

## BE DILIGENT

### **Introduction**

One day a man came to the studio of the famous artist Gabriel Rosetti (1828-1882.) The man brought along with him some samples of his drawings and asked for a candid opinion as to their quality. Rosetti looked them over with his trained eye, he saw that they had little artistic value, and in a kind way let his visitor know that they lacked any appreciable artistic value.

The man then produced another set of sketches, indicating that they were the work of a young student. Rosetti, as a master artist, immediately recognized that they displayed a remarkable talent. He predicted that without a doubt the young artist, whoever he was, would soon distinguish himself.

With a look of regret the visitor said, “Mr. Rosetti, I was that student. But I failed to persevere in my work because my teacher was so demanding. Now I find that through the years I have slipped backward, my talent has deteriorated. You are right about my latest drawings: they are of no value.” (*Our Daily Bread*, 5/31/92)

Such is the sad story of a man who failed to exercise diligence, a man who gave in to the easy way, a man who wasted his God-given talent and regretted it. In our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs we come to the subject of diligence. In a word, the Word of God exhorts us to Be Diligent.

### **I. Be Diligent, Because It is Pleasing to God**

**(Prov. 14:23; Prov. 14:4; Prov. 13:19; Prov. 12:11,27; Prov. 24:27)**

***There is profit in all hard work, but the talk of the lips leads only to poverty.***  
(Prov. 14:23)

The Word of God confronts us with the necessity of labor—working for a living, and even for a higher standard of living if one does not lose his spiritual perspective.

Proverbs 14:23 is speaking of labor leading to profit, but mere idle talk leading to poverty. Note the lesson presented by a comparison of Proverbs 10:3a, 4a, 5a;

*Jehovah will not allow the righteous to be famished ...* (Prov. 10:3a)

*He who does his work negligently will become poor...* (Prov. 10:4a); literally, “*he who works with a slack hand*”—i.e.; the one who is not diligent but lazy in his work

*He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son...* (Prov. 10:5a); the son who is diligent to take care of his necessary work of preparing for the winter by harvesting the crop in due season.

The lesson is this: Although the LORD graciously and faithfully provides for His people (Prov. 10:3a,) we must not abuse this truth by concluding that God's faithfulness permits us to be negligent (Prov. 10:4a.) On the contrary, the means through which the LORD provides is diligent and industrious labor (Prov. 10:5a.) Productive, creative work is a part of our divine calling:

*And God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* (Gen. 1:28)

*And Jehovah God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and to care for it.* (Gen. 2:15)

Note that these commandments to engage in constructive and productive work occur prior to Adam and Eve's rebellion; thus work itself is not a part of the curse.

When we engage in work we are imitating God and reflecting the nature and life of God. The Lord Jesus said, *"My Father is working even until now, and so I am working"* (Jn. 5:17.) The point of Proverbs 14:23 is this: Work is the task, the calling, appointed by God for us in this world, and as we apply ourselves to this task (doing the work God in His providence has ordained for us to do) we can expect God's provision and blessing.

*Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean; but an abundance of wealth comes by the strength of the ox.* (Prov. 14:4)

If there were no oxen, there would be no mess to clean up (i.e., no unpleasant, time-consuming, boring, dirty work to be done.) But there would be no profit either (oxen are needed to perform the strenuous labor men cannot do.) The point of the proverb is that unpleasant work (work that may be tedious, boring, dirty, etc.) is an inescapable part of productive and profitable work in this present world.

When assigned to perform such tasks, recognize that they are a necessary part of productive work. Furthermore, remember our Lord Jesus Christ, in undertaking the work of redemption He was not spared from this dimension of His labor:

*Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup>existing in the form of God, he did not regard his being on an equality with God as a thing to be exploited; <sup>7</sup>on the contrary, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being*

*made in the likeness of men. Being found as a man in appearance, <sup>8</sup>he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on the cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)*

***An accomplished desire is sweet to the soul; but fools find it detestable to turn away from evil.*** (Prov. 13:19)

This first part of this proverb gives incentive to persevere, even when things are tough, unpleasant or tedious. Note Hebrews 12:2, a passage that presents to us the labors of Christ, *“Let us focus our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

When you set out to attain a desired goal and when that goal is finally achieved after much hard work, perseverance and determination, the attainment of that goal is *“sweet to the soul.”* There is a sweet sense of satisfaction that is as much a reward in itself as the accomplished goal. Consider the words of our Lord’s prayer recorded in John 17:4, *“I glorified you on the earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do.”*

***He who tills his land shall have a sufficient amount of bread; but he who pursues worthless things is void of understanding.*** (Prov. 12:11)

The first part of the proverb is not so much emphasizing the promise of prosperity (the Hebrew word, שָׂבַע, sometimes rendered, *“plenty,”* also has the meaning, *“sufficient,”*) but is reminding us of the fundamental biblical principle: diligence and hard work meet with God’s approval and God’s provision.

Verse 11b warns of the foolishness of neglecting the God-appointed course in order to pursue *“worthless things.”* What is in mind here is the pursuit of such things as “get rich quick schemes” (playing the lottery, gambling on “a hot tip” at the race track, frequenting the casinos) as a futile substitute for hard, industrious work. Also in mind is the pre-occupation with dreaming up your own “get rich quick scheme” when you should be applying yourself to the work at hand. Take note of Proverbs 28:19, *“He who tills his land shall have a sufficient amount of bread; but he who pursues worthless things shall have an abundance of poverty.”*

Yet another alternative to the God-appointed course of diligent work is the attitude revealed in Proverbs 12:12a, *“The wicked man desires the plunder taken by evil men.”* This proverb is referring to those who secretly covet the plunder of the criminal; in their heart such men wish they could take the criminal’s “easy” route to abundant wealth instead of the route of honest hard work.

***The slothful man does not roast what he killed in hunting; but the wealth of men is precious to the diligent.*** (Prov. 12:27)

The latter part of this proverb states: *“the wealth of men is precious to the diligent.”* This proverb reveals the outlook of the diligent man, it reveals how he views wealth (material prosperity): he views it as being *“precious.”* This does not necessarily mean that he idolizes it; but he does recognize that it is a blessing, that it is the result of industriousness, and that it can quickly disappear. Consequently, he appreciates the measure of prosperity he attains, he does not take it for granted, nor does he foolishly squander it.

In contrast, let us take note of Proverbs 20:21, *“An inheritance may be quickly gained at the beginning; but its outcome shall not be blessed.”* *“An inheritance”* is a gift; it is not earned by one’s own labor. This present proverb speaks of an inheritance *“quickly gained,”* (i.e., a sudden, unexpected inheritance; one that has been received without any prior preparation so as to cause the inheritor to appreciate its value.) That which is easily acquired is also likely to be easily squandered and not truly appreciated; such is the meaning of the statement: *“its outcome shall not be blessed.”*

***Finish your outdoor chores and prepare your fields; after that, furnish your house.*** (Prov. 24:27)

The message of this proverb: you must put the necessities of life before the niceties of life (luxuries, comforts, pleasures.) *“Finish your outdoor chores and prepare your fields.”* This is referring to getting your fields ready for planting and then harvesting them in due season. The reference is to the necessary labor on which your income and sustenance depends. *“After that, furnish your house.”* Here is a reference to making home improvements; this is referring to the pursuit of comforts or luxuries or amenities that are beyond the necessities of life.

Note the teaching of Scripture. Have your priorities straight: make sure you have done what is necessary to maintain and sustain your home before you invest time and money on the additional luxuries and amenities that improve the home but are not essential. By way of example, don’t stay home from your job and forfeit your income in order to build a new patio or a backyard swimming pool. Then, once you have addressed the necessities, you may pursue the niceties. Scripture does not teach that life consists of work without the enjoyment of reward. Consider Proverbs 14:24a, *“The wealth of the wise is their crown.”* Riches are viewed as the reward of wise and diligent labor, and as such are to be enjoyed with the LORD’s blessing. Note the Apostle Paul’s teaching on wealth:

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, that is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.* (1 Tim. 6:17;) although we are to be cautious with regard to riches, we are also reminded that they are a blessing from God to be enjoyed.

## II. Be Diligent, Because the Alternative is Ruinous (Proverbs 6:6-11; Proverbs 15:19)

*Go to the ant, O sluggard; observe her ways and be wise. <sup>7</sup>She has no commander, no overseer or ruler, <sup>8</sup>yet she stores her provisions in the summer and gathers her food at harvest time. <sup>9</sup>How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? <sup>10</sup>A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—<sup>11</sup>and poverty will come upon you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.* (Prov. 6:6-11)

Proverbs gives us a character sketch of the sluggard. The first thing we learn about him is that he is addicted to sleep: *“How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?”* (Prov. 6:9.) Sleep is his chief occupation, his favorite pastime: *“As the door turns on its hinges, so the sluggard turns over on his bed. <sup>15</sup>The sluggard buries his hand in the bowl; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth”* (Prov. 26:14-15.) As Proverbs 19:15 indicates, laziness is the **cause** of the sluggard’s fatigue, not the consequence of his fatigue: *“Laziness puts a man into a deep sleep; and an idle man will suffer hunger.”* We may also note Proverbs 21:25, *“The sluggard’s desire kills him; because his hands refuse to do any work.”* The sluggard’s “*desire*” is for sleep, rest, recreation, the avoidance of work (“*his hands refuse to do any work.*”) This self-destructive attitude is what “kills” him (i.e., it brings him to ruin.)

Another thing Proverbs reveals about the sluggard is that he is a master of rationalization, a master at inventing excuses to avoid work: *“The sluggard is wiser in his own conceited opinion than seven men who offer a reasonable answer”* (Prov. 26:16.) The sluggard can invent more excuses and justifications for his lack of effort than seven rational men can answer! Note Proverbs 26:13, *“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion on the road! A lion is roaming the streets!’”* The sluggard evaluates a given task as being too dangerous to undertake, it is not safe to engage in the necessary work. Consider Proverbs 20:4a for another excuse offered by the sluggard in order to avoid doing his necessary work: *“The sluggard refuses to plow because it is winter.”* He insists that it is too cold to be outdoors plowing; plowing should be done on a milder day. The sluggard determines that the present is not the right time to work; the prescribed task should be put off to another, more suitable, time.

Proverbs 6:11 warns of the consequence of the sluggard’s addiction to sleep and his aversion to work: *“poverty will come upon you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.”* The ungodly behavior of laziness and sloth will reduce you to poverty: *“He who does his work negligently will become poor”* (Prov. 10:4a.) That poverty will come like “*a bandit.*” That is to say, it will come unexpectedly. The sluggard may rationalize to himself that he has enough money to get by and that somehow everything will be all right, but before he knows what has happened, the sluggard will find himself reduced to poverty. When it comes, that poverty will have the strength of “*an armed man.*” In other words, is very difficult to

escape the clutches of poverty and debt; especially for one whose whole orientation is opposed to diligence, hard work, industriousness, and frugality. Proverbs 12:24 indicates that the slothful will be reduced to lowly servitude and dependence on someone else: *"The hand of the diligent will rule; but the lazy will end up doing menial labor."*

***The sluggard's pathway is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is made into a highway.*** (Prov. 15:19)

Due to his negligence and laziness, the *"pathway"* of the sluggard has become completely blocked up and impassable, it has become like *"a hedge of thorns"* (tough, painful, impenetrable.) Due to carelessness, lack of conscientiousness, and just plain laziness, the sluggard falls behind a little each day. Thus each day it becomes that much harder to stir up enthusiasm and that much easier to lose interest, until the whole enterprise grinds to a halt.

Conversely, *"the path"* of the upright is made into *"a highway."* As necessary tasks are addressed and completed with diligence, there comes a sense of accomplishment and also the time needed to take on new projects or responsibilities. This exercise of conscientiousness and this sense of accomplishment afford the opportunity and the incentive to undertake and accomplish more and greater things.

Note the contrast between the sluggard and the upright. The sluggard refuses to exercise the self-exertion and self-discipline needed to address the necessary Tasks. This leads to a sense of frustration and despair as the unattended tasks mount up. This in turn leads to a loss of motivation. This eventually results in a state of emotional paralysis (the sense that "I can't do anything, the task is too great, I'm not adequate to address it.") It finally results in the loss of dignity and self-respect, which may be compensated for by denying personal responsibility and blaming someone else for one's predicament. The upright exercises the self-exertion and self-discipline required to address the necessary tasks. This leads to a sense of accomplishment and confidence and satisfaction. This in turn results in an increased sense of motivation. This leads to greater productivity, and the end result is a greater sense of personal dignity, self-respect and confidence to the praise of God.

Note the moral dimension as it is expressed in this proverb. The contrast is not between the sluggard and the diligent; rather, it is between *"the sluggard"* and *"the upright."* Laziness is not an alternative lifestyle. On the contrary, it is something that deviates from the lifestyle God intended for us, the lifestyle characteristic of God Himself: *"Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working even until now, and so I am working'"* (Jn. 5:17.)

*Go to the ant, O sluggard; observe her ways and be wise. <sup>7</sup>She has no commander, no overseer or ruler, <sup>8</sup>yet she stores her provisions in the summer and gathers her food at harvest time.* (Prov. 6:6-8)

The ant is portrayed as being self-disciplined. She has no “*commander*” (or, leader) or “*overseer*” (taskmaster;) yet she goes about her necessary business and gets the job done. The ant is also portrayed as being diligent. She does what needs to be done today in anticipation of the future.

The whole message of these passages of Proverbs is that we are to be diligent, because the alternative (the lifestyle of laziness and sloth) is ruinous. It is not only ruinous financially, but also personally. It puts you into a position of dependence upon others who either become your benefactors (to whom you feel a sense of obligation and who can exercise a control over you) or your creditors to whom you find yourself in financial debt. It strips you of your God-given attributes of dignity and self-respect. It robs you of such divine experiences as creativity, initiative and accomplishment (the experiences God Himself enjoyed at the time of creation.) Furthermore, it is dishonoring to God, because it is contrary to His character and to the divine calling He has given us.

## **Conclusion**

Let us remember the story of the would-be artist who failed to exercise diligence, who gave in to the easy way of sloth, who wasted his God-given talent, ... and who regretted it. By the grace of God, and for His glory, let us put into practice the counsel we glean from the Book of Proverbs. Let us be diligent in all that the LORD sees fit to give us to do.