

THE SLUGGARD AND THE FAITHFUL

Grab your Bibles and open them to **Genesis 2**. We are going to be jumping around a bit more than usual, so get your fingers ready. Today we mark one year as a church, and I can honestly say that this last year has been one of the craziest, difficult, but in the end joyful times in my life. I can honestly say that there is nothing else that I would rather be doing right now, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for this church family. But we have work to do, we'll celebrate after the service.

Today we are finishing our study on the characters of Proverbs, and I want to reiterate my hope for what you get out of this series. This study has been 5 weeks and there is no way to do a complete study on such a full book in that amount of time. So what I and the other pastors here have done is created a structure from which you can understand the book as you read it. We have given a framework, so that you can continue to read the wisdom of God given to Solomon and apply it appropriately. I believe that too often the book of Proverbs is presented as nothing more than some helpful antidotes to make your life go better. The book of Proverbs will make your life better, but not be creating a shortcut to success. If read rightly, the truths in this book will help to reshape your mind: to change your worldview, not just improve your situation. As theologian Warren Wiersbe summarized it:

The Book of Proverbs is about godly wisdom, how to get it and how to use it. It's about priorities and principles, not get-rich-quick schemes or success formulas. It tells you, not how to make a living, but how to be skillful in the lost art of making a life.

Over the last four weeks, we have looked at:

1. How wisdom flows from our relationship with a holy God.
2. How Christ freed us from the righteous demands of the law, so that we could be righteous.
3. How Jesus rescues us from the results of our own foolishness.
4. How God adopts us into His family and promises us an overwhelming inheritance.
5. Today we will look at what all of this work that God has done means for us moving forward. How are we to respond? What does our part in God's work look like?

We begin in **Genesis 2** because it is important for us to get an understanding of where work originated. We see in verse 15, just after God created the earth and the animals, He made Adam. It says:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

So right here at the very beginning we see that God's plan for human beings was to work. We are not a people made for doing nothing. More than that, Adam had a specific job here: to keep the garden. He was to cultivate and grow and make something. Built into the human design is the desire to produce and accomplish. Work and accomplishment was God's plan for the people he had created: IT WAS GOOD. This is before sin entered the world, so you can't just chalk it up to sin. But the Fall did alter the essence of work. Flip over a page to **Genesis 3**, and in verse 17 it says:

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; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

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."

In other words, Adam's job was to tend a garden that did not produce thorns and thistles. If the curse brought forth pain and sweat to produce, this means that before the Fall, work was absolutely enjoyable. I can't even imagine the idea of work not being toil. Imagine your job with the feeling of accomplishment and the satisfaction of a good days work, but without stress and strain. Never would you hit your alarm clock in the morning and think to yourself, 'NOT TODAY.' Work was good, but we ruined it. Now work is hard.

The difficulty of work does not change what it was originally created to be. Work, even as our bodies and minds push back against it, is a gift from God, given to provide our life with meaning and purpose. What God has given us in Proverbs is a way to view work as it was originally created to be, so that we can find joy, even in difficulty, with what God has given us to do. The characters that frame this understanding for us are the SLUGGARD and the FAITHFUL.

A SLUGGISH CHARACTER

A sluggard is a person who has a broken view of work. When work becomes separated from God, and detached from our created being, than it can be viewed and judged by what it is on its own. If work has no connection, than we can put it on the scales and measure it by itself. And if you do that, you will become a sluggard. It is not simply about getting a bag of chips, 5 seasons of your favorite tv series, and finding a nice spot on the couch; being a sluggard is about taking work out of its proper place and making it something else. We will look at 3 specific errors that we are susceptible to: taking short cuts, procrastination, and having incorrect ends.

1. a sluggard looks for the shortcut

As I point out constantly, we are not a very patient people. This is true of all human beings throughout time: every person in the history of the world, if faced with the choice between having something now and waiting for it, NOW would be the obvious choice. But there is something in us that is different than many previous generations and how the majority of the world still operates. This is the land of opportunity.

We hear that and we think, sure we have choices and chances that others do not, but it is more than that. America offers the chance to turn your life around in a way that many other countries do not. In many places, the social place that you are born into determines what your life will look like. Some places the opportunity for rising above your lot do not exist. But here, with hard work, you can achieve a lot. This is a good thing.

But with this comes a side effect that most of us don't even recognize: work itself means nothing, it is all about where it will get you. Most of us would have to admit that the reason that we work is for a paycheck.

Work does earn money and that money can be used to do wonderful things, so it is not that we should all work for nothing. At the same time, if work is ONLY about the desired ends, than if we can gain that end in a different manner we will. Over the last 20 years we have seen millionaires appear and disappear in a moment with the dot com boom. We have also seen businesses fake their books to maintain a bottom line. In the great recession, we saw investors playing games with other people's money for the sake of reaching the end while bypassing the means. Many of you are thinking, well that's just business. That may be true, but what if business can only exist by skewing God's original order? Are we okay with that? We know of these ethically questionable practices because of the harm that they caused to a great number of people. So cutting corners, playing games, and finding the loophole may benefit you, you may find a way to make it work, but in the process you may be taking advantage of and hurting other people. You are padding your bottom line in a way that puts your burden of work on someone else. As Christians, there are times when we could get away with something, when we are presented with a no-brainer, and the appropriate thing for us to do is to deny the easy money to honor the God of work. Proverbs

likens this outlook to an ant. In chapter 6 (starting in v.6), it gives us a picture of how we should view work:

an unwatched worker

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.

Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.

How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

When will you arise from your sleep?

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. 6.6-11

Solomon challenges us to consider the ant; to take into account how an ant works. Specifically, he points to the fact that an ant has no boss (It isn't actually like a Bug's Life). An ant works and works and works, not because someone is watching, not because they have a review coming up, but because they were made to work. This was the basis for one of the most famous Aesop's fables: THE ANT AND THE GRASSHOPPER.

As the story goes the ants keep working and working as the grasshopper keeps choosing to take advantage of the moment. The tangible benefits of work do not seem to be there. With no paycheck the grasshopper chooses the ease of the moment. The ants keep working. At the end of the story, the weather turns cold and the food becomes scarce and the grasshopper comes to the ants looking for help. The ants turn away from him.

The ant works hard in the manner that it designed to work and when they need food the food is there. The ants don't consider that there is another way to live. They just work. There is no discussion as to whether they feel fulfilled, could get more, could make the same by working less. They work hard and they have enough.

Living in the land of opportunity leads us to believe that there is an opportunity that we are missing out on by being where we are. I have lots of family and friends who change jobs as often as they change their clothes, always have a new plan for making money, are always looking for a shortcut. I am here to tell you: IT DOESN'T WORK. Rather than being obsessed with what you don't have and making plans on how you are going to get it, work hard where you are. Don't sit on unemployment because the minimum wage job down the road would barely cover what you are getting from the government: WORK. Don't cut corners because the boss isn't looking: WORK. Stop wishing that you had the corner office. The guy who sits in there most likely took a long time to get there: WORK.

2. a sluggard is inconsistent

So the first mistake we make in relation to work is that we view it is nothing more than a means to an end, the second is that we often view work as an obstacle to overcome. In this, work becomes an enemy that you need to conquer, a pain in an otherwise good life. If work is just a pain, then why do it; I would rather do what I enjoy.

But work is not just something to do, it is a responsibility given to us by God. In Chapter 24 of Proverbs (starting in v.30), Solomon shows us what happens when we shirk our responsibilities:

an untended garden

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;

the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.

Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. 24.30-34

The sluggard here is inconsistent. He has a vineyard, which is a great blessing, but he does nothing to keep it up. The wall has been broken down allowing animals and robbers to enter. Beyond that, it was overgrown with thorns. In time, the thorns will cut off the vines entirely and the field which has the possibility of growing and producing will be of no benefit to anyone. It will be dead, all because of the unwillingness to do the work when it was needed.

We need to take work here outside of the realm of just your job, because we have stay at home moms and unemployed people who are still called have God given responsibilities that require effort, even if you have a 9-5, you still have a lot of work to do after you clock out. As Christians we have a number of responsibilities that we need to take seriously before the thorns become so great that we beyond the point of repair. It begins in the home. Husbands, repair the wall, you are the protectors:

1. of your wife: does she feel safe and loved with you?
2. your kids: do they know that your love for them is not based on their performance?
3. finances: are you burdening the financial stress for your family?
4. spiritually: are you teaching your family so that they are equipped for the attacks of Satan?
5. Yourself: Is your relationship with Jesus strong enough to keep you going as you fail at all of the above?

You need to take a serious evaluation of where you are and where the work is in your life and family. Rather than staring at the thorns and believing that it will work itself out, get the shears. The sin in your life, the habits that you know need to go away, they will kill you. My own habit: late night TV.

Ladies you are not off the hook. In Genesis 2, right after God set work up as a blessing for us, he created women to be the compliment to men. To help them, because they need help. You also have a responsibilities:

1. to your husband: does he feel supported and respected by you? Are you making the burden on his back lighter or heavier?
2. your kids: are you working toward their eventual independence or do you enjoy their dependence on you a little bit too much?
3. in the home: are you taking seriously the mundane tasks of the household that are necessary for the functioning of the family?
4. Spiritually: are you nurturing your faith, or are you planning on going to heaven on the family plan?

We have a lot of work to do. As a matter of fact, there is no arrival point. We are never done working. The thorns never stop growing. And if we focus on the thorns we will become worn down and defeated. We will hate ourselves for not being able to have full victory over some things in our lives. We will be tired of running in circles, moving from one sin to another. We will be frustrated that even though we have come a long way, we still seem so far from the finish. We will be tempted to throw in the towel. Don't, keep WORKING, all the way to the end.

3. a sluggard has incorrect motives

Which brings us to our third major mistake, we undermine work when we treat it as a means to an end or an obstacle to overcome, but we can also overvalue work by elevating it to a place of self-identifier. Many of us put our work into a place where it does not belong, it becomes a purpose in itself. This error does not lead to laziness like the others, but more often leads to workaholism. Being a workaholic may seem like the opposite of being a sluggard, but it is not. A sluggard is not

just someone who refuses to get up and do something, but also someone who works very hard in the wrong direction.

When we place so much importance upon our achievement in work, we have placed an expectation upon it that it can not hold. Whether we are talking about overvaluing the recognition that we receive at our occupation, taking pride in how well we have taught our kids, or becoming boastful about how good we are as Christians, what we are doing is making the work itself the identifier and allowing it to be our hope. This idolatry works for us when things are good. If you are successful at work, you can be confident. If your kids are obedient and talented, you can feel like a great parent. If your life looks good, you can feel better than others. But when that carpet gets pulled out from under you, you will meet despair. There are investment bankers splattered on the streets of Manhattan that prove that the fall from glory is fast. There are plenty of ruined marriages that could not withstand a time of trial.

When it comes to work what we need more than anything else is a healthy theology of work. One that can help us put work back into its created order, place the proper weight upon it, and motivate us to engage in it, lest we become just another sluggard in this world full of bad workers.

THE FAITHFUL ALTERNATIVE

God provides a perfect description for us of what it means to be a faithful worker in a broken world. This definition is given by the Apostle Paul to his protégé, a young pastor named Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2.4-7 it says this:

No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. 2 Timothy 2.4-7

Like the ant and the lazy gardener we have already met, the ideal worker is given to us in three characters: the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer.

The soldier.

The soldier works to please the one who enlisted him. In other words, his status as a soldier was secured by someone else and he now works as a soldier for someone else's glory. We also have been enlisted. As 1 Peter 2 reminds us:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are now part of a new mission and we work out of the position that has been given to us. We have been adopted into the family of God, not because He thought we seemed like a really desirable addition to His team, but because of His mercy. He lived the perfect life. He died the perfect death. He rose again. WHY? To bring to Himself a people for His own possession. And what are these people to do? Proclaim His excellence. How? By working in every area of our lives to show how wonderful our God is. To take seriously the life that we have been called to as a chosen race, a people set apart by God. We fight against sin, we care for our families, we work hard at our jobs, because we are working to please the one who redeemed us.

The athlete.

The athlete is one who competes according to the rules. There are no shortcuts in a race. People have tried. There is the story of a major marathon runner who took a shortcut and thought she would just hop out of the bushes at the end and jog into victory. But she was disqualified. We have seen cyclists disqualified for using performance enhancing drugs. In the realm of this life, there are

athletes who get away with it, but when it comes to our relationship to a Holy God, a God of justice, there is no side door. There is no magic pill. There is nothing that you can do to fix your problems and make everything okay. The Christian life is about pursuing God, turning away from our sin, and working hard. TODAY, TOMORROW, and every day until you are done with this life. As another pastor eloquently put it:

No character worth building up is built without continuous effort. If a man does not labour to be good, he will surely become bad. It is an old axiom that no man attains superlative wickedness all at once, and most certainly no man leaps to the height of the goodness possible to his nature by one spring. He has laboriously, and step by step, to climb the hill. Progress in moral character is secured by long-continued walking upwards, not by a jump.

The farmer.

Finally, we have the farmer who works hard and gets the first share of the crops. As you turn your heart toward Jesus and acknowledge Him as the source of your work; as you work continually transforming your life and heart slowly but surely, there will be positive benefits: Crops. As Paul points out it is the hard worker who will receive them. In other words, God promises, as we saw last week, that those who appeal to His created order and work hard to give Him the glory that is His will receive benefit in this life. As we pointed out last week that does not just mean money, though working hard will earn that. It means that your life will be balanced toward eternity. As Solomon puts it in Ecclesiastes 3.9-13:

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

I challenge you to return to the Biblical view of work, to take hold of the GIFT that God has given and to act out of that

1. Work hard

2. Work for His glory

3. Work continually

see what God does to your life as you do.