

Work Becomes Pointless

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Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] The chapter on work is entitled, Work Becomes Pointless. How does that take you? Tuesday morning when I woke up, I was feeling pretty discouraged with everything.

! I think it was post-vacation blues or something. And I woke up and I started working on this chapter, Work Becomes Pointless. And at first it was like, oh, this is not what I want to be thinking about.

But I found that it was very encouraging in a strange way. And so I hope this morning it would be encouraging to you. Two weeks ago we dipped into the book of Ecclesiastes.

And someone afterwards said, well, you gave me a taste and I want more of that. Well, that person is going to get his wish. If last week was dipping our foot in, this morning is a full cannonball.

So, will you please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes. And we're going to be looking at this book this morning.

[1:10] We started looking at the problems that we have with work now that we aren't in the garden anymore. Now that we're living in a sin-filled, God-cursed world.

And the book of Ecclesiastes gives us biblical wisdom and a biblical perspective of living in that world. It's such a wonderful book because it doesn't pull any punches.

It tells us exactly how things are and exactly how we know them to be living in this world. And it gives us wisdom, God's wisdom for living in that world.

When everything is very frustrating. When everything is very frustrating. Well, a few years ago on Sunday evening, we went through this book. And you'll remember that the narrator of the book is called the teacher.

Koaleth in Hebrew. It means the teacher, the philosopher, the pundit. He's someone who is God's man to give us wisdom. And in Ecclesiastes, he wrestles through the hard realities of life.

[2:21] Do you remember the key idea of Ecclesiastes? Does anyone remember? Havel is the Hebrew word.

In NIV, it's translated meaningless. Which probably is not the best way to translate it. 38 times he says, everything is Havel.

It's Havel, Havel, everything is Havel. It means vapor. Breath. It's something you can't nail down.

So on a foggy morning, you can't really get a hold of the fog. And no matter how close you get to it, it always eludes you. And it's something that always eventually escapes you.

And what Koaleth is saying is that everything is like that in this world now. Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts. It's chasing after the wind.

[3:22] You run and you run to try to catch the wind. And at the end, what do you have for your running? What do you have in your hands for chasing the wind? You have nothing.

And so it's living in a world where, as Paul says, the creation is groaning. William Butler Yeats.

He wrote a poem in the aftermath of World War I. And I think you need to understand, in the European mind, before World War I, it seemed like the New Age was upon us.

And things were at peace and prosperity. And things were going to last forever. And then World War I happened and millions and millions of young men, an entire generation, died.

And that really destroyed that mindset. And this is what he wrote in a poem after that. Things fall apart.

[4:20] The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. And that thought has been going around in my mind so much lately.

That things fall apart. Not just big things, but little things. Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. That's our world. Subject to decay.

Enslaved to decay. Enslaved to rot away, is how Paul puts it. And are Christians exceptions? Are you the exception?

Are you spared from that because you're saved? Or do you live in a different world, a different plane of reality where everything is hunky-dory? Everything stays the same.

Everything is good. Well, our very bodies testify that we're not exceptions. You're all a week older, two weeks older than the last time I saw you.

[5:18] And a month from now, you'll be a month older and not a month younger. A month closer to dying, not a month further away.

So you work out. And you exercise. And you eat right. You do everything you're supposed to. And the sad reality is, is that you only will die later.

Not that you're sparing yourself from death. You only die later. Unless you die in a car accident. And then you die sooner. And time and chance happen to all.

That's Ecclesiastes 9-11. What that means is, a young man in his youth, strong as can be, with years ahead of him, could die like that.

Some of you have known someone that has had that happen to him this week. That's the bitterness of it. None of our bitter frustration and none of our, but what about this? But what about that?

[6:26] None of our arguments can change that. God has done it. And what he does cannot be undone. And us, by talking about it, can't fix it.

Us arguing about it can't change it. As Kola says, the more the words, the less the meaning. And how does that profit anyone? So the more and more you try to talk yourself out of it, the less meaning you have.

So Ecclesiastes talks about work a lot. He talks about work so much because work is so much a part of what we do and what our life is about. We spend at least a third of our lives working. And so work is subject to this decay. And so this morning we're going to get some wisdom for work. And we're going to see that now that sin has entered into the world, work has a certain meaninglessness to it.

[7:30] That's the Havel of work. Ecclesiastes begins with three life projects. And the author goes about trying to solve the problem of Havel by doing these projects.

To find some way of nailing things down. To find some way of getting something that really lasts. That can't be taken away from him. And so he begins with something for his work.

He has these three projects. First, Kolath tries learning and wisdom. So Ecclesiastes chapter 1. Look at verse 12. So I the teacher was king over Israel and Jerusalem.

And I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men. So this is something that God has done.

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are Havel. A chasing after the wind. What is twisted cannot be straightened.

[8:40] What is lacking cannot be counted. And I thought to myself, Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.

And I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom. And also of madness and folly.

And I learned that this too is chasing after the wind. For with much sorrow, or for with much wisdom comes much sorrow. And the more knowledge, the more grief.

So the teacher gives himself to wisdom. And what does he discover? Let me ask you, what does he discover? Anyone?

Does wisdom fix Havel? If you just know enough, does it make it better? It makes it worse.

[9:42] It exposes it. So first, it doesn't fix it. Wisdom can't make it whole. No matter how much wisdom you have, you cannot fix the problem of Havel with wisdom.

You can't break the back of Havel with wisdom. What is twisted cannot be straightened. And what is lacking cannot be counted.

Now second, this is what we've seen. The more wisdom you have, the more sorrow you have.

Wisdom in a way doesn't make it better. It actually can make it worse.

Because now you see the world for what it is. And the more you understand of how the world works, the more sorrow it brings to you.

And this is what happens to everyone as they grow up. Children are innocent of the world in so many ways. They're foolish in the ways of the world. And then you grow up.

[10 : 44] And sorrows increase. Well, that's the bitterness of this world now. And so first he tries wisdom. And then he tries pleasure.

He tries comedy. He tries fun. But you can't play away Havel. Look at chapter 2, verse 1-3. I thought in my heart, come now.

So he turns away from wisdom. I thought in my heart, come now. I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be Havel. Meaningless.

Laughter, I said, is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly. My mind still guiding me with wisdom.

I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do. Under heaven during the few days of their lives. So he tries that. Then he tries the third project.

[11 : 45] And that's verses 4-10. He tries making great projects. He tries to recreate Eden, as it were. This is verse 4-10. I undertook great projects.

I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks. And planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. Those are words taken out of Genesis.

I made reservoirs to water, groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself. And the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers in a harem as well.

The delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. And in all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

[12 : 47] I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work. And this was the reward for all my labor. So that's what he does.

Houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, all kinds of fruit trees. He's doing his best to go back to Eden. He tries building wealth. He amasses wealth.

He accomplishes all of his financial dreams. And he has music and sex and everything a man could want.

And the whole time he's evaluating. He's judging. What is worthwhile for a man to do? What is something that I can do? That I can pour my life into?

And then it will repay me. And then I will be able to keep it. And then this is what he finds in verse 11. Yet, when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was Havel chasing after the wind.

[13 : 55] Nothing was gained under the sun. So he gained it temporarily. He enjoyed pleasure for a season.

But nothing lasted. Nothing lasted. And so then he goes on in verse 17. You see his heart's response to what goes on in verse 17.

So I hated life. I hated life. Because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is Havel chasing after the wind.

And I hated all the things I toiled for under the sun. Now that last line is telling.

I hated the things I worked for. He doesn't say I hated that I did that. I'm sure that was part of it. But he says, I looked at my gardens. And I looked at my houses.

[14 : 54] And I looked at my gold. And I looked at my silver. And I hated them. Why? Because he's going to die.

And when he dies, he's going to give it to who knows who. And who knows who is going to do who knows what with it. And soon enough, it will be gone. And so all the things that he worked for and labored for, he began to loathe.

Just like if you have too much rich cake at the end, you loathe it. You don't want another bite. And that's how life is under the sun.

If you get enough of anything, of stuff in this world, you begin to hate it because it disappoints you. Because whether quickly or slowly, all the results of your toil under the sun will be wiped away by history.

So the person who takes the business after you, or picks up the cause after you, or takes over the church after you, all of those things may be undone.

[15 : 57] And time grinds away. And time grinds away all of our work. Time sweeps it away, and our place remembers us no more. So the garden we worked on will soon become a yard or a paved

driveway.

So you poured your life into this garden, and you poured your life into its rose and in its plants, and into its soil and its fruit. And sooner or later, it will be overrun with weeds and go wild all over again. And that's life. That's really frustrating. So that's what... Now the point is, this is what all of our work becomes now.

Whatever job you have, under the sun, it's going to be like this. So, that's what work becomes.

Now secondly, we've seen the havel of work. Now let's talk about the alienation of our work. What I mean is, it isolates us.

[17 : 06] Work cuts us off. It leaves us feeling distant. It leaves us feeling alone. Work has a way of alienating us.

And we, in turn, feel alienated from our work. What I mean is, and what I'm getting after here is, so we put effort into our jobs, and yet we're...

We don't experience accomplishment. We don't see the big picture, and so we don't get a sense of productivity. And this happens to everyone.

So when I am done preparing this Sunday school lesson, I'll have another Sunday school lesson to prepare. And we would all like to say, I've done it.

It's done. It's finished. I've accomplished it. And to a great degree, that's not what any of us can experience, at least under the sun.

[18 : 13] And so the job that you do today, you'll end up doing tomorrow. And the process that you go through today, you'll end up going through it tomorrow. And you'll never get to see what you're really producing.

Not very often will you get to see what you're producing. Now, this alienation is in part because the way our world is.

But in some respects, and in many respects, it's our own personal sin that makes it this way. See, we can't just say this is all of God's fault.

No, to a great degree, I do this to myself. I make an idol out of work. And when I make an idol out of my work, I end up hating God.

I end up feeling isolated from God, feeling alienated from Him. Because I substitute work for God.

And work becomes a part of my punishment.

[19 : 18] Work becomes part of the curse. And my idol becomes part of my punishment for my sin. Or my discipline for my sin. Because it alienates us from God.

Maybe you've seen the movie Amadeus. It's an 80s movie about these two composers, Salieri and Mozart. And Salieri aspires to make extraordinary, immortal music.

So he's the court conductor, the court composer in Austria. And so he's good.

You don't get to that position without being good. But he wants to rise above making good music. And he wants to make immortal music.

He prays that he would make one true piece of music that lasts forever. You get what I'm saying?

He wants to accomplish something finally, forever, great, magnificent, immortal in his music.

[20 : 24] But he doesn't have the talent. Now, he thought he was really making music. And then Mozart came to court.

And then Salieri sees reality. And he sees that his best efforts aren't going to live forever. His best efforts are nothing. They're common. And people are going to forget him in the light of Mozart.

And so Salieri goes to God. And he cries out to God to fill him with creative brilliance. He cries out, Lord, give me a piece of music that will glorify you.

Really, finally, forever. And he prays. But God doesn't give him. Doesn't answer. Now, this is where you see personal sin come in.

So what is his reaction to that? So he says to God, from now on, we are enemies, you and I.

Because you will not enter me with all my need for you.

[21 : 36] Because you scorn my attempts. You are unjust, unfair, and unkind. And, of course, Salieri can't reach God. So in the movie, he decides to destroy Mozart, God's creation.

And there's something that echoes Satan's story in all of that. Remember, Satan had a certain high position. But he wanted more.

He wanted to be more than what he was. But he was what he was. And he was unsatisfied with that. So he rebelled. And he was filled with hatred. And because he couldn't reach God, he went after God's creation.

Now, this is what work becomes for people in this fallen world, in our fallen state. Work, a gift of God, becomes an idol.

We want to use our work to make a lasting name for ourselves. To give ourselves immortality. To give ourselves greatness and meaning.

[22:38] We want to achieve. We want to accomplish something. We want to live forever in our work. And God denies us all. And so we become frustrated.

We become frustrated with him, even. And so work leads to this alienation from God himself. Because now it feels like God doesn't answer me. God doesn't help me to do what I want to do in my work.

And so I don't love God as I should. We become frustrated. I think only in Christ do you get freed from the idol of work.

And you find what you've always been looking for. So work leads to this alienation from God. Work also alienates us from each other.

What I mean is our work separates us from others. And this is, it's kind of hard to put into words, but you can see it in practice.

[23:40] Now that our world is so sin sick. Now that we all have this problem with sin.

And we're sinful. It doesn't lead to unity. It leads to division and separation. Our work is included in that.

Our work participates in that. And so even as we do our work, because we are sinners, and because we do our work in sinful ways, and other people are sinners, and they do their work in sinful ways, that work actually becomes a wall that separates people.

So we feel alienated from each other. Let me give you an example. When we were adopting, the most common question that everyone always asks was, why does it have to be so hard?

Why does it have to be so expensive? If there's this great need, why can't we just go over there and do that? Well, I understand that heartbeat.

[24:48] I understand that frustration. But the bottom line answer is that this world is full of sinners. sinners. And people who do wicked and evil things.

Wicked and evil things to children. Wicked and unethical things with orphans. And the only way the world knows how to deal with sin is by making bureaucracy, making rules, and more hoops, and more government, and more agencies.

You just can't go and adopt a child because you have to go to this agency. agency. And that agency. You have to get this form and that form from this person and that person. And this person won't see you until you have seen that person.

And none of them really care about you because they see a thousand of you. They don't know you. And so there's no sense of urgency. And so it's nothing but delays and disappointments. And our world is sin sick and the result is deep depersonalization.

[25:57] You become a number. You become a number on a list to get to when you get to. And we're alienated from each other. We're cut off from each other.

And so there's desks, there's walls, there's agencies, there's corporations, there's levels of management everywhere you look. And it's people doing their jobs. That's what's the strange thing about it.

None of that work is unnecessary. None of that work is necessarily bad or anything like that. But it's just people doing their jobs in a sin sick world that separates you from them.

So look over at Ecclesiastes 5, chapter 8. And it shows us what it's like living in this kind of world that we live in.

5.8 If you see the poor oppressed in a district and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things.

[26:59] So why shouldn't you be surprised? 4. One official is eyed by a higher one. And over them both are others, higher still.

And the increase from the land is taken by all. The king himself profits from the fields. So someone is impressed and you try to do something about it. And what do you face?

Bureaucracy. One official, then another, and then another, and then another, all the way up to the king. And everyone has their own interests.

And so in Coalesce Day, the government was the only institution that was large enough to have these endless levels where you could never reach to the person that you really needed to talk to.

You could never really reach that person that could make a decision and make justice happen. The government was the only institution large enough in those days. But now, in our own day, we experience this everywhere.

[28:03] We experience corporations. So now, if you have a problem with, I don't know, your mortgage or something, you can't just call and get something fixed.

Because the person you talk to doesn't have the authority to do it. So they pass you off to the next person. And the next person doesn't know what to do and so it stalls. And one thing, another. So your mortgage is bought and sold a hundred times over. And these big, bulky packages. So you don't really even know who owns your loan. And you have a problem and so you can't figure it out and you get shuffled from one desk to another.

And that's frustrating for us who are sitting in our houses trying to solve some problem. There's all this endless bureaucracy. We feel alienated from people. Instead of them being there to help us, so often it feels like they're there to just not help us.

To frustrate us. But, I think the wonderful thing is when you realize that it's frustrating for that person in a different way.

[29:15] You know, that person that you're talking to that doesn't seem to be able to help you, he's a real person. She's a real person. And, he or she probably doesn't go to work saying, I hope I can make a hundred people mad today.

I hope I can make a hundred people miserable today. They're just doing their job. They're doing their work. And so they hear a lot of people venting their frustration, venting their anger upon them. So just think about what it's like for them. They have to ask themselves sometimes, what am I doing? What am I doing?

What am I accomplishing? And that's our work in this present context. In a fallen world, because of our sin, it cuts us off from other people.

Now, maybe the most noticeable thing about how our work alienates us is it alienates us from a sense of productivity, from a sense of accomplishment.

[30:28] For centuries, people endured back-breaking work just to survive. But at least in small farms and in small shops where you were making something, it was possible to see the product of your work.

You could see what your work was doing. So if you were a carpenter, you could see the chairs that you were making. Yeah, you might have to make more chairs after that chair's done, but at least at the end of the day, you could look at your chair and it would be finished.

But a factory worker today, it's quite a different story for them. They might get to put five nuts onto wheel lugs every 30 seconds, hour after hour, day after day.

He never gets to see the car. He never gets to see the person buy the car and drive it off the lot, happy as can be. He just sees the nuts going onto the lugs day after day after day.

When I worked at NISCO here in town, I worked in the Chrysler department and the machines that I was in charge of, that I ran, were made parts for the Jeep Patriot.

[31:49] Now, some of you probably have no idea what I'm talking about. The Jeep Patriot doesn't have a place in your heart like it does in my heart. The Jeep Patriot never meant anything to me before.

But when I was working there, I would see one driving down the road and I said, hey honey, I make the parts for that car. And she would say, yeah, that's nice. She, it meant so much for me to see it because day after day I didn't get to see what I was doing.

I just saw this little piece of the puzzle. I saw one little bit of it. And car parts don't cheer you on. And they don't say, hey, we're making something great.

You're accomplishing something. And when you're just faced with a tiny piece of the puzzle, it's very easy then to just go to work for the paycheck because you hardly ever get to see the end product. And you rarely ever feel like you're really accomplishing anything because after you do these parts, you've got to do those parts. And they're day after day. Now, that kind of job is typical in manufacturing.

[33:04] And it's typical in office work even today. So if a banker, there's people out there whose job it is to bundle up mortgages, to take your mortgage and my mortgage and their mortgage and a hundred other mortgages and group them together and then they take all those and they sell them to this person.

And then they buy other ones. So all day long they move paper around and they move capital around. They move numbers on spreadsheets around. And those people, their job, they have to have a, you have to wonder what do they think? What do they say when someone asks, well, what do you do? What do you accomplish? What good do you do in this world? We feel alienated from the big picture. We feel cut off from God. We feel cut off from people and we feel cut off from the sense of accomplishment and that's work in the sin sick world. And so if you feel those things, it's not necessarily evil. evil. Maybe it is. But if you feel those things, you're certainly not alone. And so, how do we wrap this up?

[34 : 25] I want to encourage you and end with just two lessons. First, do you see that work is a good gift but a bad idol? It's a good gift but it's a bad God.

Read through Ecclesiastes and again and again there's one thing that comes out and that work is man's lot. That means it comes from God.

And work is something that you should rejoice in. That's what's so paradoxical about Ecclesiastes. It tells you how frustrating it is but at the same time it says, no, work is a gift from God and when you see it as a gift from God, you can rejoice in it.

You can enjoy it. It's a good gift but when you turn it into something that's going to give you immortality, when you turn it into a savior, when you turn it into a God, then it actually turns itself against you and destroys you and it becomes miserable and it becomes intolerable.

And so, if you're feeling those sorts of things that we've been talking about, check your heart. some of it I think is natural and normal.

[35 : 42] It's feeling the effects of sin but a lot of it is our own sinful hearts. Work in a cursed world doesn't have the power to redeem us. Work in this world doesn't have the power to take misery out of, all misery out of a frustrated world because work itself suffers under the curse.

And when our hearts make that work our savior, it robs us of our meaning and joy and we're sure to be disappointed. But when you accept work as a gift from God, as good but not everything, then you can be happy.

It saves you from your own self-induced misery. It saves you from your own wicked heart. And so, the thing to do tomorrow is to say, I have this job because God gave it to me.

I didn't earn it. I didn't deserve it. It can't save me. God has saved me. God has loved me. And so, I'm going to work for him.

It's a good gift, but it's a bad God. Ecclesiastes 3.22 says, So I saw that there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his work because that is his lot.

[37 : 08] When your work is a gift from God, you can enjoy it. Enjoy it. It's limited. It's frustrating. But it's a gift from God. Now, secondly, find a wise balance in your work.

This is where we're going to end. So first, realize that work is a bad, as a good gift, but a bad God. And secondly, find a wise balance with your work.

Work is frustrating. What do you do about it? Look at chapter 4 in verse 5 and 6. Chapter 4 verses 5 and 6. The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.

Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. So what do you do with this view of work where it's frustrating, it's not going to save you or anything like that? There's two responses. The fool folds his hands. He does nothing. He says, well, if work's not going to do that, then I'm not going to, if work's not going to give me what I want, if it's not going to fulfill my dreams, then I'm just not going to do it.

[38 : 23] Or I'll do the bare minimum. I'll just do what I need to do to get by, but I won't try to get ahead because it's, you can't. I'll just do what it takes to get a paycheck.

That's what a fool does. The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom about the sluggard, about the lazy man. And they ruin themselves. So you don't do that.

But there's a balance here. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. So the fool has nothing. He's ruined.

He's broke. He's poor. His money doesn't give him any help because he has none of it. But this guy has two handfuls. He has lots of money and yet he doesn't have peace.

He doesn't have rest. And so he goes in the exact opposite direction. He works and he works in order to get, but there's no end of the toil. His eyes never get tired of seeing.

[39 : 27] He's never content with his wealth. He keeps on working, trying to fill his life up with money, and that turns out to be worthless. It's a miserable business is what it says later on.

So there's a balance. Tranquility without toil. So peace with no work is not going to give you any satisfaction. And work without tranquility, toil without tranquility will not bring you satisfaction.

So if all you have is rest, no satisfaction. If all you have is work, still no satisfaction. But godliness with contentment is great gain.

Nothing is gained with all work and no play, and nothing is gained from all play and no work. But godliness with contentment is great gain. so how do you, how do people like us find contentment?

If you're content, you're satisfied, aren't you? And I think the final answer comes down to us in this.

[40 : 41] We find true contentment for our hearts, for our souls, in resting and enjoying all that we have in Christ. In Christ, we have meaning.

In Christ, we don't need to make work to be our savior because he's a beautiful and all-sufficient, glorious, good savior. In Christ, we can look past life under the sun and look to a world where there is no sun because the lamb, God, our son.

And in Christ, we can say, he's enough for me. He's all I need. He's my everything. In him, I have fullness. In him, I have everything my heart could desire.

See, contentment doesn't ultimately come from just saying, I'm going to learn to live on less. Live on less. Contentment comes ultimately from feeling and knowing how rich you are in Jesus.

And when you feel rich in Jesus, you can be content in this world that's so frustrating. Well, our time is gone. We're dismissed. We're