

“The Gospel According to Dilbert”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

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September 6, 2015

There are a lot of high-priced business consultants and celebrity business gurus out there. The truth is: everything I needed to know about business I learned from a comic strip called Dilbert. For those who don't read the funny papers, Dilbert is a bespectacled, nerdy engineer with a flat-top haircut. He has a talking pet named Dogbert whose not-so-secret agenda is to rule the world. Dilbert's world is filled with shrinking cubicles, incompetent supervisors, purposeless meetings, ridiculous management fads and increasing downsizing. Sound familiar? His rotund boss, whose two tufts of hair look like devil's horns, issues directives to the employees that are either moronic or demonic or both. In one strip the boss tells a group of employees, "I've decided to use humor in the workplace. Experts say humor eases tension which is important when the workforce is being trimmed." Then he turns to one engineer and says, "Knock-knock." "Who's there?" asks the worker. "Not you anymore," the boss replies. During another meeting the boss announces, "I've been saying for years that 'Employees are our most valuable asset.' It turns out that I was wrong. Money is our most valuable asset. Employees are ninth." "What came in eighth?" an engineer asks. "Carbon paper."

Dilbert appears daily in over a thousand newspapers, Dilbert books are on the New York Times list, over a million people log on to the Dilbert Zone Website each day, and many more workers have a Dilbert strip pinned to the foam walls of their cubicles. There are plush, stuffed versions of Dogbert, Dilbert mouse pads and, of course, Dilbert coffee mugs – large super venti size to get you through those boring meetings.

Dilbert creator's Scott Adams gets his material first hand. He spent 17 years in a cubicle at Pacific Bell before becoming a full-time cartoonist. He strip mines the cynicism, frustration, discouragement and fear buried in the workplace. A Newsweek poll found that 70% of workers experience job stress, 50% feel red tape and unnecessary rules prevent them from doing their best job, 64% complain that poor communication between management and workers is the greatest obstacle to efficiency and 40% feel their employers ask too much of them.¹ All this can be explained by "The Dilbert Principle" which states: "The most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do the least damage: management."²

You can hardly blame Dilbert for being cynical. Going to work sometimes feels like an out of control roller coaster. Downsizing cuts thousands of employees from the payroll and places greater stress on those who remain. Advancing technology boosts productivity but also leaves many confused and clueless. Outsourcing sends jobs overseas. New efficiency programs create more meetings and forms which reduce efficiency. Benefits are disappearing. Job security is a thing of the past. Cell phones mean

¹ Steven Levy, "Working in Dilbert's World," Newsweek, August 12, 1996, p. 52-57.

² Ibid., p. 54.

you can never get away from your job. Everyone's working overtime, but nothing seems to be getting done.

This Labor Day weekend, as we take a break from our work, as kids take the bus for a new school year, it's a good time to take a look at this question: What's the point? What is my purpose? Why do I do what I do all day? A better question is **What is Your Real Vocation?** "Well that's obvious," you say, "I'm a teacher, an accountant, a medical professional, a mom or dad who works at home, a student, business person, etc..." But that's your occupation – the activity which occupies your time. Your occupation is important. It's usually what pays your bills and allows you to use your gifts, strengths and talents. If you are student, school is your occupation. If you are at home with the kids, your occupation is raising the next generation. If you are retired, that's your occupation. Many retired people say to me, "I'm busier now than when I had my career."

Everyone has an occupation. But you are more than your occupation. Most people mistakenly identify themselves by their occupation. "I'm a chemist" or "I'm a lawyer" or "I'm a software developer." When people learn my wife is a physical therapist they immediately tell her where they hurt. What follows is a lively conversation. Then, when they finally notice there's someone standing next to her, namely me, they say, "And what do you do?" My reply can literally silence a room. They instantly try to remember if they said a swear word in my presence. Then they tell me the stories of all the pastors and pastors kids they know who went bad. But usually they say nothing or change the subject.

Now you should never identify yourself by your occupation. That's what you do, not who you are. Overtime, occupations can become boring, routine and meaningless. Another week of work, another year of school, another dinner, diaper, dirty pile of laundry. Round and round it goes and sometimes you wonder: what's the point?

That is *THE* question of the book of Ecclesiastes. The author is a king in Israel – perhaps the wisest of all kings - Solomon. In the book he is called "The Teacher." He goes on an extensive search for the meaning of life. What he finds is that life is:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

This is no snap judgment. It comes after a lifetime of trying on different occupations. The Teacher goes to school, studies Wisdom and discovers it is meaningless (1:12-18).

I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I said to myself, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said to myself, "This too is meaningless." For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die! (Ecclesiastes 2:13-16)

His conclusion: wisdom is meaningless. So much for that Doctor of Ministry degree I just earned. Parents, if you try to wake up your kids for school and they say, “What’s the point? The Bible says wisdom is meaningless,” don’t blame me. Blame Solomon.

Yet the Teacher doesn’t give up. Next he pursues a life of Pleasure and Entertainment (2:1-11). And what does he find? It’s meaningless. Then he throws himself into his work (2:17-23). What’s the verdict? Meaningless. Next he turns to Advancement and Achievement (4:13-16) What’s the answer? Meaningless. Finally he amasses Wealth and builds a Legacy (5:8-6:2). Survey says? Meaningless. He sounds like he works in the cubicle next to Dilbert. The Teacher concludes:

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. 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. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. (Ecclesiastes 2:20-23)

All this sounds pretty depressing. No matter what your occupation, it turns out to be meaningless and empty in the end. What kept him from cashing it all in?

Finally he puts God in the picture. At first the Teacher is kind of pessimistic. In an image he says this with the voice of Eeyore.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance...
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.
What do workers gain from their toil? (Ecclesiastes 3:1-9)

This is the turning point of search. Or maybe I should say the turn, turn, turning point. There is nothing new under the sun. It’s all been done before. It will all happen again. The world just goes round and round and repeats itself. That’s the Teacher’s first impression. Then it dawns on him: everything is so orderly because God is in charge.

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11)

The Teacher discovers we are made for more than this. Our home is not in the endless cycle of time or even in the darkness of the grave but in eternity. God made us so we can live forever with Him.

As followers of Jesus we should think of ourselves as an occupation. That's not our identity. You are more than an occupation. **You have a Vocation.** The word "vocation" starts off with the word "vocal" or voice. Your vocation is your calling, it's what God is calling you to do here on earth. One woman said, "I am a servant of God, cleverly disguised as a hairdresser."

To live your vocation, God wants you to **Find Joy in Today.** The Teacher says, I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13)

Do you want to find contentment in your work? Take God to work, to school, to your home. Honor God with your work, your school work, your house work. Believe it or not, your work is a gift from God. Through work you achieve personal growth and satisfaction. Through it you serve other people and meet their needs. Through work you earn money to meet the needs of your family, to help the poor, to further the work of Christ's kingdom. Instead of worshiping your work, offer your work as an act of worship to God. Paul says,

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:12-13)

He found joy despite the ups and downs of life. He felt content while everything turned, turned, turned around him. How? Paul didn't cling to the circumstances. He held on to Christ who gave him the strength to do all that was needed. That's how we can find contentment, peace and joy in this world.

Next, to find your calling today, **Don't Live for Tomorrow.** The one reason we miss the joy of each day is we are fixated on what we have to do tomorrow. The Teacher reached for more wisdom, wishes, work, and wealth. There is always more to accumulate. There is always more over the horizon. He focused so much on tomorrow, he missed today. And when he finally gathered the most wealth or wisdom of his age, he found it was meaningless, empty, unfulfilling, not worth it. He also knew, no matter how much he amassed of this world's treasures, there would come a tomorrow when he would die and have to give it all away. What a waste. Jesus says the same:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his

righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:31-34)

If we live for tomorrow, we will miss what God wants to give us today. When Lisa and I were out in California for my graduation she said, "Let's go to Beverly Hills and walk on Rodeo Drive." We've seen this glamorous street in so many movies we thought it might be fun to see it in person. First, I was surprised how short it is – just a couple of blocks. Next I was put off by how gaudy and glitzy it is. Yet here's what I really found interesting: at the end of the street is the Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church. What a parable. When we finally give up running after the empty stuff of this world, we'll find God waiting for us.

Finally, your real vocation is **Tell The Good News About Forever**. Ecclesiastes ends with these words:

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. (Ecclesiastes 12:9, 13).

The Gospel or Good News according to Dilbert is you were made to slave away in the world's cubicle until you pass away. The Good News according to Jesus is you were made to live forever. The purpose of this life is not accumulating all the wisdom, wishes, and wealth you can. What good is that since you will have to give them away? The purpose of this life is to prepare for eternity, to start living heaven now. The Teacher tells us to Worship God not stuff and to Follow God above all. That is the calling of every person. This week ask yourself: What things am I running after: wisdom, pleasure, work, achievements, financial security, control? On which of these do I spend the majority of my time, money and energy? Now imagine how different your life would be if you put God first and kept your eye on eternity. Start now, take small steps and start to bring your work back into perspective. Your work is definitely important to God but it was never meant to be God.

A friend of mine once told me he was offered a promotion at his company. It meant more prestige, authority and, of course, income. "Did you accept it?" I asked. "No," he replied matter of factly. "Why not?" I wondered. "Because it also meant longer hours, traveling and taking work home," was his answer. "I'm content with my current position and I have time now to be with my family and do things at church." "I'm impressed by your decision," I said. His reply stuck with me ever since. "Well," he said, "I never heard someone at the end of life look back and say, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work.'"

Now that's a quote you can pin to your cubicle.