

Observations from an Anthill

The Quest for Hidden Treasure – Part V

Selected Proverbs

Introduction

In a book authored by Chuck Swindoll, he retells the humorous, anonymous testimony of someone who was overworked and tired of it. I was standing in my study reading this and laughed out loud when I came to the end of it. This is what this disgruntled, overworked person had to say:

I'm tired. For several years I've been blaming it on middle age, iron poor blood, lack of vitamins, air pollution, water pollution, saccharin, weight, dieting, wax buildup and a dozen other maladies that make you wonder if it's really worth the effort. But now I found out, it's none of those things. I'm tired because I'm overworked . . . and I've figured out why.

The population of this country is around 300 million, but 98 million are retired. That leaves 202 million to do the work.

But there are 161 million in school, which leaves 41 million to do the work. Of this total, there are 22 million employed by the federal government and another 14,800,000 people employed by state and city governments and none of 'em are doing any work which leaves us with 4,200,000 people to do all the work.

Four million are serving all over the world in the military, so that leaves behind 200,000 people to do all the work. Of them, 188,000 are sick and in the hospital, so that leaves 12,000 to do the work. But there are 11,998 people in prison, so that leaves just 2 people to do all the work; you and me. And you're standin' there reading a book . . . no wonder I'm tired.ⁱ

As I prepared for our study, it occurred to me that there is a vast difference between being tired from work and being tired of work.

Have you ever met anyone on the job who worked hard at keeping away from work?

There is probably no better testimony for Christ than someone who works hard enough on the job to get tired.

The average person in America gets paid for forty hours a week, but actually works around thirty of them. Sick days are always used, as well as vacation days, personal days, and holidays. Few of us have ever heard someone ask their boss for added assignments and more difficult tasks.

Do not misunderstand, the Bible does not recommend that Christians become workaholics. In fact, the quantity of work hours on the job is not as much of an issue in scripture as the quality of work.

Paul told the Colossian believers exactly how they were to show up and work on the job. He writes,

. . . do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward . . . It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. (Colossians 3:23-24)

“Do your work heartily.” The Greek word can be translated “energetically or diligently”.ⁱⁱ

In fact, buried in this compound word is the transliterated word, “zest”.

How often do we show up at work with the thought, “I will work with zest today.”?

This sounds like a soap commercial, does it not?

You might be thinking, “This is corny. Who shows up at the job with zest? C'mon!”

The truth is, if you did, most people would tell you, “Slow down! Where's the fire?! Relax. You're gonna make us all look bad.”

The trouble is that we have drawn an artificial line between the secular and the sacred. We can get really excited about discipling a group of men – God definitely rewards diligence in that – but how does that compare to doing laundry, or laying tile, or filing a brief?

We have forgotten that we are not working for men, as Paul reminded the Colossians, but are ultimately working for God.

In fact, the Latin word “vocatio,” which gives our English word “vocation,” literally means, “calling; a summons to duty”.

Any profession was considered your own personal profession of the sovereign glory of God in and through your work. Your work was your personal estimation of God's worth. All work was considered a sacred calling from God.

This is the reason the Spirit could inspire Solomon to write,

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might . . . (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

The truth is that Solomon had a lot to say about how we live at work – the kind of employee we are.

Throughout the book of Proverbs, Solomon continually warns his son about:

- one kind of employee that none of us want to hire;
- the worst roommate we could ever have in college;
- the most discouraging player on the team;
- the most difficult person to work around.

Solomon calls this person, *the sluggard*.

Even the name sounds slow – like a slug, does it not?

Solomon describes this person with bold and frank language throughout these Proverbs. He appears sixteen times in Proverbs.

Descriptions of a Sluggard

The word “sluggard” is best defined by the different texts that describe him in Proverbs. Let me give several descriptions of the sluggard from this book.

1. **First, the work patterns of a sluggard are undependable.**

In Proverbs 10:26, Solomon writes,

Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.

In other words, the schedule of a lazy man cannot be depended upon. Give a man a deadline – Solomon specifically refers in this verse to giving him a message to deliver to someone – and if he is a sluggard, you will end up grinding your teeth, set on edge by his failure to just do his job.

Solomon also says the sluggard will be as smoke to your eyes.

What happens to your eyes when smoke from a campfire or grill shifts in the wind and blows into

your face? Your eyes burn and water from the stinging pain.

A sluggard is going to make you cry – out of pain and frustration! Tell him to deliver a message, or show up at a certain time, or finish a job, and he loses the message, or he was late, or it was lunchtime and he stopped off to get a hamburger and then decided to run some errands. What should have been a short delivery takes an entire day and now it is too late and the post office is closed.ⁱⁱⁱ

The point is that sluggards do not really care. The boss can only bang his head against the wall and take some medicine for ulcers and cry tears of frustration.

The work patterns of the sluggard are undependable.

Bruce Waltke says that a sluggard is without a moral sense of responsibility to others.^{iv}

2. **Secondly, the excuses of a sluggard are unbelievable.**

Solomon writes in Proverbs 22:13,

The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets!”

This goes way beyond calling in sick. That is too normal; that is too “plain Jane”. “Haven’t you heard? There’s a lion loose!”

It could be true, but for the most part, his excuses are so unbelievable that after a while, others are simply in awe of his creative ability to come up with excuses.

One author said, “It’s as if the sluggard summons all of his creative energy into making excuses rather than making a living.”^v

Then again, all sluggards are not so creative. I heard on the news recently that an employee had been caught calling in asking his boss if he could miss work so that he could attend his grandmother’s funeral. Of course he was allowed, by all means. Six months later, he called in again. It seems his grandmother had died again – he even used the same grandmother’s name. It did not occur to him that he ought to use his other grandmother’s name! He was caught, of course.

Creative or not, excuses may be nothing more than lies. And the believer who is dedicated to professing the glory of God through his vocation will tell the truth and live the truth at work.

Benjamin Franklin once said, “He that is good at making excuses is seldom good at anything else.”^{vi}

First, the work patterns of a sluggard are undependable.

Secondly, the excuses of a sluggard are unbelievable.

3. Thirdly, the spirit of a sluggard is unteachable.

Proverbs 26:16 says,

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet [reasonable] answer.

In other words, try to challenge a lazy man about his careless work or his late appearances or his failure to meet the latest deadline or turn in the latest report that others are waiting on and he will respond with more reasons than seven dependable people.

Just ask him – and he will tell you that he is your best employee. She is the one who is really working the hardest. How can you do anything less than give him the biggest compliment and the largest bonus because if it were not for him, or her, you would not be able to make it one week!

Just ask them – they will tell you.

They are wiser and more valuable in their own eyes than anyone else.

The truth is that they are costly to their company. Their team is always having to pull their weight along. They can talk it up, but they do not work.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 18:9,

He . . . who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys.

He wrote, as well, in Proverbs 14:23,

. . . mere talk leads only to poverty.

It is all talk.

Just do not suggest to the sluggard that he is a bag of wind; that she is blowing smoke – they will pin you to the wall with a barrage of logic and reasoning that will make your head spin. You cannot keep up with it all. They have all the answers.

The truth is that they cannot be challenged – they refuse to change or improve. The spirit of a sluggard is unteachable.

Let us look at another characteristic of the guy or gal who is all talk and no work.

4. Fourthly, the expectations of a sluggard are unreasonable.

The sluggard will give you the biggest problem when it comes to pay raises, bonuses, promotions, awards, etc.

Listen to a person with no internal initiative – we use nice terminology for them – “these are people who lack self-motivating objectives.” Solomon calls them sluggards; lazy loafers.

Just listen to the sluggard who sits next to you in a college class, or works down the hall from you, or across the lathe in the machine shop. They consistently avoid the late hours in the library and the hard tasks. They refuse to pay the price and sweat it out, yet they will talk about everything they are going to have.

He has high expectations. He is the one going places. He is going to do this and start that; he is going to have this and build that, reach this and win that. He is going to do great things – just watch and see.

However, watch his life and discover that in reality, he is expecting everything to happen without him ever lifting a hand.

In Proverbs 12:27, Solomon informs us that the sluggard finally goes out to hunt wild game, but then he never prepares it and roasts it so he can eat it – that is not as much fun.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 20:4,

The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing.

The sluggard is so unreasonable in his expectations that he arrogantly expects to go out to his field that he has not plowed or planted and still find some profit where he has invested nothing. And if you ask him, he will tell you all the reasons why life is unfair to not pay up, even though he never paid in.

He has such big plans and dreams and desires, but at the same time, he is the guy who says, “Hey, the boss is gone – kick back and relax.” Or, “Follow this shortcut over here.” Or, “Take it easy, don’t work so hard. Where’s the fire?!”

In Proverbs 21:25-26, perhaps in the most blunt terms yet, Solomon writes of the sluggard’s misguided, self-deceived, self-centered arrogance,

The desire of the sluggard puts him to death . . . all day long he is craving . . .

Literally, the sluggard desires a desire.

In other words, every day he wakes up and finally gets out of bed and desires another desire – he covets greatly.^{vii}

However,

- his expectations are unreasonable because,

- his spirit is unteachable, and
- his excuses are unbelievable, for
- his work patterns are undependable.

Let us look at one more.

5. Fifthly, the private life of a sluggard is unaccountable.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 26:14,

As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed.

Solomon uses the metaphor picture of a double hinged door. There is a lot of movement – turning back and forth – but never any forward motion.^{viii}

This is the sluggard in bed – he turns back and forth – there is a lot of movement, but no forward motion.

In verse 15 of Proverbs 26, Solomon writes that the sluggard is so lazy that he,

. . . buries his hand in the dish; he is [too] weary [to bring] it to his mouth again.

This is total apathy. He does not take care of himself at all. Even when he is at the table, he has no initiative to feed himself properly.

This employee; this roommate; this co-worker is headed for disaster.

Solution for a Sluggard

Solomon has one solution that he believes will work.

Turn to Proverbs chapter 6. Solomon further describes the life of a sluggard behind closed doors as being one of undisciplined laziness. He says in verse 9,

*How long will you lie down, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?*

Notice verse 11.

*your poverty will come in like a vagabond and
your need like an armed man.*

In other words, you are being robbed of an excellent life and you do not even realize the burglar has moved into your guest room.

You are not just cutting corners at work – coming in late, making up excuses, not fulfilling your contract, being dead weight in the board room and on the dorm floor – you are allowing your life to be stolen away.

[Just] a little sleep, [just] a little slumber . . .

Solomon says in verse 10.

In other words, “That’s all I’m doing – just taking a nap.”

This is not the kind of nap you took this Sunday afternoon. How many of you got a Sunday afternoon nap? That is a rich experience, is it not?

One of my college-aged sons – now nearly twenty-two and home on winter break – was headed upstairs last Sunday after lunch, and I asked, “Where you going?”

He replied, “To take a nap.”

I said, “Do you remember when we made you do that so we could take our nap on Sunday?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “I thought you guys were so out of it – now I know better.”

Solomon is not referring to a nap brought on by fatigue and hard work – this is not that kind of nap, thank the Lord.

One author writes, “The sluggard will lose in life, not everything overnight, but minute by minute, inch by inch; just a little here and a little there.”^{ix}

He will just waste life away by degrees.

Solomon says, “I’ve got the solution. Let’s take a field trip out to an anthill and just watch.”

He writes in Proverbs 6:6,

*Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways
and be wise,*

Have you ever watched ants work?

When our kids were smaller we had an ant farm. It was sort of a Plexiglas aquarium filled with sand and a bunch of ants.

We watched the ants work. They would dig amazing little tunnels and they would store food. They simply worked all the time.

Solomon said, “Study the ant.”

So, I did a little extra study on the ant. It was hard to know where to start.

One single ant colony can include over five million busy ants. There are soldier ants to guard the colony and worker ants that all have their job to do – cleaning, or caring for the Queen ant, or gathering food. All of this is implanted into their created instinct by God.

Argentine ants keep herds of “cows,” which are plant lice. The Mediterranean ant makes “biscuits” from seeds. Honey ants store their food in “living storage tanks”. Amazon ants have “employees” to help with the work.

Ants carry on complex organizations, building projects, and communication systems. They can lift up to thirty to forty times their weight, which would be like us going out to the parking lot and picking up the nearest SUV – with a full tank of gas even.

Red fire ants live a very organized life – they literally never stop doing their job. Red ants are extremely clean and constantly clean the mound.

Some of you, who are moms, are convinced that none of your kids have any red ant DNA.

The leaf-cutter ant builds mounds that contain as many as three thousand chambers and houses up to four million ants. This is twice the population of the state of West Virginia, the state of Nebraska, and the state of Idaho; larger than the population of Oklahoma.

The amazing thing, which Solomon writes in verse 7, is that the ants have,

... *no chief, officer or ruler,*

Can you imagine the state of North Carolina – or any state for that matter – surviving without police officers and government officials and civil support systems?

Nothing is provided for the ants. They do it all themselves.

One woman sent in a brief story of what happened when she visited her parent’s home on the farm. Her five-year-old niece had come along and she was going to be able to pick and shell corn by hand. At first, the work was great fun, but after a few minutes, this little five-year-old looked up at her grandmother and said, “You know you can buy this in the store, don’t you?”^x

Have you ever taken your kids to a strawberry patch? That is a test of endurance and sanctification. Work is fun – until you have to do it.

It is amazing that, as Solomon says, these ants do it all without three kinds of people – or ants, in this case. Let us look at these, from Proverbs 6:7.

1. First, Solomon writes that ants do it all without a chief.

This Hebrew word can be rendered “judge”. There is no need for any ant to settle a dispute or decide some duty or direct some issue that relates to labor. The ants just move around and over each other. The task is more important than anything else. This word can also carry the nuance of a guide.

Imagine a mound with four million ants – and no traffic signals. I like that!

2. Secondly, Solomon mentions that ants do not need an officer.

This is a word that refers to someone who literally “writes down or lists personnel”. This is the guy who makes sure everyone stays in line and on task.

This is the same word used for the Egyptian officers who drove the Israelites to their hard labor in Exodus 5:6.

In other words, there are no ants with little whips to crack over other ants if they come in late or sleep on the job or slow down the assembly line.

3. Thirdly, according to Solomon, also unnecessary in the ant colony is a ruler.

While ants serve the queen who lays eggs all her life – up to several million a day – what Solomon means is that the ants do not need a supervisor. The word could be translated to mean, to either challenge them to work or praise them when they did.^{xi}

As I studied these three unnecessary occupations within the ant colony, it struck me that:

- they do not need restrictions – that is the chief;
- they do not need requirements – that is the officer;
- they do not need rewards – that is the supervisor.

They do not need anyone to:

- make them,
- manage them, or
- motivate them.

Ants are internally managed and motivated by instinct to serve for the good of the colony.

It is no wonder that Solomon writes in Proverbs 6:6,

Go to the ant O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise,

Solomon says, “Go to the anthill – look and learn. It just might rescue you from wasting your life away.”

Conclusion – Observations from an Anthill

Let us wrap up our study by making some observations from an anthill.

1. Observation number one: Ants seem to have an internal eye on the future.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 6:8 that the ant, . . . *gathers her provisions in the harvest.*

Ants know that the season of being able to work outside and gather food will eventually be over.

Let us learn from the ant!

We should consider the future day when Christ will gather us before His Bema Seat and reward us for glorifying the Father by our good works. As I Corinthians 3:13 says,

each man's work will become evident . . .

A trip to the anthill results in very practical questions:

- What kind of employee are you?
- What is your work ethic?
- What kind of student are you?
- How hard do you work?
- What does the teacher think when he or she sees you show up in class?
- What does your boss think of your effort and the quality of your work?

Do not forget that the review that really matters is not at the end of the fiscal year – it is at the feet of Christ who will evaluate not only the work of our hands, but the attitude of our hearts.

2. Observation number two: Ants labor according to their divinely created calling.

If they are:

- worker ants – they serve;
- the queen ant – they lay eggs;
- cutter ants – they gather leaves;
- army ants – they guard the mound.

What are we to learn from this observation?

I believe it returns us back to the calling of God for every believer. Your “vocatio” – your calling happens to be your profession. Honor God in it. Consider it a sacred calling.

Frankly, a lazy Christian is a contradiction of terms.

Listen to Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Ephesians 6:6-7:

Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you

have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile on your face, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders, you're really serving God.

Your work is a sacred calling from and unto Christ.

Let us look at one more observation that may provide some of the secret of the ant’s endurance.

3. Observation number three: Ants unite their efforts and pool their strength and resources.

I have watched an ant struggling with a load, only to see another ant and then another come along and pitch in.

What a great illustration for the family at home and the family at church this is.

The advancement of the gospel is not in big chunks of service or magnificent acts of ministry, but in and through a lot of little acts of service.

If this church was effective today in demonstrating the grace of God and delivering the gospel of Christ to people, it was only because there were a thousand-plus people that we never saw behind the scenes pooling their strength. These people will never get rewarded on the platform; they will probably go unnoticed by the majority of the church members, but their faithful service in the mundane, mattered to Christ and His church.

In studying for this message, I read a lot of things about a lot of different kinds of occupations. One caught my attention as a great illustration of the critical nature of our work in the gospel and our commitment to serve Christ with excellence and passion.

The Texas Army National Guard has a group of special workers called riggers. Their job is to fold and pack the parachutes soldiers use when jumping from an airplane at 5,000 feet. These people are intensely dedicated to their task. The Rigger’s Creed says this, “I will be sure . . . always.” They know jumpers need assurance that everything regarding their chutes is perfect. Think about it – there is no room for error. In the twenty minutes it takes to meticulously pack an MC1-1 military parachute, thirty folds are required. The Rigger’s Creed further states, “I will never let the idea that a piece of work is ‘good enough’ . . . there can be no compromise with perfection.”

These dedicated riggers know that the parachute business is a life-or-death enterprise. Mistakes cost lives. There is no room for complacency.

Maybe you are thinking, “That’s a little too perfectionistic for me.”

Not if you have to jump out of airplane with their work strapped to your back.

Can you imagine being told, “Listen, your parachute was packed by that sluggard over there. We think he stayed awake and did all thirty folds, but he rarely cares enough to count them.”

His work matters to you.

If God takes note of the ant and commends them, how much more will He commend you when you stand before Him, having served as:

- a faithful secretary;
- a dedicated teacher who prepared well;
- a plumber who worked to get it right;
- a mechanic who charged only for what was done;
- a doctor who took time to listen;
- a cook who served only their best;
- a salesman who cared about customers;
- a student who tackled every assignment.

Remember, you are performing your sacred calling – your “vocatio” – unto Christ, who has seen everything and will reward you with the incredible words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

ⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 319.

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 582.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray Pritchard, The ABC’s of Wisdom (Moody, 1997), p. 236.

^{iv} Bruce K. Waltke, Proverbs: Chapters 1-15 (Eerdmans, 2004), p. 476.

^v Charles R. Swindoll, Selected Studies from Proverbs (Insight For Living, 1994), p. 52.

^{vi} Pritchard, p. 477.

^{vii} Peter Steveson, Proverbs (BJU Press, 2001), p. 292.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 367.

^{ix} Waltke, p. 339.

^x Dana Stephens, “Kids of the Kingdom,” Christian Reader (July/Aug. 2000).

^{xi} Waltke, p. 337.