

Four Types of Laborers

📖 Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

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Last week I had a difficult time putting the argument together in Ecclesiastes 3:15-22, especially how Solomon was relating men to beasts. It finally clicked with me on Monday and because teaching God's word accurately is important and I'm going to be held accountable for it, I'm going to walk through these verses again and show how I changed my mind and what the argument is that I think Solomon is presenting.

What Solomon has said up to this point in chapter 3 is that the natural man and the carnal man detect that everything seems to happen at the correct time in life. In other words, they are detecting that there is something behind history and the timing of events in their lives. In 3:14 Solomon is talking about man's circumstances and he says, "I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it," that is, the circumstances God places us in are fixed by Him and there's nothing we can do about it. What we can do is respond correctly or incorrectly. The correct response is what he states next, "for God has so worked that men should fear Him." In other words, He sets up the circumstances in our life so that we will fear Him, meaning live as if He exists. Everything is arranged in all people's lives for that purpose.

In 3:16 he observed something further, "Furthermore, I have seen under the sun," that is, just from the standpoint of the natural man and the carnal man, "that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness." He was observing the courts, that is the most natural place to expect to find justice and righteousness, and yet what man finds is wickedness. It was disturbing to Solomon, so in 3:17 he "said to" himself, this is the natural or carnal man talking to himself, saying, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. In other words, the natural and carnal man recognize that God won't let all this injustice go overlooked. Eventually He will judge the righteous with reward and the wicked with punishment. In 3:18 he said to himself further, "concerning the sons of Adam, 'God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.'" This would seem to be the case when injustice is looked at through the eyes of the natural man. The natural man would conclude that man is just an animal. In 3:19 the natural man then goes on to try to prove to himself that man is just an animal by citing outward similarities between man and animals. "For the fate of the sons of Adam and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other;" And as far as outward observation alone, Solomon was right. He then

adds another similarity, "indeed, they all have the same breath." The natural and carnal men are trying to prove to themselves that man is just an animal and that he is not responsible to God for his injustice, so that his conclusion is that "there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity." He's going straight after this idea that man is responsible to God. He's smashing that idea. Verse 20, "All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust." That's all there is, man is nothing more than an animal and we're all just going to return to dust and that's the end of it, no judgment. In 3:21 he says nobody can know and nobody can prove that "the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth." He is convincing himself that there won't be a judgment for all his injustices. His conclusion in 3:22 is hedonism, "I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him." So just eat, drink and be merry, because there is nothing else. When you die, you die, there's no accountability for our injustices because we are just animals. And this is definitely the end of evolutionary thought. Man is just an animal and there is no God and there is no personal accountability to a God and so really there is nothing left than to eat, drink, be merry and pass on your genes in the game of the survival of the fittest. Chapter 3 ends on this note of pessimism about man. And yet these outward observations are just a test. God is testing man to see how they will respond to Him in the circumstances He arranges. And when they commit injustice what they do in their mind is entertain the thought that one day God will judge this, but they quickly suppress this truth in unrighteousness and conclude that they are nothing more than animals and there is no ultimate accountability to a God. So I might as well just live life to the fullest now, because when I die that's it.

Now in Eccl 4 Solomon looks again at acts of oppression and concludes that the ones who oppress others do not have an advantage over those who suffer under the oppression, all are in the same boat. Verse 1, **Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun.** You'll see Solomon **look** at things **again** and **again**; he's always taking another look, looking at things from a different angle in order to see if he can squeeze any more information out of what he observes. Now he's looking **again at all the acts of oppression.** Notice the **all**. He was just looking generally at society and seeing **all the acts of oppression** that were **being done under the sun**, without respect to God, as if God wasn't there, as if God wasn't watching. Men are failing the test God put them under. They are explaining away any accountability for their oppression of others by saying we are just animals. It's the evolutionary hypothesis explaining away what they know in their minds to be the truth. The word **oppression** is from the Hebrew verbal root *asaq* and refers to "acts of abuse of power or authority, the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in station."¹ The men have power; they may be rich bankers, politicians, judges, or police officers, but Solomon observed that they constantly misused and abused their power to oppress those without power.

And behold, what Solomon saw, **I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them.** He saw these people were sad, these people were exploited and could do nothing about it. These were innocent people suffering because people in power were abusing their authority. And notice also, **that they had**

no one to comfort them. Nobody cared about them. Nobody came to their aid when they were mistreated. They were just left there to mourn. Wiersbe said, "The king witnessed three tragedies: (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice; (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people; and (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort."² So terrible was this oppression that Solomon repeated it **and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.** The **oppressors had power...on their side.** The word **power** in the Hebrew means "*the ability, power* of doing any thing."³ Often this ability is due to wealth. No matter what crimes they commit they are able to get off because they have the money to buy the best lawyers and pay off the jury. And no one even cared for those who got taken advantage of.

Solomon saw this and sharing eyes with the natural man he drew two conclusions. First, in verse 2 he concluded **So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living.** In other words, Solomon concluded that it was better to be dead than it was to be alive. It is better to be dead than keep seeing all the suffering and oppression. Second, in verse 3 he concluded, **But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.** The way men treat one another is horrible. If you back away and consider it sometime, you might agree that the worst lot is to be here alive witnessing this evil, and that it would be better to be dead than have to witness all the mess, and better yet to have never been born at all! People often wish that they could die or that they had never been born. That was Solomon's conclusion. And truth be told, God did not design us to live in a world full of suffering and evil. Evil and suffering were not a part of the original creation. They were introduced through the fall. They are therefore abnormal. So our trying to deal with and manage evil and suffering is abnormal. That is why we sometimes just want to be dead or wish we had never been born. It's not the right response, but it is a response.

A question we might ask is "Why didn't Solomon do something about this injustice? After all, he was the king."⁴ But in reality, even though he was the king, he couldn't do much about the problems. He was much like Donald Trump trying to do things about the problems in this country. The government is a big organization and one man can try to re-arrange things, but the moment he does that he stirs up a hornet's nest. After he's done this a few times he might think twice about doing it again. It gets tiring trying to change things for the better. Eventually most men in leadership who are trying to change things for the better become exhausted fighting the hornets and just go with the flow. That's not to say that we Christians shouldn't try to vote the corrupt people out of office, we should. But we should also pray for those in leadership, that they would have stamina, and that laws would be passed that are just and those who judge will judge rightly. But ultimately, it's difficult for one man in such a huge government to lead an effort to fix the situation. This shows the fallacy of thinking one man in one office will solve all our problems in this country. Solomon was the most powerful man in the nation of Israel and he realized he couldn't do anything about the problem of oppression. His conclusion was it would be better to be dead and better yet to have never even existed.

In 4:4 Solomon observed something about man's labor. Remember, this whole section is Solomon's observations. Here he observes several men and their outlook on labor. The first man he looks at is the industrious man. This is the man with ambition to go out and change the world. He said, **I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.** He says, what I'm seeing out there in the world of ambition, is industrious men who make products and through those products they find success. That's all fine and dandy, the Bible is not against making products and finding success. But what Solomon observed was that the motive of these men was **rivalry**. They only wanted to become richer than the next guy. It was all about competition, getting ahead of your neighbor, and keeping up with the Jones'. None of the products were developed for the right purpose, which is to help others and bring glory of God. Wiersbe said, "The only reason these people perfected their skills and worked hard at their jobs was to compete with others and make more money than their neighbors. The purpose of their work was not to produce beautiful or useful products, or to help people, but to stay ahead of the competition and survive in the battle for bread."⁵ Competition became the motivation. Of course, competition is not sinful in itself, it actually helps develop character when it is pursued with a healthy outlook. But when competition becomes about being number one at all costs, then competition has become sinful. Solomon saw that ambitious men were all about being number one at all costs. They produced new and better products, but only to make themselves richer than their neighbor. He concluded, **This too is vanity and striving after the wind.**

Next, in 4:5, Solomon observed the second man. The second man he observed is the opposite of the industrious man. He doesn't have any ambition at all. He is the idle man. He said, **The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.** Solomon saw these men just standing around doing nothing. They slept in and wanted to sleep in longer. They didn't go to work. They just sat around. There's an end to the idle man and that is they **consume their own flesh**. That means they end up having nothing to eat but their own flesh. They want to have something to eat but they don't want to work for it. They eventually waste away. Paul said later to the Thessalonians, "If anyone does not work, he is not to eat either." They shouldn't be allowed to eat. And the error of the idle man is that he's the opposite of the industrious man. And neither is right. Clearly there should be a balance between working and enjoying pleasure. Wiersbe concluded, "The industrious man was motivated by competition and caught in the rat race of life. He had no leisure time. The idle man was motivated by pleasure and was headed for ruin. He had no productive time. Is there no middle way between these two extremes? Yes, there is."⁶

So we come to the third man in 4:6. This is the man we might call the integrated man. He has an integrated approach to life, he keeps the two in balance. **One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.** The man who has both **fists full of labor** is the industrious man from verse 4. He was motivated by competition and greed. He wanted to be number one at all costs, so he spends all his time working to become number one so he can have so much money that he can enjoy whatever pleasure he wants. But this

man is so busy he ends up not being able to enjoy anything at all. He just has **two fists full of labor**. It's work, work, work. I think when a man can't just sit and rest but has to find something to work on he has been conditioned by overwork. I think that is a major problem in America and I think it is ultimately because employers are driven by money. The bottom line is the thing that counts most, and if that means destroying marriages and families and individuals, then the companies don't care. It's the worship of the almighty dollar. Really the only way to climb in these companies is to be married to these companies. And if that means sacrificing your own health then so be it. Why? Because they are after money and you get stuck in the rat race and you don't know how to get out. But Solomon said that **one hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor**. The point is to strike a balance. If you have **one hand full of rest** then the other fist is **full of labor**. That's a good balance. At least that way you can have a part of your day in labor and the rest in relaxation and enjoyment. Wallace said, "Qoheleth lists three approaches to labor: (1) the competitive workaholic in 4:4, (2) the impoverished sluggard in 4:5, and (3) the contented laborer in 4:6. The balanced approach rebukes the two extremes."⁷ The question is which worker are you? Are you the workaholic? The lazy sluggard or the contented laborer who has struck a balance. It's much better to be the latter. Wiersbe described the danger of being either one of the first two when he said, "The industrious man thinks that money will bring him peace, but he has no time to enjoy it. The idle man thinks that doing nothing will bring him peace, but his life-style only destroys him. The integrated man enjoys both his labor and the fruit of his labor and balances toil with rest. You can take what you want from life, *but you must pay for it*."⁸ You see, there are consequences to either one of these first approaches, you will pay for what you get from life. So calculate wisely and decide to be the integrated man. You will find it is a much better way to live. You may not have all the things that the Jones' have, but you will have something they don't have, rest, improved mentality and better health. You can't buy those things.

Next we come to a fourth man in 4:7-8. This is the independent man. He is the man who is going to do it all himself. In verse 7 Solomon said, **Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.** Here is the independent man, the self-made man. This man didn't have a son or a brother to help him in his labor. He was a solitary worker. He had his own business and no one helped him with it. He wanted to do it all himself because he wanted all the profits for himself. For him there **was no end to all his labor**. He was just one man, he had to do everything. But the benefit was he got all the profits. However, **his eyes were not satisfied with** the profits. And in fact, he was so busy working that **he never even asked** who or what he was working for? Why was he working so hard if he had no one to pass it on to, no son or family member to give it to? He was doing all this work to build up this massive bank account, but there was no one to give it to when he died and all along he was **depriving himself of pleasure** because he had two fists full of labor and no time for **pleasure**. You may be wondering how this man is different from the first man, the industrious man who was a workaholic (4:4). Well, at least that man was working

with others, he had employees, he was providing a job for them. But this man was working all alone, he had no employees, it was just him and there **was no end to all his labor** because he had to do all the **labor**, and there were all these riches and no one to share them with, and no enjoyment either. So this man is worse off than all the others. He's a loner and he's amassed great wealth but in the end he's got no one to share it with. He's a scrooge if you will, and he never enjoyed any of it himself. Solomon concluded, **This too is vanity and it is a grievous task**. So much for the independent man. You don't want to be this man. But you don't really want to be the industrious or idle man either. There is only one man of the four you want to be and that is the integrated man. He has work and rest in balance.

We could go on, but I've given you enough to consider tonight. Let's review and then think about how to apply this to our lives.

¹ Ronald B. Allen, "1713 קִשְׁטָה," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 705.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 54.

³ Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 390.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 54–55.

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 55.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 56.

⁷ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition*; Bible. English. NET Bible.; *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 57.