

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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Consider the Ant and Be Wise

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Dear Radio Friends,

If you have your Bibles, I ask you to open them to Proverbs 6:6-11. In this message, and in the one next week, I plan to speak to you on the important subject of labor, or work. When we come to this subject, there are two dangers that the Scripture addresses for us. The one is that we work for the wrong reasons. That is the one we will look at next week. We should not labor to be rich. The other danger is that we do not work as we should, that we are lazy. And it is that which is addressed in the passage before us.

Proverbs 6:6-11: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.”

In this text the Bible gives us two examples from which we should learn. The first is the example of the sluggard—the lazy man. Solomon says, in Proverbs 24:30-32, that he went by the sluggard’s field and he saw and considered it well and looked upon it and received instruction. We must receive instruction from the example of the sluggard.

The second thing from which we should receive instruction in the text is the ant. In the text: “Consider the ant and be wise.”

The text that is before us is addressed to the sluggard. Solomon says, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard.” What is a sluggard? A sluggard is a lazy person. It is someone who has work to do, who has the ability to do that work, and either refuses to do that work or does that work with a completely wrong attitude. He does that work out of compulsion or out of necessity.

Solomon, in the book of Proverbs, highlights four characteristics of the sluggard. First of all, the sluggard is a procrastinator. His motto is given in the text before us, Proverbs 6:10. He says, “Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.” Soon, because this is his motto, the day passes and he has nothing done. Every opportunity to be productive in life slips away.

The second characteristic in the book of Proverbs with regard to the sluggard is that the sluggard does not finish the things that he is given to do. Sometimes he begins those things; sometimes he maybe even begins those things with great enthusiasm. But the novelty of those things wears off. The effort required to finish is too much, and so he does not finish his work. In Proverbs 12:27 Solomon says, “The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting.” Here you have a man eager to get out with his comrades and hunt. He goes out and, what a disappointment, he kills an animal. Now he has the work of cleaning it. Now he has the work of doing something with the meat so that it can be eaten. Instead of doing that, the slothful man leaves that which he took in hunting outdoors to be eaten by a wild beast or to rot.

In Proverbs 26:15, “the slothful man hideth his hand in his bosom; it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth.” The word that is used here for “bosom,” could be “bowl”: the slothful man puts his hand in a bowl of food and he is too lazy even to bring it to his mouth to eat. This is the tragedy of the lazy man. He does not finish that which he starts to do.

The third characteristic of a sluggard is that he is a man full of excuses for why he should not and can not work. In the text, he is too tired to get up and work. “A little sleep,” he says, “a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.” In chapter 26:13, the slothful man saith, “There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets.” He comes up with excuses for why he should not do his work. In chapter 22:13, “I shall be slain in the streets.” He thinks it is not safe to go out, so “why should I go out and work?” In chapter 20:4 he says that he cannot “plow by reason of the cold.” He always has an excuse. He knows that it is very clear to others that he is not doing his work, that he is not being productive. And so he has a reason, an explanation, for why he does not do his work.

But all of his excuses are ridiculous. Chapter 14:23, “In all labour there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury [poverty].” This is the lazy man. He has plenty of ideas. He always has an excuse. He is full of talk. But he never does anything productive. And so he comes to poverty.

The fourth characteristic of the lazy man in the book of Proverbs is that he is a dissatisfied man, an unhappy man. He is covetous, he is jealous of others. Everyone else, in his view, has it so good. But he has it so bad. He views himself as a victim. In Proverbs 21:25, 26, “The desire of the slothful killed him; for his hands refuse to labour. He coveteth greedily all the day long.” He does not think that life is fair. He covets and he wants and he thinks that everyone else has it so good. He views himself as a victim. And, yes, he is a victim. But he is a victim of his own laziness.

The text before us is warning us against this attitude toward our work and this lazy approach towards life. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” The Bible wants us to learn a lesson from the sluggard.

The Bible does not tolerate this man. In chapter 26:14 it almost makes fun of him: “As the door turneth upon his hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed.” When you go to wake him, he says, “Just a little more sleep, just a little more slumber,” and then he rolls over in his bed like a creaking door hinge. A few minutes later, his alarm rings again, he presses the snooze button, and he rolls over one more time, creaking like that door hinge. This is the figure and the picture that the Scriptures give of the lazy man.

The lazy man needs to learn a lesson. And we need to learn a lesson from the lazy man. The lesson that we should learn is that his laziness will result in poverty. First of all, it will result in a physical poverty. The text before us makes that plain in verse 11: “So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.” The one that travelleth and the armed man are thieves—a bandit or a gypsy or an armed robber who comes and takes all your things. If you are sleeping, and the armed man has been in your house during the night, you wake up in the morning and your possessions are gone. The lazy man will awake someday to find out that he has nothing—that the world and its opportunities and the things that he could have had for himself have passed him by.

But this poverty is not only physical. The poverty that will come on a lazy man is a spiritual poverty. There is an old saying that “idle time is the devil’s playground.” That means that if a man is not productive, if he does not work, Satan will soon fill that void with temptation and with sinful thoughts. You have only to think of the parable that Jesus told of the prodigal son. Jesus builds that parable around the proverb in chapter 28:19, “He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread: but he that followeth after vain persons shall have poverty enough.” You think of the prodigal son. He followed vain persons. Not only was his time occupied with the wasting of his goods, but his time was also occupied with partying and rioting, and he came to a spiritual death. There is a great danger. And that is a danger for your soul.

The apostle Paul addresses this also in his epistle to the Thessalonians, II Thessalonians 3. The Thessalonian church was plagued with an error. The error was that Christ’s coming would be very soon and that, therefore, they need not concern themselves at all with their earthly occupation or earthly things. And so the people, instead of working, were waiting—sitting and doing nothing and waiting for the coming of Christ.

The apostle Paul addresses this in II Thessalonians 3:11. He says, “We hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.” Because of their laziness and because of their idleness, they became busybodies. The devil filled the vacant time in their minds and in their life with sticking their nose into other people’s business. And this was destructive not only for themselves, but also for the church.

Now as we think about the sluggard, we should recognize that his attitude and his sinful inclination is in every one of us. We can think of lazy people when we think of the sluggard. Maybe we think of people who try to live off welfare for as much of their life as they can. Maybe we can think of somebody in our relations or in our church who is lazy, or someone in our workplace, and we want to take this text and apply it to them.

But laziness is a sin of the heart. It is an attitude that we should recognize in every one of us. Do we procrastinate? Do we take the easy road when it comes to work? Are we jealous of others and think that they have it so much better than we do? Do we make excuses for not being as productive as we should be in the work that we have? Maybe you have a job. Are you fair to your employer? Maybe you are getting an education. What is your goal? Is it so that your life can be easier, or is it so that you may use our talents best to serve the Lord?

Over against the sluggard in the text, there is the positive example given of the ant. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” This is a humiliating example for man. Here God comes in the Word and He addresses one whom He originally created in His own image, to multiply and subdue and to keep the earth (this creation), and He takes him to one of the smallest of the creatures of the creation and He says, “Look at that ant and learn from him.”

We should be like the ant. We have only to watch the ant for a few minutes and we can see that it is an industrious animal. We can see that it is a cooperative animal. We can see that it is self-motivated. We can see that it perseveres. And this is a very convicting example for us. The ant, according to the text, has no guide or overseer or ruler, and yet she provides her meat in the summer and gathereth her food in the harvest. She plans. And if you have ever tried to stop an ant from doing its work, you know that an ant does not stand still for a minute. It will hesitate if you

block its path, and then find some other way to accomplish its goals.

We have to look at the ant, and we have to learn from the ant, and we have to gain wisdom. Consider the ant and be wise.

What is wisdom? Wisdom is a knowledge that takes God into account, a knowledge that applies the reality of God to daily life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. With regard to work, this is wisdom: to look at the ant and learn. We should recognize, first of all, that work is God's design for man. God created man to work. This is what God is saying when He tells us to consider the ant. He is saying, "I made you like the ant." He does not tell us to consider some other creature, like a snail or a turtle or a slug or a sloth. But He says, "Look at the ant. Consider the ant. This is how I made you. I made you like the ant to be an industrious creature." This was His original design for man. This is what He told Adam immediately after the fall into sin: "In the sweat of thy face thou shalt labor." And this was His plan in the original creation-week: six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work. Work is not a curse. The curse is the difficulty of work and the bad attitude that we would have towards our work.

Wisdom, with regard to work, is also this, that God not only created man to work, but He created work as the way for man to meet his necessities. This is not true of all creatures. Some creatures do not have to work to get their food. But God gives us our food through our labor. And God creates an inseparable connection between work and eating. In Proverbs 28:19, "He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread." And in the New Testament, the apostle Paul makes this connection. Speaking to those who will not work, he says, "If a man does not work, he should not eat."

Wisdom with regard to work is also this, that God expects diligence from us in our labor. He expects us to do our best. He expects us to be stewards of the gifts and the time that He has given us to work. If you look at the ant, this is his outstanding characteristic: he is diligent in his work. And the Bible tells us that God created us like the ant to be industrious creatures. In Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." And believers have a special reason and a special purpose to be diligent in their work. According to Colossians 3:23, we labor unto the Lord; and we must do our work heartily as unto the Lord. This is good stewardship. God expects us to do our best in our labor.

God rewards such diligent labor. There is, for the child of God in his diligent work, peace of mind. In Ecclesiastes, the sleep of the laboring man is sweet, whether he eat much or little. Contentment comes, not through having all our needs met, not through making a good income by our work, but simply through working diligently and happily in the labor that God has given us to do. The sleep of the laboring man is sweet.

So we must learn from the text. We must learn from the sluggard and we must learn from the ant. We must learn that God puts us here in this world as Christian human beings, stewards, to labor. And we have a calling to labor in the vocation and in the place that He has given us in life.

We have to do this in a world and in a culture that is opposed to work and labor; a world and a culture that views work as simply a necessary evil; a world and a culture that emphasizes pleasure, vacation, wealth, the weekend, retirement, and laboring with those things as our goal. Rather, we have to work simply because God gives us this calling as believers.

There is also in this text a spiritual application. And that comes in two areas. The first is this: we must balance our work. Someone says, "Yes, I know I must work; but how much should I work? Should I work six days a week on the job? What about my family? What about my marriage? What about my church? What about my spiritual responsibilities?" The answer to that is this, that we are called to work in our day-job (whatever that may be), but we are not to do that to the point that we jeopardize the priorities of our health and family and church and spiritual well-being. God is not a slave-driver. And the family concerns and the spiritual concerns that He gives us are also our work. If we neglect these for the sake of our day-job, there is a laziness involved. God gives us work to do in our homes and families and church and with regard to spiritual things. And we must throw ourselves into those things as well, and labor diligently in them. We should not leave these for other people. That would be laziness.

How much do you give yourself to these spiritual labors and work? How much do you give yourself to the work of love—in the church and in the home? The lazy person says, "Well, love just happens." But the Bible says, No, it takes much labor. How much do you put into your personal spiritual growth? That is something that does not just happen, either. And it is not something that we should simply leave for others to do. How much do you put into the work of being a good Christian witness in this world and into the furtherance of the gospel and the name of Jesus Christ? This requires labor as well—from every believer. We have to be warned against laziness with regard to the spiritual aspects of our life.

The Bible calls us to be diligent—to be diligent in spiritual things; to be fervent in prayer; to be zealous in love; to be like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures daily; to realize that there is a battle and we have to be vigilant in this battle against the spiritual dangers. The Bible calls us not to put off these things. It has been said that the road to hell is paved with many good intentions—people who say, Yes, tomorrow, tomorrow I will be concerned about spiritual things. And then they wake up in hell. The road to hell is paved with many good intentions. We must move beyond the good intentions and the talk and the excuses. The Bible calls us not to wait. We should not put off repentance for a sin and hold on to that sin. If you have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, you should not wait to believe. But you should believe the gospel today.

This work, this spiritual work that has to do with the well-being of your soul, should take priority. We must labor. We must labor diligently in the work that God has given us to do. May God give us the grace to do that.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee that Thou hast put us here in this earth with this great calling to labor. Help us to be diligent in the work that Thou hast given us to do and to do it in such a way that we live to the glory and honor of Thy name. For Jesus' sake we pray it, Amen.