

**“Relationships are Messy”**  
**Ecclesiastes: The Good Life**  
**Ecclesiastes 4:1-16**  
**05/07/2023**

### Introduction

**Pray.**

**Ecclesiastes 4.** We are continuing our series today on the book of Ecclesiastes. In case you're new or just checked out in sadness, our big goal over this series has been to join this guy, who the text calls *the Preacher*, on his search for **the good life under the sun**. Here on earth, this side of eternity – what does it mean to *live well*?

And what we've returned to over the past 3 weeks is this summation:

**The Good Life is a place to belong, a people to belong there with, good work to do, all in and with the presence of God.**

That's been our argument – The good life the preacher returns to again and again is what we see in God's original design of Genesis 1-2, before sin entered the world there was:

- A Place – The Garden of Eden
- A People – Adam and Eve, fit for and created for one another
- Good Work – have dominion, keep the garden, work it
- The Presence of God - intimacy with Him.

And though it's broken now by sin, that is also where we're headed:

- A Place – New Heavens and the new Earth
- A People – All who worship Jesus celebrating Him forever
- Good Work – our future is not a garden, but a garden city where there will be good work for us to do
- The Presence of God – in fullness. No lamps because Jesus will shine so brightly

In others if that's where we were (we **had** the good life), and that's where God is taking us (we **will have** the good life), then even as we and life are tainted by sin how do we strive for those very same things here and now under the sun.

How do we learn to enjoy, embrace, and live well within our – Place. People. Profession. Presence.

**Now today in Chapter 4, the Preacher is going to hone in for us on that 2nd part – a people to belong with.**

If you want to live the good life – you have to learn to live in deep, loving, true relationships with others.

The Preacher says this clearly in the middle of today's passage – **9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.**

Now you may have heard this passage before at a wedding to describe the beauty of marriage – two are better than one – and while that's a very fitting application of this passage, it's not the sole application. What the Preacher has in mind is not less than marriage, but certainly much much more – He's pointing us to something that echoes and resounds throughout

the Scriptures – **A life well lived is lived with others. In other words – you were not meant to be alone. You were wired at your soul level for community.**

**We see this all throughout the Bible, but most notably at the very beginning in the account of God creating the world.** After God creates the world, he stands back and declares it “good”. It is fitting and right, everything is as it should be. Except for one thing. The only thing declared by God to be “not good” in his creation before sin enters the world.

**Gen 2:18 – It is not good that the man should be alone.**

Another passage often used to address marriage, but again with implications much larger than that. It is not good for you to be alone. Two is better than one. You were wired for community.

**We see this interwoven into the story of the gospel as well** – that when God saves us, forgives us of our sin, washes us clean through the work of Jesus, that He reconciles us, as we say every week when we pass the peace, not only to relationship with Himself, but relationships with His people. You get God as Father, and other Christians as your new brother and sisters – your family.

And this, as the Preacher would tell us – is a part of God’s good gifts to us in *the good life* under the sun – that we don’t have to be alone. That two are better than one. Or as the slogan of my favorite basketball team says – there is “strength in numbers”.

Because remember – God’s design for life is not simply the *right* way to live, it is the *best* way to live. God knows what we truly need to live a flourishing life with Him.

**And if you’ve ever been a part of deep, flourishing Christian community or if you’ve joined us as a part of this church family, you’ve hopefully/probably experienced this.**

- How helpful it is to have someone to call and talk you down after that rough day at work when you’re ready to snap at your boss.
- How beautiful it is to be in a circle and have a deep sense that you’re fully known and fully loved by those around you.
- How necessary when you’re overwhelmed by guilt or shame or grief to have people remind you of the gospel, and what is true about God and true about you in Christ Jesus.
- How important it can be when you’re trapped in your emotions and 5 seconds away from making a stupid decision, to have someone with enough courage to say “nah, this ain’t it. Let me help you.”

**AND you’ve also probably experienced just how life-giving it is for you to be that person for someone else in all the situations and scenarios I just mentioned.**

You and I were created for life-giving, sacrificial, fully-known and fully-loved, over the long-haul relationships with one another. That is not just the right way to live, but the best way to live. **That is essential for the good life under the sun.**

### **Community Killers**

**But the Preacher is not only deeply honest about the beauty and necessity of community. He’s also honest about just how difficult it can be. And that’s where I want us to spend our time together this morning.**

His main point – two are better than one – is sandwiched between a bunch of ways community can be broken. A myriad of ways that deep, rich, flourishing relationships with others can be tarnished and destroyed. There’s actually more than just what he mentions in this passage, but these are some pretty big ones.

He gives us 5 of what we’ll call **Community Killers**.

**5 heart level temptations, pulls, evils that will keep us from living in joy-filled, flourishing relationships with others under the sun.** 6 problems we all struggle with, that if you don’t learn to recognize, fight, and put to death will consistently creep in to destroy the beautiful community you were designed for and that your soul longs for.

Let’s work through the text together, don’t get nervous, we’ll hit them fairly quickly.

**Eccl 4:1-3 – 1 Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. 2 And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. 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.**

### **1. Objectification**

The Preacher says everywhere he looks he sees oppression. Those who have power are using it, not to build others up, but to put others down for the sake of their own advancement and gain.

And he laments this to an incredible degree. This is a painful level of honesty. He looks out at the world, as so many of us could today – at the horrific levels of oppression and injustice being done across the globe – humans are responsible for so much evil – Human Trafficking. Murder of the unborn. Astronomically evil rates of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse. Humans do some of the worst things imaginable to one another.

And the Preacher’s looking at it going – what’s wrong with us? If this is what humanity does to each other under the sun it’s better to be dead than alive. Or even better yet – is to never have been born at all.

Now, I know some of us in this room have faced these sorts of abuses, injustices, oppression at this sort of scale. We’ve experienced and been the victim of horrifically painful acts done by others to hurt us, use us, and tear us down. And that is worthy of our attention, our voices, our laments, and our grief.

But I also think it’d be a miss if we don’t address the ways this happens at more everyday levels too. Because it can be easy to hear “oppression” and start pointing fingers to the worst of it and miss that all of us can be guilty of the heart of oppression – **where we don’t think of each other as human beings to be loved, but objects to be used.**

**The core of oppression is objectification. I’m going to determine your value based on your usefulness to me, like you’re a product or a commodity, and then treat you in line with that valuation.**

Oppression and objectification start at the same place – **you exist for me.**

My life, as I am taught to make it in the secular west, is all about **“Project Me”** – I’m becoming the best and happiest version of me that I can be – and so we look at another human with a soul, disregard that reality, and decide – your role, the time I’ll give you, the energy I’ll put towards you, the care molecules you’ll get from me – that’ll be determined by how beneficial you are to me or not.

**Just think about the times you find yourself saying those two words – “For me.”**

- “I just don’t feel like going to group tonight is what’s best **for me.**”
- “I just don’t want to spend time with that person because they’re draining **for me.**”
- “I don’t want to go to the hang out because that activity isn’t life-giving or fun **for me.**”
- “I don’t want to listen to you right now because I don’t think what you’re saying is good **for me.**”

That is the language of objectification. Everyone else around me (groups, organizations, individuals, church) all exist as means of benefiting me. But this posture kills the community. Because I’m using you, not loving you. And you’re using me, not loving me. But a vibrant flourishing community is built on mutual self-sacrifice – I’m laying down my good for your sake and vice versa.

**Let’s go to #2...**

**Eccl 4:4 – 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.**

**2. Jealousy**

“All toil and skill come from envy.” How much of your working hard, wanting to do better, be better – in your job, in your parenting, in your hobbies – fill in the blank – how much of it is driven by *jealousy*?

I’m not content because I **deserve** what you have. I deserve to be as comfortable, as wealthy, as successful, as talented, as important, as good looking, as happy as \_\_\_\_\_. This takes the search for more, like we looked at in chapter 2, and turns it into a desire for “more” driven by the “more” of others.

And the Preacher tells us – this is vanity. It won’t lead to the Good Life with others. Because we often think about envy just as wanting the thing. “I want that, give it to me.” The coveting side of envy. But envy rots our soul with bitterness towards others as well.

Because you cannot celebrate what someone else is celebrating if you’re jealous they have it instead of you. And you cannot empathize with what someone is struggling with if you’re jealous they have something instead of you.

In other words jealousy cuts off a crucial part of living in deep community – the ability to rejoice with those who are rejoicing, and weep with those who are weeping.

And this is hard, because a lot of times it’s real things, real desires being unmet, a real sense of lack in your life that makes this so hard to wrestle with.

- So you’re struggling with your singleness, and you have to sit in group with someone who’s complaining about their marriage.
- You’re struggling with wanting kids, and someone is sharing their struggles in parenting.
- Or you feel crushed by what feels like an endless list of demands over your time, and someone you envy who objectively has a less busy life than you is complaining about being busy.
- You feel a real lack in your job - pay, recognition, promotion – and someone is sharing about how much responsibility their new promotion has given them and how much of a burden that is.

And so what happens? That struggle with contentment in your own soul, has bled into envy of what they have you desire or feel like you deserve. So you can’t empathize with them, share the gospel with them, love them, come alongside to care for them – rejoice with them or weep with them – your envy has killed your ability to live in community.

Let's go #3....

Eccl 4:5 – **5 The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.**

### 3. Laziness

The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. This phrase “folds his hands” shows up a couple places in Scripture. It's an ancient Jewish way of describing the lazy person. The imagery the Preacher shows us here is someone who is so lazy, he won't work, he won't labor to get real provision, so he ends up just eating his own hands instead.

What does this mean for our relationships? A ton. Laziness kills community – **because any meaningful relationship takes work.** If you're lazy, you will never experience deep flourishing, happiness producing community.

**College.** This is part of why people struggle so much building real adult friendships after college. College is not reality. College is a utopian environment where (for the most part) you live in close proximity to a bunch of people your same life stage, who have pretty flexible schedules, and not very much responsibility.

So you can be as lazy as you want in relationships and still feel like you developed your best friendships ever.

I would have stints in college where I wouldn't leave my house except to go to Bojangles for like 3 straight days, and that was totally fine because I lived with some great dudes and we could just hang out and play XBOX all day. I could be as lazy as I wanted and still have a community around me.

And so many of us experience this and then what happens...we leave college. And you get a job that takes you up most of your day for 5 days a week. Then there's all the other responsibilities that get tacked on to that - grocery shopping, chores, workout, for some marriages and kids.

**And when you mix a progressively busier life with an ingrained habit of relational laziness what do you get? A bunch of complaints about how hard it is to make friends as an adult.**

And the statistics back me up here. Poll after poll tell us the statistically loneliness demographic in America are working adults age 25-40. AKA - our the majority of our church.

We'll hit the busy part in a second, but let's just stick with laziness – It takes effort to build meaningful friendships. It takes effort to schedule time with others. It takes effort to go to the event. And then once you're there, it takes a ton of effort to not check out on your phone but to actually engage. I mean it sounds ridiculous but really listening and engaging people in real relationship is hard work.

- It's going to take some effort to turn off the TV and actually talk and then listen to your spouse.
- It's going to take some effort to put the kids in the car and drive 20+ minutes to Community Group.
- It's going to take some effort to wake up and go to breakfast with that new friend before work.

This is a huge problem with the general movement of technology. It's the opposite of real relationships. Phones make it possible to communicate without being present with someone. Texting makes it possible without even hearing their voice. Social media lets us keep up with each other's lives without ever even communicating. The more technology advances, the less we are forced to develop healthy communication skills. Technology feeds into our convenience addiction and we're losing the ability to work hard at building relationships... It's lazy and it kills community.

You cannot live a lazy life and a life of loving others.

**Two more.**

**Eccl 4:6-9 – 6 Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. 7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.**

#### **4. Busyness**

The opposite end of the spectrum from laziness. The Preacher then talks about busyness. It's vanity, hebel, meaningless when a person gives all of themselves to toil, no end in sight, because they need more and more and more – never satisfied with the riches they have. And so they work and work to accumulate more and more and they never stop to ask – who am I working for? Do I have anyone to share it with?

##### **Busyness kills community.**

- You're never at Sunday worship because you're always traveling and visiting that place and that place.
- You're never at group because you always have a work emergency. At some point if “emergencies” are keeping you at work late 4 days a week, that's not an emergency, that's a pattern.
- I can't go to that hangout on Saturday, because I have this house project and the house project.
- OR even if you're able to squeeze it into your schedule to show up, you're not actually about to pause, breathe, and be fully present to the people around you. Scatter-brained, rushed, constantly checking your phone, thinking about your to-do list you could be tackling instead.

Listen – life is busy. It is. I'm not saying anything contrary to that. We all have responsibilities, tasks, burdens that are on our plate. That's life. It's real.

But God's design is for us to live in deep, flourishing community. So if your life has become so excessively busy that you have no time to build the deep meaningful relationships with people that the God has placed around you; then there's no way that your life is prioritized around what God thinks is most important.

I'll even say it this way – the type of relationships your soul craves, take wasting time with others. If you can't sit with no agenda and no timetable with somebody else, you're never going to create that space for laughter, that space for calm, that space for connection.

**Last one then we'll head towards home. Skip down to v13...**

**Eccl 4:13-16 – 13 Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. 14 For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. 15 I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. 16 There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.**

#### **5. Pride**

This is a common thing in wisdom literature – a small story to illustrate a point about how to live. Here the Preacher tells us about someone who goes from rags to riches – from the prison to the throne. And he contrasts this king to someone who is back where he once was - a young poor child in his kingdom. And he said it's better to be the poor wise youth who is willing to listen to others, then the old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

This is pride. Or what I like to call narcissistic inflexibility.

- Narcissism is an individualistic, self-consumed love of yourself and your own ideas.

- Inflexibility means you're completely shut off to anyone else's input or help or advice.

**So in other words you kill community in your life because your pride makes you think you're awesome and no one can tell you otherwise.**

How might this look?

- Someone tries to tell you you're off in group, you roll your eyes, minimize it, move past it really quickly.
- Someone tries to point out sin in your life, you have a thousand excuses.
- Someone tries to lovingly encourage you to forgive someone who wrongs you, you rebut.
- Someone tries to address a poor habit ingrained in your life, you cut them off.

And what happened to that king the Preacher mentions? He was powerful, but no one cared. "Those who come later will not rejoice in him."

And if we refuse to fight against our pride, the same will happen to us. Eventually people will stop trying. They'll start self-protecting – I don't want to point this out to them because it always turns into a fight. I don't want to address this sin issue because they always want to defend themselves. I don't want to help them see this area that might be off, because they always take it so dang personally.

Pride kills community.

### Three Invitations

**Two are better than one. Community, a people to belong with – essential and necessary to the good life under the sun. And yet can get killed by things we all struggle with – Objectification. Envy. Laziness. Busyness. Pride.**

So what do we do with all of that?

Well the issue for us on the surface is the Preacher does nothing with it. There's no summary phrase like he gave us in chapters 2 and 3. No turn towards joy and life and solutions.

BUT, this chapter isn't separate from the rest of the book or the rest of Scripture, so the invitation I think is back to the same invitations we've had throughout Ecclesiastes and see how the gospel of Jesus applies to these community killers...

#### **1. Sacred Honesty**

Most of us, myself included, are too self-obsessed to realize we're self-obsessed. I am incredibly skilled at justifying my own behaviors and actions. I mean I'm elite at seeing every single one of these community killers in my life and then justifying why it's ok for me because of what I'm going through or my responsibilities or because someone else was lazy first therefore I can be lazy...fill in the blank.

It's going to take some Holy Spirit empowered conviction to help us be sacredly honest about the ways we kill community. To be convicted and honest enough to repent of our objectification, our envy, our laziness, our drama creation, our busyness, our pride.

That when it comes to the issues and problems we have in community, the first step is to agree with the great prophetess Taylor Swift – "It's me. Hi. I'm the problem, it's me."

“Yeah but other people do X, Y, and Z!” I’m not even disagreeing. I just know Jesus says deal with your sin first. Deal with your heart first.

- In prayer – God show me the ways I kill community in my life. I’m feeling lonely, like no one really knows me, show me the role I might play in that reality, and help me to repent and trust you more.
- In community – Learn to ask this question – “How do you experience me?”. or maybe this week a good application would be to text or call your CG leader and just ask – do I struggle with one of these community killers? Am I hurting our community and keeping it from flourishing because of my objectification, jealousy, laziness, business, discontentment, or pride?

## 2. Sacred Mundanity

Stop rebelling against the life you have. That’s the continual call back in Ecclesiastes – stop striving for something different. The people God has put around you are...the people God has put around you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – **“The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.”**

They’re most likely pretty weird, a bit socially awkward, a touch forgetful, a bit overbearing. Their best attempts to help you see your sin are probably way less gracious than they need to be. It probably takes way more energy to be around them than you have to give. They’re probably still struggling with that pesky thing called sin.

Here’s the good news – **so are you.** That’s why we need each other. Yeah they’re messed up and broken, but so are you. And so would anyone else you find to be in community with. But we need each other and we were designed for this, so embrace those God has given you.

That’s the path to the good life. That’s the path to flourishing under the sun – embracing who God has put around you. Seeking as much as possible with the power of the Holy Spirit to live in this world in such a way that the people God has put beside you and around you – friend, spouse, children, neighbor, coworker, friend – serving and loving them becomes the focus.

That leads to...

## 3. Sacred Joy

After all, was this not the way of Jesus?

Jesus lived the good life. He was the walking, talking, living, breathing epitome of the good life with God – and His entire life was one of giving himself away for those around Him. Jesus lived the good life, of self-sacrifice not self-preservation, and that was the way to joy.

Even the cross, the greatest act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others in the history of the world – even that, Hebrews 12 tells us, was an act of deep joy. So Jesus shows us the path to a life of sacrificial and loving community.

**But he does much more than that – He enables us to then live into it.**

Jesus came, lived the perfect life we could not live, died the death we deserve, and rose again to kill our community killers.



**Just think about the ways the gospel speaks directly to what is within you that might kill community.**

- **Objectification** – lays down his life, sacrifices, for the very people killing him.
- **Envy** – He gives us more than we ever deserve. We can be content in Him.
- **Laziness** – Jesus compels us and moves us to love with energy and zeal.
- **Busyness** – Jesus gave of himself and entered into our suffering and great cost and *inconvenience* to himself.
- **Pride** – The gospel levels the playing field. There is no room for pride at the cross. The cross shouts to us that we are simultaneously more broken and messed up than we can ever imagine and more loved than we can ever fathom. So it crushes our pride because salvation is free – we can never earn it. We could never be good enough to earn God's welcome – it's all a grace gift from Him through Jesus.

So we're freed and empowered to bend and serve and go out of our way to love others because Jesus bent and served and went out of his way to love us.

That is the path to the good life under the sun – receiving God's gift of a people to belong with.

**Pray.**