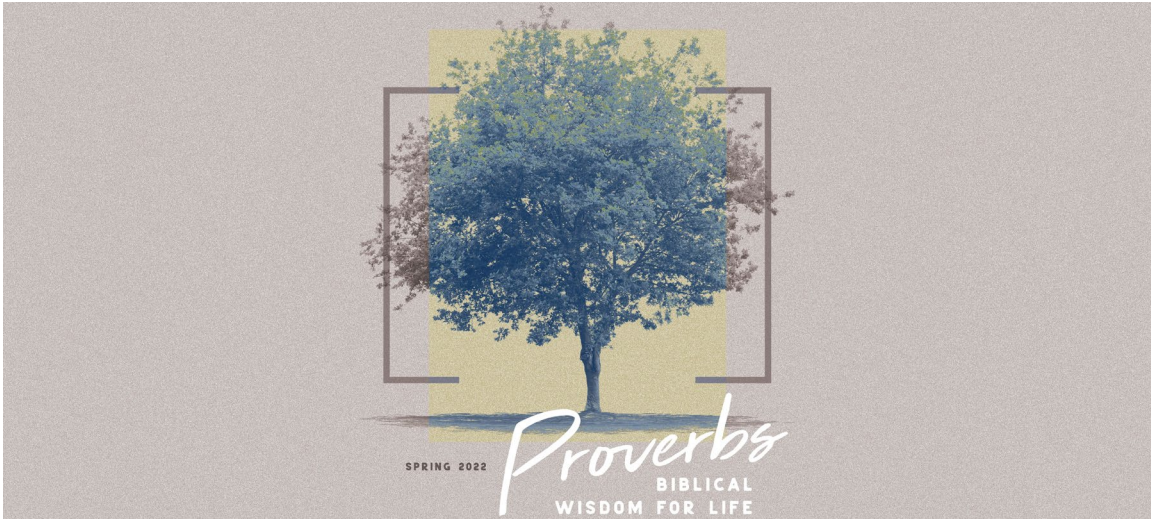


Week 5: Proverbs: Diligence and Laziness

Hook



Main Point: Diligence is not only the godly choice, it's also the most productive choice.

Michael Jordan is known to be one of the best basketball players of all time, and his work ethic is legendary. In college he was quoted saying that “Nobody will ever work as hard as I work.” He put in countless hours, practicing just as hard as he played because he wanted to be the best. At the University of North Carolina, he would continue to practice after the rest of the team would be ready to go, but he would push the best players to stay so that he could play against and learn from them. His work ethic inspired his teammates to put in the work as well.¹

Q: How is Michael Jordan’s work ethic tied to his success?

Q: How can our work ethic glorify the Lord?

Q: What impact does our work ethic have on our witness?

Week 5: Proverbs: Diligence and Laziness

Book

Main Point: Diligence is not only the godly choice, it's the most productive choice, too.

Proverbs 12:14; 13:4; and 15:19 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Work is a gift from God, something God intends for our good.

Q: Why do we as human beings get satisfaction from doing well at our work?

Q: How is the *soul* of the diligent richly supplied (not just financially or physically)?

One of the biggest misunderstandings some Christians have about the story of the Fall of humanity is that work is a curse of the fall. But when we look carefully at the story, we see that work existed as a good, God-ordained thing before the Fall (Genesis 2:15). As a result of the fall, the *ground* was cursed. Work became laborious and painful (Genesis 3:17–19). Adam and Eve's work was central to God's purpose in Genesis 1 and 2. Paradise wasn't a place where they just laid around and plucked fruit off the trees. They worked the garden. As author and scholar Amy Sherman wrote, "Work is a gift from God. Work is something we were built for, something our loving Creator intends for our good."²

Human beings are made in the image of God, and God is a diligent worker. He created a pattern for us of six days of work and one day of rest. All work is important to God, whether it's "ministry" work or "secular" work. Really, all our work is ministry work because it's all part of who God created us to be in the world. He expects us to work diligently at everything we do, working as for the Lord, no matter what our work entails (Colossians 3:23–24). Our work matters to God, whether that work is being a pastor or a plumber, a stay-at-home parent, a CEO or a janitor.³

Like the story of creation, Proverbs tells us work is a good thing. It not only sustains us physically by providing money for us to live, it also gives us a sense of satisfaction and pride in ourselves (12:14). It's good for our souls (13:4) because human beings always feel more fulfilled when they work hard to accomplish something, rather than just being given it. It's part of how we are wired. This doesn't mean we should place our self-worth and identity in our career success or other achievements. Our identity and value are found in Christ alone. But there is nothing wrong with taking pride in the fruit of our diligent work. In fact, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon concluded that after his lifelong search

for meaning, he saw that “there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work” (Ecclesiastes 3:22; cf. 5:18-20; 9:10).

Q: In what ways does your work give you purpose and satisfaction? How can you find meaning in your work even if it’s not where you want to be right now?

Q: How can you see your work as a ministry of the kingdom, even if it’s a “secular” job?

Q: In what ways does the way you approach your work impact your witness?

Proverbs 6:6–11; 10:4–5; 12:11; 12:27; 14:23; and 28:19 [Read]

Note that Proverbs 12:11 and 28:19 are almost the same. Remember that this happens often in the Proverbs because repetition is a teaching tool.

Talking Point 2: Hard work leads to prosperity; laziness leads to poverty.

Q: What is the difference between “working your land” and “following worthless pursuits”? How do you see that played out today (like get-rich-quick schemes, etc.)?

Q: Give an example of how “mere talk” leads to poverty.

We could apply many proverbs to the way we work, even if they aren’t specifically about work. Proverbs are generally about growing in wisdom and character, which always contribute to your work in some way. Who you are as a person affects who you are as a worker. Our faith doesn’t just impact our Sunday mornings; it impacts our Monday through Fridays, too. The Proverbs teach that a good work ethic generally leads to success in the workplace. But more importantly, hard work and good ethics honor God.

Biblical wisdom is not about achieving worldly success, it’s about following God. Many of the proverbs speak directly about the workplace activities of the ancient Near East – agriculture, animal husbandry, clothing manufacture, trade, raising children, construction, and so on, but the lessons can be used for any type of work such as prudence, honesty, justice, kindness, grace, insight, money and relationships.

When it comes to this general principle, we want to be careful not to make the sweeping statement that “all poor people are lazy,” because a lot of circumstances can lead to poverty, some which are out of our control. As Solomon noted elsewhere in his wisdom literature, “I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle

to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Sometimes, the richest among us are actually the laziest. Think about those who do nothing but live off their family’s money while those living in poverty are actually working really hard to try to get themselves out of that situation. But generally speaking, as a principle, laziness leads to poverty and hard work to more financial security.

We’ve all experienced this in life, haven’t we? When we work hard and make wise choices with our money, we can find ourselves building wealth over time. And we’ve seen lazy friends or family not be as successful as the diligent workers we know. It’s a general principle of life we all want to teach our children so they will work hard and make wise choices as they get older. That’s why we encourage them to do their homework, keep their rooms clean, and give their all in their sports and extracurricular activities. They’re practicing diligence and seeing the payoff for themselves now, so that when they become adults, they’ll become productive members of society.

These verses compare “working your land” to “following worthless pursuits.” In the ancient world, most men taught their trade to their sons. If your father was a carpenter or a fisherman or a farmer, you became one, too. “Working your land” could be interpreted as “doing your job,” whether farming or fishing or anything else. It’s not saying we should all grow our own food. “Worthless pursuits” is an ancient way of talking about get-rich-quick schemes that don’t involve hard work. This is another form of laziness – trying to find the “easy way out” instead of just doing the work.⁴ The point of these proverbs is that we should work diligently at whatever God has called us to do, not try to find the easy way out.

In the ancient world, a lazy son brought shame to the family (10:5). This isn’t a matter of comparing wealth but of valuing hard work. A hard-working teacher won’t make as much money as a hard-working lawyer, but both are doing what is right in God’s eyes. Nor is it a comparison of who is “more successful,” because success may look different for a teacher than for a lawyer. The character trait being commended is diligence and a good work ethic, no matter the financial result or “success” in the world’s eyes.

Reputation matters. Paul challenges the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, “...to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” Notice that the believer’s work directly impacts how the outsider (nonbeliever) views him, and by extension, how the outsider views the Lord. Seeking to live a life of ease and live off of the spoils of others’ hard work negatively impacts our testimony and mischaracterizes the Kingdom.

Q: How has a strong work ethic helped you in your life?

Q: In what ways have you seen trying to take the easy way out *not* pay off?

Q: What character qualities in workers help to advance the Kingdom?

Proverbs 18:9; 22:29; 31:13–19, 27–29 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Hard work opens doors for us and brings us honor.

Q: What do you think is significant about standing in the presence of kings in the ancient world? How can that translate to our world today?

Q: Why did the husband and children of the noble woman praise her?

In the ancient world, when someone was unusually good at his job and had gained a reputation for it, he may be brought before the king or even summoned to work in his court.⁵ Remember when Joseph was called in from the prison pit to the courts of Pharaoh to interpret his dreams (Genesis 41)? Or when Saul sent for the most skillful musician (David) to play for him to soothe his harmful spirit (1 Samuel 16)? Or when Solomon sent for the best bronze worker in the country, Hiram of Tyre, to do all the bronze work on his house (1 Kings 7)?

The king always sought out and hired the best musicians, the best artisans, the best prophets, the best administrators, the best cooks, the best of the best of every kind of job. Being called before the king was the ancient equivalent of rising to the very top in your field. Similar to becoming the CEO of your company, making five-star general, winning a Grammy, winning MVP of the World Series, or hitting #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

In none of the examples above was the person called before the king because of anything but his skills and hard work. It wasn't because of bribery or flattery or pedigree. They were all called before the king because they were the best of the best at their jobs. In fact, David was just a shepherd boy, the youngest of his family, when he was called to play for Saul, and Joseph was a prisoner when he was called before Pharaoh. The general principle is that it is the quality of your work that ultimately determines your career, not bribing or manipulating or backstabbing your way to the top. Yes, some people reach the top by using family connections, trading favors, or employing deceit. But in general (these are general principles, not guarantees), when you're really good at what you do, people will recognize it, and you will rise to the top.

This means that the best way to success is working hard at honing your craft, whatever that is. Of course, you'll have to network and do other things to advance in your career, too, but diligent hard work is an effective way to success. Not only will diligence help you get technically better at your job, it also shows people you have a strong work ethic, which is one of the biggest things employers look for. *Forbes* says that the "dirty little secret of career success is that very often work ethic and drive trump raw talent as a barometer for overall success.... Just working circles around everyone else may matter more than having superior intellect or skills."⁶ Being the smartest or most talented person in the room means nothing if you're lazy. It's hard work that will really get you places.

This doesn't mean overwork or "workaholism." That's unhealthy in the other direction. That's making an idol of your work instead of working "heartily as unto the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). Because the ultimate king we want to be able to stand before is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who will be pleased when we work hard for Him – to serve and build His kingdom, not for our own glory, honor, power or wealth.

Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:1-4). Paul viewed his labors to provide an income for himself as a tool, opening doors to missions work. By working hard, toiling "day and night" to provide for himself, he was able to communicate to communities that his motives toward them were pure and that they demonstrated his great affection toward them (1 Thessalonians 2:1-9). Paul's tentmaking may not have earned him favor with rulers, but it garnered the attention of those the apostle sought to convert. Working diligently and being as self-sufficient as possible opens doors for the gospel.

Q: How have you seen these principles work out in your life or the lives of others?

Q: In what ways do you struggle with doing your best at work? Why?

Q: If you were to do *all* your work "as unto the Lord," how would your work be different?

Week 5: Proverbs: Diligence and Laziness

Took

Main Point: Diligence is not only the godly choice, it's also the most productive choice.

Colossians 3:23 challenges believers to develop diligence in their work that is informed by their relationship to Jesus: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." This week, choose to cultivate this mindset. Viewing your work through a Colossians 3:23 lens staves off laziness that results from feeling unappreciated or a view that the work itself is menial. Working "as for the Lord" should affect your motivation and work quality.

Q: How can we encourage one another to work hard as unto the Lord?

Q: What is something you are avoiding that you need to do?

Q: How can we change our mindset of doing even mundane tasks with joy?

CHALLENGES (Please note that all these challenges include stay-at-home parents and other caregivers in our definition of "work." Whatever it is God is calling you to do with your life is your work, whether you receive a paycheck for it or not!)

THINK: What struggles do you have with doing your best at work? Laziness? Trying to take the easy way out? Simply seeing it as a drudgery instead of a gift? What difference would it make if you saw your work as a gift from God to be used for His kingdom and His purposes, whether you really like your job or not? How would that change your attitude? How would it change the way you do your job? How would it change the way you interact with people at your job?

PRAY: Thank God for the gift of your work, even the parts you don't particularly love, knowing that those things are helping you grow as a worker and as a person. Ask God for wisdom to see how to use your work to bring Him glory and build His kingdom. Ask Him for guidance and wisdom in how you can love and serve people more effectively through your work.

ACT: Practice diligence. In what ways have you been lazy – at work or at home or with friendships or family or at church? How can you do something tangible to reverse that laziness this week?

Editing by Alan Moore

Hook & Took by Shelley Reeves

¹ Tom Huddleston Jr., “How Michael Jordan Became Great: ‘Nobody will work as hard as I work’” CNBC Make It- <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/21/how-michael-jordan-became-great-nobody-will-ever-work-as-hard.html>

² Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011).

³ “Proverbs and Work,” *Theology of Work Commentary* - <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/proverbs>

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004).

⁵ Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁶ Dana Brownlee, “The Dirty Little Secret of Career Success: Work Ethic” *Forbes*, May 19, 2020 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2020/03/19/the-dirty-little-secret-of-career-success-work-ethic-may-trump-raw-talent/?sh=7d84cc7b30f8>