

## **“Laziness”**

**Proverbs 6:6-11**

**July 24, 2022**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

In a series on the theology of work, it would be impossible to ignore the positive emphasis the Bible gives to diligence and hard work. It is viewed as a virtue throughout the Bible, while its opposite—laziness—is viewed as a serious vice. The book of Proverbs has a surprisingly large volume of material on the sin of laziness. The character of the sluggard appears frequently in at least eleven different passages. He is a character both tragic and comedic. For example, when he eats, he manages to muster enough energy to begin the meal, but can't manage to bring his hand to his mouth to complete the most simple act of eating (19:24). He doesn't just like to sleep, but is hinged to his bed (26:14). He offers outlandish excuses for not getting to work, such as a purported lion roaming the streets (22:13). But he is also tragic in the damage he does to himself and to others.

Why does a wisdom book like Proverbs have so much material on a sin that most people think applies only to others? People seek help from pastors for a large number of sinful issues in their lives. I can't remember a single person ever coming to me with a request for help to overcome the sin of laziness. Is it possible that so much emphasis is given to this sin in Proverbs because it is a bigger problem than we might at first realize? Most of us have a powerful instinct to view ourselves as diligent and hard-working. For example, I think the second most common response to the query, “How are you?” is the reply, “Keeping busy.” In his book *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller tells the story of a young doctor who was pregnant with her second child. She said to a friend of hers, “Do you know what I love most about being pregnant? I love being pregnant because it's the only time where I feel productive *all* the time. Even when I'm sleeping, I'm *doing* something!” (p. 226). I want to suggest to us all, even someone with an attitude similar to that of this pregnant woman, that we may all have a bigger problem with laziness than we initially recognize. And I want to suggest that this is the reason Proverbs devotes such attention to this.

### **I. The Sluggard's Errors**

The sluggard prefers not to be put under too much scrutiny, preferring to slide through life without anyone noticing him. But what he needs is to be exposed, to have everyone see his life in detail. Perhaps in that way he can be shaken from his inertia. So the writer of Proverbs gives us a detailed look into his life, looking especially at his errors. I notice three of them.

The first error of the sluggard is pointed out when the writer contrasts him with the ant. Unlike the ant, the sluggard is not self-motivated. The ant needs no boss hovering over it to force the appropriate work to be done. There is ample internal motivation for doing what needs doing. I once saw a cartoon where a boss walks up to one of his loafing employees and asks him, “Why aren’t you working?” The loafer replies, “I didn’t see you coming.” The motivation we bring to our work is of critical importance. What motivates you to show up to work every day and do the job you were hired to do? There are lower-level motivations that we could summarize as the carrot or the stick. Some people work simply for the carrot of receiving a paycheck, while others are principally motivated by fear of the stick. The fear could be material poverty or a loss of purpose and identity. Such motives are not sinful *in* themselves, but become sinful *by* themselves. There is a higher motive for our work, and the ant shows us what it is. Ants are hiving creatures. That is, they work for the good of the ant hive rather than for an individualistic purpose. That suggests to us the higher motive of love in our work. We’ll look at this more in our final sermon on this series next week when we consider the topic of discerning God’s call for our work. But for now, let me just mention that our work should take place at the intersection of one’s gifts with the needs of the world.

The second error of the sluggard is a timing problem. Unlike the ant, he has a very short time horizon. The ant shows the ability to anticipate long-term needs and is willing to make sacrifices in order to meet those needs. It works hard to store its food in summer for the coming winter. The sluggard, on the other hand, chooses only to look at the present. His sleep is sweet to him, and he is unwilling to make the sacrifice of giving up his delicious slumber for something as distant as next winter’s food supply. Another aspect of his timing problem is that when he does work, he does the fun work instead of the needful work. We read elsewhere of him, **“The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing”** (20:4). Here we see him preparing for work, the work of harvesting. But since he didn’t do the needful and less satisfying work of plowing the hard ground three months ago, there is no harvest to be gathered.

The distinction between important and urgent tasks comes to mind with this. The sluggard may at times be seen working. After all, he’s ready to work at harvest time. But it’s the urgent that moves him from his inaction. The important but non-urgent duties he puts off and never gets around to doing. Does that sound familiar? Are there important duties you have been neglecting? Perhaps it’s doing a budget and taking some steps toward getting control of your finances. Or maybe it’s engaging in some prayerful planning. Or it could be in the most important area of all—pursuing fellowship with God through his word and prayer.

The third error of the sluggard is to always make the easy choice. When he is forced to answer the question, **“How long will you lie there?”** he responds

that it will only be for a short while. **“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”** (6:10). He tells himself that he has no intention of spending half the day in bed—just a few minutes more. But we all know what happens, don’t we? Once the first concession is made to just a little more sleep, the second becomes easier, and each one becomes progressively easier after that. Eventually, after a long series of concessions, the work is forgotten. We have all seen this error at work in our own lives, I am sure. There is some unwanted task that lies before us, and we know we need to do it. Perhaps it is some phone call that needs to be made, some bills that need to be paid, or some planning work that needs to be done. It begins with just a little surrender. “As soon as this television show ends, then I’ll do my work.” But that is followed by another concession, and then another, until the entire task is postponed to another time. The sluggard here fails to take the first step of the day. Have you ever noticed how first steps are often the hardest? But once taken, each successive step becomes easier. In our battle with laziness, this helps us know of our need to seek God’s help in that first step.

## II. The Sluggard’s Outcome

Our text is clear in teaching that sloth leads to poverty. **“Poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man”** (6:11). How does the robber come? He comes suddenly. At one moment, all is smooth sailing, and then everything changes with the arrival of the robber. For the lazy, poverty can come just as swiftly. One day everything seems to be fine, and the next it becomes clear that there are no resources available. Poverty comes not only suddenly, but without cause. Like the robber’s victim, who thinks that nothing was done to cause the robber to take his money, so the sluggard thinks that his actions could not have been the cause of his poverty. All he did was take just a few more minutes of sleep. The result is also the same. A third way poverty comes upon the lazy is that the robber violates the will of his victim, forcing him to do what he doesn’t want to do. There is an irony in this. The person who always does only what he wants to do instead of what he needs to do finds that he is forced to do what he doesn’t want to do. In other words, the lazy experience a poverty of freedom. It needs to be added here that while laziness is *a* cause of poverty, it is not *the* cause. When we look at the rest of the Bible, we see other causes that don’t involve any kind of wrongdoing on the part of the poor person. Poverty is also caused by injustice and by natural disasters such as drought, disease, and pests.

A second result of sloth is also filled with irony. The sluggard’s plan to grab just a little more sleep was intended by him to make his life a little easier. But what he was actually doing was making it more painful. The second result of sloth is to increase the pain of life. That’s why Proverbs 15:9 says, **“The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns.”** Since God has designed us for work, it is far more painful to be idle than it is to be active. We are not made for sitting still.

A third outcome of sloth is diminished capacities. Proverbs 19:15 says, **“Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep.”** It leads to a dulling of our abilities, like we are moving through life as sleepwalkers. We are like the butterfly that needs to struggle while emerging from the cocoon. I understand that if some outsider helps the butterfly emerge from the cocoon in a way that takes away his struggle, the butterfly will be irreparably harmed. When we take the slothful, easy way out, the result upon us is the same.

Sloth also results in destruction, both for those around the sluggard as well as the sluggard himself. Proverbs 18:9 says, **“Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.”** The slothful would object to this comparison. The verse is saying that they are in the same category as the person who sets out to destroy. The lazy teacher is in the same league as the vandals who enter the school at night to destroy the property. The destruction brought on by sloth takes longer to be seen, but is no less real. Not only does sloth bring destruction to others, but also to the slothful him or herself. Proverbs 24:30-31 features the observant reporter’s eye as he sees the sluggard’s house. **“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.”** The crumbling wall is an apt metaphor for his life. A stone wall in this day wasn’t just decorative; it served to protect the vineyard from those who would destroy it. In the same way, a life of sluggardly behavior is one where the protective walls are crumbling.

### **III. The Sluggard’s Biggest Problem**

Why is there such a large amount of material in Proverbs about the sluggard? There are other sins we rightly regard as serious sins that don’t get nearly the same attention. Sins such as sexual promiscuity, theft, and gossip appear in the book, but much less frequently than this sin of laziness. Something of an answer can be found in the first three words of our text. **“Go to the ant,”** the sluggard is told. He is being told to go to the ant for counsel, even though the ant has a brain smaller than a poppy seed. He shouldn’t have any trouble finding an ant, which is good for the one who has difficulty with any hard task. It is estimated that there are about ten quadrillion ants on the earth. With the current population of the earth, that means there are 1,430,000 ants for every human on the earth. The sluggard is being told to go to the ant because the sluggard’s biggest problem is his pride. He needs to be humbled, and being told to seek help from the lowly ant is the way Proverbs seeks to humble that pride.

The point is made explicit later in Proverbs 26:16. **“The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”** The sluggard

attributes his dodging of work as evidence of his wisdom. He thinks he's smarter than all these others working their fingers to the bone. To his way of thinking, he's not lazy, but shrewd and clever.

Laziness appears so frequently in Proverbs because it's a window into the problem beneath the problem. Though no one has ever come to me with help for the sin of laziness, if they were to do so, here's what I would tell them. This is also what I tell myself when I struggle with laziness. The root of the sin must be addressed, and that root is pride. If you're going to deal with this powerful sin of pride, you're going to need outside help, divine help. So the first step is to ask God to show you your pride, and to show you how your pride leads to laziness. Maybe your pride leads you to think that the rules don't apply to you. You are so exceptional that you can just skip all the steps others must take. Or maybe your pride leads you to conclude that you are a master and not a servant, in contradiction to what Jesus said. Or perhaps your pride makes you think that you are in control of your laziness, that you can end it at any time you choose simply by determining to try harder not to be lazy. The gospel message is that you have a far bigger problem than you realize, but also a far greater resource than you realize. Repentance is possible, and forgiveness is free and complete for the sin of lazy pride. Upon this repentance and forgiveness, God's Spirit gives power to overcome sloth.

If your heart is quick to judge others for laziness, humble yourself by asking God to show you any laziness in your own life. Maybe it's a spiritual laziness. I note how all the errors of the sluggard can be applied to spiritual laziness. For example, we saw how the sluggard has a timing problem, being willing to work in the harvest season but not in the plowing season. One form of laziness can look like hard work, but is really just doing the thing you want to do while neglecting the thing you need to do. Many people do that spiritually. They may look very active, all the while neglecting the thing that God says is our central work. And what is that? When Jesus was asked about that, he replied, **"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent"** (John 6:29).

## **CONCLUSION:**

To believe in Jesus means that we remember that forgiveness comes to those who don't work. It means to learn to rest in all that we have in Jesus instead of in the rest we might be able to provide for ourselves.