

Politics, Religion, Relationships and Money, part 1

(Ecclesiastes 4)

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Introduction

As the holidays approach, families gather and food is eaten...

Along with the food and the fellowship, there is conversation..

Relatives catch each other up on their jobs, their children, their lives..

But most conversations are of the lighter variety...

Sports, shopping, tv shows dominate most of the conversations and the reason for that is simple..

Most families live by the rule of never discussing politics and religion..

And why is that?

Well, those issues are so deeply personal to people that it quickly leads to arguments and broken relationships at just the mention of their name..

Therefore, many people would never think of bringing up either subject at a family gathering..

Many people even say that politics and religion don't mix, but the reality is that the Bible talks about both of them in detail in many places...

God cares about how people worship Him..

And God also cares about how people are governed in the world..

God has created both politics and religion, and HE seeks to educate his people about both..

Well, from Ecclesiastes 4:1 - 6:9, we are going to discuss politics and religion, but we are also going to add in money and relationships to make it even more controversial...

Now the reality is that people need to talk about these subjects because God is not silent on any of them..

In fact, we need wisdom on these things, so over the next two weeks, we will dig into these things in the book of Ecclesiastes..

Now, a natural question is why does Solomon address these subjects on a book that details his search for meaning in life?

Why move into areas such as these?

Well, maybe Solomon is still searching through these controversial areas of life looking for meaning there..

We all know people who try to find their meaning in life through politics or relationships or money..

Solomon is no different, so maybe he is returning to these subjects a second time in hopes that they will satisfy..

However, what we are going to find in this section from chapter 4 to chapter 6 is a small section on a man's relationship to God in worship, which will really serve as the high point of this section..

However, let's begin in verses 1-3 of chapter 4 with what we can call...

I. The Frustration of Oppression (4:1-3)

1 Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. 2 So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. 3 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.

A sad reality of government is that it can never be perfectly fair..

Unfortunately, people expect fairness from their government and politicians..

The end result is that no one is ever fully satisfied by their rulers..

And even though Solomon was a king, he realized that the people under him were still oppressed..

There were still people in Israel who were taken advantage of by people over them..

And the same is true today..

You could elect the most Christian president ever and guess what?

He could stop all oppression in this country..

And the reason is simple..

Man is fallen and his corruption leads to all sorts of injustice and oppression in the world.

Even though people may live under a righteous ruler, they are still able to oppress others..

And Solomon noticed his own limitations to stop it..

But this is true for every king and for every form of government..

Though some governments do more to protect the poor and disadvantaged, no government is able to completely eradicate oppression..

And Solomon observed this and was frustrated by it even to the point that he said the dead were better off than the living...

And the unborn are better off than the born...

Now clearly this is not an encouragement to despair of life.

But it is a reminder that life isn't fair and try as he might, Solomon can't make it fair..

And that is clearly a reason for his frustration with politics and government...

A second frustration in life is found in verses 4-8...

II. The Frustration of Possessions (4-8)

In verse 8, Solomon leaves politics and moves to money..

Let's read verse 4...

4 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 [a]vanity and striving after wind.

Solomon's first frustration with money is found in verse 4..

To him, it seems that people work out of jealousy of their neighbor..

People work, not because God commands it, but because their hearts are envious of others..

And work provides the wealth needed to satisfy their need to have more than their neighbor..

Yet the reality is that their neighbor is working just as hard to stay ahead of them...

And this rat race is a never ending cycle to have the most possessions...

To which Solomon comments, “man that rivalry with my neighbor is useless.”

Now, this is not to say that work is bad..

We know its not..

In fact, let’s read verse 5-6..

5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. 6 One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

Verse 5 is clear, - lazy people end up with nothing to eat...

The person who folds his hands is a picture of someone not working...

And there are people like that in the world..

Some even say that they left the workforce because they were tired of chasing the Joneses..

It is now popular among a whole generation of young people not to work since work ruins their relationships and requires so much time..

But God would say through Solomon that this mentality is an overreaction to verse 4...

Just because people work out of jealousy of others doesn't mean that work is bad, it means that people are wrongly motivated..

Work is not problem.

The greedy and jealous human heart is the problem.

So don't quit work or else you may have nothing to eat but your own flesh..

Therefore, you must keep work in balance...

So verse 5 is one end of see saw where no one works but verse 6 is the other end where people work too much...

In other words, a fist full of work and fist of rest is better than two fists full of work...

This is the balance..

Work is not evil, so work...

But too much work can be sinful, so make sure to rest as well..

This is picture of the work week seen in the book of Genesis..

6 days God worked. 1 day he rested.

The same is true of man.

Work is good but keep it balanced.

Don't be lazy or you may starve.

But don't work yourself to death due to your envy of man.

Instead work and rest for the glory of God.

However, Solomon is not done about the danger of possessions...

Though we may expect another warning to get to work, Solomon ends this section with an illustration of why too much work is bad..

Verse 7..

7 Then I looked again at vanity under the sun.

8 There was a certain man without a [b]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.

Some people are so addicted to work and wealth and possessions that they work all the time but eventually figure that there is no one around them to share the joy of wealth with..

For them, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin are their only family..

For them, money is their family and possessions are their kids and wealth is their wife..

Such a sad outcome of life would be to work to acquire wealth but have no one left to enjoy it with..

This is the frustration of money for Solomon...

Yes, you need to work.

Yes, wealth feed the family and buys the clothes and supports the church..

But the love of wealth can also leave you quite lonely...

Better to die a poor man surrounded by room full of family than to die a rich man surrounded by room full of possessions that can't hug or kiss you..

Yet that is a sad reality in a fallen world for so many people.

Solomon now turns to the subject of relationships in verses 9-12...

Specifically, Solomon address the subject of friendships..

What prompts this discussion?

Quite possibly, the sadness of the verses that we just read about a man who was alone due to his obsession with work and wealth...

Let's simply call this..

III. The Frustration of Isolation (9-12)

Verse 9..

9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10 For if [c]either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not [d]another to lift him up. 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they [e]keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? 12 And if [f]one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

In the middle of Solomon's frustrations with the world around him, he now touches on something of meaning in the world...

And this is the idea of relationships that we have with others..

When we think of the Scriptures, we see so many examples of friendships...

Clearly, Adam and Eve and marriage is considered the closest of friendships in the Bible and life..

Yet, there are also additional friendships in a person's life as well..

David and Jonathan...

Ruth and Naomi..

In the NT, we see Paul and Timothy...

But then the greatest example is that of Christ himself and his friendships with the disciples around him..

We need relationships in the world, and Solomon is reminded of this when he considers a wealthy but very lonely man..

So the Lord inspires Solomon to right about something of value in world that seems to lack value..

And verses 9-12 are the result...

So let's take note of the value of friendships in a world where everything seems to be vanity..

The first value of friendships is helpfulness..

WE all understand that two people working on a task accomplish more than one persons alone...

However, that never applies to government employees..

In that case, two working together are much less useful...

In all seriousness, this is the picture of the church..

We accomplish more as we unite to do the work of the church...

Verses 10 and 11 give us a second benefit of friendships...

Friends run to our rescue..

In a fallen world, people also fall frequently..

So you need someone to catch you frequently...

This is the role of a friend..

He or she serves as a source of sympathy or encouragement...

At times, friends cry with you while other times, that tell you to stop crying...

And then the picture of two friends lying down to keep warm is not to be taken as picture of intimacy..

It is simply symbolic of the mutual benefits of friendships..

In a society where people traveled by foot and slept outside, the warmth of two bodies was greater than the warmth of just one body..

The picture again is a reminder of how friendships are mutually beneficial..

And this is a good reminder to us that we are to give as much as we take from a friendship..

In fact, we should encourage our friends as much as they encourage us..

We should cry with our friends as much they cry with us..

Worldly and selfish friends make the friendship about their needs but godly friendships are focused on others needs..

And then a fourth and benefit of friendships is found in verse 12, which by the way, is one of the more popular verses in the book of Ecclesiastes..

And the picture here is that friend serves as a protection in life..

One person is easily overpowered..

Two people can defend themselves..

And three people are even better..

Look, I was always the smallest kid in my group of friends but I had the biggest mouth...

I know that is hard to imagine but it is true..

And the reason my mouth ran so much is that I always had 2 or 3 bigger guys with me..

Now the reality is that none of my friends would have probably defended me..

In fact, a couple of them watched me get punched one night...

But the people I was talking to didn't know that, so I ran my mouth even louder..

I am clearly not proud of that and that definitely isn't the way to apply this verse, but it is an illustration of it..

There is safety in friends..

In the church, friends vouch for you character if it is attacked..

This is the picture of verse 12..

Friends are a line of defense even in attacks by the evil one..

Your friends are there to encourage you to withstand the attacks of Satan...

To not give in to temptation..

To not fall into sin..

You need friends to call when you are tempted...

They often provide the way out of temptation that the Bible describes in 1 Corinthians 10:13...

In a world that appeared meaningless to Solomon, he did see the value of friends...

And the reason is simply..

The world is temporary but some relationships and some friendships will carry on into eternity..

Therefore, they give some meaning to our lives...

One final stop to make tonight in the Ecclesiastes 4 takes us back to the world of politics...

We will call this..

IV. The Frustration of Succession (13-16)

13 A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive [g]instruction. 14 For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. 15 I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who [h]replaces him. 16 There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.

In these verses, Solomon makes us of what we could call a parable..

Though Jesus is the master parable teller, Solomon users one here to highlight the frustration of political succession..

You see, in a fallen world, no king rules forever..

Some are killed..

Some are overthrown..

Some get sick..

Some die..

So political structures are always in flux..

They are always changing..

People are wise to consider who is in power and who is headed out of power..

The instability of governments make the world a dangerous place..

Even today, a mad man can rise to power and fire nuclear weapons if given the opportunity..

This is as true today as it was in Solomon's day..

And it was frustrating to Solomon in a couple of ways..

The first frustration is that older kings and rulers often get in ruts in how they rule..

The king of verse 13 no longer knows how to recover instruction..

In other words, he isn't teachable..

He isn't interested in learning..

And that is frustrating because the world is ever changing..

So Solomon says that a young wise man is better than a fool..

Now let's be clear ..

This is always the case..

Youth isn't always preferable to age, but if age means stubbornness and inflexibility, then Solomon says that youth is preferred..

And often in the world, people rush to the younger and fresher face...

We see this in politics, in business, in all sorts of areas in life..

Yet, this rush to support to young man is also frustrating to Solomon because one day he will be replaced as well..

In other words, the popular young lad eventually become the old stubborn man and the whole cycle repeats...

And that is the frustration of succession in politics..

As soon as things start to improve, that king gets old and stubborn and things start to decline...

Such is the frustration with politics in a world of constant change...

And Solomon and we feel that same frustration even today...

Conclusion

So what can we conclude and apply from Ecclesiastes 4?

#1 - You will always have the poor.

Look, Jesus said that and Solomon observed that..

Poor and oppressed people will always exist in a world with greed and envy.

And what is our response to that?

Well, simple.

Fight the fires in your neighborhood..

If the Lord enables you to fight oppression in your job, in your town, in your family, do it..

But realize that the fires of injustice are burning everywhere and there aren't enough people to put them all out..

No Christian oppresses others and no Christian enjoys the oppression of others...

But it is equally true that no Christian can end all oppression..

Oppression and injustice will occur until Christ returns to rule the world..

#2 - You will always have work.

The need to work never disappears in your life.

Because hunger never disappears in your life.

There is always work to be done and we should always be working and serving the Lord..

Yet, work cannot become your God..

There is a balance in work that we must always seek..

Work to honor the Lord by providing for your family, but rest to honor the Lord in enjoying your family as well..

Work to honor the Lord by keeping yourself out of sin, but rest to honor the Lord in not making work the sin of idolatry in your life.

#3 - You will always have friendships.

It is good that God allows us to enjoy people beyond this world..

It is encouraging to know that family and friends will unite in heaven..

This is what makes godly relationships such a blessing in this life..

WE know that what we put into those relationship on earth will continue into eternity...

Some friends you will know forever, so get busy making those type of relationships today..

#4 - You will always have political unrest.

Many folks accuse me of having no interest in politics, yet that is not the case.

I have an interest in politics because the Bible commands me to have one..

I am to submit to political figures over me.

I am to pray for and honor the king.

Every Christian has an interest in politics...

Yet, what separates me from so many other believers in the world today is that my hope is not in politics...

On the Wednesday after the November midterm election, I will get up and study and carry on as usual..

In two years on the Wednesday after the next presidential election, I will get up and study and carry on as usual...

My life does ride the wave of political turmoil in the world..

Yes, I want righteous leaders.

Yes, I want the freedom to preach the gospel.

Yes, I want abortion and homosexual marriage eradicated..

But I also understand the reality of politics in a fallen world..

Abortion may be legal today and illegal next and then legal again in 2 years..

The same for any other issue...

This is the frustration of putting your hope in man's kingdom instead of the kingdom of God..

Man's kingdoms rise and fall, and so there is always political turmoil..

God's kingdom endures forever because its king endures forever..

I pray that King comes soon.

Amen..