

Proverbs on Diligence, Laziness, and Work

May 6th, 2018

Big idea: Diligent work is part of human flourishing in God's world.

Introduction

In Proverbs 3 a few weeks ago we looked at the concept of shalom, God's peace in human flourishing.

Proverbs 3:1-2 My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; ² For length of days and years of life And peace they will add to you.

We get glimpses of shalom in this life as we follow God's wisdom, but ultimate fulfillment is after this life. Right now we have plenty of sorrow, hardship, and suffering mixed in.

If Proverbs contains instructions for wise living in God's world, we shouldn't be surprised that many passages deal with diligence, laziness, and work.

A few years ago when I taught a series on the book of Proverbs in the Bible I started my study time by taking several hours going through the entire book of Proverbs and categorizing the verses by different categories.

Speech (47), Fear of the Lord (17), Conflict (27), parenting and family (31), money (36), pride/humility (19)

One category surprised me – laziness and diligence (33)

1. Why work:

- a. We create because we are made in the image of our Creator.
 - i. Before people rebelled against God and sin entered the world and the curses that accompanied by it, people worked. The work was physical and intellectual
 1. **Genesis 2:15** Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.
 2. **Genesis 2:19** Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.
 - ii. Work became harder after the fall as weeds continually crept in and every co-worker is a sinner. But work preceded sin.
 - iii. Work was part of being an image bearer of God – He is a creative creator and we mirror that as we create and bring order to God's world. That image was marred by the fall but not obliterated. It still persists in every person.
 1. When we complete a job well done there is a sense of satisfaction and joy.
 - a. A vibrant green lawn that is freshly cut.
 - b. A section of code that runs perfectly
 - c. A kitchen counter covered in fresh loaves of bread
- b. We work as an application of the commandment to love our neighbors.
 - i. **Matthew 22:39** "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'
 - ii. **Ephesians 4:28** He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need.
 - iii.
- c. We work because it is the normal means of providing for our basic necessities.

- i. **Proverbs 12:11** He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, But he who pursues worthless things lacks sense.
- d. *Proverbs introduces us to a character who does not work well or consistently.*
 - i. He is known as the sluggard. One writer compared the sluggard to cold syrup being poured out of a jug.
 - ii. The sometimes humorous descriptions of a sluggard though carry a serious warning from a kind God. You are made to work and you thrive when you do work but failing to work diligently often catches up to a person to their harm.
- 2. A sluggard will not finish what he starts.
 - a. **Proverbs 26:15** The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.
 - b. **Proverbs 12:27** A lazy man does not roast his prey, But the precious possession of a man *is* diligence.
 - i. He gets out, hunts, kills but doesn't go to the effort to cook it and make use of it.
 - c. Illustration – man in H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* who has grand plans about a new civilization of man dwelling in the undergrounds. He casts this vision in compelling terms but the main character of the story soon learns that he has only worked a couple hours on implementing it and then runs off to relax. He says that he immediately realized what sort of man he is.
- 3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.
 - a. Sleep is good and part of being human in contrast to God.
 - i. **Psalms 121:2-4** My help *comes* from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. ³ He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴ Behold, He who keeps Israel Will neither slumber nor sleep.
 - ii. It is a daily reminder of our weakness in comparison to God. The toughest among us still collapses into a vulnerable heap for hours at a time.
 - iii. Sleep is a daily reminder of our frailty before an unsleeping God.
 - 1. "Sleep is a daily reminder from God that we are not God. Once a day God sends us to bed like patients with a sickness. The sickness is a chronic tendency to think we are in control and that our work is indispensable. To cure us of this disease God turns us into helpless sacks of sand once a day." – John Piper
 - iv. **Ecclesiastes 5:12** The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.
 - b. **Proverbs 19:15** Laziness casts into a deep sleep, And an idle man will suffer hunger.
 - c. **Proverbs 20:13** Do not love sleep, or you will become poor; Open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with food.
 - d. **Proverbs 26:14** As the door turns on its hinges, So does the sluggard on his bed.
 - e. **Proverbs 6:6-11** Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, ⁷ Which, having no chief, Officer or ruler, ⁸ Prepares her food in the summer And gathers her provision in the harvest. ⁹ How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰ "A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest "-- ¹¹ Your poverty will come in like a vagabond And your need like an armed man.

- i. “A little . . .” He does not commit himself to refusal but deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away. (Kidner)
 - ii. Perhaps self-justification or self-deception . . . “I’ll just sleep a little while. I won’t sleep all day and I certainly won’t fail to prepare” . . . but in the end it builds and cascades upon itself and leads to ruin as the minutes become days, the days become weeks, and the weeks become seasons of life.
 - iii. The poverty comes upon like a vagabond – an unpredictable, dangerous robber that appears suddenly.
 - iv. ***What all can we learn from ant school?***
 - 1. The ant described is probably the harvester ant which are abundant in the area of Israel. They store grain in their nest to eat later.
 - 2. Inner motivation – no chief, officer, or ruler – no one making the ant work.
 - 3. Hard work
 - 4. Future preparations
4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.
- a. **Proverbs 10:4-5** Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich. ⁵
He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully
 - i. Harvest time depends on the climatic conditions of a particular area – Jordan valley – barley harvest begins at the beginning of April, coastal plain, 8-10 days later; mountains, toward the end of April. Wheat harvest – 2 weeks later. (waltke)
 - ii. Between barley and wheat the harvest would last about 2 months
 - iii. “Make hay while the sun shines”
 - b. **Proverbs 12:11** He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, But he who pursues worthless things lacks sense.
 - c. **Proverbs 28:19** He who tills his land will have plenty of food, But he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty.
 - i. “tills” includes everything necessary to help the land produce – fertilizing, cultivating, tilling
 - ii. “worthless things” or empty things are those that don’t involve hard work but are “get rich quick” schemes or gambling.
 - d. **Proverbs 20:4** The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, So he begs during the harvest and has nothing.
 - i. There was only a small window of time when a farmer could plow. It corresponds to early December on our calendar. It had to be after the rains started so the ground would be soft but if they waited too long they would miss the window to be able to plant.
 - ii. This was the only time plowing really mattered. If he failed to work then, when harvest came and he should be overflowing with produce, he will be begging for food.
 - e. **Proverbs 14:23** In all labor there is profit, But mere talk leads only to poverty.

- f. What does diligence look like in different stages of life and for different vocations?
 - i. What does it look like for a middle schooler? College student?
 - ii. Farmer? IT professional? Engineer? Writer? Cook? Janitor? Teacher? Nurse?
 - iii. Retiree? Stay at home mom with a new baby? With school age kids? As an empty nester?
- g. Does the Bible teach that poverty is always the result of laziness or failure to work?
 - i. No, although that is primarily the type of poverty over which the individual has some type of control.
 - ii. However, it also has strong warnings for those who mock or oppress the poor. It uses a different series of words that are translated “poor” or “needy” in our English Bibles to describe those who are poor by virtue of circumstances beyond their control. The Lord shows a special concern for them.
 - iii. **Proverbs 14:21** He who despises his neighbor sins, But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.
 - iv. **Proverbs 14:31** He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.
 - v. **Proverbs 22:9** He who is generous will be blessed, For he gives some of his food to the poor.
 - vi. **Proverbs 31:20** She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy.

5. A sluggard is an **irritation** to those who depend on them.

- a. **Proverbs 10:26** Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, So is the lazy one to those who send him.
 - i. Both the vinegar and the smoke are irritants when there should be something pleasant or helpful. The person may be expecting wine but instead their mouth is met with acidic vinegar. The cook is expecting the helpfulness of the wife but instead is merely blinded by the smoke.
 - ii. In the same way, a messenger sent with an important word should be helping but instead he proves to be an irritant because he is unreliable.
- b. **Proverbs 18:9** He also who is slack in his work Is brother to him who destroys
 - i. Brother implies they accomplish the same end. In other words, being slack in working is similar or the same as being destructive. They cause the same result.

6. A sluggard may **crave** more but doesn’t follow through to get it.

- a. **Proverbs 13:4** The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, But the soul of the diligent is made fat.
- b. **Proverbs 21:25-26** The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, For his hands refuse to work; ²⁶ All day long he is craving, While the righteous gives and does not hold back.
 - i. He wants things, he craves things but he will not work for them.
 - ii. The contrast with the righteous is that he gives rather than merely craves to get.
- c. **Proverbs 15:19** The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns, But the path of the upright is a highway.
 - i. The way of laziness is a hard road
 - ii. Impassable obstruction, an obstruction that pricks and pains

7. A sluggard makes excuses to avoid things he doesn't want to do.
- a. **Proverbs 26:13** The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!"
 - b. **Proverbs 22:13** The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets!"
 - i. The implication is that there is not a literal lion outside and the person will not be killed
 - ii. This is an excuse not to leave the house because he doesn't want to leave the house and work.
 - iii. This points a finger at the man or woman who looks for excuses not to work rather than simply getting the work done.
 - iv. "The diligent man or woman can always find a reason to work, but the sluggard always has an excuse for not working." Wiersbe
 - v. Matthew Henry commentary – what he really dreads is the street, the work! What he pretends to dread is the lion.

Conclusion

Imagine you are hiking in the woods and come to a fork in the trail with two options. You can't quite tell what they are like but you see an experienced, rugged looking backpacker come walking back. He sees the choice before you and, based on experience on both trails he says, "Oh, you definitely want this path. The view is better, it's easier walking as a whole, although there are hard parts in both. This other path is full of thorns."

Would you say, "Quit telling me how to live! I'll hike where I want to hike!" Or would you be grateful for the counsel?

Proverbs does this not with a hiking trail but with life. God is offering wisdom not to control you but to bless you, not to stifle you but to lead to human flourishing for His glory and your good.

We need to teach on down-to-earth topics like this because God's Word clearly does. But the danger is that someone could grab on to this, be a diligent, faithful worker, and yet never grab hold of Christ.

Romans 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

John 6:28-29 Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

Transition to communion

The good thing about having communion at the end of the service is that it helps me keep the gospel in mind even as we study a topic as earthy as work, diligence, and laziness.

1 Cor. 11:23ff

Looked to the past – saving event of the cross

Present – saving relationship with Christ

Future – return of Christ



Proverbs 3:1-2 My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; ² For length of days and years of life And peace they will add to you.

1. Why work:

- a. We create because we are made in the image of our Creator.

Genesis 2:15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

Genesis 2:19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.

1. Why work:

- b. We work as an application of the commandment to love our neighbors.

Matthew 22:39 "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'

Ephesians 4:28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.

1. Why work:

c. We work because it is the normal means of providing for our basic necessities.

Proverbs 12:11 He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, But he who pursues worthless things lacks sense.

2. A sluggard will not finish what he starts.

Proverbs 26:15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.

Proverbs 12:27 A lazy man does not roast his prey, But the precious possession of a man *is* diligence.

3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.

Psalms 121:2-4 My help *comes* from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. ³ He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴ Behold, He who keeps Israel Will neither slumber nor sleep.

3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.

“Sleep is a daily reminder from God that we are not God. Once a day God sends us to bed like patients with a sickness. The sickness is a chronic tendency to think we are in control and that our work is indispensable. To cure us of this disease God turns us into helpless sacks of sand once a day.”
– John Piper

3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.

Proverbs 19:15 Laziness casts into a deep sleep, And an idle man will suffer hunger.

Proverbs 20:13 Do not love sleep, or you will become poor; Open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with food.

Proverbs 26:14 As the door turns on its hinges, So does the sluggard on his bed.

3. A sluggard sleeps when he should work.

Proverbs 6:6-11 Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, ⁷ Which, having no chief, Officer or ruler, ⁸ Prepares her food in the summer And gathers her provision in the harvest. ⁹ How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰ "A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest"-- ¹¹ Your poverty will come in like a vagabond And your need like an armed man.

4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.

Proverbs 10:4-5 Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich. ⁵ He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully

4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.

Proverbs 12:11 He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, But he who pursues worthless things lacks sense.

Proverbs 28:19 He who tills his land will have plenty of food, But he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty.

4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.

Proverbs 20:4 The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, So he begs during the harvest and has nothing.

Proverbs 14:23 In all labor there is profit, But mere talk leads only to poverty.

4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.

Proverbs 14:21 He who despises his neighbor sins, But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.

Proverbs 14:31 He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.

4. A sluggard fails to work diligently when it is needed and so suffers in the end.

Proverbs 22:9 He who is generous will be blessed, For he gives some of his food to the poor.

Proverbs 31:20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy.

5. A sluggard is an irritation to those who depend on them.

Proverbs 10:26 Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, So is the lazy one to those who send him.

Proverbs 18:9 He also who is slack in his work Is brother to him who destroys

6. A sluggard may crave more but doesn't follow through to get it.

Proverbs 13:4 The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, But the soul of the diligent is made fat.

Proverbs 21:25-26 The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, For his hands refuse to work; ²⁶ All day long he is craving, While the righteous gives and does not hold back.

6. A sluggard may crave more but doesn't follow through to get it.

Proverbs 15:19 The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns, But the path of the upright is a highway.

7. A sluggard makes excuses to avoid things he doesn't want to do.

Proverbs 26:13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!"

Proverbs 22:13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets!"

Romans 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

John 6:28-29 Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."