

MAKING ROOM FOR Life

MAKING ROOM FOR LIFE: TRADING CHAOTIC LIFESTYLES FOR CONNECTED RELATIONSHIPS

“OVERCOMING BAD HABITS AND MYTHS ABOUT RAISING CHILDREN”

This is the third lesson in a four-part series entitled *Making Room for Life*. The first lesson in the series identified a problem we all face, “crowded loneliness.” God created us for community, but our contemporary lifestyle precludes us from experiencing it fully. In effect we have traded what is more valuable for what is less valuable, our birthright for a mess of pottage.

The second lesson identified the solution to this problem, and we discovered it is not more of the same. The pursuit of the “good life” blessed by our materialistic culture, and its attendant accumulation of more and more stuff, something we tirelessly fund by working more and more hours, is part of the problem, not its solution. The life we long for cannot be bought with money, nor can it be found in the things money can buy; we have to restructure our relationships and our time to discover it.

This week's lesson is about two obstacles that stand in our way. Randy writes, “There are at least two serious obstacles to overcome in our

quest to make room for life. First, we must be fully aware of the bad habits we've developed that keep drawing us back into crisis mode and prevent us from enjoying the simple life of community. Second, we must address the current myths about how we're raising our children. Once we see the true impact our chaotic lifestyles are having on our children, we should be motivated to make the necessary changes” (*Making Room for Life*, 69).

At the root of the problem is a way of life that Solomon, “The Teacher” (Ecc. 1:1, 2; cf. 1:12; 7:27; 12:8-10), calls “meaningless – a miserable business” (Ecc. 4:8). He saw an ancient who had no family relationships – no one to share his wealth with or leave his estate to – yet there was no end to all his work, which ironically left him with no time and no friends either. He was truly “all alone” (v. 8) as are many today, his contemporary counterparts. He denied himself something far better than his wealth, which left him feeling empty – companionship and community.

Your Initial Reaction

Record your thoughts on the situation Solomon observed in his day.



1

Look Closely – observe what you are reading.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-12

[4] And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

[5] The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.

[6] Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

[7] Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

[8] 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 – a miserable business!

[9] Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

[10] If one falls down, his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

[11] Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

[12] Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

• Reading to gain an impression – record your thoughts. (3rd Grade – Adult)

• Reading again to see the details (5th Grade – Adult)

- Circle the important word “meaningless” in vv. 4, 7, and 8.
- Box the important word “better” in vv. 6 and 9.
- Underline the phrase “chasing after the wind” in vv. 4 and 6 with one line.
- Underline the phrase “under the sun” in v. 7 with two lines.
- Put a check mark over the words “all alone” in v. 8 and “alone” in v. 11.
- Highlight the rhetorical question in v. 8.
- Draw a line from the word “if” introducing a *condition* to the word “but” indicating *contrast* in v. 10 and in v. 11.
- Put an asterisk in front of the word “because” indicating *reason* in v. 9.
- Draw a line from the word “one” in v. 10 to the word “two” in v. 11 to the word “three” in v. 12.



2

Think Carefully – interpret what you have read.

• Recognizing the message of the passage (5th Grade – Adult)

This week’s passage, Ecclesiastes 4:4-12, belongs to a larger section (4:4-16) in which Solomon argues that man’s *raison d’être*, reason for being, is neither achievement nor advancement. It’s a passage driven people need to memorize. According to The Teacher, God did not put us on earth to get ahead. In the first place, our hard work and accomplishments are all too often motivated by envy. “I have also learned why people work so hard to succeed: it is because they envy their neighbors,” Solomon said (v. 4 TEV). Competition and rivalry taint all that we do. Moreover, there is something better – “one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil” (v. 6). Less is actually more when it is accompanied by peace of mind.

In the second place, having community is better than being alone. The person who works all the time leaves himself no time for friends, and even if he has family, finds himself “all alone.” Like the Prodigal Son, when he comes to his senses he will ask himself the penetrating question, “For whom am I toiling, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” Living such a miserable life just doesn’t make sense! Especially when there is something better – community. Two are better than one (vv. 9-12a), and three are better than two (v. 12b). Having a friend is better than being alone, but having two friends is better still, and by implication the more relationships the better. Solomon isn’t extolling friendship; he’s extolling community. The person who chooses to be alone in order to get ahead shortchanges himself.

The Point of this Lesson

Having community is better than being alone, but “the American way of life is chocking connectivity to others right out of our lives,” so we have to overcome bad habits and myths about raising children to have it.

• Digging deeper into its meaning (5th Grade – Adult)

v. 4 **all** “All labor and all achievement” are probably *hyperboles* for which there are few exceptions.
 v. 4 **spring from envy** “Come from one person’s envy of another” (NRSV), “Is the result of rivalry” (NASB). Preferred by most English translations over, “for all toil and every skillful work a man *is envied* by his neighbor” (NKJV; cf. KJV).

v. 4 **meaningless** The Hebrew word *hebel* translated here has a variety of meanings and nuances (see note on v. 10 in the previous lesson). Hence, it is variously translated: “useless” (TEV), “profitless” (the NET Bible), “emptiness” (NEB), “vanity” (NRSV, NKJV), “what a waste” (*The Message*). Here, followed by the phrase “a chasing after the wind,” it seems to connote senseless activity that begs the question, “Why bother?” or “What’s the point?”

v. 5 **folds his hands** The fool “folds his hands and does no work” (the NET Bible) and thus “ruins himself.” Most English versions translate the Hebrew idiom literally, “eats/consumes his own flesh” (NRSV, NKJV, NASB). Others try to explain it like the NIV: “wastes away” (NEB), “let himself starve to death” (TEV). But what do vv. 4 and 5 mean? According to some, the overachiever and the fool represent wrongheaded extremes corrected by v. 6. According to others, the fool lacks ambition (“folds his hands”), still he “eats his own meat” or “food” content with the simple needs of life (Donald R. Glenn, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 986). In other words, the indolent fool eats his food and finds life more satisfying than the overachiever. One translation makes v. 5 the words of the ambitious (v. 4) in their own defense, “They say that a man would be a fool to fold his hands and let himself starve to death” (TEV). In any case v. 6 expresses what is better.



- v. 7 **under the sun** i.e., “on earth” (the NET Bible), “in this life,” or “in this world” (TEV).
- v. 8 **all alone** This person had no family (“no children nor siblings” the NET Bible) and no time for friends – in other words, no community. “Such a man, even with a wife and children, will have little time for them, convinced that he is toiling for their benefit although his heart is elsewhere, devoted and wedded to his projects” (Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*, 46, 47).
- v. 8 **he asked** Some translations indicate that the lonely workaholic asked himself this question (“He laments, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’” the NET Bible; cf. NIV, NRSV). Others indicate that this is a question he never asks himself (NKJV, NASB). In either case, sacrificing community on the altar of materialism doesn’t make sense.
- v. 12 **three** Two are better than one, and three are better than two. The progression implies that Solomon is recommending more than friendship – having one or two friends. His words imply the value of relationships and the benefits of community.

• Answering Interpretive Questions - For older learners (5th Grade – Adult)

1. What would you say to corroborate, qualify, or refute what Solomon observed in verse 4?

2. Put what verse 6 means in your own words.

3. What word would you use to describe the man in verse 8 and why?

4. Verse 8 concludes, “This too is meaningless – a miserable business.” Explain.

5. Relate verses 9-12 to community.

6. In chapter 6 of *Making Room for Life*, Randy writes about imbalance with respect to work, relationships, and sleep all too common today. We're busy well past 6:00 p.m., reducing the time we have to invest in relationships, leaving us "sleepless in Seattle" so to speak. In a nutshell, our lifestyle is the culprit. He writes, "Simply put, the American way of life is chocking connectivity to others right out of our lives" (82). Confirm or refute his assessment from personal experience.

7. Randy maintains that children's lives today are overscheduled in large part because parents have enrolled them in all kinds of late afternoon and evening "adult-driven, highly-structured, age-graded activities" (96) that they believe are good for them. What do you think?

8. What does the pressure to be involved in so many activities come from if it's not really what kids and their parents want?

9. Chapter 8 presents seven things our children risk losing as a result of all these evening activities: creativity, leadership skills, mentoring, conflict management skills, health, finances (this one relates to parents but has implications for their children), and family meals. Which one concerns you most and why?

10. This lesson is titled "Overcoming Bad Habits and Myths about Raising Children." Identify one bad habit we have to overcome and one myth about raising children that we have to overcome in order to make room for life.

3 Respond wisely – apply what you have read. (5th Grade – Adult)

• How might Christ followers respond to the message of this passage?

1. Set the boundaries you need to restore the proper balance between work, relationships, and sleep in your life.
2. Consider what you expect your children to receive from the activities they participate in, and determine whether your expectations are really being met. Then reduce their participation accordingly.
3. Identify what your children are losing as a result of their involvement in “adult-driven, highly structured, age-graded activities” and how it can be found in an informal activity closer to home.
4. Relate the message of this passage to your life. How might you live differently tomorrow based on the point of this lesson?

4 Gather together – discuss what you have read.

• For older learners (5th Grade – Adult)

1. Read together this week’s passage from Step 1 or your Bible.
2. Read “Recognizing the message of the passage” along with the point of the lesson in Step 2.
3. Discuss your individual responses in Step 3.

• For families

In this series, you will find one family night activity each week. Depending on the age of your children, you will pick and choose from the ideas below.

Pray

Pray for wisdom and direction as you create a healthy schedule for your family. As you look at your child, pray that the Lord would guide you in the decisions you make concerning his/her activities. Pray for balance and freedom from the obstacles before you.

Act

With your family, complete the “Community-Building Exercise” below. This is also found at the end of chapter 7.

“Pick an evening . . . when everyone [in your family] will take the night off, just like the people of Ridgewood did.” Create a meal to share together and spend time after the meal cleaning up together and then playing a game, reading or some other fun activity.

Discuss

Over dinner, discuss the questions below as a family. Everyone can answer.

- Are we out of balance in work? Do we cut off activity at 6:00 in the evening?
- Are we out of balance in our relationships? How many fast food meals do we eat in a typical week?
- Are we out of balance in our sleep?
- How many activities are you involved in as a kid?
- Do you enjoy all of these activities?
- Does your schedule stress you out?

• Suggestions for Small Groups

1. Read *Making Room for Life* and select topics you want to discuss from the list found at the end of each chapter.
2. Discuss where to start when it comes to restoring balance to life.
3. List the seven deadly sins against children in order of importance.

About the Authors

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