

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-4/ecclesiastes-44-6/>

Rivalry in our labor is tempered by working for what we need rather than to impress. A proper balance between striving and resting is better than a futile obsession with work.

Next in Solomon's discovery of *vanity and striving after the wind*, he observes that comparison and competition is the source of every *labor* and *skill* done under the sun. Human striving *is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor*. Humans perform with a view to what others do and think. We are naturally competitive with one another.

Like all things which Solomon observes apart from faith, this is also *vanity and striving after the wind*. We impress someone today, then both they and their accomplishments are gone and forgotten tomorrow. What's the point?

The two words here, *labor* and *skill*, have opposing connotations. The Hebrew word translated as *labor* is *amal*, which is troublesome work. *Amal* is often translated "toil." The word translated as *skill* has the connotation of *success*. Every success and failure, indeed every thing we try to measure, is the *result* of *rivalry*. Our definition of winning is made in comparison with others. And this is *vanity*. I win today, you win tomorrow, then it all decays and is forgotten. Who cares?

On the other hand, we could do nothing. That's arguably even worse. *Striving after wind* surely sounds superior to behavior that *consumes our own flesh*. And that is exactly what transpires from idle laziness. Inactivity is the lifestyle of the *fool*. *The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh*.

So what do we do? It seems the answer is to *enjoy our activities*. Rather than obsession over one-upping our *neighbor*, get some balance in life. A life of one hundred percent work is *striving after wind*. Better to have *one hand full of rest* and one hand full of labor. That's better *than two fists full of labor*. All work and no play is *striving after wind*.

Idleness is self-destructive. But *rest* is a part of God's design. The Sabbath is a principle of resting. We need a healthy balance of rest and work, which is only possible if we avoid being obsessed with *rivalry*.

An application of Solomon's observations in this passage is connected to the Bible's teaching that we ought to work to please God ([Col 3:23](#)). When we follow God's recipe and example for work, we will include an element of Sabbath *rest*. If the only goal is beating rivals, we won't allow ourselves any rest. If we become addicted to work, then we will forget to *enjoy* it. And "there is nothing better than for a man to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good" ([Ecclesiastes 2:24](#)).

Biblical Text:

⁴I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.*⁵The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.⁶One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.