
Ecclesiastes 4:4 (ESV):

> “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

The Hebrew word “toil” (עָמָל), from which *Amali* is derived, generally refers to toilsome, burdensome labor—work that is not only physically draining but often emotionally and spiritually exhausting. It carries the idea of labor born out of struggle, and often in vain.

So, Ecclesiastes 4:4 can be paraphrased this way:

> *“Then I observed all the difficult and wearisome labor, and every impressive skill in work, and I saw that it often arises from rivalry or competition between one person and another. This too is meaningless—a chasing after the wind.”*

Theological Reflection

Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, recognized that many people’s hard work is not rooted in divine purpose, but in envy, ambition, and comparison. The implication is that even skillful work—if it is driven by jealousy or the desire to outdo others—is ultimately vain (hebel), which in Hebrew means *empty, fleeting, or meaningless.*

This does not mean that all hard work is sinful. In fact, Scripture elsewhere commends diligence and responsibility. However, when labor is disconnected from God, or fueled by carnal motives like greed or pride, it becomes vain toil, with no eternal value.

Ecclesiastes 4:8 (NIV):

> “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!”

This verse reveals the emptiness of labor when it lacks relational and eternal purpose. A person can work endlessly, yet never find fulfillment, because material success without spiritual alignment leads to emptiness.

Not All “toil” Is Evil

It’s important to clarify: Not all who labor hard do so from envy or sinful ambition.
Some people work with integrity, with good intentions, and with the fear of God. They seek to provide, to serve, or to fulfill a calling. For them, labor is a form of worship and stewardship.

And the Bible affirms this:

Ecclesiastes 5:19 (AMP):

> “Also, every man to whom God has given riches and possessions, He has also given the power and ability to enjoy them and to receive his allotted portion and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God.”

Ecclesiastes 8:15 (NIV):

> “So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.”

When our labor is surrendered to God, it becomes meaningful. God gives joy in the work of our hands when it is done with reverence and purpose.

Jesus Gives True Rest

If your work feels burdensome, if you’re exhausted mentally and physically, and you don’t see lasting fruit—turn to Jesus. He invites all who are weary to come to Him.

Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV):

> “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will

> give you rest.
> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
> and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Psalm 127:2 (ESV):

> “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
> eating the bread of anxious toil;
> for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

Conclusion

“toil” (toilsome labor) can be either vain or valuable—it depends on the heart behind it. Work done for selfish gain or comparison leads to emptiness. But work offered to God, with godly purpose, is rewarded with peace, joy, and eternal value.

May the Lord bless the work of your hands.
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