

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Rat Race

Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit. (Ecclesiastes 4:4-6)

In *The Message of Ecclesiastes* J. A. Motyer gives the title to these verses "The Rat Race," a fitting title. Years before reading this volume I heard a quip, "The only winner in a rat race is a rat." On Sunday morning, well insulated in our religious best, we may dismiss the daily struggles of life that we cryptically refer to as the "rat race." However, during our normal Monday to Friday life, we find such disinterest in the mundane issues of life far more challenging, if not at times seemingly irresistible. Oh, we will rationalize our excessive investments in the various activities that we pursue for financial or other gain with noble motives. "I'm working these long hours to afford the best for my family" sounds great. However, if you die of a heart attack before your child gets to college, what favors have you bestowed? More often than suffering a premature death you may become a near-stranger to your family in the process of "going for the gold" and seeking what you consider to be the "good life" for them. They will suffer daily from your absence, sometimes a physical absence, but often an emotional absence because you are so emotionally involved in your work that you aren't really "home" when you are home.

I grew up in a home where the parents instilled the values of hard work and accomplishment into the children very early—and very consistently. Solomon in a later lesson will exhort us to do whatever we do with vigor. In the New Testament (Colossians 3:23) Paul will urge us to do whatever we do heartily as unto the Lord and not as unto men.

Between the "rat race" assessment of our study verses and these verses we discover a certain tension. However, a more careful examination of Solomon's lesson will resolve the tension and define a sense of balance in our thinking. Be prepared; Solomon will not

allow us to rationalize the competitive urge to make more money or in other ways accomplish more than our neighbor. When the urge to do well takes on a "one-ups-man-ship" over others, pride more than godliness controls our motives. Therein appears the resolution between the passages dealing with godly devotion and sinful pride to prevail over others.

Verse 4 confronts our sometimes mixed motives. If the desire to outshine someone else—or not to be outshined by someone else—lies at the heart of my drive to succeed, I may reasonably rest assured that my attitude will appear in one form or another, and the other person will sense my true spirit. Often people intuitively sense deeper motives in others without being able to articulate them. God has a righteous sense of humor. He assures us that our own true motives will eventually turn back against us and come home. If your neighbor envies your success, be wise. Assess your neighbor's attitude, but do not overlook the possibility that your own attitude may have contributed to his envy.

We have met folks who live their whole lives in the "slow lane," doing as little as they think they can do and get past the minimum requirements of life. At times these folks will merely resent the accomplishments of more successful people without any help. These folks are not my primary concern, nor are they likely Solomon's in this verse. He will deal with them in the next verse. He specifically refers to envy in our "neighbor," someone who lives near us, not merely by street address, but in worldview and life choices. Excessive "driven-ness" is contagious, and the disease is persistent. You will not cure it with two aspirin and a good night's sleep. The symptoms may not appear as an excessive hunger for money, but for any number of other things.

Whatever instills an incessant drive to gain or master can be fully as consuming as the drive for money. Often people who give up on gaining a fortune will exhibit a similar all-consuming drive for other things. The give-away point appears when they view themselves as privileged over others by their pursuit.

If we were to construct this lesson in the allegorical style of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we'd likely name this first person Mr. Ambition. Verse 5 takes us to the opposite extreme; we'd likely name this fellow Mr. Drop Out. Actually Solomon names him for us, Mr. Fool! He may appear to be a noble fellow in his disdain for raw ambition, the competitive urge, and all the other trappings of the over-ambitious fellow in Verse 4. However, the wise man takes us beyond the superficial appearance into what the man is truly all about. After all Solomon by inspiration calls him a fool! Not only does he waste time and opportunity by his "drop-out" mind set, he eventually begins to erode his very personality. In Solomon's words he eats "his own flesh." These people often live in a dream world that avoids many of the basic realities of life. Motyer warns of the true danger that these folks face. Their aloofness endangers their self-control (No one can live in such artificial form for ever.), their grasp of reality, their capacity to care for others—especially those folks who are so consumed in the "rat race"— and eventually when reality invades their imaginary world their self-respect.

Consider that both the ambitious and the drop-out are involved in their own version of the "rat race." Neither will succeed in terms of life's meaningful and worthwhile accomplishments. The ambitious person dehumanizes self by reducing life's primary objective to an appetite for more, whatever his "more" happens to be. In Verse 8 Solomon describes the lonely ambitious person as facing the stark reality of his choices, "For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good?" In fact this whole verse rather clearly exposes the problems related to the ambitious lifestyle. He becomes incredibly lonely. There is no safe companionship at the top of the heap. Did you ever consider the words to the Simon and Garfunkel song "Sound of Silence"? He may be part of a large family, but he is lonely. He has sacrificed family,

often the very thing that he used to rationalize his ambition, for his pursuit.

The "loner" life will always fail. God did not design our nature to strike out alone and destroy the relationships that assure balance and blessing to our life. For this reason He instituted a national worship among His people in the Old Testament and a collective church community of worship in the New Testament. Several years ago a delightful man from the Middle East lived directly across the street from us. On more than one occasion he talked with me about being a Christian. His father-in-law had first introduced him to the faith. Over the years that his family lived in our neighborhood I observed that he never took his family to church on Sunday, or any other time for that matter. I also observed significant character flaws in this man's conduct toward his family and others in the neighborhood. While claiming to be a Christian, he developed entrenched non-Christian habits that glaringly exhibited his failure, not his success, in his Christian profession. When the pilgrims settled the eastern seaboard of our country, they did not migrate in isolation, but in community. The most remote evangelist in a foreign culture, if he succeeds, will keep close ties and communication links with his friends on the home front. In observing folks who attempt to strike out on their own as isolated Christians I have yet to see a single person succeed. Eventually error of the greatest magnitude will slip into their thinking, and they have no supportive community to provide course correction.

After examining the two typical extremes of human life, the ambitious and the drop out, Solomon shows us the godly balance. "Better is a handful with quietness...." In the New Testament Paul will use these words, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). In the fourth verse at the beginning of this lesson and again in the sixth verse Solomon describes the errant life choices as "travail," a word that refers to a pregnant woman in labor. A woman who delivers a healthy baby looks back and considers that the result justified her pain. However, in this case look at the baby! Solomon nudges us to ask the probing question. When we look at the results of our choices, "Was it worth the price that you paid?" A godly life, lived in the community

and fellowship of other believers, is a beautiful baby, worth the effort. Both alternatives, the excessively ambitious and the drop out, deliver a hateful and deformed baby that leaves the exhausted “mother” with the probing question, “*Why did I invest so much of my life for this?*”

The Hebrew word translated “quietness” in Verse 6 is significant.

“Our root signifies not only absence of movement but being settled in a particular place (whether concrete or abstract) with overtones of finality, or (when speaking abstractly) of victory, salvation, etc. For synonyms cf. *šābat*, connoting the absence of activity (or, of a particular activity), *šāqat* which connotes the absence of disturbance from external causes, *šālam*, connoting wholeness, i.e. the state of well being, and *dōm* ‘quiet,’ *rāga*: ‘to be in repose.’”¹

Whether we choose the ambitious “fast track” lifestyle or become drop outs, we choose a life that Solomon describes as “under the sun,” and predicts the outcome of loneliness and a dreadful lack of contentment. When we submit our lives to God and begin to live according to His master plan, not our own, we increasingly discover a sense of “victory, salvation...the absence of disturbance from external causes...wholeness...the state of well being.”

The most significant step in refining our lives to this “above the sun” model occurs when we cease the invasive habit of devaluing the Bible as our in-the-trenches resource for how we live and order our lives. Rather than minimizing what the Bible has to say about a particular issue, we seek—and delightfully discover—wise and pertinent Biblical truth for our needs. Rather than rationalizing why we chose to ignore clear Biblical teaching regarding a particular issue, we repent—regardless the price of repentance—and build our life around God’s teaching, not our own rationalizations.

¹R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed., 562 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980).

The “quietness” of the faithful and obedient believer is deafening in its peaceful and godly impact, as is the opposite “noise” of rationalized and self-justified rebellion in its chaotic influence.

Which lifestyle do we choose? How will we be remembered when we are dead and gone? We refer to this lasting aroma of a life lived out to completion as a person’s legacy. We get to choose our legacy every day that we live with every decision that we make. May we go to the Scriptures of God—and to the God of Scripture—and make the right choices.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor