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The Rat Race

Ecclesiastes 4: 4-8

The rat race DIG: What is the meaning of each of the proverbs in verses 5-6? What do they imply is the Teacher's view of labor and competition? What is the status of the man in verse 8? How materially successful is he? At what cost? Why does Solomon see wealth as pointless?

REFLECT: How much does someone's wealth or status affect the way you treat them? Do you presently have "one handful" or "two?" For whom (yourself, God, others) do you toil in the different areas of your life (work, school, home)? How much satisfaction do you get?

The only answer to covetousness is to find our delight in ADONAI.



The rat race: Next I realized, indicates that **Solomon** turns to a new topic, **that all effort and achievement stem from one person's envy of another**. That is, people take a look at their neighbors and work hard to keep ahead of them. That is the rat race. **Solomon** concludes that **this** cycle of **envy** leading to hard work can never be satisfied because it merely leads to ceaseless striving and despair. Once again, **the old king** implies that that kind of lifestyle is **pointless, like chasing the wind (4:4)**.

This second little portrait shows the contrary extreme: the drop-out. **He** scorns the frantic

rivalries of the rat race. But **he** is given **his** real name, **the fool**, for **his** apathy is just as **foolish** as the rat.²⁷⁴ **Fools fold their arms together and eat their own flesh away (4:5).** This brief, sarcastic image has several parallels in the book of **Proverbs (Proverbs 6:9-11, 10:4, 12:24; 19:15, 20:13, 24:30-34)**, and signals that **the Teacher** here quotes **a proverb**. The intention of the proverb is to ridicule **the lazy fool**. Those who **fold their arms** and refuse to work end up with nothing but their own flesh to eat. In essence, they become cannibals of themselves. The implication is that they will kill themselves by starvation. Of course, **Solomon** is being sarcastic and using hyperbole. **He** mocks the lazy. Since they don't raise anything, they must **eat their own flesh**.²⁷⁵

To both of these unhappy ways of life **verse 6** holds out the true alternative. **Better an armload of tranquility than both arms full of effort and chasing the wind (4:6).** The beautiful expression, **an armload of tranquility**, manages to convey the twofold thought of modest demands and inward peace: an attitude far removed from the scramble of the rat race and **the fool's** laziness.

The lonely miser: Then I turned my attention to something else under the sun, cutting **God** out of the picture, **that is pointless**. The next two verses picture the compulsive money-maker as someone virtually dehumanized, for he has surrendered to a mere craving and to the endless process of feeding it. It is the story of **a solitary man** who has **no friend**, no business partner, and no wife. Furthermore, **he** had **neither son nor brother**, relatives who might benefit from his toil through inheritance. **The Teacher** pictures this individual **working endlessly but never has enough wealth**.²⁷⁶

Up to this point, **Solomon** referred to this lonely **miser** in the third person. Suddenly, **he** interjects the first person. **He** identifies **himself** with this **man** and enables us to do the same, by voicing for **him** the question, **"For whom," he should ask, "am I working so hard and denying myself pleasure?"** These words come unannounced, as though to express what **the man's** whole life is saying. **This too is truly pointless, a sorry business (4:7-8).**²⁷⁷

Do not covet: Earlier in his life **Solomon** had written: **A tranquil heart gives life to the body, but envy (Hebrew: *qin'a*) rots the bones (Proverbs 14:30).** Indeed, this is exactly the area about which **the Teacher** is talking about here. **Envy** is a most heinous attitude, since most **envy** of neighbors is due to **covetousness**.

The Torah teaches us: **Do not covet your neighbor's wife, nor desire your neighbor's house, his field, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (Deuteronomy 5:21).** The climax of **the Ten Words (to**

see link click [Bk - The Ten Words](#)) takes us to the heart of the matter, to the source of so much of what the previous **mitzvot** have prohibited, namely, human **covetous** desire. We should remember that **the Ten Words** is not a code of **mitzvot** in the legislative sense. They are never called “laws,” but **words**. **They** set the boundaries of required and prohibited behaviors for **the covenant people** as a matter of fundamental principle. The inclusion of **coveting** shows that covenant loyalty in **Isra’el** went far deeper than external conformity to statutes (Hebrew: *hachukkim*, meaning *to write into law permanently*) and ordinances (Hebrew: *hammishpatim*, meaning *a judgment of the court*). The **God** who claimed **the people’s love** also claimed the rest of **their** affections and desires. **If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar. For the one who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (First John 4:20).**²⁷⁸

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (Exodus 20:17).

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).

In some respects, the tenth and last **mitzvah** is the greatest of the last seven that are more horizontal and describe our relationship with one another. This last **mitzvah** gives the internal aspect because it focuses on the desires of the heart. If we keep this **mitzvah**, all the other **mitzvot** are more easily kept. No system of law has ever had a statute that deals with intent because there is no human way to enforce it. It goes beyond regulating outward acts to requiring us to control our inner thoughts. The apostle Paul said it this way: **We demolish arguments and every arrogance that raises itself up against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey the Messiah (Second Corinthians 10:5 CJB).**

We need victory over our thought life more than anything else. **Covetousness** makes people greedy and causes them to steal. **Covetousness** drives people to sacrifice the lives of others, even to kill, for what they want. **Covetousness** gives rise to that uncontrolled lust that plunges people into adultery. **Covetousness** endangers mutual trust and causes people to lie about themselves and each other to gain money, power, prestige or praise. In short,

this **mitzvah** covers a multitude of sins.

So what does it mean to **covet**? Does it mean to desire something? Absolutely not. Desires are a normal and healthy part of human life. Our desire for food makes us hungry. That's how we maintain our health. Our desire for sex is a vital part of **love** and marriage. This leads to the creation of life. We desire approval and respect. That's what makes us bathe ourselves and brush our teeth. Another legitimate desire is to get along with others for common goals within society. Basically, without desires we wouldn't have life.

So does **coveting** mean desiring something that we don't have? Not exactly. For example, many people attend college because they desire an education, something they don't have. But this is not **coveting**. Almost everything we call progress, improvement or civilization has come from a desire for something we don't have. Desire is even important in spiritual matters. The Apostle Paul said in **First Corinthians 12:31, eagerly desire the greater gifts**. Yeshua also said: **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness**. No, **coveting** is not merely a desire for something, even something we don't have.

Covetousness is a desire that runs rampant over the rights of others and even over one's own reason. It is an out of control desire that will injure or destroy to get what it wants. It's not wrong for a man to want a house, **wife** or a car. But it's wrong for him to want his neighbor's house, **wife** and car. This kind of desire is different because a desire for someone else's belongings plants the seeds of a willingness to lie, steal or kill in order to fulfill that desire. When we feel this type of desire we may even destroy or injure ourselves to get what we want. **Covetousness** is a normal desire gone terribly wrong. It says, "I want this and I will get it whatever it costs me, whatever the consequences." A practical substitute for the word **covet** might be *greed*. It's hard to define, but you know it when you see it.²⁷⁹

Nathan the prophet saw it in King David (**Second Samuel 12:1-13**). **ADONAI** sent Nathan to King David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba, his neighbor, and murdered Uriah, her husband. But instead of confronting him with the actual crimes he had committed, he told him a story. There was a rich man who had a large amount of land with lots of sheep and cattle. One day one of his very best friends came to visit him and he wanted to have a great feast. But he didn't go out and find one of his own sheep to slaughter, he took his sheep from a poor man who had only one little ewe lamb, a family pet. The rich man could have chosen a sheep from his vast herd, but he took the only lamb the poor man owned. Nathan pointed out that David was the rich man, and **covetousness** was David's sin.

When **Yeshua** came **He** taught that the cure for **covetousness** was to surrender to the

Lordship of **Messiah**. **He** wanted change from the inside out. **He** said that wrong ideas and wrong desires lead to wrong actions. No matter how pious our outer life may be, if we yield inwardly to **covetousness**, we are guilty of breaking **the mitzvah**. Only when we first **seek the Kingdom and His righteousness** will everything else be given to us (**Luke 12:31**). To accomplish this change we need a new birth, a conversion, a change of outlook and a change of values. Since **covetousness** is a sin of the inner life, our supreme need is to be set right within our hearts.

Are you master or slave to your desires? Sin always costs you more than you wanted to pay, and takes you further than you wanted to go. The only way to change, to become master, is to surrender to **Yeshua Messiah**. We must find a new **Master** who brings us peace so that we can agree with the apostle Paul and say: **For to me, life is in the Messiah, and death is gain (Philippians 1:21)**. The only answer to **covetousness** is to find our delight in **ADONAI**. So, the B'rit Chadashah teaches us not to **covet** by being content in **Yeshua Messiah**.²⁸⁰

Yeshua summarized the **Ten Words** by condensing them into two. **He** said that **the first and greatest mitzvah** was to **love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37)**. Then **He** went on to say that **the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18; Matt 22:39)**. **He** concluded by boldly claiming that **all the Torah and the Prophets hang on these two mitzvot (Matthew 22:40)**. **Messiah** was saying essentially that **love** for **ADONAI** (that is, obeying the first four of **the Ten Words**) and **love** for neighbor (that is, obeying the last six of **the Ten Words**) form the basic teaching of the TaNaKh.

Messiah understood **love**, the most positive force in the universe, as the total intent and thrust of the **Ten Words**. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger once said much the same thing in his definition of **love** as "the medicine for the sickness of the world." The combination of ingredients in **God's** prescription for human happiness known as the **Ten Words** is guaranteed, if taken, to keep us spiritually strong and healthy. To obey **His** covenant stipulations is to receive **His** bountiful blessings.²⁸¹

At this point **Solomon** seems to pause in **his** search for what is lasting in life, and we can seize our chance of looking back over the stretch of country we have covered with **him** up to now.²⁸²

*Dear Heavenly Father, Praise **You** that as we focus on **Your love**, we are filled with a peace and a sense of gratitude and with the joy of pleasing you. We do live with an urgency, but not the rat race urgency. **Your** children live an urgency of sharing your greatness with the*

world for you will be returning soon. As we look around at all that is happening in the world and how evil is now acceptable, the stage is set for **You** return. What a joy to share that there is a reason for life on this earth - to prepare us for life in heaven. It is so important to make the choice to **love** and follow **You** now.

Though we don't know when **You** will return, we want to be ready. **For this we tell you, by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall in no way precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the blast of God's shofar, and the dead in Messiah shall rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left behind, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air - and so we shall always be with the Lord (First Thessalonians 4:15-17 and First Corinthians 15:51-52).**

Living with **You** forever in heaven is a wonderful thought to live for. **"Behold, the dwelling of God is among men, and He shall tabernacle among them. They shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them and be their God. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).** How wonderful to live where there will never be **crying, dying, mourning** nor **pain**. We look forward to praising **You** throughout eternity! In the holy name of **Your Son** and the power of **His** resurrection. Amen