

Back to Work

Proverbs 6.6-11

Scripture reading: Ephesians 6.5-9

In the Disney animated classic, **Snow White and the Seven Dwarves**, the dwarves have this little song they sing every day as they walk to work: *Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, it's off to work we go*. It is an unmistakably cheerful little ditty – they even whistle. These dwarves actually like going to work (well, maybe Grumpy doesn't, but the other six sure do).

How different the dwarves are to the average Australian.

According to statistics from the AWU, 52% of Australian workers reported negative working conditions in 2011 – they didn't like their jobs. Looking ahead to 2012, 69% expect that their working conditions will worsen.

This means that as the holidays end, few Australian workers will be "whistling while they work", as another song in Snow White advises.

How about you? What is your attitude towards going back to work?

Sermon in a Sentence: **Always work hard.**

[Pray]

A photographer was snapping class pictures of first graders at a primary school, making small talk to put his subjects at ease.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked one little girl.

"Tired," she said.¹

She must have been thinking about work.

Today we are returning to the book of Proverbs to seek God's guidance for living The Good Life. So far in our studies, we have learnt that the overarching secret to The Good Life is to fear God – this is the beginning of wisdom. It is impossible for your life to be eternally satisfying unless God is at the centre.

Where is God in your life?

We have also learnt that there are three hazards to avoid: fatal friendships, foolishness, and fornication. On the positive side of the coin, there are three values to uphold: learning, loving and leaning (as in depending on the Lord).

¹ Preaching Today website. Submitted by J. R. Love, Rushton, Louisiana

This morning, we are in the practical section of our studies through Proverbs. Work is the topic we are exploring. Let's get some background to the subject before we look at what Proverbs has to say.

The essential issue is this: Is work a curse? The experience of many workers would suggest that it is. You might be among them . . . so as you look ahead to heaven, perhaps you picture it as an eternal holiday. No more working. Everlasting retirement.

But work is not a curse, nor is it something we should expect to ever escape. Adam and Eve were given work responsibilities from the very beginning of creation – before they sinned.

Genesis 2:15 (ESV)

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden **to work it** and keep it.

There is also every reason to expect that work responsibilities will continue through eternity – no retirement. Will there not be some who, as a reward for faithfulness in this life, will receive authority to manage cities in the kingdom of Christ (Luke 19.11-27)?

That's a surprising concept, isn't it? Work is actually a privilege and a reward!

So why does work so seldom feel like a good gift from God? It is because work – though not the curse itself – is nevertheless cursed because of sin.

Genesis 3:17-19 (ESV)

¹⁷ . . . **cursed is the ground** because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸**thorns** and **thistles** it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the **sweat** of your face you shall eat bread . . .”

In the introduction to his book about work, Studs Terkel writes that work is “about violence to the spirit as well as to the body; about ulcers [and] accidents; about shouting matches . . . [and] nervous breakdowns . . . [and] above all, about daily humiliations.

“It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.

“Once man sinned, God made work—even good work—hard. He did it so that we would be impelled to turn to him when the thorns get to be too much for us.”

So going back to work is a good and right thing for us to do – even if it is hard. To find satisfaction rather than resentment in our work is what makes for the Good Life.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 (ESV)

¹²I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³also that everyone should eat and drink and **take pleasure in all his toil**—this is God's gift to man.

In principal, it sounds easy, but in practice it is far from it. Work is hard.

Let's turn now to Proverbs 6.6-11 as we endeavour to keep our sermon in a sentence: **Always work hard**. Here we find from the example of the ant three secrets to being a hard worker.

Proverbs 6:6-11 (ESV)

⁶Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. ⁷**Without having any chief**, officer, or ruler, ⁸she **prepares her bread in summer** and gathers her food in harvest. ⁹How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹and **poverty** will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

Three secrets to hard work:

1. Be motivated in your heart (v 7)

Notice the example of the ant in verse 7. Without any form of supervision, the ant does her work. She is self-motivated.

How few workers are self-motivated! Many are self-demotivated. They do as little as possible for as long as they can get away with it.

I read this week about a rail line that was shut down when a mysterious electrical device was found near the tracks. At first, there were fears that it was a bomb . . . but it was soon discovered to be an ordinary motion sensor that transmitted to a receiver in the station house. Lazy workers were using it to know when the boss was coming so they could look busy.

This story reminded me of an early computer game that featured a “boss key”. You could play the game at work and just hit the letter “b” if you heard your boss coming. Immediately a fake Microsoft Word screen would cover the game so the boss would think you were working.

It seems that these kinds of examples are more common than the example of the ant. We must find motivation to be different from two directions:

A. Our reputation before people

Being a slack worker might make a person popular with colleagues – for a little while. There might be some laughs and even some admiration at first. But doing the wrong thing never makes for the right reputation. In the end, our sin finds us out.

And make no mistake: being slack at work is sin. For one thing, it is theft because we are paid to put in an honest day’s work. For another, it is destructive. Look at a few additional proverbs:

Proverbs 18:9 (ESV)

⁹Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who **destroys**.

We might never lower ourselves to maliciously damage equipment, but if we are slack, our actions – or lack thereof – lead to losses that are just as severe.

Proverbs 10:4 (ESV)

⁴A slack hand **causes poverty**, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

What happens if a company is not getting value for money from its workers? It goes broke.

Proverbs 10:26 (ESV)

²⁶ Like **vinegar to the teeth** and **smoke to the eyes**, so is the sluggard to those who send him.

Nothing gets up the nose of an employer like an employee who proves to be untrustworthy. But a self-motivated employee who gives 110% to his job not only gains a good reputation for trustworthiness for himself, but also for Jesus Christ.

A good witness was Paul's concern when he wrote this to the Thessalonian church:

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ . . . aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to **work** with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² **so that you may walk properly** before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

People form opinions about you based on how you work. Work hard and you'll earn a good reputation.

More important than what people think about us is what God thinks about us.

B. Our reputation before God

Who is your boss? Ultimately, God is our boss. This means the whole concept of "the cat's away, the mice will play" is a fallacy. God always sees what we're doing and always holds us accountable. The cat is never away!

So what does God expect from us at work? Strong self-motivation to do above and beyond what is expected.

Colossians 3:22-23 (ESV)

²² Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, **as for the Lord** and not for men,

Now I understand that a person who works hard sometimes gets up the nose of his slack co-workers. If through your honest self-motivation you put out 100 units a day whilst your co-workers are only doing 50, they'll probably pressure you to slow down. This is a test: will you please God? Or will you please men?

You might suffer some persecution for doing the right thing . . . but it is worth it to have a good reputation before God and men.

A recent study on work motivation turned up a surprising result. Motivational speakers – such as Anthony Robbins – make no discernible difference in the workplace, but God does.

"the only long-lasting motivation will come from employees who bring it to work in the form of God, spirituality, or something else that causes them to 'rise to a higher purpose.'"²

² USA Today (5-10-01)

As you go back to work, will you be motivated by a higher purpose? The purpose of the glory of God . . . magnified in the form of a job well done.

Be motivated in your heart to always work hard. Make this your daily prayer: “God, please help me to do my best to exceed expectations today . . . for your glory.”

We come now to secret number 2:

2. Be stretched in your vision (v 8)

The advance planning of the ant is impressive. So, too, is her determination to finish the job.

Proverbs 6:8 (ESV)

⁸she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.

In contrast is the sluggard:

Proverbs 20:4 (ESV)

⁴The sluggard does not plough in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

Vision stretches to see ahead so that goals are achieved. It is not satisfied with merely doing a thing; it aspires to do something better.

But being stretched in our vision is itself hard work. It takes extra time and extra energy.

And it doesn't come naturally.

Do you know what does come naturally? Entropy.

Entropy is related to the second law of thermodynamics which says that anything left to itself will deteriorate and stop. Our natural tendency, therefore, is to slow down, which means if we are to be stretched in our vision, we must go against our nature.

Have you noticed how a moment of laziness so easily multiplies? We may think, “I don't feel like working today; I think I'll take it easy”. But a stolen break rarely solves our feelings of fatigue – it often does the opposite. Laziness then becomes a downward spiral and we soon begin to struggle to do even simple tasks.

Proverbs 19:15 (ESV)

¹⁵Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger.

Proverbs 19:24 (ESV)

²⁴The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.

Now please understand that I am not discounting the need to take a holiday, nor am I criticising someone who, because of a personal health issue, is not able to do as much as they once did. I'm addressing the matter of going back to work after a holiday, or after an illness. We must go back with our vision stretched. We must fight entropy.

I think it would be worthwhile to hear what John Ortberg says about entropy:

“Entropy is one of the great enemies of the human spirit. A person becomes apathetic or complacent or settles for the path of least resistance in some area of life. Dreams die and hopes fade. A terrible thing happens: a person learns they can live with mediocrity.

“Everyday you have to be on the lookout for entropy. Though things might have been okay yesterday, that doesn't mean they stay okay forever. Put any important area of your life on autopilot, and risk entropy that is both subtle and destructive.”³

The alternative to fighting entropy with vision is to make blind excuses.

Proverbs 26:13-16 (ESV)

¹³The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!” ¹⁴As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. ¹⁵The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. ¹⁶The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

There was a story in the Los Angeles Times about a man travelling through the area where he lived as a boy. Feeling sentimental, he detours to where the old house stood, and then on an impulse goes up to the door. The owners welcome him in to explore the place that holds so many wonderful memories.

He goes up into the attic and there finds a jacket that belonged to him. In the pocket is a 20-year-old receipt for a shoe repair job that he never picked up.

Just to be funny, he goes to the shop to claim his long lost shoes. The shop owner takes the ticket, goes to the back and then re-emerges with word, “They aren’t quite ready yet. Come back a week from Thursday.”

That’s the mind of the sluggard; they’re always saying, “A week from Thursday”.

The secret is to be stretched in your vision. Dare to go above and beyond . . . to plan ahead . . . and to finish the job.

So, the secrets to always working hard are 1) be motivated in your heart, 2) be stretched in your vision, and . . .

3. Be gratified in your labour (vv 9-11)

We get this point by inverting what Proverbs 6.9-11 says about the sluggard. The lot of the non-sluggard – the hard worker – is the opposite.

Proverbs 6:9-11 (ESV)

⁹How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹and **poverty** will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

³ John Ortberg, in the sermon Intercepting Entropy, PreachingToday.com

The sluggard gets no satisfaction from what little work he does. But the hard worker feels gratification for a job well done.

Not only that, but the hard worker prospers.

Proverbs 12:24 (ESV)

²⁴The hand of the diligent **will rule**, while the slothful will be put to forced labour.

Proverbs 12:27 (ESV)

²⁷Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man **will get precious wealth**.

Proverbs 13:4 (ESV)

⁴The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent **is richly supplied**.

A lot of people have the mistaken notion that good things come to people because they are lucky. The reality is that hard work makes the difference.

How hard are you working? The best things in life are worth working for.

Now I want to clarify that I am not proclaiming some humanistic “work hard and you can achieve anything you want” message. The reward might not be monetary; and it probably won’t be fame. In fact, there is a reward that is much greater than both money and fame. This is the reward we should seek.

The reward I speak of is the voice of God saying, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord.” (Matthew 25.21)

That is what it means to be gratified in your labour.

In conclusion, I want you to see that this topic actually encapsulates all of life. I have spoken in relation to employment or jobs. But work is not just about jobs. School is work. Gardening is work. Housekeeping is work. Cooking is work. Coming to church is work. Praying is work.

Always work hard in each and every area of life – and do all for the glory of God.

I got my first job when I was 16 years old. It was at Radio Bible Class – an international Christian ministry that produces the Our Daily Bread devotional. I was so proud to have a job at RBC . . . until I realised what I was hired to do: put books in envelopes. Do you have any idea how boring that is to do? Eight hours a day, five days a week. Take a book, put it in an envelope, seal the envelope and send it down the line for addressing. I hated it.

One day, my boss assigned an elderly woman – an old time employee – to work with me. She was like a machine. For every book that I did, she did at least three. After about 15 minutes she started in: “Son,” she said, “tell me honestly. Are you working hard? Or are you hardly working? Because it looks to me like you are hardly working.”

She was right. I had a bad attitude. I couldn’t believe that they had a person of my talent and ambition packing books in envelopes. I felt like quitting.

But Abbie Koetsier wasn't finished yet. "Do you know what is so important about these books?" she started in again, "These books go to people who have given generously to fund this ministry. These books will be read and treasured and will change people's lives."

I hadn't thought about it like that. Suddenly, I was glad to be stuffing envelopes – paper cuts on my fingers and all – and I started keeping pace with the old pro.

Working hard? Or hardly working?

Which one describes your approach to knowing God?

Which one describes your approach to building Christ's body in Erskine Park?

Which one describes your approach to your family? Your home? Your work?

Always work hard. Be motivated. Be visionary. Be gratified.