject foolishness. House work. Yard work. Course work. Charity work. You name it. Throw it all on the bonfire. Burn baby burn. There is meaning in this life. It does exist. Just not under the sun. Just not on this earth. Just not in what you do.

### Transition

Watch how Qoheleth leads us there. Look at [verses 12-17](#). By the way, I’m including verse 17 in with this section because the natural break in the text occurs between verses 17 and 18, not at the end of 16 like the NIV suggests.

### Main Points

- [Verse 12](#). *Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?*
- In other words, what more might a person do to find meaning and fulfillment in life than what Qoheleth’s has done? Answer? Nothing. Of all the quests for meaning past, present and future, Qoheleth’s was the greatest. No one will ever be able to match his search. He’s already found no meaning in wisdom and knowledge, 1:12-18, no meaning in pleasure, 2:1-11. If meaning is to be found anywhere, in his thinking it has to be in wisdom. That’s why in this section he’s back on the subject of wisdom.
- [Verse 13](#). *I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.*
- Of the two, obviously, it’s better to be wise than to be a fool in the same way that *light is better than darkness*. Wise people walk around with clear heads, like in a well-lit room. They know where they’re going able to avoid the obstacles of life. The fool walks around in the dark, blind, bumping into one obstacle after another.
- [Verse 14](#). *The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.*
- Despite all the advantages wisdom might provide, in the end, it really makes no difference. *The same fate overtakes them both*. The person who lives responsibly, who’s lived wisely, who hasn’t bumped along in life with poor choice after poor choice, has no advantage over the person who’s lived irresponsibly because in the end there’s death for both. Death happens to everyone. It’s inescapable.
- [Verse 15](#). *Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?"*

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Woolf, author and publisher (Hogarth Press), literary editor of *The Nation Wireless Age*, Sept-Nov 1998, 35.

- I said in my heart,  
"This too is meaningless."*
- 16 *For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!*
  - In the words of [Tremper Longman](#), “death renders all things, including wisdom, meaningless.”<sup>4</sup>
  - [Verse 17](#). *So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*
  - The **inevitability of death** [[Slide #3](#)] leads to Qoheleth to a conclusion in verse 17. His conclusion is that our work, what we do in this life is, and I quote, a grievous thing. That word *grievous*, is a word that means the opposite of the word *gain* or profit which Qoheleth used in 1:3. Worse than no net advantage, worse than something of no profit, what we do, our work, is actually a loss to us.
  - You bust your hump for 60 hours a week, make smart investments, spend less than you earn, climb the ladder, build something up, and in the end you die. All those smart choices, all the wise planning, all that effort is wasted. All that work leaves you no better off than the fool who’s wasted his life. The end for both is the same. In fact, Qoheleth says, if you’ve tried to live wisely you’re actually worse off than the fool who at least had the sense to enjoy life and take it easy.
  - The contemplation of this loss, the futility of work in light of the inevitability of death, leaves Qoheleth beyond frustrated. All he’s left with is a nasty repugnant taste in his mouth from this thing called life.<sup>5</sup> He hates life. Look at the text. [Verse 17](#). *I hated life* is his confession. And what he says is what all of us feel. There’s something about this life worth hating.<sup>6</sup>
  - How do you explain this? Does your view of the world have the right kind of explanatory power to make sense of how we feel? Why is Qoheleth right? He’s right because God’s warning to Adam and Eve in the Garden is true to life. Genesis 2:15-17 *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."* There’s God’s good and gracious warning.
  - Remember what God said to Adam after his rebellion? Genesis 3:17-19 *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 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."*
  - Why should we expect anything more from our experience of life than Qoheleth’s confession *I hated life*? Why should it be any better for us than for him? Or for Adam and Eve? Did

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<sup>4</sup> Longman, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Constable, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>6</sup> Longman, p. 100.

you somehow think all that stuff about Adam and Eve and sin was some kind of polite idea for flannel graphs and little kids on Sunday morning but irrelevant to real life, adult life? Because of sin our work is cursed and then we die. You hate life; you hate your work because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Their story is our story is your story is my story.

### Transition

The vanity of it all doesn't end there. Qoheleth goes into even more painful details. Look at [verses 18-23](#). Listen. *I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. 21 For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. 22 What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.*

- Our work, our toil, our labors will never yield ultimate meaning, or fulfillment, or purpose because whatever we might **gain from all that work is left behind**. As the proverb says, “There are no pockets in shrouds.” [[Slide #4](#)] We can't take it with us when we die.
- We have no control over whatever we might build in this life. It all goes to someone else. It goes to the kids, it goes to the State, it goes to the business partner, it goes to a spouse. [Verse 19](#). *And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Who knows what they'll do with what we've built up, what we've saved, what we've earned, the benefits of all our toil? Who knows if they'll run it into the ground or fritter it away? Who knows? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. 21 For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.*
- [Verse 22](#). *What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.* In the words of [Chuck Swindoll](#), “Burning the midnight oil, developing great plans, risking hard-earned funds, skipping much-needed vacations, worrying about competitors...then when we least expect it—death.”<sup>7</sup> And it all goes to someone else. All we really get from this raw deal called a life of work is pain, grief, and a lot of sleepless nights.
- In fact, Qoheleth says in [verse 24](#), “Those who do not order their lives according to God's standard will never enjoy the benefits of their toil.”<sup>8</sup> *A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? 26 To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.* Even the simplest of labors, eating and drinking, if done apart from God, are meaningless vanities.

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<sup>7</sup> Chuck Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Swindoll, p. 21.

## Conclusion

- [Slide #5] If I'm lying here tell me. If all this is a joke then laugh. If this is a bad dream then wake me up. If what Qoheleth says isn't true then someone speak up please. Except we all know even though the bite of these words are harsh there's truth. In fact, maybe these are the truest words you've heard all week. And so we cry out with the Apostle Paul from Romans 7. *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*
- Qoheleth longed for the good news but never got a taste of it. He longed to see what's been revealed to you and me. *Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Christ has done a work. He labored on the cross and he won. By his death and his resurrection he rescues all who would come to him. Through his work he rescues all who feel this burden, all who are cursed with death and a life of despair and futility.
- Qoheleth's words here are not a bitter pill; he's pointing us to the cure. To Christ. Galatians 3:13 *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He is the one who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.*<sup>9</sup> There is meaning in this life. It does exist. It doesn't come from what you do it comes from who you know. Do you know Christ and are you living for him?
- The absolutely amazing thing about serving and living for Christ is that you don't have to suffer through Qoheleth's curse. Your work, your labor, what you do, even if it's scrubbing toilets all day, can have meaning and purpose if it's done with God and for God. That's why Paul can say *always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*<sup>10</sup> Your labor, if done to the Lord, for the Lord is not vanity. Your work, the daily grind of your 9 to 5, can have eternal significance and purpose if done in the name of Christ.
- The choice is yours; throw yourself upon the mercy of God in Christ or choose some other way to find rest for your restlessly weary soul.
- [Video]

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 103:4

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58