

Proverbs, Part 6 3-6-22

Lazy Bones

Way, way back in December when we still feared Delta and had not heard of Omicron, we did a series on Proverbs – themes from Proverbs. Back then we saw that God, in His book of wisdom, has exhorted us and warned us and argued with us to acquire wisdom, to avoid destructive pleasures, to watch our tongues, to choose good friends, and to speak the truth. But, due to illness I was not able to finish our final theme from Proverbs and so, today, I take us back to Proverbs one more time to ponder a theme that will become evident to you as we read our first text. Proverbs 6:6-11 *Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, ⁷which, having no chief, officer or ruler, ⁸prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest. ⁹How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”— ¹¹Your poverty will come in like a vagabond and your need like an armed man.* When people learn that I am a Florida guy, they will often ask how I like Western, Pennsylvania in comparison. My answer frequently hinges on what time of year it is. For the last few months we have had to battle snow and ice. Not a problem we had down south. But, of course, the summers here are much to be preferred – AND, there are the bugs. Mosquitoes – way worse in Florida. So too are the ants. As a homeowner in Florida I was always engaged in a battle to gain dominion over my lawn and the ant was the arch enemy. Today he is our teacher. We are to sit at his feet and be instructed and his lesson is “be diligent.” Don’t be lazy, don’t be a sluggard, be diligent. That is our subject today and I want you to know I worked very hard on this sermon.

The ant we see here is a model of hard work. Most people have to be driven by someone else to work hard but the ant is self-motivated. Verse 7 says she has no boss or master but she works hard in preparation for the future. The sluggard doesn’t. He fritters his time away and ends up in poverty. 10:4-5 *Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. ⁵He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully. 13:4 The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the soul of the diligent is made fat. 15:19 The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway. 24:30-34 I passed by the field of the sluggard and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense, ³¹and behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles; its surface was covered with nettles, and its*

stone wall was broken down. ³²When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction. ³³“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,” ³⁴then your poverty will come as a robber and your want like an armed man. 26:13-16 The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!” ¹⁴As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed. ¹⁵The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is weary of bringing it to his mouth again. ¹⁶The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer. It is not hard to see why I call this a major theme of Proverbs. Now that you have gotten an overview of what Proverbs teaches I want to break down our meditations into these categories: areas of diligence, motivations for diligence, and rewards of diligence.

It is clear enough that God has urged us to work hard, to be diligent but it matters that we know what God wants us to be doing diligently. You could be a diligent thief but that certainly isn't what God has in mind. So, I want to ground this concept in some very practical areas of your life and get you thinking about what diligence will mean for you where and how you live. Probably the first area of life that comes to mind when you read these verses is that of vocation, your job, the thing you do to provide for your family. God has your vocation in mind when He reminds you that diligence leads to riches and laziness to poverty. You see how this is true for the businessman, and the farmer and even the worker in a big corporation. If you think about it you can also see how it relates to those of you whose major employment is found in your academic work at a school. The word of God says to be a diligent student, a diligent worker, a diligent businessman. Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3 specifically address employees with the need to work hard. A Christian who is lazy on the job is a shame to the name of Christ who has told us to do our work heartily.

But there are a lot of people very diligent in their jobs whose life is a mess because they have let other critical concerns fall by the way side. For example, God calls us to be diligent in our family life, in our responsibilities to parents, spouses, children. I think of some of the passages where the word diligent is used. Proverbs 13:24 *He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.* You parents know that takes a lot of work. Deuteronomy 6:6-7a *These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.* ⁷*You shall teach them diligently to your sons.* Perhaps your family is also your vocation. God has called us to diligent parenting.

Thirdly, we are to be diligent in our spiritual lives. Obedience to God calls for diligence in learning and then doing His word. Deuteronomy 4:9a *Give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently.* Psalm 119:4 *You have ordained Your precepts that we should keep them diligently.* Proverbs 4:23 *Watch over your heart with all diligence.* If your spiritual life is going to be vibrant it will take some work on your part, but if anything is worth being diligent in surely this is it. The great commandment expresses the diligence called for in a relationship with God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Fourthly, we are to be diligent in our ministries. This, of course, assumes you have a ministry, a way that you are serving others in the church or community. Whether it is some aspect of PBJ, teaching a children's class, helping a neighbor in need, the call of God to us is to put away laziness. Get away from the idea that I will do the minimum daily requirement only and instead do your job with diligence and excellence. If you have a ministry go for it with gusto, give it your best, be diligent in that ministry.

One could find many more areas of life that need diligence but these four I have given to get you thinking practically on this subject. Now I want you to ponder the motivations for diligence. What incentives do we have to be diligent in our labors? What are the motives? First, we are diligent for the Lord's sake. Colossians 3:22-24 *Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.* Wow! So helpful. We, so often, get worn out and frustrated in our work simply because we forget to have this perspective. We come to think that we are working only for that ungrateful boss, or those ungrateful kids and we forget that we are serving the Lord in, notice this, in all that we do. And if you are a Christian who believes that this Lord came down to earth for you, gave His life for you, will one day judge and reward you - you have tremendous motivation in this. We are diligent for the Lord's sake. And it is for His sake that the Christian exists. Romans 14:7-8a *not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸for if we live, we live for the Lord.* This is a distinctly Christian orientation. Most people deep-down believe that their purpose in life is self-gratification and that is how they live. But not so the person of faith. We see that we are servants of the Lord, we are here not to please self but to please him, to work for Him. I have a Master to please who deserves my best and that alone is reason to give my all in whatever I do.

But then the Christian has even more motivation. We are to be diligent also for the sake of others. What you do with your life and your time makes a difference to your children and friends and your spouse, and the needy of this world. Do you care about these? Then be diligent about what concerns them. The 18th century evangelist, John Wesley, was known to travel on horseback twenty miles a day for forty years. He preached four-thousand sermons, produced four hundred books. At 83 he was annoyed he could not work more than fifteen hours a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5:30 in the morning. That's funny, I have that same tendency. Why did Wesley push himself so? As best I know Wesley's heart it was for the sake of those he served as evangelist and pastor. His life was a blessing to so many and still is today because of his diligence. Be diligent for the sake of others.

Thirdly, be diligent for the sake of self. Really the emphasis of Proverbs is on how you can help yourself by its virtues. Almost every verse we read when we started made this point, laziness leads to lack, diligence to gain. But, ever since the fall there has been an element of pain involved in every accomplishment. If achievement did not cost us or hurt us in some way everyone would be a high achiever, but it clearly does involve some pain. As a young athlete I heard my coaches say over and over again, "no pain, no gain." In this fallen world that's the way it is. But the assumption of my coaches and the great message of Proverbs is that the gain of diligence is well worth the pain. Several years back a poll was taken on college campuses that asked the students if they felt their lives were happy and fulfilling and out of about 50 colleges where the survey was taken only one school had over half its students responding in the affirmative to that question. That school was the U.S. Military Academy which is known for its high standards and discipline. When we live diligently for the sake of the Lord and others we find that we ourselves are blessed as a result.

So, these are the things that motivate the diligent man. Which of these motivates the sluggard? The sluggard is not unmotivated. All behavior is motivated by something. Is laziness motivated by a concern for God, for others or for self? Obviously for self. Lazy people are selfish people, and more than that they are foolish people. The lazy man thinks he is doing himself a favor by his sloth, but the Lord says just the opposite. There is something the lazy man is missing, something he does not see. That would be the big picture. He can't see God, he can't see others, and he can't see past the present moment, he does not see what is ahead. The future with its demands, and winters and judgment days is not a reality to him.

Think again of the diligent ant of Proverbs 6. What was motivating that ant to such industry? What was she busy doing? She was storing up for the future. It said the ant 8 *Prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest*, because she knew winter was right around the corner. You see, during the good times when there was plenty of food that ant could easily have worked a couple of hours and then spent the rest of the day on the internet without any problem until winter came and then there would be no food available for the lazy ant who did not store up during the good times. But this sense of preparing for tomorrow is not natural to us. If you give a child two dollars and no directions for how to spend it will it be there the next day? Forget it. That child is immature which means that he is unable to postpone gratification. Think about this, maturity essentially is the ability to put off immediate gratification in order to obtain a more substantial long-term reward. It is the whole idea behind discipline of body, mind, time, or money. But we aren't born with that ability. That's the frustrating thing about babies, they are so immature. And typically, they will stay that way unless some mature person imposes discipline upon them and requires them to delay gratification for their own good. That's what parents have to do. Maturity means we can choose for ourselves a delayed gratification; but until we get there we need someone to drive us. Way back in the previous millennium, I enjoyed the Cosby Show. The best line I ever heard on that show was when Theo came home with Cs and his parents got on his case about it. Theo launched into this touching speech about how it was great that his parents had been big successes and all but that he was just an ordinary guy who was destined for mediocrity and that his very successful parents needed to understand and appreciate that. When Theo finished his passionate expression the studio audience clapped vigorously but as the clapping died off Dr. Huxtable said and I quote, "That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life!" It was exactly what my mother would have said. She would never let me be happy with just getting by. I know some parents go too far with this. I know too that many don't go far enough with it. My mom pushed me to be diligent and I thank God for that! I thank God for the other adults who made me work hard, for Miss Staratt who had our 6th grade class working out of college grammar texts, for Coach James who made me run so many wind sprints I thought I'd die. Somewhere I picked up the perspective of maturity so that I was motivated to be diligent on my own. I saw what an advantage hard work gave me in the long run.

Diligence is a virtue that is future directed. It sees what is coming and prepares for it. Someone said that we ought to care about the future because we

will live the rest of our lives there. Think about that. That is right on. When the three little pigs built their houses only one really thought about the future. The lesson of that story is that you should be like the one. Ask not what will make me happy over the next five minutes but over the next five years or fifty years or even better, ask what will bring me the most joy eternally. That is maturity, that is the perspective missing in the sluggard, but that is the perspective of a man of God, of a man of wisdom of a man who is diligent.

In our last moments on this them, consider two of the rewards of diligence which we can also contrast with four penalties of sloth. Reward #1 is confidence as opposed to anxiety. 22:13 *The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets!"* The sluggard has these unusual fears. 26:13 *The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!"* There he goes again. He says there is a lion out there so I'm staying at home. What is the connection between these fears and laziness? The lazy man is afraid, not of lions, what he is afraid of is failure. He would rather attempt nothing than risk failure. So, he makes excuses for his lack of effort. The lazy man is paralyzed by his fear and his laziness produces more failure which produces more fear and on and on it can go. The only thing that can break the cycle is diligence. You do a job well, experience the joys of success and you enter the diligence-confidence loop instead of the laziness-anxiety loop. I glanced at an article this week on how to overcome public nervousness and the first point was - be well-prepared. If you really know what you are going to say you are not as inclined to be nervous about it. Diligence is a confidence builder. The student who is up on his work, who is ready for the test, may be a bit nervous for an exam but he certainly doesn't fear it like the unprepared student. In the same way we all feel a little uneasy about the idea of standing before the judgment seat of Christ but if you have been a diligent servant you have much less fuel for that fear. Diligence will give you confidence. That is true in every area of life and even as you face death.

Reward for diligence #2 is prosperity as opposed to poverty. This, of course, is all over Proverbs. 10:4 *Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.* 21:25-26 *The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work; ²⁶All day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back.* It is quite a coincidence isn't it that hard working people tend to become wealthier than lazy people. Not always, but tend to. Materially and spiritually. If you envy some Christian's ability to trust God in hard times, or to pray, or to use the word of God to advantage, or to lead his family don't kid yourself into

thinking those character strengths came naturally. You can bet they were developed thru consistent effort, thru diligent use of the means of growth. And, if you are still a doubting, worldly, inconsistent spiritual infant maybe it is simply because you have not been diligent, you have chosen to go the easy route, giving in to your flesh time after time. **6:10-11** *“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”— “Your poverty will come in like a vagabond and your need like an armed man.* That is as true spiritually as it is materially. But diligence, effort, work in the context of faith will make your soul rich and healthy.

Those are no small rewards, are they? Confidence and prosperity. If you are not pursuing these, why not? Are you a prisoner of your lethargy? Do you feel like a helpless victim of your sloth? Many years ago, Dostoevsky said that there would come a day when there is no sin only disease. That day is now. Things that used to be called *sins* are now called *diseases* and that is tragic because a disease you can do little about, a sin you can repent of and cast away from you. Laziness is a sin, which means you can stop it. You can change. If you suffer from an acute case of voluntary inertia I’ve got good news, you can do something about it. Just get to work and you are cured instantly. You see I don’t have any steps for getting over this sin, except one. A friend was talking last week about self-help seminars that you can go to where you get all inspired to improve yourself. He noted that the basic point of these courses was that you can take control of your life. We agreed that something is wrong when you have to pay someone to tell you that. Certainly, as Christians we can see that we, by the mercies of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit, are free from sin! Laziness no longer has a grip on us! Praise God and lean on His Spirit. Confess your sins of yesterday and determine before God to stop excusing your sloth and start living for Him with all diligence. And the next time your lazy bones try to order you around make that decision again and again until the devil gets frustrated and leaves you to the joy of diligent service for your king. Let us pray.