

**"Musings on the Rat Race of Vanity"**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1, 2:18-26**

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## I. Life Isn't Fair

Behold the ranting of the Old Adam: It just isn't fair, so why bother?

It seems like a good idea in life, to make something of yourself. Build up something that will last. Pursue excellence. Be the best at whatever you do. Devote yourself to building a legacy to leave behind: A Fortune 500 company, a mega-sized congregation, a healthy estate. After all, hard work pays off, and it's no secret that lots of people gain their identity from their labors—they establish who they are by what they do. They're known as the sales wizard, the software guru, the skilled craftsman. They're respected for their skill and success. It seems like a good idea to make a name for yourself.

But on the other hand, why bother? After all the work you do, whatever it is that you've done won't last. It may be a simple matter like the market going soft and stocks dropping through the basement. Or, as the Scripture Lessons make clear today, you can't take it with you. After all your hard work, somebody else gets it. It may be somebody wise, who continues the fine work that you've begun. It may be somebody egotistical, who builds on what you've done by erasing your name and claiming credit for it all. Or it may be somebody who doesn't have a brain in his head, who manages to bring everything to ruin in no time whatsoever.

Whoever it is, he gets the undeserved pleasure of ruling over whatever it is that you've accomplished. Look at the text in Ecclesiastes 2:21: For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. It sure is! You work with your wisdom, knowledge and skill; you suffer the sorrows; you have the sleepless nights when things aren't going well. But when you're done, you're done and you can't do it anymore. Somebody else—with perhaps no wisdom, knowledge or skill—takes over the reins, someone who will never understand or appreciate the labor, the hardship or the sleepless nights.

So, I repeat: Life isn't fair. So why bother?

Or, as the Preacher puts it [As the Old Adam loves to invoke Scripture on a self-serving, limited basis]: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. It's all done in vain, so why do anything at all?

I suppose the lesson could be contentment: Not everyone who does well retires in bitterness. Perhaps the lesson is eat, drink and enjoy the labor; that's the best you can do, because there's nothing better that I can find. The Preacher says (Eccl. 2:26) that God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that

He may give to him who is good before God. So make the most of the life He's given you.

Of course, how good to you have to be to be good in His sight? If it's up to me to be "good enough," how good enough do I have to be? Lots of people would say that God helps those who help themselves, indicating that hard work is the major ingredient there. But my griping so far has pretty well demonstrated that even if I try to honor God with my works, my heart is far from Him. And I still don't get to keep what I've worked for. This also, then, is vanity and grasping for the wind.

And so, it appears that we're stuck.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

Maybe the bumper sticker was right: Life is hard, then you die.

It's not fair. So why bother? You can't win.

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So go the musings of the Old Adam according to Ecclesiastes 2, dear friends. They run in this direction because the Old Adam has no faith; thus, when it looks at life, all it can see is a rat race of hopelessness.

The sin at work here is the temptation of covetousness, of greed. By nature, you will always want what you do not have, and you will always be a little bit too attached to things that you do. The covetousness takes on different forms. Luther once noted that for those in their twenties and early thirties, it takes the form of lust, coveting others whom the Lord has not given to them in marriage; too often, husbands and wives look right past the gifts of their spouse and wish to be married to someone else. For those in their thirties and forties, covetousness manifests itself as greed, the desire for wealth and material gain at the expense of other, more important things. For those in their fifties and sixties, it takes the form of a desire for power and a good reputation.

Each form of covetousness has its own set of dangers: The one who covets via lust will never be satisfied with the one whom he marries, and his marriage will suffer from it as he blames the other for his sinful covetousness. The one who covets via greed will neglect his family and his Lord in order to build up wealth that is never enough, and stands a good chance of destroying both family and faith. The one who covets via power and reputation is tempted to compromise with the world in order to be remembered favorably by the world.

Beware of covetousness. It takes godly gifts-sex, daily bread, responsibility-and twists them into idols. It does so with a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it whispers in your ear that your identity is found in the things that you have, that you are what you have accomplished: This feeds greed and obsession and pride. On the other hand, it also whispers that the clock is ticking, that you only have so long to accomplish these things before your life is over: This feeds a sense of desperation and futility.

But the Preacher of Ecclesiastes sums this up with one sentence: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. No matter how hard you try, none of these things last. Death comes to us all, and not even the rich man with storehouses full of grain can prevent it. To identify yourself as the sum total of your

accomplishments and possessions is futile; this makes a god out of you and your things. Such a god can't save you, for as the pop singer notes, "There ain't no hearses with luggage racks."

Desperation or futility: These are the end products of covetousness. Desperation which reasons that time is running out, that you only have so much time to look out for yourself because life is short and it just isn't fair. Or futility which reasons that, since time does run out, what's the use of even trying anymore? Life isn't fair, so why bother?

Either way, there is no hope. And from the musings of the Old Adam, we do agree with one truth: Life isn't fair.

But there is a more excellent way than finding your identity in your labor or possessions, of bemoaning the unfairness of life. The good news is this: God isn't fair, either.

## II. God Isn't Fair

God isn't fair, and that's a good thing. Fair means according to the rules: You do right by God, and He'll do right for you. If God were fair, the plan for salvation would stop with this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5). Use all that you have always in service to God and to your neighbor. Do so without resentment, and never give a thought to lust or greed or covetousness along the way. Do this and heaven is yours, don't do this and you're condemned.

Do you see? If God were fair, we would already be in hell.

God is not fair. To you, He is more than fair, and we see this even in our Old Testament lesson today. Consider, for instance, Ecclesiastes 2:21 once again: For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it.

There is such a Man, and His name is Jesus. As far as wisdom, He is no less than the wisdom of God (I Cor. 1: 24), who makes us wise unto salvation. As far as knowledge, He alone knows even God the Father (Matt. 11:27), and makes Him known to us so that we might have eternal life. As far as skill, see Him heal and perform miracles; hear Him proclaim eternal life and confound the enemies of God. Truly, He does all things well (Mark 7:37).

So this is the Man of wisdom, knowledge and skill, and He applies it to His labor. Although He is the One who has created the heavens and the earth, He puts no covetous claim upon them, even though all is His; no, He walks the earth in simplicity, and has only garments to be divided among the soldiers when He is put to death. He keeps God's Law-not just outwardly, but with all of His heart, soul and mind. He does not undergo such rigorous labor for Himself, but for you: Having fulfilled all of God's commands, He gives you the credit. Although He deserves all worship and glory, He devotes Himself in service to others: He feeds them, heals them, saves them. Rather than worry of His reputation before the world, He remains faithful to His Father in heaven; He dies scorned by the world, but He dies there for you.

This is the man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and He leaves His heritage to a man who has not labored for it: That would be you, and that would be me. It isn't fair: If His is the work and His is the suffering, it is only fair that His should be the reward. But while the suffering is

His, the salvation is yours. He serves others and dies, that you might be forgiven for trampling others in your pursuit of personal gain. He practices perfect contentment and dies, so that you might be delivered from greed and covetousness. He credits you with His virtue, and dies in punishment for your vice. Not fair, is it? No, but thus you are saved.

Or consider Ecclesiastes 2:26 once again, this time overshadowed by the cross: God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that He may give to him who is good before God. Jesus is the Man again—the Man of wisdom who is good, and the sinner who gathers and collects. God gives to Him wisdom and knowledge and joy, for Jesus is good in His sight. The Father announces that this is His beloved Son (Luke 9:35), good in His sight, and gives Him all knowledge and tells us to hear him. He also gives Him joy, but a peculiar joy to the world: For the joy set before Him, He endures the cross and scorns its shame (Heb. 12:2). He goes to the cross for you; and as He goes to the cross, He gathers and collects the iniquity of the world, carrying all sin to the cross. There, God makes Him who knows no sin to be the sinner (2 Cor. 5:21), and judges Him for the collective sin of the world. Because Christ is the punished sinner in your place, you are forgiven and good in God's sight. Therefore, the Lord gives to you the wisdom of salvation, knowledge of Him, and the joy of the certain hope of eternal life—all for the sake of Jesus.

It isn't fair, is it? No, but God is more than fair, so He sacrifices His Son to save those who are lost and dead in their sin.

Ironically, it's Jesus who looks like vanity to the world, for sinful man pictures Him as a good teacher who unfortunately dies for no purpose on the way; His cross, it is said, is futility that accomplishes nothing. But you, O Christian, know better: What Christ has accomplished is no vanity. It is your life and salvation.

### III. Life with Worth

And that, dear friends, is your identity and worth. Ultimately, your identity is not based upon who you are and what you do, but whose you are and what He has done.

You are the Lord's, and He has died to redeem you. By His blood, you are saved from your sin and delivered to eternal life. By His doing your life is transformed from a futile pursuit for fulfillment to a grateful response and service. By His grace, the things that you have are no longer gods that must be attained and kept, but gifts placed under your stewardship to be used in service to God and others.

While this may not be the legacy you hoped for, it does keep matters straight and true. Those things which you possess will not last forever; therefore it is only sensible not to trust in them for help, and to see them only for what they are: Lifeless things that cannot save you. On the other hand, you now will live forever—not because of the name you make for yourself, but the Name that has been placed upon you. You are the Lord's, for He has made you His own.

Oh, at times you will be tempted with covetousness and the desire for more, as your Old Adam seeks to convince you that eternal life and God's gracious favor aren't enough (!). When your sinful nature leads your mind astray, turn back. Repent. Confess to the Lord your preoccupation with things, trusting that Christ has died for this sin. Give thanks to the Lord for those things that He has entrusted to you, and make use of them in service to others. Go about your daily tasks with joy,

knowing you do so as one redeemed. Annoy your Old Adam further by demonstrating your freedom from covetousness, allotting a portion of what you have and giving it regularly to the Church in service to the Lord. Do so out of joy, for Christ has set you free to do such things.

At times you will be tempted to vanity and futility. Hard work will show little progress, fervent sowing will reveal little to harvest, and you will wish to throw up your hands and say, "What's the use? I'm getting nowhere, so I quit." At such times, confess your frustration to the Lord, confident that He has died for such sins. Remember that servanthood often appears futile, as did the Lord's death on the cross; but even as the victory over sin was won there, the Lord is often behind the scenes accomplishing His will. Never believe for a moment that you're getting nowhere. You've already been gotten into the kingdom of heaven-eternal life is yours because the Lord has died to make it so. Therefore, go about your work with joy, knowing that your destination is already achieved for the sake of Jesus. And should you look back upon past years and regret that much was done in selfishness, be assured that the Lord still made use of much that you have done to care for those around you.

The way of the world is the pack-rat race of covetousness, where you are to gain all you can for yourself. But as we've seen before, there is no happy ending for the Old Adam: The one who pursues possessions will either die like the rich man of the Gospel lesson, without hope; or else he will end up like the preacher, collapsed in futility when he discovers that possessions cannot save. With the Old Adam running the show, it's absolutely true: All is vanity, and you can't win.

But you have been delivered from all of this, for Jesus Christ-the God-man of all knowledge, wisdom and joy-has saved you from this. Because sinful covetousness leads to death, He has gone ahead and died that death for you already, that you might be saved from covetousness. Because obsession with possessions leads to the futility of eternal condemnation, He has already suffered that condemnation on your behalf.

Such actions on His part are unfair, it is true; for fairness would leave you to win salvation for yourself. But so that you might be saved, God is patently, sacrificially unfair. And because God is unfair, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.