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Sermon Notes

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On Work, Leisure, and Laziness

Proverbs

As the sun makes its twenty-four hour circuit over the face of this earth, its light shines on a world at work... incessantly at work

- It shines on a young investment banker in Tokyo as he chats on his cell phone and arranges a stock purchase on the Nikkei stock exchange for a wealthy client
- It shines on the rice farmer in Thailand, bending over double to insert rice plants in a watery paddy which he has carved from a steep hillside
- It shines on a Siberian forester harvesting Siberian fir trees near Irkutsk
- Through windows in laboratories in Germany, the sunlight shines on chemists developing new polymers for use in biomedical application
- The sunlight streams down on talented artists on the left bank of Seine in Paris, where they develop their skills with oils on canvas
- The sunlight shines on the walks of Harvard Yard and MIT, where professors hurry to their next lectures
- It glows over the back of a sanitation truck running through the neighborhoods of Chicago, where a strong man gets ready to jump down and empty of cluster of trash cans
- The sunlight illuminates a park in Sacramento where stay at home moms talk to each other about parenting and watch their toddlers play
- It shines on the most dangerous occupation in the world—commercial fishermen seeking Alaska King crab in the thrashing and frigid waters of the Bering Sea off the Aleutian islands

This is a WORLD busy at work!! But the Bible stands over each and every one of the workers—from the Japanese investment banker to the Alaskan crab fisherman, and everyone in between—and asks this question: **why do you do what you do? Why do you work?**

There's a famous story about a traveler in the Middle Ages, who visited a city where many stone cutters were working. Approaching several, he asked the same question:

"What are you doing?"

The first stonecutter he met replied, **"I'm cutting stone. It's dull work, but it pays the bills."**

A second stonecutter responded, **"I'm the best stone cutter in the land. Look at the smoothness of this stone, how perfect the edges are."**

A third pointed to a foundation several yards away, and said, **"I'm building a cathedral."**

One lacked purpose altogether. The second was proud of the work he did. But the third clearly had a sense of purpose, of the greater reason for his work.

So many people just "mail it in" when it comes to their work... they work simply to survive, to live... living from paycheck to paycheck:

Others have a career and develop it because of the joy and satisfaction they get out of it... to be the best at what they do

Others they like to feel happy with the work they do and feel that they are building a cathedral.

But the fact is, even cathedrals will not last forever:

Solomon understood the limits of even great and glorious building projects:

Ecclesiastes 2:4-6 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

So why should we work so hard? To feed our bellies and those of our families? To bring us joy and satisfaction in projects and accomplishments?

The deepest answer the Bible gives to the question is this one:

John 17:4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

The Bible gives us a grand, overarching motive for all our work: the glory of God as He builds a Kingdom

So, our work should be for the glory of God and for the growth of His Kingdom...

BUT does the Bible have any PRACTICAL wisdom about our lives of work? Either about our careers or just how we go about menial chores?

Yes it does, and that book is PROVERBS

I. Balance in Work and Play: A Timeless Challenge

A. Are we Workaholics or Sluggards?

1. America struggles with extremes on the issue of work and play
2. On the one hand, there are some who tend toward workaholism... 70-80 hour workweeks
 - a. One of my first jobs, TriSolarCorp... made solar-powered water pumps founder worked an average of 100 hours per week; chain-smoker, drinker, divorced, no family life
 - b. Workaholics can't stop working or thinking about work... they drive themselves and people around them to achieve constantly
 - c. Whole corporations can be driven by the ambition of the CEO...
 - d. They are never satisfied, and tend to be miserable people
 - e. One thinks about the executives on the fast track to career success; the young lawyer driven to become partner; the entrepreneur whose drive to make his company succeed consumes his life
3. Electronic technology makes constant work more possible
 - a. The age of the wireless laptop, the Blackberry, the cell phone... it is possible to stay in touch and to make business deals or achieve work-related tasks CONSTANTLY
4. SO... there are SOME in America who are addicted to their own achievements, pridefully getting their self-worth out of what they accomplish
5. AND YET... America seems EVEN MORE ADDICTED TO LEISURE than to work!!
 - a. Bumper-stickers celebrate this addiction, in many different ways

- A bad day fishing is better than a good day at the office
- Work fascinates me—I can sit and watch it for hours
- If work is so terrific, how come they have to pay you to do it?
- I'm stuck here, but my head is stuck on WEEKEND
- Hard work has a future payoff—laziness pays off now!
- I owe, I owe, so off to work I go
 - b. That last one hits close to home... many Americans overspend on their lifestyles... running credit cards up to the max, living for the latest electronic device from Best Buy... then work only exists to pay off those debts
 - c. Americans have almost endless ways to spend leisure time... addicted to hobbies, sports, computer/video games, vacations, etc.

B. The Church Over the Ages: Struggling with Both Work and Leisure

1. Balance has been very difficult to achieve throughout church history
2. Early in church history, the **extreme ascetics** fled worldly life and went to live in the desert to fast and pray and labor with unremitting commitment
3. The Puritans were famous for their “Puritan work ethic”... they took delight in their labor to the glory of God, and looked at any lawful calling as a form of worship to the Almighty
4. BUT they also were extremely skeptical of leisure time... of recreation... they rested very uneasily and generally wrote and spoke against sports or play of most types
5. Generally very few in church history have thought through work and leisure in a balanced way

II. The Blessing and Cursing of Work

A. Work a Blessing from God

1. God Himself labored with great skill in crafting the Universe... AND rested afterward

Genesis 1:31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-- the sixth day. ... Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

2. God entrusted meaningful work to the human race

Genesis 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

B. Work Cursed by God

Genesis 3:17-19 "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food

C. Work Mysterious: Cause and Effect, Under the Sovereignty of God

1. Now God uses our efforts, our labors, to produce effects
2. Even though sinful, man can still accomplish incredible things with his knowledge and technology
3. BUT YET God oversees human labor, causes it to sink back into the dust, and builds His Kingdom in His own way... yes, using human labor to make a difference, but not depending on it

III. Proverbs: Celebrating the Glory and Rewards of Labor

A. Introducing... the Ant!

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

1. Held out as a role model for us
2. One of the most amazing creatures God ever made
 - a. Ants never sleep; There are over one million ants for every single human being on earth!!
 - b. Ants can lift over fifty times their body weight with their mouths, akin to you or I lifting a car
 - c. All ants live in communities... colonies
 - d. The largest ant colony ever found was located in Italy and northern Spain, and it stretched a total of 3600 miles, containing millions of nests and billions of ants
 - e. Every ant has a specific function
 - i) Soldier ants protect the rest of the colony from enemies

- ii) Harvester ants store seeds for use as food; some of these ants chew the seeds and turn them into a kind of ant bread; others take out wet seeds to dry them in the sun
- iii) Weaver ants use their larvae, which produce silk thread to sew together leaves for shelters
- iv) Carpenter ants hollow out tree stumps for use as nests
- v) Slave maker ants raid other ant colonies and carry off larvae; these slave ants then grow up to do the work of the colony

3. Solomon urges the sluggard to observe the ant for its WORK ETHIC

Proverbs 6:7-8 It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, ⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

- a. The issue is DEDICATION to the task... SELF-MOTIVATION... and FORESIGHT... making the most of TODAY for the sake of tomorrow
- b. The essence of the sluggard is PROCRASTINATION... putting off to tomorrow what should be done today
- c. Also a poor worker is one who will only work when someone is watching, directly overseeing... when the boss's back is turned, the person immediately begins to slack off

B. The Rewards of Labor

- 1. Satisfaction of basic necessities: food, clothing, shelter

Proverbs 16:26 The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on.

- This has to do with MOTIVATION... work is hard, and we sometimes reach the end of our normal resources; if a man is desperate enough, he will do ANYTHING to meet the needs of his body (and by extension, of his family)
 - Examples: “will work for food” during the Depression... desperate men willing to do extreme things to keep a job
- 2. Abundant food and blessing... even wealth!!

Proverbs 10:4 Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.

- 3. Skill results in advancement and wider range of blessings

Proverbs 22:29 Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.

- 4. Hard work also results in authority and greater responsibility

Proverbs 12:24 Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.

5. Desires are fulfilled

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

6. A hard worker will be praised and rewarded

The virtuous wife:

Proverbs 31:13-18 She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. ¹⁴ She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. ¹⁵ She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls

Proverbs 31:31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

So, Proverbs gives a sweeping endorsement of the value of productive labor

Proverbs 14:23 All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.

C. Some Practical Wisdom on Work

1. Work your fields and avoid fantasies

Proverbs 28:19 He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty.

Application: get-rich-quick schemes... “impressions of the Holy Spirit”...

2. Prioritize your tasks wisely

Proverbs 24:27 Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house.

3. Be honest in business

Proverbs 16:11 Honest scales and balances are from the LORD; all the weights in the bag are of his making.

4. Take care of your “equipment”... prize your possessions

Proverbs 27:23 Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds

This is some of the wisdom God gave Solomon for a lifestyle of hard work... it is wise, prosperous, orderly, and satisfying

So the Lord envisages a life that is 6/7ths hard diligent labor... what about rest? What about leisure? What about recreation???

Is there a LIMIT to work???

IV. The Blessings and Purpose of Leisure

A. Rest Displayed and Commanded by God

Genesis 2:2-3 *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

Exodus 20:8-11 *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work*

B. Rest "Sweet" to a Man of Wisdom

Proverbs 3:21-24 *My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight... ²⁴ when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.*

C. BUT Too Much Sweetness Can Be Destructive

1. A command to eat honey

Proverbs 24:13 *Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.*

An ascetic life of harsh sternness is detrimental to the soul... so also a life of endless toil with no earthly blessings

God WANTS us to enjoy the blessings of this life... but in MODERATION

2. A command not to OVEREAT honey

Proverbs 25:16 *If you find honey, eat just enough-- too much of it, and you will vomit.*

Proverbs 25:27 *It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.*

3. The danger of overeating... even the blessings become curses

Proverbs 27:7 *He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.*

4. Proverbs on honey... literal, but MOSTLY SYMBOLIC!!

- a. “Honey” represents blessings from God not essential to life
- b. Leisure, recreation, entertainment, relaxation are all “honey”
- c. The problem comes with OVERINDULGENCE
- d. This is the whole problem with our present generation
 - i) It’s not enough to have food... we have to eat to the level of gluttony
 - ii) It’s not enough to have recreation... we have to play to the level of the frantic addict
 - iii) It’s not enough to have a weekend, or a vacation in some pretty place... we become idolators and LIVE for the weekend and the vacation and HATE work
 - iv) It’s not enough to watch a ballgame... we have to have cable stations that feed us sports 24-7!!!
 - v) All of this is HONEY consumed too much until we vomit!!

5. So it is damaging to LOVE PLEASURE

Proverbs 21:17 He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

So... life should be a wise balance of diligent hard work and occasional rest and leisure...

To highlight this, and to show the danger of addiction to leisure, we have the SLUGGARD

V. The Shame and Destruction of Laziness

A. Introducing... the Sluggard!

1. He loves to sleep...

Proverbs 6:9-11 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 bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

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

2. He is filled with desires, dreams, and aspirations... but nothing ever comes of it, because he is completely UNWILLING TO WORK to make any of it happen

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

Proverbs 21:25 The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.

3. The sluggard is constantly making excuses for his laziness... even if the excuses are ridiculous

Proverbs 22:13 The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!"

4. The level of the laziness can reach ridiculous, epic proportions

Proverbs 26:15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.

Just picture this man, still living at home with his parents at age forty, sleepy from his afternoon nap, turning to his mommy who has cooked him another home-cooked meal, asking her if she'll cut up his food and feed it to him!!

That's how pathetic and disgusting laziness can become

5. The sluggard creates immense frustrations for all who rely on him

Proverbs 10:26 As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.

Illus.: you're standing around a campfire; the wood you used is green, sappy, pine logs... the fire is extremely smoky... and it seems no matter where you stand, the wind changes direction to blow the smoke right into your eyes... it stings, it blinds you, it is extremely annoying

That's what it's like to send a sluggard to do anything!

A boss chooses an employee to bring some drawings to a vendor for manufacture... the vendor says if he can get the drawings by ten in the morning, he can turn the parts around by 4:00 that afternoon; the young man takes the drawings, gets in the company truck, and drives off... but little did the boss know that the man was a SLUGGARD!!! As soon as he drives off the lot, he goes over to his favorite Starbucks coffee shop... he reasons that he won't get a coffee break like the rest of the guys, so he grabs the opportunity; an hour later, the man shows up at the vendor with the drawings... but the vendor is the best in the state, constantly busy... he had assumed when he didn't get the drawings right away the company had changed its mind and didn't need the parts ASAP after all... the drawings get put in a stack along with all the other parts needing to be made... at 4:30, the boss calls the vendor and asks where the parts are... the resulting conversation is frustrating for BOTH parties... and all because the messenger was a SLUGGARD

6. The sluggard misses opportunities and makes excuses about it

Proverbs 20:4 A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.

Amazing... when it was time to plow, he wasn't there... perhaps he was asleep; plowing time is a window of opportunity, and that window closes at a certain point

Even more amazing... he still looks for a harvest, even though he missed the planting season by a month or more

So it is now:

The deadline for applying for fall classes comes and goes; a week later the registrar's office gets a call from a prospective student wanting to sign up for classes; it doesn't matter how patiently the registrar explains the deadline, the sluggard will explode in anger and berate him over the phone

So it goes in the life of the sluggard...

"A day late and a dollar short"

And always blaming someone else for his own laziness... ultimately even blaming the Lord: "How could you let something like this happen to me?"

Proverbs 19:3 A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.

7. The sluggard starts projects, but doesn't finish them:

Proverbs 12:27 A sluggard does not roast his prey, but the precious possession of a man is diligence.

8. Basically, the sluggard fights his laziness at every turn in the road, and therefore he leads a very difficult life despite the fact that every decision he makes is motivated by EASE and COMFORT for himself

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

This is a man who can't find his passport when he wants to travel; who puts off calling his roommate from college when he heard that his father had died... and as a result loses some of his relationship with him

This is a man who buys a white dress shirt because he can't find his other one, and he needs it today... then finds the other one a week later

Every single issue of his life is made difficult because of his IMMENSE LAZINESS... the fact that he NEVER denies his flesh for one moment, blocks his whole life in every way

He procrastinates ... He burns relationships... He burns opportunities... He is frustrated, bitter, listless, immobile

Basically he is a SLAVE to his own sense of comfort and ease

9. Yet for all of this, he still has a HIGH OPINION of himself

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

B. The Results of Laziness: A Shameful Display

Proverbs 24:30-34 I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; ³¹ thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. ³² I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: ³³ A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest-- ³⁴ and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

C. So What's Wrong with a Little Sleep?

1. Many warnings against sleep

Proverbs 6:9-11 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 bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

Proverbs 10:5 He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

Proverbs 19:15 Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry.

2. Sleep in some cases is seen to be a BLESSING from God

Psalms 127:2 [the Lord] grants sleep to those he loves

Ecclesiastes 5:12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much

3. Jesus Himself fell asleep in a storm... so sleep itself is not evil

4. The real issue: LOVE of sleep

Proverbs 20:13 Do not love sleep or you will grow poor; stay awake and you will have food to spare.

D. Summary: A Sluggard is someone who gluts himself on rest, leisure, pleasure, comfort... the result is an ever-increasing addiction to these things, and a shameful resistance to any hard work... his life is OVERGROWN WITH WEEDS

VI. Application s

A. Rest in the Finished Work of Christ on the Cross

1. Workaholism makes too much of our own labors
2. Our own works can never pay for our sins... it is dust in the wind
3. The only ETERNAL value of our work is in Christ

“Only one life, ‘twill soon be past... only what’s done for Christ will last.”

B. Live for the Grand Overarching Work of the Kingdom of God

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.”

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

C. Learn the Practical Lessons of Proverbs

1. Daily life is to be filled mostly with productive labor
2. Study these proverbs to learn these lessons
3. Don’t despise the menial tasks of the day... a life worth living is made up of garbage taken out, bills paid on time, lawns mowed, gardens weeded, socks repaired, shirts ironed, thank you notes written, cars washed, groceries bought, meals cooked, children bathed and put to bed, etc.
4. Don’t despise this hard working life

D. Beware the Recreation Crazy Culture we Live in

E. Teach your Children to Labor... not be Addicted to Recreation!!!

F. Don’t Procrastinate or like a Sluggard... Do Today’s Tasks Today