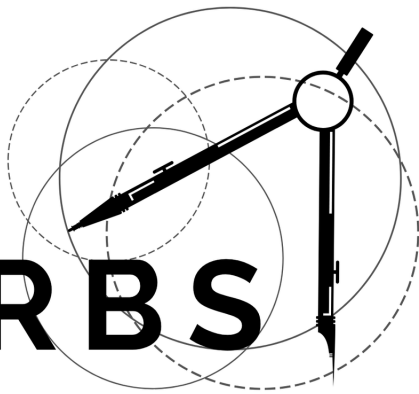




PROVERBS

SKILL IN THE ART OF LIVING

PART EIGHT – “ANTS, SLUGGARDS & DILIGENCE”

By Pastor Robert MacDonald

Proverbs 6:6-11

Living the Slug Lyfe¹

⁶ “Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!

⁷ It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,

⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.

⁹ How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?

¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest –

¹¹ and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man.”

Proverbs 6:6-11

We should recognize that the ‘sluggard’ is not meant to a specific person. One of the features of Proverbs is that it personifies patterns of living that exist in all of us. The word isn’t meant to single us out, as much as it’s meant to caution us away from destructive patterns.

Laziness as a Resistance to the Demands of Love

In her book *Glittering Vices*², philosophy professor Rebecca De Young defines ‘sloth’ as “Resistance to the demands of love.” She points to a long history of theologians wrestling with the sin of sloth, and states: “...sloth has more to do with being lazy about love than lazy about our work.”

Beth-Av: The Communal Nature of Work

Most Israelites were part of a social unit called a ‘Beth-Av’ – literally ‘house of the father.’ In this structure, a patriarch would live on a piece of property along with his descendants. If he had adult sons, they would live in a house right next to his, along with their families. Archeologists estimate that each piece of property had from 50 to 100 people on it, including poorer working families. This means that work was usually a family affair.³ Your alarm clock was the sun, and sleeping in or slacking off just meant, at best, more work for everyone

NOTES

¹ Not a spelling error:) An archaic form of spelling that is meant to include a broader view of life

² De Young, Rebecca. (01 June 2009). *Glittering Vices*. Baker Publishing Group.

³ One place we can look is the book of Ruth, which gives a snapshot into work life around harvest time. We see men working shoulder to shoulder in the fields, leaving some of their harvest behind for the poor to “glean” – come through and pick it up.

else. At worst, it meant people going hungry; and just like in ancient Israel, **laziness does damage**.

Proverbs 21:25-26

²⁵ "The craving of a sluggard will be the death of him,
because his hands refuse to work.

²⁶ All day long he craves for more,
but the righteous give without sparing."

Proverbs 10:26

²⁶ "As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so are sluggards to those who send them."

Laziness is a matter of timing

Part of what makes laziness work is that it often consists of doing technically good things.

Look at verse 9 of our passage:

⁹ How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?⁴

Proverbs 6:9

Sleep is good only when it's happening at the proper time. If we don't properly understand our duties and responsibilities, good things, like work, activities and social outings, can be expressions of laziness.

Laziness is Incremental

The path to laziness is often incremental. Look at how our passage puts it:

¹⁰ "A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest -"

Proverbs 6:10

Notice the repetition of 'little.' It's what we call 'procrastination.' The 'I'll get to it latering,' that many of us do when we're anxious or afraid of opening up the spooky can of worms that is a task.

I love the very beginning of Psalm 1:

¹ "Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,"

There's so much wisdom in this verse – notice 'walk,' then 'stand,' then 'sit.' Concise poetry that tells us so much about how we slide away from the good path. Step. By. Step.

Laziness Likes Excuses

And the incremental pull of laziness makes it feel rational.

Proverbs 26:16

"A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven people
who answer discreetly."

But brains are excuse factories.

One of my favourite proverbs is Proverbs 22:13 –

¹³ "The sluggard says, 'There's a lion outside!
I'll be killed in the public square!'"

Biblical scholar Robert Alter⁵ points out that the Hebrew phrase is literally 'I shall be murdered;' it's meant to be a silly image. Maybe a modern version would be: 'I can't come to work today. There are cars. I'm going to be mowed down in a hit and run.'

Part of becoming a diligent person is learning to selectively short-circuit our brains, close our eyes and just dive into the difficult thing ahead of us. Sometimes, rationalizing is not your friend.

Laziness is Destructive

Hebrew Laziness proverbs tend to use the conventional term 'atsel' (אֶסֶל) (ah-tsale), translated 'sluggard' or 'lazybones.' They occasionally use the word 'rmiyah' (רִמְיָה) (reh-mee-yah) – a word that typically means treacherous, or deceitful, but can also mean lazy.⁶

NOTES

⁵ Alter, Robert. (18 Dec 2018). The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary. W.W. Norton & Company.

⁶ Proverbs 10:4; 12:24, 27; 19:15

⁴ See also Proverbs 10:5 and 19:15

This overlap between deceit, like being a con-man, and not getting your work done is interesting. The choice of this word highlights the fact that laziness is destructive. If we return to our passage, looking at Proverbs 6:11, we see the conclusion of this section – the fate of the sluggard:

*“and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man.”*

What our text is highlighting is that there are real, scary, long-term consequences to inaction; and it sneaks up on you. All the way along, there are no alarm bells. But by the time we feel the fire under our butts, it's too late.

Proverbs 24:30-31 gives us a picture of how laziness makes life more difficult in the long-term.

³⁰“I went past the field of a sluggard,
past the vineyard of someone who has no sense;
³¹ thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.”

Not only has the sluggard lost his source of food, but enormous amounts of additional, painful effort is now needed to get the farm back in working order.

It's the great lie of laziness – it tells us 'life is hard, but here's a shortcut.' It's that part of us that wonders...do I really need to do dishes? It obscures the destructive future from our naïve present selves. But the shortcuts multiply pain down the road.

Excursus – Mental Illness, Disability, and Responsibility

For many, laziness tends to mean an ‘unwillingness’ to work or accomplish a certain task. But many people find themselves ‘unable’ – not ‘unwilling.’ For those with a physical or mental disability, wrestling with chronic pain, limitations posed by anxiety, depression or even Autism or ADHD. Or even new parents, those with aging parents or disabled family members. The line between ‘unwilling’ and ‘unable’ is complicated.

In the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus tells of three different people, each having a different amount of resources and abilities. The question we are left with isn't 'how much have you accomplished' - it's 'what have I done with what I've been given.'

What is the Opposite of Laziness?

What's the opposite of laziness? If we aren't careful, we can make some dangerous assumptions. Let's look at a couple of bad antonyms for laziness.

Bad Antonym 1: Busyness

The first bad antonym is Busyness. Busyness sounds like the opposite of laziness. But the never-ending nature of busyness slowly kills us. It cultivates a sort of spiritual sloth, and doesn't give us the space we need to make thoughtful, wise choices in our lives.

God gives His people true rest. Israel has one day a week where no work is permitted whatsoever. Check Pastor Ricky's sermon on Sabbath from last fall for a good dive into that topic. There are mandatory holidays, and every seven years, you just stop planting stuff for a whole year. Every fifty years, you do that two years in a row. Rest. Genuine, turn your phone off kind of rest, is essential for living a life of wisdom and diligence.

NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Bad Antonym 2: Productivity

A second bad antonym is Productivity. Sometimes I've used the words 'lazy' and 'unproductive' interchangeably. But for Biblical wisdom, productivity isn't automatically good.

In her book *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, Biblical scholar Ellen F. Davis states that the opposite of sloth "is not work merely, but good work."⁷

We need to ask: 'producing what? For whom? To what end?' We can work hard and leave the world and our communities worse-off. Monopolizing, deceitful sales practices, taking advantage of the poor, can all be categorized as 'productive' in some way or another. Diligence will never call us there.

Learning Diligence from Ants

Not busyness, not productivity. The word we get consistently as an antonym to laziness is diligence. If laziness does damage, diligence brings life. A good working definition of diligence is love at work. **Diligence is love at work.**

Let's look at Proverbs 6 again:

⁶ Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!

⁷ It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,

⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.

Proverbs 6:6-8

We'll highlight three ways that ants can help us think about what diligence looks like for us:

1. What are my limitations?

First, ants are small. They have limitations, like us. Being diligent starts with knowing our own limitations and capabilities. We ask: What are my limitations? Being diligent requires a strong sense of self-awareness.

2. What are my needs?

Second, ants are communal. They have needs. Like ants, we weren't created to be self-sufficient. We ask: What are my needs? When we don't accurately recognize and express our own needs, the people around us suffer.

3. What am I responsible for?

Third, ants are responsible. Each one has a job to do, and if they don't do that job, it doesn't get done. That's the main point of this passage we're looking at – know what your responsibilities are and take ownership. So we ask: What am I responsible for? The answer is different for each of us.

Diligence is Love At Work

Proverbs begins with lady Wisdom – the path of skillful living – calling out to us, and ends with a picture of how wise, diligent living brings blessing to everyone.

The diligent woman:

"Brings...good, not harm," Proverbs 31:12.

"...provides food for her family..." Proverbs 31:15

"She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy." – Proverbs 31:20

Laziness destroys and impoverishes. Diligence gives, builds, strengthens. It blesses.

For those of us who have committed our lives to following Jesus, our path of discipleship calls us to diligent living.

Who demonstrated love at work more than Jesus? Loving and blessing those around him, healing, feeding, teaching, liberating. Jesus wasn't busy. He took time away to rest. When wrestling with the grueling path of the crucifixion in Gethsemane, He chose us. The whole world is blessed. The cross is the most concrete act of love in human history. It's the symbol of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**" ²⁵ **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**

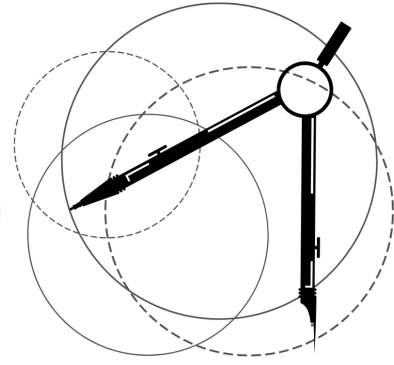
Matthew 16:24-25

⁷ Davis, Ellen F. (20 Nov 2008). *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge University Press.

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SKILL IN THE ART OF LIVING

Discussion



Reflection

- Rebecca De Young defines “sloth” as “Resistance to the demands of love.” What are the demands of love in your life right now?
- Who do you know that’s a great example of diligence? What can you learn from them?

Read Matthew 25:14-30

- What are some of your unique capabilities?
- What are some of your unique limitations?
- What does a self-aware approach to diligence look like for you?

Prayer

Thank God for the ways that you have been blessed by the diligence of others. Ask God for to give you what you need to meet the demands of love around you and grow on the path of diligence.

APPENDIX: HOW TO USE PROVERBS

This summer, our hope as a church is to steep ourselves in the wisdom of Proverbs. But this book invites a different approach than most others. The Book of Proverbs isn't meant to be speed-read—it's a book to sit with, to meditate on, to 'chew the cud,' as the rabbis would say.

- Chapters 1–9 serve as the introduction. They give us the book's purpose, a guiding epigraph (1:7), and ten speeches from a father to a son about wisdom. This section works well with a 'chapter-a-day' reading rhythm.
- Chapters 10–30 contain collections of short, poetic couplets. These proverbs are often loosely connected but are mostly designed to stand alone—ideal for slow, focused meditation and memorization.

GENERAL GOALS FOR READING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Go Slow	Stop when something grabs your attention. Sit with it. If it takes three years to get through the book, that's perfectly fine.
Memorize Individual Proverbs	These sayings are written poetically so we can remember and apply them. Like the phrase "fail to plan and you plan to fail"—it sticks because of the way it's worded.
Read in Multiple Translations/Versions	English versions vary in how they handle the poetry. When meditating on a proverb, read it in several translations. While the King James Version isn't always clearest elsewhere, it often preserves the poetic force of Proverbs well, thanks to its translators' classical training.
Be Biased Toward Action	Proverbs are meant to be lived. The goal of meditation is obedience. If all you do this summer is live out one proverb, that's a win.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERNALIZING PROVERBS

Rewrite Proverbs in a Journal.	Use a general journal or a dedicated wisdom notebook. Rewriting helps with memorization and makes the proverb more personally accessible. You might even blend a few translations into a version that sticks best for you.
Put Them in Front of Your Eyes	Use sticky notes or other visible reminders. Place proverbs on your fridge, your desk, your mirror—anywhere you'll see them often.
Practice Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)	Read: Slowly read a chapter or section of Proverbs several times. Look for a verse that 'leaps off the page.' Meditate: Reflect on that proverb. What is it saying? Have you seen this truth in your life? Why might God be highlighting it now? Pray: Talk to God about what you're noticing. Ask for wisdom and strength to live it out. Contemplate: Spend a few quiet moments in God's presence, letting the proverb stick to your soul.