

Work, wealth, possessions, and security in Ecclesiastes

Main Point

One bad response to life being *hebel* is to seek security in work, wealth and possessions. Rather, these are for enjoyment and generosity.

Application

Enjoy work, wealth and possessions before God, as he has given to you. Be content and generous.

Purpose

1. Expose some of our wrong thinking about work, wealth and possessions
2. Give Qoheleth's view of work, wealth, and possessions
3. Help people think differently about what work is, and change the way they work accordingly

Introduction: The idol of status

You may have gathered from the talk's title that tonight we're going to consider work, wealth, possessions, and security in Ecclesiastes.

But before we look at what Ecclesiastes has to say, I think we need to paint a backdrop of some of our presuppositions about work.

I'm going to outline how I think work, wealth and possessions function in our culture, then I'm going to open for questions and comments, so you can say up front if you think I've got it wrong.

In essence, I think that work, wealth, and possessions determine status in our culture. By status, I mean our social standing, our place in society's pecking-order.

And effectively, status is something other people confer on us. It's determined by what other people think of us. We are quite free to ignore their opinion, if we so choose.

More often than not, though, we buy into other's views of us. We believe what our culture tells us about ourselves. So our sense of self-worth gets very tied up with work, wealth, and possessions.

We feel the need to improve our status, to improve our standing in the eyes of others. We think that will make us feel better about ourselves.

I think work is the primary determiner of our status. It's the first question we ask someone when we meet them, "What do you do?"

It was one of the questions I put on the questionnaire last week: do you like telling people how you fill your week?

If you feel proud of your job, or ashamed of your job, or ashamed because you don't have a paid job, chances are you're subject to our culture's rules of status.

The reason I say **work** is the most important factor in determining your status is that it seems to trump money. That is, if I had left school at fifteen and been apprenticed to a plumber, by now I could own my own plumbing business and be making a tonne of cash.

But that would be viewed as less prestigious than if, say, I were working on a PhD and tutoring at a university. As a plumber I would earn more money, but I would have less status.

I think you can see work determining status sometimes even in people who are in paid ministry. They're not really able to compete on the money front, so they chase other status symbols. They jostle to see who's the best preacher, who has the biggest youth group, and so on. It's a real danger for church leaders, so we should be praying for them.

[PPT — BLANK]

The thing that we often ignore about the rules of status is that they're totally arbitrary. Humans are capable of competing over anything.

I was speaking recently with a man who told me proudly that he had won a ribbon at the Royal Easter Show for his African violets. I had no idea that you could get ribbons for such things, or even that getting a ribbon was a desirable thing.

In Jane Austen's world, status was linked to social class. Again, that that was more important than money. In *Pride and Prejudice*, [PPT] the Bennett family are poor relative to others in their social class, but they are nevertheless landed gentry. [PPT] It is their social class that determines whom they can marry, not their money. And boy did that turn out well for them. [PPT — Firth]

By contrast, Mr Gardiner, who is Mrs Bennett's brother, is of a lower social class because he is a merchant. He is wealthier than the Bennetts, but a lower class.

[PPT — BLANK]

Somewhat more removed from us is the Cubeo tribe of the north-western Amazon. For them to achieve status, they were to be good hunters, and particularly of jaguars. When a man killed a jaguar, he would keep a tooth to thread on a necklace.

Thus the Cubeo chiefs would wear large jaguar-tooth necklaces, and, just for good measure, an armadillo girdle.

Now, I have never envied a man his capacity to kill a jaguar, any more than I have envied someone's capacity to grow violets. And yet, in the right time and place, these things are prestigious.

The laws of status are arbitrary and change across time and space. Sometimes it doesn't have to be much space at all. While I was living in Chatswood and studying in Newtown, it occurred to me that a Jeep Grand Cherokee might be an object of envy in the one place, and an object of scorn in the other.

Are there questions you'd like to ask or comments you'd like to make about my observations of the way work, wealth, and possessions function in our culture?

Well, tonight we're going to let the wisdom of Ecclesiastes cut across our culture. It will be difficult, and it may demand big changes of us. So how about we pray as we begin?

Almighty God, we thank you again for your word. Thank you in particular for Ecclesiastes. We ask that as we read your word tonight you might give us quick minds and sensitive consciences. Please give us freely of your spirit so we can see how we need to change, and so that we'll be empowered to do so. Amen.

It will be really handy as we go if you can open up Ecclesiastes in your Bibles, which is on page **, and if keep a copy of this outline in front of you as we go.

A quick recap of what we've seen the last two weeks:

The first week, [PPT] we met Qoheleth — MythBuster, the shadowy speaker of the book of Ecclesiastes. [PPT] We saw that he said everything is *hebel* — a Hebrew word that means 'mist' or 'vapour'. We've been thinking of it as fleeting, futile, and puzzling. That is, everything, life, is fleeting, it's brief, it's futile and it's puzzling — you can't quite work it out.

Last week, [PPT] we looked at the right way to live our fleeting, futile, and puzzling lives. We saw that we should enjoy life, because that's God's good gift, will, and purpose for us. And we saw that disaster and death will inevitably come upon us.

That's why the series is called 'Good things that won't last': life is full of good things to be enjoyed — good things that won't last, but good things nevertheless. [PPT — BLANK]

This week, we're going to look at a bad way that people typically try to cope with a *hebel* world, as we consider work, wealth and possessions.

1 Qoheleth's perspective

a someone who had it all vv 4–10

And really, Qoheleth gives us his perspective right at the opening of the book. Have a look with me in your Bibles at Ecclesiastes 2.

Verse 4:

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man.

9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour.

Qoheleth had it all. He was the Rupert Murdoch of his day. All the good things his world could provide him, he had in spades. He had wealth, he had wives, he had power.

And yet, what was his assessment of all this? Verse 11:

11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was *hebel* — pointless — a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

As we saw in the first week, you can't gain anything from life. You can't end up with any surplus. That's simply not the way the world is set up.

But Qoheleth notices that work in this world has some other pitfalls as well. Point 2 a on your outlines.

- **You can't hold on to your work**

The first pitfall Qoheleth notices about work is that you can't take your work with you.

Just jump down to verse 18 of chapter 2 with me:

18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun (literally, I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun), because I must leave it to the one who comes after me.

19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is *hebel*.

20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun.

21 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 *hebel* and a great misfortune.

Whatever remains of your work at the end of your life — whether it's a business, or a good reputation, or just money — you're just going to have to pass it on to someone else. Your life's work is then *hebel* in a double sense: your work expires when you do, so it's both fleeting and uncontrollable.

▪ **the confessions of a workaholic**

The second pitfall that Qoheleth notices is that people tend to work too much. Chapter 2 verse 22:

22 What does a man get for all the toil and ***anxious striving*** with which he labours under the sun?

23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is *hebel*.

Here are the confessions of a workaholic. There's an admission that working too much is bad for you. It causes anxiety, pain, grief, and sleeplessness.

And surely our society knows this better than did Qoheleth's. The invention of the light globe has ensured that we can work longer hours than was possible in the ancient world. As I mentioned in the first week, Australians work longer hours than almost everyone else in the OECD. Ask just about anyone how they're going, and they'll say they're busy.

Meanwhile, rates of anxiety and depression rise. According to *beyondblue*, depression now affects one in five Australians at some point in their lifetime.

Overwork is bad for us, and yet we so willingly subject ourselves to it. We make the decision, for example, to take out a large mortgage, which effectively enslaves us on one side to the bank and on the other to our employers.

And for what, asks Qoheleth.

- **driven on by envy**

Qoheleth suggests one reason we might be tempted to push ourselves to work too much. He's fairly brutal. Have a look with me at chapter 4, verse 4: [PPT]

4 And I saw that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour. This too is *hebel*, a chasing after the wind.

One thing that pushes us to work so hard is envy. We want to get ahead. We want to achieve quickly. We are driven by anxiety about our status. [PPT — BLANK]

Interestingly, the people we envy most intensely are those who are closest to us. That is, I don't imagine many of us are likely to compare ourselves to Bill Gates or Rupert Murdoch. They're just in another league.

But we **do** compare ourselves to our colleagues. We wonder if the boss will prefer them to us. We think about how we can secure that promotion for ourselves.

Or in the family arena, we don't compare our children to those who have been hot-housed, who learned to play violin before they could feed themselves, who when they sang 'Old McDonald had a farm', knew that on that farm he had a *sus domesticus*, with an oink, oink here, and an oink, oink there.

But we **do** compare our children to their cousins. And we compare them to others in their class. We can't help ourselves.

Our whole society pushes us in that direction. That's why we ask ludicrous questions like, 'If $a - b = b - 3 = 6$, what is the value of a ?' Who cares? **We** do, if it gives us another way to compare ourselves to others.

I think the classic situation for comparing ourselves is the high school reunion. Here's a group of people who once were our peers, but now threaten to have outstripped us.

I have a school reunion later this year. I can't imagine I'll go, but I'm sure it would be amusing to turn up and let them know I still don't have a real job, but I am thinking of working for a puppy school next year.

[PAUSE]

So work under the sun has these three pitfalls: you can't control what happens to your work after death; you'll be tempted to work too much, while you live, and; chances are you'll be driven to do so by envy.

b Qoheleth's solutions

Having exposed our problems, Qoheleth mercifully proposes some solutions.

- **be satisfied with what God has given you**

Not surprisingly, Qoheleth says the first cure for us is to be satisfied with what God has given us.

Have another look with me at chapter 2 verse 24:

24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is **from the hand of God**,
25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.

Again, this is the gift of God. It is part of how we have been created: to be content in our work.

We won't be content as long as we're scrambling to climb the corporate ladder. We'll never be content if our sense of self-worth is pegged to our work. We will always be comparing ourselves to others, and feeling envious.

And with job stability how it is at the moment, if you peg your self worth to your job, you're setting yourself up for disaster.

- **have tranquillity with one handful**

Qoheleth summarizes his approach to work nicely for us over in chapter 4, verses 5–6:

5 The fool folds his hands and [literally] eats his own flesh.

6 Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

The ideal for Qoheleth is to have one handful with tranquillity. You want one handful — enough to sustain you. You can have peace with that.

And this approach avoids two errors. On the one hand, it avoids the laziness that leads to destruction. The fool lazily folds his hands, and is left with nothing to eat but himself.

It's the same kind of principle Paul applied in 2 Thess 3:10 [PPT]:

If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

Laziness is no way to cope with the world. As Ecclesiastes 10:18 says, [PPT]

18 If a person is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks.

But overwork is equally foolish. There is no point having two handfuls if it requires an endless pursuit of the wind, a futile desire to achieve a surplus.

[PPT — BLANK]

[PAUSE]

Unfortunately, the way we as individuals and as a society madly scramble about to get two handfuls for ourselves, means that many are left poor and oppressed, without a single handful (4:1-3; 5:8-9). This, too, for Qoheleth, is a great evil.

[PAUSE]

- **work for the good of others**

Finally, Qoheleth shows that the best antidote to envy in our work is to work for the good of others.

Chapter 4, verse 9: [PPT]

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

We should not be motivated by envy for our neighbour, but love. Even if our neighbour is our enemy, we are to serve them.

We are created for community. We are created to be co-operative. Perhaps in some circumstances the person who works alone shall reach their destination quicker. Perhaps they will end up with more money.

But along the way, they will have missed the point of life. They will have had to dig their way out of ditches themselves. In fact, they probably will have had to push other people into ditches.

[PPT — BLANK]

It is possible to proceed in life with a single-minded self-focus. But that is the way of the sociopath.

I think if we were to take ethic to heart, if we were truly to put it into practice, it would revolutionize the way we work. We are so heavily geared to individual advancement.

But this for Qoheleth is wicked, and it is stupid. That's not how life is meant to be. If we forge ahead on our own, at the expense of others, we've missed the point. We're doing damage to ourselves as well!

We've bought the lie that our value, our status lies in our work. We've missed the fact that as humans we are designed to be communal. Work is a communal activity.

For many of us, we might not have much control over our workplaces.

If that's us, perhaps the test is if we can truly rejoice when we help improve someone else's standing at work. Can we delight when someone who deserves a promotion gets one, even if it means we were passed over?

If we saw success as communal, relationship-building, rather than individual, we would begin genuinely to rejoice in the welfare of others.

We're going to move on to wealth and possessions in a moment, but I thought we might pause for a couple of minutes, to listen to a song called 'Fred Jones Part 2'. It's by Ben Folds, and it's almost as if he'd been reflecting on Ecclesiastes as he wrote it.

3 Wealth and possessions in a *hebel* world 5:10–20

a the problems with wealth and possessions

We turn now to consider wealth and possessions in a *hebel* world — point 3 on your outlines.

- **love of money can never be satisfied**

The first problem that Qoheleth notices with regard to wealth is that a desire for wealth can never be satisfied.

Will you turn in your Bibles to chapter 5 verse 10:

10 Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is *hebel* — pointless.

11 As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?

Our appetite for money grows as it is fed. It is insatiable. I don't think we believe this. We seem able to deceive ourselves no end, here. But we need to recognize that however much money we have, we always think we need just a bit more. When we get a pay-rise, our spending increases proportionally.

We do the same thing with possessions. Think of all the possessions you've ever owned. Has any one of them brought you fulfilment? Of course not!

Why, then, do we persist in thinking that the *next* thing we buy will satisfy us. We're idiots on this front! All the evidence of our senses tells us that material goods will not make us happy, and yet we grind ourselves into the ground to acquire them.

And it seems to me that our whole world is blind, here. We consistently seek economic solutions to problems. Whether you believe in a completely unregulated market, or in a communist state, or anything in-between, there is a fundamental assumption that humans would be better off if only they were richer.

Nonsense! That's not what wealth is for!

Money **will not** make you happy.

Money will not make you **happy**.

Money will not make you happy.

Money will not make **you** happy.

That's not what it's for.

[PAUSE]

Like everything else, wealth is *hebel*. It is fleeting and elusive. You can't hold onto it.

Verse 13 of chapter 5:

13 I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:

wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,

14 or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him.

15 Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand.

16 This too is a grievous evil:

As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind?

Wealth is lost in two ways here. In verse 14, it is lost through misfortune. This is what happened to Jenny Lamont, a mother who now begs for money to feed her children. Listen to this interview:

[PLAY INTERVIEW]

So you can lose your money through misfortune. It's amazing how quickly it can disappear, when you listen to Jenny's story.

Even if you manage to avoid major misfortune like this, you cannot take any money with you when you die.

You cannot hold on to your wealth.

Therefore, there is no security in this world. Our obsession with superannuation, investments, and insurance is daft. Such things cannot preserve us from disaster if God chooses to visit it on us (Eccl 7:14).

It is stupid to seek security in work, wealth, and possessions.

And worse than stupid, it is wicked. Jesus categorically says that "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13).

Such is the power of wealth over us that it demands the allegiance that is owed only to God.

Why bow down to such an idol, to our own destruction?

Mark 8:34 Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Mark 8:35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Mark 8:36 For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

It is **hard** for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Luke 18:25). It is hard. So often we say, "It's hard, but it's not impossible." Let me remind us again that it is hard.

You may be able to pass a camel through the eye of a needle, but it shall end up one long bloody string.

b Qoheleth's solutions

[PAUSE]

So what is Qoheleth's solution?

- **be satisfied with what God has given you**

At the risk of teaching you to suck eggs, the solution once again is to be satisfied with what God has given you. Chapter 5, verse 18:

18 Then I realised that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him — for this is his lot.

The purpose of work is not to amass wealth, but to be satisfied with work. That is, work is a good end in itself. Work is made for humanity. It's stitched into the fabric of creation.

But humanity's chief end is not work. We need to be content with what we do and what we have, rather than chase after the wind, in pursuit of financial gain, or some kind of security for a trouble-free life.

- **even if you're rich 5:19–6:2**

It's worth pointing out, here, that Qoheleth doesn't simplistically say 'poor is good; wealthy is bad'. The aim here is contentment. And you can be content with much, or content with little (1 Tim 6:6–11).

So, verse 19 of chapter 5:

19 Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work — this is a gift of God.

God **does** grant some people both wealth and contentment. Some people manage to amass wealth without really trying. They don't work too hard, and it doesn't keep them awake at night.

But this is an exceptional case. Qoheleth goes straight on in chapter 6 to say:

1 I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men:

2 God gives a man wealth, possessions and honour, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is *hebel*, a grievous evil.

Even if you lack no material thing, God may not grant you joy. It is not work, wealth, or possessions that will bring you joy. Joy is a gift from God.

[PPT] So while you *might* be happy with a large house and a pricey car, you need to recognize the important *caveat*: [PPT] happiness is not included.

You might be happy if you have a large house and a pricey car, but it won't be *because* of the large house and the pricey car. Material goods will never satisfy you.

Rather, in Qoheleth's view, we should be content with the simple pleasures of food and drink and love that God has given us, and we should be **content** in our work, rather than consumed by it.

4 Living rightly in a *hebel* world

So, conclusion, to live rightly in this *hebel* world, with regard to work, wealth, and possessions, we'll need to smash the idol of status, and we'll need to reflect the character of the giving God.

a smash the idol of status

That is, we have to stop bowing the knee to our rabid desire for status. It seems to be this desire that drives us ever on, to achieve more and more, to make a name for ourselves, to build our own private Babel.

This is flatly contradictory to Qoheleth's approach to life, where everything — including enjoyment of life — depends on God.

We must learn to depend on God.

And we must learn to value what God values. How dare we value one occupation above another, because of worldly prestige?

How dare we create a pecking order of people in our minds, according to their jobs?

How dare we despise the task of raising the children God has given us?

How dare we devote ourselves to our work above our service to our family, and to God's family?

Let us tear down that idol in the way that we think, and let us tear it down through the way that we live.

b reflect the character of the giving God

And as we do so, we shall come to reflect the character of the giving God. The verb most associated with God in the book of Ecclesiastes is the verb to give.

God is the great giver. Our generosity can only ever be a pale reflection of his, who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, and so graciously promises with him to give us all things (Rom. 8:32).

Our generosity will be a pale reflection of God's, but it must be a reflection. It's what we were made for.

Will you pray with me?

Almighty God, our heavenly father, we admit before you this evening that we do not perfectly share your values. We confess that there are times we long to honour ourselves, rather than honouring you.

Please forgive us, and change us.

Thankyou that you are the giver of all good things, and especially of the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom alone we can come to you and call you father.

Please grant us contentment in our lives as we rely on you, and look to you for all our needs, and all our joy. Amen.