

"Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" I know I'm stepping on holy ground to disagree with Vince Lombardi, but he was wrong. Part of our DNA because we're made in the image of God is that we're designed for relationship. That attitude, *"Winning is the only thing"* is a relationship murderer. All of us want relationships, to love, be loved. It's why some of you are registered on Match.com or other Internet dating sites. It's why you're putting the schedule on pause to be with family this weekend. It's why we long for a friend, someone to care, to help fill that hole in our soul.

The problem is this. Because of sin, at the same time we're looking for a relationship, we're also competitors. Because of competition, unhealthy competition, we struggle to have relationships. It's that drive to win. As Abby Lee Miller from *Dance Moms* says, *"Second place is the first loser."* Unhealthy competition is the source of all conflict. It's a relationship killer.

Please understand: competition in and of itself isn't bad or wrong. Competition isn't the problem. But in life under the sun, life without God, there's this drive that "winning will make my life meaningful, it will give my life purpose." It's where we gage our work and value. "If I win, if I can be the best, my life counts. Beating you means I'm better than you." It's a way to gain approval and reduce our meaninglessness. You and I compete every day in a 1000 different ways. There's some level of rivalry in all of our relationships, even with our spouse, child, even with our mother-in-law.

The Chinese sign for war is two women under one roof. You'd hope that because two women love the same man (one as a Mom, the other as a wife) there'd be a healthy relationship because of a common love and interest.

Sadly, as we all know that too often that's not the case. Let me share some actual things a mother-in-law said to her daughter-in-law: Sarah Swatowski's mother in law told her, *"I think it's silly that you're going back to school to become a nurse. You know you're not smart enough to work in the medical field."* Madeline Smeery's *"You're lucky my son is such a patient person. If I was him, I would have left you years ago."* April Welch's mother-in-law, *"You should really stop wearing your makeup like that. It makes you look cheap."* My favorite is Elizabeth Johnson's, *"I don't know why you cut your hair so short. It just makes your head look bigger than it already is."* Wow!

What's at the bottom of it? Unhealthy competition and it permeates all of our relationships. It's like the guy who was trying to find the right girl to marry. He finally found one, brought her home but his mom didn't like her. So he found another one. Mom didn't like her either. Finally, he went out and found one exactly like his Mom in every way and brought her home...his Dad didn't like her. Competition complicates relationships.

We're working our way through an Old Testament of wisdom, Ecclesiastes, *What's the point?! Is there purpose, meaning to life? King Solomon – wisest, richest man who ever lived tries everything to find meaning in life without God. He becomes an intellect, gets the best education of all time. It doesn't satisfy. He pours himself into pleasure: sex, drugs, rock and roll, fame, property, luxuries. It doesn't satisfy. He attempts to control his time, to find some sense of justice. That fails. Now he decides that purpose in life must come from success, from being a winner. Sadly again, he strikes out.*

Our culture worships at the altar of success. We're told from the day we arrive on the planet, if we're going to matter, we must win. It starts at recess when teams are picked. No one wants to pick the "losers." It'll cost them the game...after all we're setting world records out here on the playground.

If you type in the word *winning* on Amazon, you'll find over 25,000 books about some form of winning. Everyone loves a winner. Yet, we fail to count the cost to our own souls. Winning doesn't satisfy or give us ultimate meaning. Please turn to Ecclesiastes 4:4-16 (p. 555).

The key words in these 12 verses are "one" repeated five times and "two" four times. This passage is about relationships, unhealthy ones for the most part because of competition. Rivalry never produces companionship. Because of our sin nature, we're in a constant state of competition in our marriage, parenting, with siblings, friends, at work, in our neighborhood, even at church – every single sphere of our lives. But this drive to be number one costs us. It limits us from ever developing into a healthy two, into having a marriage or any other relationships that God desires for us.

Please understand. Solomon is not teaching that we shouldn't do our best or work hard. He's not encouraging mediocrity. But we must come to grips with the fact that winning is limited, particularly when it's motivated by envy. It won't satisfy and ultimately leaves us emptier. It's a bold faced lie that success satisfies and gives meaning to life. It doesn't, never has, never will. The top of the mountain is a very lonely place. That's because...

1. Competition is frequently motivated by envy. Sally: *"Wake up, big brother."* Charlie Brown: *"Wake up?! Wake up?! Why are you waking me up?"* Sally: *"I thought you might like to get an early start."* Charlie Brown: *"For what? I'm not going anywhere."* Sally: *"That's too bad. You could have been the **first** one there."* That might be amusing if it were

not for the fact that this insane desire to "be the first one there" is so personally and relationally destructive. We are driven to be #1. We have an "I" problem.

Where are we going? Western culture always answers this question individualistically rather than relationally. It's about me. *"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"* (vs. 4). What an interesting observation. Solomon says, "As I look at the act of business—buying and selling—as I watch people chasing their goals, as I look at the acceleration of success running its course from the bottom to the top, I observe a severe rivalry, a competitive determination, a dog-eat-dog mentality." The problem here is not the man's *hands*, it's his *heart*. It's not *what* he's doing; it's *why*. Coveting, competition and envy go together. Competition is not wrong or sinful. It's the motive behind it or what's driving it. Please understand that envy is a rebellion against God's will and plan. We don't want others to be more blessed than we are, regardless of God's master plan. Envy is the direct opposite of love because love rejoices in the good fortune of others. Rivalry is the enemy of relationships, community and companionship.

PersonnelToday.com is a resource for HR managers. It reports of a survey on this subject. The caption is *Professional Jealousy Grips the Nation*. The article says, *"Almost nine out of ten office workers suffer from 'professional envy' of colleagues they perceive to have more glamorous or better paid jobs. The survey of 1,500 office workers found more than two-thirds of respondents felt professional jealousy toward friends who made their own working life appear bland in comparison. Almost a third envy a partner or spouse's job, while a fifth feel jealous of a work colleague who is further up the career ladder."*

The very first reason why we live lonely, detached lives is because we're coveters. Some of us are lonely because we despise being around people who have things we don't have. If they're wealthy and we're poor. They're attractive and we're not. They're smart and we're not; or they get a boyfriend or a girlfriend, we get jealous. It's impossible for us, if we have a jealous heart, to rejoice with those who rejoice. Some of you have friendships that went sour because something good happened to you, and your friends were jealous. Or, something good happened to your friend and you got jealous.

We are a people who, oftentimes, Solomon says, *"are motivated to work, to live, not out of glory to God, but out of competition with our neighbor."* Jealousy poisons our relationships. It goes down like this. If you're single and one of your friends gets a love interest, it bugs you. If you're married, you covet if your friend's marriage is going better than yours. Maybe their spouse is nicer. Maybe their kids are more compliant. Maybe your friend gets a better job than you have. Or, they got a new car while you have a clunker. And envy rears its ugly head and contaminates your relationship. Your friendship starts to deteriorate when your friend comes to you with good news saying, "Look what happened!" All of a sudden jealousy is born. You can feel it. You can sense it. Solomon says, "This is one of the primary reasons why people live isolated lives." They're jealous, coveters who chafe at the blessings that God gave someone else.

Envy drives our world. We try to outdo each other, often to our own and others detriment. People will climb over corpses to be #1. *"Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?"* (Prov. 27:4).

So how can God's people function in such a dog eat dog world? Solomon graphically sketches out the **three options**. Since we usually work with our hands, he sketches out these three options with three positions of our hands.

a. Some face life with folded hands. *"The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh"* (vs. 5). People who fold their hands can't use their hands for work. Folded hands are indicative of people who won't work. They opt out of the workforce. That's not a good option. Solomon doesn't call them bums, but "fools." He puts the resulting poverty in graphic terms: *"[he] eats his own flesh."* They self-cannibalize. As there's nothing else to eat, they'll eat up their savings and relationships. Laziness is a dumb choice.

b. Some face life with two open hands. *"two hands full of toil and a striving after wind"* This second one is of hands cupped open, grabbing as much as possible. When kids come for Halloween treats, they often cup their hands together. Two cupped hands can hold much more than one open hand. *"Two hands full of toil and a striving after wind"* (vs. 6). It's Gordon Gekko's, *"Greed is good."* At first sight, *"two handfuls"* looks very desirable. Who wouldn't rather have two handfuls instead of one?

We're taught early that bigger is better: More money is better than less; a Cadillac Escalade is better than a Ford Fiesta; a mansion is better than a shack; a bigger business is better than a little one, a mega church is better than a small church. Yet, there's a downside in living a two handful life. The trailer is *"full of toil and a striving after wind."* To gain those two handfuls, you have to resort to toil without rest: work, work, work, and the outcome is *"chasing after wind."* Solomon says that ultimately, you end up with two handfuls of wind, that is, two handfuls of nothing at all.

c. Some face life with one handful. *"Better is a handful of quietness"* (vs. 6). One handful isn't a large amount. Yet, if it comes with *quiet* or with *"peace of mind"* (NEB), it's very satisfying. It's the way God's people need to work in a dog eat dog world. The book of Proverbs says, *"Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble"*

with it” (15:16). *“Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice”* (16:8). Jesus warned, *“Be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”* (Luke 12:15).

Because our society is driven by envy, we must choose what we’ll work for. Will we fold our hands and opt out of the workforce? Will we cup both hands and become workaholics? Or, will we be content with one handful?

Incidentally, the juxtaposition between verse 4 and 5, is the generational disagreement taking place in homes across America. Verse 4 describes the father, verse 5 his teenage/twenty-something child. The father is completely driven, going, going, going. He says to his twenty-something offspring, *“How long are you going to sit around, playing video games and listening to that dumb music? How long do I have to put up with it? Why can’t you be like me? Get a job. Smell the coffee. Find out what life is all about. Be somebody. Do something.”* His adult child slams the bedroom door and says, *“You can keep it! I’m not interested in being like you. I don’t want to be like you. I don’t like the fact you’re gone all the time, that you’re working all the time. I don’t like what you’re doing to my mother. I don’t like that you’re driven by some envious passion to have more, more, more. I don’t care about keeping up with the Joneses. And I know that I look to you that I don’t care about anything but if you ever really talked to me Dad, you’d find that I care about a lot, and I care about a lot of people, and I care about the oppression that you apparently don’t care about with your investments in the third world. And if you cared about those people, you’d be concerned that those people made a livable wage.”* Then, Dad slams the door, *“Not only do I have a lazy son but I have a Communist for a son. The whole thing is nuts. Those people should be thankful for 73 cents an hour. If we didn’t go down and give them 73 cents, they’d have nothing.”* And his son retorts, *“It’s clear. We’re going to have to go down two different roads Dad. You’re living envy. I’m facing poverty, and both of us are going to be wracked by anxiety.”*

The anxiousness of the envious grasp...the anxiousness of the where’s it coming from question. In a moment of insight Solomon answers, *“Better is a handful of quietness.”* It’s not an argument for doing poorly or accepting mediocrity. It’s an argument about motivation. It’s a comment on the blessing of contentment.

2. Competition frequently ends in loneliness. Jimmy Johnson (**picture**), former head coach of the Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys, earned over \$1 million a year for his efforts and was known for his habit of carrying (and handing out) \$100 bills like they were “ones.” Johnson achieved recognition for his accomplishments, but his focus on money, competition and winning—cost him something, some would say everything. When he took over the Cowboys in 1989, he divorced his wife of twenty-six years, explaining that he needed to focus completely on the Cowboys. His \$50,000 speaking fee dissuades any who’d desire his presence at a social function. His drive to be the best almost completely alienated him from other meaningful relationships. *“I don’t want to make him sound shallow,”* said son Brent, *“but Dad has his work and then his private life. He doesn’t have a whole lot of interests. He’s got football, my brother Chad and me...He’s got a few friends—very few—and he’s got his fish. I like the fish, but not as much as he does. I guess, when you think about it, the fish are easy. They’re not demanding—not like a dog, say, that might need his time or that might want to be petted every now and then.”* That’s success??? What a sad, lonely life.

Is it any wonder that Joan Collins, not exactly a pauper herself, said, *“Loneliness is the universal problem of rich people.”* And Solomon makes a careful observation about the way people live, vss. 7-8, *“Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This also is vanity and an unhappy business.”*

It’s the sad tale of the lonely top dog. The man isn’t mentioned by name, but he lives and works alone. If he has a wife, she’s not mentioned, so perhaps this is the biography of a bachelor. Even if he has a wife, he doesn’t have an heir — a son or a brother to inherit his wealth. He’s only working for himself, not for the blessing or benefit of anyone else. As Solomon looks at the man’s life, he saw that it was vanity from top to bottom. There seems to be no end to the man’s work. Day after day after day he works away, from dawn until dark. Yet the wealthy miser is never satisfied; he always wants more...but for what purpose? No matter what he gains, he has no one to share it with. He’s working too much and too hard to make friends or start a family. Apparently, he never takes the time to stop and ask himself what he’s doing with his life. If he did ask the question, he couldn’t answer it. He’s making costly sacrifices to advance his career, to build up his bank account, yet he never considers whether it’s all worth it. It’s obvious it’s not. His sacrifices are worthless. His possessions will never satisfy his soul. Without anyone to share it with, his life will end lonely and unhappy. It’s a warning for all of us against isolation, selfishness, greed, and a sinful addiction to work. Living and working for ourselves is one of the fastest ways to turn the American dream into a nightmare. We work long and hard to make all of this money to have all these things and in the end, we’re stressed, depressed and need to spend a chunk of change on medication and therapy. That’s dumb.

How many people have a boat they never use because they’re always working? They have golf clubs they never swing because they’re always working. They have kids they’d love to play with but can’t. They’re always working. They have

friends, hobbies, church. They have things they could enjoy but there's no time because they're always working. Why are they working? To make more money. Why do they want more money? To be successful. Solomon says, "*The goal is to enjoy life, not to make money. Money is a means to an end, not an end. We don't live to work; we work to live.*" If our goal is money, we mis-define what it means to be wealthy. A truly wealthy person isn't someone with lots of money. A wealthy person is rich toward God, enjoys life and is content with what God has given him.

So am I saying, "Don't work"? No, not at all. Work hard. Have your work be part of your wealth, but have worship, ministry, friends, family, even hobbies as part of your life, too. That's what gives fulfillment.

3. Competition can kill community. Look at verses 9-12. If you're married, especially if you're happily married, you may think this is about marriage. I don't think so. Marriage is never mentioned in this section of Ecclesiastes.

Do you know someone who fits these examples? By keeping the descriptions general, Solomon invites his readers to think of their own acquaintances and say, in effect, "I know someone like that." As we work through these ask yourself: *Do I have a friend like that?*

God has a better way for us to live and work. We're not designed to live solitary lives. According to this simple comparison, it's better to share your life than to try to make it on your own. We're designed for community. The buddy system isn't just for school field trips; it's God's plan for our life and service to Him. It's been this way since the Garden. God created Adam and said, "*It is not good that man should be alone.*" But it goes against the grain of our individualistic thinking. Togetherness is better than individuality and its companion, loneliness. Connection is better than competition. So here are a number of reasons why partnership is better than isolation.

a. Two are more productive, "*they have a good reward for their toil.*" The man in verse 8 had no one for whom or with whom to work. When two people work together well though, they accomplish more than twice as much as either one could accomplish alone. Whether in the church, workplace, or at home, our work is more rewarding when we share it with someone else. That's why it's important to be involved in ministry with other people.

b. Two can help each other. Two are better than one because they can help each another in times of trouble. "*If they fall one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!*" It's like the commercial of the elderly woman who has an accident at home and says, "I've fallen down and I can't get up!" That happens in life, not just literally but also metaphorically. We get knocked down by life's troubles. Sometimes somebody pushes us. Sometimes we trip over our own two feet. Either way we end up on the ground. We try something and end up failing. Relationships get broken. Financial difficulties make us feel desperate. We fall into some grievous sin. If we're all alone, we may go down and stay down. But we're not alone. A brother or sister in Christ is there to lift us up with words of encouragement, to remind us of the love and mercy of God, and to help us get back up again.

c. Two are more pleasant. "*Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?*" At first it seems like he's talking about the marriage bed, but the implications are much wider. What he has in mind is someone traveling through the wilderness. The desert gets cold at night. If a traveler sleeps alone, he'll freeze, maybe to death. But not if he has a companion! Two of them can sleep back to back, staying warm all night.

I don't like being cold, do you? This isn't just good travel advice, it's wisdom for our soul. There's spiritual warmth travelling through life with other believers. It's too easy to grow cold in the Christian life, to grow numb to the work of God, and eventually to freeze nearly to spiritual death. When we grow cold, the warmth of another believer can warm us up. Prayer of a godly friend, a verse shared from Scripture, an exhortation to turn our hearts back to God — these are sparks that God uses to keep our soul fire burning.

d. Two can protect each other. Cold is not the only danger travelers face. This was especially true in Bible times. There was the danger of being attacked by robbers but two can protect each another. Although "*a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.*" There's safety in numbers. Two people are more than twice as hard to defeat as one. Sometimes all it takes to protect us is one person who's got our back. Even if we don't travel the open road, we still face spiritual danger every day. This world is full of temptation — the desire of the eyes, lust of the flesh, the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Satan prowls around like a lion to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). When it comes to facing spiritual dangers, two are always better than one. If we live lives close with other believers, there's always someone to stand with us in the fight and to cover us with the protection of prayer.

So do you have this? Other than your spouse or your family, who are your friends? Do you have someone? Anyone? How are you doing when it comes to true friends? Sadly, most of us downsize as we age when it comes to friends and our spirit of competitiveness often tragically isolates us.

4. Competition is dangerous. Check out verses 13-16. No wonder Emily Dickinson said, "*Fame is a fickle food upon a shifting plate.*" This is one of the tougher sections in Ecclesiastes. Here's what Solomon is saying. Our society is filled with government, companies and organizations. At the top of these, there's a leader, a CEO, a boss. Here, it's the king.

And this is what happens. The people become unhappy with the quality of their life. When that happens, they try to find a reason. They try to figure out why is it that my life looks like this? Why am I unhappy?

We only have two options when we start to investigate why we're unhappy with the quality of our life. We can put the blame *out* there or we can put the blame *in* here. What's our greatest propensity? Out there. Like Adam in Genesis 3. "Gonna find somebody else to blame for the condition of my life and the unhappiness that I live in." Then, what inevitably happens is that people look at institutions because they're more visible and they blame the leader. "I'm not happy. My life isn't going well – it's his fault. We need a revolution. We need to overthrow the leader. We need a new one." There will then be a movement of complaints and criticism against organizations. They tear down that leader. They tear down that organization. They usually thrust up some young guy who's got all these great ideas. There's naïve optimism and hope, and pretty soon, he's the king. So he puts his plan in place and what happens to him? The next guy comes along and says, "You know what? I'm not happy. It must be that new king. We need another one."

And the cycle goes on and on ad nauseam. It's where children blame their parents. It's where students blame their teachers or principals. It where we blame the government, or bosses, or our church. And rather than asking if the problem is *in* here, we assume that the problem is *out* there.

This is so important. The reason you don't like your job is not just because of your boss. The reason you don't like your marriage is not just because of your spouse. The reason you don't like your family is not just because of your Mom or Dad. The reason that you don't like your social circle is not just because of the most influential person in that social group. The real reason why you and I fall into despair, loneliness and isolation, is because the problem isn't just *out* there...the problem really is *in* here.

Many groups, many people, many movements are held together by what they're against rather than what they're for. All they can agree on is that they don't like that guy. So, they get rid of him and get a new guy. They don't like him. And this cycle keeps on going over and over again. Am I saying that your boss, your Congressman, your parent is perfect? No.

What it does mean though is that you and I need to own the underlying causes that Solomon has just listed out for us, competition and envy. Those aspects of our life are under our jurisdiction. Your life is your life. What you do is under your jurisdiction. You're responsible. And what I want to invite you to do today is to take it back. Stop wasting time blaming institutions or organizations or leaders. When people are dissatisfied, it's easier to blame someone else than it is to own your own participation in that culture and be an agent of change. It's always easier to point fingers and blame than do something and take personal responsibility.

If you're a leader remember that fame and popularity are very fickle. Ask Brett Farve or Michael Jordan. British statesman, Winston Churchill, knew that. After he gave a speech where 10,000 people attended, a friend asked, "Winston, aren't you impressed that 10,000 people came to hear you speak?" Churchill wisely replied, "Not really. 100,000 would come to see me hang."

Conclusion: How do we start breaking free of this spirit of competition that contaminates our relationships? At the beginning today I talked about bad in-law relationships. Let me end with one of my all time favorite in-law stories.

She was a girl from the wrong side of the tracks, a pagan and an idol worshipper. Unfortunately, her in-laws were backslidden believers. They'd given in to doubt, left the Promised Land because of tough economic times, looking for hope and change. Both of their sons married pagans. They got change but not like they expected.

First, the Dad, the patriarch dies. Then, the two sons die, one of whom is married to this girl. God now has Mom's attention. She's lost it all but she still has God, though she's ticked off at Him. She decides to go back home, to the Promised Land. She's so far away from God that she doesn't care about anyone but herself. She's a widow. Her daughter in-laws are widows but they offer to go with her back home. And she tells them to stay in a pagan land, to keep worshipping idols. In other words, she essentially tells them to go to Hell. One goes home to her Mom and Dad and idols, the other one doesn't. God has been working in her heart and even through the clouded testimony of this backslidden mother in-law, she turns to the one true God.

And she tells her mother in-law that she's going with her and she's going to take care of both of them. Her name is Ruth. Her mother in-law's name is Naomi. Ruth's story is just four chapters in your Bible. It's the best chick flick of all time because God Himself writes the happy ending.

Let me share Ruth's words of love and commitment to her mother in-law, "*Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!*" Ruth 1:16-17, *The Message*).

What happened? Ruth trusted and gave her life to God. Because she had a relationship with God first, God gave Ruth and her mother in-law, Naomi, a new family, a community, a whole new country and a heritage that will be remembered

for all eternity. Ruth is one of the heroines of the Bible. She's the great grandmother of King David and is in the line of Jesus. She's one of His ancestors. And all of Naomi's friends said this about Ruth at the end of the story, "*Your daughter-in-law who loves you...is more to you than seven sons.*" God gave her more than she had before because Ruth trusted God and was content with His will. She let God give her what He knew was best.

When you have a vibrant relationship with God, you don't need to compete. You're not jealous of others. You trust God. And you end up not only with a relationship with God, you also have healthy relationships, friends, church, community, purpose and meaning. It starts though where Ruth the Moabitess started, by trusting God first. For us, that's knowing Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. It's running to His cross to be forgiven of our sins.

Do you want to be free? To get out of the frustrating arena of competition? Turn to Jesus. Trust Him and He'll start repairing your world, one relationship at a time. But you must choose to trust Him.