

LIFE MATTERS 4: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
ECCLESIASTES
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Many of you work or did work at an office in recent years. I am guessing a few of you have been caught in a reply-to-all-storm, or as it is called by others, a reply-all-apocalypse. That is when someone makes the extreme mistake of replying to everyone on the email list. At that moment, they have opened up the floodgates of disaster and three waves seem to follow. The first wave is that other people reply all to your reply all and their message is, "I don't think I was supposed to be included on this." The second wave of people are those who reply all to those reply-all's with the message, "Stop replying to all." Finally, the comedians come out and reply to all with those reply all's with jokes that further drive people nuts. Let me give you an example as it happened at Time Inc. last week.

Hello,

Can you confirm what date the HSA seed money will appear in our Wage Works accounts? I have not yet received mine, and wanted to make sure there wasn't a problem, as last year we'd already gotten it by this time.

Thanks and best

[Redacted], can you help?

WAVE 1

Not sure why I got this email. But I actually had the same question. I wrote to the Time Inc. One Exchange this morning. Asking why I don't see the Time Inc. HRA balance in Wage Works.

I don't know why I am on this email.

I'm also receiving this for some reason....

WAVE 2

*Clearly we are all ACCIDENTALLY in the group TI HR HEALTH WELLNESS. This is an IT fix.
Stop replying.*

Please remove me from this email.

Que esta pasando aqui – no entiendo!

PLEASE STOP REPLY ALL. I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS MATTER.

WAVE 3

Keep us in the loop! I'm on the edge of my seat!

I'm selling Girl Scout Cookies!

You'll pry the reply-all button from my cold, dead hands.

There is a problem. Then there is a solution. Then it turns out, the solution is also the problem.

The reply-all-apocalypse might as well be a small snapshot of human nature. Problems bubble up, everyone starts getting involved and the problem is worse than it began. In the meantime, everybody's blood pressure is up, relationships are fractured and nothing has been solved. If you don't believe me, watch the presidential election coverage. Problems arise, solutions are offered, everyone argues about the solution offered and now we have a new problem.

Our world is just a series of reply-all's. One incident happens in a foreign land, the leader of the affected land reply's to all with punishment. The children of those who were punished also got punished, so they reply to all with violence and anger when they grow up.

The cycle continues as people reply-to-all around the globe. The problems get exacerbated, the violence increases, solutions are lost and new problems emerge. So one singular message or problem spreads and multiplies around the globe, and there doesn't seem to be a fix. There don't seem to be any solutions.

If you are looking at American politics right now, you know how this feels. If you are looking at the refugee crisis in Europe, you know how this feels. If you are looking at the issue of sex trafficking, you know how this feels. Maybe, just in your own household, you know how this feels. A single moment has been reply-all so many times and your kids, siblings and loved ones have all been dragged down and displaced and you are so far from where you began. Qoheleth knows how you feel.

Ecclesiastes 4:1

The oppressed are miserable and crying and there is no one there to comfort them. Ironically enough the oppressors also are miserable and crying and there is no one to comfort them. While we often think in terms of power structures and control, which leads us to consider who is happy and who is living a good life, Qoheleth states that it's one big reply-all mess. The oppressors and the oppressed are hurting with different kinds of pain and none of it desirable. Then he offers these comforting words:

Ecclesiastes 4: 2-3

He sees the mess. He watches it all unfold, and he makes some pretty drastic claims. It's better to be dead than to watch this. He takes it even one step further and says the dead still had to endure a life of watching this mess unfold, people hurting people, and it drives him to a place of despair that there are no answers, and that solutions are still problems.

H.L. Mencken once said, “*For every complex problem there is a solution which is clear, simple and wrong.*”

H.L. Mencken knows what we know, and Qoheleth knows what we both know. There is something hebel in the world around us. I introduced this word a few weeks ago as we began this series. Hebel means vanity. It means meaningless. It means absurd. There is a lot in this world that is utterly complex, and there is a lot in this world, truth be told, that may be unsolvable. With 6 billion people replying-to-all and with one person’s problems spilling over to ten other people and one city’s problems becoming one state’s problems, on to the country and the world, you can see the hebel of it all.

We are in the middle of our Life Matters series in which we begin each year reacquainting ourselves with what it means to follow Jesus. We believe following Jesus requires three things: Life in God, Life with Others and Life for Others. Life in God is worship. Life with Others is community, and Life for Others is service. We think these are three core things Jesus did. It’s how he lived. You often find him stealing away to pray and spend time in quiet worship. You often find him with other people in community, sharing his life with other people, and you often find him blessing other people. These three things are essential to be a follower of Jesus. These aren’t three things to *learn about* Jesus. These are three ways of modeling your life after his.

We spend two weeks on each of these and this is our first week of Life with Others. Practicing your faith in Christian community. Living your life with other Christians. Sharing burdens with one another. Sharing resources with one another. Celebrating with one another. Recreating with one another. We actually spent a lot of time discussing this in the series we just finished in the book of John. The thesis of that series was that our life in God is inextricably linked to our life with others. You cannot be a full follower of Jesus if you are not also connected to other Christians. You might have seen a few years ago that Ann Rice became a Christian. Ann Rice was a novelist and noted atheist for most of her life, but in her latter years, she became a Christian. Then she came out with this statement:

For those who care, and I understand if you don't, today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.

Ann Rice didn't stop being a Christian, at least according to her. She just stopped affiliating herself with other Christians. She resigned from the club even though she still deeply loves the founder. Ann Rice saw the discord and anger and reactionary group that seems unloving and nothing like Jesus. She resigned from all of that, but she is committed to still following Jesus, to being a Christ-follower. In one sense, Ann Rice did not stop being a Christian but in another she did. You cannot separate the two. They are inextricably linked.

The very practice of loving hard-to-love people is what makes you more Christ-like. But Ann Rice saw the reply-all world of her cohorts and she didn't like it. She saw the ridiculous hebel of it all and she bailed out. I'm guessing she could read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 and say, "I get that. This place is a mess and people are the problem." The problem, of course, is that she is replying to all on her blog. She is no different than the person who replies to all to tell everyone "stop replying to all." She is publicly shaming her own clan and distancing herself from the family of God.

I know how she feels. People are hard to live with. They can be insensitive. Violent. Uncaring. Divisive. Abusive and just mean. It can make you think that all that really matters is your relationship with God and that you want nothing to do with these messy people.

For my birthday, my family and I went to Davenport to Panther Beach. We had never been there before and it was great. The sun was shining. The air was clean. The waves were crashing. We walked down the hill, alongside a guy and his dogs, a Husky and a German Shepherd. Big dogs. We made it to the bottom and unpacked all of our supplies including yellow cake with chocolate icing which is a special treat that I request and my wife makes once a year for my birthday. Meanwhile the guy with his dogs let his dogs run wild at the

beach, but they were far away until the cake came out. His dogs got on the blanket scaring my 10 month old and eating my 3-year old's cake. The guy didn't rush over to shoo his dogs away. He didn't yell at them to leave. In fact, he just watched. I was pushing his dogs away while my children were crying, and he finally arrived. I told him that his dog ate my 3 year old's cake, and he shrugged. I asked him if his dogs were his responsibility and he said, "No."

It's one thing not to shoo them away. It's another thing not to stop them, but it's quite another to not be apologetic but defiant. It was maddening. I dreamed of slicing his tires. I dreamed of pepper-spraying his dogs. And this was cake on a beach. I know many of you have received much worse at the hands of people in your life, and it drives you nuts, especially from other Christians. It can drive you to despair, just like Qoheleth, but listen to what comes just a few verses later.

Ecclesiastes 4: 7-12

Qoheleth considers a man who seems to be purposefully alone, and he asks what good is life if you have no one to share it with. This is not a commentary on getting married or having kids. This man seems to have no connections to anyone, and he doesn't realize how hebel this is. Qoheleth goes on to say these iconic phrases you have probably heard before, "two are better than one," because someone will be there to help lift you up when you fall. Someone will be there to keep you warm. Someone will allow you to not be easily broken.

This same man who has just surveyed human relations and oppression and stated that it's better to be dead than dealing with this mess has just found meaning and joy and warmth and strength in those same messy people. I have a simple piece of circular logic for you today when it comes to Christian community: the problem is the solution and the solution is the problem. More colloquially put, humans: you can't live with them; you can't live without out them.

That's not just a statement about weathering and navigating this life. It is a theological truth. When you become a follower of Jesus, you will aspire to be like Jesus, which is the point. You will also begin to have open eyes to see all the people, including Christians who are not living up to those same standards. You will see people that look nothing like Jesus, and it will drive you nuts. The little thing we forget is that we are just like them just with different idiosyncrasies and peccadillos.

Only with the help of my wife and the Holy Spirit was I able to humanize that monster at the beach. He had no kids, so he didn't know how fragile they were. His dogs were his kids, and they could do no wrong in his eyes. There weren't other kids on that beach and maybe his dogs came there all the time. Now, I still think he was wrong, and I still hope that the chocolate on that cake gave that dog extreme digestive issues that the owner had to deal with. But the difference is that moment, when you don't reply-to-all, yell, get violent, abandon all hope or do something you regret.

The short version of this is remembering that we love others because Jesus first loved us. Back in the Garden of Eden, a single message of sin was created, and we have been sending it around the globe ever since, and it has multiplied and grown. Jesus came to show another way and to absorb that tidal wave of sin. He was unjustly accused and illegally put to death, but he took it anyway. I lost cake on the beach. He lost his dignity, he lost flesh off his back, he lost his life, but he did it anyway. He took that message of anger, sin and hatred and received it in his own flesh.

That's when something new started. Loving your enemies. Loving unlovable people. Loving awkward people. Loving smelly people. Loving theologically inaccurate people. Loving people of different worldview and race. Loving people of different orientation and look. Loving all people.

The hardest part about life with others...is, well, the others. I am quite fond of saying, there is an awkward or weird person in every Life Group, and if you don't know who that person is, it's probably you. The problem is the solution and the solution is the problem. I think

God calls us to love other people, so we can learn to be more like him. There is no greater sanctification than sharing your life with imperfect people.

Have I sold it well enough? My goal today was not to blow smoke. I could have gotten up here and told you joining a Life Group or expanding your Christian community will be smooth sailing, but most of you have lived long enough and learned enough to know that simply isn't true. I'm guessing more than a few of you have had Ann Rice type of days. I do want you to know that the alternative is no better because being isolated is not in God's design. You need people to help you up. You need people to keep your body and soul warm. You need people to be your strength.

Joining a Life Group will change your life. I mean that in every sense of the phrase. Somebody might eat your cake, but that same person after some reconciliation and growth and forgiveness might be your number one prayer partner. They might become the shoulder you cry on. Christian community is the number one way that we express and experience God's love. It is the vicarious economy of love that God has designed for all of those in his upside down, wacky, occasionally mean, occasionally insufferable, occasionally awkward family. You are God's gift to one another. I want to remind you that Jesus saw a hurting world complaining to one another about one another. *We can't live with 'em* and that's why he went to the cross and said, "I can't live without 'em."