

The CITYGATES C H U R C H

Proverbs Diligence vs Laziness

Summary: Work is a part of our lives; we should neither avoid it nor worship it.

In New York City, outside the UN Headquarters, is a statue of a man beating a sword into a plow, turning from war to agriculture. It was a gift from the Soviet Union in 1959. The concept is drawn from Scripture where the prophet Isaiah is speaking of that perfect future world where the Messiah will reign. He writes:



Isaiah 2:2 Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the LORD's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow to it.
3 Many people shall come and say,
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations,
And rebuke many people;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore.

It's beautiful and vivid imagery. When you hear it, or see the statue, something inside you resonates. Something within you says, yes! we should do that - we should be looking forward to that day. We should never get used to wielding the sword as if it was a good and necessary part of life. We should never come to accept warfare and violence as normal. We should long for the day when

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore.

But the imagery is so powerful, we often miss something else about this passage, something not so obvious on first glance.

Isaiah is describing a time of spiritual utopia: Messiah is on the throne, ruling over the earth, *that's why people stop fighting*. He's describing a time when people center their lives around knowing God and worshipping Him.

And yet, they beat their swords into plowshares, not harps or guitars, or pianos. They beat their swords, instruments of war, into plowshares, tools for work. Apparently work will still exist when Messiah reigns.

Consider something else: when God made Adam and Eve and put them in the Garden, He gave them work to do – to subdue the earth and fill it, it wasn't all laying out on the beach sipping coconut water and nibbling fresh fruit. When they sinned, work became harder as one consequence, but work still existed before the Fall, in the perfect Garden of Eden.

God worked to create the world. And, Jesus came and lived in a working class family and was Himself a carpenter and stonemason – a construction worker with calluses on His hands and dirt beneath His fingernails.

What does all of this tell us? It shows us that work is a part of our lives; work is part of what makes us who we are and work is part of what we were made to do.

But, there are two problems we must watch out for – we must neither avoid work, nor worship it.

You see, there's a ditch on either side of the road and we have to avoid falling in. The solution is to dwell in the tension between being diligent to work on our part and resting in our dependence on God to control and direct our lives. You see, we need to figure out how to live in the place between avoiding and shirking things that are hard on the one hand, and being so obsessive and driven that we treat our work or studies as the most important thing in our lives on the other. And then we'll close by making some observations about forming a spiritually healthy view of work.

We begin by noticing that Proverbs is filled with colorful warnings to those who would avoid work. Look with me at

Proverbs 6:6 Go to the ant, you sluggard!

Consider her ways and be wise,

7 Which, having no captain,

Overseer or ruler,

8 Provides her supplies in the summer,

And gathers her food in the harvest.

The point is – no one is telling the ant, “It’s time to get up. It’s time to get dressed, it’s time to go to work or school.” It’s just out there working, and working hard, all day, because winter is coming and now is the time to store up what you’ll need. When you look at nature, you seek work being done all around you. Plants and animals prepare for the future, building nests and dens, storing food, raising babies. So, go, consider the ant and let them be your motivation. Because, you seem to need some:

9 How long will you slumber, O sluggard?

When will you rise from your sleep?

10 A little sleep, a little slumber,

A little folding of the hands to sleep—

11 So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler,

And your need like an armed man.

The ant is out there getting after it, diligently working to prepare for the future, and you’re hitting the snooze button again.

Now, there is nothing wrong with sleep and slumber, our bodies require them, but at some point we have to get up and work, or study, or do our chores, run our errands. Or else, poverty, you could also say failure, or missed opportunities, will come upon you like a prowler, like a pick-pocket, a robber – you won’t see it coming until it’s too late.

Now, we do need to say, this was written by the King during a time when justice and equity existed in society. Under those conditions you could make the case that work was possible and rewarding enough financially to keep you out of poverty.

That isn’t always the case. There are plenty of people who work hard and yet are oppressed by systems, structures, and people that rob them of the benefits of their labor or block their access to self-improvement. We’re not talking about those situations. Here, we’re talking about a situation where you have the chance to do honest work, but you honestly just feel like hitting the snooze button again – which *is* something we feel like at times, isn’t it?

Well, God wants to make sure you know not to make a habit out of that. Listen to:

Pro 10:4 He who has a slack hand becomes poor,

But the hand of the diligent makes rich.

5 He who gathers in summer *is* a wise son;

He who sleeps in harvest *is* a son who causes shame.

God has designed the world so that, under the right circumstances, honest work provides for our needs. And, often, increased effort and skill result in increased productivity and profit. Diligence leads to profitability and advancement while sloth, slackness, laziness, procrastination and avoidance lead you down a path toward poverty and shame.

Now again, I need to absolutely clear here, God is not saying that all poor people are lazy or should be ashamed. Everything depends on the system – do they live in a fair and equitable system that allows them to increase wealth through diligence? Do they have opportunities to acquire and amass? Some people are poor because legislation and economic policies are stacked against them. They're not lazy, they're trapped.

Nevertheless, some people have missed opportunities to improve their conditions because *it seemed like too much work*. There are consequences for those who choose to sleep in time of harvest. And God makes no promise to keep you from those consequences. In fact, He's warning you about them.

You can't just sit around and pray, "Oh God bless me" and expect Him to take care of everything. There is a balance between diligence on our part and depending on God. The farmer works hard to prepare the soil and plant the seeds, perhaps even to irrigate and fertilize the soil.

But God provides the harvest. And, as the farmer does his part with diligence, God may choose to bless him with a bumper crop. He may choose to spectacularly bless your efforts and produce even greater results than you should normally expect from what you've done. And yet, even if He chooses to do that, He doesn't then miraculously harvest it all for you and put in the barn. You have to go out into the fields and bring it in, and if He has blessed you with a larger yield, a larger harvest, then that's going to mean even more work for you to do to bring it all in, right? It's diligence on your part, as you depend on Him.

Because, God has designed the world so that effort generally produces rewards. Listen to this:

Pro 12:24 The hand of the diligent will rule,
But the lazy man will be put to forced labor.

Pro 13:4 The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing;
But the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.

Pro 21:5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty,
But those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty.

Time and time again we see the message that diligence and effort produce effects, but laziness, sloth, and cutting corners, produce poverty.

There's one more passage to take a look at. Turn with me over to:

Proverbs 26:13 The lazy man says,
"There is a lion in the road!
A fierce lion is in the streets!"

We've always got a reason for why we're not out working, right? You never just say, "Oh I don't feel like doing my homework," There's always a reason, always a story. Even very creative and skilled people can be lazy; they talk, dream, plan, but never get started or don't finish - because of the obstacles. Because there's a lion in the streets. And so:

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

That's some great imagery, isn't it? And, if you're honest, you know it's true. How many times have you laid there in bed, not wanting to get up, and just flipping back and forth like a door on it's hinges? You're so tired, no motivation to get up. And even when you do finally get up:

15 The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl;
It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth.

He's so tired he can't even eat; it's too much effort. Now, this is not the tiredness that you feel after a hard day's work, this is not the exhaustion you feel from good effort. This is the lethargy and laziness you feel from having nothing to do, no purpose, no pressure – it's beyond relaxing, it's actively avoiding any effort. It's unjustified rest and it saps your strength away instead of restoring it. If you're not careful it's the kind of thing that becomes self-justifying:

16 The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes
Than seven men who can answer sensibly.

Beware of giving yourself justifications and excuses. Beware of telling yourself stories. We all face the temptation to pull back, cut corners, or avoid hard things. But life requires us to get up, press in, and push back. God has given us work to do and designed the world to reward and recognize good work done well.

Pro 22:29 Do you see a man who excels in his work?
He will stand before kings;
He will not stand before unknown men.

Now, again, the world is broken, and it doesn't always work this way. Sometimes hard-working,

excellent performing people don't get the recognition they deserve. But doesn't your anger over that injustice kind of prove the point? You recognize it's what *should* have happened, you feel, deeply, that's the way it should have been. They worked hard, they deserved it.

No one ever says, we really should have promoted the sluggard, given the lazy guy the opportunity! No, we instinctively want to recognize and reward the hard worker. That's a good instinct, a God-given instinct. That's the way He has designed the world.

But, hard work, success, and the recognition it brings are not just about you. God wants to use your hard work and diligence to provide for others. Turn the page with me to Chapter 27 and drop down to the end, and look at what we're told in

Pr 27:23 Be diligent to know the state of your flocks,
And attend to your herds;
24 For riches *are* not forever,
Nor does a crown *endure* to all generations.
25 *When* the hay is removed, and the tender grass shows itself,
And the herbs of the mountains are gathered in,
26 The lambs *will provide* your clothing,
And the goats the price of a field;
27 *You shall have* enough goats' milk for your food,
For the food of your household,
And the nourishment of your maidservants.

Now, if you've been with us for a while, last verse should sound familiar. Doesn't it remind you of the woman we met in Proverbs 31? There we saw the value of a virtuous and valorous wife, a woman who is worth more than jewels. She was described, in part, as a woman who is diligent, who works hard to provide for herself, her family, and her employees. And you remember we noticed that everyone her life touched benefited from their relationship with her. Her work, her efforts, her diligence provided things that tangibly improved the life of others.

So, here in Proverbs 27 we're encouraged to work hard because opportunities don't last forever. This is much more obvious in an agrarian society. You have to plant when it's time to plant so you can harvest when it's time to harvest. Otherwise, winter comes, and you've got nothing to live off of. Well, the same thing holds true for us today.

There are seasons when your opportunities expand, maybe you receive a bonus or an inheritance, maybe you sell your home and make a profit, maybe the economy booms. When those things happen, use them as an opportunity to shore up your financial foundation, instead of extending to reach to something bigger and greater.

Do the modern equivalent of taking care of your flocks so that the assets you accumulate and maintain can support you through the lean times that always seem to come and enable you to help others through your generosity.

In fact, we're told in,

Pr 24:27 Prepare your outside work,
Make it fit for yourself in the field;
And afterward build your house.

The point here, again in an agricultural society, is: develop your land before you build your house because the work you do in the field is what will make the house possible. Don't spend time building the bed that you're going to turn back and forth on until you've got all your work projects lined out. In other words, take care of your responsibilities before indulging your opportunities. Do your homework before you play any games. You get the idea?

But here's where we need to take a cautionary turn and note the dangers of all this talk about diligence. Because, do you remember we said earlier there's a ditch on both sides of the road? We've made a pretty clear point that we don't want to ignore or avoid work, but we don't want to worship it either.

God has ordained both work and rest. You need to prepare your work. You need to be diligent to know the state of your flocks, or your assets, or your projects and career. You should aim to excel in your work and stand before leaders and executives. You need to fight the good fight against sloth, laziness, and self-indulgence.

But you need to keep it all in check too. The lazy man or woman needs to get up and do good work. But the hyper-competent and uber-productive man or woman, the task ninja, needs to sit down every now and then: to be still and know that God is God and that He commands us to work *and* rest.

After creating the world and everything in it, what did God do? He rested. Why? Was it because He needed to? Was it because He was tired? No. It was because He chose to. And He commands us to do the same.

Have you noticed there is only so long you can surge, only so long you can press, only so long you put in the long hours, and then you collapse? Your body breaks down and runs thin. You require sleep and *isn't that weird?* Do you realize how productive you could be if you just didn't need sleep? But you do, and possibly more than you're getting.

Did you know sleep deprivation can be used as an interrogation technique? Because depriving

you of rest makes you increasingly vulnerable and comprised.

Did you know you can only go without sleep for about 11 days and then you'll die? You can go for 40 days without food, over a month, but you can't make it two weeks without sleep. Just a few years ago some Danish scientists made a discovery that helps us understand why.

They're working with the hypothesis that while we sleep our lymph system flushes toxins out of brain. They believe your brain contracts and expands during sleep cycles and this pulls in and pushes out cerebral-spinal fluid, essentially rinsing dead cells and other biological waste products out of your brain. It's like changing the water in a fish tank or changing the oil in your car. The fluid collects impurities and at some point it needs to be changed out.

Have you ever noticed that if you don't get enough sleep you seem like someone who is intoxicated? Well that's the point – if you don't get enough sleep, you don't give the brain a chance to take the trash out, so toxins build up and you become increasingly intoxicated in a sense, until eventually, you die.

Now, we're not even talking about the idea of having a Sabbath, we're just talking about accepting the very real limitation that the need for sleep imposes on us. You will spend, on average, 1/3 of your life, 7-9 hours a day, doing nothing. Rest may seem terribly inefficient, but it is absolutely necessary, and it is impossible to avoid.

We weren't designed to be continually performing machines. Diligence is good, laziness is bad, but that doesn't mean constant busyness is best. We follow in the example of God when we work, but we also follow in His example when we rest.

One of the greatest challenges of ministry here in the DC area is helping people to understand that throwing your life away by chasing your career is, in the eternal perspective, no different than throwing it away by getting hooked on heroin. You're still wasting your life - missing your purpose, and ignoring God in the process. You can do it by burning out or by dropping out - they're both ways of wrecking your life; they just do it by falling into opposite ditches.

We recently studied the book of Matthew together and worked through the famous Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said:

Matthew 6:24 No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

But it's not just money, you could take out money and put career, position, achievement, anything you like. You can't serve God and anything else, because sooner or later they'll run into

each other, and one will have to bow down to the other.

So, and this might hurt a bit, but let's ask the question anyway - does your work or do your studies get in the way of your relationship with God, your family, your community or tribe and church? Do they keep you from rest and relationships? Has work, or school, become the ultimate thing in your life? Does it have to be that way?

Sometimes the answer is yes – when it's time to plant, the farmer surges, and the same with harvest, there's no going home early in the middle of the harvest. But those are seasons, they're surges, they're not the norm. So too, you might be up against a deadline, or studying for finals. But we're talking about normal life – are you running in the red by default now? And if so, is there anything you can do to push back against it? Or, to pull back from it? Not be lazy, but to keep it in its proper boundaries? How would the people who love you answer that question?

There is no doubt we should work, and we should work hard. Before Jesus began His public ministry, John the Baptist came calling people to repent, to change their ways. And people asked him what that should look like. Some specifically came and said, 'How should this affect my job?' He didn't tell them to stop working, he told them to work differently. To work hard, but to work in a way that helped others and pleased God.

In other words, to use work as an opportunity to live out the great Commandment, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Work gives us the opportunity to do both. Work is not the god we serve; it's how we serve God.

And that means your job may be one way you express your identity, but it's not who you really are. It's not your ultimate identity. You were somebody before you started working and you'll be somebody when you stop, the question is: who?

Who are you really? Are you still somebody important without your job, your title, your position? I don't know how you answer that question for yourself, but if ask God He says clearly, undoubtedly, absolutely, "Yes, you are!"

Long before you reach your dream job, and long after you separate from it, you are still known by, loved by, and treasured by a God who has been working for you.

We read in

Ephesians 2:4 ... God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the

heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Christian, God has work for you to do. Good work, fulfilling work. He hasn't designed you to sit around and amuse yourself to death. But, He has also given you your identity in Christ. You don't need to prove yourself or promote yourself any more. He is at work in you. You are His workmanship. The weight isn't all on your shoulders, it's not all up to you to make things happen, or achieve your goals. He is with you. He is directing you. He's warning you to avoid idleness and to avoid making an idol out of your work. He's trying to keep you from drifting into either ditch by keeping your eyes fixed straight ahead, on Him.

Let's pray.