

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Advice About Vices

We all love to make comparisons, don't we? This football team is better than that football team. The original movie was much better than the sequel. Those shoes are more expensive, but they are better made. These are the kinds of comparisons people make all of the time.

The writers of the Bible did this too. When the prophet Samuel wanted to say that a vital relationship with God is more important than religious rituals he said, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."¹ And the Book of Proverbs makes this comparison: "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, Than a fatted calf with hatred."²

In our passage from Ecclesiastes today Solomon makes some comparisons. The last time we read the preacher's words he wrote about an oppressive world where sometimes it may seem better if one had never lived at all. That's passionate and painful, but not realistic—we are here. Therefore Solomon makes a few comparisons about life in this world that offers us some practical wisdom. And here it is: by the grace of God it is better to live with contentment than envy, to be in partnership with others rather than be alone, and to have a humble, teachable attitude than to be a know-it-all.

Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 4:4)

From the Book of Genesis we learn that work is a gift of God.³ And we are to work in whatever it is we do, for the glory of God, our own good and the good of others. But sin distorts the value, meaning and motivation for work. We can be motivated to work by envy. When we strive to "keep up with the Joneses" we have become a slave to the world's values. Some people work and strive for success so they can have that new smart phone, or car, or house just so they can show off.

¹ 1 Samuel 15:22

² Proverbs 15:17

³ Genesis 2:15

We are tempted to envy someone's position at work or power and prestige. And if we do get everything we want, you can bet your next pay check that someone will envy us and the vicious cycle continues. But our ruthless competition with each other for more is vanity, valueless: chasing after the wind. Jesus Christ spoke about this foolish evil.

Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴ But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

¹⁶ Then He spoke a parable to them, saying:

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully.

¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' ¹⁸ So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods.

¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" ²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'

²¹ "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

(Luke 12:13-21)

Our striving after things so we can have what someone else has, or to have more and more is foolish. It is not wrong to store up and save. But there comes a point when you have too much, then it would be best to share what you have with others. We cannot take it with us when life ends. Now, there is nothing wrong with having money and nice things, but they will never bring someone peace of heart. And so the apostle Paul wrote that,

...godliness [a trusting, loving relationship with God] with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into *this* world, and *it is* certain we can carry nothing out.

⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.

(1 Timothy 6:6-8)

So it is foolish to strive in life because of envy. But the flip-side of this, which is to drop out of the work force altogether, is just as foolish.

The fool folds his hands
And consumes his own flesh.
(Ecclesiastes 4:5)

In verse 4 we have striving because of envy. Now, here in verse 5 we don't have contentment, what we have is complacency. This person twiddles his thumbs until he starves to death. There are people who think the world owes them a living. And so they perhaps become moochers. But there is a good and happy middle ground between being lazy or envious.

Better a handful *with* quietness
Than both hands full, *together with* toil and
grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 4:6)

A good synonym for "quietness" would be contentment. As I mentioned earlier true contentment is bound up in loving God. Proverbs 15:16 teaches, "Better is a little with the fear of the LORD, than great treasures with trouble." Both a pre-occupation with the pursuit of wealth and an attitude of laziness is foolish and evil. We need to work honestly and diligently to provide for our needs and the needs of family and to give to others.⁴ Any other motivation or lack of motivation is worldly and wrong.

I remember a little boy who misquoted Psalm 23 but hit the nail on the head. Instead of saying "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" he said, "The LORD is my shepherd; that's all I want." Now, from the folly of envy and laziness Solomon moves on to deal with loneliness.

Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun:
⁸There is one alone, without companion:
He has neither son nor brother.
Yet *there is* no end to all his labors,
Nor is his eye satisfied with riches.
But he never asks,
"For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?"
This also *is* vanity and a grave misfortune.
(Ecclesiastes 4:7, 8)

⁴ Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:8

Here is the sad story of the person I would call Mr. Scrooge. This person lives and works alone, but not for any godly reason. He or she is working 40, 60, 70 hours a week for the riches they hope they can achieve. Here is someone making costly sacrifices to pad his or her bank account, but for what? Life is more joyous, Mr. Scrooge learned, when you share what you have with others.

I read a story about a man who worked hard all his life so he could retire at 50 years of age. He stockpiled money on top of money so he could do all that he wanted to do in retirement, but only a few months after retirement he suddenly died. To find meaning and purpose in work we need to ask the question asked in verse 8, "For whom do I work?" As Christian believers we should work for the glory of God and the good of other people. As Galatians 6:10 exhorts, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Two *are* better than one,
(Ecclesiastes 9a)

It is better to share life with others than to try and make it on your own. You can see this in any good, godly marriage where responsibilities are shared. But the Preacher is not simply talking about marriage. He is speaking about all of our relationships; with family and friends.

Two *are* better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him *who is* alone when he falls,
For *he has* no one to help him up.
¹¹ Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm;
But how can one be warm *alone*?
¹² Though one may be overpowered by another, two can
withstand him.
And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

We were never designed by God to be hermits. We were created to live in community with other people. David needed Jonathan and Joab. Paul needed Luke and Timothy. The "buddy system" is not just for school trips! There is joy and safety in a family or with a group of friends. This principle is true for all of us as a church as well. The church is a family and we are to love and care for one another. In the New Testament Book of Philippians we are told,

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests,

but also for the interests of others.⁵

We've all seen the TV commercial where a woman falls and cries "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up." This happens in life too and so we need each other's help and support.

And think about this as well. Jesus Christ said, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."⁶ If companionship is good as Solomon says it is, how much better it is if that companionship is in the name of Jesus Christ? Finally, it is good to have a humble heart and to always be willing to learn.

Better a poor and wise youth
Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.
¹⁴ For he comes out of prison to be king,
Although he was born poor in his kingdom.
¹⁵ I saw all the living who walk under the sun;
They were with the second youth who stands in his place.
¹⁶ There was no end of all the people over whom he was made
king; Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him.
Surely this also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)

These last four verses of chapter 4 present us with a "rags to riches" story. The story is a little difficult to follow, but here is the point. A poor young man rose to great power and took the place of the King who was before him. He ruled over a vast kingdom with many loyal and supportive subjects. But the time came when this popular King stopped taking good advice and lost his popularity.

Surrounded by "Yes men" who catered to him, the king began to think he could do no wrong. The young man once wise grew up to be an out of touch King who forgot his roots.. This tragedy has been repeated many times as people cling to their theories and ideas instead of being willing to listen to and examine other ideas and advice. The King proves to be foolish when he no longer welcomes advice. Proverbs rightly warns us, "The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel *is* wise."⁷

The greatest example of the second part of this Proverb is Jesus Christ. In Luke 2 we are told that as a young man "...Jesus increased in wisdom and

⁵ Philippians 2:4

⁶ Matthew 18:20

⁷ Proverbs 12:15

stature, and in favor with God and men.”⁸ We are told in Philippians 2 that as an adult Jesus,

...humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.

⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name (Philippians 2: 8,9)

Jesus is the only success story of a boy born in poverty who has been exalted as King forever. And now there is no end to the people who are his loyal subjects. If we are wise we will ask God to give us a humble and teachable heart. For it is better to follow Jesus Christ than it is to follow those who are under the sun.

⁸ Luke 2:52