

"Is The Rat Race Worth Running"

Ecclesiastes 4:4-8

Pastor Dan Erickson

July 13, 2025

A wife said to her husband, "It is sure hard keeping up with the Jones', when the Jones keep buying things we cannot afford." Folks, though it is indeed hard, this is still a game many Americans play. Maybe you want to have a bigger boat than your next-door neighbor, or you want to beat out a co-worker for a promotion. Perhaps you want to have nicer furniture than your sister-in-law, or maybe you just want to have a cell phone like everyone else has.

It is all part of the rat race, trying to stay ahead or catch up with others around us, especially when it comes to material possessions.

The rat race has a couple of big problems, however. First, it is not easy to win. It can be very hard to stay ahead of or keep up with someone else. That is especially true when "new and improved" seems to be all around us. Smart phones were super cool, until smart watches came along. And now the cool people are wearing smart glasses. And who knows what the next smart thing will be people will want to have. Trying to keep up with someone or a group of someone's can be exhausting.

Second, another problem with this type of competition is that the rewards for winning are of questionable value. As Lily Tomlin said, "The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat." Getting and staying ahead of everyone else around us often makes it hard to have friends. And despite what many think, winning the rat race, getting ahead of other people, will not bring the satisfaction and happiness in life for which all of us yearn.

Friends, 3000 years ago, a man named Solomon, was one of the great rat racers of all time. He was King of Israel, and his wealth, wisdom, palace and harem were the envy of the world. Yet, winning the rat race, being ahead of everyone else in many aspects of life, didn't bring Solomon happiness. As he looked around, he realized that others running this race were not finding happiness either.

Today, as we continue our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes, we come to chapter 4:4-8. As

we look at God's Word, let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to understand and apply what He says to us through Solomon today.

Let's take a look at Solomon's message. **Ecclesiastes 4:4 And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.** This seems like kind of a strange statement, but we should keep a couple of things in mind.

First, Solomon is certainly using hyperbole, intended exaggeration. I don't think he believes envy is the sole motivation people have for working. Survival, meeting one's basic needs is something else that often inspires us to work. Providing for people we care about can be another motivation. His point is that competition or envy does play a very big role in what makes us tick.

Second, I don't think Solomon would deny that competition can have some important benefits. Many years ago, I earned a degree in economics, and I know that competition is essential to our economy. In fact, the more competition in the market place the better.

But Solomon is not talking about grocery stores or any other business competing with each other. His focus is on us as individuals. Yet, even here limited competition is not necessarily harmful and can actually be good. However, Solomon knows we are often far too competitive and frequently envious. Staying ahead of or keeping up with other people often plays a much bigger role in our lives than it should.

Solomon's basic point is that running the rat race is simply not worth it. It is meaningless, the Hebrew word is "hevel." It makes as much sense as chasing the wind. He would agree with the fellow who asked, "Why do I buy things I cannot afford, with money I don't have, to impress people I don't like?"

Even winning the rat race doesn't make one happy. And material success is fragile and often fleeting. Medical problems, unemployment, a tornado, or lawsuit can change one's financial

situation overnight. And even if you are able to maintain your success over a long period of time, it still doesn't bring real satisfaction or happiness.

Solomon, anticipating some folks will think, "Solomon, you are right, this rat race is ridiculous. I am going to quit playing the game. I will drop out and do nothing." But this is not the answer. **Ecclesiastes 4:5 Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.** Being lazy doesn't work either. Throughout the book of Proverbs, Solomon frequently warns of the dangers of laziness or sloth. Though envy should not be our motive for working, not working is not a good option. The Bible gives three reasons why each of us who is able to, should work and earn money.

First, so we are not a financial burden on others, living off their labor. Second, so we can provide financial support for our family. Third, so we are able to give money to others who are in need. It is foolish to stop working just because you don't want to be in the rat race.

So where does that leave us? Solomon's conclusion is in verse **Ecclesiastes 4:6 Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.** These poetic words simply mean that one of the most important things in life is this tranquility we long to find, contentment and to be happy with who we are and what we have. We might only have half as much as someone else, but if we are content with that, we have far more than the billionaire who would be happy if he just had a little bit more.

Throughout the Bible, God reminds us of the importance of contentment, and the fact that people who don't have a lot are often happier than people with much more. **Proverbs 15:15,16 All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast. Better a little with fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil.**

In Philippians 4:11 Paul says he has learned to be content in any circumstance because he knows **1 Timothy 4:6 But godliness with contentment is great gain.** That combination, godliness and contentment, is what truly brings one joy.

Those who have had the opportunity to visit Christians in different parts of the world, especially Africa, South Asia and parts of Latin America, are often amazed at how content these people tend to be, even though they are really quite poor.

I remember going to Honduras years ago and being struck by the contentment of the Honduran Christians. Those folks didn't have closets full of clothes, or new cars or even video game equipment like many of us do here. Yet often they are very happy and content.

Solomon would not be surprised by that at all. He knows those leading the rat race are seldom content, and therefore seldom happy. It is often people with modest possessions who learn to be content with what they have and are thus happy.

Solomon points out another danger of the rat race in **Ecclesiastes 4: 7,8 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless (hevel), a miserable business!**

The rat race can be a trap in which people get stuck. Some people will keep running even when they have no reason to win. They continue their pursuit of wealth just out of habit. They don't enjoy their work, they already have more money than they could possibly spend, they have no one to share the money with. It has never entered their mind to give money away, but they continue to strive to "get ahead," just out of habit.

Some folks refuse to retire and keep working 60 hours a week, not because they enjoy the work or need the money, but just because it is what they are in the habit of doing. Solomon says, what a sad way to live. He is right. If we are addicted to the rat race, even though we no longer have any reason or desire to run, we certainly are not going to find happiness.

Okay, that is Solomon's analysis. Now let's consider four lessons I think the Lord has for us in this passage.

#1 We need to stop trying to keep us with the Jones'. We must not define our material needs and wants based on what other people have. Most parents realize the fact "all the other kids in school have one" is not an adequate reason to buy something.

Yet, those same parents and a lot of other adults fall into that trap with their own purchases. We buy certain houses, cars, trucks, clothing, tools, and toys, not because these are things we really need, but because we want to have as nice of stuff as other people in our neighborhood, family or church.

No, I don't believe there is anything inherently wrong with having nice houses, cars, trucks and clothing. If the Lord has blessed you with enough money to afford those things and leads to you spend it that way, great. But you need to make sure your spending decisions are based on what is needed and is good for you and your family, rather than on what someone else is doing.

It is probably fine to buy a new couch for the living room (from Rupp's Furniture in Chisholm, MN) if your old one is worn out or even if it is no longer in style. But you should never buy a new couch simply because your sister-in-law got one last month. Some people end up getting in deep financial trouble just because they are in the habit of buying things to keep up with someone else. Trying to make sure you have what someone else has or something better than someone else has, doesn't honor the Lord.

#2 We need to keep our job and work in perspective. We already noted that the Bible says it is a good thing to work. And it is good to work hard. In Colossians 3:23 the Lord tells us to "do your work with all your heart." There is nothing wrong with working hard so you can be successful in your career, get a promotion, or earn more money. There is no virtue in being lazy or in just putting in your time when you are on the job.

But keep a couple of things in mind. First, your motivation for working hard and being successful should not be so you can get ahead of someone else or make more money than your brother-in-law. That type of competition puts us in this rat race where even if you win, you are still a rat.

Second, our commitment to our job and desire to work hard must not interfere with more important priorities. Many in our culture, especially men, but women as well, tend to worship their job. Yes, we should take our work seriously, but we should not take it as seriously as our commitment to the Lord, to our church, and to our family. The most important priority you have as a Christian is to honor God in all that you do.

If your job is preventing you from taking time to read the Bible and pray, if it keeps you from serving in our church in the way God has called you to do, then there is something wrong. No job is more important than honoring the Lord. Many of us who work also have family responsibilities. If your commitment to work keeps you from being a good spouse or a good parent, then there is something wrong. By God's grace, that needs to change.

Larry Burkett, a Christian financial advisor, used to say that no one should ever work over 50 hours a week at his or her job. If you did, he feared you would be wearing yourself out and not fulfilling your responsibilities at home or church. Was he right?

Well, the Bible doesn't specify an amount of time someone needs to spend at church to be a faithful Christian or an amount of time a person needs to spend at home to be a good spouse or parent. Some people get by on 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night, so they might have more time available to fulfill church or family responsibilities. But remember what Solomon said in **Ecclesiastes 4:6** **Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.**

So, I would say this. If you are working over 50 hours a week, or if you and your spouse are both working full-time, it is important to do a periodic evaluation. Ask yourself is my family life, my relationship with God, or my service in the church suffering because of how much and how hard I am working?

If the answer is, "Yes," then you need to figure out some way to cut back a bit before your life gets totally out of balance. Now, often there is a relatively easy way to do that. But sometimes it means a decrease in your income, which may require you to adjust your budget and cut some

expenses. But remember you can never make enough money to make up for the harm that over commitment to work may be doing in your home or here at church.

#3 We should teach children to have a Christian perspective on competition. Though Vince Lombardi was perhaps the greatest football coach in the history of the game, he was totally wrong when he said, "Winning is not everything, it is the only thing." Whether it is sports, business, job promotions, graduations at school or playing cribbage, there are more important things than winning.

Now, again, I think some degree of competition is often healthy. Whenever I am playing a game, I want to keep score. I find most of the "non-competitive" games people have tried to develop in recent years to be boring and usually silly. Yet, I think any honest observer of American culture would agree that many people in our society are too competitive.

I don't know if it is an inborn trait or if it comes from watching and participating in different sports, but it seems that most children are pretty competitive. I remember when I used to coach little league baseball, I would sometimes tell the kids, "Today we are going to play a game just for fun. We are not going to keep score today." But that didn't keep them from keeping score in their own minds or from constantly asking, "Are we winning?"

When my sons were growing up and were riding in the car as I drove down the highway, they would always want me to "beat the car" along side of us. Nancy thought I often tried to comply, but that was only on rare occasions. Now, I don't have any magic formula, but I think as parents, grandparents, Sunday School teacher, etc., we must work at helping children not to be overly competitive.

Probably a good place to start is not to be quite so competitive ourselves. When dad is crabby because he didn't do very well at golf or pickle ball that morning, or when mom has to go out and buy new kitchen appliances because the gal across the street did so last week, it is no surprise that our children are more competitive than they should be. The most important thing, however, is to

avoid encouraging our children to try to win at all cost. Glorifying God, not winning, is what life is all about. It is the only thing that really matters.

#4 We need to ask the Lord to help us be content. How will this happen? First, pray that you will realize that even if the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, it usually is not. There is a story of little teardrops floating down the river of life. One teardrop asks another, "Who are you?" "Well, I'm a teardrop from a girl who loved a man and lost him. Who are you?" "Well, I'm a teardrop from the girl who got him."

Yes, sometimes we cry over what we do not have, but it is very possible that we might cry twice as much if we did have it. God, in His sovereign, loving wisdom often spares us from the so-called "blessings" we ask for, because He knows that, in reality they would actually end up being curses.

Second, we need to ask the Lord to help us be grateful and thankful for what He has given us. Contentment and happiness flow from a grateful heart. I suspect most of us in this room have been blessed with plenty of material possessions, with relatively good health, and with a loving family and good friends.

We should be very thankful for these gifts from the Lord. But even if you don't have any of these things. Even if you are poor, sick, and alone, I believe you should still overflow with thanksgiving and should still be content. Why? Because if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have received a gift from God not only that you don't deserve, but a gift that's value is beyond your imagination.

The Lord Jesus is indeed the pearl of great price, the greatest treasure, and when you have Him, when you have experienced His grace, and have been both born and adopted into His family you have all that you truly need. Oh, there are a lot of other things that are nice, that make life easier and more pleasurable. But the bottom line is that when you are a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, you have what you really need.

I love the account of the old Puritan who sat down to a meal of a tiny loaf of bread and a cup of water and exclaimed, "Praise God, all this, besides what I have in Jesus Christ."

Oh, folks, I would like that to by my attitude. I would like you to have that attitude. May we realize all we really need is what we have in Jesus Christ, and that every other blessing is just a bonus. And as we understand the value of what we have in Jesus, may it cause us to abandon the rat race. May we stop focusing on trying to keep up or ahead of others. Instead, may we experience true contentment and joy as we devout ourselves to what matters most, loving God, loving others, and making disciples of Jesus.