

01-07-22b Ecclesiastes

Let's resume our study now in Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Solomon has used a variety of devices thus far in this book to achieve emphasis. He has used illustrations from nature. He has used symbols in different ways.

He has used examples of things that he has personally done, things that he has experienced, and things that he has seen. We're currently in chapter 4 being taken to different views of life or different episodes that Solomon himself has witnessed. He says, When I consider the oppression that goes on in the world, there is no good side to oppression.

It's not any better to be the oppressor than to be the oppressed. It's evil anyway you slice it. And it is so bad and it is so widespread that people who have died and don't have to look upon the oppression on the earth are better off than those of us who are still alive.

And those who have yet to be in existence are better off still because they have never had to see it. And I think there is a common view, even among unbelievers in the world, that oppression is a bad thing and that having to look at it and to be helpless to do anything about it is frustrating. It's a hard thing to look at.

You can see pictures they always have, especially on Saturday afternoons and sometimes late in the evenings, they'll have organizations that want to go feed the children or save the hungry or do something in a far off land. Some of them are Christian ministries and some are not. But they're showing pictures of children with swollen bellies and flies and disease and all these different things in far off lands.

Well, why do those conditions prevail? Do those countries not have a government? Yes, they do. Do the people in the government look like these people that are living in squalor? No, they don't. So that's oppression.

The government is not looking out for the people. Their policies, their siphoning off and stealing of Red Cross goods and reselling them on the black market. I mean, there's governments that sponsor this kind of thing.

They routinely derail shipments of aid and use it for their own economic gain to put in the coffers of their unstable and unpredictable government, and the people for whom the aid was sent never receive it. Well, this is another example of oppression, and it's a hard thing to look at. There are people who are suffering that, and their country is suffering that, and it is a part of the plan of God, and it is a demonstration of what happens in a pagan nation.

You know, these godless areas of the world where they've got meals running around on four legs all around them, but they consider them sacred, and so they won't partake. And so people starve right next to a herd of cattle because the cattle might be holy or somebody's ancestor or

whatever. So there is oppression on every side, and really, even though the oppressors have power, they don't have a comforter either.

And in some cases, you think it would be better to not have to look at this anymore or to never have seen it. It is evil work that is done under the sun. So the things that we're seeing here in Chapter 4 are going to be differentiated, different categories of things that Solomon is going to look at.

In this case, the work that is being done, we've seen a lot of ma'asa, which is the work, the labor that man is toiling in during his lifetime under the sun. Well, this is work in verses 1 through 3 that is intrinsically evil. Oppression and all of the evils that oppression causes, that's a bad thing.

The work that is being done is evil. Now in verse 4, we're going to work at toil and skillful work. And this is good work that is being done, but there is still evil associated with it because now it's going to engender bad attitudes.

You see the contrast? In the first case, the work itself is bad. Oppression, there isn't a way to justify oppression. In the second case, it's not the work that's evil.

It is the attitudes. Again, verse 4 of Ecclesiastes 4, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work that a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is havel and a chasing after wind.

It is temporary, but it is nevertheless going to be an example among several of what is hard to look at. The word that is translated here as skillful work is Sharon. You may recall that there's a powerful man in Israel right now who has that as his last name, Sharon.

Talk about the Rose of Sharon and that sort of thing. Well, Sharon means something that is skillful, that is a delight to behold. And this is a good work in contrast to being an evil work.

And it has to do with skill, something that reflects skillful labor. That's the result of diligence and spending time in learning a trade or a craft. And so someone does this and develops it, and what happens? It says a man is envied by his neighbor.

Well, this word is interesting also for envy because it is the word Qana, Q-A-N-A. And the root of this word means to be read. And it has the idea of being flushed with a passion, and it is sometimes used of a good thing and sometimes used of a bad passion.

God is represented as having this passion in some cases, and people can have this passion against evil. And so it comes to mean, you know, our God is a jealous God, and that idea where He is jealous of His people and He looks out for them and has very strong feeling. It comes to mean any sort of very strong feeling, the kind of feeling that would make your face flush red.

It can be passion. It can be anger. It can be envy or jealousy.

It can be zeal. You can be either jealous or zealous under this same word, and it's translated just about evenly. Half the time it's zealous and half the time it's jealous.

So what is the meaning in this context? Well, you have a man who is doing a skillful work, and his neighbor looks at it, and a strong feeling of some sort is engendered in him. Well, we call this keeping up with the Joneses. We call this competition.

We call it... A lot of competition is motivated by jealousy or by envy or by wanting to... You see somebody else do something well, and you say, I think I can do that. Maybe I can even do it better. And you throw rocks at the guy that's doing the skillful work and say, well, you know, you missed a spot there when you were doing that.

And you say, well, if you think you're so smart, why don't you do it? And somebody says, well, I think I will. And so I think there's kind of a general word that's used here because whenever somebody does a work or accomplishes tasks in a skillful way, other people are going to look at it, and it's going to create a reaction. They're going to sometimes dislike it.

People want to pull down somebody that does something great. They want to find the flaw. There's a great sport that's done in the media where somebody who achieves something in politics or in entertainment or something, they've got to go dig up the dirt because it's interesting.

And you get the idea that people like to smash the glass. They want to bring somebody down. They can't be as famous or as notable or make the impact that this person made, so they're going to sort of be the antithesis.

They're going to gain their notoriety by tearing them down or by competing with them or by having something. Again, when we were talking about integrity on Friday nights, about not changing because people are around. If you have integrity, if you've been transformed on the inside and your life on the outside reflects that inner transformation that God accomplishes and we're living the life of faith, we're walking on the narrow road, we are doing what we do heartily as unto the Lord and not unto men, the fact that somebody near you is doing something similar or maybe even doing it better or is doing some skillful work in your periphery isn't going to change the way you view life or the way you behave or how you set your priorities.

There is a syndrome that takes place in ministry among pastors and among evangelists and other leaders of faith-based groups where you get to a certain point, you're functioning in a certain way and then somebody over here does something and their crowd is bigger or their impact is larger or their ministry is more far-reaching in some fashion. And so the guy says, well, I want to do that also. That guy is making tapes, I want to make tapes.

Or that guy's got videos, I want to have videos. Or he's broadcasting over FX, I want to have an FX. Or he's on the Internet, I want to put myself on the Internet.

It isn't exactly competition and it isn't exactly jealousy, but it is a change in priority and it's a change in deciding what your goals are based on looking over at somebody else who seems to be succeeding and doing well at something. It can be as simple as the way somebody prints their notes. I remember a long time ago I went to a church and saw a guy that printed his notes all ahead of time and he had a particular format where the text was over on the left, the actual biblical text, and then over on the right he had his points and his notes and things and parallel passages and things that he was going to go to.

And the whole thing was laid out. I thought, boy, that is really slick. He is so well organized.

He's got the whole thing laid out ahead of time, printed it out ahead of time. People don't even need their Bible. And that's when I stopped.

I thought, people don't even need their Bible. You get these notes. I went ahead and got in my word processor and made the format and did up for a couple of weeks.

I did my notes that way. Then I got to noticing nobody was using their Bible. They were just reading everything off of the notes.

I thought, well, now this is not good. I don't want to be encouraging people to just have their Bible lay fallow and collect dust. There's something about, for me, and I think for everyone, there's something about having your own Bible and looking things up and seeing it on the page and what book it is and here's the context that surrounds it.

And if you have something that piques your interest and you want to read on down, you've got it right there. You've got your own Bible. People died to give us the English Bible that is in our lap here.

And that's why I don't typically print notes at all. Once in a while I will, but generally I don't because I think as the Word of God is communicated and God the Holy Spirit does His work both on my end and on your end, it is going to meet a variety of needs. It is going to, you can hear this lesson now and it strikes you a certain way.

You could listen to a tape of this lesson two months from now and it might strike you a completely different way because you've moved, you're in the outfield there and you might have been in center field one time and now you're in right field. I wouldn't say you're in left field. But your circumstances can change.

The things that are percolating around in your mind and in your soul can change. And when the Word of God comes, it hits us right where we are. And if we're in a different place, then it's going to strike us differently.

And that's the power of the Word of God. It always has an effect no matter what you're thinking

about or what you're doing. If you pay any attention to it at all and give the Holy Spirit any kind of sway, it is going to do its work.

And that's why two people, spouses for example, can sit and listen to a lesson and afterward when they begin to discuss it, they might have picked up something that just went right by me. I didn't even remember somebody saying that and Patty will have heard it. Or something strikes her and she brings it up and talks about it later.

And maybe there was something different that kind of stood out in my mind. But that is the great thing about the Word of God. Well, you have the presence of someone else and what they're doing makes a difference.

And just because somebody else prints their notes, that works for them. That's good for them. God maybe gifted them with organization and the ability to do that.

And I'm not saying that it's evil to print out notes ahead of time. I think it's great for people that are built that way. But everybody has to live their life in the light of God's Word before the Lord as best they can.

And to look across the fence, to look in the neighboring row, we always talk about, boy, that's a tough row to hoe. I got to thinking about that. I used that expression once or twice this past week and I realized that there are people who don't have any clue what that phrase means.

You look at somebody that's having difficulties, you say, boy, they've got a tough row to hoe. Well, if you're in the country and you've done gardening, you know that you can have a lot of people in a large field or in a garden and everybody's assigned the row that they are supposed to hoe. They've got to take the hoe and chop the weeds out from around the growing plants.

And some rows are better than others. Some of them are really easy and the plants are widely spaced. Others, they might be narrow spaced and full of rocks or brambles or other things in there.

And so as everybody starts at one end of the field, they all come out of the truck and grab their hoe and take a big swig of water and wrap their bandana around their head. And then they get at the beginning of the row and they start hoeing. They're going down this long row.

Well, people with an easy row get ahead and people with a tough row are kind of behind. And so as you're going backward down the row and you look around, you say, boy, they must have a tough row to hoe because they're not making the progress you're making. Well, it's easy to look at somebody and say, you know, they're doing something, I need to do it.

Look how skillful they are. Look how successful they are. They're successful because they do this thing.

You can look on Christian television if you're a communicator of God's Word and you see people who can fill stadiums and fill big auditoriums. And what do they do? Well, among other things, they will prance and dance and rant and wide sweeping arm gestures and wave their Bible around, hold their Bible in a certain way. There's one guy I've noticed, he has a grip that he gets on his Bible so that the pages ruffle every time he flings it around.

He's got a soft cover Bible and he always holds it the same way. And when he starts gesticulating, you can see the Bible just a flopping. I figure he must go through about three Bibles a year waving it around that way, not from reading it or studying it, but just from waving it, just the drag on the pages getting frayed.

Well, and you will notice that as younger, as I get older, now I see younger preachers that haven't been around before, and they've got the same sort of twang and the same sort of verbal mannerisms and the same kind of prance. And they say, ah, at the end of all of their phrases when they say, the Lord and His Word. And they say, ah, at the end of every little phrase.

Well, you know, everybody isn't born that way. They don't talk that way when they're at the shopping center trying to find a battery for their car. Have you got a battery for my car? I mean, they don't talk that way.

It's an affectation. It's something they looked over the fence and saw somebody else doing that and they said, He's skillful. Look at the crowds he's pulling in.

I'm going to sweat and puff and rant and dance and do these things and repeat myself and whip people into a froth and into a frenzy and have a guy playing the organ behind, and he'll get all frenzied with the music when I make a frenzy point, and then he'll calm down and play soothing things when I take a rest. And they do this tension and release thing all the way through, if you ever notice. They'll build up to a point of tension, and they'll get frenzied in their eyes.

They'll get big around. You see the white all the way around, and there's sweat drops flying every which way, and they're whipping people up and, you know, turn to your neighbor and give them a high five and say this and the other, and then they calm down. Tension and release, tension and release.

This is a well-known technique for manipulating a crowd, and if you watch closely, these guys are schooled in the art of crowd manipulation, and they understand. It's just like a movie or even a book. Why are books in chapters? The girls love it when we read chapter books because every chapter builds up to a point of tension, and then in the next chapter you have a release, and then it builds up to a new point of tension, and you have your cliffhanger at the end.

This is what keeps people's interest, and so if you've got to talk to somebody for 40 minutes and you want to just use techniques of listener manipulation, this is what you do. Well, these people learn that because they saw somebody doing what they thought was a skillful work, so I'm going

to do that same thing. Solomon says, This is havel.

It is grasping for the wind. Do you really want to spend your life looking at other people, seeing the ways that they are skillful and the way that they succeed, and trying to copy and emulate everybody around you? Do you really want to let yourself be manipulated in that way? You're actually sort of chaining yourself to everyone around you. You say, well, I'm in some field of endeavor.

There's one thing in learning from someone else's mistakes or seeing the things at work, you get taught by somebody who knows how to do something, ostensibly at least. There seem to be a lot of failed musicians who teach music and a lot of failed artists who teach art and a lot of failed computer guys who go teach computers, and we're not talking about that, but you obviously learn from people who are skilled, and you can learn from others' mistakes. You can see the things at work and don't go off and just do dumb things, but it is a bad idea to have your face get flushed, to look over and be motivated to do something.

You're not already looking around trying to find the best way to do something. You were plotting along doing fine, and then you looked over and you saw somebody doing it skillfully, and you said, hey, I'm going to copy that. I'm going to borrow from that.

I'm going to pull that in. This happened in music back in the 50s when the race records were catching on and getting popular and the black musicians sang with so much verve and people liked to dance to their music, and so you had people like Pat Boone. Pat Boone had this vanilla milkshake kind of a career going on, and so then he tried to sing Tutti Frutti by Little Richard.

Well, you listen to Little Richard sing Tutti Frutti and you listen to Pat Boone sing Tutti Frutti, and, you know, it's just not the same. But Little Richard, whatever else you want to say about him, he had a hit record with that style, just like old Johnny B. Goode there did, hopping along on one leg playing his guitar. Well, a lot of white musicians thought, well, I'm going to get a hold of that and incorporate that because they were jealous of the success of the race records.

Well, we do this. It's in our nature. And Solomon says, you've got to watch out.

This is Havel. You may actually get another big crowd. These young evangelists and preacher guys, they can fill a house just like the old guys.

Oral Roberts is kind of resting on his praying hand statue or something now. He's not out there, you know, whipping the crowds into a froth doing tent meetings. Younger men are doing that, but they're copying his style and the things that he did, and they're getting the same kind of success.

But a lot of that, if one is not careful, is just vapor and chasing the wind. When you get to the end of your life, go stand before the judgment, there's not going to be anything of substance. Then in verse 5, Solomon says, the fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.

Better a handful with quietness than both hands full with toil and grasping for the wind. Well, this, I think, communicates to us the principle of balance. Do you just say, well, because we're observing that some work is evil, like oppression, and some work is just motivated by looking at the other guy, competition, emulation, copying, seeing something that works and trying to do the same thing because you want success.

So do you just stop working altogether? Is it impossible to do any kind of work and have it be meaningful? Are you just sick of plodding along doing what it is you're supposed to do? Well, there are extremes to which you do not want to go, and if you just fold up your hands and don't do anything, that's foolish. I mentioned recently, and it occurs to me again as an illustration, that sometimes you say, you know, every time I get into a conversation with this person, I end up getting angry, or they get angry, or when I converse with them, it just always turns bad. I'm just not going to converse at all.

I'm going to give them a silent treatment. I'm not going to say anything. You think, well, that's one way to ensure that I won't engage in a sin of the tongue or cause them to engage in a sin of the tongue, and we both get into mental attitude sins, and it just turns into a big cesspool.

Well, there is a time for separating from someone that you constantly wind up. It's like you put the two things together, and it produces mental attitude sin. Any time the two elements are there, it's like epoxy.

You put them together, and you get smelly glue. You put these two people together, you get gossip and maligning and judging and all kinds of mental attitude sins, or you get anger and bitterness and wrangling and arguing and that sort of thing. Well, sometimes you can't separate.

Sometimes it's not appropriate to separate. The challenge is to overcome the difficulty and be the agent of change in that situation, and the answer is not to just stop talking. The answer is not to separate and never get in that situation again.

The answer is to be different, to be transformed, to find the problem in your soul that causes you to stumble and let God fix it, go back in and not make that same mistake, and you be the agent of change. If only one half of the epoxy is getting there, it's never going to turn to glue. And if the bitterness in your soul and the rancor in your soul and the lack of self-control and the lack of perception, you're not watching and praying.

You remember our study on watch and pray? This can be an occasion to learn to be different and to overcome and succeed in a circumstance where you've always failed before. A besetting sin type thing. Well, same thing here.

Just because labor doing something skillfully causes other people to feel bad doesn't mean you should stop doing it. Just because something you do creates ripples doesn't mean you should just stop doing it. There may be another answer.

The fool, when you start looking at labor, saying, well, look how many different ways labor can go wrong. This would be like people saying, oh, the world is so evil, we're just not going to have any kids. We're not going to bring kids into the world because it's so evil, full of oppression.

We just won't have any kids. That'll solve that problem. Well, the fool is the one that folds his hands and quits working because there's so many problems with work and toil.

What does he end up doing? He folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. He winds up having to cannibalize himself. Elizabeth thought this was happening to one of her fish up there, one of these betas with the big, long, flowing tail.

She put it in there, and as she watched the hours go by, his tail kept getting shorter and shorter. She said, well, he's just eating his own tail. He's consuming his own flesh.

The problem is the fish can't bend around and reach its tail with its mouth, and it's kind of a silly thing for a fish to do. A fish has got tail rot. But there was only one fish in the bowl, and she thought, well, fish eat each other's tails when there's more than one fish.

Well, this fish was losing a tail. He must be eating his own tail. He's consuming his own flesh.

Well, the fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. And you can look at parallel passages for this in Proverbs 6, verse 10, for example, where Solomon says, How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your need like an armed man. So, you know, there is a strong work ethic in the Bible.

Same thing over in Proverbs 24, 33. He says, he repeats that very same proverb. You go back a little bit to verse 30 of Proverbs 24.

I passed by the field of the sluggard, and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense. And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles. Its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.

When I saw, I reflected upon it. I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, then your poverty will come as a robber, and your want like an armed man.

So, it is not the answer just because something seems to go wrong or it seems to create problems to just stop. There are ladies, I don't know any at this time, but I know in the past, that have in their marriage, they are the ones who are interested in the things of God, and their husband is not. And so they would get up and go to church on Sunday, and their husband wouldn't go.

And then this seemed to kind of rankle the husband, and he would kind of give him grief and

would sort of taunt them or make snide remarks when they were getting ready to go or after they came back, and would sort of parade what all he had gotten done on Sunday morning while they were just sitting down there at the church in the air conditioning. And a lady in that situation might decide, you know, maybe I ought to just not go so that it doesn't cause this tension and this friction. And that, of course, is not the answer.

Well, all of these things tie in with what we studied in terms of integrity. We don't do what we do, or we don't stop doing what we do because of people or their reaction. To stop with all of Solomon's views on the toils and labor of this life and all the things that he has pointed out that can go wrong, the answer is not to stop.

Verse 6, Better a handful with quietness than both hands full with toil and grasping for the wind. Well, what have we here? If the answer is not to fold your hands and stop working, the opposite extreme is also not true. You also should not become a workaholic and be working 10, 12, 14 hours a day, laboring and striving, saying, well, Solomon said, you know, don't fold your hands and consume your own flesh, so I'll just spend all my time in my labors, in my efforts, whatever they may be.

It's not always work in terms of getting an income. It can be any opportunity that you have, housewives being a housewife or businessmen running a business or employees being employees or hobbies pursuing hobbies, people that get into genealogy or get into whatever other hobbies there might be, people can just pour themselves into it. I saw a thing on fencing.

They were talking about how fencing is coming back as a sport and people are getting more interested in it, and kids who are kind of in the awkward squad, they can't run very fast, they're not very physically adept at other sports, often take up fencing, and they were saying fencing is really about 80% mental and 20% footwork. They said it's a lot like chess, where you really have to get into the mind of your opponent and be able to predict where he's going to parry and thrust. And so they showed all these in the white suits, they've got electrical things now so they can tell if you get tapped by the other guy's foil.

But they talked to a little girl, she was about the same age as my girls, about 10 years old, 10 or 11, and she said, Oh, well, I come down here and I fence 3 or 4 hours a day, 5 or 6 days a week. Now, that is too much fencing for a kid that age, just like somebody that practiced piano 4 hours a day, 6 or 7 days a week. That is too much.

When you're in your growth years, you need a smorgasbord of experiences. You don't want to be just doing one thing and saying, Well, I want to become an Olympic fencing champion or something. I mean, do that later, but 4 hours a day, 6 days a week, that's way too much.

So Solomon, I think, is alluding to that here when he says, It's better to have a handful with quietness than to have both hands full. This is the difference between just having a sufficiency and going for all you can get. One handful is enough.

He's been saying all the way through, you know, this grasping for the wind, you always come up and your hand is empty. If you can just get one handful, be content with that. But don't go nuts and try to get both hands full.

You can even do this with the Word of God. I've had friends, and I probably was even guilty of this myself for a while, where I thought, Well, you know, if the Word of God is the answer, then I'm just going to cram myself so full of the Word of God that I split open with it, and I would spend, you know, I would listen to 5, 6, 7 hour and 15 minute Bible classes in a day on a Saturday or something when I was at school and everybody was gone. You can spend just an inordinate amount of time on that one thing, and you can push almost anything to excess.

Just get your handful. A handful is all you need. You don't need a double handful, because one handful with quietness, with peace, is better than both hands full but toil and chasing the wind.

You've got to be sure that you're accomplishing something that stays in your hand. And as soon as you start pushing something too far, it's not going to be staying in your hand anymore. You're thinking you have both hands full, but you've turned it into hobble.

You've turned it into grasping after the wind. You think you've got both hands full. You open them up, and there's going to be nothing there.

So this, I think, verses 5 and 6 are an argument for balance. And even in the midst of talking about all of the different ways that human labor can go wrong, Solomon says, you've got to keep a sense of balance. You don't just stop working and have empty hands and consume your own flesh, nor do you try to have both hands full and wind up right back where you started with grasping for the wind.

So he interjects that right in the middle of talking about these various kinds of evil and emptiness that he sees under the sun. And when we resume our study next time, we're going to start in verse 7 where he says that he sees another kind of hobble, another kind of vapor under the sun. And this talks about whether you are alone or whether you have a companion.

This is the famous passage that talks about two are better than one, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken, and the value of companionship. And we're going to see that he's talking about oppression, where you've got these isolated, you've got somebody on top and somebody down below, and nobody has any comfort. You have someone who is toiling skillfully and another person who's not toiling so skillfully, and there's this flush of envy or flush of motivation that occurs because of that.

And this person is going to do what they do because they see someone else. Now we're going to see the dynamics of being alone versus being with someone else. And there are people who say, you know, it's really the teamwork that counts.

I'm going to throw everything into my relationships, my personal relationships, and that's going to be where the meaning of life is. There was a famous song, I think the most famous version, one of the famous versions was done by Nat King Cole called Nature Boy. It's got a beautiful tune, but I just heard it yesterday out there on the AM radio.

But it says there was a boy, a strange enchanted boy, and he searched the world. It's kind of a weird way to start a song. But basically this Nature Boy gets some kind of secret wisdom, and this guy sees Nature Boy when he passes his way, and he says, well, give me this big piece of wisdom.

And he says, well, the greatest thing you'll ever learn is to love and to be loved in return. And that's the big idea of the song. And this, of course, is a very popular conception in humanity at large is that love, you know, John Lennon, all you need is love, and so forth.

Well, that's what we're going to investigate next time, what does Solomon have to say about two being better than one in the threefold court. But let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, we thank you for the privilege of studying your word.

We pray that we will be able to remember and apply what we've seen from your word, that we can profit from the investigations of Solomon and what he has to tell us here. And we pray that God, the Holy Spirit, will help us to see the meaning and applicability of these things in our own set of circumstances, our own individual lives. We pray that in all things, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be glorified.

We pray in his name. Amen.