

Sloth!

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[0:00] Okay, now we're going to look at our series this morning, which is on... It's a theme, so we're taking it from lots of different verses as we do. That's what Proverbs is like. It's a thematic book.

And we're going to be looking at quite a lot of different verses this morning. But I'm going to read a chunk of them. I'll come back to some of them later on in the service.

So, if we can have the first of these. And it's probably the best known. It's Proverbs chapter 6, 6 to 11. Go to the ant, O sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise without having a chief officer or ruler. She prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want or need like an armed man. Okay, Proverbs chapter 10, 26. Like, and some of these are great. Well, they're all great, but some of them are quite funny as well. Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.

[1:10] Proverbs 12, 11. Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense. Proverbs 21, 17.

Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man. He who loves wine and oil will not be rich. Proverbs 24, 30 to 34. I passed the field of a sluggard by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns.

The ground was covered with nettles and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it. I looked and received instruction. Again, a little slumber, a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, poverty will come upon you like a robber and want or lack like an armed man.

Okay, these are some of the verses we're going to be looking at today. Oh, I've got one more.

Sorry, yeah. So Proverbs 26, 13 to 16. The sluggard says, there's a lion on the road.

There's a lion in the streets as a door turns on its hinges. So a sluggard on his, so does a sluggard on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

[2:23] Sluggard is wising in his own eyes on seven men who can answer sensibly. These, this is the word of God, and we're grateful to be able to read it.

And I can immediately see some of your minds working saying, I better not look like I fall asleep today in church. It's okay. I know it's hot and you're tired.

And it's not really about that. So we're going to look eventually at this theme today, but I'm going to take quite a long introduction to get there. So please stay with me as we do so.

Because I can think, I'm kind of going to begin with the opposite of being lazy, and that's been hard working. I can think of at least four ways, I think, there are probably many more, but at least four ways which we misunderstand the Bible's teaching on hard work, both practically and spiritually.

And I'm going to intertwine the two today, practical truth and our spiritual life. They should all come together anyway. And one is when we think of salvation as a gift, and we know that's true, don't we? Salvation, I've been praying about that.

[3:28] We believe that it's a gift of God. We can't earn salvation. It's a free gift from the living God. But when we think like that, sometimes we get to the place where we think, therefore, serving is just a big slog.

It's hard work. And really our salvation is such a gift, it's all about love and desire. We lose sight of the place for dogged obedience, for duty and effort.

We just want to let go and let God. We love that kind of philosophy. And it plays itself out in thinking it doesn't really matter how we live. It's not that important how we live.

Because we're saved, and we're saved by grace. That might be one misunderstanding in terms of hard work. The other is the opposite end of that where we say, I've got to earn my salvation with God.

I've got to work hard to be made right with God. Now, you know, really well, theologically taught and trained, you know, since Cori's come. And you know these things.

[4 : 30] You know the truth. You know in your head. You know theologically that that's not the case, that you don't earn your salvation with God. But sometimes practically that's how we live.

Our faith is a really heavy weight. Because we're driven by guilt, by fear, by our image before other people, by our poor understanding of grace and of our identity in Christ.

And a deep-seated belief within us, within us all that God only helps those who help themselves.

And sometimes that's what we really think. And we think we need to live a certain way in order to please God so that He will accept us, earning our way, hard work to make God happy with us.

That may be a second misunderstanding. A third is maybe related to hard work. Generally, we maybe think of hard work, or work generally as just a natural attribute that people are born with.

You're either born hard working, or you're born lazy. And maybe that's all you think of. People either are lazy or hard work, it doesn't matter if they're Christians or not Christians, they're going to be hard working Christians, or they're going to be lazy Christians, because that's their natural inclination.

[5 : 53] But the reality is in Jesus Christ, if you're a hard worker naturally, you have to change your motive for hard working. Because being in Christ is all about our motives for what we do, not the fact that we do it itself.

So if you're a hard worker naturally, then you need to channel your hard work to God's glory, and not just be hard working because it's natural for you. And if you're naturally lazy, you need to repent of that, and recognize that God's called you to be a worker for Him and His kingdom.

So sometimes we just shrug off these characteristics as if we can't do anything about them. And the last potential misunderstanding is that we just believe our time is absolutely our own.

That God has no right to tell us how we work, or our attitude towards work, or what we do, for example, in our employment. That's our secular space.

And how we live there as Christians is really just a no entry sign for God. So we maybe have, and maybe you associate with some of these misunderstandings about work. But I'm making a thesis today from, I hope from Proverbs, as we eventually get to it, related to work and sloth, which is such a great word.

[7 : 14] My thesis from God's word, I think, is that when your heart is right with God through Christ, when your heart is right with God through Christ, you will be a hard worker. When your heart is right with God through Jesus Christ, through trusting in Him as your Lord and Savior, you will be ordinarily in your life a hard worker.

And under work I'm subsuming everything, how we spend our time, our employment, our spiritual lives, our leisure, everything. Because we are called as Christians, we're called to love the Lord, aren't we?

That's our calling, we're called to love the Lord. Love the Lord your God, Jesus says in Matthew 22, twice, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself.

Because that's the second commandment.

So we are called as believers to love the Lord. And we love the living God because of His character, because of His nature, because of His work.

And we love Him, part of it, because the essence of His character is that He is a creative God. He is a sustaining God. He's a hardworking God. He's a loving God.

[8 : 26] He's a judging God. John 5.17, when Jesus did miracles on the Sabbath and the Jews complained and persecuted Him, in His defense John 5 says, My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working.

So we see in the essence of God, and at the very core of our salvation, is a Savior who worked on our behalf. Jesus, as I prayed about, was a Savior who served His Father every day, who worked physically, who worked in obedience, who worked from the heart, who worked from His soul, who worked to serve others, who put others before Himself, who put the Father before everyone, and who went all the way to the cross, the cross itself, being His greatest work on our behalf.

His greatest energy and effort poured out on our behalf so that we might know salvation, His great work, so that we can rest in Him.

He defeated death to God's wrath, went to hell, was resurrected in the third day, and ascended to the Father. His great was to offer us free and full salvation without having to work for it.

That's the essence of His character. And when He created us, we know from the very beginning that He called us to work, to steward, to take care of the garden.

[9 : 55] And we know that the consequence of sin entering the world was that work became a struggle, the motives for working, the actual ability to work, the challenge of work generally became a struggle.

But we know in Christ that whole mandate is renewed and refreshed, and we are redeemed. And our work and our lives, therefore, are redeemed.

We've got these great words in Proverbs 3, 5 and 6, which we've looked at before, the kind of the linchpin of Proverbs, trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding.

In all your ways, your ways, your work, your effort, submit to Him, He will make your path straight. We have that great truth that in the Holy Spirit, as we are renewed by faith and as Christians, we are empowered to see our hearts changed and our attitudes to work changed and our attitudes to life changed because of grace.

And we can live the life and live the lives that Jesus wants us to live. So we're called in our work, in everything we do, to be God-honoring, in everything we do to redeem the time and to honour God with everything that we are, everything we do.

[11 : 23] Even the rubbish tasks that we have in life, even when our job seems dead-end, even when we're asked to do things that we have no desire or interest in doing, we're called to recognise and do them to God's glory.

And that's very much the focus of our walk of faith. We know, we recognise that salvation and our work of... our gift of salvation is something we can't earn.

It's a free gift of God, but we live it and we work out ourselves. Philippians 2, 12 and 13 says that, reminds us of that, doesn't it?

It doesn't say work in order to be saved. It reminds us that we are saved, but we continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And that is a reminder to us that faith costs.

There's a cost to living this freedom in Christ, this gift of salvation. Sometimes I'm going to do a little sidebar here. Sometimes I think that faith is the last area that as Christians, we put work into.

[12 : 35] We're content with it just being a feeling, just being a reality in our lives. I can stop saying someone in our lives, but it doesn't involve us in effort and hard work or salvation.

I'm going to give you an example. But hopefully it will maybe make us think a little bit. Do you imagine a young guy here in the church? He sees us, we'll take it, he's a student.

And we'll just say that he's in a flat with two other guys in the church. And he comes to church every Sunday morning. And one of the Sundays at church, when he should be listening to this sermon, of course, he clocks a really good-looking girl.

And he says, she's the one for me. And so he eventually starts talking to her. And they get to know one another. And they go out together, eventually gets engaged to her.

And they say, I date for the wedding. The wedding's here. I'm doing the wedding. And the wedding day arrives, and all this stuff that comes up for it arrives. And she comes down the front, she's beautiful, and everyone's there, family and friends.

[13 : 47] And he's waiting there at the front, smiling. They're vows together, they sing. Everything goes swimming, it's great. And then they go back to the hotel. They have a big feast together with all their friends and family.

And after that, there's a Kaley and they all dance, and they're happy, and it's a really good time.

And at the end of the night, the groom says, that's it. I'll just head back to the flat with the boys then. I'll see you next Sunday in church. Now that's bizarre, isn't it? That would be a strange way to start a marriage, especially if that's how he intended to go on.

Just go back to the same life that he had before. He's married. There's no relationship there, but he'll see her every Sunday when he comes back to church.

Now, that's a stupid example, is it? No one would ever do that. But sometimes I think we think that in a relationship with Jesus. All it needs is just a turn up once on a Sunday.

[14:50] That's all we did. We don't need to think about him the rest of the week. We made a commitment, we were saved 20 years ago, but from Monday to Saturday, just got about my life. And I meet him on a Sunday in church for the hour.

If he goes on to an hour and five minutes, start getting unhappy and restless. And then we go back to live our lives as it were without him. And yet that's not what the gospel teaches.

If you read the epistles of grace, the epistles of love, all the epistles in the New Testament, in fact, the gospels as well, they are full of that word, work. Full of how we have to work out our salvation, about putting off the on, about perseverance, about keeping going, about running, about walking, about all these things, because there's this recognition, and we could say so much more about the importance of a hard-working, daily relationship with Jesus Christ, about prayer, about learning, about growing, about serving.

We spoke the Lord's prayer together, and it speaks about that, doesn't it? About daily being in His presence. Daily requireings need daily worshiping and serving and following Him.

Hugely important. And our work, therefore, is so significant in our Christian lives, and it's motivated by our love for God. It's a mark of our wisdom.

[16:15] We spoke about wisdom right through. This is a wisdom book, Proverbs, and we've looked at wisdom. And we're reminded in Proverbs 6 verses 8, the passage we read about the ant, that go to the ant, you slugger, consider its ways and be wise.

Great, great little animal, the ant. Superhuman strength, forward thinking, providing for itself and for others.

Great evidence of wisdom in this little created being. And it's a great thing, the ant.

It's got two stomachs, one for itself and one for other people, other ants. Probably not other people. But if we apply that, then our spiritual two stomachs are those that we need to nourish ourselves and be fed.

But we need to learn and receive food in order to give and nourish others as we serve them. So we too, if we're wise like the ant, have this great amazing strength from the Holy Spirit.

[17:25] We have to be forward thinking, we have to work and serve for the glory of God. So we are called as believers to love the Lord. That's our calling. Now that's the longest introduction you've ever had.

Because our temptation is to love nothing worthwhile. That's our temptation and that's where sloth comes in, or laziness. We're tempted to love nothing worthwhile.

In other words, a lazy love in Proverbs 21 and verse 25, it speaks about our desires. The Proverbs says, the desire or the cravings of the sluggard kills him for his hands refuse to work.

There's a laziness and his heart therefore, his right desires crumble. And there's this great theme throughout Proverbs about sloth, which, you know, go to the ant is probably the best example of it for us.

And it's a reminder how practical Proverbs is about how we spend our lives, how we live our lives. And it will all look different for all of us. It'll look different for me.

[18:37] And can I just say at this point, in case you think I'm preaching at you, I'm absolutely not. I was hugely convicted doing this sermon and preparing it for myself from God's word about the ease with which you fall into idleness and sloth and laziness.

There's two particular ways, I think, that Proverbs makes clear about how we can be slothful and lazy in our lives. And the first is by making excuses for not working.

Making excuses is a brilliant and it's repeated twice in Proverbs 22 and verse 13 and then 26 and verse 13. The sluggard says, there's a lion outside.

I shall be killed in the streets. And then again, Proverbs 23, the sluggard says, there's a lion on the road. There's a lion on the streets. I'm not a lion on the streets.

He's just making excuses for not going out to work. He's procrastinating. He's imagining things that are there that would stop him working. I can't do it.

[19:48] He's making excuses and it's easy for us to make excuses not to serve and not to work, isn't it? It's too hard. I don't have the ability. I need my time.

Others don't deserve my efforts. They don't appreciate them. And it's easy for us to make excuses not to do what we're called to do and what we're gifted to do and what we have time to do.

And spiritually we do it all the time. Too busy for the Lord Jesus Christ. It's too hard to follow Him. I can't do it. It's impossible. Family time comes first.

My hobbies comes first. They are very important for me to rest. And God can be relegated to a nodding acquaintance on a Sunday morning. I'll go to church on Sunday. That will be the one thing that sets me apart from the world. But we have no time for building the relationship. A student in the church gets married and goes back to the flat with his mates. [20 : 44] Making excuses is one of the great temptations to laziness. I think the other in Proverbs is choosing leisure.

Now leisure in and of itself. There's nothing wrong with leisure in and of itself and pleasure. But when we choose that to relegate the significance of serving the Lord and serving others, or as an end in itself, or as the be all an end of life, then it becomes sinful. Choosing the Proverbs 12, 11, whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense. It's foolish as opposed to wise.

Or Proverbs 21, 17, whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man who, he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. Worthless pursuits, the loving of pleasure is a form of slothfulness and laziness.

And we can work very hard at that. We're probably the most hardworking generation of pleasure lovers that there's ever been. Pleasure is hugely important to us, hugely significant.

[22 : 02] Worthless pursuits are there at just the tap of a button for all of us any time of the night and day. We can prioritise it. So easy for us today to prioritise making sure we watch hours and hours of sport, that we can scroll Instagram for any moment that isn't filled in our lives.

For entertainment, we just need the button to be pressed. Our use of time, our use of time which we never get back, is what we are challenged to consider when we think of our leisure and pleasure time.

Again, I'm not saying these things are wrong. I'm not saying that God doesn't give them. But we're to enjoy pleasure, we're to work at pleasure to the glory of God. And we're to thank Him for it and we're to put it in its context as a part of life which we need, but which isn't an end in itself and which shouldn't be the driving force behind our lives.

How much time do we abandon for growing with God, for serving Him or for serving other people? Because we want to pursue leisure and pleasure and worthless activities as it's spoken of here in the light of eternity.

It lacks sense, it lacks understanding and above all, it lacks love. And when that is our slothful desire and laziness is at the core of who we are, it provides a fertile mind for gossip, scandal and temptation.

[23 : 48] So I'm sure Proverbs says a lot more about motives of sloth and laziness, but I just want to finish by looking at some of the results of slothfulness or laziness as it's expressed biblically.

And what I want as always to remember is the heart behind it and where we are in our heart. I think the first thing we can say is that Proverbs reminds us that laziness becomes habitually worse.

The passage we read in chapter 26 is great because it's progressive. If you noticed, it's progressive.

The Slogger says there's a line in the road, there's a line in the streets. So he's got an excuse not to go outside the door. Then we're told that as a door turns on its hinges, so does a slugger turn on his bed.

Not only can he not go out the door, he can't even go out of the house. He can't get out of the bed, I mean. It's just turning his bed like it's just a hinge. And then it says, the slugger buries the sand in the dish.

[24 : 53] It wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. He can't even eat, get up to eat. It tires him so much to even eat that he can't even bring his hand back to his mouth.

The pictures just of the slugger just going into a plate of food because he can't even be bothered eating. So there's this laziness, the picture here is of it becoming habitually worse.

And that's a really important principle in life in terms of how we spend our lives spiritually. Our choices in life as Christians will determine our joy, our usefulness and the quality of our Christian lives.

If you live your Christian life and if I live my Christian life consistently ignoring God, being prayerless, abandoning service and going our own way, that will have a downward spiral for our spiritual life.

It will always be that case if we choose not to pray and choose not to follow any spiritual discipline, to work off our own salvation, to fight the good fight, to shrug our shoulders, then we will

struggle with our relationship with Christ.

[26 : 09] Or if we choose to work simply for work's sake, to make money, to be popular, to be successful, to be accepted by God, that's what will be important to us.

And that will become increasingly important. And God and grace and service will become increasingly less important. Or if we're half-hearted at work and consistently and habitually ignore Him in our place, it will take us further down the road of sloth.

And what I can say is just so hard, it's so hard to change our routines. I think it's an incredibly difficult thing to do in our lives. I find it an astonishingly hard thing at the age of 58 to change habits, to change the things that I do.

We need grace, we need to work at it. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit so that we will change and not...

because we're not unchanging, we're actually doing a spiral downwards if we don't respond to grace. So we recognise that laziness becomes habitually worse. We recognise that it leads to a broken life before God.

[27 : 26] In Proverbs 24, 30, 34, we've got that great picture of the field of the slugger by the vineyard of a man lacking sense. It was overgrown with thorns, the ground was covered with nettles, stone wall was broken down.

Then I saw it as considered and looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. There's this broken down life. The Bible speaks a lot about... has that picture, a lot of a broken vineyard as a picture of a broken life spiritually.

Loveless and selfless. That's what laziness and sloth will do for us. If we keep letting people down, if we keep resisting God and can't be bothered, if a friend who needs just a pain in the neck, if sacrifice and responsibility and commitment and leadership are things that you recoil from, they will continually be lacking in our lives before God.

And we just become a dead weight in our life. Self-serving without a servant heart for God or for others. It's kind of an ugly picture. And I see it so clearly, sometimes in my own heart.

So a broken life with God. But it also leads, I think, thirdly to tension with others. Proverbs 10, 26, as vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so as sluggers to those who send them.

[28 : 52] So someone sends out someone to do something on their behalf and they make a complete botch of it because they can't be bothered. They're not really that concerned and it's like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes.

Leads to tension in relationships. It's a hard reality that laziness, sloth, doesn't just affect us. It affects those that we love, affects those that depend on us. It affects those who rely on us because we let them down. Because our own significant is most important.

Leads to tension with others and that kind of individual poverty is the fourth thing. The ant passage again speaks a little, folding of ant litter.

And poverty comes on you like an armed man. It's that poverty of spirit. It's the dissatisfaction and poverty that comes from not knowing and enjoying and serving God.

[29 : 58] The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied. So there's a general principle about poverty that comes from slothfulness.

As it's the case in broad verbs all the time, we're talking about general principles and every individual case does hard work being blessing and contentment or riches and wealth, as it's sometimes explained in proverbs.

But the general principle proverbs is that hard work brings rewards in our lives. It might not necessarily be financial, very often won't be, but it will bring fulfillment and it will bring satisfaction and it will bring a deepening of our character before God and meaning, our life will have meaning and significance and above all love because it's the outworking of love as we live for God and live for others.

Whereas idleness and slothfulness is dissatisfying, it's unfulfilling, it's unrewarding, it hollows you out as a person because it's the opposite of doing what God created you to do.

And spiritually, and we know that often poverty in the Bible is linked not to financial poverty, material poverty, but to spiritual poverty.

[31 : 24] It's often why we are so poor spiritually, so blind, so far from God because we don't heed His call to transform our hearts by His grace and by His Holy Spirit, to work out our salvation, to deal with our sinful desires which drain our love for God and our love for other people so that we are

on this drift away from Him in poverty.

And if we ask ourselves why we find the Christian walk so tough, it's often because we have lost sight of this element of effort that is required in our relationship with Him.

Building of that love and spending time in His company and learning from Him and praying to Him and being in His shadow.

But we can be content with a poor life, and if we do, we miss out on the blessings of peace and joy and the paradox of rest through hard work.

The great biblical paradox that as we serve the one that we have received the gift of salvation from, we serve Him with every sinew of our being wholeheartedly and therein is rest, therein is peace, therein is contentment and fulfillment.

[32 : 58] I'm going to finish by reading some words, the Bible says things much better than I do. Colossians chapter 1 and verses 9 to 14 which encourages us to trust in the Lord.

And I encourage you today as I encourage myself anew and fresh to trust in the Lord with all your heart as Proverbs tells us at the beginning, to grow in Him.

To remember that thesis that I made at the beginning, that if you are in, your heart is right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, you'll be a hard worker. And remember these words from Colossians chapter 1.

So from the day we heard we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So as to walk in a work and walk, really mean the same thing. So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

[34 : 08] May you be strengthened with all power according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He's delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That's why we work.

Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to just get the balance right in our lives, to receive the gift of salvation as a glorious, completed, finished gift from a loving Father who has done everything that we couldn't do and paid the price for everything that we stand guilty before God for, in order that we might be righteous.

And as righteous people, Lord, give us just a heart and a desire and a longing to not be lazy with you, not take you for granted, not ignore you, not abuse you, not make you someone that you're not, and not be lazy or slothful spiritually or indeed practically in our lives.

Help us if we are hardworking naturally to look into our hearts for the motives for our hard work, to make sure that we are glorifying you and we're doing it for you, and not just for our own, or not just because we're annoyed that everyone else who's not working.

[35 : 48] And if we're lazy by nature, slothful Lord, help us to look at that and seek by God's grace to be transformed and changed so hard. It's so almost impossible.

But we ask for your grace to enable us to change, to work our relationship with you, and to work at serving you and others which sometimes is so hard.

Help us to do it with the right motives we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.