

“The Sin of Idleness”
Ecclesiastes 4:5-7
(Preached at Trinity, June 25, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citation will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Solomon continues to make observations of conditions in this world. Remember, Solomon's chief focus in Ecclesiastes is life without God. In a world without God Solomon gives only one conclusion:
Ecclesiastes 1:2 NAU - "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
2. As we entered **Chapter 4** turned our attention upon all of the oppression that exists upon the earth. As I pointed out last time, many people find it difficult to reconcile the existence of an all-powerful, all good, sovereign God and the presence of such suffering upon the earth. How do you reconcile tornadoes and hurricanes? How do you explain the existence of disease and famine? How are we to understand all of the evil and oppression upon the earth.
3. Far more troubling, how are we to understand these things in a world without God's sovereign precision?
Solomon concludes:
Ecclesiastes 4:3 NAU - "But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun." It would be better to have never been born at all than to see all the evil done under the sun.
4. Now Solomon briefly again returns to the topic of the futility of our labor upon the earth.
 - A. First of all, work is often the result of rivalry between neighbors, each trying to outdo the other. This is how we live. We want the bigger car or the bigger house to impress others. It only serves to stir the envy and ill-will of our neighbor. His neighbor despises that he is prospering and doing well. Such was the ill-will that led to Cain taking the life of his brother, Abel. Or Saul's insatiable desire to kill David.
What a wretched condition—to labor and give oneself to increasing his wealth only to be despised for your efforts. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”
 - B. Solomon supplies us with a response. If work is motivated by pride and envy the solution is to quit working. Jump off the treadmill. There are homeless people who have taken this outlook. But this causes greater problems. The man who is lazy and slothful brings nothing but grief upon himself. He has nothing to eat but his own flesh.
5. Solomon concludes that labor must include contentment:
Ecclesiastes 4:6 NAU - "One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind."

- A. In other words, how blessed is the man who labors quietly and enjoys the fruit of his labors. Paul also wrote of this principle.
2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 NAU - "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread."
- B. The "two hands" describes greed and gluttony which is striving after the wind.
- C. **Verse 6** may also be promoting the sin of idleness. It's better to have one's hands full of rest than full of labor.
6. Solomon is contrasting hard work versus idleness.
- A. Hard work is honorable. Blessed is the man who finds rest and contentment in his labors. However, it is striving after wind to fill your fists full and still not be satisfied. If your goods are only a means of satisfying your lusts.
- B. The lazy man will only find his hand empty and his life in need. The Bible has much to say about the sin of idleness. Solomon's message is clear. The lazy man will be in great want.
Ecclesiastes 4:5 NAU - "The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh."
 It's a picture of self-cannibalism.
 Matthew Henry – "Idleness is a sin that is its own punishment."¹
 Douglas O'Donnell – "The grotesque imagery of self-cannibalism, of a foolish man sitting with his hands clasped together and gnawing on his knuckles illustrates that the one who refuses to work will only destroy himself. His sloth is slow suicide."²
7. As always, we must strive to maintain a Biblical worldview. This worldview will almost always be contrary to the prevailing mindset of our culture, but it must always obey God rather than men.
- I. Idleness is often seen as a virtue today.
- A. The welfare state promotes idleness
1. Instead of a temporary lifeline, for many it is a way of life.
 2. It is systemic injustice. It involves taking from those who are engaged in productive work and giving to those who will not work. It actually promotes idleness. Never should our mercy promote idleness.
- B. People long for their retirement.
1. Modern retirement is systemic idleness.
 2. Much of our thinking about retirement have been influenced by the Social Security Act of 1935. The idea was to provide relief for those who could not support themselves in their old age. Workers became eligible for benefits at age 65 which at the time was older than the life-expectancy.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1037.

² Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 98.

3. Americans are living longer today than ever before. We enjoy better health even in our latter years. Yet, we still think we should retire in our 50-60's. A person born in 1995 can expect to live 35 years longer than a person born in 1900. In 2016 there were 82,000 Americans over the age of 100. By 2025 it is projected to reach 120,000.
 4. Today, we still think a person has the right to retire at age 65 even though he can easily live another 20 years in good health. Some plan retirement even earlier than this.
 5. What I'm saying is highly offensive today because we have been so thoroughly indoctrinated. Few teach this and most modern Christians are more than willing to follow the status quo and follow the teaching they want to hear. Modern retirement is not a Biblical principle.
 - a. Immediately, someone will bring up the Levitical priesthood. **Numbers 8:23-25 NAU** - "Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,²⁴ "This is what *applies* to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall enter to perform service in the work of the tent of meeting.²⁵ "But at the age of fifty years they shall retire from service in the work and not work any more."
 - b. This passage doesn't teach retirement as we know it today--ceasing from all labor and living the rest of our life in leisure. Rather, it recognizes the aging of our bodies and our changing labors. The Levites transitioned to assisting and mentoring the younger priests. They didn't sit in the door of their tents passing the time in idleness. **Numbers 8:26 NAU** - "They may, however, assist their brothers in the tent of meeting, to keep an obligation, but they *themselves* shall do no work. Thus you shall deal with the Levites concerning their obligations."
 - c. Work is the God appointed purpose for man. It is a creation ordinance. Work is a source of human identity. For a man to lack purposeful work is by implication dehumanizing.
 - d. If work is an integral part of our humanity how can we say that older people can do without it? Could this be one of the reasons we see so much depression and unhappiness among the elderly who have ceased to be productive?
- C. What do we see in the Biblical examples?
1. Noah was 600 years old when he completed the ark. Even after the flood he became a farmer. **Genesis 9:20 NAU** - "Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard."
 2. Jacob was over 70 years old when he began to labor for Laban. He worked for him until he was past 90.
 3. Moses was eighty years old when he began to lead the children of Israel through the wilderness which would be a 40-year affair.
 4. Caleb was 85 years old when he went to war to conquer the land appointed to him. **See Joshua 14:11-13**
 5. Joshua labored until his death at the age of 110.

II. Some Biblical principles for your life.

- A. Resolve in your heart that you will work for the rest of your life.
1. Many may find this a shocking statement – this is God’s plan for your life.
 2. But what about the leisure of retirement? It is unbiblical.
 - a. God calls sloth sin
Proverbs 20:4 NAU - "The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, So he begs during the harvest and has nothing."
2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 NAU - "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies."
 - b. Paul described our pleasure-seeking world
2 Timothy 3:1-4 NAU - "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ² For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,"
 - c. Besides the sin of homosexuality, God tells us He also destroyed Sodom for their sin of idleness
Ezekiel 16:49-50 NAU - "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ "Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw *it*."
 3. Repent of any notions you may have that work is a bad thing. That is sinful. God has created you to work. Work is good and honoring to God. Solomon knew this.
Ecclesiastes 2:24 NAU - "There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God."
- B. Make wise plans for the unexpected
1. We must lay up resources for the future in the event that our health declines in our later years prohibiting us from working.
 2. We should take advantage of our “harvest years” to guard against becoming a burden to our children.
Proverbs 6:6-8 NAU - "Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, ⁷ Which, having no chief, Officer or ruler, ⁸ Prepares her food in the summer *And* gathers her provision in the harvest."
- C. Be wise stewards in order to leave your children an inheritance
1. Modern retirement is the systematic spending of your children’s inheritance.
 2. It is a good principle to strengthen the family by passing resources from generation to generation – this is why inheritance tax is so anti-family.

3. The Apostle Paul affirmed the principle of inheritance
2 Corinthians 12:14 NAU - "Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children."
4. The bumper stickers that read, "I'm spending my children's inheritance" is an example of our godless, self-indulging society.

III. Two more issues with retirement.

- A. What if I plan on quitting my job to give myself to Christian ministry?
 1. First, you should be doing that anyway – We must never postpone our Christian service until a more opportune time. It is presuming that time will come.
 2. Unless you feel a direct call from God to give yourself to full-time Christian service you should keep your job.
 - a. It is wrong to plan to retire from your labors so that you can do Christian work on the side.
 - b. It is certainly wrong to try to come up with some Kingdom endeavor as an excuse to quit work. Usually, those who make great boasts of all they will do in retirement are those who have seldom given themselves in Christian service.
- B. What about ladies who don't work outside the home?
 1. You too are involved in labor that offers no retirement – the care of the home.
 2. It is also sinful for you to be idle.
This was the problem of the faithless widow.
1 Timothy 5:13 NAU - "At the same time they also learn *to be* idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper *to mention*."
 3. The godly woman will not find time to be idle.
The virtuous woman
Proverbs 31:15 NAU - "She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens."
Proverbs 31:27 NAU - "She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness."
Proverbs 31:18 NAU - "Her lamp does not go out at night."

Conclusion:

1. These are Biblical principles. Like most Biblical principles they are out of favor today. Our duty must always be to live according to God's Word rather than the teaching of society.
Our mind should be that of Joshua:
Joshua 24:15 – "as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."
We should mimic the words of Peter,
Acts 5:29 – "We must obey God rather than men."
2. May all of us labor into our old age as an example of the virtue of hard work to those coming after us. May they look at the hoary head as an object of respect. The man who spends his last days fishing or playing golf will not draw great respect from young men. The woman who spends her last days in idleness will not be the woman of Titus 2 worthy of the reverence and esteem of the younger women.