

## Work Life

### “The Dead End Job” (Ecclesiastes 2:17-23; Matthew 7:1-11)

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#### Dramatic Reading

“Employment”  
By Nathaniel Bellows

At the time the time felt well spent but now  
I see it was wasted. Not a waste—it just had  
no point—no shape—no hourglass’ tapering  
waist. At a certain point, bliss gets replaced  
by disinterest. If you will allow me for once  
to be honest. I left the sea’s lacy wake, waking  
each day well-rested, untested, unmet. Nothing  
was going to change, and that was the point.  
The seabirds sang: Protect your gifts! burying  
their doomed eggs in the sand—sand to heat,  
to melt, shape into that chalice of time: bulb  
upon bulb, curvaceous, urgent as an aging  
odalisque. It was a version of love not meant  
to set—the best—not trashed, but wholly left  
to the mists of that idly mown lawn, the little  
boat trolling a coast, bereft of tide or tempest.

#### Introduction

1. Welcome to our summer series on work life. In this series we are seeking to view work life as a pilgrimage of identity. In the opening weeks of the series we focused on high level concepts such as the difference between jobs, careers, and vocations, with vocation being the highest and most important lifelong themes that we nurture and develop regardless of our jobs and careers.

As we go forward we are moving into deeply practical matters, such as today’s topic “the dead end job.” I have been in the American workforce for thirty years and my understanding of what is a dead end job continues to evolve. In the early part of my work life I would have looked at movies such as the 1999 movie “Office Space”...



...as the classic portrait and lampoon of a dead end job. Do any of you remember this movie? (show of hands) Remember “someone stole my stapler...I am going to burn this place down.”

For those who don't know it, this movie features an attractive white male protagonist fighting his way to freedom from the cubical laden corporate evil empire named “Initech”, including this attempt to leave early on a Friday afternoon.

[ONSCREEN: TRT 2:14]

## TWO SHORT MOVIE CLIPS FROM OFFICE SPACE

Classic. At least classic in the 1990s. Times have changed and while some believe that corporate cubicles represent the classic dead end job, it is possible for any job to become a dead end job depending upon how we feel about it and regardless of whether we are good at it or not.

- Michael Jordan, one of the most famous basketball players of all time, burned out on the game and left it for two years to play baseball, which we can safely say was not his gift!
  - I know dozens of people who, after years of doing a job or career path in which they continued to earn a decent living wage, felt despondent and stuck. Helpless and meaningless.
  - And, I know people who work in cubicles and in the same jobs and career paths as those who felt despondent and stuck, and they feel comfortable and alive in those same jobs because they were different people doing different work during different seasons of their lives.
2. The dead end job, like mid-life crises, is very likely something that everyone will experience at some point in our lives. It's just a reality. So, what are we to do when we feel that we have hit a dead end? How are we to think about such things as Christ followers?

There are two passages of Scripture for today's teaching that help us get at these questions. The first is from Ecclesiastes, a Hebrew book of the Bible, and the second is from Matthew's gospel

biography of Jesus. These Scriptures frame three possible responses that we can have when feeling like we are working in a dead end job beginning with the all too easy path of *just giving into despair*.

## A. Give Into Despair

1. You know how movies and media often warn their audiences of adult content before they begin their shows? It has long been my belief that the Bible should place a warning before the Hebrew book of Ecclesiastes that says, "If you are struggling to find meaning in your work and feel as if you occupy a dead end job, do *not* read this book of the Bible at this time. It will lead you deeper into despair and meaninglessness."

Seriously, everyone (except those who feel meaningless in their work life) I challenge you to read the entire book of Ecclesiastes this coming week. It is only 12 chapters and you could probably read it in less than 30 minutes. But, remember my warning because this book of the Bible was written by a king who appears to have nearly lost his mind.

One scholar asks these questions of Ecclesiastes:<sup>12</sup>

Is [the king] coherent or incoherent, insightful or confused? Is he a stark realist or merely faithless? Is he orthodox or heterodox? Is he an optimist or a pessimist? Is the ultimate message of the book, "Be like [the king], the wise man," or [the king] is wrong, make sure you don't fall into his trap"?

2. Wonder why these questions are raised? Listen to Ecclesiastes 2:17-23:

<sup>17</sup> So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. <sup>18</sup> I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

<sup>20</sup> So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

<sup>22</sup> What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? <sup>23</sup> All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 2:17-23. NIV

3. I am not even slightly exaggerating when I say that the entire book is some variation of this depressing sentiment with a very abrupt addendum at the end by an anonymous voice saying "so, just fear God and keep his commandments". Oh, there is an occasional outburst of short wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote I swap out the Hebrew name "Qohelet" for "the king" to simply the point. Read more at:

<http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/resources/introductions-to-the-books-of-the-bible/ecclesiastes/> (accessed 7-16-16)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Enns. Ecclesiastes (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (THOTC)) (Kindle Locations 104-106). Kindle Edition.

saying that sort of come out of nowhere and gets popularized in such things as songs, weddings and movies. The book is sort of minefield, though. Especially, if you “proof text” it, which is the practice of grabbing a passage of Scripture out of context and establish it as the main point, when it isn’t the main point.

Like, what I discovered when I was doing research for the first sermon in this series titled “The Many Layers of Purpose”. While cross referencing work theme Scriptures I came across the following in Ecclesiastes 3:22a:

“So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work...”

Ecclesiastes 3:22a. NIV

Well said. Except what is written after this text is about oppression, toil and friendlessness, and what is written immediately *before* this text is as follows:

<sup>19</sup> Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. <sup>20</sup> All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. <sup>21</sup> Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

Ecclesiastes 3:19-21. NIV

Read in that context the entirety of verse 22 is actually quite dark.

“So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?”

Ecclesiastes 3:22a. NIV

4. I go to the trouble of sharing all of this because what the king of Ecclesiastes gives us in our journey of work life is the fact that the larger questions of meaning will always be nipping at our heels. Regardless of whether we are pastors and philosophers, artists and social workers, politician and bankers...at the top of our game or feeling lower than low—in every case, the shortness of our life spans and the finiteness of our humanity will sooner or later corner us and in that moment we face a choice: we can give into despair over that which do not understand and which is out of our control, or we can humbly accept the gift of human consciousness as a grace filled journey of what Jesus and the New Testament authors taught as the journey of belovedness regardless of what we do or accomplish in our work life.

Actually, when feeling as meaningless as the king of Ecclesiastes or as if we are in a dead end job, there is third option that the king of Ecclesiastes talked about (as being meaningless, of course<sup>3</sup>) and what Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount—we can despise *others* more than our own misery.

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<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:7-8.

## B. Despising Others

### 1. Jesus said:

<sup>1</sup> “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

<sup>3</sup> “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

[This next verse is very curious because it almost sounds like it doesn’t belong]

<sup>6</sup> “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Matthew 7:1-6. NIV

2. The gross exaggeration of a plank versus speck of dust would have probably caused Jesus’ listeners to chuckle. And, the lesson is both obvious and universal: don’t be judgemental with others about the very things we struggle with, and don’t be overly critical of others generally.

- Does this mean turning off our brain when someone else is obviously being offensive or unhelpful? No.
- Does this mean there is no real sense of right and wrong. Of course not.
- Does this mean that Jesus’ way of wisdom requires us to be introspect of our shortcomings as we see them mirrored back at us through the lives of others? Yes!
- Does this mean that being hyper critical of others may give us a bump of adrenaline but in the long view of things only make us and our relationships more miserable. Absolutely!

Because, when we are judgemental and hyper critical of others, and when others are judgemental and hyper critical of us, we are all taking that which is sacred, the belovedness of every person, and throwing it to the likes of dogs and pigs. (And, for the dog lovers in the congregation today, dogs in Jesus’ day were *very* different than our fluffy little genetically bred companions today!)

3. In work life and when feeling stuck in a dead end job it is as easy as breathing to take our internal anxiety and project it on others through judgement and criticisms and the beast of jealousy. It was William Shakespeare in his play Othello who had the power scheming character of Iago plant the seeds that would eventually destroy Othello when Iago said: “Oh, beware my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.”<sup>4</sup>

In fits of jealousy, have we ever heard ourselves saying:

“If I had their job, I’m sure I could do it better than them”

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-easy-ways-deal-jealousy-work-sheri-staak> (accessed 7-16-16)

“They are getting all of the good projects”

“Why do their ideas always get used more than mine?”

“I don’t know why they were given a raise and I wasn’t”

“If only I had their looks...”

One job coaching site spoke to the problem of jealousy at work in very plain terms:<sup>5</sup>

- Get over it.
- Stop comparing.
- Show support, not spite, respect, not disrespect.
- Redirect the emotion.

4. Redirect the emotion. That is insightful. And, it challenges us to refocus on the bigger picture of our identity that transcends our jobs and career paths. Remember talking about the difference between jobs, which tend to be single repetitive work items, careers, which tend to be widening pathways of advancement, and vocations, the highest set of themes that guide our lives regardless of the jobs and careers that we do?

That perspective helps us when our stuckness tempts us toward judgement, hyper-criticism and jealousy. And, the teaching of Jesus that I am going to read next encourages us to remember that when our job or career feels as if it has reached a dead end, we should take a step back and reflect on our higher level vocational intuitions and have the courage to explore new job and career pathways rather than taking out our anxieties on the people around us.

### C. Ask, Seek, Knock.

1. Jesus said:

<sup>7</sup> “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

<sup>9</sup> “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:7-11. NIV

This and the earlier part of the text represents universal wisdom from Jesus that also applies to work life. And, it applies to work life because as with all of life, *nothing* need be a dead end. Will we sometimes have to linger longer than we want in a job and sometimes we do not have a choice to find a great deal of meaning in our paid work and need to find that in non-paid

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<sup>5</sup> IBID.

activities, but we needn't feel that all of life is a dead end simply because our job feels like a dead end.

As an aside, I had a friend who has repeatedly told me that he "doesn't live to work, he works to live," meaning that he finds paid work a tolerable necessity that helps him pay the bills so he can do the more important things in life away from his paid work. He's ok with the corporate cubicle as long as it gives him the means to do that which is more meaningful to him.

2. For those who are more restless than that about paying jobs, it is appropriate to apply Jesus' teaching of seeking, and asking and finding to our paid work life as well as our unpaid work life. Practically speaking, what does that look like? The obvious start is prayer. But, not prayer as an incantation or demand of God. Prayer, rather, as letting go and listening to God, what is going on inside ourselves, and the voices of those we trust around us. If our work life is to be a pilgrimage of identity we have to be willing and have the courage to listen and then (and this is key) see everything as an *invitation* of personal growth.

I am guessing there may be some inside voices saying "My job will never be an invitation, it's a prison cell. Have you met my boss?" I get that. But, the dead end is about you, it's about me. It's not about our bosses, or our companies, our churches, or wherever we work. It's about the creator of all things compelling us toward the fulfillment of all that we are intended to be. Jesus' invitation is to not accept current reality as the end but rather to take this moment that feels like a dead end and leverage it as a time of honest self-discovery, patience to endure a season of waiting, and then when given compelling and forward looking insight, taking courageous risks to change the path.

3. I have a few examples of people who were honest, patient, and who courageously changed their path. These stories are from the media program "Storycorps.":



Len Berk, 85, and his younger friend Joshua Gubitz, 46, talked on the program about Len's surprising twist of work life. Len never loved accounting but wanted to have a good paying job to take care of his family. His accounting career spanned 25-30 years. He decided to retire, and was thinking "what am I going to do next?" He went on to say:

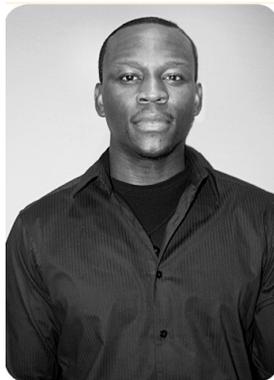
"I got a telephone call from a friend who said that she saw in The New York Times that Zabar's, a gourmet food store on West Eightieth Street and Broadway, was looking for a lox slicer, and I thought, I could do that. I had been a customer of that store for many years, and I would never have my lox sliced; I'd always buy a chunk and take it home and slice it myself.

It's almost like I was preparing for this job. So I sent the owner an email listing ten attributes that would make me a fine lox slicer (including): "I'm reliable. I've been one of your best customers. I've always been a fish person."<sup>6</sup>

The owner called him immediately and asked "What kind of CPA wants to slice lox?!" Len used to make \$150 an hour and the owner said "How about nine dollars?" Len's been slicing ever since, and describes the work in meditative terms: "Some people, they're in a hurry. But you can't be in a hurry when you want to have salmon sliced...I want to make the best possible slice I can make. It's a sensual experience that occurs between me and my salmon and my knife, and I never get tired of it....you can get lost in the lox.

My wife Holly and I actually visited this exact deli three years ago. We couldn't remember if it was Len who served us, but we agree that lox slicing truly is an art form in that space!

4. A second story is about the work life of Ayodeji Ogunniyi. (A-oh-dee-gee Oh-goo-nee-yee)



His family is from Nigeria and in that country his father had a bachelor's degree and was a manager of a big bank. When his family immigrated to the United States beginning in 1988 they moved to Chicago's South side. When he was very young he remembers being dropped off at the daycare and waking up on the back of his father's cab. He says that his parents drilled into his head the two greatest priorities of life: God and education.

He said in his interview:

"So since I was a child, I was trained that I was going to be a doctor, and if not a doctor, an engineer. And if not an engineer, a lawyer. For the first fifteen years of my life, I thought that those were the only three occupations that were out there. When I got to college, I was in the premed program, and I was going to be a doctor. I got straight As because the math and science came very natural to me, but I had no passion for it. I thought, Do I really want to be a doctor?"<sup>7</sup>

In a surprising turn in his story he describes the tragic murder of his father in an alley in Evergreen Park. He later learned that the murderers were eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-two years old. In

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<sup>6</sup> Isay, Dave. *Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work* (A StoryCorps Book) (pp. 195-196). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Isay, Dave. *Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work* (A StoryCorps Book) (p. 170-172). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

his rage he wanted to retaliate. For sure he wanted to ask them “Why? What happens to a person? Where do they get lost and become murderers?”

He recounted:

“At the time I was tutoring kids at an after-school program for some extra money, and these kids came from the same impoverished conditions as the people who murdered my father. One student in the program— he was probably around sixteen years old— always had this terrible attitude. We were doing something where everyone had to read out loud, and when it was his turn to read, he just stormed out of the classroom. I went out and I asked him, “What’s going on?” and he just broke down. He said, “It’s hard for me to read.”

And then it dawned on me: You have to do what you love. So that’s when I said, I’m going to follow my heart and become a teacher.”

In that moment Ayodeji awoke to both his career path and his vocation. He realized that he could give children meaning and empowerment because everyone at some point sits in classrooms and *that* space could be the foundation for everything else.

## Conclusion

So, what about us? What about you?

How do you experience the context of your work life? Is it life giving? Is it just work? Is it drudgery and a dead end? Or, are you in a space where you are indeed listening to the themes of your vocation and for what is next?

Next week we are going to talk about transitions and living in the in-between times. The word for this experience is “liminality” or the space between, a threshold.

If we reach a point where our work feels like a dead end, let’s take a step back and reflect on our vocational themes and have the courage to see this moment as an invitation to move toward something new. But, on our way to that new place, let’s be diligent to be honest, patient and courageous while we explore new ways forward.

## Prayer

God of all things including our journey of work—help us to slow, listen, and pray when we feel as if we are in a dead end job. Give us vision for the process, sometimes short, sometimes long, that we must go through in order to experience a refinement of our vocational path as it dances with our careers and jobs. We want to be like you, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## Benediction

As the new week begins, may we experience God in our work life, and find our identity formed, but never trapped by the work we do in day to day life.

Amen. Go in peace.