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Proverbs #8

Sermon Summary #8

Proverbs on the Sluggard

Proverbs 6:6-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Typically, when the apostle Paul or some other biblical author issues a stern warning to separate or stay away from a particular person, you expect it to be based on something fairly serious. Perhaps the individual has denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Or maybe they are living in open and defiant sexual sin or are engaged in some form of idolatrous worship or perhaps are guilty of repeated instances of theft. So, when I come to 2 Thessalonians 3, verse 6, and I hear Paul say that we are to “keep away” from certain people I expect him to tell us that they are guilty of dividing the church or of unrepentant drunkenness or adultery. But no, he says in vv. 11-12, “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

In the immediately preceding verse Paul said these now famous words: ***“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat”*** (2 Thess. 3:10b). Clearly there was a problem in the church at Thessalonica. Some have suggested that certain Christians in the church in that city had become so obsessed and preoccupied with the possibility of Christ’s soon return that they quit their jobs and, although healthy and able to work, refused to support themselves and their families. Instead, they became what Paul refers to as “busybodies,” squandering time while meddling in the affairs of other people, making it almost impossible for them to get their work done, all in the name of being spiritual and zealous about the second coming of Jesus. They also likely expected, indeed sinfully presumed, that others would supply their needs and feed their families while they were off somewhere engaged in more “spiritual” activity.

Paul’s command is to the point: If they are *able* to work, but *unwilling*, don’t let them eat. In other words, don’t support them out of a false sense of love and charity; otherwise you will only encourage their sloth and laziness.

2 Thessalonians 3 is not the only place in God’s Word where the dignity of work and the sin of sloth are mentioned. In fact, there are nearly two dozen passages in Proverbs alone where this problem is addressed. And today we are going to look at several of them.

Before we begin, let me mention three things that you need to keep in mind. **First**, Paul is very clear in 2 Thessalonians 3:10b that he has in mind those who are ***“not willing”*** to work.” He’s not talking about the man or woman who is *unable* to work. There are a number of reasons why a person who is willing to work might not be employed. He/she may be suffering from some physical illness or disability that makes work impossible at the moment. Others may want to work and wish they could but for reasons beyond their control there simply isn’t a job available. Economic depression may be the reason for their failure to work. They are looking for work and would be quick to take whatever job might come their way, but the times are tough and nothing is available. Or someone may be in between jobs. The promise of employment is there but there is a time gap through which they remain

unemployed. Neither Paul nor the authors of Proverbs are condemning such individuals. *So, if you are unemployed through no fault of your own, please don't take offense at what you are about to hear.*

What Paul and the book of Proverbs address is the man or woman who is physically and mentally capable of working and supporting themselves and their families but refuses to do so. This is the sort of person who is always making lame and baseless excuses why they aren't working. This is the sort of person who is, for lack of a better way of putting it, *sinfully slothful*. This is the person who is lazy. This is the person who also would try to excuse their sloth by portraying themselves as super spiritual and devoted to doing the Lord's work when it comes their way. So, some of you should not feel guilty for what you are about to hear, whereas others of you should and, I hope, will.

The **second** thing to keep in mind is that much of what Proverbs says about the lazy, slothful couch potato is cast in rather humorous and even sarcastic terms. Some might be put off by this, or even offended, but such is the nature of sloth that it evidently justifies being described in this manner. So be prepared.

One **final** thing. The underlying assumption in all that we'll see today is that *work has inherent, intrinsic dignity*. Work is not the result of the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. God commanded Adam to work before his sinful rebellion. Pain and frustration were added to mankind's work because of the fall, but work itself is always viewed as divinely ordained. ***All work is sacred!*** All work is an act of obedience to God. Thus all work is, in a manner of speaking, worship.

Many of you consider what I do for a living to be sacred, while what you do is secular. Nonsense! In Ephesians 6:6 Paul describes the person who works as "doing the will of God from the heart," and in Colossians 3:23 he says, "Whatever you do (in terms of your job or your work), work heartily, *as for the Lord and not for men*, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. ***You are serving the Lord Christ.***" That's right: whether you dig a ditch so that a sewer line can be installed or preach a sermon on a Sunday or change a diaper on a Wednesday or argue a case in a court of law, all work is to be done for the Lord as an act of obedience and worship unto him. No one said it better than the 16th century Protestant Reformer Martin Luther:

"Our natural reason . . . takes a look at married life . . . and says, 'alas, must I rock the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed . . ., labor at my trade?' What then does the Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. . . . When a father goes ahead and washes diapers . . . God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling – not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith" (from the *Estate of Marriage*).

(1) Proverbs 6:6-11 (cf. 20:13)

"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" (Prov. 6:6-11).

There is something of a rebuke in this exhortation. After all, that a human being created in the image of God himself should have to learn a lesson about hard work from an ant, of all things, does not speak well of our wisdom or maturity!

The most important thing to note is that the ant is both *self-disciplined and a self-starter*; the ant doesn't need prodding to work or someone constantly looking over his shoulder (do ants have shoulders?) to motivate him to get the job done. He accomplishes everything without a "chief, officer, or ruler." Listen again to what Paul says about this in Colossians 3:22-23,

"Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (Col. 3:22-23).

Consider Paul's words, "*eye-service*" and "*people-pleasers*." Let me illustrate what he means. Most of you are too young to remember the TV commercial for Mennen's Skin Bracer after-shave lotion. The boss of the office typically used an obnoxious after-shave lotion whose odor was so strong that it would quite literally go before him. So, his employees in the office would often be playing games or sleeping until they caught a whiff of the odor of his after shave. They would immediately leap into action and by the time the boss actually arrived they were seen working hard. When the boss changed to Mennen's Skin Bracer he no longer gave off an early signal of his impending arrival, and, as you might guess, he arrived at work only to catch his employees asleep on the job.

The point is that they were all giving only "eye-service" as "people-pleasers" in their work. They didn't work on the basis of principle: an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. They only worked when the boss's eye was upon them, when they knew he was watching. Paul is saying that no Christian should behave that way. You work hard because that is what godliness requires of you, regardless of who is or is not around to keep an eye on your performance.

Such is the ant. He doesn't work hard because some "chief, officer, or ruler" is standing watch over him. So also should it be with the Christian! Even when your work is drudgery, oppressive, boring, and you labor under poor conditions for a pathetically low wage, do your work as unto the Lord, not as unto your earthly employer.

The warning to the sluggard is in vv. 9-11. Drowsiness or sleepiness is the ally of sloth and the enemy of diligent hard work. Wake up, says Solomon! *Stop hitting the snooze button on your alarm clock*. If you continue to justify your laziness by insisting that you need a little more sleep and a little more slumber, before you know it poverty will take hold of you like a robber does his victim at night.

(2) Proverbs 10:26

"Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him" (Prov. 10:26).

These are two images designed to portray something very, very unpleasant, even painful. Vinegar and smoke are irritants. So, too, is the lazy man or woman who is trusted by someone to deliver a message on time or to complete

some assigned task. The sluggard procrastinates and dithers away time, all at the expense of the person who hired him.

(3) Proverbs 12:24

“The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor” (Prov. 12:24).

His point is that lazy, half-hearted effort can easily lead to slavery. Don’t forget that in the ancient world if you couldn’t pay your debts you quite literally were sold into *economic slavery*. It had nothing to do with race or one’s skin color. You became the slave of your creditor until you worked off what you owed him.

However, don’t make more of this than is intended. He’s not saying that all poor people are lazy, nor is he saying that all lazy people are poor. Some people who work hard suffer lack for other reasons. And in some instances those who are quite lazy experience a windfall or inheritance or by sheer luck fall into great wealth. Remember that these are general principles, not rigid rules that allow no exceptions.

(4) Proverbs 12:27

“Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth” (Prov. 12:27).

The point is either that the sluggard is either too lazy to hunt for food and thus has nothing to cook and hence nothing to eat, or that once he catches his prey he’s too darn lazy even to create a fire and roast it! He is full of good intentions and majestic plans, but never follows through. “He only roasts his game in his head. He only tastes roast game in his imagination. Even if he gets up off the couch and actually bags his prize, he lacks the discipline to skin it out and cook it” (John Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 277).

(5) Proverbs 13:4

“The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied” (Prov. 13:4).

The sluggard desires and craves the gain and pleasures which diligence would bring, but he is unwilling to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices to make it happen. He’s the sort of person who longs to make straight A’s in school but refuses to study, or who yearns for great wealth but never bothers to get a job.

(6) Proverbs 14:23

“In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty” (Prov. 14:23; cf. 19:15).

The sluggard can talk a great game! He can carry on and on about his dreams and his gifts and the experiences he's had in life, as well as the day soon coming when "his ship will come in" and he'll forever live in the lap of wealth. But mere talk without action leads to poverty. I don't know who wrote it, but this simple poem captures this proverb:

“Two brothers once lived down this way,
And one was DO and the other SAY;
If streets were dirty, taxes high,
Or schools were crowded, Say would cry:
‘My, what a town!’ But brother Do
Would set to work and make things new.
And while Do worked, Say still would cry:
‘He does it wrong, I know that I
Could do it right.’ So, all the day,
Was heard the clank of brother Say.
But this one fact from none was hid,
Say always talked, Do always did.”

(7) Proverbs 15:19

“The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway” (Prov. 15:19).

It may be that he's talking about a man so lazy that he refuses to trim his own hedges and thus catches his clothes in the thorns as he walks along. Or it may simply mean that the sluggard is like a man whose path is forever hedged around, thereby making genuine progress and success impossible.

But what's most important is that in this verse *the “sluggard” is contrasted with the “upright.”* The point is that *laziness is a sin!* It's not a matter of personality type or mental intelligence or even of opportunity. Sloth is sin!

(8) Proverbs 16:26

“A worker's appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on” (Prov. 16:26).

Drudgery and laziness have no greater friend than hunger! An empty stomach will drive a man to overcome his sloth and get to work. Thus even hunger can be a blessing from God in that it stirs one to work hard. This is why Paul prohibited the giving of food to the man who can work but won't (2 Thess. 3). To feed a sluggard will only perpetuate and intensify his laziness.

(9) Proverbs 18:9

“Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys” (Prov. 18:9).

The word “destroys” may mean something like “wastes” in the sense that he wastes or squanders time and opportunity. Stop “killing time” and start to “redeem” it! On the other hand, there may be another way of reading this passage. In saying that the sluggard is “a brother” to the man who destroys, it may be telling us that the lazy man is similar to or somehow in the same class as the prodigal, that is, the man who has a lot of money and simply destroys it by spending it on worthless pursuits. In other words, *the sluggard wastes opportunities to gain wealth while the other man destroys it by spending everything he has.*

(10) Proverbs 19:24 (26:15)

“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth” (Prov. 19:24; 26:15).

Don't forget that people in ancient times rarely used utensils to eat: no forks or knives or spoons. There would be a common dish in front of them and they would all dip their hands in to take hold of food. The sluggard is so lazy that if he's lucky enough to grab hold of something to eat he's too darn lazy to lift the food to his mouth! It just takes more energy and effort than he's willing to expend!

(11) Proverbs 20:4

“The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing” (Prov. 20:4).

The autumn is the cold season, so the sluggard uses the discomfort of weather to excuse his laziness. “It's just too cold out there to plow and plant.” But when harvest time comes he has no crop and thus nothing to eat. This is what lazy people are like: they are not willing to do the spade work, so to speak, that is necessary to reap a harvest. He may well have a great goal in mind but is too lazy to do what it takes to pursue it.

(12) Proverbs 21:25-26

“The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back” (Prov. 21:25-26).

The sluggard substitutes wishing for working. His desires ultimately kill him because they remain forever unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Note also how once again the lazy person is contrasted with the righteous! The righteous man is the hard working man who earns much, not so that he might spend it on himself but so that he might be generous to those who are genuinely needy.

(13) Proverbs 22:13

“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!’” (Prov. 22:13).

This verse is a comic portrayal of the absurd lengths to which the lazy person will go to justify doing nothing. He rationalizes his sloth by insisting that there’s a lion on the loose and if he goes out to work he’ll surely be eaten alive. It’s instructive to note how laziness “is fertile soil for paranoia and excuses” (Kitchen, 501).

(14) Proverbs 26:14

“As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed” (Prov. 26:14).

There are numerous interpretations of this text, but most likely he’s saying that just as a door is stationary, anchored to its hinges, so too is the sluggard anchored to his bed. The door moves but never actually goes anywhere. In the same way the sluggard flops from side to side but never emerges from his bed!

(15) Proverbs 26:16

“The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly” (Prov. 26:16).

Laziness leads to conceit! The sluggard says to himself: “I can get by without working; only an idiot spends his time on a job that can potentially injure his body. And working like that will rob him from really enjoying life.” The point is that all too often nothing you can say will persuade him that his laziness is life-threatening. You can bring six other wise men with you to speak truth into his life and he’ll still insist he’s smarter than all of you combined.

In summary, let’s be careful not to draw the wrong conclusions:

First, nothing that we’ve seen in Proverbs or in Paul or anywhere else in Scripture means we shouldn’t take time to enjoy life away from our work. We must be careful to rest and be renewed. Recreation and leisure are a gift of God and we shouldn’t treat them as if they were fleshly or sinful.

Second, nothing that we've seen in any of these texts justifies a work-aholic approach to our jobs.

That being said, I want to leave you with Paul's loving but stern warning in 1 Timothy 5:8 – "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."