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BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

study guide : part three





Being Human?

Soul : The Pursuit for More

By Colton Conrad

Being Human | Soul

Ecclesiastes 4 and the Pursuit for More

“And the Cat’s in the Cradle and the Silver Spoon, Little Boy blue and the man in the moon. When you coming home Dad I don’t know when, but we’ll get together then, Dad, you know we’ll have a good time then...”

Gaining and Losing

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.
2 And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.
3 But better than both
is the one who has never been born,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

- What do you cherish?
- What, if you had it, would it make you think – I’ve made it?
- What would satisfy the deepest desire of your heart?

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”(Matthew 16:24-26)

A Mountain of Oppression: The heart that consumes

Oppression: “pursuing profit without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of other people.”
(Ian Provan)

Why do people oppress others?
Because people are out for “gain”.



A consumer makes transactions to get what they want. To further their own interests. We can actually approach people and relationships like that. *Quid Pro Quo Love*. When a person agrees to give another person something in exchange for what they need or desire.

The Good News of Jesus stands against Quid Pro Quo Love.

Will you invest in people who cannot “give you anything in return?”

Untranquil Envy

4 And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

5 Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.

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

Ian Provan defines envy as the thing that drives us on the mad rush for “gain.” “It is the suspicion or realization that others are gaining more in life than we are and that leads us on to compete with them in the insane rat race, striving to outdo them.”

Envy then, is rooted in **discontentment**.

“There are many things we are tempted to envy — for example, *someone’s looks or abilities or situation in life*. Someone else has the job or the grades or the girlfriend that we always wanted.

But of all the things that we are tempted to envy, usually our neighbor’s possessions are near the top of the list. Just look at the Tenth Commandment: most of the things it tells us not to covet are things that money can buy. We work hard to get more money to buy more things, or else we pull out the plastic to engage in what one economist has called “retail therapy”. If we get everything we covet, someone else will envy us, and the cycle will continue. **The world is full of Joneses trying to keep up with the other Joneses.**”

- Philip Graham Ryken

“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...It is comparison that makes you proud...”

- C.S. Lewis

“A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.”

Proverbs 14:30

“...the life of striving is anti-neighbour. The point of life, when viewed from this perspective, is to get ahead of one’s neighbour rather than to participate in community with them.”

– Ian Provan

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

– James 4:1-3

“3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

– Philippians 2:3-4

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

- 1 Peter 4:10

Ask yourself –

1. have you learned to be content?
2. And are you able?

Lonely Striving, and Sabbath Rest

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother.

8 There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!

-Ecclesiastes 4:7-8



“I go among trees and sit still. All my stirring becomes quiet around me like circles on water. My tasks lie in their places where I left them, asleep like cattle.”

“After days of labor, mute in my consternations, I hear my song at last, and I sing it. As we sing, the day turns, the trees move.”

- Wendell Berry, *Sabbath 1979*: I

Rest in God’s Grace

Rest helps us invest in relationship. God’s grace bids us come and find rest:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

– Matthew 10:28-29

Rest in God’s gaze

““Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matt.6:1-4)”

Whose opinion of you matters? And to where do you run for rest and refreshment? How you answer these questions will tell you something of what you love and worship – about what is most important to you.

Gospel Community and the Great Commandments

Finally, Ecclesiastes tells us why community really is better for each and every one of us than stepping on others to get ahead of them. Here is what we read in Ecclesiastes after we read about the oppression, envy, and loneliness of striving:

9 Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
10 If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them 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.

“In community our lives are strong and enduring, like the rope “of three strands.” The fool’s individualistic life is, by contrast, weak and destined to be “broken.”

– Ian Provan

Ecclesiastes says to “Fear God and follow His commandments for this is the whole duty of mankind (Ecc. 12:13-14). And what does He command? Jesus tells us: ““The most important one...“is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

God has saved us, not for greatness, gain, and consuming, but for relationship with Himself and one another. Our hearts truly are, as Augustine said, restless until they rest in Him. What it means to be human does not mean to gain the world, but to love Him with all your soul, and to love your neighbour as yourself. And when we rightly come to Him and rest in His grace, we also come to one another with and by that same grace.

May we lay down the possessions and gains of the world, to gain that which we cannot lose – a relationship with Christ and place among His children for eternity. *May we not lose our soul!*

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” (Phil 3:7-8)





SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ways you've seen oppression play out in our world? What is to be gained by the oppression that we have seen?
 2. If you are comfortable, share and pray for one another about some of the things that make you envious. What are they today? What have they been in the past?
 3. The humble serving and self-emptying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is the kind of culture that the reality of the gospel – the good news that God loves sinners through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – creates. What are some ways you have seen that kind of culture in our world? In our church?
 4. Sabbath rest from work is something important. How do you cultivate rest and time for community in your day to life? If you are retired, what are some ways you wish you did that better while you were working?
 5. What are some of the ways that our lives are strong and enduring, like a "rope of three strands" in community?
 6. Read **Mark 12:29-31**. If someone asked you "What does that mean, and how do you do that?" How would *you* answer them?
- B. What are some ways that selfish desire has caused fights and quarrels among you – whether in your marriages, in your groups, etc. If you aren't comfortable answering that question in your small group, consider taking some time to pray for one another – that humility and self-sacrificial service for one another would characterize your group and each individuals life.

