

The Elusiveness of Happiness

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The value of work is largely uncontested in our society. It is held that a person makes himself as a person, gains social status, and creates his own measure of happiness by his work.

That attitude to work is shown by the information we seek, when we meet a stranger. Once the introductions are over the next question usually is: what do you do? In this way we check each other out and find out who we are. Which is all very well, unless you happen to be unemployed, or a student, or 'just' a housewife. Since these people don't hold down paid jobs, they don't usually rate on the official scale of values. Most people, then, live for their work and through their work. By it they find their fulfilment.

Despite this most people do not enjoy their work, for their job is but a means to an end for them. They work to create happiness for themselves. By their work they produce or purchase those products which are supposed to bring them happiness, whether it be a video recorder or a trip overseas. So, guided by advertising and fashion, they work for the production and consumption of happiness. They imagine, they can do this, because they have, in practice, ceased to believe in God's management of the world.

Now there is nothing new about this technological philosophy of life which overestimates man's ability to master and manipulate his environment for his supposed advantage. It is as old as the hills. In fact I reckon that the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament is still the most searching and critical examination of it. Like an accountant with his clients Ecclesiastes gets us to audit the books of our lives. He seeks the answer to a very simple and yet subversive question: 'What does a person profit from all the work which he does here on earth (1:3)?'

There are two sides to his examination of the supposed profit from work. First of all, in 2:1-6:9 he scrutinises the life of the go-getter, the high achiever, the man of action who carves out a business for himself in life. Now it is true that such a person may succeed in his endeavour. He may accumulate much wealth and gain many possessions. He may be able to afford all the luxuries of life. Yet Ecclesiastes concludes from bitter experience that in the end all this is vanity, and an exercise in futility. Its worth is as fleeting as a cloud and as elusive as the wind. In fact the effort to create happiness is most often counterproductive. It does not increase enjoyment and satisfaction but tends to produce growing anxiety and dissatisfaction. The harder you work to get to the top, the harder you have to work to stay on top. The more you have, the more you have to lose. The more luxuries you enjoy, the more unsatisfactory such things become. The wealthier you are, the more you can be cut off from others. The worst thing of all is that the work which was meant to be a means to happiness of some kind so often becomes an end in itself. The high-

achiever then ends up as a restless workaholic, obsessed with his work and possessed by it. His work so dominates his existence that he can't even relax at night or rest on holidays. His habit of doing has destroyed his receptiveness to his surroundings and his capacity to be. Such a person lives a self-made life in a self-constructed universe whose ongoing existence depends upon his continual exertions.

But there is also a second kind of work which is not motivated by ambition and greed. This kind of work which Ecclesiastes examines in 6:10-11:6 is based on careful reflection and shrewd calculation. Now this kind of worker is much less likely to fall flat on his face, because he looks before he leaps. Yet that thoughtful person is just as powerless to create his own happiness because of four simple limitations - the prevalence of human injustice, his own capacity for folly, his inability to foresee the chances and accidents of life, and the suddenness of death which robs him of everything except his naked self. All these combine to undo his best-laid plans and to mock his careful pursuit of happiness. Since so much is uncertain, the thoughtful person must take things as they come and be ready to make the corresponding adjustments to circumstances as they arise.

In contrast to the notion that happiness is something which can be created by physical exertion or mental calculation writer of Ecclesiastes maintains, from his own experience, that happiness is a gift received by some people in some circumstances. It has something to do with work and yet does not come from work. It has something to do with physical satisfaction and yet does not come from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse. It may be found in those activities, even though it does not derive from them. Hence one person may enjoy the most menial task, while another will be bored in the most exciting occupation. A poor person may enjoy the plainest food, while a millionaire will be disgusted at the choicest food. This is so, because happiness is a gift of God rather than a human product (Eccl. 2:24-25; 3:13; 5:19).

Happiness is a gift of God in three ways. First, it comes from him and so cannot be had apart from him (Eccl. 2:24-25). It cannot therefore be manufactured by people or derived from any possessions. Secondly, God gives each person the means to receive their share of happiness from him. Ecclesiastes calls this that person's lot. An Israelite's lot was the portion of God's land which he inherited from his ancestors. It was his livelihood and gave him his status. Through its produce God blessed him with both the necessities and luxuries of human existence. Well, Ecclesiastes uses this term to describe a person's place in the world as well as his span of life. It includes both the work which each person is given to do, like a farmer with his plot of land, and the benefits received from God in his earthly existence, like the harvest from a piece of land. Through these God gives to each his happiness and enjoyment. Thirdly, God gives to people their capacity for enjoyment (Eccl. 5:19). This includes the physical health needed by the person for the enjoyment of his possessions, the acceptance of his given lot in life, and the wisdom to find the enjoyment given to him in his work. So happiness is, like life itself, given rather than achieved.

Well then, if we do not create the conditions for our own happiness, what is the point of our work and our thought? At this point Ecclesiastes takes an unexpected turn. Unlike the dropouts from our work-obsessed, pleasure-seeking society he still affirms

the relative value of both. We may not be able to control our destiny by our work but we can find fulfilment in our work. We may not be able to plan for our future enjoyment but we can recognize and seize the moments of enjoyment given by God at every stage of our lives. The trick of enjoyment lies in our readiness for the opportunities given in our experience by the passage of time.

Ecclesiastes then confronts us with a searching analysis of our current attitudes to work and happiness. He distinguishes between two different kinds of work. On the one hand, you have a commercial, godless philosophy of work. It looks upon life as a business to manage by oneself and to produce profit for oneself. The commercial person works to secure himself and to manufacture happiness for himself by possessing and exploiting his environment. But anyone who does that is doomed to disillusionment, for happiness cannot be taken and owned. On the other hand, you have an ecological, godly philosophy of work. The God-fearing person regards his lot in life as a good farmer regards his land. It has been entrusted to him to cultivate and harvest. He is not meant to exploit what he has for his own aggrandizement but to manage it properly so that he can enjoy all its fruits in each season, including the gift of happiness. If he always remembers his Creator and his own creatureliness (Eccl. 12:1), then he will always have good reason to rejoice in the divine festival of life (Eccl. 8:15; 9:7-11; 11:7-8).

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