

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

OCTOBER 13TH, 2019 // BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes 4 examines worldly ambitions and accomplishments and humanity's motivation behind our achievements. We're reminded of the importance (and elusiveness) of true, genuine friendship.

THE TEARS OF THE OPPRESSED (ECCLESIASTES 4:1-3)

As Solomon continues his examination of life "under the sun", he comments on the pervasiveness of injustice and oppression that he's observed.

- Both those who were oppressed and the oppressors had one thing in common: there was "no one to comfort them" (vs. 1).
- We can understand this with the oppressed, but how can this be with the oppressors?

If all of humanity in our fallen state can be classified in two categories- the oppressed (those without power) and the oppressors (those with power)- which category is the most desirable?

- Surely not "the oppressed"- their plight is one of tears and great grief: the powerful can do what they want to the weak, and no one can stand up for them. So what about the "oppressors"?

Power and authority, especially the kind that enables someone to oppress a "weaker" party, provide little comfort and meaning in life.

- Power, control and being in charge is no substitute for meaning and purpose.
- Some of the loneliest, emptiest, and most miserable people are those with absolute authority and no character or accountability with which to temper it.

So Solomon looks at the misery of the oppressed and the misery of the oppressors and concludes that the dead are "more fortunate than the living" (vs. 2).

- He even goes so far as to say it's all so meaningless and painful that not existing at all was the preferable option (vs. 3). How on earth can this be the least bit helpful for us??

"FOR WHOM AM I TOILING?" (ECCLESIASTES 4:4-12)

After Solomon observed injustice, oppression, and loneliness in the world, he heads down to the marketplace to observe the various laborers at work.

- Surely meaning could be found in honest, hard work, because work is a gift from God.
- But what he finds as he observes those at work was not just the work of their hands, but the motivations and intentions of their hearts.

He observes those who are industrious in vs. 4- those who work with great diligence and skill.

- But he discovers is that the main reason that people work hard at their jobs and perfect their skills was "envy" (vs. 4) - simply to compete with others and their neighbors.
- The purpose of work for these people was not to create beauty or be helpful in the world, but only to stay ahead of the competition.

If we're being brutally honest, we can admit that the primary motivation that makes the world go round is this inward desire to outshine our fellow man.

- For many people, work is simply the means by which we can wear clothes, drive cars, live in houses and take trips that make our neighbors see us and feel a little jealous.
- At the center of our hearts, we want to be noticed and be the center of attention.

Then Solomon considers the opposite extreme in vs. 5- those who have observed the rat race and decide they want no part in it.

- He observes the idle and lazy fool who has no ambition at all.
- We might consider vs. 4 to be the ambitious, driven, materialistic father to the son in vs. 5 who has witnessed all of the toil driven by selfishness and wants no part of it.

And so the idle fool "folds his hands and eats his own flesh" (vs. 5).

- His idleness is as equally useless as industry driven by selfishness.
- Why? Because his idleness is also self-centered.
- The industrious man is motivated by competition and gets caught up in the rat race, and the idle man is motivated by pleasure and self-preservation and ends up headed to ruin.

Then we see a man whose life is balanced in vs. 6- he's productive in his work, but he's also careful to take time for quietness.

- He understands there's a great cost and a point of diminishing return for "two hands of toil"- what good is killing yourself to get ahead when it costs you your family, your health, and your marriage?
- So he's not running in the rat race, but he's also not running away from the normal responsibilities of life.

Solomon observed another "great vanity" in vs. 7-8 as he sees a man hard at work with an appetite for riches, but neither "son or brother" to share or enjoy it with.

- This man wanted all the profits for himself, but he was so busy he didn't even have time to enjoy his profits.
- And yet, he never stopped to ask himself, "for whom am I toiling?" (vs. 8).

Material gain, wealth, trinkets & toys, career successes, power and status will NEVER protect a person from loneliness.

- Then Solomon reminds us of what truly matters in vs. 9-12- relationships.
- "Two are better than one..." (vs. 9)- money, stuff, or success can't pick you up when you fall (vs. 10), give you a companion in your time of need (vs. 11), and give you support when you're under attack (vs. 12).

The rat race of working hard to "keep up with the Joneses", the self-indulgence of checking out and doing nothing, and the futility of gaining ALL the world all for ourselves- all of these things can and will lead to intense, soul-withering loneliness.

- Loneliness is so pervasive because our society is defined by rabid individualism, fierce competition, and narcissistic self-gratification.
- How can we find a true friend? How can we be a true friend?

"Under the sun", true friendship is quite elusive because most of humanity is self-serving, therefore many friendships are quite artificial.

- But at the same time we all need friends- however, there isn't a person on earth that can meet our needs and satisfy our desires.
- We need the friendship of God (Ex. 33:11), and when we have our deepest needs met by God, we can then enjoy friends and relationships as gifts, not as gods themselves.

LONELY AT THE TOP? (ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16)

Now Solomon introduces a story that teaches two truths: the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity.

- The old king in the story had at one time been in touch with how to rule wisely, but as he got older he refused to listen to the advice of others.
- The problem wasn't just stubbornness and senility, it was most likely that he was surrounded by flattery, "yes men" and parasites.

What happened to this old king is what most often happens to anyone who gets into a position of authority and power.

- They aspire to "the throne" because of their own personal ambitions and over time become more concerned about their careers or legacy than the people they're called to serve.
- The hero in the story is a poor and wise youth in prison (vs. 13-14).

Maybe he was in prison because he was threat to the old king or because he had radical political ideas, but at any rate he gets out of prison and becomes king.

- This boy who was born poor and had been imprisoned is now a hero of the people and is no doubt popular and beloved!
- But now the young man who was poor becomes rich and occupies the throne.

It's only a matter of time before he too loses touch with the people and "those who come later will not rejoice in him" (vs. 16).

- In other words, popularity and applause do not last- aspiring to be famous, beloved, and "on top" is vanity and "striving after wind" (vs. 16) because it doesn't last.
- The same crowd who flatters you with applause one minute will criticize you the next.

Not only that, fame, popularity, and authority on any level is intensely lonely.

- When everybody thinks they know you simply because your face, name or work is recognizable, it becomes very confusing to know who your real friends actually are.
- When being friends with you is actually of personal advantage to other people, it becomes difficult to know who truly loves you or only loves what you can do or get for them.

WHAT DRIVES US? WHAT MOTIVATES US? (HEBREWS 4:12, JEREMIAH 17:9)

- More than anything in the entire world, your soul needs and is aching for genuine friendship.
- You need a friend that "sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24) and that knows all of you and accepts all of you- you need God and you need godly friends.
- But to make a friend, you also have to be willing to be a friend.

HOW CAN I APPLY THIS?

1. **Stop and ask yourself, "what's truly driving me to accomplish, to work, and to meet my goals? What am I working for?"**
2. **Put a priority on relationships this week-** call a friend, go on a date, take your kids for ice cream!
3. **Allow yourself to know and be known by God.**