

## Productivity Lessons From a King

Let's pause for just a moment to turn back the clocks a few thousand years to consider a couple of important lessons from King Solomon. He was, after all, the wisest man who ever lived and must have at least a thing or two to teach us about productivity.

Solomon's Proverbs can be tricky. They award their riches to those who ponder them, to those who meditate upon them, to those who are willing to do the hard work of considering and applying them. There are many proverbs that relate directly to productivity. Among my favorites is Proverbs 14:4, a classic example of a proverb that requires deep thought. "Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox." A little bit of research shows that commentators are divided on exactly what it means. There are two broad streams of interpretation and both of them can be very helpful to us.

### *Lesson 1: Productivity is Messy*

You have probably heard the saying before: A clean house is a sign of a wasted life. Whatever else the phrase means, it expresses some of the frustration and the sense of futility that attends life in this world. If we accept the first stream of interpretation for this proverb, we see Solomon expressing some of that frustration. According to this explanation, the proverb is about the messiness of a life well-lived. Tremper Longman says the moral is that "a productive life is messy."<sup>1</sup>

I love productivity, at least when it is properly defined as effectively stewarding your gifts, talents, time, energy, and enthusiasm for the good of others and the glory of God. As we have seen in this book, each one of us, no matter our vocation, is responsible to pursue productivity with all the vigor we can muster. And if you do that, it is inevitable that along the way you will accumulate some mess. You cannot maintain a laser focus on noble goals while still keeping every corner of life perfectly tidy. The pastor's desk will at times be crammed with books and papers. The baker's counter will sometimes overflow with pots and pans and flour and sugar. The mechanic's hands will be stained

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 297.

with grease, and his shop will need a daily once-over with the power washer. And the home—the home will at times be messy and cluttered and downright embarrassing.

Longman says, “One desires a neat and tidy life, just as the ideal stall would be clean. However, a clean stall by the nature of things would mean an empty stall since oxen do not have to be in a stall long before it is messy. However, without oxen there is no productivity.”<sup>2</sup> There is a helpful application here for those whose primary field for productivity is their home. We could as easily say that one desires a neat and tidy house, just as the ideal stall would be clean. However, a clean house by the nature of things might just mean an empty house since children and husbands and houseguests and those neighborhood children do not have to be in the house long before it is agonizingly messy. However, without all of those people there is no productivity—no true, biblical productivity—no children to care for, no friends to counsel, no hospitality to extend.

Like so much else in this life, you cannot have it all. You cannot have perfect order and perfect productivity. You cannot have a home that is warm and full and inviting, you cannot have every child fed and cared for, while also having every dish done and every sock laundered. You just can’t. Of course this is not to excuse slovenliness or laziness. But you need to understand what Derek Kidner says: “Orderliness can reach the point of sterility. This proverb is [a plea for] the readiness to accept upheaval, and a mess to clear up, as the price of growth.”<sup>3</sup> Growth, or productivity, as the case may be. Is a clean house proof of a wasted life? Not at all. But a tidy house isn’t necessarily evidence of a well-lived life.

If you do the things God tells you to do, messes will inevitably follow. But take heart: According to the wisest man who ever lived, these messes are not proof of a wasted life, but of a productive one.

## ***Lesson 2: Productivity Needs Good Tools***

I said there are two broad streams of interpretation for this proverb, and my preferred one says that it speaks to the messiness of a life well-lived. “A productive life

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs*, 100.

is a messy life” is a perfectly valid and accurate interpretation of the text. But there is a second explanation for the proverb that is (almost) equally intriguing.

“Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.” Whatever else we believe about the proverb, we know that Solomon meant to tell us that having oxen is better than not having oxen. We can extend this to say that having the appropriate tools for a task is better than having inappropriate tools. Here’s the thing: You can have a full feed-trough if you’ve got a small animal or no animal at all. But it is far wiser to let a big ol’ ox eat the feed and use it as fuel for some hard work.

A farmer persuades himself that if he doesn’t buy any oxen he will save himself both the initial outlay and the cost of feeding and the labor of maintaining them. But this is the fool’s economics. The wise man realizes he himself cannot do the work the ox can do; he will always be scraping a living, whereas if he buys some oxen and fodder, their work will bring a harvest which will feed him and them, with some left over.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, a stingy investment in tools earns a stingy return, and a substantial investment in tools earns a substantial return.

When I interpret the proverb this way, I see it as a call to obtain good tools, even when those tools involve a greater cost. As Lane says, “Investment in the appropriate equipment will more than pay for itself, and the effort put into maintaining it will be saved in its efficiency.”<sup>5</sup> The fact is, not all tools are created equal. We have many options for most of our tools, and we typically need to choose from a spectrum of qualities and prices. We are not surprised to find that better tools cost more money. Solomon’s farmer found the same. He could plow the field himself, or he could use a donkey—both of these would be economical options. But by investing in the ox, he will soon see abundance. Why? Because the ox is the best tool for the job. The ox is the wisest investment.

There is a movement afoot in the Christian world that elevates thrift as one of the great virtues. According to this movement, we are to be thrifty people who use our

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Lane, *Proverbs: Everyday Wisdom for Everyone*. (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

resources carefully instead of wastefully. Well and good, and especially so in an age of instant indulgence. We should not be wasteful! But the danger of thriftiness is that it can easily tip into stinginess. (Of course, in the same way, free spending can tip into profligacy.) We can elevate the joy of finding an item at a low cost, while overlooking that this low cost may necessitate low quality. When we do this we may be settling for lesser tools which subsequently provide a lesser return.

The farmer, like you and me, is completely dependent upon his tools. If he wants abundance, if he wants to be the best farmer he can be, he will need good tools—he will need to buy and feed an ox, the best tool for the job. And if you want to succeed in whatever it is that the Lord calls you to, you will need tools as well. You will need good tools. Expensive tools, even. But take heart. You do not have to feel guilty for spending on your tools. The bigger expense may just be the wisest stewardship.