



Ecclesiastes 2:17-23  
 Life Is Too Short To...  
 “Work All The Time”

Rev. Brian North  
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According to a Gallup survey of a selection of U.S. full-time workers about 10 years ago, the average number of hours worked in a week is 47. **Here in this chart** you can see the spread of full-time

*Average Hours Worked by Full-Time U.S. Workers, Aged 18+*

In a typical week, how many hours do you work?

	Employed full-time
	%
60+ hours	18
50 to 59 hours	21
41 to 49 hours	11
40 hours	42
Less than 40 hours	8

workers: 8% typically work less than 40 hours per week; 42% usually work just about exactly 40; 11% work 41-49 hours; 21% work 50-59 hours; and 18% - nearly 1 in 5 full-time workers in the U.S. – work, on average/typically, 60 or more hours per week. That’s 6, 10-hour days per week, or 5, 12-hour days per week. Not that you needed me to do the math...but when I think about it like that, it really puts 60+ hours in perspective.

There was a first grader who wondered why her father brought home a briefcase full of papers every evening. Her mother explained, “Daddy has so much to do that he can't finish it all at the office. That's why he has to bring work home at night.” “Well then,” asked the child, “why don't they put him in a slower group?”<sup>1</sup> That story is a bit dated, of course...who uses a briefcase, brings home paperwork...and who works at an office, right? 😊 Regardless, we spend a good chunk of our lives working, and for some people it’s practically all the time.

Last week we started a series on the topic of the shortness of life – we have a finite number of years, months, weeks, days, and hours, and it really isn’t all that long. And today, we're looking at the idea that life is too short to work all the time. Now, just to be clear: work is important. From the very first page of Scripture we see God working, and though he rests on the 7<sup>th</sup> day from his creation work, he continues his work of sustaining creation and his work of

transforming lives through his spirit; And then we're created in His image and part of that is being created to do work. In fact, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis, God tells Adam to work, to care for the land and the plants around him.

**So...The last thing I want someone to take away from today's message is that laziness is good.** It's not. It's like the two guys were walking down a sidewalk, and noticed a sign in a store window that read: NO HELP WANTED. As they passed by, one said to the other, "You should apply--you'd be great." That's *not* what today's message is about.

Also, this isn't just about paid work. Retired folks are some of the busiest people I know, with a lot of that time spent doing volunteer work! In the last 20+ years as a pastor, I've lost track of how many retired people I've heard say, "I'm busier now than when I was employed." Stay-at-home moms (or stay at home dads, as is the case with one of my friends): they may not receive a paycheck, but they're still working, no doubt about it. So, this idea that life is too short to work all the time isn't just for people earning a paycheck.

This morning's passage in Ecclesiastes has something to say about that. Solomon was probably the author of Ecclesiastes, though we can't know 100% for sure, as the author doesn't identify himself. But the signs of authorship in Ecclesiastes point to him as a very strong possibility. King Solomon had an extravagant home, servants, incredible wealth, power, and more. Certainly, a good portion of his wealth was inherited from his dad, King David, but he spent much time toiling under the sun. He had a working role to play for what he had.

But he realized that all that work, and the fruit of it, was, in the end, for naught. It's meaningless. **"Hevel" is the word he uses for what is translated "meaningless;" more literally it means "vapor, or breath."** He uses the word liberally throughout Ecclesiastes, even opening with it, stating that "everything is meaningless." Such an encouraging message, isn't it? ☺ The point he's making is that trying to hang onto his stuff, and derive meaning from it, is like trying to catch the wind. Because: He can't take his wealth with him. He can't take his palace. He can't take his gold. He can't

take his property...and he had a lot of all of that – he was like the Bill Gates or Elon Musk of his day, combined with being the President of the United States without term limits...elected for life.

So he finds no consolation in the fact that someone will inherit his wealth. Because, who knows, as he says, whether they will be wise or foolish with the inheritance? If he knew they would be wise with what they receive, you get the feeling that the tone of his writing might be at least a little bit different. But he doesn't know whether those who will inherit the efforts of his work will be wise or foolish.

And if he doesn't know whether the person or people who will inherit his wealth will be wise or foolish, I find myself asking: How well does he know his own children? **If he's worried about how his wealth is going to be used by the next generation, then he needs to stop worrying about his wealth so much, and start engaging with the next generation.** He should start spending some time being with them, raising them and training them to be wise and good stewards of all that God gives them – whether they earn it or inherit it.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright once told of an incident that had a profound influence on the rest of his life. When he was 9, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. He pointed out his own tracks in the snow, straight and true, and then pointed out young Frank's tracks meandering all over the field. “Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again,” his uncle said. “And see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that.”

Years later the world-famous architect liked to tell how this experience had greatly contributed to his philosophy in life. “I determined right then, not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had.”<sup>2</sup>

How frequently are we missing “most things in life,” because we're barreling forward toward some goal that in the end, is really quite meaningless? This is not to encourage laziness, or being a poor employee, or not to be a good

neighbor and take care of your property, and so forth. But it can be easy to get so focused on “stuff.” But doing that is so meaningless.

**Instead: There is nothing more important in life than cultivating our relationship with God, and our relationships with our families and friends.** That's why God tells us to take a Sabbath. God wants you and me to take a break. Just as God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day from his creation work – he asks us to do the same. Now, as I said earlier, and as we sang earlier as well: God continues to be active in the world; God doesn't stop working in that sense...but he rested from the creation process. And he invites us into that same place of rest, from what we create through our work the rest of the week. And it's this Sabbath that allows us time with family and friends, engaging in rest together, and spending time with God in worship, prayer, devotion, etc. That's what God intends us to use it for.

**Now: In our society, the Sabbath rest tends to focus on the recreation part of that purpose that God outlines.** Actually, “sabbath” is language that most people aren't familiar with. It's just “the weekend.” So, there's a different label, and there's some lost meaning, but some of it remains the same. Because, especially in the summer here in Western Washington when the sun finally shines, recreation rises to the top of many people's list of things to do. We become very recreation-minded. When Gwen and I were in the Los Angeles area for seminary, we found ourselves overly busy trying to “take advantage of the good weather.” Because, here, that's what you do. But in SoCal, it's pretty much always good weather! You don't need to get outside just because it's sunny. The point is, this recreation aspect of Sabbath is something our culture is drawn to.

**But there's another aspect of Sabbath – it's the part that secular society has lost in just talking about “the weekend” – and that's worship of God.** There's a tension here between recreation and worship, and for many people recreation wins the day. This is why, every Saturday night, I pray for rain on Sunday morning – so people will come to worship! (Clearly, not effective praying lately!) And when we engage in worship, we cultivate our relationship with Jesus, the one who invites us to rest in him...to “sabbath” in him. That's what Jesus gives us. In the end, **Jesus is our true Sabbath.** Jesus

gives us rest. Many of us are probably familiar with his teaching from Matthew 11:28-30 - “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Jesus, Mt. 11:28-30). So, Jesus is our sabbath, he is our rest.

Sunday worship services are not the only way, place, or time to worship and get re-centered on Jesus; but for many folks it’s the most important. For some people, it’s the only dedicated time of reconnection with God they have each week. So: **Make worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit the priority of your Sabbath.** There's still plenty of time for the recreation aspect of Sabbath, either on Saturday, or on Sunday after worship. God wants us to take a Sabbath for those things. But the other priority, and really the first priority, is that the Sabbath day is for worshipping God. It helps to build the foundation that we need for the rest of life, and the rest of the week.

What's interesting is that when we allow ourselves that time with God and time with other people, our relationships with them strengthen, and believe it or not, our work performance gets better, too. **As we strengthen our family bonds and our bond with God, not only will those relationships benefit, but so will our work performance and enjoyment of it.** It’s like people who are workaholics really need to do just the opposite in order to have the success in the work they’re literally working themselves to death for. Whether you’re a workaholic or not, this sabbath worship, and time spent with God, will benefit your relationships and your work performance – again, whether there’s a paycheck tied to your work or not.

Zig Ziglar was a motivational speaker and author who passed away a little over a decade ago. Perhaps some of you are familiar with him. He had this to say about the connection between relational health and our work performance: “The evidence is convincing that the better our relationships are at home, the more effective we are in our [work]. If we're having difficulty with a loved one, that difficulty will be translated into reduced performance on the job...The evidence is overwhelming that the family is the strength and foundation of society. **Strengthen your family ties and you'll**

**enhance your opportunity to succeed.”**<sup>3</sup> And the deeper foundation, the deeper relationship that needs strengthening is ours with Jesus. The better it is, the better the rest of life will be work, family, friends, neighbors...even with the outlaws. I mean, the in-laws. Or the ex. Hopefully, our prime motivation for finding our rest in Jesus, and taking a weekly sabbath that includes worship is that we want to strengthen that relationship with him...to come to a deeper place of rest in him. But, there are other benefits, and maybe that helps motivate us some, too.

One final comment on Ecclesiastes and then we'll wrap this up. We can't read this passage, or really any of Ecclesiastes, without skipping to the next to last verse of the entire thing. All of Ecclesiastes has to be read with the next to last verse in mind. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes how his work has become meaningless, it's become just a chore because he can't take his wealth with him, and his heirs might be foolish and waste away everything he's worked hard for. In fact, most of Ecclesiastes is like this. And yet, at the end of it all, he comes to this conclusion: **“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).** Now maybe he didn't put that to practice very well in his own life – at least when it came to Sabbath rest. It seems that he worked a lot. But he passes on the lessons he's learned, even if he learned them the hard way, and we can benefit from his writing.

Put God first, keep his commandments – including the commandment to take a Biblical Sabbath that includes worship in addition to recreation – because this is why you were created. In the language of the New Testament: Your work is not your purpose or your foundation, Jesus is. Life is not Hevel...it is not meaningless, when it is lived in the relationship with Jesus. Your work, your relationships, your recreation...all of that is built on the foundation of your faith in, and your relationship with, Jesus. So, take a break. Take a regular sabbath. Find rest in Jesus – who gives us true Sabbath, who is our true Sabbath. And then let that relationship with Jesus flow into the rest of your life – where you live, where you work, where you play – and especially let it flow into the relationships you have in those places. Because life is too short to work all the time. Let's pray...Amen.

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- 1 Chuck Swindoll, Growing Strong, p. 213.
  - 2 Focus on the Family letter, September 1992, Page 14.
  - 3 Zig Ziglar in *Homemade*, March 1989.