



[Ecclesiastes 4:4-8](#)

(4) Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit. (5) The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. (6) Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit. (7) Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun. (8) There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

King James Version

Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 records Solomon's analysis of four types of workers. He appears to have disgustingly turned his attention from the corrupted halls of justice to the marketplace, watching and analyzing as people worked. Recall how those who work diligently are lauded throughout Proverbs and how Ecclesiastes 2 and 3 both extol work as a major gift of [God](#). Solomon came away from this experience with assessments of four different kinds of workers. Understand that God chooses to illustrate His counsel by showing extremes; not everybody will fit one of them exactly. At the same time, we should be able to use the information to make necessary modifications to our approach to our own work.

The first he simply labels the “skillful” worker. This worker has not only mastered the techniques of his trade, but he is also unusually industrious in performing it. We might better call this person a skillful *workaholic*. The man's skill is laudable, but his productivity motivates others to envy rather than to admiration. Knowing human nature well, Solomon is motivated to think more deeply about what drives such a person to apply himself so intensely. This may be especially useful for us because it seems to apply well to life in an Israelite culture.

Verse 4 is translated to make it appear as though those watching this skillful worker envy his diligence. However, other versions change the direction of the translation,

The Berean: Daily Verse and Commentary for Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 (<http://www.theberean.org>) instead saying that the diligent worker labors as he does because he is driven by *his own* attitude. The *Jewish Publication Society*, the *New American Bible*, and the *Revised English Bible* all change the word “envy” to “rivalry.” That is, people of this mindset perfect their skills and work industriously because of their competitive nature gone overboard.

They want to have more wealth as well as a greater reputation than others in their field of endeavor. This type is especially strongly driven to stay ahead of the competition. Some have analyzed that such workaholics see themselves in what may be called a “battle for bread”; their purpose in being skillful is less to produce a truly quality product than it is to get rich. Thus, the hands are truly capable, which is admirable, but the heart is out of alignment with God. Solomon describes a law of nature, the survival-of-the-fittest attitude, applied to a person's trade. He concludes that this is detrimental, literally a sheer vanity that makes life meaningless.

He is describing something similar to American capitalism, which is productive but not perfect. This competitive approach to work was not part of God's original creation of mankind but a twist [Satan](#) has inserted as part of human nature. It is unbalanced in a number of ways, one of the more obvious being that such driven people ignore or submerge other important aspects of life like marriage and family. The worker may feel good about himself because he is providing well for his family, but he is blind to the fact that others are paying a severe price.

[Covetousness](#), competition, envy, and jealousy are often linked. Competition is not evil in itself, but when being first is pursued at the expense of honesty, trouble will also be produced. We see this when some athletes break the rules by using drugs or when manufacturers cut back on the quality of a product. [The world](#) is full of Joneses to keep up with or excel.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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