

Go to the Ant

Based on Proverbs 6:6-11, 10:4-5 | Applying Wisdom: Our Work
"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" — Proverbs 6:6

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon resumes the summer Proverbs series and begins the application phase — taking the foundation laid in the first three sermons (what wisdom is, where we find it, how we live it) and applying it to specific areas of life. First up: our work.

The sermon began by re-orienting us to the series. We live in an information age that has exploded in knowledge but not in wisdom, and in a world that has exploded in choices — from roughly 25 decisions a day in the ancient world to 35,000 today. We saw that wisdom is creational (God has woven a pattern into creation; wise people live within it), covenantal (Yahweh's name appears 87 times in Proverbs), and Christ-centered. We find wisdom in the covenant community, in observing creation, in obeying God's law, and in trusting God's providence through suffering. And we live wisdom through daily small actions that shape our hearts. Now: how do we apply all of that to work?

Work Is a Big Topic — So Start Small

Work is not a minor subject. The average American works about 42.9 hours per week — roughly 90,000 hours over a lifetime, or about one third of our life and the majority of our waking adult hours. And yet the way into this enormous topic, God says, is to look at something very small: an ant.

The sermon offered a remarkable portrait. There are about 12,000 species of ants, and roughly 1.5 million ants for every living human — their combined biomass approximately equals humanity's. An ant can lift 50 times its body weight (some species 100 times) — the equivalent of us walking into the parking lot and lifting an F-150. They don't sleep at night; they take one-minute power naps totaling four to five hours a day, meaning the average ant works roughly 20 hours a day, seven days a week, all year. At any moment, about 80% of a colony is working. A small creature with an enormous work ethic — and God says: that's your example.

Proverbs 6:6-8 "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest."

The Sluggard: A New Character in Proverbs

Proverbs 6 is the ninth of ten father-to-son lectures in the book's opening chapters, and here it introduces a new figure not to emulate: the sluggard. The word appears here for the first time, occurs 14 times in Proverbs, and appears nowhere else in the Old Testament — it is a word of wisdom literature. One scholar defines the sluggard as shiftless, self-excusing, half-hearted, or bone-idle: the antithesis of getting on with the business of living in a purposeful, organized, and thrifty way. The ESV renders it "lazy bones."

The passage offers first a positive example, then a negative consequence. The positive: get down on your hands and knees and observe an anthill. This is one of the places we find wisdom — observing God's world. What do we see? Ants have no commander, no overseer, no ruler. They function on instinct and environmental cues, not on orders. They work 20 hours a day, lifting extraordinary loads, not because they're forced to but because it's their nature. And they store provisions in summer and gather at harvest — the original farmers,

models of planning, efficiency, and effort. One scholar calls the ant "the preeminent symbol for diligence and foresight in work."

Then the negative. "How long will you lie there, you sluggard?" Notice the repetition of the word "little": a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest — and poverty comes like a bandit, scarcity like an armed man. It doesn't take vast laziness. Just a little bit of not working hard enough. Two ways to live: like an ant or like a sluggard. Diligent or lazy. Harvest or poverty.

Proverbs 10:4-5 "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son."

Our Culture of Work — and Where It's Heading

The sermon observed, with humor, that this diagnosis fits our culture uncomfortably well. Reflecting on a trip to France, the pastor noted the contrast: France has a legal 35-hour work week, a mandatory minimum of five weeks paid vacation, and a legal "right to disconnect" from work emails and calls. The French sleep more and spend more time eating than any other industrialized people.

The United States, by contrast, offers the least paid vacation of any industrialized nation — and over half of Americans don't even take the days they're given. Nearly one in four (23%) took no days off at all last year; a third haven't taken a full week off in two years. We are a nation of ants. And in northwest Iowa, we sit near the top of the anthill: nowhere are the farms tidier, the sports teams stronger, or the work ethic fiercer.

But here the sermon turned to something worth wrestling with. For 200 years, technology has produced labor-saving devices, and they have genuinely reduced our workload — from 12-hour days six or seven days a week to a 40-hour week; from a full day of laundry with a river, buckets, and a heavy piece of metal heated on a stove to 30 fewer hours a week of housework. And we're just getting started. A recent New York Times piece reported that some of the brightest minds in business believe AI will end the 40-hour week: one financier predicts four days, Zoom's CEO three, Bill Gates a two-day week within a decade, and Elon Musk foresees work becoming optional altogether — a hobby, like a video game.

The sermon asked the question directly: if that came true, would it be our salvation or our damnation? Is a world where we don't have to work a world we should aspire to? Does it fit the creation model of the Creator? Or would God look at us — passive, served by machines, like the humans in WALL-E — and say: go to the ant, you slacker. Get back on your hands and knees. Look at something small to see the big pattern of creation.

First Truth: God's Wisdom Reveals the Creational Goodness of Work

The sermon's first major claim: work is not a curse to be escaped but a creational good. Creation does not function by things coming to us passively or magically. God designed the world so that fruit comes through effort.

A striking study in Germany illustrated this: researchers offered ants two food sources — one requiring a difficult vertical climb, one on a flat easy surface. The ants preferred the food they had to climb for, laying down a stronger chemical trail to the harder-earned fruit, even though the food was identical. God designed us to want to work and to enjoy the fruit of our work.

The ant is a small window into the Creator's larger intent. God himself is a worker who designed and made the world. In Genesis 1, he creates humanity in his image and immediately gives us work: fill the earth and subdue

it. In Genesis 2, the Lord God puts the man in the garden "to work it." The Ten Commandments say "six days you shall labor and do all your work." And in the New Testament, Paul urges believers to "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, mind your own business, and work with your hands." Even in dull routine, our work is a calling from God — not an imposition on our life, but part of God's gift for our life.

| **Genesis 2:15** "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

Second Truth: God's Wisdom Reveals Our Redemptive Need for God's Work

But if the sermon stopped there, it would be no gospel at all — just a command to work harder. Proverbs points to Christ. Notice the verse immediately preceding the diligence passage in Proverbs 10: "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry." It is not finally the righteous who feed themselves through their own effort — it is Yahweh, the covenant God, who provides. Psalm 145 adds: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing" — including all 1.5 million ants for each of us. Behind our daily grind is God's daily grace.

And deeper still: even our best work, even with God's grace, cannot bring us where we most need to go. We need a different kind of work. So God sent his Son — who, notably, spent the majority of his earthly waking hours not teaching or performing miracles but working with his hands as a carpenter. In John 5, Jesus says, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." But unlike the ants, Jesus's work had an endpoint. His food, he said, was "to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." And on the cross, his final words: "It is finished."

Jesus finished the work he came to do — a work that saves sluggards (those of us who sleep a little too much) and saves workaholics (those of us who try to find our salvation in our own effort). Both need the same finished work.

| **John 19:30** "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Rest Because the Work Is Finished

Because Christ has finished the work, we are now free to engage our own work not with desperation, despair, or frenzied activity, but in the deep peace of gratitude — looking to the finisher of our work.

The sermon closed with a picture from the pastor's father — an 83-year-old still farming full-time, so committed to work that he had no time to fill out a memory book he'd been given. With rain threatening and a narrow window to cut and bale hay before the weather turned, the perfect moment to cut fell on a Sunday morning. And the haybine stayed in the shed. A man who has spent his lifetime working knows there is something more important than work. You can rest on the Sabbath when you recognize there is a finished work. Yes, there is good work for our hands to do — but the ultimate work is already done, and we are invited to rest in it.

Key Takeaway

Work is a creational good — written into the pattern of God's world and visible even in an anthill. God made us to work and to enjoy the fruit of our work. But behind our daily grind is God's daily grace. And the ultimate work — the one that saves both sluggards and workaholics — has already been finished by Christ. That's why we can work with diligence and still rest without guilt.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise." God's chosen teacher on the subject of work is a tiny insect. What does the ant actually teach — diligence, foresight, self-motivation, planning? Which of those qualities is strongest in your own work? Which is weakest?

2

The sermon noted that the sluggard's decline comes through "a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands." It doesn't take dramatic laziness — just a little. Where do you see small, easily-excused patterns of avoidance or drift in your own work?

3

The sermon contrasted France's 35-hour work week and mandated vacation with America — where nearly a quarter of workers took no days off at all last year. Where do you land on that spectrum? Is your greater temptation toward the sluggard or toward the workaholic?

4

If AI made work optional — a two-day week, or no work at all, with income simply arriving — would that be salvation or damnation? What do you think a life with no work would actually do to us? Does that change how you think about the work you have?

5

The German study found that ants preferred the food they had to climb for — laying a stronger trail to the harder-earned fruit. Have you experienced that? What work in your life has been genuinely satisfying precisely because it was hard?

6

"Behind our daily grind is God's daily grace." Proverbs 10:3 says the Lord does not let the righteous go hungry — even our provision through work is ultimately God's gift. How does that truth change the way you carry the weight of providing for yourself or your family?

7

Jesus said "It is finished" — finishing a work that saves both sluggards and workaholics. Which of those two are you more likely to be? How would truly believing that the ultimate work is already finished change how you approach your work this week — and your rest?

"Behind our daily grind is God's daily grace. Jesus has finished the work — and so we are invited to engage our work not with desperation, but in the deep peace of gratitude."

— From This Week's Sermon

LIVING IT OUT

Work with the diligence of an ant. Rest in the finished work of Christ. This week, practice both.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Proverbs 6:6-11 and 10:4-5 this week, and then honestly diagnose yourself: am I more prone to be a sluggard or a workaholic? Both need the same Savior. Bring your particular distortion of work to God in prayer, not as a performance review but as a confession.
- Sit with the phrase "behind our daily grind is God's daily grace." Where have you been carrying the full weight of provision on your own shoulders? Practice, each morning this week, naming your work as your calling AND naming God as your provider.
- Meditate on "It is finished" this week. If the ultimate work is done, what does that free you from? Ask God to show you where you are still trying to earn something — with him, with others, or with yourself — through your effort.

In Your Closest Relationships

- The sermon noted that a third of our life is spent working. How is your work shaping your closest relationships — for good or for ill? Ask your spouse, a family member, or a close friend honestly: does my relationship with work help or hurt us? Listen without defending.
- The pastor's 83-year-old father left the haybine in the shed on a Sunday, even with rain coming — because he knew something is more important than work. What is the equivalent decision in your life? What is the "haybine in the shed" moment you need to have this week for the sake of the people you love?
- If you have children or younger people watching you, consider what your work habits are teaching them — about diligence, but also about rest, about worth, and about where salvation comes from. Have one honest conversation with them about it.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Go outside this week and actually do it: find an anthill and watch it for a few minutes. Consider its ways. What do you notice about diligence, cooperation, foresight, self-motivation? Let the smallest creature preach to you about the biggest pattern of creation.
- Identify one place where you have been half-hearted, self-excusing, or shiftless in your work — the "little folding of the hands" the passage names. Address it this week, not out of guilt, but because work done well is part of the creational goodness God designed.
- Take one ordinary, unglamorous task this week — dull routine, nothing special — and consciously offer it to God as a calling. Paul says to work with your hands as unto the Lord. Notice whether framing it that way changes how you do it.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon connected the finished work of Christ to the Lord's Supper — where God nourishes us and sends us out to work. The next time you come to the Table, come as a worker being fed by the One who has finished the work. Let it reframe the week ahead.
- Practice Sabbath deliberately this week. Not as legalism, but as a declaration: I can rest because the ultimate work has been finished. Guard one day (or a substantial portion of it) from work, and notice what it stirs in you — peace, or anxiety, or both.
- Talk with someone in your congregation about how they see their vocation as a calling from God — whether they farm, teach, keep a home, run a business, or are retired. Wisdom about work is caught in community. Learn from someone whose approach to work you admire.

A Word to Carry

God made you to work, and the fruit of good work is a creational gift, not a curse. But your provision is his grace, and your salvation is his finished work. Work like an ant. Rest like a person who knows the work is already done.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Work in God's world is meant to build up, discover, and serve neighbors. This week, put your hands to work on someone else's behalf.

This Week's Challenge: Work With Your Hands for a Neighbor

God gave us hands to build up, to discover, and to serve our neighbors — to unfold what he has designed. This week, do real work on behalf of someone who needs it.

Step 1 — Name Someone Who Can't Do the Work.

Think of one person who has work they cannot do right now — because of age, illness, injury, exhaustion, or being overwhelmed. A widow with a yard. A neighbor recovering from surgery. A young family drowning in tasks. Write their name down.

Step 2 — Do the Work, Don't Just Offer.

"Let me know if you need anything" is easy. Ants don't need a commander — they see what needs doing and do it. Look for the work that obviously needs doing, and do it. Mow the lawn. Fix the thing. Bring the meal. Take the shift.

Step 3 — Do It as an Act of Worship.

As you work, remember: this is a creational good. God designed hands to build, to serve, to unfold his world. Frame the labor consciously as an act of worship and calling — not just a favor.

Step 4 — Offer to Pray.

If the moment allows, pray with the person — that they would know God's daily grace behind their daily grind, and that they would rest in the finished work of Christ even when their own work is undone.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share what you did and what you noticed. A colony works together — and so does a church.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read every passage in Proverbs about the sluggard this week (the word appears 14 times — try Proverbs 6:6-11, 10:26, 13:4, 15:19, 19:24, 20:4, 21:25, 22:13, 24:30-34, 26:13-16). Notice how the portrait builds. Which of the sluggard's excuses sound uncomfortably familiar?
- Read Genesis 1-2 alongside John 5:17 and John 19:30 this week. Trace the arc: God works, God gives us work, Jesus works, Jesus finishes the work. Let that arc reframe your understanding of your own labor.
- Take an actual, deliberate Sabbath this week — a full day, or as close as you can manage, genuinely free from work. Notice what rises in you when you stop. Bring whatever surfaces — restlessness, guilt, relief, peace — honestly to God.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for the goodness of work woven into creation, for hands that build and serve, and for a God who is himself a worker and who made us in his image.
- Confess honestly — both the sluggard in us (the half-hearted, self-excusing avoidance) and the workaholic in us (the frantic effort to justify ourselves through what we produce).
- Rest in the finished work — say it out loud together: "It is finished." Let the completed work of Christ be the ground of both your labor and your rest this week.
 - Pray for your work — for the specific tasks in front of you this week, that they would be done with diligence, offered as worship, and released into God's hands at the end of the day.