

**WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD**  
**Esteeming Work, Pt 1**

**“He also who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys.” ~ Proverbs 18:9**

**Work—A Blessing or a Curse?**

If a man begins full-time work at 21 years of age and retires at the age of 65, he will spend about 86,000 hours “at work.” This amount of time is significant even of itself, but it does not even include the hours spent laboring outside of a career, in response to the daily demands of life: maintaining a home, raising a family, caring for relatives, etc. Without question, work is a central aspect of a man’s existence.

Yet despite the staggering amount of time we devote to labor, few people actually esteem work. A 2013 survey revealed that 73% of the people surveyed worked strictly for a paycheck. In other words, almost three-quarters of the workforce today sees little inherent value in the 86,000+ hours they will spend in their lifetime at work. For most, work is a necessary evil—perhaps even an unjust byproduct of the capitalist system in which we live.

The deteriorating esteem for work reflects the growing secularization of our culture. Once God is eliminated from the discussion, so is the dignity of human life and consequently, the dignity of work. In response to this cultural decay and its negative influence on God’s people, it is vital to return to Scripture to challenge and correct our understanding of work and its role in our lives.

More than any other book in Scripture, Proverbs provides the broadest teaching on this topic. It contends that there is indeed true dignity in work (not all work, of course, but work in principle), and that diligent labor is to be esteemed as a great virtue. Proverbs rejects the worldview that places “work” in the category of the “secular” and treats it as an issue over which God is ambivalent. He is not. All work must be treated as sacred. But to treat it as sacred, one must apply the wisdom God has revealed.

God has revealed this wisdom through Solomon and other men moved to deliver the contents of Proverbs. A survey of their wise sayings provides at least **ten important lessons about a proper relationship to work**. The first five will be treated in this study; the second five will be presented next week.

**1. A biblical esteem for work recognizes that God Himself works.**

It is commonly believed that work is the consequence of sin. Many begin their working lives counting down to their retirement. The perfect world they envision is one of non-stop rest or recreation.

But this attitude is not consistent with the book of Proverbs—or the Wisdom writings of Scripture in general. Rather, **everything in the world that is good and praiseworthy is the direct result of the work of God**. Infinite power combines with inscrutable wisdom to produce astounding displays of majesty.

- **Proverbs 3:19** – “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens.
- **Proverbs 8:22-31**

These words echo Moses’ record of creation in the opening pages of Scripture (Gen 1:1-2:3). Thus, work itself must never be viewed as a consequence of sin, for God Himself—who is perfect—is a God of work (Ps 111:2-3; John 5:17). And since man was created to bear God’s image, he, too, is to devote himself to work to reflect in his labors the glory of God (Gen 1:28-29; 2:15).

The very fact that man *can* work is evidence of his likeness to his Creator. Yet it is clear from surveying the book of Proverbs that work in this present world is not immune from corruption. In fact, the book of

Proverbs issues far more warnings and correctives about work than positive instruction. Why is that? The world into which Proverbs speaks is not the world of “the Garden of Eden.” The world into which Proverbs speaks is the world *outside the Garden*—a world under curse inhabited by depraved sinners (Gen 3:17-19). Depraved man either refuses to work to obscure God’s glory, or works for his own glory.

Therefore, a biblical esteem for work must recognize that work is not inherently sinful but good. The depravity of man corrupts man’s motivations and expressions of work, and a world under the divine curse makes work difficult and painful. Nonetheless, wisdom enables the one who fears the LORD to redeem the glory and fruitfulness of work. The common saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” can in a very real way be changed to “Industriousness is next to godliness.”

## 2. A biblical esteem for work requires the mortification of laziness.

Sin’s perversion of the image of God in man has resulted in the corruption of man’s work ethic. Consequently, a significant portion of the book of Proverbs’ teaching on work focuses on identifying the ways in which this corrupt work ethic manifests itself. While there are various manifestations, the primary one is *laziness*.

The favorite term the book of Proverbs uses to describe one characterized as lazy is the word “**sluggard**” (לָצֵל, *‘atzel*). It is found 14x in Proverbs (6:6, 9; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:13-16) and nowhere else in the Old Testament. Never is it used in a positive sense; it always describes a moral condition that must be admonished and avoided.

The book of Proverbs uses other language as well to describe the sin of laziness. When all these terms and descriptions are studied, a full portrait of the sluggard emerges. What does he look like?

- (1) The sluggard relaxes *when he should be laboring*: **10:5; 12:27.**
- (2) The sluggard relaxes *before his work is complete*: **12:27; 19:24; 26:15.**
- (3) The sluggard relaxes *to the detriment of those around him*: **10:26; 18:19.**
- (4) The sluggard relaxes *in defiance of the counsel of others*: **26:16.**
- (5) The sluggard relaxes *by exaggerating the risk of the workplace*: **22:13; 26:13.**
- (6) The sluggard relaxes *even though it restricts him to a life of menial labor*: **12:24; 13:4.**
- (7) The sluggard relaxes *even in the face of poverty*: **6:9-11; 13:4; 15:19; 19:15; 20:4, 13; 21:25-26; 24:30-34.**

**“Laziness in Proverbs is more than a character flaw; it is a moral issue.”**  
~ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 115

The book of Proverb’s harsh treatment of laziness is often either ignored or treated as an ancient problem. As a result, it has become one of the “respectable sins” among God’s people today that rarely receives treatment. Yet as the timeless wisdom of Proverbs makes clear, laziness is the cause of many significant troubles in families, in the assembly of God’s people, and in society at large. Some of the consequences of laziness today include:

- Exposure to and ensnarement in all kinds of sinful habits.
- Involvement in shady schemes and dishonesty in handling money.
- Propagation of the welfare state and the theft of wages from hard-working men.
- Abuse of the charity of God’s people, leaving less for those with genuine needs.
- Perpetuating poverty for future generations of the family.
- Dishonor of the Lord by debasing His image and squandering His resources.

### 3. A biblical esteem for work prioritizes diligent labor before reward.

In response to the sin of laziness, the book of Proverbs prescribes hard work and diligence—the practice of *sustained discipline*—as the way of success: **10:4b; 12:24a; 12:27b; 13:4b; 21:5a; 31:10-31.**

Once again, it is important to note Solomon’s **cause-and-effect logic** with respect to successful living. In this case, diligent labor is the *cause*, to which profit or reward is the *effect*.

- **6:6-8** – “Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer *and* gathers her provision in the harvest.”
- **10:4-5** – “Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, *but* he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.”
- **12:11, 14; 13:11; 14:4, 23; 20:4; 21:5; 24:27; 27:18; 27:23-27**

Inseparable from this cause-and-effect logic of biblical wisdom is the concept of **delayed gratification**. The concept of delayed gratification teaches that the reward for work will always be greater when it is enjoyed after the work rather than before it. That may seem obvious, but the tendency of man in every age and culture runs contrary. A simple look at credit card debt among Americans illustrates this point.

#### THE SLUGGARD’S PROVERBS

“Never accomplish today what you can put off to tomorrow!”

“Never delay to tomorrow what can be enjoyed today!”

The concept of “reward-for-labor” is not only an OT idea alone. It is also emphasized also in the NT: **Matt 6:1-18; Mark 9:41; Luke 6:22-23; 1 Cor 3:8; Col 3:23; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim 2:6; Heb 11:6.**

The concept of reward plays an important part in instilling and cultivating a biblical work ethic. This doctrine deserves special emphasis in a day like ours, when **the dangerous ideology of socialism** is rapidly growing in popularity. Socialism rejects both *the cause-and-effect nature* of God’s universe and *the virtue of delayed gratification*. Ultimately, socialism appeals to the sinful flesh—to man’s innate propensity to laziness and his default position of sinful dependency.

### 4. A biblical esteem for work takes responsibility for ending the cycle of poverty.

As a general principle in life, Solomon taught that individuals must take responsibility for their plight in life—including poverty. Rather than emphasizing the obligation of the community or the family to raise an individual out of poverty, Solomon taught that the individual himself must see his responsibility with respect to what led to his current state of destitution and with respect to his path to escape that plight. Once again, the **cause-and-effect** logic of Solomon’s wisdom is clear:

- **6:10 // 24:34** – “‘A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,’ then your poverty will come *as* a robber, and your want like an armed man.”
- **10:4; 12:11; 12:24; 13:4; 14:23; 16:26; 19:15; 20:13; 28:19**

This, too, was an emphasis needed in the NT church: **1 Thess 4:11-12; 2 Thess 3:10-12.**

Some might argue that Solomon’s wisdom works well in the agrarian-based culture of his day, but not in our industrial, urbanized era. While this is a factor, it does not erase the basic truth of Proverbs: **personal responsibility and hard work are the best responses to poverty, while the blind and unconditional distribution of entitlements creates a cruel system of dependency.**

Solomon's instruction on this point must be understood in **context**. These proverbs have been collected and placed within a book which must be studied in its entirety in order to avoid misapplying the truth each proverb seeks to convey. When read in the context of the whole book, Solomon's emphasis on personal responsibility is tempered by the following **qualifications**:

- (1) Some who are wealthy are not righteous (16:8; 28:6, 8, 11; Ps 73:2-12).
- (2) Some who are poor are not so because they have never worked hard (13:23; Job).
- (3) Wealth is never to be considered the ultimate goal in life (19:1, 22; 22:1; 23:4-5; 30:7-9; Ecclesiastes).

Furthermore, as the wisdom literature of the Bible teaches in general, the laws of Proverbs are not intended to exclude the reality of God's mysterious providence.

- **Job 1:21** – “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”
- **Job 2:10** – “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?”

### **5. A biblical esteem for work cannot coincide with an attitude of self-sufficiency.**

The book of Proverbs rejects the notion that true success in work can be achieved according to one's own strength, in isolation from the wisdom that is found only in the LORD. A strong, biblical work ethic does *not* lead to arrogance and an air of self-sufficiency. To the contrary, planning for labor and labor itself must be done in a spirit of dependency and teachability. Success in labor is achieved by the application of wisdom, and wisdom is acquired through receiving instruction and correction from the wise.

- **1:7** – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”
- **15:22** – “Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed.”
- **16:9; 20:18; 24:3-6; 26:16; Psalm 90:17**

Since one's work ethic has such a profound influence on his present and future wellbeing and the wellbeing of those in his circle of influence, every God-fearing man must be hungry for counsel and open to correction.

### **For Further Reflection**

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- When you look at your life today, can you affirm that your work ethic glorifies God through your stewardship of the image of Him that you bear?
- What are you teaching your children—particularly your sons—regarding the dignity of work? In what ways does your current attitude toward work leave a negative impression on your children?
- Our culture emphasizes that one should be content in his work only if he “likes” it. Does this reflect a biblical worldview? Is it important to take joy in one's work even if it is not his preferred occupation? Explain.
- What personal obstacles discourage you from working diligently in your work? Do you reflexively complain when an extra amount of effort is required in your work, or do you rise to the occasion with joy?
- Identify the areas where men often struggle in their work with respect to the concept of delayed gratification. Has the innate tendency to enjoy the reward before the labor hindered you in your own growth as a working man?

**This Week's Audio & Notes:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** Jan 20 – Esteeming Work, Pt 2