

Augusta First Baptist Church
August 13, 2006
Ecclesiastes 3:9-15
Work: *Getting Ahead or Getting a Life?*
Answers to Life's Pressures

NRS *Ecclesiastes 3:9* “What gain have the workers from their toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. 11 He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. 14 I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.”

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Remember when you first took that question seriously? At differing points in my childhood I wanted to be a truck driver, a formula one race car driver, a world-famous artist, and a preacher – sometimes all at once!

When you are a child there is no real pressure about choosing a career. The world belongs to you and like the expanding universe, so are your possibilities. But then comes high school graduation and the pressure begins in earnest: what will you do with your life? There is the pressure of choosing the right major so one can have the right job and then landing the right job with the right salary.

A few years ago on the cover of the Atlanta Journal Constitution there was an interesting article: Over 21 percent of today's college graduates expect to make a million dollars by the time they are 40. Half of those same graduates have not received a job offer. ***Pressure!***

But the pressures of building a career are not just for the young folks starting out. It is something all of us face. We want to know that the portion of our life (roughly a third) that we spend working a job, keeping house, raising our children, volunteering or even retiring will mean something, be worthwhile, and have lasting significance.

Many of us here today feel that our entire identity is wrapped up in our work. Invariably when we introduce ourselves we state our name and what we do. “Hello, I am Greg DeLoach. I am a pastor.”

When I asked you to respond to the question, “what pressures do you face,” I overwhelmingly heard many of you say that your job, your career, your vocation gives you much stress. For some of us it is the pressure to measure up – you know, just doing the job. For others it is the pressure to succeed, get that promotion, acquire that title, or to reach a new rung in the climb to success. For some it is the pressure to feel that what we are doing during most of our waking hours will actually mean something besides a paycheck. Some of us today are facing the pressure of either a) keeping a job, or b) finding a job.

The publishing industry has made a fortune off of books designed to help us work better, smarter or at least feel like we are making a difference to somebody, somewhere. Just look at some of the titles on my shelf: Good to Great, Primal Leadership, Deep Change, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, First Things First, Lincoln on Leadership, The Tipping Point, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, and The Question Behind the Question.

This morning I have brought before you a most interesting passage from a most interesting book in the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes was probably written by an old man who has *been there, done that*. He has reflected on his life, all that he has accomplished, all that he has lost and all that he has accumulated. The repetitive phrase that we remember best of Ecclesiastes is “Vanity, vanity; all is vanity.” That is what the author who calls himself a preacher or teacher thinks: in the end it is vain.

Lest you think this is just some dribble from a bitter old king from ancient Palestine, look around and listen to what is happening today. Last week in the *New York Times* there was an article on working professionals in their 40s and 50s who have lost their job due to downsizing or the economy. Many of them have chosen not to find another job. They just are not finding meaning in their work or feel as though what they are doing no longer counts for anything.

Verse 10 of this passage says it well: “*I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.*” The various translations of verse 10 are interesting. While the NRSV uses the word “business,” the NIV says *burden*, the NASB uses the word *tasks*, and the KJV uses the word *travail*. Business, burden or travail - One’s work is all a matter of perspective isn’t it? But the bottom line is this: We all have a job to do – call it a career, a calling, a vocation, or even a burden. But we all have a job to do. The only full retirement we get in this world is at the cemetery. Understand?

No doubt, one of the big pressures most all of us face throughout life is the pressure of building a career that matters, even beyond retirement. For we all do something with the 24 hours per day God has given us.

One would be hard pressed to find a better passage than this section from Ecclesiastes to address the stress of our work and careers. The question that the author of Ecclesiastes implicitly asks is: *Are we getting ahead or getting a life*? Is our existence about *building a career or building a life*? Now the author of Ecclesiastes is anonymous. He is simply identified as the “Teacher.” The “Teacher” has discovered that in spite of all his worldly accomplishments, it really does not amount to much in the big scheme of things. That is what is meant by the word vanity: life is a vapor; a breath.

Let’s see what the “Teacher” has to say about the pressure of “Getting ahead or getting a life.”

3:9 “*What gain have the workers from their toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.*”

The teacher of Ecclesiastes is saying...

Make a Profit

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes asks the worker – that is you and me – where is the gain in all our labors? In other words, *where is the profit*?

Many of you here seated before me have had or will have the valuable experience of working as an intern. Most internships pay nothing or very little. Yet internships are by and large highly profitable. They will provide real-life experience in a chosen vocation.

Some careers pay gobs of money with out-of-this-world benefits but are so stress-filled that I find it hard to believe it is really worth it, really profitable.

What are you gaining from your work? Money? Relationships? Prestige?

The stress is unthinkable if we spend a third of our life and get nothing out of it. Talk about pressure! Ecclesiastes asks where is the profit? Where is the gain? Where is the satisfaction? We can build a career but are we building a life?

A career is more than just making a monetary profit. If you are not excited about what you are doing in the big picture, then why are you doing it?

Martin Luther King Jr. in one of his many great speeches once said: *"If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well."*

If what we are doing is not profitable in the full sense of the word then we can count on the fact that our pressure, our stress will only increase.

But know this; we will never know all the profit.

The NLT translates verse 11 as: "God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, ***but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.***" Indeed, Paul the apostle said "...for now we see in a mirror dimly...now I know only in part" (I Corinthians 13:12).

Some results or profit from our labors will take time, and some results we just will not see. There is much good that we do with our labors, yet we do not always know the impact it will have on others.

I saved a clipping from a newspaper article printed a couple of years ago about a 16 year old kid named Drew. The year before the article was written Drew was a 315 pound freshman in High School. Drew described himself as fat and miserable. But something changed his life. That year he signed up for JROTC and as part of the class he went to Parris Island for 5 short days. He remembered that on the first day there were no water bottle belts that could go around his 53 inch waist. He was about to cry, when the drill sergeant Eduardo Quiroz stepped up, put two belts together and wrapped it around his waist. He looked Drew in the eye and said, "Improvise and overcome."

For the next five days Sgt. Eduardo pushed Drew through a confidence course and told Drew that he had the heart to do anything in his life. Drew said, "I began to believe it." By the end of the week Drew had lost 15 pounds and was awarded Best Cadet.

But that is not the end of the story. Because this drill sergeant had inspired Drew to believe in himself, Drew made it his mission to lose weight that he had spent his whole life gaining. One year later Drew had gone from 315 pounds to 180 all because someone he met for just five days inspired him to do better.

When the newspaper reporter tracked Sgt. Eduardo down and told him what a difference he had made in Drew's life, the drill sergeant was puzzled and said that Drew and his bulky frame did not stand out; all he saw was a group of young men and women.

Sgt. Eduardo was just doing his job; and to a large extent was particularly blessed because a year later he got to see some of the impact he made.

You and I may not, probably will not, see the big picture or all the profit. We are like a marching band member who cannot see the complete formation. We are called to toot our horn and march.

Nearly every funeral I have officiated has included people who shared stories of how their lives have been impacted by the now deceased – to the surprise of many.

A few chapters later in the book of Ecclesiastes we read in chapter 9:10: ***Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might.***

The teacher of Ecclesiastes says that life is about making a profit, but the profit has nothing to do with money, and the profit may not be fully realized in this life.

The second answer the Teacher provides in helping us deal with the pressures of work, of career, can be summed up as:

Make it a Ministry (Vv 12-13):

The Teacher from Ecclesiastes wrote in verse 12 and 13: I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live;¹³ **moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.**

A chapter earlier he says the same thing: 2:24 *There is nothing better for mortals than to **eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.***

In chapter five, verse 18: *...it is fitting to **eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun...***

And then there is chapter eight, verse fifteen: *So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their **toil** through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.*

If we want to minimize the pressure of building a career in one's life, find meaning in the toil. Do your job and do it well. Take your job seriously, but yourself lightly. You are not God, but you are God's worker.

When you are happy, you have less stress. But more importantly, when you know God can use you no matter how simple the task, xxxxxx.

14 I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

God can use us, no matter how humble the surroundings. You have heard me speak on more than one occasion regarding my home church when I was a little boy before joining the Baptist Church in town as a teenager. Concord Methodist was part of a five point charge. That means simply that one pastor shared the responsibilities of those five churches. One of those churches is St. Paul United Methodist Church where I attended about once a month for Sunday night services that would conclude with a covered dish supper. This was the church my grandfather attended in his childhood and it was also where his funeral was held.

A few years ago while home visiting my family, I decided to drive by St. Paul's and see, if by some accident, that I could get in. When we pulled into the church yard in what seemed to my boys the middle of nowhere –because it was – I took them on a tour of memories. Next door to the church is the old school house where my grandfather went before dropping out in the eighth grade. Rockville Academy is recognized by a Georgia Historical marker as the first rural consolidated school in the state. It had a couple of rooms plus an assembly room upstairs and on the back corner was the teacher's quarters. One of my grandfather's jobs as a little boy was to chop stove wood for the teacher's fireplace.

As we crossed the field to walk over to St. Paul's, I showed the boys where I would play football with the other children before and after the services. I was delighted to discover that the door was unlocked and as we entered the one room church house it was like stepping back in time. I am sure it has been at least 20-25 years since I had been inside the church, but it looked exactly the same. Indeed, for the last 100 years or so nothing had changed except that some carpet was added a few years back.

Behind the worn and marked pulpit I heard many sermons and had my faith gently nurtured as a little boy who could not sit still. I remembered the lonely afternoon sitting on the second pew with my daddy, brothers and sister and grandmother and cried during my grandfather's funeral, especially when the preacher's wife sang "Shall We Gather at the River."

Before my family and I left I noticed there was a framed picture with a note on one of the walls. The note said something like: "My father was the pastor of this church in the early 1900s and it was at this very pew that I gave my life to Jesus." The date of the letter was 1955 and it was signed by Rev. Pierce Harris. At this time Rev. Harris was the pastor of First Methodist Church of Atlanta and was one of the great leaders of Atlanta in bridging the racial and religious divisions that were marring other parts of the South. Under his ministry he brought Asa Candler Jr., of the Coke-a-Cola empire into the membership, who in turn financed Rev. Harris's revival preaching throughout the United States.

How about that? In a little country church in the middle of nowhere a little boy receives Jesus and grows up to be one of the spiritual leaders in Atlanta during a turbulent and troublesome decade. How about that? In a little country church in the middle of nowhere my faith was nurtured and even though many miles and many years have separated me from St. Paul's I know that the best of me is due in some part to places like that church.

God really does have the whole world in his hands doesn't he?

Amos tended sycamore trees and was a herdsman for a living, but we know him as one of God's mighty prophets who defended the oppressed and marginalized.

Paul made tents, alongside Pricilla and Aquila, but traveled much of the world telling the Gentiles about Jesus.

Peter, James and John were fishermen who worked with their hands and not part of the learned class, but were hand-picked by Jesus to carry on the message.

Esther was a housewife, but because she took a stand in what she believed was right she saved the people of Israel from annihilation.

NRS 2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a **worker** who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.