



Proverbs 6:1-11

The Sluggard

6/25/2023

We are going to Proverbs 6 today.

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

That’s the theme that runs through Proverbs. If we are going to be wise, if we are going to be able to apply knowledge and know how God’s world works, we need to start with God.

Wisdom recognizes that there is a sacred order to things, that God is at the center of all things and the foundation of all things, and then wisdom works to build “on earth as it is in heaven.” It creates greater stability by building order here in light of the sacred order. It learns that God made the world a certain way, and then orders its life in that way.

And one of the key areas of life that we need to become wise in is God’s purpose and design behind our work.

Whether we are paid for our work through our jobs and careers or not paid for our work like through parenting or serving the community or church, God has a design for work that the wise will learn and conform themselves to.

A lost doctrine in the church for a long time was the doctrine of vocation - the teaching on what work is even for. I spent years around a number of people who thought that to give your life to full-time Christian ministry was the only holy work, while other jobs just existed to earn a paycheck and support ministries.

The real holy people, they thought, were the pastors and missionaries. Everybody else just worked for a buck and was a sell-out of some sort. And many lived with a sense of guilt that their work in the trades or in finance or in medicine was somehow less sacred, less important, less holy than pastoral work.

Now I've seen less of that recently. (In fact, every once in awhile I'm having the make the case that pastoral ministry is legit holy work - this is good too!) But I believe there is a big gap in our understanding of the way God made the world when it comes to work.

In Proverbs 6, where we will be for a couple of straight weeks, there is a list of some of the foolish people who oppose themselves to God's order for things and, as a result, bear bad fruit. And right after the person who becomes surety (pursues easy money without working for it), God points out the sluggard, or the lazy person:

Proverbs 6:6–11

- [6] Go to the ant, O sluggard;
consider her ways, and be wise.**
- [7] Without having any chief,
officer, or ruler,**
- [8] she prepares her bread in summer
and gathers her food in harvest.**
- [9] How long will you lie there, 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] and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.**

So Solomon does what he often does: he looks at the natural world, and draws from it wisdom. And in verse 6 he urges the sluggard, or the lazy person, to look at a colony of ants to learn wisdom for work.

What wisdom does he want the lazy person to learn?

- [7] Without having any chief,
officer, or ruler,**
- [8] she prepares her bread in summer
and gathers her food in harvest.**

In Palestine, there's a common kind of ant called the harvester ant that stores up grain in its nest all summer long to feed the whole colony for the year.¹

¹ Waltke 336.

And Solomon says to the lazy person: look how the ant works hard to provide for its needs. And it doesn't do so because there's a chief making it do so, it doesn't do so because someone on the outside is organizing all of its work. With no chief, it engages in productive labor. By nature, it gets up and gets stuff done.

So wise people, like the ant, don't need someone to tell them to work. They don't work because someone is making them.

They work, like the ant works, because it is in the nature of wise people to give their days to productive labor.

Wise people know something about the way the world works. And that is that:

Proverbs 12:11 Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread...

The way the world normally works is that if we work hard, good things will come of it, namely provision for our families.

God made the world to be worked. And hard work produces good.

Proverbs is a book about the way God's world works, and to really understand how it works, knowing the story of how it all started is essential, so in Genesis - the book of beginnings, we have the origin of work:

Genesis 2:7 7 then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

So God has created the world, and then God gets his hands dirty - and works the ground to form man out of the dust of the ground. God is working in the dirt to make something come of it.

And if a holy God works the ground, we know that work is not a sentence or a penalty for sin. Otherwise God wouldn't do it. At the beginning of the Bible, you see God working.

So there must be something fundamentally good about work. So God works the ground and makes man. And then:

Genesis 2:8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. **Skip to 15:**

Genesis 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

So before there was any sin, before there was any need for punishment - God made us workers. In paradise. This is our ideal state and the ideal life for us - what we were made for. We were given work to do.

So work is a good thing. An unfallen world would not have been a world free from work - it would have been a world with lots of work happening, the creation being subdued, economies being formed, new products being developed, technology being created, merchants finding pearls, gold being mined, children being raised - all of which takes hard work, and all of it would have happened in paradise even if there hadn't been sin.

So we weren't designed to just sit on a beach all the time - we were designed for 1 day in 7 of doing that. But we were made to do productive and fruitful things with the other 6.

So when you clock in at your job, don't quietly curse Adam. Work was God's design, it is a blessing, it is part of who we are and what we were meant to do.

And we also know this because when Jesus came, he worked. He didn't come just doing miracles. He came as a carpenter. He worked too.

So why is my job so awful?

Adam and Eve fell, and part of the punishment was a big change in how their jobs go:

Genesis 3: 16 To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." **17** And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

So childrearing becomes hard. And Adam's job becomes hard - now there are thorns. It's not just "Dress and keep the garden, work the ground." It's "do all of that - but the ground is going to fight you." Just as Adam fought against God by disobeying, God causes the ground to fight back against Adam and disobey him- and work becomes hard, painful, and thorny. Eve's good work of child-rearing becomes hard. Work is good, but it has been tainted with a curse.

So you're planting your lawn on soil that wants to produce creeping charlie and clover. You're building your homes on soil with radon in it and with materials that decay and corrode and cement that doesn't set properly. You're opening your business in the face of a difficult government and customers who are prone to suing you. You're cleaning an office building where slobs work and you'll be doing it again next week. You're repairing cars that rust and fall apart. You're raising kids that don't always respond to correction. The ground fights back. But the work underneath it all is still good.

Jobs are hard because of the curse, but they are noble by design.

And this is true of nearly every job. There are some jobs that are dishonest that we shouldn't do, jobs that are illegal, jobs that do harm. We shouldn't sell crack, we shouldn't be hit men.

We shouldn't be involved in shady practices or dishonest sales work. But if the job isn't immoral, it has some dignity. Whether it is considered menial or important by the world around us - it all has dignity.

And we should all work.

Now keep in mind that when Proverbs says we should be diligent and diligence produces wealth, money is not the only form of wealth, and shouldn't be the ultimate thing Christians are after anyways. So much of our work doesn't produce financial wealth - but godly kids, a healthy church community, a connected neighborhood, are all the product of hard work.

But the principles of diligence apply to all of us - we should all be diligent, whether our work is paid or not.

And if we fail to be diligent and work hard, we can expect to not have our all we need:

Proverbs 24 30 I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, 31 and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. 32 Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.

So he goes by the field of the lazy guy, it's a mess, it's not producing a crop. And he tells his son to learn from that guy's mistake.

For the guy who won't work - there isn't any food. This guy had a field, but instead of doing the hard work of fighting back thorns and thistles and working in the hot sun, he is inside perfecting his world of warcraft skills, changing his facebook profile picture every day, and sleeping until noon.

And because he lacked sense, he didn't see the consequences coming. But they came:

Proverbs 24: 33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, 34 and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

So this guy was lazy, and as a result he became poor.

So the teaching of Proverbs is that if you are lazy, you will become poor.

(It is not that all of the poor are lazy - let's catch this - Jesus was poor and not lazy. You can be generous in your giving and it will mean you have less money. Christians should give generously to our church and to meet needs around us - and it usually means we have less than we could, that we feel it. Laziness isn't the only reason people become poor - there are good non sinful ways to become poorer.)

But laziness is a road poverty.

And diligence - hard, smart work, will produce an abundance:

Proverbs 10:4 A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

Now immediately, if you're engaged here, you're thinking of the exceptions. There are rich lazy people who've never worked a day in their lives. We are familiar with trust fund kids who had rich parents but don't ever work, but stay rich. The allowance from mom and dad never goes away, and they stay lazy.

And we probably all know some people who are very hard workers, but fall on hard times. Their industry goes away and they lose their jobs, or they get sued in a frivolous lawsuit and go broke, or they get hit with giant medical bills that they never recover from.

But Proverbs speak in generalities.

So we have this general teaching in Proverbs that if you're lazy, you'll go broke. If you don't work, you can expect the results of not working.

And laziness doesn't only cause problems for us as individuals, it is a problem for the whole community.

Proverbs 10 5 He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.

A dad is ashamed of a lazy son. And that's because someone who isn't diligent ends up being a drag on everybody else. We all have to do something productive with our time, and if we don't, others have to do it for us. And when we could work but don't, that's a shameful thing.

Now in our church, I know there are people who legitimately can't work. And the Bible calls us to bear one another's burdens - that's not a shameful thing if you can't pull your weight now.

As a church we don't let any member starve. And nobody who is diligent but falls on hard times will not be cared for by our church. So don't be ashamed to ask - it is a blessing to help people who need it. We do this quietly behind the scenes all the time - it's a non-negotiable. It's one of the reasons we all give to church, so we can help those who are legitimately in need. So there is no shame in asking for help.

But it is a shameful thing to be a drag on a community because you lack diligence. We all consume the resources of every community we are part of, and Bible teaches that it is a shameful thing to not contribute as much as we consume because we are lazy.

We are supposed to be dependable contributors, and when we aren't dependable and don't contribute, it frustrates everyone:

Proverbs 10:26 Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.

You've sat around a campfire when the wind shifts and the smoke blows in your eyes. Its frustrating and you have to move to get away from it. A lazy person frustrates those who depend on him.

Christians are supposed to be reliable contributors to our communities - whether to our family or society or church community. But when we become consumers and try to put in as little as possible and get out as much as possible, we're like smoke in the eyes.

We see this pretty often here when people make demands of the church, but don't put in the amount of service it would require everyone to put in for us to be able to meet those demands:

"I want a church where I can rely on people to volunteer to teach my kids classes. But I won't be a reliable volunteer anywhere in the church.

I want to hear teaching, and worship, and receive counseling, and have this place to invite friends, and see missionaries go out, and community formed, churches planted, but I won't give or serve.

I want to be loved and served, but I won't love and serve others. It's all the same principle - we're part of a community that we're all supposed to build together.

And its a shameful thing to consume more than you give *when you could give more*.

Also, we have to remember that laziness doesn't always look like a guy who sleeps 12 hours per day, wakes up, and hits the hammock. It can, but not always.

There are actually a few forms of laziness that Proverbs presents:

1) What we normally think of - laying around lazy:

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

A door hangs on its hinges and swings back and forth, but never really goes anywhere. Some lazy people just lay around, and don't go anywhere today, and don't go anywhere with their lives.

They don't believe that there should be any work in their lives, they don't want to do what is required to eat, so:

Proverbs 26:15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

He wants to eat, but won't do what you have to do to eat, which is work.

So that's the kind of laziness we're familiar with.

But laziness can look much more busy and active. We have to avoid the trap of thinking we're not lazy because we're very busy, because we can be busy in all the wrong things.

2) Another is playing it too safe - Where out of a hyper-concern for safety, we don't take the risks required to go to work, to attempt hard things, to start a business, to sign up for the ministry. We try to protect ourselves:

We protect our energy too much.

We protect our time and margin too much.

We look for reasons that we shouldn't act:

Prov 26 13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!"

You going to work today? No. Why? Lions in the road. Well sure, sometimes, but everybody else is going to work. Not me. I don't want to risk it.

We can be so afraid of risking our comforts that we don't act. And we'll blame the lions - but there's always a chance that there's a lion in the street, and we still have to work.

So they're laying around lazy, there's playing it too safe lazy, there's also excuse making lazy:

3) Excuse Making Lazy:

Proverbs 26:16 16 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

He's always too smart to listen to anybody, and criticizes those who do work instead of working himself. I won't work a job like that guy, because that's a 9 to 5 desk job and it's boring - he doesn't know how to live. I won't work a job like him, because it's menial and you can never move up there. I have a college degree, I'm not going to get that job for less pay than I'm worth - for some reason he's too good to work, too good to listen to anyone, and spends time and energy justifying his laziness.

So laziness can be laying around, risk-avoidant, excuse making. Or just very active in pursuing things that don't produce fruit:

4) Busy With Fruitless Pursuits

Proverbs 12 . 11 Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

We can be very busy with less important, less fruitful things: working on the easy stuff, the fun stuff, very very busy with full days and weeks. But lazy, because we aren't doing the hard things that could produce the best for our neighbor, our church, our family, or our company.

But there is plenty of bread for those who work hard at the right things.

We can be confident that God made the world to be worked, and when we go out and do holy work, we can expect God's blessing and increase, normally.

And you might say, "Yeah, but that's church work - God blesses that stuff. I'm in business. I'm a carpenter. I'm an entrepreneur. I can't do my work with that same faith that God will bless it.

Yes you can. All work that you're made to do is spiritual work. People are praying, "Give us this day our daily bread," and by doing an honest job you're contributing to God's answer of that prayer.

Someone prays for food - and God blesses the work of the farmer who plants the wheat, the guy who builds the tractor to harvest it, the guy who sells the steel to build the silo to store it, the guy at the bakery, the guy who plows the roads to transport it, the truck drivers, the people at Wegmans selling it - he blesses all of it.

Martin Luther told the milkmaids to be encouraged that their work is spiritual because when they milk the cows, God is milking the cows through them.

Another guy came up to him and said, "I want to serve the Lord with my life - what should I do?"

Luther asked, "What do you do?"

He said, "I'm a cobbler - a shoemaker."

Luther replied, "Then make a good shoe and sell it at a fair price." (At least according to legend he said this.)

We are to be diligent at whatever our hands find to do, and then use all of the influence your honest hard work gives you to make a great name for Jesus in your industry, use your wealth to plow back into pushing darkness around you.

If you can do your job well, always work on doing it better, build your skills, work hard, you gain huge influence for the Gospel of Jesus.

Proverbs 22 29 Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.

How do I know what I'm supposed to do?

What would you like to do? Is it a real good you can do for others (or is it just for you?) What gifts do you have that could be used? What skills and training have you already received? Where's your best track record? What opportunities are in front of you?

What do people who know you well and who will be honest think? Wife? Small group? Pastors? Is there a real need for that skill?

Then take some risks, and work hard, trusting God for the necessary blessings.

And this is where we get to the heart of laziness: we don't use work the right way because we don't trust God.

There are 2 abuses of work:

1) Overwork, which proverbs rarely addresses but the Bible does. This is where we are driven by work, we must succeed, we get our identity from our success at work, we sacrifice our family for our work. We just can't rest.

2) Laziness

But both of these come from not trusting in God and his goodness.

We are lazy, often, because we don't have much hope that life could be any different. We don't believe that God will bless us. I don't pour energy into my children because I know I'm sinful, and why would God bless my efforts - it's futile, they'll eventually just rebel. I don't want to take a risk because I'm not the kind of person God blesses. He knows my heart - and it's not good.

I really just deserve frustration - I'm so sinful, why would God bless me. And Proverbs says this:

Proverbs 15: 19 The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway

This says if you're upright, you can expect God to bless you. But if not, just thorns.

And I'm not upright.

Why would God bless my work? My kids? My church endeavors?

I'm not worthy of it, things don't go well for me. I deserve the thorns.

True.

But there was one who didn't.

And He took the thorns.²

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we confess that often we try to subvert your divine order of things by taking an easy way out. Instead of working where you've placed us, we drift toward laziness - through giving ourselves to unimportant or unfruitful things, through inaction, and through taking the easy way. You've given us so much to do, and we often don't do it.

Jesus, thank you for your intense and perfect work for us. You modeled rest, you modeled celebration, and you modeled intensely hard work. But your model wasn't enough for us - we needed a redeemer. So you went to the cross where, by the works of your hands, we can be saved. You took the crown of thorns we deserve so we can live hopefully.

Spirit, remind us of how for us you are in Christ so that we engage - so that we work to build homes and churches and businesses and careers and children and neighborhoods. You've give us so many good things to do, help us to see what's important and fruitful, and so it in response to your Gospel.

Assurance:

Titus 3:5 "he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Discuss Proverbs 12:11. Is it your experience that hard work produces plenty? Why or why not?
- 2) Discuss the different forms of laziness (pages 8-10 of this manuscript.) Which is most tempting for you?
- 3) How are overwork and laziness driven by similar hearts? What is the answer to that?

² This is Tim Keller's observation.

4) How does confidence in the Gospel enable hard work?