

Work Becomes Fruitless

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Date: 06 October 2013

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[0:00] Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 2. Ecclesiastes chapter 2. Right after the book of Proverbs is the book of Ecclesiastes by the teacher.

And we turn our attention to chapter 2 in verse 17. And we're going to read through verse 23. Follow along as I read. So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

So we're talking about what we're talking about in this class. Work. So the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, chasing after the wind.

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun. Because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool.

[1:15] Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill.

And then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?

All his days his work is pain and grief. Even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. Well, what is the teacher so grief-stricken about in this passage? Well, it's work. The difficulty of work. I hated life because of the work that is done under the sun.

[2:18] All of it meaningless, chasing after the wind. Why is he experiencing such despair over his work? Because for a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill.

That's what we talked about last week. Doing your work well. Doing it with skill. And you can do that. And you can do your work well.

And then there's this great intruder called death that comes. And then you have to leave all of your work into the hands of someone who didn't work for it.

So what does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? And the implied answer is nothing. Nothing permanent.

He doesn't get to take it with him. So what has happened to work ever since the fall? We've been talking about work before the fall.

[3:20] How God designed it to be. But something terrible has happened. It's become fruitless. It's become fruitless. And when I say that, I don't mean that it's become absolutely fruitless.

That we don't get anything from our work. Because that wouldn't be true. But we don't get anything permanent. At least as far as what we experience on this earth.

We don't get anything permanent. We also, we never see the full harvest for our work. So we plant our apple tree.

And we expect a thousand apples. And it grows 30 or 40. Not totally fruitless. But so far under its potential.

So we've been talking about how God has designed work. We've been talking about the big picture. Of what God originally meant work to be.

[4:22] But we are no longer living in that perfect world anymore. The garden of Eden is in the rear view mirror. And we can only see it as we look back.

We're east of Eden. And now work has become fruitless. And that's what today's lesson is entitled. Work becomes fruitless. And I hope you understand what I mean when I say that.

Not absolutely, totally fruitless. But it becomes blighted. And all of our hopes for it ends up living, not living up to our expectations.

Or our dreams. Or our aspirations. So J.R. Tolkien. He had been working on writing The Lord of the Rings for a few years. For some time.

And he had this vision in his heart of a story that he wanted to tell. But now he had hit a wall. There came a place when he was writing The Lord of the Rings.

[5 : 23] Where he totally stopped working. He lost heart. He didn't know what to do. If you know the story of The Lord of the Rings. It's right as The Fellowship of the Ring.

At the end of the first book. The Fellowship of the Ring. It splits up. Boromir has tried to take the ring from Frodo. And now characters are going all over this world.

They had originally, they had all been together. And so it had been an easier story to write. But now characters were going in all different directions. And the threads of the story were beginning to unfold in different ways.

And that made it incredibly difficult as an author to keep track of it all. To keep it all in his mind and give it a good direction. And so it was very difficult.

But it wasn't just that. It was 1939. And he was living in England. And so World War II had just broken out. He was too old to serve.

[6 : 23] But he had served in the trenches of World War I. And so he had that in his past. He had survived, obviously. But he said, by 1918, all my friends were dead.

So that was in his past. And so you can imagine his fear. His despair. That haunted him. And it was, am I going to be able to finish this work? Am I going to be able to finish my story?

And for him, it just wasn't this one story. He had been working on all this background before it for decades at this point. And he's saying, am I ever going to be able to finish? Or is this war and his death just going to sweep it all away?

Before it ever comes to fruition. Well, one day he woke up. And he looked out his window. And a neighbor had chopped down a tree. And he thought, that's going to be my work.

It's going to be chopped down before it's finished growing. Well, with all this in his mind, he woke up one morning, sometime later, a little bit later, with another story in his mind.

[7 : 33] And it was a short story that he later called Leaf by Niggle. And it's a story of a painter named Niggle. And Niggle is a word that means to work in an ineffective way.

It means to spend a lot of time on unnecessary details, on petty details. And Niggle was Tolkien. He was really good at working at teeny tiny details.

And getting so caught up in the tiny details that he lost sight of the big things. And he was a perfectionist. And he was always unhappy with what he produced.

And he had a terrible way of working. Like, if he ran into a wall, he would throw everything away and start all over again. And so, he got distracted with unimportant things as he fussed over these minute details.

Now, in the story, Niggle has a journey to make. It's a long journey. It's a journey he doesn't want to go on. But there's no getting out of it. He tries to put it off.

[8 : 37] But he knows it's coming. And the long journey is death. It's coming. Now, Niggle had one painting that he was trying to work on. That captured his mind.

It started with a leaf. And as he imagined it more and more, it became a tree. And then in his imagination, he began to see this whole country opening up with forests and mountains.

And this picture, this painting, had got into his heart. And he lost interest in all of his other pictures. And so, he laid out a canvas that was so big. He wanted to capture this vision that he had.

This work that he wanted to do. And it was so big that he needed a ladder to reach the biggest, the tallest parts. He knew he was going to die. But Niggle thought, at any rate, I'll be able to finish this one picture.

I'll be able to get it done. My real picture. This one that I really want to do before I go on this journey. And so, he worked. And he worked. But you know how he worked. He got caught up in teeny tiny details.

[9 : 39] And he never got much done. And he spent so much time on single leaves that the tree didn't get painted. And that picture, it was in his heart.

It was in his mind. But he could never get it out onto the canvas. So, he had a problem. He had lack of ability. Lack of time. He was always getting interrupted.

His neighbors would always come along and ask him for help. And he was a kind man. And so, he would go and help them. And one neighbor named Parrish. You get at the church. They asked for a

lot of his time.

And he gave it. And he never got his painting all the way done. Well, one cold night, he was out late. And he caught a cold. And he knew it was time to take his journey.

And he painted desperately all through the night. But it was too late. And he knew it. And he started sobbing. It's not done. It's not finished. And then the driver came.

[10:45] And took him on his long journey. The people who bought the house came. And they saw the canvas. And on it was one single leaf.

That's all that he had accomplished. One beautiful leaf. And they took it. And they put it in the town museum. And they put a little plaque that said, Leaf by Niggle underneath it. And a few people came and saw it.

Well, that's not the end of the story. But we're going to get to the end of the story at the end of our lesson. But all of us, in some way, are like Niggle.

We have big dreams. We have big aspirations. We want to accomplish something with our work.

We want our work to be meaningful and useful and helpful to people.

We have big dreams. God's put eternity into the heart of man. And everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten. Everyone wants to make a difference in life.

[11:46] But something dreadful has happened. We lost paradise. Man sinned. And that's our first point. Paradise lost.

Paradise lost. So we sinned. We rebelled against God. God's good design was over here. And we turned away from it.

Obedience was this direction. And we took disobedience. And so God put Adam and Eve into the garden. And he told them not to eat of a particular tree. What was so special about that tree?

Well, probably nothing per se. It wasn't magical, I don't think, or anything like that. It says that it was good for food and pleasing to the eye. But I imagine most of the trees were that way.

So there was nothing particularly special about this tree. Except God had said, don't eat from it. You can eat from all the other trees.

[12:52] But don't eat of this one. God was saying, I want you to do something for me. I want you to do it not because you understand why. I want you to simply obey me because of who I am.

And I want you to trust me because of who I am. And I want you to love me more than anything else. Even more than yourself. So it was an opportunity for man to voluntarily put their relationship with God before everything else.

Including themselves. Simply to obey his word because that was what was his due. Well, Adam and Eve disobeyed.

And in a way they did become like the serpent said. They became like God. They put themselves in God's place anyways. And they took it upon themselves to decide what was right and what was wrong for them.

And for them and for us to be like God in that way. To have the center place. To have the place of I will make the rules and I will do what I want.

[13:58] I will do whatever pleases me on heaven and on earth. For us to occupy that place is catastrophic. Because we weren't made to be in that place.

We were designed to be the servants. And it's like a sailboat captain saying, I want this sailboat to be like a car. And so we run it aground. Well, yeah, now it's like a car.

It's on the ground. It's not in the water anymore. But the ship is ruined. And it's useless. It's damaged. So we were designed to serve and to know and to love God.

We flourish when we're in the water. Not on the ground. We flourish when God is God. And we're loving and obeying him. So God put a terrible curse upon the world.

For our sin. And so we live in a cursed world, a frustrated world. Everything is falling apart. Romans 8 says the whole creation is subject to decay.

[15:01] So have you seen that log in the forest that is decaying? It has some shape of a log, but it's slowly falling apart. Things fall apart.

The center cannot hold. Anarchy is loosed upon the world, as one poet said. So God warned Adam. The day you eat of that tree, you will die.

But they didn't. They ate the tree, but they didn't immediately drop dead. That came later. That happened eventually. They had to take that long journey. But not until they saw death tear everything apart.

And destroy everything that they, their whole world. So not until they saw their sons at war. Not until Eve wept in childbirth.

And not until Adam drops sweat as he tried to get food from the ground. See, the places where they worked. The spheres of their labor.

[16:03] And family. And farming. It was full of pain now. And it's full of fruitlessness. And it's true to this day. To this day the creation groans.

And so now we are like Niggle. We can envision so much more than we can accomplish. We have, we can see what we wish we could do.

But then we fail to experience that. We experience failure and fruitlessness at our work. We lack abilities. You ever have that problem?

When I was in art class in high school. I always had these great things about what I wanted to do. My art project to me. And, but I had no ability. So I go to paint the picture.

And it doesn't look anything like my brain wanted it to look. And the art teacher gave me a B. Because I was trying hard. And I saw him like a year ago.

[17:04] And I'm like, did you do that to all the students? He's like, yep. If they tried, I gave them a decent grade. It had nothing to do with your work. Because we lacked ability. And there's resistance everywhere.

Resistance. Mothers. Your children resist your instruction. Don't they? Just like you resisted your mother's instructions. They wanted, They won't do what's good for them.

Even when you do your best to tell them what's good for them. They are so slow to do it. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child. So moms, that's the clay that you are given.

Foolish lump of clay that will resist your instructions. And men, You work in a world Where envy reigns. Look over at Ecclesiastes 4.4.

It's right across the page. And I saw that all labor and all achievement Spring from man's envy of his neighbor. So why do so many people work?

[18:12] Because they want to be better than you. They want more than you. They want to be better than their neighbor. So does that make for a happy workplace? Where the primary motivation is competition?

Well, no. Because true teamwork, True camaraderie is now the exception. It's not the norm. It's not the rule.

And men will throw you under the bus to get ahead of you. And men will lie and cheat and take credit for your work. And the whole time your work is thwarted. And it's a dog-eat-dog world.

So maybe you have aspirations to do a certain kind of work. And perform at a certain level of excellence. But you never get that opportunity. Now it's not because you have a lack of ability. Now you have a lack of time. You don't have time to do what you want to do. You just have to do what you can do. I just read today of a pastor.

[19:16] So busy. And he admitted, sometimes I do slipshod work. Because that's all the time I have for it. That's all I can do. It's better than doing nothing. But it's not what I want to do.

So you have time conflicts. You have relationship conflicts. And it all joins together to make your work relatively fruitless. So moms and dads, you have these aspirations.

What kind of, what you want your children to be. What kind of character you want to instill in them. You have high hopes for their education. And things like that.

You dream about what kind of children they could be. What kind of parent you could be. Your heart warms to think about it. But then the house gets dirty. Neighbors come over.

The children don't care. They can't see why it's important. And your vision for what could be is not realized. Or you try to tell them about it. And they don't understand.

[20:16] And they don't want it. And so you carry on. You try to do your best. But the tree doesn't bear as much fruit as you would like. Or maybe you are at work.

And you see a wonderful opportunity to make things better. You see a way that your company could be profitable. It could be more productive. It could be better for the customers.

And so you introduce. You roll out your plan. Your idea. And other people all they see is. Well now I have more work to do. Or all they see is.

What you think you're better than us? Why are you trying to get ahead of us? Instead of rising to the occasion. And making something good. They fight. And they complain. And in a thousand ways.

Work has become fruitless. Like a tree that. Could grow a thousand apples. But it only grows thirty. And that's life in this sin cursed world.

[21 : 15] Now. That's what the Bible says it's like. If it sounds bad. It's because it is bad.

We're experiencing. The bitter fruit. Of our sin. Well. Now what? Where do we go from here? How do we deal with the fruitlessness. Of work. Two things. Two things. First. We have to accept it. We have to accept it. Is your job frustrating? Do you feel like you can never do what you want to do? You can't achieve what you would like to achieve?

Part of the answer. Is simply accepting it. And realizing that that's the way it is. And that means that fruitlessness.

[22 : 12] Doesn't mean that you're not called to. Whatever you're called to. God calls us to work in the midst. Of our fruitlessness. So he calls us to the orchard.

And the orchard isn't going to bear as much fruit. As we had liked. Or we hope. And yet. God still says work in the orchard. Still calls us to that work. And this is where so many young people today. Have been given the wrong advice. They've got the wrong idea. They think if they aren't changing the world. If they aren't experiencing great bliss from their work.

Then. They need to try something else. A different career must be the answer. I just saw a video this week. It went viral.

So everyone was watching it. Maybe you watched it. About this girl who quit her job. And the reason she says she quit her job. Was because her bosses didn't care about the quality.

[23 : 17] All they wanted was quantity. So her job was to make videos. And the people over her. They only wanted people to watch their videos. And it didn't matter what kind of quality the videos were.

It just mattered the quantity. So she quit her job. Where is she going to go? I don't know. She's famous for a day.

So I'm sure she already has a job somewhere. But is she going to go to a job. Where they don't care about quantity. All they care about is quality. Is she going to find that job. Where all of her dreams are met.

No. Part of the answer. Part of coming to grips. Coming to terms. With the fruitlessness of it. Is just accepting it. Fruitlessness.

May or may not be a sign. A signal. That God has called you to a different place. So moms. Dads.

[24 : 15] No matter how much your children resist you. Is that a sign. That God wants you to. Abandon ship. Stop being a mom.

No. Just because you don't realize. Your highest aspirations for work. Does not mean that you've chosen the wrong career. Or you are in the wrong place.

If you're looking for a job. Without frustration. You are looking for a job. That doesn't. Exist. Exist. And so. You can expect. Regular frustration.

Even if you are in the exact right. Vocation. But on the other hand. Sometimes fruitlessness. Might be a signal.

Might be a marker. Might be wisdom. Prompting you. To go find work. In a different field. This goes back to kind of what we talked about last week. If you are fruitless.

[25 : 12] Because you are incompetent at your work. Then it might be time to find. A different line of work. So. If a barber. Can't cut hair well.

He's fruitless in his barbering. Then he probably needs to go find a different job. A farmer. Who isn't any good at producing crops. Probably needs to go find. A different job.

Doesn't he? Total fruitlessness. Probably means. That God is calling you. To go somewhere else. So. If. And then on the other hand. If you have.

This is where it gets all murky. And I don't have the right answer. And you can only. Pray long and hard about it. But if you have passions and desires. That aren't fulfilled at. At all at your work. So if you're. Where your heart is warm. And your beat. Your heart beats. And your. Your dreams. And your mind. And your imagination. Are this way.

[26 : 07] And your work. Gives you nothing. Along those lines. Then. That might be. A marker. That it's time to go to a different area. God can. And he often does.

Change what he calls us to do. But you won't be able to see. Or measure. Or weigh. Any of that. Clearly. Until you. Accept.

That. To one degree or another. All work. Is going to. Be frustrating. All work is going to be. Fruitless. To some degree. It's not a pleasant truth. But it is the truth. And I think it helps us to know. That God knows that. He's not playing hide and seek. With us. He's told us how it is.

God tells us about it. He knows work is frustrating. And there's something. Just comforting about. Coming to terms with it. Realizing that.

[27 : 06] You know what. For now. This is the way it is. If that was all I had to say. Then I'd be pretty sad. Wouldn't it?

There is deeper comfort. And deeper consolation. Than just accepting it. And that's looking. Ahead. To our future.

Life. Christian. This is. Your comfort. In the midst of. The fruitlessness. Of your work. How do you deal with fruitlessness.

With frustration. You can look forward. To an eternity. Of fruitfulness. So. We need work to be happy.

It's the way God made us. He's made us in his image. God. God works. So we work. We need work. In order to. To. To be. Joyful.

[28 : 03] Complete humans. And because that's the way. God made us. Our work. Was meant. To make us flourish. And it was made. To make our world. Flourish.

We were meant to work. To make this world. A garden. Full of beauty. And usefulness. And in our hearts. We still long for that. God has put eternity.

Into our hearts. But because of. The fall. Work is now. So frustrating. It's never as fruitful. As we want it to be. And so you work. And you work. And for all your work. You get a lot of thorns.

And that's why. But. But at the same time. You do get some fruit. Don't you? You get thorns. And fruit. And people see one. Or they see another.

And they. Instantly go to. Two extremes. They. They either become. Idealist. Or they become. Cynics. Or they go back and forth.

[29 : 01] So like this girl. That we're talking about. That she quit her job. Because. All her bosses cared about. Was quantity. And not quality. Well. She's an idealist. I'm going to change things.

I'm going to make a difference. I'm going to accomplish something new. I'm going to bring justice to the world. I'm going to create videos. Like they've never seen. That it's revolutionized. This whole thing. I'm going to make things right. I'm going to make things beautiful.

The idealist. Has these gigantic dreams. And thinks that. They're all going to happen. And thinks if they don't all happen. There's something wrong. And the cynic says. Well nothing really changes. Don't get your hopes up. Just do what it takes. To make a living. Don't care too much about it. Or it will just disappoint you. In the end.

Well neither idealism. Or cynicism. Is biblical. Genesis 3. Even as God curses them.

[29 : 59] He says. By the sweat of your brow. You will eat. With the thorns. There will be some fruit. It will never be as much. As it promises.

Or you hoped it to be. But work will be both. Fruitless and fulfilling. In a certain way. And we experience that.

Don't we? In some way. It is still. Fruitful. In some way. It does fulfill us. To go and do. A good hard day's. Work. Sometimes.

Work does show us. A glimpse. Of the beauty. And the glory. Of what used to be. And thankfully. Sometimes. Work shows us. A glimpse. Of the beauty.

And the glory. Of what's going to be. We're going to see it. In Isaiah 65. Today.

[30 : 56] Sometimes. Work shows us. A glimpse. Of what. Will be. When God makes. New heavens. And a new earth. And. I think. As.

You listen to the sermon. Today. You're going to see. That work. Gets changed. In the new heavens. And the new earth. And. Here is this. Deep comfort. That I was talking about. In heaven. There will be work. I don't know. How your job. Will be translated. To heaven. I don't know. How my job. Will be translated. To heaven. I was thinking about that. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. What work. Is going to look like. But there will be work. And for the first time. We're going to be able to work.

The way we've always wanted to work. We're going to be able to work. And bear fruit.

Like we've always wanted to. Like we were meant to. In heaven. You will be useful to others. And you will perform. With all the skill. That you can imagine.

[31:53] And it will be a gift of God. It will be God's gift to you. Giving you work. That is both beautiful. And useful. We left Niggle.

As he was. Taking his long journey. Remember all that he had accomplished. Was one little leaf. On his tree. And one leaf.

That's now framed. In the town museum. That only a few people. See and appreciate. So he took the train. And he made it to.

The end of his long journey. And when he was on the. He stopped at the train station. He got out. And now he's on the outskirts. Of the heavenly country. And as he's walking.

He. Something caught his eye. You know. What it was. I wonder. Something caught his eye. And he ran up to it. And there it was.

[32:51] A tree. A tree. Before him. Stood the tree. His tree. Finished. Its leaves opening.

Its branches growing. And bending in the wind. And he gazed at the tree. And slowly. He lifted his arms. And he opened them wide. And he said. It is a gift. The world.

Before. His death. His old country. Had forgotten him. And his work. Had ended. Unfinished. And. Helpful to only. A very few. But in his new country.

In the permanently. Real world. He found his tree. He found his work. Finished. In full detail. It wasn't just a dream. That died with him. No.

Part of. The true reality. That would live. Forever and ever. And be enjoyed. Forever and ever. Was a piece of. His work. And. So he died.

[33:51] Weeping. That his picture. Was. Unfinished. But now. He comes before it. And it's complete. And it's a gift of God. That was. Tolkien's way. Of saying to us.

And to himself. That our deepest. Aspiration. And our deepest. Hopes. For our work. Will be fulfilled. In God's future. In our future.

So work. Glorious. Meaningful. Fruitful. Work. Will be God's. Gift to us. And all the thorns. Will be gone.

And the curse. Will be gone. Why? Because Jesus. Came. So. Brothers and sisters.

We can take comfort. In that. And you can take comfort. In your labor. In this frustrated world.

Because look. What's coming. And we sing it. Every Christmas. Joy to the world.

[34:47] The Lord. Is. Come. Let earth. Receive her king. No more. Let sins. And sorrows. Grow. Nor thorns. Infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow.

As far as the curse is found. Far as. Far as. The curse is found. God. God's blessings.

Will reach as far as the curse. so what can help you what can comfort you in the fruitlessness of your work just this behold Isaiah 65 17 behold I will create a new heavens and a new earth the former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind well we're going to sing joy to the world hymn 149 is our response