

Wisdom from the Proverbs Wisdom about Work

Introduction: Perhaps there is no ethic in our society that appears to have suffered more over the past hundred years than the principle of personal responsibility. Over and over we are confronted with the problem of people who truly think that someone else owes them a living or who would simply rather use others than put forth their own personal effort to succeed.

The problem is as old as human beings and it is interesting that Solomon in the course of his judgments must have been constantly confronted with the problem of people who were too lazy to work and who consequently became a burden to their society either by crime or dependency. Thus, many of the proverbs are devoted to the wisdom about work.

Solomon introduces us to a colorful character that in our translations is called the “sluggard”. He is a virtual tragi-comedy; a man to laugh at and pity at the same time.

The sluggard

The sluggard’s laziness described

Imagine a person too lazy to put forth the effort to do the simplest things for his own benefit.

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth. (19:24)

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again. (26:15)

The sluggard is not merely anchored to his bed; he is hinged to it! As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed (26:14)

His preposterous excuses

The lazy man used every imaginative fear to avoid taking responsibility for himself.

The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside; I shall be slain in the streets!” (22:13)

The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!” (26:13)

His indefinite procrastination

Solomon pictures the efforts to get a commitment out of a lazy man.

How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?

But the best you can get out of him is an indefinite:

“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”—Kidner observes, “He will not commit himself to refusal, but deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away.”

Unwillingness to finish what is started

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

The sluggard takes the time to go hunting and then will not cook what he bagged.

The immorality of laziness

Sometimes laziness is simply viewed as a personality quirk. But God sees it differently:

He also who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys. (18:9)

We are able to see that laziness is often merely the extension of pride, the belief that one knows more than others and can afford to resist correction. The sluggard rationalizes His excuses and ignores wisdom of others

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer. (26:16)

The sluggard even ignores the examples of diligence around him in the natural world.

Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest. (6:6-11)

The consequences of the sluggard's laziness

He makes a hard road for himself.

The way of the sluggard is as a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway. (15:19)

People dread having him around because he makes life harder on others.

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

And if that lazy person is a young person, he shames himself and is an embarrassment to his family.

He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully. (10:5)

There is a day of reckoning for the lazy man.

Laziness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle man will suffer hunger. (19:15)

I passed by the field of the sluggard, and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense; and behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles, Its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest," then your poverty will come as a robber, and your want like an armed man. (24:30-34)

So he is forced to swallow his pride and beg for food.

The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing. (20:4)

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the soul of the diligent is made fat. (13:4)

When nothing is forthcoming, he may even die.

The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work; all day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back. (21:25-26)

Application for our time

Of course, the principles of diligence in work are clearly taught in the NT.

Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. (Ephesians 4:28)

But in addition the challenge to be diligent in our spiritual life is even more pronounced:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; (2 Peter 1:5)

One of the most excoriating judgments of the Lord is expressed in the imagery of the parable of the talents:

But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' (Matthew 25:26-28)

Conclusion: The sluggard is alive and well; and I fear that too many people will miss heaven simply because they were too lazy to study their Bibles, to compare truth and error, to apply what they knew to be right.