

Proverbs: Wise about Work

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Introduction

Apparently the following message was put up on the notice board in the office of a New York based company:

Some time between starting and quitting time, without infringing on lunch periods, coffee breaks, rest periods, story-telling, ticket selling, holiday planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's television programs, we ask that each employee try to find some time for a work break - *quoted by Stott (IFCT, pg.155)*

Some Christians view work as one of the many tedious but necessary results of God's curse on his creation. For others like those who worked in that NY based company work is about doing as little as possible in as much time as possible and of course getting well paid for it. And yet the average adult spends a third of their day working.

That means if you started full time employment when you were 16 and retire at 65, you have spent more than 16 years of your life at the office, or in the work place. Whether we like it or not work is a part of life. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them work to do according to Genesis (1:28 and 2:15). So in a sense when we are idle we are going against God's creative purpose for us. So firstly we are created for work and to work, that is a part of what we live to do.

Secondly, because we are created to work we find a certain amount of fulfilment in work. That is why unemployment can have such a devastating effect; it is an assault upon our humanity. And the black communities in South Africa know a good deal about that. But sadly for many people who have work it is an idol from which they derive their sense of worth. Incidentally I am not just talking about paid work, the housewife and the volunteer worker are to be included in this. Even the retired person can find work to do.

But thirdly we work for the benefit of society as a whole and the communities we live in, in particular. In the OT those who worked the fields were commanded to share what they had received from the Lord with the needy. In the NT Paul says of the converted thief that he should find work so that:

...he may have something to share with those in need - *Eph 4:28*

Now you may remember that we have been consulting with the great wisdom teacher of the OT: King Solomon through the book of Proverbs. We have been learning about wisdom which is a very broad concept in the Bible. Wisdom can be described as '*the know how for getting life right*'. Proverbs is there to help us with those moments when we think to ourselves I've been a fool. And in our last study we looked at how we can avoid being foolish with respect to our friendships.

Structure of Proverbs

Now it is clear that we are to understand that Solomon wrote the bulk of what we now call the book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-9 serve as a sort of extended introduction to help orientate us as we read the rest of the book. Verse 10 of chpt.9 is vital if we are to get the most out of consulting the wisdom that Solomon has brought together in his book of wisdom:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. - Pro 9:10

This is the key to unlocking the wisdom of Solomon's proverbs. Notice the way chpt.10 begins: '*The proverbs of Solomon*'. Now this second section extends all the way to 22:16 and it would seem contains proverbs written by Solomon himself. The third section of the book extends from chapter 22:17 to the end of ch 24 and is entitled '*Sayings of the wise*'.

It is possible that there was an oral tradition of wisdom which Solomon later committed himself to writing down. The proverbs in this section may well have come from pagan sources, or from wisdom teachers outside of Israel which Solomon collected and gathered together in this section of the book of Proverbs. Our fourth section contain proverbs that were committed to written form during the time of Hezekiah (Pro 25:1) or they were copied and edited from an existing document that is now lost to us. But these proverbs are also ascribed to Solomon.

And then if you look at the fifth and final section of the book (ch 30-31) you discover proverbs written by two men: Agur and King Lemuel. Both these men are unknown to us in the OT and may have been non-Israelite or pagan.

Now some Christians struggle with the idea that pagan literature could somehow find its way into the Bible, but we must understand that wisdom is about how God has ordered his world. What that means is that there are areas of wisdom that are valid for all people no matter where they are or what they claim to believe. That is because a good deal of wisdom operates on the practical level of our common everyday experiences.

So for example in our modern South African culture the law says 'Stop when the robot is showing a red light'. Solomon or the book of Proverbs might put it this way '*The wise man stops at red lights, and saves himself and others from disaster*'. Or to put it negatively: '*The fool rushes through a red light, and so brings himself and the innocent to ruin*'.

The point is that you don't have to be a Christian to see and accept the common or general wisdom of these two proverbs. The Christian however will understand these proverbs in the context of fearing the LORD. So he/she stops at red lights because we accept that God has so ordered things such that to go through a red light represents a spiritual and moral failure, because it is to go against what God has set in place, it is to go against his created order.

The traffic laws have been put in place by the South African government, but the South African government has been ordained and put in place by God to keep law and order. Of course when we begin to understand that God has ordered every aspect of our lives because he is the sovereign creator and giver and sustainer of everything, we begin to take everything we do more seriously, because we are guided by wisdom or '*the fear of the LORD*'.

You may remember that in chapters 1-9 the call is for you and me to be wise, to come and get wisdom while avoiding folly, in other words to take life seriously. From chapter 10 to the end of the book we have a collection of wisdom saying encapsulated in tiny sentences or proverbs. Often they are one sentence but sometimes they are a few sentences strung together. Often they require careful reflection if we are to understand what lies under the surface. A proverb has been described as '*a shrewd concentration of truth*'. And they usually cover a whole host of situation that reflects life lived in God's ordered world.

Concerning Work

Today we are going to look at what the proverbs have to say about work. But we are going to do so by looking at a somewhat comical character who pops up in the book of Proverbs from time to time. We don't know his actual name because if the truth be known he has many names, but for our purpose he is called '*the sluggard*'.

Now although the teacher of wisdom uses the sluggard as something of a caricature, it is supposed to bring a knowing smile to all our faces as we recognize something of ourselves in him. He also wants to draw our attention to that aspect of human nature which means you and I tend to dislike work.

I don't know about you but sometimes whenever I get the feeling that I need to go to my office and do some work, immediately I want to lie down somewhere and have a rest until that ghastly feeling goes away; do you ever feel like that? I cannot be the only one.

In other words there is a part of me, and I suspect you also, that likes to rest and so uses a great deal of ingenuity to avoid doing any kind of serious work. Well what can Solomon teach us about this sort of attitude through the sluggard? Well the first thing we learn about the sluggard is this:

1. The Sluggard is Lazy

I remember another minister whom I respected and thought was quite hard working saying that he was naturally lazy. I think Proverbs would say that is true of us all, Proverbs 26:14:

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

I am told that those with teenage children immediately recognise the wisdom of this proverb. The sluggard is so attached to his bed and to sleeping or resting that his relationship with his bed is compared to the relationship between a door and its hinge.

How often do you see a door that is not attached to its hinge, the two are usually inseparable, just like the sluggard and his bed. But not only is the sluggard lazy, he also has an active imagination such that he can come up with all sorts of excuses for why he is still in bed and so never gets anything done. Look at the verse before:

The sluggard says, There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets! - Pro 26:13

In other words I cannot possibly go out to work since there is a lion in the street and I might get eaten. Rebekah and I have had two South Africans live with us during our married life. One of them was a man named Andrew who stayed with us while we were living in North London in England. He was meant to be finding work but Rebekah and I would come home and find that he had not set foot outside all day because, get this, it had been raining.

Can I just say to those South Africans planning to go to the UK to work at some stage that if you are only going to go out to look for a job when the sun is shining it's going to take you an awful long time to find a job. But not only is the sluggard lazy, the sluggard also never begins things. The sluggard, far from being an initiator never starts anything. So second:

2. The Sluggard Never Begins Things

In Proverbs 6:9 we read this about the sluggard:

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. - Pro 6:9-10

He is the kind of person who when the alarm clock goes off in the morning says to himself '*just another 5 minutes*'. An hour later when asked why he is not out of bed yet, he makes it very clear that you are hassling him. You get accused of being like the CD player that gets stuck playing the same track over and over again.

But notice from vs.10-11 that the sluggard does not so much decide to do nothing he just procrastinates, he puts off deciding whether he will or not until tomorrow, he is the kind of person who lets time and the moment just slip away. And simply by never beginning things the sluggard vs.11 finds himself in hot water and in great need because his

inactivity catches up with him. The sluggard is lazy and never begins anything, but third the sluggard never finishes anything either.

3. The Sluggard Never Finishes Things

If the sluggard does eventually get around to actually starting something, that rare and precious impulse soon dies such that the effort that was actually put in for a change, as miraculous as it may have seemed ends up being a waste of time:

The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions. - Pro 12:27.

It is quite a laughable picture, but imagine you are a full-blooded South African male who loves all things outdoors (some of us have to imagine harder than others). You go to a friend's farm and after stalking it for hours shoot a buck with your crossbow. I mean for once in your life you actually get your act together and hit and even kill something, it's a miracle.

But having got home you decide that watching the rugby would be much less trouble than skinning and roasting your game and feeding your family. When you do eventually get round to finishing what you started, as you approach the rotting carcass the stench as well as the maggots are enough to put you off hunting for life. Proverbs 19:24 puts it this way:

The sluggard buries his hands in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth. - Pro 19:24

Now if this picture was not so pathetic and sad it would be funny. The sluggard sticks his hand in the fruit bowl but cannot even be bothered to raise the apple in his hand to his mouth because it is too much like hard work. Pathetic definitely, sad yes, because we have probably all met people just like this. People who begin things but never finish them. The person who perhaps likes to talk but has no follow through. So can I ask you; have you seen the sluggard? Have you met the sluggard? Are you the sluggard?

4. The Sluggard Never Faces Things

In chapter 26:13-16 a number of the characteristics of the sluggard are brought together. In vs.13 the sluggard is full of excuses, in vs.14 he is far too attached to being lazy, in vs.15 he never finishes what he starts and then look at vs.16:

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly. - Pro 26:16

The sluggard never faces things. When others try to help him by giving him wise and discreet counsel he will not listen because he will not face the truth about himself.

The sluggard comes to believe the excuses he makes about his own shortcomings. He rationalises his laziness, I can do more in less time, you think I'm lazy you but you should see so and so. He is sure he knows what he is doing and so cannot or will not listen to those who want to help him.

5. The Sluggard does not Plan Ahead

To further fill out our profile of the sluggard we can add fifthly, the sluggard does not plan ahead.

A sluggard does not plough in season; so at the harvest time he looks but finds nothing. - Pro 20:4

The idea in this verse is that he does not go out and plough in autumn because it is too cold so he procrastinates; he delays until it is too late. He will not face up to what must

be done today here and now, if he is to have a future tomorrow. He will not plan ahead and say if I want to be able to sell some of my crops at harvest time I need to have planned ahead and done a certain amount of work prior to that. He won't do it. Notice that he looks but finds nothing, so not only will he not plan ahead but he will not face up to the consequences of his lack of planning and foresight. Rather than looking down the corridors of the future he insists on living solely for the moment. Sixthly:

6. The Sluggard is Never Satisfied

Now the problem with the life of the sluggard is that he is never satisfied. Proverbs 13:4 says this:

The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied. - Pro 13:4

Now like all the proverbs in this book, this proverb is not making an absolute statement but rather a general one based on one's observation of everyday life. The point is that there is something fundamentally unsatisfying about being lazy. By contrast hard work and diligence bring their own satisfaction. Turn to Proverbs 21:25-26 which say this:

The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing. - Pro 21:25-26

The sluggard is a dreamer who craves and wishes for a better life but is not willing to work for it, he is selfish and self-absorbed and so is never satisfied. He is contrasted with the righteous person but note the righteous is not the person who craves and dreams and works hard and is satisfied but rather it is the person who works hard and rather than being selfish and self-absorbed generously shares with others. Seventhly:

1. The Sluggard's Life is a Deception

Proverbs 15:19 say this:

The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway - Pro 15:19

Being a sluggard in God's world is fundamentally dishonest and involves being deceitful. And so ultimately it will lead to trouble. The sluggard will eventually discover himself to be on the path of the foolish. Notice that his path is blocked with thorns that he has to fight his way through. While by way of contrast the path of the upright is plane sailing like being on the highway. The sluggard's perception of herself is not that she is lazy; she's just not a morning person. It's not that she minds hard work, she just feels coffee breaks and holidays are important.

She is not a time waster but rather in a reflective mood, it's not that she is not listening to the advice of others she is just sticking to her original convictions. Elsewhere the teacher of wisdom show us that the sluggard is a dangerous person to have around because he is a brother to the one who destroys (Pro 18:9) and if you send him on an errand his dislike for work will drive you to distraction like smoke in the eyes or vinegar on your teeth (10:26).

Conclusion: Learn from the Ant, You Sluggard

Our teacher of wisdom is anxious to teach the sluggard a lesson about how to live. But he does not send him to some successful entrepreneur or self-help guru. Rather he humbles the sluggard by sending him to the ant of all creatures:

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. - Pro 6:6-8

If the sluggard will not learn from the ant then according to 6v11 he may end up learning the hard way as disaster unexpectedly overtakes him like being hijacked at gunpoint. Now according to the last 5 verses of chapter 24 the teacher of wisdom went past the field of the sluggard and saw his run down property and applied his heart to learning a lesson from what he saw.

So what has the teacher taught us through the sluggard? Well first he has taught us the importance of embracing good honest hard work. If you are the kind of person who tries to shirk that responsibility by sponging off others while doing as little work as possible then be wise and be warned, laziness is foolishness, and it is not to be the path of one who claims to fear the LORD, ultimately it will lead to disaster.

But secondly the teacher has taught us that 'the fear of the LORD' is not some mystical experience. It is not about acting in a way that makes you feel like you are being reverent when you enter this room. No, the fear of the LORD has everything to do with the decision I make and the way I conduct myself, Monday through Sunday of each week.

But, of course some of us here are anything but sluggards. If the truth be known we have gone to the other extreme and are workaholics, we live for work and would lose all sense of identity and purpose if we could not work. In a world that knows nothing of '*the fear the LORD*' we have bought into the lie that says we work in order to amass great wealth for ourselves.

Why? So we can live in a nice house in a nice area while living in complete comfort and ease while lacking absolutely nothing we desire. No! No! No! According to the NT that is not why we work. The lesson of the sluggard is not that you and I should be the exact opposite of the sluggard. It is not that we should fill our lives with work such that work becomes our god.

No according to the NT you and I must work so that we can fulfil our responsibility to provide for ourselves and our families. And of course once we have done that, far from making our lives more comfortable we should be using our money to help the needy. And of course the greatest need that every person has is the need to hear and respond to the gospel. Let's close by listening to what the one who is greater than Solomon has to say about work:

Jesus answered... Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life...." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

Brothers and sisters, the great work that you and I should be preoccupied with is firstly making sure we believe and continue to believe in the one God has sent; the LORD Jesus Christ who died for us on a cross so that we could be forgiven for all the wrong we have done, and for some of us that wrong will include being lazy at work or making an idol out of work.

But secondly we should be working hard to make sure that others believe in the one God has sent. There is no work more glorious and more precious than that. I wonder if you believe that?