**The wisdom of work**

Text: Proverbs 6:6-11

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**Scriptures:** Proverbs 6:6-11; 31:10-31; John 4:31-38

**Songs Chosen:** Behold Our God[[1]](#footnote-1), [SttL] 65, 500, Facing a Task Unfinished1, [SttL] 145b

**Series: Proverbs.** Sermon 8.

**Theme:** The lazy, idle, person is unwise because he/she does not plan ahead, is not self-disciplined and will consequently not be blessed

**Proposition:** Jesus is the wise worker – follow Him!

**Introduction**

Do you enjoy working? You might answer, well sometimes, but not always. Work in this world now is not 100% very good, but it once was.

God created man to labour: “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it*” (Gen 2:15). Gardening was the ‘first profession’.

Work is a blessing from God which sin has changed into an activity which is often less than fully enjoyable and satisfying and which is sometimes unpleasant, difficult and discouraging. There are ‘thorns and thistles’ amongst the crop (Gen 3:18) and hard labour is necessary (Gen 3:19). Sin turns a blessing from God into a curse. We saw that with human sexuality from Proverbs 5. In our text from Proverbs 6 we see that mankind’s rebellion against our Creator has also turned God’s good gift of work into a curse.

We need God’s wisdom to understand how to work well in ways which reflect the character of our Creator who made mankind to work, as an aspect of being made in His image. God is a wise worker who works great works, in Christ we are able to work wisely because: **“***we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*” (Eph 2:10).

We’re going to see how we can work wisely under three headings:

1. The wise worker plans ahead
2. The wise worker is self-disciplined
3. The wise worker is blessed
4. **The wise worker plans ahead**

Having a wood burner is a blessing. It produces plenty of heat and the cheery sight of the glowing embers and the cosy/gezellig atmosphere of sitting round the fire is wonderful.

Before the cold weather begins in autumn, it is wise to aim to have a full woodshed because going out to get fresh firewood in winter is less than ideal. The wood is usually sap and rain wet and won’t be properly dry until the following summer. **Operating a wood burner wisely requires forward planning.** The best time to cut, split and store wood is in the summer.

So it is for the ant, a small insect used by the writer of Proverbs to teach the wisdom of work by way of example.

* Did you know that ants have colonised almost every landmass on [Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth)? The only places lacking [indigenous](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_%28ecology%29) ants are [Antarctica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antarctica) and a few remote or inhospitable islands.
* There are approximately 12,000 ant species in the world today.
* It has been estimated that there are about 1million ants for every human being on this planet.
* Ants are very strong in proportion to their size and can lift up to 50 times the weight of their own body.
* Ants live together in highly structured colonies where there is [division of labour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_of_labour), communication between individuals, and an ability to [solve complex problems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_solving).

There are many fascinating facts about Ants which a simple Google search will reveal. An atheist ant observer might say – these creatures are a marvel of nature’s design! A wise person would say “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*" (Isaiah 6:3)

There are more fascinating facts about ants which are brought out in our text. Like the wise wood burner owner, who collects fuel in the summer, So, the wise ant, ‘*prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest*’ (v8). She knows that summertime is the season of plenty, but when the cold winter comes, food sources will be scarce or non-existent, So the wise ant plans ahead and works hard to gather and store food. As Agur notes later in the book of Proverbs (30:25) “*the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer*”

There is another small creature connected to our text. Can you spot what it is?…. the slug. A slug is a slow moving slimy gastropod, an organism from whose name we have the term ‘sluggard’. Did you know that:

* Only approx. 5% of the slug population is above ground at any one time.
* A slug’s blood is green.
* A slug has approximately 27,000 teeth – that’s more teeth than a shark!

These are interesting facts, but the most important truth about a slug for the purposes of our text is that a slug moves **very slowly**. A sluggard is habitually slow, lazy, and inactive. The sluggard has the ability to work, but refuses to do so. He or she lacks the drive, personal responsibility and common sense to provide for his/her needs and for the needs of others. The sluggard is sluggish – looking for every opportunity to get off-task and to slow down or preferably stop.

Unlike the ant, the sluggard does not plan ahead. Proverbs 24:30-34 “*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*”

The sluggard is not wise enough to know that **short term sacrifice** is necessary in life for **longer term** benefits. The sluggard lacks a sense of urgency in preparing for the future. Rather than planning ahead, the sluggard looks for immediate gratification of his/her desires.

Whereas the ant plans ahead. Proverbs 6:8 “*she (the ant) prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest*” links the ant’s work of food gathering to future provision for the following winter. Whereas Proverbs 20:4 connects the land preparation period to the future harvest. “*The sluggard does not plough in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing*”. The message is the same – **the wise worker plans ahead.** Proverbs 10:5 “*He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame*” clearly teaches that what is true of ants in Prov 6, is true of humans.

God is a ‘wise worker’ who plans ahead. After the Fall of mankind, He promised a Saviour who would ‘bruise the head’ of Satan. The remainder of the Bible progressively reveals God working to His plan of redemption through His Son Jesus Christ.

Do you plan ahead? When you attend Bible studies, or on a Saturday before the Lord’s Day?

The wise worker plans ahead, not only in his/her occupation but also in the spiritual disciplines – including prayer, Bible study, and corporate worship which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The wise worker is self-disciplined**

When I’ve visited post office sorting rooms, the area where the workers manually sort mail has adjacent rooms and corridors with one-way glass. The workers never know if someone is keeping an eye on them. The concept is that this incentive will motivate them to diligent work. (please note that my intention with this illustration is not to denigrate postal workers!)

A good measure of how well a person works is how they function when nobody is looking. More responsible, and generally higher paid, work involves a higher level of trust in the employee. There is confidence that he or she will work well without direct supervision.

In Proverbs 6, the writer makes the point that the ant works diligently even though she has no ‘chief, officer or ruler’. The individual ant doesn’t need another creature to keep them ‘on task’. In other words, the ant is a **wise worker who is self-disciplined**

In contrast, the sluggard looks for excuses to delay starting work e.g. **Proverbs 26:13** *The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!"* The idea here is not that there is actually a dangerous animal just outside the sluggard’s front door, but rather that he is generating a reason to stay at home rather than go out to work. He is fabricating a crisis so that he can delay starting work. Even if there was a lion outside, the sluggard’s attitude shows an unwillingness to face up to challenges in life.

An undisciplined person may not finish what they start due to a lack of diligence. Proverbs 12:27 says that “*Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth*”. It’s difficult to tell from the original Hebrew whether the man is too lazy to roast the prey he has caught or whether he is so inactive that he never even catches it.

The sluggard may eventually start a job, but will not finish it. The various proverbs about the sluggard can be quite funny, yet at the root they are very sad. **Proverbs 26:15** “*The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth*”. He is too lazy to even finish feeding himself.

The sluggard who is a procrastinator whose motto could be “never do today what you can put off until tomorrow”. The sluggard is unreliable and brings great discomfort, irritation and distress to those who put their trust in him/her to do a job. **Proverbs 10:26** “*Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.”* The sluggard is likely to be a ‘talker’, not a ‘doer’ **Proverbs 14:23** “*In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.”*

The sluggard’s preferred piece of equipment in life is what he sleeps on! **Proverbs 26:14** “*As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.”* The physically inactive sluggard has a quick mind which can readily defend his or her laziness with excuses –justification for inaction: **Proverbs 26:16** “*The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”*

The sluggard lacks self-control and is unproductive, unfocussed and more concerned about him/herself than about others. The sluggard has many desires, but is unwilling to work. **Proverbs 13:4** “*The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.”*

The sluggard is **not like** the virtuous woman described in chapter 31:10-31. She is a **wise worker** who plans ahead:

* v15 “*She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.”*
* v16 “*She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.”*
* v21 “*She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.”*

We may be diligent in our workplaces and/or with domestic tasks at home. In light of the wisdom of Proverbs, it’s good for each of us to ask ourselves: How self-disciplined am I in regular Bible reading, prayer, theological and devotional study, church attendance and engaging in gospel-centred relationships with others both inside the church community and in the world outside?

Our text focusses on the sluggard, who ‘underworks’, but there is a lack of self- discipline also in the workaholic who ‘overworks’. It may be easier for the workaholic to devote himself to his duties as an employee or employer than to his other spiritual obligations. The workaholic may rationalize his addiction by insisting that working less would ‘hurt his testimony’ if he did not do a good job at work, whilst neglecting the call to love one another in Scripture. If the things we are working hardest at are keeping us from obeying the commands of our Lord, we may well be both workaholics and spiritual sluggards. Making work the chief goal in life is idolatry.

In a fallen world, it is difficult to maintain a godly work/life balance. Yet this is worth striving for, because:

1. **The wise worker is blessed**

Ordinarily (a great ‘reformed’ word!) the wise ant colony survives the winter with the stores of food gathered up in the previous summer. Whereas, the unwise sluggard who has slept when there was necessary work to be done later ordinarily experiences great need. Prov 6:10-11 expresses it this way: “*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.”* It’s always possible that the ant colony may come under attack and thereby not survive- remember the proverbs are not mathematical formulae always guaranteeing a particular outcome. Sometimes lazy people (especially in a welfare state) do not experience abject poverty.

Yet the principle is clear – work so that you will have.

* **Proverbs 28:19** *Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.*
* **Proverbs 10:4** *A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.*
* **Proverbs 19:15** *Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger.*

My parents always taught me that there was a wise order to consuming food from my plate ‘eat your greens first’ – deal with the hard stuff before you move to the easier, more pleasant things. When it comes to labour- do your productive work first and then attend to domestic matters.

Proverbs 24:27 *Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house.*

The sluggard’s life is likely to be characterised by barriers and difficulties as a result of his laziness and inaction. “The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway” (**Proverbs 15:19**).

The sluggard will not become a good leader because to be one requires diligence, sacrifice, long hours, pain and perseverance. **Proverbs 12:24** *The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labour.* The wise worker who plans and exercises self-discipline in working the plan is (ordinarily!) blessed with prosperity. **Proverbs 21:5** *The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.*

**Proverbs 21:25-26** *The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labour. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.* The unfulfilled desires of the sluggard eventually wreaks havoc in his life, whereas the diligent have so much that they can continuously give generously. ‘The sluggards commitment to serve self and maintain an idle existence may make them resist any attempts to detach them from their electronic devices or T.V. It has been said that ‘Netflix is the opiate of the sluggard’.

The sluggard lacks sense (24:30) and is only wise in his/her own estimation (26:16). The sluggard is motivated by his own desires (Prov 21:25-26) which in the end destroy him. **Proverbs 21:17** *Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.* In other words, the sluggard is a fool. He is heading for sudden (but as yet unforeseen) destruction (6:11; 20:34).

**Proverbs 18:9** Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys. **Proverbs 22:29** *Do you see a man skilful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.*

**Diligently develop your God-given gifts to become as competent as you can at what you choose to do.**

In contrast to the sluggard, **the wise worker is blessed.** Why? Because he or she works for the very best of bosses! **Colossians 3:23** “*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”* **Romans 12:11** “*Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”* The gospel **motivates** us to work hard in this brief life on earth for the glory of God, the good of others and for our own benefit.

The enabling power of the Holy Spirit encourages us to **sharpen** our God-given skills for the use of our King and for other people, to face our work with courage and to complete difficult tasks thereby avoiding the unnecessary trouble of laziness. Jesus, the image of the invisible God is the perfectly wise worker who said, "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*” (John 4:34)

His work was **well planned** – e.g. **Luke 9:51** “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*”. Before entering the city: *“Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'*" (Mark 11:1-3)

His work executed with **self-discipline** e.g. “*Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8) His work brings blessing to people like us who cannot do the necessary work to save ourselves. **2 Corinthians 5:21** “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

His work was blessed. At his transfiguration, God the Father said "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him*." {Matthew 17:5}

Now because of Christ’s wise work for us, we are called to be His willing workmen and workwomen. We are blessed by being enabled to do the work which God has set out for us to do: **Ephesians 2:10** “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

The song ‘facing a task unfinished’ (Keith and Kristyn Getty) speaks of the task of the church to make disciples:

*“Facing a task unfinished*

*that drives us to our knees,*

*a need that, undiminished,*

*rebukes our slothful ease,*

*we who rejoice to know you*

*renew before your throne*

*the solemn pledge we owe you*

*to go and make you known.*

*from cowardice defend us,*

*from lethargy awake! Forth on your errands*

*send us to labour for your sake.”*

We are called to plan our gospel ministry and to be self-disciplined as we work. Then we are blessed to see Christ at work through us gathering His people, building His church, confirming the work of our hands

That is motivating work – well worth getting out of bed for!

AMEN

1. S.I. Presbytery approved [↑](#footnote-ref-1)