

All Alone With Your Greed

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

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Those who are filled with greed are among the loneliest people on earth. For the life of one who is filled with greed is all about self rather than about others. Those who are greedy may throw big parties with many guests and may have people around them all of the time, and yet be all alone. Why? Because those who are greedy use people rather than loving people. Those who are filled with greed don't want to make commitments to people, because such commitments take them away from pursuing their work, their ambitions, and their dreams. The greedy don't have time for family and friends. They're too consumed with their own goals to be bothered with loving relationships of family and friends. Such relationships are really a distraction and hindrance to their own work. A person of greed becomes a slave to his/her work (a workaholic). Rather than using the possessions of this life to serve God and others, he/she uses God and people to serve his/her possessions or his/her desire for possessions.

Dear ones, are you enslaved by your greed to possess what others have, so that God, family, brothers and sisters in Christ, and neighbors don't really hold a significant place in your life? Although it is true that relationships with others cannot MAKE us happy, let us not minimize the importance of our family and friends as a means to enjoying the goodness of God. Dear ones, the joy of the Lord which you seek will not be yours apart from loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself. One who is all wrapped up in himself is a very small, lonely package, as we shall see from our text today in Ecclesiastes.

The main points from our text are these: (1) The Misery of Being Alone (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8); and (2) The Reward of Family and Friends (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

I. The Misery of Being Alone (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8).

A. Solomon turns from discussing how our envy of others (and other's envy of us) is a potential hindrance to our joy in the Lord (in Ecclesiastes 4:4-6) to now discussing how our greed of wealth, fame, and pleasure in this life lead us to a solitary existence where family and friends have little or no importance at all (in Ecclesiastes 4:7-12).

B. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 4:7: "Then I returned" (or "Then I turned again") to consider another vain and empty course which men take in their lives under the sun, in order to find a lasting joy and happiness. Although related to the envy just discussed in the previous section (Ecclesiastes 4:4-6), there is a shift in the present passage to how our envy leads to greed, which leads to solitude, which leads to misery.

C. The effect of envy in our lives is to think we do not need God or others (according to Ecclesiastes 4:8). All we need is ourselves. All we need are our dreams, our work, our fame, our fortune, and our fun. And whoever we may need to use to get what we want is not so much viewed as a dear family member, brother or sister in Christ, or friend, but as an object to reach our goals (like a pawn in a chess game). The effect of envy in our lives, dear ones, is to make us takers rather than givers. God and others are only significant to us, if they can serve some purpose in reaching our own self-centered ambitions.

1. Here we see presented to us a solitary person: "There is one alone, and there is not a second." Solomon says in effect, "There is one by himself and not another person with him." He (or she as the case may be) has no one to stand with him, to walk with him, or to commune with him in any meaningful way.

He has no spouse, no children, no brother, and no friend (and even if he does have a spouse, children, brother, or friend, these relationships are all so superficial). What a pitiful state in which this person finds himself. He is all alone in this world. But why is this man all by himself? Is it because he is so poor? No, not necessarily. Is it because he is a scandalous criminal? No, that is not the issue. Is it because he lost his true love and became so hurt that he stopped trying to love and live any longer? Nothing is said to that effect. Dear ones, here is the sad and pitiful answer. He is all alone because HE WANTS TO BE ALONE. He does not want a wife, children, brother, or friend. How could this be? Why would one want to be all by himself/herself?

2. We find a description of this person who is all alone in Ecclesiastes 4:8. The description of this man tells us why HE WANTS TO BE ALONE.

a. First, there is no end of all his labor (“yet is there no end of all his labor”). His whole life consists in his work. Therefore, he has no time (or better, takes little or no time) to spend with God or others. He is a slave to his work. Work to this greedy person is not viewed as a gift from God in order to serve the Lord and to provide for himself and others, but as his gift to himself in order to serve himself and his own dreams. Work serves no higher purpose than to promote one’s own agenda of fame, fortune, and fun. When this is the case in our lives, work then becomes a big game where we are always trying to outmaneuver this person or that person in order to make ourselves look better. Dear ones, although we must be wise and carefully consider how our decisions affect others, people ought not to be USED by us, but LOVED by us in all that we do and say. Using people will not issue in the joy of the Lord, because it is disobedience to the command of God to love your neighbor as yourself. To use people is to think in terms of what is best for you alone. To love people is to think in terms of what is best for others, according to God’s holy commandments. Dear ones, are you a user or a lover of people? Are you a taker or a giver? You will be all alone even in the midst of a multitude of people if you are a user and a taker. You will be a solitary person (even if you have a family), if you don’t consciously work for the glory of God and for the good of others. Yes, we should work hard. Yes, we should seek to work our way up the ladder in order to improve our skills and abilities, and to achieve promotions at work. Yes, there is a lawful use of work that promotes a certain sense of accomplishment and well-being in oneself. But as we have noted in a previous sermon, when we spell JOY—JESUS, OTHERS, and YOU—there is meaning and purpose to our lives, there is an enduring joy; for we understand that we have been created and redeemed to serve Christ first and foremost. Our work (whether it is work as a student, work as a housewife, work as a computer analyst, work as a doctor or nurse, work as a cashier or meat-cutter) is first and foremost to serve a higher purpose in serving Christ, and then to serve a subordinate purpose of serving others and ourselves. The Apostle Paul made this so clear in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: Read it. Whereas, when we invert that order and life consists in serving YOU, OTHERS, and then JESUS, our lives will be as meaningless as the word YOJ. Dear ones, thank God that the Lord Jesus was a GIVER even to the point of laying down His life for unworthy, defiled, and ungodly sinners like you and me (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 5:2).

b. Not only is this person in Ecclesiastes 4:8 all alone because he is a slave to his work, but second, he is alone because he is filled with greed (“neither is his eye satisfied with his riches”). What drives this man to be the workaholic that he is, is not the need to serve God and others, but is rather the desire to have more, and more, and more. He has more than enough riches for his mouth and for his belly, for his back, his arms, his legs and his feet. But he does not have enough riches for his eye. His eye cannot be satisfied. For he always sees and wants so much more than what he actually has. Those who are filled with greed are people who find it difficult to enjoy others. For others have what the greedy person wants. Other people remind the greedy person of what he does not have, but covets. It is not only difficult for the greedy person to enjoy others, but it is also difficult for others to be around the greedy person. For he is one filled with discontentment about his own circumstances and with complaint about other people who have what he wants. Dear ones, if we find that people seem to avoid us, if we find that we are not invited very often to the

homes of others, is it possible that our discontentment, our self-pity, and our grumbling against the good providence of God has isolated us and pushed us away from others? We all fall into these sins to varying degrees, but what are we going to do when we find ourselves in this condition? Continue to wallow in our own misery, or turn our thoughts to all that we have in Christ and in this world for which to be thankful? The choice is yours and mine. Greed leads you to feeling all alone and withdrawing from others. Thankfulness and contentment with what God has given to you lead you to serve God and others and to enjoy the family and friends God has given to you (2 Corinthians 6:9-10).

c. Not only is this person all alone because he is a slave to his work and because he is filled with greed that is never satisfied, but thirdly he is also all alone because he considers himself to be self-sufficient (“neither saith he, For whom do I labor, and bereave myself of good?”). He needs no one else—whether God or man. There is a good sense in which each of us should not depend upon others to feed us, clothe us, and provide for us (and that is, if we are physically able to do so). We should not be lazy sluggards expecting others to care for us, rather than working hard to provide for ourselves (“If any would not work, neither let him eat” 2 Thessalonians 3:10). However, that does not mean that we should consider ourselves to be self-sufficient, so that we need no one else in our lives. Dear ones, only God is self-sufficient. Only God needs no one else, because only God has no needs. He is perfectly happy in Himself, perfectly content in Himself, perfectly strong in Himself, perfectly wise in Himself, and perfectly satisfied in Himself. So why did God create the world, angels, and man? Not for any need He had, for there was always perfect communion among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created all things simply to show forth the greatness of His power, wisdom, love, goodness, mercy, grace, justice and holiness. Now for us to show forth our own glory is sin, for we are God’s creation and in so doing we rob God of His glory. But for God (who is the Holy Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Savior) to manifest His glory is not only not sin, but is the greatest good possible. When we think, speak, and act as though we need no one but ourselves, we act as though we are God. The person spoken of here in Ecclesiastes 4:8 is alone because he does not consider his work to be for anyone else but for himself alone. I have seen people withdraw into a kind of cocoon of self-sufficiency because they have been hurt by others. They will make it on their own because others have failed them, and their defense mechanism is to isolate themselves from close relationships. But dear ones, we are sinners and we live among sinners. We are all going to fail one another, or fail to meet the expectations of one another in one way or another. The answer to this problem is not some isolated sense of self-sufficiency, but forgiving others, serving others, and loving others. It is because we are all sinners that we need one another as family, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and as friends. If anyone ever could have isolated himself from people due to their wicked treatment of Him, it was Christ. He was no sinner, and yet He was persecuted, rejected, slandered, mocked, beaten, crowned with a crown of thorns, and crucified. Rather than isolating Himself from others due to the way He was treated, He humbled Himself and served others by laying down His life for others. Herein consists the misery of the one who is alone. Dear ones, no one but the Lord Jesus Christ can MAKE you happy. But the Lord brings others into your life, in order that you may love and serve them and make your joy full. Do you USE the people God has brought into your life, or do you LOVE and SERVE them? Do you merely TAKE from others, or do you GIVE of yourself to others? Do you HIDE yourself from others because you are so busy with your dreams and work, or do you REACH OUT to others with the love of Jesus Christ? The joy of the Lord comes not from isolating yourself from others, but from involving yourself in the lives, needs, and cares of others, not from being rich toward yourself, but from being rich toward God (Luke 12:21). To be alone due to slavery to a job, due to greed, or due to self-sufficiency is vanity and emptiness. It leads not to joy but to misery.

II. The Reward of Family and Friends (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

A. Solomon now teaches us that joy in this life comes from understanding this Divine principle:

“Two are better than one.” Being alone in this world is not good. From the very beginning of creation and before man fell into sin, God said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). God may grant a special gift of celibacy to a man or to a woman (as he did to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8). But even in such a case, it is still not good that a man or a woman be all alone and isolated from family, brothers and sisters in Christ, and friends. God made us to be sociable beings, who find great joy in loving and serving one another.

B. The reason why “two are better than one” (according to Solomon) is that “they have a good reward for their labor” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). In other words, there is a mutual benefit to those who work together, who commune together, who worship together, who discuss together, who dream together, and who play together. There is wisdom in the counsel of more than just yourself (whether it be in a marriage, among members of the church, in a committee at work, or within the civil government). The Lord Jesus sent out His disciples two by two, not only because the truth of God is confirmed by two or three witnesses, but also because they would derive great benefit from the comfort and encouragement of a fellow brother in Christ. The rest of the text spells out more specifically the various ways in which you are rewarded by God, as you join with others, rather than standing aloof by yourself as an island.

1. There is a reward when one falls—he has one to lift him up (Ecclesiastes 4:10). This is true both literally and figuratively.

a. Literally, when you are in some physical danger, would you rather be all alone or have someone with you to help or to call for help?

b. Figuratively, when you fall into some spiritual danger, would you rather be all alone in your guilt, misery, and constant struggle with that sin, or would you rather have someone give you their hand to help pull you out of that spiritual pit into which you have fallen? We are members of the same body of Christ. We do not shoot our wounded that fall into sin. We seek to heal them of their wounds (Galatians 6:1-2). We are so quick to come to the aid of those who are in physical danger, but how quick are we to come to the aid of those who are in spiritual danger?

2. There is a reward when one is cold—he is warmed by the other (Ecclesiastes 4:11). This likewise is true literally and figuratively.

a. Literally, in a day and age where there were no electric blankets and no central heating in all of the bedrooms, the heat that came from a wife or a husband, or from a brother or sister was such a blessing. The same is still true on a cold night.

b. However, figuratively this is also true. For it is the heat and warmth of affection, correction, exhortation, and zeal that we receive from one another that often times melts our cold and indifferent hearts and keeps us going in performing our duties as Christians (Hebrews 10:24). How many times would we have fainted along the way, if we were not warmed with that letter of encouragement or that word of hope given to us by a wife or husband, by a parent or child, by a brother or sister in Christ? Two are better than one.

3. Finally, there is a reward when we are attacked by others—two can better withstand the attack than one. Again this is true literally and figuratively.

a. Literally, it is funny how as a child I would tease my younger brothers, but let someone else tease them or try to hurt them, and I was there to defend them. One of the benefits of having a quiver full of children is that you can take them to the gate to face your adversaries (Psalm 127:5). I doubt that too many people wanted to mess around with Jacob, who had 12 sons. There is safety and protection against our adversaries when others who love us stand with us.

b. Figuratively, the same is true in the Christian life. Our Solemn League and Covenant (1643) calls us to defend one another in the Cause of Christ against all adversaries to the truth. We are not to attack one another, but rather to defend one another. Even where there is sin in our lives, we do

not attack fellow Covenanters as if we were enemies. We lovingly exhort and admonish with tears, in order that Satan (our great enemy) may not overwhelm us.

4. Solomon closes with a proverbial saying, “a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.” A single cord all by itself may be snapped when pulled, but take a second cord and a third cord and wrap them all around the single cord and it will not be broken. So likewise, dear ones, we will not be broken if we maintain and promote our love for one another in the common truth of Jesus Christ for which we stand. Let us thank God that although we may be small, we are not alone. The Lord has blessed us with spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters so that we might not fall, so that we might be warm, and so that we might be defended against the attacks of the enemy. Thus, our joy in the Lord will be made full.

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