

UNIT 1: WORK AND REST

Lesson 2

June 14, 2026

Biblical Wisdom for Work: Proverbs & Ecclesiastes

A right attitude toward work makes it more rewarding.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

The significance of our labors comes through our relationship with God. Work is rewarding when performed with a proper attitude but can seem mundane and meaningless when engaged in a self-serving rather than a God-honoring fashion. The Book of Proverbs illustrates that work can yield profit, but perhaps just as importantly, it can provide us with purpose. The lazy person often lacks both means and meaning in their lives. Ecclesiastes reveals that work that does not honor God may bring profit but still lacks significance, thus becoming vain or meaningless.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Given that King Solomon received special wisdom from God in response to his humble request (1 Kings 3:5-12), it is likely that most of the Book of Proverbs was written by Solomon. Proverbs contains godly wisdom and identifies behaviors that characterize the wise, such as “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). Some of the proverbs came from “the words of the wise” (22:17), but most were either written or collected by Solomon. The Book of Ecclesiastes also appears to reflect wisdom from Solomon’s life, concluding that without God, life, work, and pleasure are vain.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. ABOUT WORK AND LAZINESS: Proverbs 14:23; 18:9; 23:4; 24:27, 30-34.

- A. Work: Profit and Purpose, (Proverbs 14:23; 18:9; 23:4; 24:27, 30-34)
- B. The House of the Slothful, (Proverbs 24:27, 30-34)

2. WHAT MAKES WORK VAIN: Ecclesiastes 1:3; 2:4-6, 11, 18-23; 5:12.

- A. Empty Labor, Empty Life, (1:3; 2:4-6, 11)
- B. The Work of the Wise, (2:18-23; 5:12)

3. WHAT MAKES WORK REWARDING? Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; 11:1-6; 12:13-14.

- A. God Gives Work Meaning, (9:7-10)
- B. The Worker Who Trusts God, (11:1-6; 12:13-14)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. ABOUT WORK AND LAZINESS: Proverbs 14:23; 18:9; 23:4, 30-34.

A. Work: Profit and Purpose, Proverbs 14:23; 18:9; 23:4.

Many proverbs contrast the rewards of hard work with the results of laziness (10:4; 12:24; 13:4; 28:19). Proverbs 14 contains many contrasting concepts, which are identified by the word “but,” which compare a positive character trait or practice with a negative one. For example, 14:1 states, “Every wise woman buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands.” The word ‘but’ occurs 27 times across 35 verses in chapter 14. Verse 23 contrasts with the one who works and the one who only talks. There is a profit (benefit) to labor, but the person who only talks wastes time and opportunity. It seems there have always been those who do more talking than working, and such people are great wasters (18:9). These are typically lazy people who talk big and work little. They waste their employers’ resources through unproductive time for which they get paid.

Proverbs 23:4 points out that the motive for work should be more than wealth. There are many examples of people who sacrificed their families and health to climb the ladder of success, only to discover that their ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. If fame or fortune is the driving force of our lives, then we have made a god of success, and such a god is never satisfied, regardless of our sacrifices. Instead, this proverb encourages us to seek wisdom: Wealth can be taken away, but wisdom endures and empowers the wise to rise again, even if they must start over at the bottom.

B. The House of the Slothful, Proverbs 24:27, 30-34.

Verse 27 counsels the reader to prioritize preparing the fields for planting before focusing on the home. A beautiful house without enough food to eat reveals misplaced priorities. Western culture often prioritizes appearances, striving to appear more successful than we are. However, this proverb advises preparing and planting the fields before working on the house. Planning with proper priorities will produce more success than improper priorities and poor planning.

The proverb continues with the writer stating that he observed the field of the slothful and unwise man who lacked understanding. That field was not productive; it was overrun with thorns and weeds, and the stone wall around it “was broken down” (v. 31). This is the field of a man who was both lazy and unwise. This man would have no harvest. However, the writer has learned something from the field of the foolish man (v. 32). The lesson: What may seem like a little rest here and there, when one should be working, results in a lack of resources. Little by little, poverty creeps up on the slothful man “like a prowler” (24:34 NKJV), and then suddenly, the needs of the sleeper hit him “as an armed man,” demanding to be satisfied – the bills must be paid, the children must be fed, and taxes are due.

It’s often said that if one fails to plan, then one plans to fail. This may sound cliché, but there is much truth in this saying. The Bible reveals that God has plans. In fact, He has plans for our

lives (Jeremiah 29:11). Likewise, the wise person will pray, plan, prioritize, prepare, and then execute the plan. Lazy people trust luck and circumstances to meet their needs, but the wise person sets goals, works hard to achieve them, and enjoys the fruits of godly plans and faithful efforts to bring their vision to reality.

2. WHAT MAKES WORK VAIN? Ecclesiastes 1:3; 2:4-6, 11, 18-23; 5:12.

A. Empty Labor, Empty Life, Ecclesiastes 1:3; 2:4-6, 11.

Although we were designed in the image and likeness of God, with the capacity to engage in creative and productive work, our efforts can sometimes feel empty and meaningless. The writer of Ecclesiastes (believed to have been Solomon) used the word ‘vanity’ to describe this sense of meaningless. Solomon seemed to have it all: fame, wealth, houses, land, many beautiful women in his life, and the people’s adoration. The Biblical text, however, reveals that even with all this, he lost his focus on God. In the absence of God, Solomon began to see that everything he had done was vanity. In 1:3, he essentially asked, “What’s the point of all that I’ve done?”

In chapter 2, he began listing the things he had accomplished. He built houses and planted vineyards, gardens, and orchards with “all kind of fruits” (v. 5). He constructed pools that supplied water to various trees, which provided various kinds of wood for his building projects (v. 6). Everywhere he looked, he could see what his labors had produced. His success was the envy of the world. He had servants, cattle, and the best entertainment money could buy (vv. 7-8). He said he still had his wisdom (v. 9), and anything he saw that he wanted to try, he did it (v. 10).

After years of planning, working, and creating, one might think he would have found satisfaction in his accomplishments. At first, he says he did have joy and delight in his labors, and he claims he had a right to rejoice in his works (v. 10), but then something changed. He said he looked again at all that he had done, “and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (v. 11).

B. The Work of the Wise, Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 5:12.

Solomon realized that regardless of what he had accomplished – his wealth, his possessions, and so forth – he would have to leave it all behind when he passed from this life to the next (v. 18). Also, it troubled him that he could not know if the person who took his place and inherited the benefits of his labors would be wise or foolish (v. 19). Either way, someone else would be ruling his kingdom, eating from his orchards, and living in his houses. He had worked very hard to achieve success, but someone else who many be foolish and lazy would inherit it all. This distressed him. When he was a young man looking ahead to his goals, the thrill of the vision propelled him forward in wisdom and God’s blessings. Now, however, late in his life, he realized that it would all end up in the hands of someone else, and he concluded, “This is also vanity” (v. 19).

This thought took the joy out of his life. He had it all, but now he took no pleasure in it. He said he was the man who worked, he was the man with wisdom, he was the man who labored,

het another who had not earned it would get it (v. 21). For Solomon, this was “vanity and a great evil: (v.21). He wondered what the point was for all his blood, sweat, and tears if someone else got to enjoy all he had worked for. Foolishly, he had made many compromises to form alliances with other kingdoms. He married many pagan women and allowed them to build temples to their gods (1 Kings 11:1-11). He had all he ever dreamed of, but he compromised his relationship with God, and now, nothing he had accomplished brought him joy. He once found fulfillment in his labors, but now, with all that anyone could imagine possessing, he found no rest, no sleep, and no satisfaction (5:12).

Sometimes, dreaming, planning, and working to see a vision achieved can be as exciting and fulfilling as achieving the dream. As we envision a preferred future in the Lord, we must consider the legacy we leave behind for those who will follow us. Solomon lamented that he had to leave all he had achieved to someone who would benefit from his labors. A legacy is more than material possessions left to our heirs. A legacy includes demonstrating what it takes to reach our goals and teaching the next generation about the value of godly goals, faith, and hard work.

3. WHAT MAKES WORK REWARDING? Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; 11:1-6; 12:13-14.

A. God Gives Work Meaning, Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

In chapter 9, Solomon began to consider the implications of the fact that good and evil things happen to both wicked and righteous people: “One event happens to the righteous and the wicked” (v. 2 NKJV). Then, he observed that everyone dies, and “a living dog is better than a dead lion” (v. 4). Therefore, in verse 7, he instructed the reader: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.”

In short, enjoy the life you now have and give God your best. Wake up every morning, wash your face, put on clean clothes, and seize the day (v. 8). Among the things Solomon said a man should appreciate are his wife (v.9) and the opportunities he has to work, create, and accomplish something of significance (v. 10). His counsel is that we should do it now, do it when we have the chance because once we die, all the opportunities we have to accomplish anything in this life die with us. He is not saying we should only live for the moment, but he is undoubtedly saying we should live ‘in’ the moment.

B. The Worker Who Trusts God, Ecclesiastes 11:1-6; 12:13-14.

In 11:1-6, Solomon said there is much a person cannot know about the ways God works in nature or in people’s lives. In verse 5 and 6, Solomon said “thou knowest not” three times. However, ignorance of details, such as when it will rain (v. 3), when or which way a tree will fall (v. 3), the direction the wind (v. 4), or how a baby is formed in the womb (v. 5), should not result in inactivity. Despite what we may not know, we should continue to do right by others (v. 2) and continue to do what we know to do because God continues to work even if we do not know how He does it: “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand” (v. 6). We may not always know the outcome of our hard work, but we do know that the outcome

of doing nothing is a harvest of nothing. Therefore, “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” (v. 1), meaning, do good whenever you can because the good you do will eventually return to you.

In 12:13-14, Solomon drew upon all he had observed and contemplated and came to a concise conclusion about what makes one’s labors and life meaningful: “Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (v. 13). God created humanity for relationship with Him, but this is possible only through obedience to God’s Word and will. Apart from that relationship, everything we achieve or possess is vanity. One day, all will stand before God to give an account of our works and secret things, whether they be good or evil (v. 14; see also Revelation 20:13). If we have not maintained a right relationship with God through faith and obedience, then nothing we have done in this life will be of any benefit in the next. Only our works will follow us into eternity (14:13).

There is a consistent principle in the Bible of sowing and reaping. In Galatians 6:7, Paul said, “For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” This was symbolic language drawn from the natural world, but it applies to many areas of life, including spiritual and relational contexts. If we do not invest in having and maintaining healthy relationships with God and others, then nothing else we do will bring joy or satisfaction, and our lives will feel empty and meaningless. However, if we walk faithfully with God, we can find joy in all we do.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus came to do the works of the Father who sent Him (John 9:4). We are to follow in Jesus’ footsteps and faithfully carry out the works He has given us to do, serving as salt and light in a lost world.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

People watching our lives can tell whether our achievements or our relationships with others are most important to us. We should always prioritize God and others (Philippians 2:3).

Work, Play, Recreation, and Sports

By definition, work is “activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something” (M-WCD). By this definition, a large number of activities we do not regard as work because these are not the occupations by which we earn our living are, nevertheless, work.

For example, most people do not regard play, recreation, and sports as work. Yet, all of these activities fit under the definition of work; only they are not the kinds of work by which most people earn their living.

Any comprehensive dictionary has scores of definitions for the word ‘play,’ but most of us would immediately associate the word with the enjoyable activities of children. In fact, play is work, but we do not call it work because it is enjoyable work for a child, although it usually consists of mimicking what they see adults do, including the work (occupations and professions) of adults.

Jesus said those who refuse to hear and obey the truth are like children playing games, “sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, saying, ‘We have played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We have mourned for you, An you did not weep’” (Luke 7:32).

By definition, recreation is “refreshment of strength and spirits after work; also: a means of refreshment and diversion” (M-WCD). While this definition distinguished recreation from work, quite often recreation is another kind of work, different from our occupation or profession. A man who earns his living by doing carpentry might enjoy fishing as recreation, while a man who earns his living as a commercial fisherman might enjoy carpentry as a hobby. All of it is work.

Finally, there is the area of activity called sports. Those who watch sporting events (spectators, fans), and those who engage in the sporting events, call it playing: playing football, baseball, basketball, golf, or soccer, and so on. For those who earn their living by engaging in sporting events (and some become extremely wealthy), they may be “playing,” but they are also working.

WORKSHEET

Overcoming Laziness

Thomas Alva Edison developed more than 1,000 inventions. His inventions included the electric light bulb, the phonograph, an early movie camera, and the rechargeable alkaline storage battery.

Edison said, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and look like work.”

Another famous American inventor was Benjamin Franklin. He invented the lightning rod, bifocals, swim fins, a metal-lined fireplace, and a large-arm extension to reach high books.

Franklin said, “Laziness travels so slowly, that poverty soon overtakes him.”

Edison and Franklin were not the only two innovators to coin wise statements about a poor work ethic. King Solomon was a master builder and brilliant writer. Fill in the blanks from these statements he compiled:

Proverbs 19:15: “Laziness casts one into a _____, and an idle person will suffer _____.”

Proverbs 12:24: “The hand of the diligent will _____, but the lazy man will be put to _____.”

Ecclesiastes 10:18: “Because of laziness the _____, and through idleness of hands the _____.”