

WORK WISELY

Proverbs - Selected Verses

Some times it seems as if there is not enough time to get everything done that we need to do. Nearly always it seems that there is not enough money to buy the things that we need. Our success in dealing with both these situations is a matter of setting priorities. We are not going to make more time; therefore, we must use what we have to the best advantage. Most of us are not going to have a lot more money than we now have, so we must use what we have there also to the best advantage. If we make the right choices, then we are said to be wise in the use of our time and money. If we make the wrong choices, then we seem to be foolish in such matters.

We spend a lot of effort trying to create more time by hiring people to do what we need to have done or by using machines that get the job done faster. We also spend a lot of effort to obtain more money by getting training to get a better job or by switching jobs that offers better pay.

I believe that we would make more of an impact on the outcome if we invested in obtaining additional wisdom as to how to use the time and material things that we have. I see people who seem to make a lot of money and have a lot of time on their hands and they use both in foolish ways so that not even they benefit from the time and material things except for the moment. If all we do is but for the moment, then life really is futile; however, if there is an eternity (and there is) then all of life itself should be directed to wisely investing in that future.

Those that live for the moment claim that they are seeking happiness and yet they never find it, while those that live with their eye on heaven while their feet are on the ground find happiness and blessedness as a by-product. Every person, young or old, rich or poor, has the same basic needs for wisdom in the way they work. Wisdom is the gift that you give to the person who has nothing. It is also the gift that you give to the person who has everything. It is certainly the gift parents must pass on to their children.

Work Diligently – 13:4; 14:23; 20:4; 24:30-34; 26:13-14; 28:19

⁴The soul of the sluggard craves and *gets* nothing, But the soul of the diligent is made fat. Proverbs 13:4

²³In all labor there is profit, But mere talk *leads* only to poverty. Proverbs 14:23

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

³⁰I 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. Prov. 24:30-34

¹³The 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. Proverbs 26:13-14

¹⁹He who tills his land will have plenty of food, But he who follows empty *pursuits* will have poverty in plenty. Proverbs 28:19 (NASB95)

Many of the proverbs make their points by comparing or contrasting the right way and the wrong way. We saw such contrast of Wisdom and Folly in the way we think about life itself. We also saw a comparison of being careful (in control) and being careless (out of control) with regard to what we say in our interactions with others. Now, in the realm of actually doing something, we find a contrast of the lazy and the energetic. Various translations use such terms as sluggard, slothful, and lazy to designate undesirable behavior and words such as diligent, energetic or conscientious to label behavior that produces good results.

We sometime have been guilty of thinking that those who have little or nothing are in that condition because they want to be. We think that “they” are satisfied with not knowing much

about what is going on in the world, not having a nice place to live, getting by on a day-to-day basis or a hand-to-mouth existence with nothing in reserve to help during a crisis. The first verse in this group tells us that the desire to have such things is there, but obtaining what they want doesn't happen. This situation is contrasted with those who are diligent whose lives are enriched. What makes the difference? The selected verses that follow will give us some insight into the differences in how people approach work or actually do something.

The first thing we see in 14:23 is confirmation of the modern-day adage "no pain, no gain." The word translated "labor" has also been translated as "sorrow" and "hurt" and "toil." It is not just activity but "hard work" that produces the profit or the gain. Some people have jobs and they think that all they need to do is to "show up and be there and go through the motions" doing as little as they can to just keep their jobs. That is NOT what produces gain or profit. That produces the status quo or is just the neutral position. If we are doing only what is required, then Jesus (in Luke 17:10) characterized such a person as an unprofitable servant.

"So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done (only) what was our duty to do.'"

On the negative end of the scale of applying oneself to the tasks at hand is the person who spends all their time just talking and not doing even the routine or required actions. You've heard of people who "talk a good game" but don't actually "walk it out" in their lives. The ability to "talk a good game" shows that they actually know what should be done, they just don't follow through because of lack of diligence which is typically expressed in hard work. How would we characterize a person who is "less than unprofitable?"

A second characteristic that we pick up from verse four of chapter 20 is that there is little or no preparation for the future by those who are lazy or slothful. Failure to plow at the appropriate time results in the inability to produce a crop. We are not in an agricultural economy, but we can think of things that people should do that are comparable to plowing in the fall. Education and training are things people can do to get themselves prepared for opportunities that may come along. It is what you do when you don't have to that makes all the difference when it is too late.

There was a story in one of the text books used in the first grade about an animal whose house would leak when it rained. The point of the story was that he could not repair the leak because it was raining and when rain stopped, the roof no longer leaked and, therefore, the repairs were not made.

In chapter 24 we find a group of five verses (30-34) that give us a third reason why those who are lazy are not successful. The first was a failure to do hard work, the second was failure to plan ahead, and now we see that a failure to be persistent in the maintenance of what God has given us will also produce poor results.

In this description of the property, we see that someone had worked hard at one time to create a working farm with fields and vineyards. Now the owner of that property was being neglectful in maintaining it. How would something like that happen? One distinct possibility is that such property would be inherited by a child of the person who had done the hard work of planting and building fences and whatever else needed to be done. It may have even passed through several generations.

We are experiencing a generational deterioration of values in our national culture. That deterioration has led to lack of maintenance of those things that made us successful as a nation. On the farm, the problem was thistles and nettles. When we look at our culture as being the once-productive field and vineyard, what would be the equivalent of thistles and nettles? Think of things and practices that have crept into our society that choke out the life of that which

produces physical and spiritual wealth. One of the obvious breakdowns is a lack of appreciation of spiritual values. Many have abandoned the idea of absolutes when dealing with right and wrong. We have turned away from heeding what the Scriptures teach regarding the value of life (especially of the unborn) and we no longer see the necessity of a traditional family. The work ethic has been replaced by an entitlement mentality and the use of chemical substances and drug abuse is rampant. Many in positions of national leadership have abandoned the idea of purity and now celebrate perversion in sexual relationships.

The other thing that was evident of deterioration on the farm was that the stone walls were broken down and that allowed all kinds of animals to come and go as they pleased that resulted in the crops being eaten or otherwise destroyed. The modern-day equivalents of protective walls in the civil arena of life are the Constitution and laws regarding criminal and civil behavior. These are being broken down by those in authority who ignore the enforcing of these principles and letting anyone and anything come and go at will.

In the spiritual arena of life, the protective walls are the commandments and principles found in the word of God. We have deliberately abandoned those protections and we have been flooded with an invasion of demonic activity and ungodliness that have taken over the lives of many.

How did these things happen? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest is all that it took. Notice the repeating of the word “little.” It does not take much inattention or neglect to have things get completely out of control. Natural events favor the growth of Bermuda grass, nettles, and weeds in general. Things left to themselves will tend toward disorder. In the same way the forces of chaos and anarchy and lawlessness will impact us unless work is expended to reverse the natural tendency toward decay and disorder.

The results of disorder and disarray and disharmony are poverty and want. It will happen and it will occur without a lot of warning. For the U.S. the official figures are about 15 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. In India the figure is close to 30 percent. Many African nations will have above 50 percent. That is just for economic poverty. Spiritual poverty is much higher in all cases.

Those who are not diligent in doing what they can to improve will use any excuse regardless of how ridiculous it sounds to avoid hard work. Since I retired, I have found that many times it is too hot or too cold to do what needs to be done around the house. So far, I have not used the “lion in the street” excuse to avoid mowing the lawn or weeding the garden. Unfortunately, our welfare system has provided many with a seemingly valid excuse to not be diligent. If they work, then they will lose their government welfare checks and they may wind up in deeper poverty and need. This is what is known as the “welfare trap.”

The final observation is that those who are slothful spend a lot of time “resting” as if they are hinged to their bed as a door is hinged to the door frame. This tells us that many will have trouble getting out of the routine or rut of their lives since doing so puts them out of their comfort zone. A door can become a table or a sled or a ramp if it is removed from its hinges. In the same way a lazy person could develop into any number of possibilities if they would get up and get about doing something useful.

The final comparison shows us essentially that you can't succeed if you don't try to do something useful. Tilling the soil and planting seeds will give a person a chance to harvest some vegetables. Watching the television all day long won't ever grow anything that will feed a family. Empty pursuits produce empty results.

Work Smartly – 6:6-8; 10:5; 14:4; 21:20; 24:27

⁶ Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, ⁷ Which, having no chief, Officer or ruler, ⁸ Prepares her food in the summer *And* gathers her provision in the harvest. Proverbs 6:6-8

⁵ He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, *But* he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully. Proverbs 10:5

⁴ Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, *But* much revenue *comes* by the strength of the ox. Proverbs 14:4

²⁰ There is precious treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise, *But* a foolish man swallows it up. Proverbs 21:20

²⁷ Prepare your work outside *And* make it ready for yourself in the field; Afterwards, then, build your house. Proverbs 24:27 (NASB95)

We will sometimes quote the advice to “work smarter, not harder.” Actually, we need to do both. I don’t care how smart you are, if you don’t diligently apply that knowledge by hard work, then it will not amount to much. In the process of being diligent, engage your mind to make what you do count for something.

How smart do we need to be in order to have success? Solomon thought that just having as much sense as an ant would be enough. The logic of what ants do and honey bees do is obvious to all who will look. A person doesn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know what “make hay when the sun shines” means and how to apply it.

The application to life with regard to timing can be seen in that the best time to train children and to teach them is when they are young. There are windows of opportunity when learning “facts” is easier. It is also important to notice that abstract concepts cannot be taught to a very young child and there are seasons for that also as a child matures into their mid-teen years. If those opportunities are missed, then the desired results may be absent and success can be more difficult to achieve.

Desire and willingness to work hard can be greatly enhanced in their effectiveness if a person is provided the proper tools. Let’s assume that you were to give a child a wood screw and a block of wood and told the child that you would reward him with a hundred dollars if he could just fully insert the screw into the block. He would be motivated and would work hard to get the job done, but without a screw driver would be severely impeded in doing what was necessary to earn the reward. A smart worker would make use of labor-saving things such as using an ox to pull a plow or a hammer to drive a nail. In using tools, there is a trade off. The tools may cost something and may require some care, but the price that is expended will pay off as a good investment. Having an ox will require that you feed it and clean up after it, but the strength of the ox enable the person to do much more.

Proverbs 21:20 is somewhat of a warning for us to use our resources wisely. There are at least two lessons here. The first is to not spend all you make but to save and keep some resources in reserve. The second would be equivalent to an expression that is used today of not eating the seed corn that is set aside for next year’s crop. Only the foolish would do that and show no regard for the future.

This section ends with a reminder that we have both urgent and important things to do and we cannot neglect the important because of the demands of the urgent. These two types of needs tend to line up with short term and long term objectives. We cannot just live for the moment but we need to think ahead and allow time for things that don’t happen instantaneously. This takes maturity and discipline to make sure that the important things don’t fall victim to the urgent things of daily living.

Give Generously – 11:24-25; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27

²⁴ There is one who scatters, and *yet* increases all the more, And there is one who withholds what is justly due, *and yet it results* only in want. ²⁵ The generous man will be prosperous, And he who waters will himself be watered. Proverbs 11:24-25

¹⁷ One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed. Proverbs 19:17

⁹ He who is generous will be blessed, For he gives some of his food to the poor. Proverbs 22:9

²⁷ He who gives to the poor will never want, But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses. Proverbs 28:27 (NASB95)

The secret of success is truly bound up in knowing the Source of all prosperity. If we want true success in life and enjoy the blessing of a good life, then we should be learning and living in agreement with Godly principles. The bottom line is that all our labor will ultimately be in vain if God does not bless us and bless what we do. Failure to acknowledge God as the Owner of everything and to see that we are privileged to be entrusted with resources will eventually lead to pride and failure.

We certainly want God to be generous to us and to help us prosper. We want Him to water our fields so they will produce good crops. The way we tap into those benefits is to realize that God blesses us in proportion to the way we bless others. Just as Jesus taught us that God forgives us in the same way we forgive others, we can apply that same measurement to His blessings on our labor. The beauty of God's economy is that He multiplies His blessings many times greater than what we do to bless others. It is like planting seed where the yield may be tenfold or sixty-fold. We cannot out give God.