

Ecclesiastes 4:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

Analysis

The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh—after diagnosing envy-driven achievement (4:4), the Preacher addresses the opposite extreme. The Hebrew *kesil* (כֶּסֶל, fool) designates moral and practical stupidity, not mere intellectual limitation. *Chovek et-yadav* (חוּבֶק אֶת-יָדָיו, folds his hands) depicts lazy inactivity—arms crossed in idle refusal to work. The result: *okhel et-besaro* (אֶכְל אֶת-בָּשָׂרָו, eats his own flesh)—self-destruction through sloth.

This vivid metaphor portrays laziness as self-cannibalism: refusing productive work, the fool consumes his own resources and substance until nothing remains. Proverbs repeatedly condemns sloth (6:6-11; 24:30-34). Between envy-driven overwork (4:4) and lazy self-destruction (4:5), verse 6 will offer the balanced alternative: peaceful sufficiency. Paul commanded, 'If any would not work, neither should he eat' (2 Thessalonians 3:10), condemning parasitic idleness.

Historical Context

Agricultural societies required consistent labor for survival—planting, tending, harvesting demanded diligent work. The lazy person who 'folded his hands' during planting season would literally starve during winter, 'eating his own flesh' as resources depleted. Ancient wisdom literature universally condemned laziness (Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope; Mesopotamian wisdom). Israel's agrarian economy provided no safety net for voluntary idleness—Torah mandated provision for genuinely unable (widows, orphans, disabled) but not the willfully lazy. The

New Testament church confronted idle busybodies who refused work while expecting communal support (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. In what areas might you be 'folding your hands'—avoiding necessary work and thereby consuming your own resources and future?
2. How does this verse challenge contemporary attitudes that romanticize leisure while denigrating productive work?

Interlinear Text

בָּשָׂרָה: אַתְּ וְאַכְלֶתֶת לְאַתְּ כִּי כְּסִיל
his own flesh: at and eateth ac'l et l' at ki k'sil
The fool foldeth his hands and eateth his own flesh
H3684 H2263 H853 H3027 H398 H853 H1320

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 9:20 (Parallel theme): And he shall snatch on the right hand, and be hungry; and he shall eat on the left hand, and they shall not be satisfied: they shall eat every man the flesh of his own arm:

Job 13:14 (Parallel theme): Wherefore do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in mine hand?

Proverbs 20:4 (Parallel theme): The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.

Proverbs 13:4 (Parallel theme): The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat.

