

Ecclesiastes 2:18–26 | “Are My Efforts In Vain?”
Preached on March 29, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to Ecclesiastes 2, and we will be in verses 18–26 today.
[pauseeee]

The book of Ecclesiastes pushes us to think about the big questions of life, whether we like it or not. *[pause]*

It’s not always a pleasant endeavor, but it’s a *needed* endeavor.

And this morning is another example of what I’m talking about because it will talk about something that we all feel from time-to-time: are my efforts in vain? *[pauseeee]*

“Leonard Woolf...was a British publisher and political theorist who wrote over twenty books.
[pause]

He [reflected on] his life and work [and said this]: ‘I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing.

The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played PingPong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. *[pause]*

I have therefore to make a rather *[igno-minious]* confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.”¹ *[pauseeeee]*

Have you ever felt like Leonard Woolf? *[pause]*

Have you ever felt like all of your work was in vain? *[pause]*

That’s a common experience of humanity. *[pauseeeee]*

The truth is that from time-to-time, we wonder: is my effort worth it? Will it last? Or even, what will happen to it after I die?

And the author of Ecclesiastes felt the same way. *[pause]*

He looked at all of his toil and reflected upon it in the grand scheme of things. *[pauseee]*

Let’s see what he concluded in verses 18–23. *[READ]*

The writer doesn’t hold back, but gives us a hard, yet true statement, and it’s that...

I. Under the sun, hard work feels like a waste. (18–23)

¹ Quoted in Edward M. Curtis, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, *Teach the Text Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 19.

In verses 18–21, he explains that you could put so much wisdom and effort into building something, only for it to be squandered by someone who comes after you. *[pausee]*

A real life example of this is the Vanderbilt family...

According to one article, it's said that "Cornelius Vanderbilt started the family business by borrowing \$100 from his mother." *[pause]*

He "went on to build [the] railroad empire, New York Central...

[And] he reportedly accumulated a \$100 million fortune by the time of his death in 1877—more than was held in the U.S. Treasury at the time."² *[pause]*

Another article explains what happened to the Vanderbilt wealth: "In just a few generations, the Vanderbilts went from the richest family in the world to financially irrelevant.

Mansions were bulldozed. Trust funds vanished. By 1973, not a single living descendant was even a millionaire."³ *[pauseeee]*

This is what Solomon ponders—he thinks about how all of his effort could be wasted when he dies. *[pauseeee]*

Solomon calls this reality "vanity" and a "great evil." *[pause]*

We can't control what happens to what we have once we die—it could be treasured, or it could be trashed. *[pause]*

This thought causes Solomon to proclaim in verse 22, "What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?" *[pausee]*

Remember that this is viewing things "under the sun," so this is the perspective of if you took God and eternity out of the picture...

If this life is all that there is, then what lasting profit do we have for all of our toil? *[pause]*

You can't put all of your hopes in your efforts because you will die, and it could crumble.

Therefore, ultimate satisfaction can't be found in all the work we do. *[pauseeee]*

Our effort may create temporary gain, as we get to experience the blessings of hard work, but think farther—what about when you die? *[pause]*

What's going to last? What will matter in the end? *[pauseeee]*

²<https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2014/07/14/the-vanderbilts-how-american-royalty-lost-their-crown-jewels/>.

³ <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/articles/entertainment-articles/riches-rags-story-vanderbilt-family/>.

There are many people who are workaholics, obsessed with success or creating some sort of empire.

It's all they think about, it's what they dream about, and it consumes their life, but have they ever thought about the truth of this passage? *[pause]*

Have you? *[pause]*

Have you ever realized that it could all be squandered when you're gone?

Your hope cannot be put in your work. *[pauseeee]*

What does being a great businessman in this lifetime really produce for you in the end, if that's all your life is about?

Your business could be gone in a couple years. *[pause]*

What does all of this striving really do, as you lay on your deathbed, if you don't know Christ?

Your life can't be all about the work you do, but it must be about something deeper, something more lasting. *[pauseeee]*

Work itself is hard due to the Fall, so there's a natural hardness to our work.

But now think about the person whose life is obsessed with their work. *[pause]*

They experience the natural toil of their labor that we all do, but due to their trust in their efforts, they also experience what verse 23 says...

"All his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest." *[pauseeee]*

Work is a grueling god to have. *[pause]*

You make work your god, and all your days will be full of sorrow because work is painful, so no wonder he says, "his work is a vexation." *[pause]*

It leads to a life encompassed by frustration and irritation because work is all that he lives for, and this is seen in how verse 23 says, "Even in the night his heart does not rest." *[pauseee]*

Here's a person who can't stop obsessing over work even as he or she lays in bed—work is on their mind day and night.

There is no rest, no relief, no stopping. *[pauseee]*

This is why workaholics are usually miserable people because they do not ever stop experiencing the hardness and frustration that comes along with work.

Like I said, work is a grueling god to have. *[pauseeee]*

Are you a workaholic in any way? *[pause]*

Do you put your hopes in your efforts?

Realize that your toil is a miserable place to put your trust. *[pause]*

The results of your toil could be squandered, but also, the effects of a toil-obsessed life are days full of pain and frustration. *[pause]*

This is why the author says that he hated all his toil and it led him to despair because it could be squandered. *[pauseeee]*

Under the sun, hard work feels like a waste, so it cannot be where we put our hope and trust.

So what's the key to how we should live in such a world as ours? *[pause]*

Verses 24–26 gives us the answer. *[READ]*

These verses show us that...

II. From God's hand, we can experience joy in His gifts. (24–26)

After reading verses 18–23, you could walk away thinking, “Ugh, life is just grueling and there is no joy or rest found.” *[pause]*

It could not only lead you to despair, but to stay there. *[pause]*

Now certainly Solomon wanted us to feel the despair of a life trusting in work because it doesn't *work* in the long run, but he doesn't want us to remain in despair.

Instead, he wants to lift us out of it by showing us that it's possible to experience joy in this world. *[pause]*

It may be joy mingled with toil, but it's joy, nonetheless.

And the key is how you view and approach the things of this world. *[pauseeee]*

He starts out verse 24 by saying, “There is nothing better for a person...” *[pauseeee]*

He's pointing us to the best way to live. *[pause]*

Many people wonder, “How should I live?” Or, “What is the way to find joy?”

Well, Solomon gives you the answer here. *[pauseeee]*

The author's task from the beginning has been to find the best way to live.

And amidst so many dead-ends along the road of Ecclesiastes, here's a path laid out for us.
[pause]

It's like he's been saying, "Nope, that's not it...not that one...neither is that over there."

Now finally, he gives us a breath of fresh air, as he says, "Nothing is better than this!" [pause]

At last, a rock of joy to cling to amidst the rushing water of vanity. [pauseeee]

He says that a person should "eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." [pause]

Now why does he mention those three things?

Well if you think about it: eating, drinking, and working are some of the basic, ordinary things of life.

And if you can find joy in the everyday things of life, then you can find joy in other things.
[pauseeee]

Do you ever find enjoyment in eating and drinking, or even in your work? [pause]

Solomon teaches us that we can (and should) find joy in them—but how? [pause]

The key is found at the end of verse 24 and into 25, where he says, "This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" [pauseeee]

The way to find joy in eating and drinking and toil is to see those things *as gifts from God!*
[pauseeee]

Too often, we think that we deserve to eat or drink because we worked so hard for them. [pause]

Too often, we think that we deserve to work at our job because we put so much effort into getting to the place that we are at.

But even our food and drink are gifts from God—may we never forget that! [pause]

Our ability to work and the position that we have at our workplace is a gift from God. [pauseeee]

Do we realize that as a consequence for our sin, God could have left these joys out? [pause]

Let's not forget that even the most ordinary blessings of life are a gracious gift from God's hand, so don't take them for granted!

That's why 1 Timothy 4:4 says, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." [pauseeee]

We can only eat and drink and find enjoyment in our work because of God. [pause]

We didn't create the seeds that turn into vegetables, we didn't create the elements found on the earth to make all the different kinds of drinks in the world. *[pause]*

We didn't give ourselves the ability to complete a task. *[pause]*

From the most complex blessings in life to the most ordinary ones, are from the hand of God.

And this means that God *wants* us to enjoy His gifts! *[pause]*

He is no stingy Lord, but look around you at all of the joys and pleasures of this life...

That great meal, that refreshing drink, that feeling of a job well done—all from God. *[pauseeee]*

God doesn't tell us to eat the bare minimum, or drink just enough to not die, but here in His Word He tells us, "Eat! Drink!"

Verse 25 tells us that we "have enjoyment" from Him. *[pauseeee]*

When you eat that great meal, and drink that refreshing drink, you can do so with joy, thanking God for such a good gift. *[pause]*

Now this doesn't mean that we should gorge ourselves with food and drink, but it means to enjoy them with gratitude to God. *[pauseeeee]*

Now what does it mean to find enjoyment in your toil?

Solomon just got done telling us how grueling, hard, and vexing that toil can be, and that our efforts could all be squandered, so why say to enjoy it now? *[pause]*

It's because it's all about how you *view* work.

If you see your work as an end in itself, you will be miserable, but if you view work as a gift, you can find joy in it. *[pauseeee]*

There is a certain experience of satisfaction and delight that we can have from our toil. *[pause]*

Some of you are thinking, "What? Really?!"

Yes, one of the delights we can have in our toil is the feeling of a job well done. *[pause]*

Haven't you ever finished something, looked at it, and felt a certain pleasure of seeing it done well? *[pauseee]*

You mow the grass and then look at it with satisfaction. *[pause]*

You spend hours making a craft, and delight in the finished product. *[pauseeee]*

There's also the joy of getting better at your job...

When you can look back at your progress over the years, there's a pleasure that comes from seeing that. *[pause]*

There's also the joy of helping others through our work, whether it be by providing for them through the money we make, or by serving them directly through our efforts. *[pause]*

Lastly, have you ever experienced a certain joy when you thought, "I'm blessed to have the ability to even do this"? *[pause]*

Realize that not everyone has that ability, and for those who don't have the ability, are you thankful for the gifts you *do* have? *[pauseeee]*

Fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, *it is possible to delight in your toil.* *[pause]*

You shouldn't be grumbling into work each day, but you can accept your toil as your God-given task for that day.

You can enjoy the simple pleasures of a job well done, of the ability to serve others, or of the capability to be active and progress. *[pauseeee]*

These two sections taken together show us that there is a proper and improper way to view your work...

You either see it as a god or a gift. *[pauseeee]*

Think about the person obsessed with working all the time, what happens?

He or she never really enjoys the simple gifts of God. *[pause]*

A meal no longer becomes a delight, but something to quickly gulp down before the next task.

But if you approach work as something where you can enjoy seeing a job well done, or enjoy helping others through it...

You no longer work obsessively, nor put your hopes in it, but you see it as a gift, and you can rest in God's control. *[pauseeee]*

In a world full of trouble, isn't it a blessing to know that the Lord doesn't want us experiencing more trouble than is necessary, but wants us to rest and enjoy good things? *[pauseeee]*

That's our Lord and good Father in Heaven—He truly loves us and cares for us! *[pauseeee]*

The reason why we can enjoy these good things is because God desires to give good to those who please Him...

Listen to the first part of verse 26, "For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy." *[pause]*

As we know from the rest of Scripture, it's through faith in Jesus Christ that we can please God.

So it's not through our works, but through faith in His Son.

And that means that this “one who pleases him” is us who trust in Christ, and so it's us who receive wisdom, knowledge, and joy. *[pauseeee]*

God is the ultimate source of good and blessing, and so everything good comes from His hand.

That's why James says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above...”⁴ *[pauseeee]*

So the one who pleases God receives all of these good things, but what about the one who doesn't?

Listen to the rest of verse 26, “But to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” *[pauseeee]*

The person who lives life in rebellion against God by not trusting in Jesus Christ doesn't receive the blessings of wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

Rather, they live based on their own wisdom and knowledge, and do not find lasting joy. *[pauseeee]*

The person who is all about the things of this world and trusts in their efforts, never obtains what they are truly looking for.

So they keep striving, but never obtain. *[pause]*

They gather and collect, gather and collect the things of this world, believing that if only they had “a little more” then they would be satisfied.

But it never works! *[pauseeee]*

If your life is all about gathering and collecting more, so God says, “That's what you will do then: you will just keep gathering and collecting, but never be satisfied.” *[pauseeeee]*

This is because true and lasting satisfaction cannot be found in gathering and collecting things, but in knowing and being loved by God. *[pauseeee]*

If you put your hopes in your labors, you will just keep laboring, and it won't work.

If you put your trust in pleasure, you will keep seeking it out, but never feel satisfied.

If your life becomes all about things, so things you will gather, and you will gather everything, but what your soul truly needs. *[pauseeee]*

⁴ James 1:17.

In the end, all of that gathering and collecting will only be given to the one who pleases God.

And this points to the fact that someday believers will be given all things,⁵ but those who reject God will lose everything they ever acquired. *[pauseeee]*

This text teaches us...

Do not put your ultimate hope in your efforts, but gratefully enjoy the gifts of God.

You can't trust your own efforts, for all of that effort could be squandered by someone who follows you. *[pause]*

It doesn't provide you with lasting gain, nor lasting satisfaction. *[pauseeee]*

Work is a horrible god, a bucket full of holes, and a heavy, heavy burden.

That's why Jesus tells us, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest..."

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls...

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."⁶ *[pauseee]*

No longer be burdened with the weight of work as your ultimate trust, but throw it off, and find rest in Jesus Christ, who died for your sins and then rose again! *[pause]*

He did the work that was needed to provide you with *lasting gain*, for through Him we receive everlasting life. *[pause]*

His work can never be wasted nor squandered, for it was done once and for all,⁷ and is able to save us to the uttermost.⁸ *[pauseeeee]*

I like this quote by an author who wrote, "Life is meant to be enjoyed not mastered."⁹ *[pause]*

This means that life isn't all about what my hands have done, but what the hand of God has provided me. *[pause]*

From the gift of salvation all the way down to the everyday gifts of life, look at the blessings you have from God, and enjoy them as the gifts that they are. *[pauseeee]*

Don't these truths change so much? *[pause]*

⁵ Romans 8:32.

⁶ Matthew 11:28–30.

⁷ A reference to Hebrews 10:12–14.

⁸ A reference to Hebrews 7:25.

⁹ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 46.

I no longer have to burn myself out, thinking that if only I do *more* then I will be good to go.
[pause]

I no longer have to think, "If only I do more, then I'll be satisfied."

I no longer have to think, "If only I do more, then my life will have meaning and purpose."

I no longer have to think, "If only I do more, then I'll be good with God."

But in Christ, I can rest. [pause]

In Him, I find satisfaction, meaning and purpose, and favor with God because He did the work that I could never do, and accomplished what I could never accomplish. [pauseeee]

This means that now in Christ, I can work hard in His power, knowing that if it's done for His glory, then it will last into eternity.

And I can find joy in the simple things like eating, drinking, and resting. [pauseeeee]

Our work cannot save us, it cannot be our hope—so turn to Christ and find rest in *His* work!
[pause]

His easy yoke and light burden replaces the heavy burden that we had before.

And the heart not at rest during the night can now be at rest in Him.