

Chasing the Wind: Work

DUANE KELDERMAN

Work is good, right? Work is how we earn money to live, to pay our bills. Our work is also part of God's calling to us. It is a gift of God. When we work, we are working for God. But the preacher of Ecclesiastes suggests that work can also be like chasing after the wind. What does he mean and how can we be sure that the work we are doing is not wasted and chasing after wind?

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I am Duane Kelderman. We have been looking in this series at, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." We have also seen in this series how positively he says, "Enjoy life; enjoy each day as a gift of God." Those are two of the big themes in this book.

DAVE BAST

Fear God and obey his commandments; there is another one.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and we have seen how Ecclesiastes, after making those big themes and those big claims, actually goes after some very specific things. Today we are going to look at work and how work can be a chasing after the wind.

One of the things that is very important to clarify, I think, as we talk about the possible futility of work is that work in itself is not bad; in fact, as Reformed Christians, we would want to say that work is a gift of God. It goes with how God made us, and work is a good thing. Paul says in Colossians that when we work, we work with all of our heart as working for the Lord, not for human masters. Our work is an activity of devotion and worship to God. Work is, in the Reformed vision of things, not a necessary evil. We were made to work.

DAVE BAST

Right, and that brings us right back to Genesis and what we like to call the creation mandate. In Genesis 1:28 God says famously – I think most of us are familiar with this text: Be fruitful and increase in number; (he says it to the male and female just after he has created them in his own image.) Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. And that has, at times, been taken as an excuse for exploitation and despoiling of the earth and the creation, but at its best, and when rightly understood, it is an encouragement to us to pursue all kinds of work and technology and developing our skills and our gifts; and this is what God wants us to do. Here is the important point: Work precedes the fall. It did not come in after the fall. It is not part of the curse.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes.

DAVE BAST

The fall led to frustration in work, but the work itself is part of God's good purpose for human life.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And certainly there is a lot of work that is difficult that has a sort of drudgery to it; work that is almost oppressive. At the same time, it is interesting that studies that are done on when people are the happiest indicate that most people are at their happiest when they are at work and have tasks at work that are challenging, but not overwhelming. They do not want to be bored; they do not want to be overwhelmed; but most people are actually at their happiest at work. It is counterintuitive to how we think about work. What is it? TGIF – Thank God it's Friday.

DAVE BAST

I can't wait for the weekend. Work is a necessary evil just to get enough money to do what I really want to do in life; but the truth is, we were made to work, and that is why fitting and suitable work suits us as well; and any kind of work – it is true that nobody wants to be stuck in a dead-end job or just do drudge kinds of things – but even the lowliest in the Reformed life and world view that we espouse – even the lowliest tasks can be done for God and for God's glory.

I love this quote of William Tyndale, who was the father of the English Bible – the first to translate the Bible into English – who said “between washing dishes and the preaching of the Gospel, there is a difference, but for pleasing God, there is no difference.” So, no matter what you do, whether you are a farmer or a business person or a doctor or a factory worker or a preacher of the Gospel, if you do your work to the best of your ability for the benefit of other people, it glorifies God, and God is pleased with that. He is not more pleased with the clergy than he is with the laity. That is just part of our basic conviction.

DUANE KELDERMAN

You know, I needed that quote about 30 years ago when I was in my first church and was working with a family who all became Christians together. It was a beautiful experience and I sat around their kitchen table with them and we did Bible study and basic Christian teaching; and then he came before our group of elders to make his profession of faith to join the church and I asked Terry about his prayer life, and he said: Oh, yes; I have a very active prayer life. He said: I pray every day that the assembly line will break down at work so I do not have to do anything. That was sort of a humorous moment. He was not sure why it was so humorous. We had to explain to him that your work is a part of your devotion to God – just the point you were making with this great quote.

DAVE BAST

Yes; but, Solomon, the Preacher, is going to remind us that work can also be a kind of futility or exercise in meaninglessness – a striving after the wind – and we are going to look at where he says that and why he says it in just a moment.

Segment 2

DUANE KELDERMAN

I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Well, in our first section we talked about how, indeed, work in itself is a good thing and we do not want to denigrate all work, but now we need to get to the point of Ecclesiastes that there is a way in which work also can be a chasing after the wind; and the first way in which that is the case, according to Ecclesiastes, is when we reduce work to being simply the means by which we accumulate all kinds of things; and they are things that just do not make us happy. Again, in those first verses of the second chapter, he lists some of the things that he came up with. He had gardens and parks and he planted fruit trees. He had groves, he had servants, he had gold, he had silver, he had singers, he had a harem; he had all of these different things that he was able to accumulate because his hard work.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he says he undertook these great projects. So, this is the direct result of his work; and often we think of work in those terms. We do not think of work as something that we offer up to God, as we were saying, as part of our sacrifice – our living sacrifice of ourselves. It is not for his glory, it is for our glorification and self-gratification; it is to gather stuff.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and the stuff varies today, but it is still stuff. I had a conversation with someone just a while back who came to the United States not too long ago, and one of the things that amazed this person, coming from a poorer country of the world, was not only do we have these huge houses, but there are these rows and rows of storage garages where we can rent garages and fill them up with more of our things. It was just amazing to that person.

DAVE BAST

Right; which is not to say that we do not have to make a living – that we do not need to work to meet our basic needs.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Not at all.

DAVE BAST

I mean, it is easy to dismiss money and possessions if you have them.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

If you do not have them, that is another story. Then they become the focus of your daily striving. I mean, we all have to eat. We all have to have a place to live. But the question is maybe how much and how well do we need to live, and when is enough enough?

DUANE KELDERMAN

And there is plenty of evidence as we actually observe in our own culture, but as we read scripture, that there is a distinction between meeting our basic, daily needs and having more than that.

Years ago, an economist, Paul Samuelson, wrote an article in Newsweek Magazine, in which he distinguished between money that removes specific miseries, which does make us happier, and money that just gives us more of what we do not need. He gave an example of a pair of shoes. You need a good pair of shoes or otherwise those rocks on the road are going to tear up the bottom of your feet; but you can get that pair of shoes for \$19.00 at K-Mart.

DAVE BAST

Right. You do not need a \$350.00 pair of Celebrity Sneakers...

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or basketball shoes, right.

DUANE KELDERMAN

So that anything that goes beyond the removing of specific miseries may be good for our ego. We may enjoy it for a while, but it does not make us fundamentally happier, more fulfilled people.

DAVE BAST

You know, some years ago – many years ago, now, I think it was – I ran across an anonymous quote that I think sums up Solomon's first point just perfectly. Work becomes a kind of futility when it is just accumulating more and more things beyond what we need, and the quote went like this: I was one of those people who spent their lives doing work they did not like to accumulate money they did not really need to buy things they did not really want in order to impress people they really did not care for. And that is striving after the wind, right there.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes, yes. A second reason that Ecclesiastes gives for work being meaningless is that it is so short-lived. These verses in Chapter 2, beginning at verse 17, he says:

So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless; a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet, they will have control over all the fruit of my toil, in which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This, too, is meaningless.

DAVE BAST

Yes, how true that is. Look at the stories that abound of successful – hugely successful people who have built an empire and then wanted to pass it on and the next generation and the next proved unworthy or unable or incapable. In fact, there is an old saying: Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations; right? The first generation works and builds it up; the second generation enjoys it and spends it; the third generation is ruined by it, and they are back.

Jesus actually told a parable along those lines, the parable of the rich fool who accumulated a great deal, and then God said to him: You are going to die; then whose will all these things be? And the context of that story is two brothers who are quarrelling over the inheritance. Often the case may be that we say we are gathering these things together in order to provide for our families, and all we are doing is really causing more problems.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; well, and that is where America is really a mixed bag here. On the one hand, we can certainly look at America and the drive to work and to consume and accumulate. By any standard, we are certainly a very materialistic society, and that is a problem; it is a big problem. It is also interesting, though, that America's richest folks are actually getting together and trying to figure out how to give their money away in creative and helpful ways, and the world scratches its head. The world cannot figure America out. We work so hard to accumulate this money, and then we give it all away; and some of the most exciting things happening in world development today are happening by people who figured out that Ecclesiastes was right. That simply having more zeros on a piece of paper is not meaningful; and so, they found meaning in actually helping other people, and it is just exciting to see some of the things that people are actually doing giving their money away.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. I think there is a third thing that we can say about work, too, and what renders it useless and futile in the end is the fact that we cannot do it forever. If you are living for your work, if you have poured all of your meaning and self-worth and identity into your career, well, guess what? Someday you are not going to have that. Your career is going to come to an end, and then what? Then what? That is the question; so again, work as the reason for living just does not carry the freight. It is not strong enough to bear the meaning we want to invest in it.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And there is plenty of evidence that if we do not have a balance in our lives between work and play and worship and family, when we are working and in our working years, we probably will not have a very good

balance in our later years.

DAVE BAST

I have a mentor, a very wise man named Max De Pree, who has written and thought a great deal about leadership, and he has dealt with many important, highly successful people, and lately he has been working on a concept that he has developed of the “third third of your life;” that our life roughly falls into thirds. The first third, maybe the first thirty years, we are getting an education; maybe we are having a family and getting started, getting launched. The next thirty years are the years of high effort and hard work and often success – hopefully success; but then comes a period, sooner or later, somewhere in your 60s where you are done with that and you are no longer the high achiever and you are no longer the leader, maybe, of an organization or whatever your position was; and the question is: Then what? Who are you when you have stopped doing your job, who are you? Is there some person there who has meaning and significance? And one of the reasons so many people struggle is that they do not have anybody who is there.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And the fact is, there are many people who really do not know what answer to give to that question other than by identifying themselves with their work; and certainly there has to be more to life. We will turn to that next on *Groundwork*.

Segment 3

DUANE KELDERMAN

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we have been looking in four programs now – this is the last program in this series – at the wisdom of the book of Ecclesiastes; and we are discussing, in this program in particular, how even work can be a kind of meaningless exercise, a chasing after the wind, if that is all you have to live for.

DUANE KELDERMAN

It would easy with this whole series to sort of get stuck in the mud. I mean, a lot of what Ecclesiastes has been talking about is it is kind of a downer – the vanity and the meaninglessness of knowledge, of pleasure, of work; and we want, in this last segment, to really end on the positive note that Ecclesiastes has throughout the book, even as he talks about this meaningless life.

DAVE BAST

We have said this several times in the course of these programs. A lot of what Ecclesiastes does is demolition work. It is meant to do away with our casual optimism, our cheerful, unthinking, uncritical approach to life. It is meant to show up and expose to us some of the idols of our own culture – living for work, living for pleasure or consumption, even living for the unbridled pursuit of knowledge – anything goes – we are going to be saved through our technology. No, no, no; none of that works. That is all kind of idolatry, and not only is it wrong, it is unsatisfying in the end; but I think we need to also point out that Ecclesiastes is not the Gospel. It does not really tell us the heart of what we need to know, and we find that elsewhere in the scriptures, of how to come to a full life of intimacy and fellowship with God. For that we look elsewhere; so, we take that for granted; but meanwhile, there are some very practical kinds of wisdom that Ecclesiastes gives also.

DUANE KELDERMAN

You are right, it is not the Gospel; and yet, it is in tune with how God made us, and how, with the geometry of the universe, where God is big and I am small; and in terms of that geometry of the universe – his bottom-line, positive message – pre-Gospel – but bottom-line, positive message is: Enjoy life; enjoy life. Throughout the book he says some variation of these words:

2:24 A person can do nothing better than to eat or drink and find satisfaction in their toil. This, too, I see is from the hand of God. 25 For without him who can eat or find enjoyment? 26 To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

So, enjoying life within God's limits is the positive message of the book of Ecclesiastes; but, yes, right. It is not yet the Gospel, and I hope that throughout our conversations around the book of Ecclesiastes, it has been clear that we cannot even talk about this for very long without at certain points saying: But the kingdom of God – Christ – living for Christ – Christ in us – we cannot avoid going there, even though the book of Ecclesiastes does not.

DAVE BAST

Right; but I also think it is great to think of this message at this time of year. We have intentionally planned these programs for the beginning of the new year; a time when many people make resolutions, you know – I am going to do better – I am going to lose weight. I think that is the most common one, probably, for most of us; or I am going to somehow change my life, and it never seems to happen – never seems to materialize. I think Ecclesiastes can help us perhaps take a little better perspective or tack on that.

Are there any practical things you are taking away from this, Duane?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes, there are. This study has been very convicting for me at many levels, and convicting in a good way. As I think ahead, I think that I want to take some more walks. I want to simply observe what is around us and there to be enjoyed, and that most of the time I do not even notice.

Just this morning, I was reading an obituary of someone who died in the church where I am a member, and the daughter wrote the obituary of her mother; and she said of her mother that she lived with wonder, which, she went on to say, includes curiosity and awe; and I thought, you know, there are too many days of my life where I do not have enough curiosity about the things around me, and enough awe for things that really are awesome, which add up to living more with a sense of wonder; and I think for me it is slowing down and simply observing what is around me.

DAVE BAST

Yes. I think for myself of this idea of self-control. I think that is so much more positive than mere resolutions; and the fact that it is good for us sometimes to be empty. It is good for us sometimes to be hungry. A reminder, as Deuteronomy says and Jesus famously quoted: Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So, I think I want to develop the day-to-day wisdom that says you do not need to be full; you do not need that thing to satisfy you; what you are really hungry for is God; and to sharpen my desire for God just in the daily course of life.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. Several times throughout this series I have thought of those words of Jesus in Matthew 6, where he is talking about not worrying; and then he says at the end of that passage:

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you as well. It is not that all those things – all these things that are recited in the book of Ecclesiastes are in and of themselves bad, but the frame of all of this needs to be that we seek first the kingdom of God, and then all of these things will find their natural place.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right, exactly. Put first things first in your life, and then keep second things second; and they are still good – they are still great – they are still to be enjoyed, but as second things, not as first things. That is the pathway to satisfaction in this life and to eternal happiness in the life to come.

DUANE KELDERMAN

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hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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