

## Week 6 - Striking the Right Balance - Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

### Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:18-25

#### Introduction

How would you define “success?”

What does a well-lived life look like to you?

One of the most damaging lies told to women in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century was that they could “have it all.”

The former editor of Cosmopolitan magazine, Helen Gurley Brown, made a business of selling that lie and even made it the title of her popular book, “Having It All,” where she sold the idea that everything was possible for the modern woman.

However, within thirty years of Ms. Brown making “You can have it all” a feminist mantra, it had largely ceased to be seen as an empowering challenge.

Still, many women bought into the myth and chased its elusive promise, and some still do.

But time and truth walk hand-in-hand, and, over time, they discovered that life is a series of trade-offs and no one can possibly “have it all.”

And that’s not just true for women - it’s a universal truth that applies to everyone.

The best any of us can hope for is to find the right balance - the sweet spot of a life lived as God would define it.

But what does that mean?

In today's passage, Qoheleth makes a series of “better than” statements as he compares different lifestyles.

In a sense, he began the series as he began Chapter 4, saying that, given all the injustice and oppression in the world, it might be better to have never lived.

And he now continues with three more comparisons whereby he shows that it’s better to live with **contentment**, better to live in **community**, and better to **cooperate** with others.

Qoheleth begins this section by considering a problem that remains pervasive today - **work-life balance**.

I looked up the term “work-life balance” on Google, and it returned over 5.5 billion results in 1/3 of a second.

A casual glance at the first few pages of those results showed that most of them had something to do with how to achieve it and assumed that people are working too much.

And that *is* a problem as the technology that was supposed to relieve us of our toil and usher us into lives of leisure has largely done just the opposite.

For many people, constant connectivity and availability have caused a blurring of the line between work and leisure, and people are finding it harder to get away from work.

However, the issue is actually much more fundamental than that, as Qoheleth points out.

So, let’s look together at verses 4-8 [**Ecclesiastes 4:4-8**] to see what he has to say -

*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.*

*The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.*

*Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.*

*Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.*

Qoheleth talks about both ends of the spectrum of work in those verses, looking at both the workaholic and the slacker. But the crux of the matter has to do with contentment.

## **I. Contentment**

Qoheleth has already told us that work is a gift from God and that it's possible to find at least some measure of joy in our work.

But like all of God's blessings, work can be distorted by sin and become a curse.

And he says the **first** distortion is caused by our motivation - the competitive urge he labels as **envy of one's neighbor**.

We don't want to press his statement that "all" toil and "all" skill in work results from such envy lest someone come along and try to prove the opposite, as there are no doubt many examples to the contrary.

However, his point is valid, and far too much of our hard work and industry can be chalked up to the desire not to be outdone, and much effort is expended in trying to get what our neighbor has.

A certain amount of competition and self-interest may be necessary.

But, if we aren't careful, it can morph into an unhealthy attempt to get ahead by getting ahead of others.

I had an uncle who had a clever way of getting around appearing covetous.

One time, when he saw a really nice RV parked by someone's house, he exclaimed, "I wish I had that, and he had a better one."

I suppose that is a kinder, gentler form of covetousness.

But in the final analysis, it's still a violation of the Tenth Commandment against desiring what our neighbor has.

All discontent does is create an endless cycle where we work harder to buy more things, causing others to envy us and do the same.

Or we go into debt and wind up working for the things we bought on credit with the same result because the rat race is being run in a hamster wheel, and there is no chance for true progress.

And Qoheleth reminds us that it's *hebel* - vanity and chasing after the wind.

The **second** error Qoheleth directs our attention to is the opposite of the first: **the dropout**.

The law of inertia says that a body in motion tends to remain in motion, and a body at rest tends to remain at rest.

This person desires to have nothing to do with the rat race and the petty rivalries of one-upmanship characterized by the covetous overworker.

But his error is just as bad because disinclination to labor is self-destructive.

Notice that Qoheleth calls such a person a "*fool [who] folds his hands and eats his own flesh.*"

Laziness obviously has a detrimental impact on one's productivity, but it also inhibits personal growth.

Prolonged idleness leads to ambition atrophy and keeps people at a permanent base level.

It also strains relationships with other people, and laziness is quickly becoming one of the most significant factors in serious health problems, both physical and mental, around the globe.

This person not only wastes his capital, but his idleness also eats away at who he is as he eventually loses everything, including his self-respect.

The errors described in these two verses are like two sides of a coin where work becomes all-consuming, and idleness becomes self-cannibalizing.

So we must walk a fine line between overwork and idleness [tightrope], and in verse 6, Qoheleth shows us the way.

“Quietness” is another way of saying “contentment,” and Qoheleth points us to the person who is neither always striving for more nor satisfied with having nothing.

This person is satisfied with a single handful.

They aren’t grabbing with both hands, but they also don’t have their hands permanently folded in idleness.

Quietness or contentment paints the picture of a person with the inward peace that comes from having modest demands and abundant gratitude.

They have found the right balance as they work hard enough to meet life’s needs and are satisfied with what God gives them.

We might reasonably expect that to be the last word on the subject, but Qoheleth suddenly turns his attention to consider a problem that’s even worse than working from envy - what we would call being a **workaholic**.

This is the person who works compulsively because they have an internal problem - they are never satisfied.

They don’t even know why they are working so hard, but they’re driven to keep going, and their labor can no longer be classified as habitual; they’ve moved beyond that, and working has become their fixation.

Qoheleth describes this person as one who has sacrificed everything on the altar of work.

They are pictured as men who have no one - no family for sure, and likely no friends either - they have no time for relationships.

They don’t even take time to figure out why they are working so hard to amass the things their labors accumulate and if it’s all worth it.

But Qoheleth sees its value and says it’s *hebel* - all vanity and an unhappy business.

Then, it appears the loneliness of the chronic worker causes Qoheleth to consider the value of living in community with others.

Look with me at verses 9-12 [**Ecclesiastes 4:9-12**] -

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

What he saw is a warning for us all against isolation, selfishness, greed, and a sinful addiction to work.

The better way, by far, is to live and work in harmony with others.

## **II. Community**

We often see these verses used in marriage ceremonies as the officiant charges and encourages the couple.

And, while the verses certainly can be applied to marriage, marriage wasn’t Qoheleth’s focus.

***I often say that Scripture can have many applications, but it only has one meaning.***

And what Qoheleth is talking about in these verses is the value of human relationships in general.

Having just looked at the poverty of the life of the loner despite whatever material success his labors net, he turns to point out the value of community.

And he declares relationships to be an essential part of life.

Humans were made for relationships - God designed us to function in community rather than in independence and autonomy.

**Genesis 2:18** tells us that after God created Adam, he said, “*It is not good that the man should be alone,*” and he created Eve to be a helper for him.

Living and partnering with others has its downside - to be sure being with others has its problems.

There would be no need to praise its benefits if it were trouble-free.

Whenever you involve someone else, you give up some degree of independence; you must consider the other person's perspective, listen to their reasoning, and weigh their feelings and interests.

And for people who are introverts like me, you have to allow for the psychological, emotional, and physical drain being around other people causes.

Despite all those things, Qoheleth says partnership is better than isolation for several reasons.

**First**, working with others makes us more productive - we have a "good reward for [our] toil."

I once saw a draft horse contest at the county fair and was amazed at the power of those beautiful animals.

I want to share a little-known fact about the pulling power of horses that relates to our passage today.

A single draft horse can pull a load of about 8,000 pounds, so we would deduce that a team of two horses would be able to pull somewhere around 16,000 pounds, right?

In reality, two draft horses can pull three times the weight one horse can pull, and if they have been trained by working together for a long time, they can pull four times the weight they could pull alone - so between 24-32,000 pounds.

That's the power of teamwork, and the principle transfers over to people, too.

It really is true that teamwork makes the dream work; two people working together will typically more than double their productivity, and work is simply more rewarding when shared with someone else.

**Second**, working with others is better because of the mutual assistance it makes possible.

Let's face it, we're all prone to falling.

We may trip over our own feet, or life may come along and knock us flat, so it pays to have someone there to help us get back on our feet.

I'm sure you remember the commercial of the old woman who cried into her LifeAlert pendant, "I've fallen, and I can't get up!"

The acting in that ad caused many to chuckle, but the reality of falling while alone - whether it be an actual physical fall or a financial, relationship, or moral fall - is frightening.

Because, when we fall alone, we just might stay down.

But having someone come alongside and give assistance - even if it's only an encouraging word - is invaluable in helping us up.

The **third** benefit he mentions is warmth or comfort.

Again, we are tempted to focus on the marriage bed, but it's doubtful Qoheleth had that narrow a thought in mind.

He was more likely thinking about travelers who had to stop along the way while walking, lying down together, and keeping one another warm.

It was common practice until relatively recently for unrelated people to freely share sleeping accommodations without anyone thinking a thing about it.

It's simply the way things were done and there was no insinuation of intimacy involved.

But I think we can also look to the spiritual warmth generated and experienced when believers get together.

Growing cold in our spiritual walk is far too easy, and we benefit greatly from closeness with other Christ-followers.

Paul writes about some of the sources for that mutual warmth and comfort in **Colossians 3:16** -

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

The **fourth** benefit of community is protection.

Qoheleth still seems to be thinking of travelers and the dangers of being on the road.

In those days, it wasn't unusual for people to be attacked by bandits, and it was always better to travel in pairs or groups simply for the protection offered.

We all need someone who has our back, and we won't if we insist on standing alone.

We may not face the same danger while traveling as people did in Qoheleth's day, but we still face spiritual dangers as we sojourn on this earth.

This world is full of temptations and pitfalls, so it pays for us to have someone to face the fight with us and cover us with protective prayer.

Qoheleth's mention of a three-fold cord that is not quickly broken is also used in marriage ceremonies to indicate the strength of a human union where God is also present as a partner.

Again, that's undoubtedly true, and it's a good application of a truth that can be gleaned from this passage; God would be the supreme addition to any partnership, but I doubt that's what was on Qoheleth's mind.

I suspect he was thinking in purely human terms here and simply ratcheted up the idea of the benefits of community by saying two are better than one, and three are even better.

We encounter this kind of rhetoric in Proverbs 6 [**Proverbs 6:16**], where we read:

*There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.*

It's a form of the parallelism Hebrew poetry is known for, and Qoheleth has already shown himself to have poetic inclinations.

Therefore, I don't think we need to get more specific than he was here in trying to pin down the relationship.

He's saying living in partnership with others is better than living alone.

Still, we all know living in partnership requires certain behaviors from the parties, and cooperation is near the top of the list if you hope to find anyone who will partner with you for long.

### **III. Cooperation**

Let's look at verses 13-16 together [**Ecclesiastes 4:13-16**], where Qoheleth turns to the example of the succession of kings.

*Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

I think it's best to understand this short paragraph as a pseudo-biographical account that doesn't point to any particular king or series of kings.

It portrays a familiar enough scene where people rise in popularity only to be replaced by someone else.

It's a common enough story that extends beyond the monarchy to the worlds of business, sports, entertainment, politics, and the like.

In Qoheleth's tale, we see a king who has risen to power out of poverty and whose background also includes a stint in prison.

Whether the prison was the rhetorical prison of poverty or an actual jail cell is immaterial - this is a rags-to-riches account where the specific details don't matter beyond the level that serves the story.

What *is* essential to the story is that, at some point, the king stopped listening to other people.

He became set in his ways and stopped heeding either counsel or correction after being on the throne for some time.

Along comes a young upstart, lean and hungry, with the populace on his side, who rises to take the king's place.

As the Eagles sang in their hit song of 1976, there's a New Kid in Town - and everybody loves him.

In fact, they want to be like him as everybody's talkin' and walkin' like the new kid in town.

Qoheleth goes on to say that there was no end to the people the youth led - he was wildly popular - until he wasn't.

And the Eagles catch what comes next, as they sing the song's final verse, when, after extolling the virtues of the new kid, they sing directly to him, "They will never forget you 'til somebody new comes along."

Every new kid is eventually replaced by a new kid, everyone proves to be expendable, and, in time, no one remembers them at all.

I've held a lot of jobs in my career and, in some of them, I was a key player.

But I want you to know that none of those companies folded when I left.

They replaced me in my position and I'd like to think they might have stumbled a bit in the transition but the reality is that none of them fell and they kept right on going.

One of my favorite movies is the World War 2 biopic Patton, which stars George C. Scott as General Patton.

The movie closes with the audience hearing Mr. Scott's voice as Patton saying:

"For over a thousand years, Roman conquerors returning from the wars enjoyed the honor of a triumph, a tumultuous parade. In the procession came trumpeters and musicians and strange animals from the conquered territories, together with carts lad with treasure and captured armaments. The conqueror rode in a triumphal chariot, the dazed prisoners walking in chains before him. Sometimes his children, robed in white, stood with him in the chariot or rode the trace horses. A slave stood behind the conqueror holding a golden crown, and whispering in his ear a warning: That all glory is fleeting."

Part of the lesson Qoheleth imparts is that we shouldn't put too much stock in earthly positions, whether ours or someone else's, because all glory is fleeting.

Time, familiarity, and the restlessness of men make even the most interesting and intriguing person boring - often through no fault of their own.

However, the larger lesson is found when we consider how cooperative we are with others - and more specifically, how we handle the advice and counsel of others.

If a disciple is anything, they are teachable - that's sort of the baseline definition of a disciple, right?

In Qoheleth's account, we see the danger of old age when we begin to believe that gray hair imparts infallible wisdom and we don't need to listen to anyone else.

That's a guaranteed way to lose touch and slide into irrelevancy.

Older Christians, even leaders, need to remain open to counsel and, if necessary, accept correction.

There is a message here for younger Christians, too, as Qoheleth reveals they can do valuable work for the kingdom.

However, there's an appropriate way to do kingdom work.

And it's not by telling others what to do or demanding to be heard.

Young people, learn all you can and share whatever wisdom and insight God gives you, and wait patiently for your turn to come, knowing that when the time is right, God will give you the right place to serve.

## Conclusion

There's a lot to digest in these verses, and achieving and maintaining balance in the three areas Qoheleth mentions can be challenging.

Search the web for advice on any of the three, and you'll be met by innumerable people giving advice on how to do it. Just sorting through all the advice and trying to find balance in it would be enough to give one a headache.

Fortunately, we don't need to wade through reams of often contrary advice because we have an example to follow in Jesus and he showed us the best way to live during his earthly ministry.

We certainly see Jesus diligently working, but we also see him taking time for rest and recovery.

He maintained a healthy work/life balance.

He didn't fold his hands in idleness, and he didn't work himself down to a stub trying to get what other people had.

Jesus didn't have a fixed address or a large bank account here on earth, but he knew he had a mansion and unlimited treasure in heaven.

And every Christ-follower can say the same, so why overwork ourselves to lay up treasure here where moths and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal?

Instead, we should do the work God gives us to do as if we are serving him, learn to be content with what he gives us, use those gifts for his glory, and look forward to our heavenly reward.

Jesus understands the value of community too.

The gospel accounts show him partnering in his ministry as he chose twelve men to walk and work beside him.

Jesus was no lone wolf - he surrounded himself with people.

And rather than viewing his followers as servants, Jesus calls us his friends and desires to continue to work in and through us in partnership with us.

When our hearts grow cold, he embraces us to warm them again, and when we fall, he's there to pick us up, dust us off, and set us on our way again.

When we face danger in the spiritual warfare he has enlisted us to do, he defends and preserves us.

He is the friend mankind needs most of all and he's the best friend anyone can have.

Jesus is also our example of submissive cooperation.

I include the reference to **Luke 2:52** in every birthday card I send to the younger members of our church family because I think it's important for them to realize that, like them, Jesus was also once a child who had to mature.

Perhaps I should include it in the birthday cards I send to the adults too because all of us should constantly be maturing.

We know he cooperated fully with his heavenly Father and did only the work his Father gave him.

But he was also obedient to his earthly parents and teachers, as Luke 2:52 shows us.

If we're wise, we'll follow his example in all these areas and find balance in life as we live with contentment, and in community, and cooperation with others.

Let's pray.