

How to Handle the Rat Race

1 Tm 6:3-10; Eccl 3:16–4:6 (text)

16 August 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 16:30 p.m.

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The working-climate in which we do our daily jobs to earn our bread & butter is sometimes referred to as the “rat race.”

Why?

Well, because of the stiff competition or rivalry which so often goes with it!

One company tries to outdo another in an effort to stay financially alive or even just for the sake of... doing better!

So is there certainly some stiff competition between, let’s say, the grocery stores in New Zealand like, e.g. Countdown (which belongs to Progressive Enterprises) and Pak ’n Save (which belongs to the Foodstuffs cooperative); or between the hardware stores in New Zealand – between Mitre 10 and Bunnings. And Annette and I once felt that when a friend, the owner of a big Mitre 10 store, once saw that we had bought stuff from the opposition!

All I want to point out is what our text also points out, i.e. that, quite often, competition/rivalry between companies (sometimes even within one-and-the-same company) reaches cut-throat levels!

They’re out to outdo each other – even to destroy each other!

There you have it: the so-called “rat race!”

Perhaps even some of our congregation members have, at some stage, felt the pressures & fierceness of the “rat race.” Perhaps you’re currently experiencing it! After all, my brother & sister, by the very nature of your work, you are more likely than I to suffer from this stiff competition.

Well, under three main points, our text deals with the “rat-race” problem.

Here they are:

1. Three sad realities of the rat race
2. Reflections
3. Three ways of handling the rat race

Three Sad Realities (of the Rat Race)

Well, the **first sad reality** which the teacher observed is the one mentioned in v.16, i.e. that in the law courts – yes, the place where one *expects* to find justice and righteousness – even *there* was wickedness!

My brother & sister, most of us have seen that sculpture with which the Western world identifies its courts of law – the woman, called “Lady Justitia,” holding a set of scales by which she indicates the care the courts take to weigh justly between right & wrong!

¹ I’m greatly indebted to the wonderful exegetical work and great guidance provided by GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2010. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. pp. 88-106

What's more, Lady Justitia is even blindfolded so that she will not be able to see the face of the accused and perhaps be swayed by his/her pretty face or by his/her poverty or wealth!

See?

Of all places, the law-court is THE place where one would expect justice & righteousness!

Yet, says the teacher as he looked to his own times & culture, even *there* (in the court) the bias and unfairness of competition was seen!

Of course, other Old-Testament authors, e.g. Isaiah & Amos, also describe a similar situation!²

Wickedness even in the place of justice!

Well, I cannot speak about fairness (or not) in the NZ courts of law, because I simply do not have the information.

But, look, has reality not shown us some other courts – yes, the courts which are the *boardrooms* of businesses, companies and institutions – these are quite often those human courts where unfair decisions have been (and are being) made (at times, even against staff within one-and-the-same company) in the rat race of this world!?

My brother & sister, have you perhaps been on the receiving end of such wickedness and unfairness!?

Or even scarier: have you perhaps ever been the one who dealt out such unfairness!?

Well, sometimes the name “Rat Race” is too weak to describe the ruthless “dog-eat-dog world,” in which people with power, and without self-restraint, can do illegal things – and if not *illegal* things, then at least *unethical* things.

Yes, all too often, everyone is just looking out for his own interest – just seeking after profit with no/little regard for the needs & rights of other people!

Sad!

Well, that's the first sad reality which the ecclesiast saw – even in courts (places supposed to deal justly) there's wickedness!

Here's the **second sad reality**: Eccl 4:1 – the ecclesiast saw that these oppressors had power. He also saw the oppressed in tears.

Then, twice, he says that these oppressed people had ***no one to comfort them*** (4:1).

Well, the world (in all its history) has seen many such oppressed people – I name just a few:

- The Jews during WW II! Human courts, with great injustice decided over them, and they were oppressed with no one comforting them.

² cf. e.g. Is 5:22-23 ***Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, ²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!*** (ESV).

Amos has many verses describing this sin. Cf. e.g. Am 6:6-7 ***“For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— ⁷ those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned.”***

- Then we look at the current corruption in my country of birth, South Africa, where, after 26 years of the new dispensation, there's still no fair distribution of wealth, and people are murdered in the most gruesome ways, while many corrupt leaders are rolling in embezzled money.

Well, closer to home, some of us might perhaps personally have been on the receiving end of injustice & oppression of some sort – either in the workplace or even social circle or at home. And so, you're very familiar with this second sad reality – yes, that the oppressed were in tears *and there was no-one to comfort them*.

Well, here's the **third sad reality**, which puts them all in perspective: Eccl 4:4 describes how all these injustices – sad realities – come from one thing: *man's envy (rivalry)³ of his neighbour!*

Man is envious – he wants what someone else has; he wants to have better.

And what do you get next? Rivalry, competition, a dog-eat-dog world – yes, the rat race!

Well, having seen these three sad realities, the ecclesiast/teacher takes a break! He has observed, and now he reflects on these three sad things.

And he has several reflections/thoughts on the injustices of this dog-eat-dog world!

Reflections

Here is his **first reflection**:

In 4:2-3 he concludes that those oppressed who have already died, are more fortunate than the oppressed who are still alive. Yet, he thought it's even better not to have been born than to live under injustice and harsh oppression!

Then the teacher had a **second reflection** which brought him great comfort!

Yes, in 3:17 the ecclesiast comforts his heart by reminding himself that God, who has set a time for everything⁴ and every deed,⁵ has also set a time to *judge the righteous and the wicked*.

Judgement by God!! What comforting thought for the oppressed that, one day, God will answer their cries – vindicate them!

My brother & sister, isn't it striking how even a singer of many *secular* songs, Bette Midler, sings,

"From a distance you look like my friend even though we are at war..."

And then she continues,

*"God is watching us; God is watching us; God is watching us from a distance."*⁶

³ Yes, קנאה does mean "ardour, zeal, jealousy," but BDB refers specifically to our verse (4:4) and to 9:6 with the meaning "rivalry."

⁴ The BDB dictionary indicates that the Hebrew word מְצִיָּה, which firstly means "delight, pleasure" also acquired the meaning of "matter" in later OT Hebrew, and "thing" in very late OT Hebrew (i.e. Mishnah).

⁵ מְעִשָּׂה

⁶ "**From a Distance**" is a song written in 1985 by American singer-songwriter Julie Gold. Gold was working as a secretary at the time for Home Box Office and writing songs in her free time. Gold's friend, Christine Lavin, introduced the song to Nanci Griffith who first recorded it for her 1987 album, *Lone Star State of Mind*. It quickly became a favorite of Griffith's fans around the world.

Good words, but let's not fool ourselves: God may *seem* to be watching *from a distance*, yet He is actually watching extremely closely. Look, are His eyes not all-seeing, piercing!!?

Ps 33:13-14 *The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; ¹⁴from where he sits enthroned, he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, ¹⁵he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.*

God observes – sees all people – and... He *will* judge!!!

Now, the ecclesiast is not saying *when* exactly God will judge all people for their actions. Yet other parts of God's Word⁷ – and especially Our Lord Jesus Himself – teach us that, if God's judgement does not *already in this life* come as discipline/punishment (which it may indeed), then definitely at the end of time with Christ's return!

So, the ecclesiast had the comfort that *God will judge the wicked*.

Yet, he also noticed that there's often a *delay* in God's judgement, and this fact brought him to a **third reflection** described in v.18 – that God is *delaying judgement* on these perverters of justice,⁸ because He is actually *testing⁹ them* – testing to see whether *they themselves¹⁰* will recognise what they have become – selfish people who act beastly, and that they are therefore no different to animals!

Indeed, says the ecclesiast already in v.16, if you look at the whole spectacle from an under-the-sun perspective (in other words: from a point of view that ignores God; yes, a *God-less* point of view), then what's the difference between these unbridled rivals and a pack of animals?

After all, these power-and-money-hungry, selfish rivals – they fight like growling dogs over the same bowl of food!

So, says the ecclesiast, just like an animal breathes out his last and then just perishes,¹¹ so will it be with all God-ignoring, ruthless, business rivals. When their short-lived positions

The song also became subject of many interpretations with the most famous being the Bette Midler version (1990).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/From_a_Distance#Bette_Midler_version

⁷ See e.g. Dan 7:9-10 *“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.”*

Also Dan 12:2 *“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”*

Also Acts 17:30-31 *“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*

⁸ This seems to be sound exegesis, for the idea of God's delaying of justice is the only plausible argument to link v.17 and v. 18.

⁹ לְבַרְרֵם is a Qal inf. constr. with pron. suffix 3rd person m.pl. of בָּרַר 1. “Purge out, purify;” 2. “Choose, select;” 3. “Cleanse, make shining, polish;” 4. “Test, prove” (BDB, who chose meaning number 4). I prefer, Delitzsch's translation, “...that God might sift them...” (Delitzsch, s.a.:267). “Sifting” is closer to “purging out, purifying,” i.e. meaning no.1 of BDB.

¹⁰ לָהֶם הִנְיָה לָהֶם literally: “they for them”

¹¹ Also remember Ps 49:12 *“But man, despite his riches, does not endure;*

of wealth & power are over & gone, they – just like the animals – will just perish; just become dust!

What about these selfish people's spirits?

You see, the Ecclesiast knew that, upon death, the spirit of God's loved-ones *returns to God who gave it* (Eccl 12:7).¹²

Yet, regarding those who have lived selfish lives – who did not care what happened to others – is v. 21 not right in asking: *Who knows whether the spirit of* (such a) *man goes upward* – and not perhaps downward like that of an animal!? Who knows whether such people will be in heaven or hell one day?

Well, the expected answer is “No human being can answer this question about these people!”

But what about they themselves?

Would they *themselves*¹³ perhaps see what they have become – mere animals?

And even more important: would they *themselves* then, in time, sense this uncertainty regarding where they will spend eternity?

And would they then turn to God?

Well, these were the ecclesiast's reflections on the three sad realities he had seen.

My brother & sister, I hope that none of us, in the rat race – yes, the dog-eat-dog world – is an oppressor; a twister of justice! Yes, I hope that none of us is on the giving end of oppression!

But if anyone is on the receiving end of injustice – yes, if you are crying out under your oppressor(s) and there's (as v.1) says, “*no one to comfort*” you – remember then that even your *Lord* suffered the injustices of the human courts of the Sanhedrin and of Pontius Pilate!

Remember that even *He* cried from the cross, yet there was *no one to comfort* Him. Even His Father in heaven forsook Him in that hour!

Yet *He trusted* that His Father, despite all the injustices and oppression of human courts, would exalt Him!

And His Father *did* exalt Him, but on God's terms & for His God's glory!

Yes, the Father raised Him from the dead, proving that Christ had completed the task He came for – i.e. making right with God all who would, by grace through faith, receive Him!

So, my brother & sister, are you suffering an injustice with no one to comfort?

Then trust the One who exalted Jesus, that He will do the same for you, His loved-one – but in *His* timing, and on *His* terms & for *His* glory!

Yet, in the meantime – until God vindicates you – how will you handle injustices?

Yes, how shall the Christian live & work in the dog-eat-dog working climate? How will the godly man/woman handle this competition-driven rat race?

Well, that brings us to the third (shorter) point of the sermon...

Three Ways (of Handling the Rat Race)

Eccl 4:5 gives us **the first way** one could possibly react to the rat race: **fold your hands!**

In other words: opt out of the workforce altogether!

he is like the beasts that perish” (ESV).

¹² cf. Eccl 12:6-7 “...*before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*”

¹³ I reckon Aalders (KV 1958:66) is correct in linking v.21 with the words “they themselves” in v.18.

But this can hardly be an option for people of working age!
 If they would opt out of the workforce just to escape the rat race, they'd be silly – stupid, or as v.5 calls them, “fools!”¹⁴
 Yes, copping out, or mere idleness, is not the right way of handling the rat race!
 Is that not also what the author of Proverbs says, “*A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding¹⁵ of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man*”¹⁶
 And that's exactly what v.5 of our text says – just in somewhat stronger language: “*The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh!*”¹⁷ In other words: the fool folds his hands and ruins himself!¹⁸
 Isn't it true? If you don't work, your savings will soon dry up and then you have nothing!
 So, the first way of reacting to the rat race – folding your hands – is clearly not the right way!

Well, the second half of v.6 gives a **second way** to handle the mad competitive working environment: go full-out for it; grab **two fists full!**¹⁹
 In other words: do what children do in a lolly scramble – just greedily grab with both hands!
 Isn't it so that bigger is better? Well, that's what *sinful* man *naturally* thinks!
 Is the flashiest BMW not better than a humble Toyota Corolla!?
 Is a three-story mansion in a flash suburb not better than a modest house in an average neighbourhood!?
 Is a bigger business not promising higher income than a small one?
 Well, that's how man normally – by his *sinful nature* – thinks!
 But look! There's a downside to opting for two fists full! Verse 6 says it comes with lots of toil! Yes, two fists full means work, work, work and no (or very little) rest and family time!
 What's the end of two fists full?
 Verse 6 says, “...*a striving after wind.*”²⁰ In other words: two fists full of... *nothing!*

So, will this second way be a good option?
 Only for those who like stress and rivalry, and can handle a marriage & family break-up!

But here's **the third (and last) possible way** of handling the competition-mad rat race: just **one handful!**²¹

Why?
 Well because it comes, as the ecclesiast says, with rest/quietness, tranquillity; yes, peace of mind!²² “*One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind*” (v.6 NASB).²³

¹⁴ Yes, a לִילְוֹל is a “stupid fellow, a dullard, a fool!” (cf. BDB).

¹⁵ חִבְּקָה n.[m.] a **clasping, folding** of the hands, only cstr. לְיָדָיו לְשִׁבְּבָה Pr 6:10; 24:33 (cf. חִבְּקָה Qal).

¹⁶ ESV of Pr 24:33-34 (virtually the same as Pr 6:10-11)

¹⁷ הַכֹּסֵּי'ל הַחִבְּקָה אֶת-יָדָיו וְאֵכֵל אֶת-בְּשָׂרוֹ:

¹⁸ So the NIV '84

¹⁹ חִבְּקָה dual of חָפֵן “hollow of the hand,” i.e. “two hands cupped.”

²⁰ חִבְּקָה from רָעוּת “longing, striving.”

²¹ מְלֵא כַף

²² נְחִיחַ “quietness; quiet attitude; rest” (BDB)

²³ טוֹב מְלֵא כַף נְחִיחַ מִמְּלֵא חִבְּקָה עֲמַל וְרָעוּת רוּחַ:

And, is this truth not backed up by many other Bible verses?

- ***Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil.***²⁴
- ***Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.***²⁵
- ***Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.***²⁶

And is it not so that this one hand full of tranquillity provides what 3:22 says – happiness? ***“I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot/portion”*** (NASB).

My brother & sister, remember: our Lord Jesus also warns against the desire to grab two handfuls! He says, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”***²⁷

Indeed, through His parables & teachings, Jesus urges us to be rich in God;²⁸ yes, not to worry/chase after earthly things, but to put the kingdom of God first in our lives (and environment)!²⁹

And also our New Testament passage urges us to be content with what we have,³⁰ because ***“those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”***³¹

Well, here is my prayer for you & me:

- That we all will never deal with anyone in an unjust way; never oppress anyone; never seek our own profit without regard for the needs & rights of other people.
- And that we will never throw in the towel, nor go to the other extreme by grabbing two fists full in greed.
- But that we will be content with one handful of tranquillity – and even enjoy that one hand’s worth of assets!
- And whenever we suffer injustice with no one to comfort us (no one listening & no one helping), we will cry out to God who, because of Christ, *will* vindicate His loved ones!

AMEN (2,623 words excluding footnotes)

²⁴ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* (1984). (Pr 15:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁵ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* (1984). (Pr 16:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁶ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* (1984). (Pr 17:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁷ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* (1984). (Lk 12:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁸ cf. the parable of the rich fool – especially Lk 12:21 ***“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”***

²⁹ cf. Mt 6:31-33 ***“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”***

³⁰ Also cf. Heb 13:5 ***“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”***

³¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (1 Ti 6:9). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.