

Ecclesiastes 4:1–6 | “Ugly Realities Under the Sun”

Preached on May 3, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 4, and we will be in verses 1–6. *[pauseeee]*

Today, we are going to be looking at some “ugly realities under the sun.”

And this actually continues the theme that we looked at last week, where we saw the prevalence of death and injustice. *[pauseee]*

Now today, we will look at oppression and envy.

Listen to what it says here in Ecclesiastes 4:1–6. *[READ]*

Ugly realities of life cause us to wince, sometimes physically, but definitely in our hearts and minds. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever heard a horrible story on the news, and your heart just sank? *[pause]*

Have you ever seen someone do something so mean and nasty to someone else and you were repulsed? *[pause]*

These hurtful incidents are extremely unpleasant to witness, let alone experience! *[pause]*

Some of you are victims of oppression, so this hits home for you.

You were taken advantage of, exploited, or mistreated in some way. *[pause]*

I want to say to you this morning that what happened to you was absolutely awful and repugnant. *[pauseeee]*

By speaking about these things, the Bible actually gives voice to those who have been through them.

It shows that these things are totally wrong and hideous. *[pauseeee]*

Imagine if the Bible ignored talking about oppressive, hurtful things.

It would seem like you were the victim of some random act, and you may wonder, “Doesn’t God view this as wrong? Doesn’t He know that such things happen?” *[pause]*

But by speaking about oppression and envy, the Bible shows that it can relate to you, right where you are, in all of the mess. *[pause]*

It gets down with us into the dirt to meet us with grace.

It sits with us in our pain, and says, “This pain is real, now let me show you how to live in the midst of this.” *[pauseeee]*

Let’s see how this passage helps us...first...

I. There is a great amount of oppression done under the sun! (1–3)

Notice how he begins verse 1, “Again I saw...” *[pause]*

The writer has been looking out at the world and has been recounting what he “saw.” *[pause]*

This shows us that these are things that you can see, if only you would look around you.

So instead of looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, as Christians, we actually look and see the world around us *for what it is*. *[pauseeee]*

Are you intentional about looking at the world and seeing what’s going on? *[pauseeee]*

Solomon saw a great amount of oppression. *[pause]*

Now I know that for some of you when you hear the word, “oppression,” you are immediately put off by it.

Maybe you are convinced that it has been misused in the political sphere, so you naturally recoil at the word. *[pause]*

I would ask you this morning to not let that thinking blind you to the fact that there is *real oppression* that happens in the world. *[pause]*

The Bible is telling us here that oppression happens, so we must not throw out the word completely. *[pauseeee]*

Oppression is typically done by someone who uses their power or authority to unjustly treat someone else and it’s cruel, ruthless, unloving, and wrong. *[pause]*

Often the person who is oppressed is poor, helpless, or weak, for they are taken advantage of. *[pauseeee]*

A prime example of this is in 1 Kings 21...

There’s this man named Naboth, who owns a vineyard next to the palace of King Ahab. *[pause]*

Ahab goes home and pouts because Naboth won’t give him the vineyard. *[pause]*

In response, Jezebel, his wife, comes up with an evil plan.

She gets the elders of the city to allow two men to falsely accuse Naboth and then stone him to death. *[pause]*

As a result of this, Ahab takes possession of Naboth’s vineyard. *[pause]*

Talk about oppression—Ahab and Jezebel used their power to kill a man and take his land. *[pauseeee]*

There are other examples of oppression in the Bible like: pressuring someone to do something, or taking bribes that disadvantage others. *[pause]*

There's also things like: withholding wages, using false balances, and charging interest rates on poor people, so that you profit off of their hardship.¹ *[pause]*

These are the types of things that Solomon sees, and he sees *a lot of it*. *[pauseeee]*

A sign of the oppressed is that they are marked by *tears*. *[pause]*

He says, "Behold, the tears of the oppressed." *[pause]*

When you are mistreated or taken advantage of, it naturally leads to sorrow.

You are treated as though you are dirt and pushed down, so no wonder there's tears! *[pauseeee]*

If you have ever been oppressed, do not feel bad for crying, for it's a normal thing to happen.

The Bible doesn't say, "Oh, you're fine, just wipe your tears and rub some dirt on it," when something truly evil happens to you. *[pauseee]*

This passage is meeting you where you are, right in the middle of your tears, and giving voice to your agony. *[pause]*

If you feel put down or taken advantage of, know that God knows and God cares—He's not ignorant of your plight. *[pauseee]*

Though sometimes we feel like the psalmist who said, "Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"²

We can know that He has NOT truly forgotten us! *[pauseeee]*

Not only are the oppressed characterized by tears, but their tears *continue*. *[pause]*

He says there in the second half of verse 1, "They had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them." *[pauseeee]*

Their suffering is unrelenting because there's no one who can stand up for them and take on the oppressor, who has so much power.

And as a result, they remain in misery. *[pauseeee]*

Although the ways that oppression is expressed looks somewhat different than biblical times, it can still happen today...

An employer pressures his employee to do something wrong, or else they will get fired or demoted. *[pause]*

¹ For a few examples see: Exodus 22:25, Deuteronomy 25:13–16, Ezekiel 22:12, James 5:4.

² Psalm 42:9.

A landlord refused to fix things, knowing that the tenant has limited options. *[pause]*

A person makes a false accusation against someone, knowing that they can't do anything to defend themselves. *[pause]*

A person lends something to someone else, but then uses that leverage to get the person to do what they want.

The list could go on. *[pause]*

I'm sure we have all heard or seen these types of things, and I sure hope *we* aren't guilty of them! *[pauseeee]*

So Solomon has brought forth his findings about oppression, but what's his conclusion?...

Verse 2, "And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive." *[pauseeee]*

Kind of a depressing statement, isn't it—those no longer living are better off? *[pause]*

Truly, this is a shocking statement, but we must not miss what is going on here...

His statement reflects the reality of how *horrific* oppression really is. *[pause]*

The Bible doesn't sugarcoat the truth—it demonstrates that when people are taken advantage of, it's a dreadful thing. *[pause]*

One commentator put it this way, "Such declarations...reflect the reality that suffering under an evil system can be so terrible that death is a welcome relief."³ *[pause]*

He even goes further in verse 3: "But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun." *[pauseeee]*

Many Christians don't know what to do with such a blunt statement in the Bible...

Some try to shy away from it, but here it is in the Bible, so we must not ignore it. *[pause]*

Solomon is showing us what life is *really* like—the evil in it is truly revolting. *[pause]*

Instead of softening the facts, he wants us to see it in all of its ugliness. *[pause]*

He's also showing us what a normal human reaction to this is, for just think of some of the things that Job says in his pain!⁴ *[pauseeee]*

If we are shocked by Solomon's statement, it may be that we are ignoring how absolutely brutal that oppression can be. *[pauseeee]*

³ 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), 37.

⁴ See especially Job 3.

The person who rejects Christ is left here, right here.

They are left with the despair, with the hopelessness, with the idea that to not be alive is better. [pause]

But we, who trust in Christ, are not left at the end Ecclesiastes 4:3...

We know that there's more to the story, there's hope that pierces through and dissipates the despair. [pause]

Our eyes are turned upward to the One who comforts the oppressed, and who will make all things right. [pause]

We trust the One who has provided us with a sure hope beyond the here-and-now, and beyond the grave. [pauseeee]

How can we have such hope?...

Because Jesus came "to set at liberty those who are *oppressed*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁵ [pause]

He can do this because, as the Bible says, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth."⁶

It's He who "was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."⁷ [pauseee]

Because Jesus was oppressed for us on the cross, it has radically changed our situation from despair to hope.

Now we have the promise of life that endures beyond the grave, now we have a Father who loves us and who will make all things right. [pauseeee]

This means that even if we are oppressed in this world, we can look with eyes of faith to see that knowing Christ and being found in Him is worth it all.

That's better than anything else! [pauseeeee]

So Solomon looked out and saw oppression, but also, he saw that...

II. There is a great amount of envy-driven effort done under the sun! (4–6)

He says in verse 4, "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind." [pauseeee]

⁵ Luke 4:18–19 (Italics is mine).

⁶ Isaiah 53:7a.

⁷ Isaiah 53:5.

In the late 1800's, there was a rivalry going on that's often called, "The War of the Currents."⁸
[pause]

Thomas Edison had come up with the direct current system of electricity, but not long afterwards, Nikola Tesla came up with the alternating current system. *[pause]*

Edison wanted his DC power to be the standard, but started to see AC beginning to take a hold.
[pause]

As a result, Edison sought to convince the public that AC was dangerous by electrocuting animals with it.

He even recommended that prisoners sentenced to death be killed by using an electric chair utilizing AC power. *[pause]*

Unfortunately for him, AC was chosen to be used during the Chicago World's Fair, and became the dominant system in electrical power plants. *[pause]*

That's an example of envy-driven effort. *[pauseeee]*

Solomon saw that so much work was driven by envy for what someone else has. *[pause]*

An example of this today would be a person noticing that his neighbor bought a new car, and so now he is determined to work overtime to get a new car, too.

His effort is driven by envy. *[pauseee]*

This 'envy' is a passionate zeal for what someone else has, so much so, that it drives you to work more. *[pauseeee]*

What's interesting is that many people today would see nothing wrong with this because it's normal in American culture to do this. *[pause]*

Fierce competition, rivalry, and vying for the top spot are par for the course in American life.
[pauseee]

Think about the envy of a company vying to win out over another company. *[pause]*

Think about the motivation of envy pushing a musician to try to get better accolades than someone else. *[pause]*

Consider a student's or athlete's envy, which fuels their rivalry against another person.

It's literally everywhere, and that's Solomon's point. *[pauseeeee]*

⁸ <https://www.history.com/articles/what-was-the-war-of-the-currents> & <https://www.energy.gov/articles/war-currents-ac-vs-dc-power>.

Many people would say, “What’s so bad about being driven to get what *they* have, so that I work harder?”

But the Bible calls it out for what it is: it’s envy. *[pauseee]*

You want what they have, and so you become discontent and resentful that they have it and you don’t...

As a result, you try hard to get it. *[pauseee]*

If you have any leaning towards thinking that this type of thing is OK, then just remember the many places in the Bible that show how destructive envy is. *[pause]*

Look at Cain’s action towards Abel. *[pause]*

Look at Joseph’s brothers’ envy of him and what that led to, or look at Saul’s envy of David. *[pause]*

James says, “For where *jealousy* and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”⁹ *[pauseee]*

Here are some other examples of this that we may overlook because they are more subtle...

Do you make sure to clean your house extra well in order to try to outdo someone else? *[pause]*

Is your parenting effort done because you are envious of the praise that other parents get? *[pause]*

Is our church driven by envy of another church’s size, impact, or influence? *[pauseee]*

We would probably be surprised how often our efforts are envy-driven, if we stopped and considered them more. *[pause]*

Could it be that many workaholics are workaholics, due to envy? That’s at least something to consider. *[pauseee]*

Solomon calls this “vanity,” and a “striving after wind.”

It’s something fleeting and empty, for it doesn’t ultimately *satisfy*. *[pauseee]*

People don’t think this way, instead, they are driven by envy because they think that getting what that person has *will* satisfy them.

They think that it’s the key to contentment. *[pause]*

But here’s the thing: no amount of effort and success is ever good enough for the envious person because there’s always something “more” out there. *[pause]*

⁹ James 3:16 (Italics is mine).

Their envy-driven effort doesn't solve their problem, it reveals it. *[pauseeee]*

Work done out of envy is *self-centered*. *[pause]*

It's not done for the benefit of others, but only for the benefit of self.

In fact, others are the “competition,” not the beneficiaries of your work. *[pause]*

In that way, it won't ever satisfy because life wasn't meant to be lived for yourself. *[pauseee]*

Now this statement about envy can lead someone to respond with, “Well, it's that's the case, should we just not be driven to work at all?” *[pause]*

Solomon foresees that argument and gets ahead of it by saying in verse 5, “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” *[pause]*

He's making the point that just because there's envy-driven work doesn't mean that we should be sluggards. *[pauseee]*

He calls someone who is lazy a “fool”.

And not many people who are lazy see themselves as fools, but they are. *[pauseee]*

They “fold their hands,” which is an image of sitting around when work is supposed to be done. *[pause]*

So they are sitting there doing nothing, and what happens over time—you get hungry. *[pause]*

So does this person get up and get to work to feed himself?

Nope—in his folly, he sits there and eats his own flesh. *[pauseee]*

It's a shocking, gruesome picture that's meant to be that way. *[pause]*

It doesn't mean that a lazy person *literally* eats their arm off, but that their laziness leads to self-destruction. *[pauseee]*

This would probably look like a slothful person not working, and so leading themselves to destitution.

But they hurt themselves in other ways, too, like their character, reputation, relationships, etc. *[pauseee]*

Now after verse 5, a person is led to a conundrum...

I am not to be driven to excessive work by envy, and I am not to sit around and be lazy, so how am I supposed to approach work? *[pause]*

Listen to verse 6, “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.” *[pauseee]*

A person with “two hands full of toil” is a person who works constantly, always looking for more.

But what’s interesting is that this life full of toil is a striving after nothing, like chasing the wind. *[pause]*

They think that they will gain so much, but end up empty in the end. *[pause]*

Their bank account may grow, their house may get bigger, they may be climbing the ladder, but in the end, it’s insignificant in the scope of eternity. *[pauseeee]*

A person with two hands full of toil doesn’t have a hand free to receive anything of importance from God or others. *[pauseeee]*

So what’s better than two hands full of toil? “A handful of quietness.” *[pause]*

The point is that instead of having two hands full of toil, I have one handful of toil and one handful of quietness.

Notice the balance? *[pauseee]*

‘Quietness’ here refers to calm, peace, and rest. *[pause]*

It’s someone who is content, and not always flustered and going, going, going. *[pauseeee]*

Don’t you want peace and rest in your life? *[pause]*

Do you really want to burn yourself out, and grind yourself down to a pulp in activity? *[pauseeee]*

If you tend to be a workaholic, consider your “Why?”

Why are you working yourself so much—is it envy? *[pause]*

Do you want what *that* person has? *[pause]*

Maybe it’s their lifestyle, their wealth, their position, or something else.

If that’s the case, realize that you will end up empty—it won’t satisfy. *[pause]*

Proverbs 14:30 says, “Envy makes the bones rot.”

So your life will only and ever be just two hands full of debilitating toil, but with no hands full of peace, calm, or rest. *[pauseeee]*

We are not to live with both hands folded, nor with both hands full of toil, but with one hand full of rest and another full of toil *in balance*. *[pause]*

Neither laziness nor overworking are the answer, but a balanced, contented life is key. *[pauseeee]*

Now how does one live with a “handful of quietness”? *[pause]*

It takes trust in the Lord, knowing that He's in control. *[pause]*

If you think that life is all up to you, then you will work yourself to the bone.

But when you trust the Lord, knowing that He's in control, you can take time to rest because you know, "It's NOT all on my shoulders." *[pauseeee]*

If you are driven to overwork by envy, it's because you don't think you have enough, so you feel like you must work harder to be satisfied.

But when you trust the Lord, knowing that He gives you what you need and you are satisfied in Him, then you can rest in what you have. *[pauseeee]*

This quietness and trust reflects the gospel, for we are not saved by our own efforts, but by trust in Christ. *[pauseeee]*

God doesn't say, "Make sure you always have two hands full of toil, so you'll be saved."

No—to trust in your own efforts is like striving after the wind—it doesn't work! *[pause]*

What we need is someone else's effort: Christ's. *[pause]*

He came to this earth, perfectly fulfilled the Law for us, and then died in our place.

He then rose from the grave, completing the work of redemption. *[pause]*

Through faith in Him alone, all of His perfect righteousness and work are credited to us, as if we did it. *[pauseeee]*

If you have been trusting yourself for your salvation, then no longer do that, but turn in repentance and trust in Jesus Christ alone to save you! *[pauseeee]*

You see, the gospel doesn't call us to two hands full of toil, but really, it calls us to handfuls of quiet trust. *[pause]*

We open our hands by faith to receive the gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

We rest in Christ's work, trusting Him for salvation. *[pause]*

Now, because of what He did, we can be at rest and be content. *[pauseeee]*

I no longer have to envy another person because I can be content, due to Christ's work on my behalf. *[pause]*

Since my standing with God, my most foundational needs, and my eternity are secure, I no longer have to be driven by the accumulation of things or titles or stuff. *[pauseeee]*

I also no longer have to work myself to the bone, for God has provided and will continue to provide me with what I need. *[pauseeee]*

Is your soul characterized by handfals of quietness? *[pauseeee]*

This passage shows us that...

Oppression and envy in this world should lead us to trust and contentment in the Lord.

Oppression and envy are everywhere under the sun. *[pause]*

Look around and you'll see some sort of oppression going on. *[pause]*

Open your eyes, and you'll see how often work is driven by envy. *[pause]*

They are two common, yet ugly realities under the sun.

But what should the presence of these things lead us to? Trust and contentment in the Lord.
[pauseeee]

When we see oppression, it should remind us that God will deal with it—He is the Judge, who will make all things right. *[pause]*

He is also the One who saves those oppressed by sin through Jesus Christ by lifting us out by grace. *[pause]*

We now find refuge in Christ our Savior—He is our hope amidst all oppression! *[pauseeee]*

When we see envy-driven effort, it should remind us that it doesn't satisfy...

What satisfies is Christ, and in Him, we can be content. *[pause]*

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."¹⁰

So it's *He* who we look to, it's *He* who we rest in, for it's *He* who satisfies. *[pauseeee]*

There's a lot of horrible realities under the sun, but thank the Lord that Christ came 'under the sun' to save us and give us everything we need. *[pause]*

Will you look to Him?

¹⁰ John 6:35.