

Trivial Toil
Ecclesiastes 2:18-26
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 2, Ecclesiastes chapter 2.

In some ways our study through the book of Ecclesiastes has felt a little like listening to the evening news – we have gone from one bad report to the next. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. Solomon has searched for meaning and purpose in life and he has found that it is all pointless. He has looked into wisdom and folly and he has searched out the great depths of human pleasure and possessions and complete self-indulgence. Every report he comes back with is – vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And so in our text for this morning – like the evening news – he has more bad news for us. His investigation into the depths of our workaday world produced the same result as when he looked into wisdom and pleasure.

And this could be a pretty depressing part of this preacher’s message because we give so much of our lives to this thing called work. We work at our jobs, we work in our homes, we work in our church, we work in our community – so much of life is made up of work. And yet, the alarming message of these verses is that toil is trivial. And yet we find so much of our identity in our work. One of the first questions we ask when meeting a new friend is – so, what do you do for work? Not only do we find so much of our identity in our work, but we also long for permanence in our work. So, a few weeks ago I mentioned how pointless it was to mow the lawn because as soon as you cut it, it begins to grow again. This expressed the frustration of that type of work having no permanence. We long for our work to actually accomplish something that sticks and stays and does some true and real good.

But we have quickly realized that this isn’t going to be true and so we give in to the hopelessness of trivial toil. We see no hope for making any sense out of our work and so like the County Sewer Employee said – “I dig the ditch to get money to buy the food to get strength to dig the ditch!” Or, we work harder so that we can earn more money and buy more stuff and enjoy more that this world has to offer. We get the higher degree so that we can have the higher paying job and buy more of the toys to play with on the weekend. It’s all a cyclical and pointless existence. Much like what is expressed in the lyrics of a 1965 hit single which said:

“Up every mornin’ just to keep a job
I gotta fight my way through the hustling mob
Sounds of the city poundin’ in my brain
While another day goes down the drain.”¹

¹ As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*; Preach the Word Commentary, pg. 67.

This is especially dangerous because we can miss this truth about work. The reality is we can be working with great efficiency and with a hard work ethic and we can be succeeding in this working world, and we can be doing it all with a worthless worldview and not even realize it. So, you might really enjoy your work and might see nothing that is truly vain about it at all. Well, these verses in Ecclesiastes 2 are meant to disillusion of that worthless worldview. They tear down our wrong view of work, in order to put us in search of meaningful work in this world.

Ecclesiastes 2 verse 18 says this – *read 2:18-26*.

If anyone can write these words with complete intellectual and experiential honesty – it is Solomon. No one has been more successful in his work than Solomon. No one has ever worked in this world with so much wisdom as Solomon. No one has made so many gains in earthly possessions and personal enjoyments through work than Solomon. No one has worked at his toil with more skill or more precision or more hard work or more sincerity of heart than Solomon. If anyone could find lasting meaning and gain in work then it would be this man. But his conclusion in these verses is that Toil under the sun is trivial. The key word in this text is “toil” and it points to the dark side of work – the side which is grievous and unfulfilling. The Hebrew word is used 11 times in these 9 verses. The key idea is that this toil is trivial, or worthless. It is vanity. This is the phrase that is repeated 4 times in these verses which helps to mark off in the text the different points about toil that are being made. His first point about the triviality of toil is found in verses 18-21. Toil is trivial because death comes.

I. Toil is Trivial Because Death Comes – vs. 18-21

- a. Solomon has taken a long hard look at all of the work he set out to do in his life, and his conclusion in verse 18 is that he hated all his toil. There was not some of it that he loved and some that he hated, but he hated all of it, because it was all worthless and vain. It was worthless because he was forced to leave all of the profit of his labors to someone else. And there was no way to guarantee that this person would be as wise as Solomon was. And in fact, he wasn't. We read in 1 Kings 12 of Solomon's son, Rehoboam taking over his father's kingdom and losing 10/12ths of it because of his folly. The very thing Solomon feared as he looked ahead after his death was the very thing that did happen. These verses drip with the language of hard work, and verses 1-11 described all that he acquired through that hard work, but now it was all going to be lost upon his death and given into the hands of a fool.
- b. In verse 20, he gives his heart to despair over all of his toil. First he hates his toil, and now he is despairing because of his toil. The cause of this despair is the fact of someone inheriting all of the profit from his work without having had to do any of the work. One man does the work and another man gets the profit from the work. Solomon enjoyed it for a time, but he knew that death was coming. So, if he worked hard and toiled day in and day out so that he could gain the comforts and possessions of this life – well, then death was the great equalizer. Because no matter how long he lived or how much he made or how successful he was

through his work – death would still come. And as the old adage goes – you don't pull a U-haul trailer behind a Hearse. You can't take it with you. That is a biblical thought by the way (not the U-Haul and Hearse part, but the fact that you can't take it with you).

- i. ⁴ "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! ⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah ⁶ Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather! (Ps. 39:4-6 ESV)
- ii. ¹⁰ For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others. (Ps. 49:10 ESV)
- c. This makes our toil in this life under the sun trivial because in the end death comes and you leave all of your stuff here. All the accolades and special recognition, all the degrees, all the specification and qualifications, all of the inventions and innovations, all of the money and possessions, all of the honor and esteem from others – it all is left at death. Mankind has been desperate to deal with death ever since the curse of death was pronounced in the Garden. Some have even made their labors in this life an avenue to be memorialized well after they are gone. So, think of the ancient pyramids in Egypt. These pharaohs would employ thousands of workmen and decades of time and unbelievable amounts of material – and all for what? To live on as a memorial of them long after they were gone. It was their way of dealing with death. They spent most of their lives preparing for the days when they would no longer be alive. And it is all for vanity! It is all worthless and a great evil because death comes and all of our labor is forgotten and our profit from the labor is passed on to someone else.

II. Toil is Trivial Because Profit Flees – vs. 22-23

- a. This plays into the second point of why toil is trivial. In verses 22-23 Solomon describes the lack of lasting profit from toil. It is trivial because any profit that is actually gained from that toil flees. It is never permanent. It is always flying away.
- b. Verse 22 begins with the guiding question of the preacher's sermon – what profit is there in all of this? What is the actual gain that we attain in all of our labor? His work is cursed and therefore full of vexation and sorrow, and his work is never done so he can never truly rest from it all. No matter what your occupation is – whether you are a stay at home mom or company CEO or a worker on a production line – there are unique challenges and stresses and pressures from your job which never seem to go away. Your work is harder than it should be and it never accomplishes all that you hope it would. Your labors fall short in making the difference you had hoped, and you get to get up tomorrow and do it all over again. And so you lay in bed at night worrying about an undone job from today, or about a looming project facing you tomorrow.
- c. Notice the internal and the external effort in verse 22. Man toils – that is the external struggle of work – and he toils with a striving of heart – that is the internal effort of work. And then in verse 23 there is the corresponding vanities to

this internal and external efforts. So the external effort of toil is matched with sorrow and vexation. And the internal effort of a striving heart is matched with a heart that does not rest at night. And then notice how long this will go on – the beginning of verse 23 – all his days. And notice how pervasive this internal and external sorrow of work is – his days are full of it! And so he fittingly concludes with his familiar phrase – This also is vanity!

- d. The point here is that profit is never truly gained by all of our work. No man or woman's work is ever done or complete or finished. We have never truly finished anything our entire lives. We have never done something so perfectly and completely that it will never fail or falter or so that it will never have to be done again. So, what do you actually have from all the hard work you have done in your life? Turn, and honestly face your life and ponder this question. What have you actually gained by all of your external and internal toil? Apart from God and the Gospel – it is all vanity and a chasing after the wind. Nothing is truly gained or completely done or firmly established. It is all fleeting and temporary and therefore worthless.

III. **Toil is Trivial Because Sin Curses – vs. 24-26**

- a. But in case you are not yet convinced, there is one more reason why toil is trivial according to the preacher. Toil is trivial because sin curses. Sin has cursed our work and made it full of sorrow and vexation and ultimately worthless. This is the conclusion at the end of verse 26. To the sinner God has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This is the sad and worthless business of work in a sin-cursed world. You gather and collect and labor and toil and stress and it is all for naught because you simply pass it on to someone else at your death. They amass something that they cannot keep.
- b. The sinner has removed God from the picture as the Creator of life and the designer of work. They have gone their own way and they have taken the normal things of life and instead of enjoying them, they have crushed them under their expectations of meaning and purpose. So, the sinner takes food and drink and pleasure and work and wisdom and presses upon each one their expectations for ultimate purpose and meaning. They make the gift the god who directs and interprets and grants purpose. And the lot in life for the sinner is that they will never be able to squeeze ultimate purpose out of work because they have squeezed God out of their work. Once you remove a right view of God from life you take away all true meaning and purpose and you thwart true enjoyment and pleasure in the small things. This sin's curse which makes toil trivial is thankfully met by the Gospel's cure.
- c. So, I drew your attention to the end of verse 26, but there is great hope given in verses 24-25 and the first part of verse 26. These are the first positive words in this preacher's sermon. He has disillusioned us up to this point so that he can now re-shape our worldview. And these verses are like an oasis in the desert pointing us to a true and lasting answer to all of the vanity. The message of Ecclesiastes is not just that everything is vain and hopeless and worthless, but that it doesn't have to be this way. Life under the sun, absent of a right view of

God renders life worthless and vain, but when we see God rightly and we accept all things as coming from Him, then everything starts to make sense and have purpose. We don't have to give in to despair over life because of the message of this book, but rather, in studying it we can begin to see why everything matters and thereby find true meaning and joy.

- d. The glimpse of positive hope we see in verses 24-25 is that the Preacher turns his heart to accept from God what has been allotted to him in this life. Instead of looking to these things to make meaning, he looks to God to make meaning of them. So, in verse 24 it is a good thing for a person to eat and drink and see the good in his toil. He can do this and should do this because it is a gift from God's good hand. In other words, man's work makes sense and can be enjoyed only when it is seen in light of God's work. For, as he says in verse 25, who can eat or have enjoyment in these things apart from God? Then in verse 26 this principle is drawn out to its results. So, the one who pleases God is the one who receives these normal things in life (like eating and drinking and work) as being from God. They receive them in faith believing that God is good in giving them, and that God has a plan in asking us to do them as part of everyday life. To this person, who by faith receives these regular gifts as being from the Lord and then delights in them – to that person God gives spiritual gifts – the gifts of wisdom and knowledge and joy. So, when you receive work as being from God and you view it in a God-fearing way with a constant God-consciousness, then you will be blessed by the Lord with wisdom and knowledge and joy. You will have the wisdom to work well and the knowledge to use God's gifts and the joy in using these gifts in His world. These three gifts are not things you can get on your own, but things that are given to the one who pleases God.
- e. I think this will make more sense if we see it in relation to the events of the Garden of Eden. I have been telling you throughout this series on Ecclesiastes that Solomon's life and his message in this book is an extrapolation of the Fall, the Curse, and the promised redemption of Genesis 3. And so, this passage is no exception to that. Yet again we see the undeniable similarities between the Garden realities and Solomon's life and experience.
 - i. So, just think back to the Garden – you might be helped to turn to Genesis 3 while we work through this. Genesis 2 tells us of God's work in creating man and woman and placing them in a Garden. This Garden was God's doing – he planted it and caused all of the trees which were pleasant to the sight and good for food to spring up everywhere in the Garden. And yet, there was still work to do in the Garden. God had made the Garden and planted the Garden and caused the Garden to grow, but then God made man and put him in the Garden and told him to tend it and to keep it. We know from Genesis 1 that this means he is to exercise dominion over it and use his God-given wisdom, knowledge, and skill to make the Garden an even better place to live. Notice how man's work flows out of and is dependent upon God's work. God's work precedes mankind's work, and mankind's work only has purpose and meaning

because God has already done His work. He gives Adam a job to do that only makes sense and only finds any fulfilling purpose when it is done according to God's command. The result of mankind's working according to God's ways and in God's appointed system is that God and man are pleased. God's Garden is being tended by Adam and Eve who are living in harmony and enjoyment and oneness with each other and with God. Adam and Eve were daily receiving God's good design of their role in His creation. They were exercising dominion in the Garden and they were tending it and keeping it, and it was producing for them everything they needed and they were full of joy as they experienced deep fellowship with God as he walked with them in the cool of the evening.

- ii. But then in chapter 3 the Serpent enters onto the scene and he speaks words of deception and temptation to Eve. He questions God's Word which was their directive for their work and for the enjoyment of their work. The Serpent deceived Eve into abandoning a Fear of God which was believing His Word above all others and which was walking by faith rather than by sight. And so the Serpent re-interpreted the reality and basically told them that God was keeping something really good from them by forbidding them from eating the fruit of this one tree. He promised them increased pleasure through increased and special knowledge. He tells them that if they eat the fruit they will be like God and they will know good and evil, and inherently this means they will enjoy life more than they do now.
- iii. Verse 6 is the key verse in Genesis 3 for our purposes this morning. It says – "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." The result of the serpent's deception of Eve is that this once forbidden fruit now appeals to her so much that she disobeys God and takes it and eats it. Remember that the fruit is from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And verse 6 tells us that she saw the fruit as able to make her wise, and the fruit became pleasing to her. Do you see how these three things mirror the promise of Ecclesiastes 2:26? To the one who pleases God he give them wisdom, and knowledge, and joy. But the serpent's deception of Eve took her from receiving those things from God to now taking her own path to wisdom and knowledge and joy.
- iv. And what was the result? Did the eating of the fruit give them what Satan promised? No – in fact, the very things that were deceptively promised were the very things which were lost. They increased in their knowledge of evil and in the shame of sin, but they lost ground in their knowledge of good things and in their wisdom to enjoy and use the good things God had given and in their enjoyment of all of God's good gifts. They were cursed because of their sin and their work now became more difficult and more painful. This is what rebellion against God and His good design

does. It takes us from receiving God's good gifts of the simplest things of life and it turns it on its head. In rebellion we abandon God's purposeful design for our work and we make it about ourselves and about gaining all these things for us – and when we do we lose all true meaning and purpose and joy.

- v. This was Solomon's experience. He had abandoned a right and full view of God in all of life. He no longer thought of his work in relationship to the God of Heaven. Rather he thought of work as an avenue to make meaning and to create joy and to exercise his great wisdom for his own personal gain. And what he found was that this made work a toilsome triviality. It turned something that is supposed to be full of purpose and delight into something that was empty and vain. This is the curse of sinful rebellion. When we rebel against God and go our own way then everything loses its meaning and purpose and value, and therefore its enjoyment.
- f. Maybe work has become this way for you. It has turned to complete drudgery and it feels like a hopeless and endless gerbil's wheel that you have to just keep spinning to keep life going. The crucial question here is not "what do you do for work?" or "what do you gain out of work?" but the right question is "why do you work?" What is it that will compel you to get out of bed tomorrow morning to head to your first task of the day. What will continue to motivate you at 4pm tomorrow afternoon? Why will you do the dishes after dinner tomorrow night? Why will you mow the lawn on Tuesday? Why will you dust and mop and send those emails and fix the tractor and make those phone calls and work on that project? Why?
- g. The good news this morning is that what we curse in our rebellious sin, Christ redeems in his glorious Gospel. So, there is a way back to the Pre-Fall enjoyment of work under God. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden we can enjoy and purposely fulfil the tasks that God has given us to do in life. And the key to getting there in any moment of any day is to be brought under God's good rule of our life through Jesus Christ. As this relates to work let me point you to three strokes of God's redemptive grace.
 - i. *In Christ* the work we couldn't do is finished
 - 1. This is the glorious good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only in Christ is the work of redemption complete. You might think this has nothing to do with your workaday world reality, but it has everything to do with it. I think this is part of why busyness has become such a virtue in our society. We are trying to prove that we are worth saving. We are trying to earn our keep and show our value. We are trying to let God and everyone else know that we are better than others and so we should be redeemed.
 - 2. But our only hope of redemption from our sinful rebellion is the finished work of Christ upon the Christ. Those precious words from our Lord's mouth – *tetelestai* – it is finished! There is nothing left undone for the salvation of your soul. It is now to be received,

not earned. By faith you must look to Jesus and live. He became a curse for you so that you could become blessed eternally in Him. All of your work in this life is built upon this sure foundation of Gospel truth. Because Christ has finished His work, if you are in Christ by grace through faith, you can now work with true meaning and purpose in the most menial tasks of life.

ii. *Through Christ* we are redeemed to work with a purpose

1. This is the next Gospel stroke of grace – through Christ we are redeemed to work with a purpose. So, because He has finished His work, our work can now have meaning. Without redemption from sin our work will be vain and hopeless and pointless. But with redemption through Christ we now work with purpose.
2. We see this so clearly in one of the greatest Gospel passages of the NT. Ephesians 2:8-10:
 - a. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10 ESV)
3. God has done a work of grace through Christ and has now created us in Christ for good works. Our work – even the washing of the dishes and the mowing of the lawn kind of work – our work now has a purpose and that is to glorify God by receiving what He has appointed for us to do in His world.

iii. *For Christ* we can now labor in satisfied joy

1. The last stroke of Gospel grace as it pertains to work is – For Christ we can now labor in satisfied joy. The key to joy in work is that it is *for Christ*. Being redeemed by Christ we are now aware that God has planned good works for us to accomplish. This is not just the good works of obviously spiritual tasks – like evangelism or discipleship or encouragement or bearing someone else’s burden. No, the redemption of Christ is so thorough that even the most mundane and normal of tasks is now infused with eternally God-glorifying purpose.
2. Turn with me to Colossians 3 to see some of the most mercy-soaked verses in the Scripture. You ought to be so thankful that these verses exist. Having defended and explained Gospel truth in the first 2 chapters of Colossians, Paul now turns to very practical instruction to teach how these truths impact the bare necessities of life. He says this in verse 22. (*Read 3:22-24*)
3. Notice that the cornerstone of a right view of work is a fear of the Lord. These slaves are to obey in everything, not simply when the

boss is looking but truly and completely in all things with a sincere heart because they fear the Lord. In other words – like in Ecclesiastes 2 – they are to receive from the Lord the work they have been given to do. And they are to do it unto the Lord and not unto men. Their gain and their purpose is defined by serving the Lord Jesus Christ, not by looking for significance of gain from others.

4. Beloved – he is talking to slaves who take out trash and clean up messes and cook dinners and chop firewood and sweep the floor. These are the lowest of the low – the basest of the base of human activity. And Christ redeems us to such an extent that even these things can have eternally significant purpose. We serve and we work for Christ and not simply for others. Our work now has permanence and meaning because it is done to show Christ's glory through our submission to Him. Our work glorifies Christ as we follow His example and bring order out of disorder and as we then bless others around us. If we do it for them we will lose our purpose because they will not always notice nor will they always be grateful. And if we do it for ourselves while doing it for them we will rob our work of its true purpose and we will infuse it with a purpose it can never truly attain. But, if we do our work for Christ then we can labor in satisfied joy knowing that our perfect Master has given us this task to do for His glory and for the blessing of others.
5. You see, the Gospel frees you to return to the pre-Fall enjoyment of work which produces fellowship with God and joy in work and the blessing of others.

Conclusion: So, I ask again – why will you work this week? Will you work for the glory of Christ as one redeemed by His great grace, or will you work as one rebelling against God seeking to find meaning and purpose and joy in the gift rather than in the Giver? Let's pray.