

Sermon for Sunday, November 13, 2011
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Wisdom, Work and Wealth
Proverbs 6

Every book of the Bible has unique purposes. Proverbs has several. First, a theology of creation. It says that if we watch the world carefully, we will learn how things work. If you want to know how to work, go to the ant. Watch, consider, and you will detect the patterns of reward and suffering that the Creator placed in this world. They remain to this day.

Second, Proverbs engages the imagination. Proverbs has commands, but for a book that teaches the wise way of life and has so much counsel, commands are few (Prov 20:18-19, 22). Instead, Proverbs enlists the imagination:

- A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life (20:2).
- "Bad, bad" says the buyer; but when he goes away, he boasts about it (20:14)
- Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel (20:17).

These proverbs engage the imagination, stir memories: The day I provoked the king, the boss, to roar at me; a fraud that tasted sweet and turned to gravel. We remember what we did that day long ago. It's gravel in the mouth.

These interests in creation and imagination come together in a third interest – how this world is broken and how it might be fixed. Work is broken by laziness and by excess toil. So Proverbs show us the lazy fool, the sluggard, and the person who wounds himself with too much toil.

Yes, Proverbs also has positive counsel about work and wealth, but he has more warnings, beginning with teaching on the sluggard, who is a specific kind of a fool. Scoffer and sluggards both have a terrible trait - they are "wise in [their] own eyes" (3:7, 26:5, 12). The scoffer laughs at everyone else's convictions. The sluggard thinks he can live without labor.

Americans need this word. We make the mistakes Solomon names. Some of us are sluggards. We have an air of entitlement. We expect people to hand things to us and offended if they don't. Others work too hard and are driven by fear of poverty, the drive to prove something. We don't learn how to stop working. We accumulate wealth and don't know what to do with it – we're too busy working. Which word do you need? Proverbs has wisdom for all, starting with sluggards.

1. The sluggard as fool – pictures of sluggards

Commands are rare in Proverbs, but Proverbs 6 opens with a command: Go, look at the ant (6:6). The initial word – **GO** – rouses the sluggard from his lethargy. He must go, watch the harvester ant, common in Israel. It works hard and stores grain in its nest. "Go, observe", says Solomon. "Ears that hear and eyes that see - the LORD has made them both" (20:12). Look with moral discernment, consider, be wise. Change your ways.

Solomon even tells sluggards what to look for (6:7): The ant has no leader, no commander. No overseer gives orders, states duties, or settles disputes that break out at the work site. The ant has "a God-

given wisdom to work" in a wise, orderly way.¹ God's pressed his wisdom into its body and soul. But we are not ants, we are men and women, so we are responsible to learn.

Proverbs 6:8: The ant puts everything in order, makes everything ready by working during the harvest season. God provides food; the ant harvests it at the right time.

Proverbs 6:9-11: Now we learn *why* Solomon sent the sluggard to the ant. He is lying there, immobile, during the season of harvest. How long? Solomon asks, and we realize he's been inert for some time. Dire consequences loom. Will he get up? No, he wants to sleep a little more. The word "a little" is literally "a few" – a few more minutes of sleep, a few more moments in this warm, delicious bed. How long? A little longer. When will you get up? Soon, not just now.

"Poverty will come on you like a bandit [or 'wanderer'] and scarcity like an armed man." The translation hides a distinction. If you are a sluggard, poverty may wander into your life like a vagabond, steal what it can and move on. Or it may barge in like a fully armed outlaw, rob you with pointed sword and say, "Try to take it back." That is, laziness may bring *occasional* poverty or *crushing* poverty. The lazy may face the consequences a little, sporadically, or they may strike with terrible force.

So it goes with many sins. Suppose you gamble or take drugs [substitute laziness, overwork]. Just a little, you tell yourself. No real harm. I can stop. But you may go too far. The car may lurch into the ditch. You get out and assess the damage. Not too bad. I escaped. I need to clean up a bit, but I survived. But the next time you land in the ditch, it may be worse, much worse. The car may be totaled and you may have crushed several bones.

Proverbs 26 concludes the picture of the sluggard. Look at this fellow, turning on his bed like a door on its hinges flopping back and forth. Has someone screwed him to his bed? He "lies there" sleepy, drowsy, lazy. He needs to wake up, get up, while time remains. *When will you get up?* Solomon asks (6:9). But the sluggard isn't getting up, he's making excuses: "There is a lion in the road." If I go outside, I'll be eaten alive. If I drive to work, I may crash the car.

Laziness is his way of life: "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, too lazy to raise it to his mouth" (19:24, 26:15). Folks, that's lazy. The sluggard is so lazy, he's funny. Yet he is tragic because he won't listen. He is helpless in both senses. He can't help himself and he won't receive the help he needs because, worst of all, the sluggard is self-satisfied.

He thinks he knows everything. He listens to no voice but his own, so he won't face reality: "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (26:12). "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly" (26:16).

About fifteen proverbs connect laziness and real poverty - lack of food, basic necessities (19:15, 20:13). God's order stands; laziness has a bitter end. As Paul says, "If anyone will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10).

¹ Waltke 337

If you're inclined to think politically, this sounds like red meat conservative thought. So we need the entire biblical testimony. Proverbs stress norms - the way things work on a typical day. But some times are not typical. Drought, war, oppression, floods strike and wipe away wealth and jobs. Global crises and economic upheaval do the same.

This means people are needy for very different reasons. The lazy deserve no sympathy. They don't *want* sympathy. They "refuse to labor." Again, "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work... The shiftless man goes hungry" (21:25, 19:15).

Listen: the main words for poverty in Old Testament are *rash* and *dal*. Neither word is ever used of the sluggard. Sluggards are not oppressed. But over and over the Bible says we should show kindness and compassion to the poor and oppressed, who are not lazy, but have suffered upheaval or oppression. In summary:

- **The sluggard will not begin things.** "As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed" (26:14). Ask a sluggard "How long will you lie there...? He cannot answer *when*. He doesn't refuse to work, he delays *a little*: A little more sleep, that's all" (6:10).
- **The sluggard will not finish things.** He rarely starts things; when he does the effort exhausts him. If there is game in the fields, he may not hunt it. If he gets some, he may not prepare it (12:27).
- **The sluggard will not face reality.** Because he is wise in his own eyes, the sluggard never learns. (20:4): "A sluggard does not plow in season; at harvest time he looks but finds nothing." Because he doesn't work, "The sluggard craves and gets nothing" (13:14). In his fields thorns and weeds abound 24:30, 15:19. Proverbs doesn't say, "Don't be a sluggard," it says look and learn: "I applied my heart to what I observed and learned from what I saw..." (24:32). The wise listen and learn. Do you? Are your eyes open?

2. Steady work brings reasonable wealth

The sluggard shows that no work means no wealth. But Proverbs has good news too. Work pays off. Here are five beautiful proverbs about work:

- Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth – especially if the labor is timely – during the harvest then, today...(10:4).
- The hand of the diligent will rule... he will get precious wealth (12:24, 27).
- All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty (14:23).
- The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty (21:5).
- Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men (22:29).

Thoughtful, constant, persistent labor usually grants wealth that lasts. It's probably wise for us to summarize the Bible's message regarding work and wealth. John Frame in [Doctrine of the Christian Life](#) summarizes the basics.

- There should be a pattern or rhythm to our work: Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath.

- After the fall, work becomes toilsome, frustrating. The ground bears thorns and thistles. Childbirth is painful physically and emotionally.
- Still work is necessary and beneficial to work: “The LORD your God will bless... all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete” (Deut. 16:15).
- But we must labor steadily. Paul says, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, so [you] may win respect and... not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thess. 4:11). Paul practiced this, at times, by working part-time making tents.
- Laziness and idleness are both sins and folly. Paul says we should “keep away from every brother who is idle” and rejects God’s teaching (2 Thess 3:6).
- If we can work, we should never presume that others will care for us. If we refuse to work, we should not expect to eat.
- Faith changes work habits. Ephesians 4:28 says, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, [to] have something to share with those in need.” The converted then doesn’t simply stop stealing. He starts working, sharing. He becomes a benefactor.

3. The wise know how to enjoy their wealth

If we gain wealth, we should enjoy it. We enjoy in moderation. And we share with others. We don’t live for wealth but we thank God when it comes. 1 Tim 4:4-5 says, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

It’s vanity to work hard and die, never enjoying what is earned. A simple laborer is happier if he enjoys his food, sits in the sun. What is better than good bread and cheese in the mouth of a hungry man? “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This... is from the hand of God. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them... and be happy in his work — this is a gift of God” (Eccl. 2:24, 5:19).

But “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.” Or “Do not toil to acquire wealth, be discerning enough to desist” (23:4). This is the central statement in a long section on wealth in Proverbs (22:22-23:11). It’s mostly warnings: Don’t exploit the poor, don’t waste your wealth with fools. Don’t love delicacies. But the core lies with three proverbs.

One praises excellence: “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings” (22:29). But “Do not toil [wear yourself out] to get rich, be wise enough to desist” (23:4-5). So many Proverbs teach us to manage our desires.² Don’t wear yourselves out - because if our eye flies to riches, the riches fly away. That’s the nature of wealth – it’s fleeting. Ask Germans or Italians who lived in hyper-inflation. Disasters destroy wealth at random. Why exhaust yourself for it?

² Koptak, 551

Before anyone gets smug and says, “But money doesn’t motivate me” – let me ask you, “What does? Because we are quite capable of overwork for other kinds of wealth and some of them can fly away too.

The folks at Penn State football worked for success with honor. A laudable goal and one they fulfilled in so many ways. But not all. And it’s flown away.

Or recall the story of the journalists captured in the Libyan revolution. Two Americans, a Spaniard and a South African traveled with the rebels. Clare, an American, had recently earned a Ph.D. in history. Now she wanted to cover history in the making. They caught a ride with a rebel scout vehicle. The rebels spotted Qaddafi forces at 300 meters. The journalists saw nothing, hopped out and looked around. Minutes later, bullets flew, rebel vehicles fled and the journalists ran for a cluster of trees. One was shot and died, the rest were soon captured by Qaddafi’s forces. What happened? A desire for “wealth” – a name, peak experiences – struck them and they lacked the sense to desist.

Some of us toil because of self importance, Messianic thinking. Hilary of Tours called it an "irreligious concern for God" - a blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him. The bizarre idea: “If I don’t do this, God’s cause will fail.”

Do you ever have that idea? Do you now why you’re working? Do you know how to stop? Or do you indulge Messianic dreams?

Paul says something similar in 1 Timothy 6. “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” So don’t live to get rich. Live and work and if you happen to get rich, enjoy it, share it: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (6:10, 17). Enjoyment is good. But sharing is even more prominent in Proverbs. It’s good to consider this in stewardship season.

4. Generous giving (21:13)

Review: A warning regarding laziness, blessings on work, enjoyment, and generosity. Proverbs blesses generosity: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (19:17). Lend to the Lord? God cannot owe anyone anything. Life itself, forgiveness, wisdom, all are gifts of grace. What does Solomon mean?

First, Proverbs often blesses generosity to the poor: “A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor” (22:9, 14:21). But how do the generous give loans to God? “Because the LORD’s honor is tied up with the poor, for he made them too and they too are his image.”³ The generous take up the cause of the poor, and God takes it on himself on their behalf.

Current events: Who took the cause of the poor abused children at Penn State? If someone had, they might have paid a price in career, but we could call it a loan to the Lord – due to God’s interest in poor children.

³ Waltke 2:111

This is characteristic of God. He took our greatest debt on himself when he sent his Son: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Whatever else we say about Jesus and his work, he certainly was generous to the poor – we who are spiritually poor.

All generosity reflects the character of God. Although the Lord doesn’t work as we do, look outside the window, study the micro and macro structures of the universe and its clear that God works.

Jesus worked. For most of his years he worked with his hands – thick, strong and calloused. The Father did not place him in the home of a sultan – to receive the service that was his due. Rather in the home of a carpenter. He proclaimed the kingdom, healed the sick, taught his disciples, debated his foes, and afterward he often prayed through the night – also work. He said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” He did this so that he might **give** – give life to we who are poor. That is why we give to the poor – because we know, we are united to Jesus, who gives to the poor.

Our stewardship theme is Proverbs 3:27: “Do not withhold good from those who *deserve* it when it's in your power to help them.” Or “Do not withhold good” – good objects, such as money, or good actions, such as doing justice. “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due.” We owe nothing to sluggards, scoffers, who refuse to work or listen. We do owe help to the poor. The wounded neighbor has a claim on us – “when have the power” to help.

We can do this individually or through the church. We can do it as moved, or regularly, with a plan. I urge you to give regularly. You will give more and more wisely. The regular path according to Scripture is the tithe, which the Bible advocates about twenty-five times. A former professor, not a pastor, wrote this:

"Newcomers sometimes ask church members how much money they should give to the church. The question seems [awkward] and church people find ways to avoid it." But it's a reasonable question. "In one sense God demands all that we have" - sometimes literally, in martyrdom. But the newcomer wants to know what is considered normal, like a normal tip. "When I talk to such inquirers, I cannot get [the tithe] out of my head. Again and again the Old Testament tithe, ten per cent recurs. It's the Lord's portion. Maybe that amount is not strictly required in the New Testament, though Jesus says it's good. But surely "cheerful giving" cannot be much less than that. So the tithe is the beginning of financial discipleship."⁴

It is good to give to your church for several reasons: It is your family, its leaders care for you. All our lives, even in graduate school days, Debbie and I have at least tithed. Most years, we tithed to the church and gave more as we could. Some years we gave the majority to the church we attended and the rest to causes that needed help. Church leaders study the wise use of resources. If you let us know your plan, it helps us plan wisely. We can know what to expect instead of lurching through the year unable to see if we were on target or not.

⁴ John Frame, 800-1

I'm convinced we, Central, should plan to increase our giving and raise the per cent we give to the poor, physically and spiritually. To be honest, this church is big and old enough that it isn't easy to effect change. We can look for ways to redirect the funds we have, but the best way to increase giving to the poor and to missions is to increase overall giving and give the bulk to the poor. If we do increase our giving I'll give my best effort to put the bulk of that to fund ministries to the poor here and in Kenya, Honduras, Sudan, Ukraine. The more generous you are, the more you tell us what you plan, the more we can do.

There are lots of good reasons to give. It's an act of worship, a response to the Lord's grace. When we give we show that we trust God to provide for us. Above all, generosity follows the way of Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us.