

Wisdom and Work

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[0 : 00] Holy ant, you sluggard, consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a thief, and scarcity like an armed man.

Lazy hands make for poverty. But diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death. Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labor.

All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty. Sluggards do not plough in season, so at harvest time they look but find nothing.

[1 : 04] The plans of the diligent lead to profit, as surely as haste leads to poverty. The craving of a sluggard will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich. Do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honored. As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man.

This is the word of God. Good evening, and welcome to St. Silas. My name's Robin, I'm a member of the congregation here.

You should have, like, all the readings were on that sheet, so if you want to sort of keep your eyes on that, then we'll be looking through that as we go through it this evening. So why don't I pray, and then we'll look at it together.

[2 : 09] Father, we thank you so much for your goodness and faithfulness to us, Lord. We thank you for the Bible. We thank you for the Word of God, and we pray that you'd speak to our hearts tonight.

We pray that you'd help us to engage with it, and we pray that you'd be with us, transforming us, helping us to think about work and what it means to work wisely. And so could you just commit this time now into your hands, and pray that you'd bless us, have mercy upon us, we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Now, before we jump into thinking about wisdom and work, I just want to front it up by stating that when it comes to thinking about work, for some of us, it might touch a nerve, because for whatever reason, it's not possible, either through unemployment or our health or difficult working relationships, maybe in the past or maybe something else.

So I just want to state that whether we're in or out of work, it's the principles that we're discussing and not sort of individual circumstances. However, having said that, the majority of us will spend the majority of our life working.

If you think about it, you spend more time while you're awake with your work colleagues than you do with your family. And you just think, even when you go to school and university, its aim is to make you employable.

[3 : 31] But the way we think about work has changed and is always changing. Millennials have different attitudes towards work than previous generations.

So what we think about work is different. How many hours we should work, when we should work, that's changing. Flexi time is now in demand, people telling their employees when they want to work.

That would be unheard of in years gone by. Society and our lives revolve around working. We have unions, laws about good, safe working practice, minimum wage, how much holiday we're entitled to

is built into that.

So we think a lot about work, don't we? And yet, despite all that, we have a funny relationship with work, with going to work, don't we? Some of us love it, the sense of purpose, the power, the money we get.

And yet there are others who we hate going to work. We can't wait to finish. As soon as we're back from our halls, we're counting down the days to the next one. And we all fall, I suppose, into one of these camps, or probably somewhere in between, on sort of a spectrum.

[4 : 35] And so it's relevant for our lives today to think about these types of things. Our attitudes, our approach towards work. And so as we've been going through this summer series in the book of Proverbs, what does it mean to be wise when it comes to be thinking about work?

And we're going to be thinking about that in three points. It is good and wise to work, our sinful approach to work, and then the gift of work. It is good and wise to work, our sinful approach to work, and then the gift of work.

So firstly, it is good and wise to work. I suppose this is something we all know, isn't it, that work is good, it is wise, and it benefits society. We mentioned earlier, I spoke, you know, about how much we think about work.

You think of the government or even the tabloids, they know that it matters to us. You just think that the percentage rate of unemployment is something that the government is judged on. If anything, it might be one of the key statistics.

Think about world leaders in Donald Trump's presidential campaign to make America great again. He banged the drum of getting people back into work. And that is always one of the key points of a manifesto of an election campaign.

[5 : 43] That's what people want, he said. There's so much good that happens from people working. And I'm not trying to tell you anything new here. We know that. We know that. But the astounding thing, I think, is that as we look at the scriptures, what we observe is that the wisdom of the world regarding work is not something new, but rather its origin is much older.

The wisdom we think we might have today has its source in the Bible, God's authoritative word. The book of Proverbs, it's written roughly about 3,000 years ago. And the principles it esteems regarding a good and wise way to live, they're the same principles that we would regard highly today.

What we see repeated is how working hard, being diligent and prudent, is commended, it's esteemed and rewarded. Just look with me at a few of the verses.

We've got chapter 10, verse 4, diligent hands bring wealth. Verse 5, he who gathers in summer is a prudent son. Verse 12, chapter 12, 24, diligent hands will rule.

Chapter 14, verse 23, hard work brings a profit. Chapter 21, verse 4, the plans of the diligent lead to profit. Working produces rewards, doesn't it?

[6 : 57] Even in a worldly sense. If you're studying and you do lots of revision, you'll get a high grade. If you work hard, you'll be recommended for a promotion. The way that it's sort of worked out in the world is that the way that we provide for our family is from working.

Working is built into the fabric of who we are. And I suppose there's more to it than that, isn't it?

Because it goes right back to the story of creation. Remember Genesis chapter 1?

So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number.

Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living thing that moves on the ground. We're made to work, made to steward the world God has given us to live in and to rule over it.

It's part of what it means to be made in the image of God. God is the creator and ruler over everything. And so as we work ruling and stewarding his world, we reflect him.

[8 : 02] That is true of every person. Whether you're a Christian or not here tonight, working, stewarding, creating, and caring for the world reflects who God is because we're made in his image.

So what conclusions have we reached at this juncture that work is good and wise? Because it's what we're made to do and it brings reward. It's what we're made to do and it brings reward.

But I suppose we might think, if work is good and wise, which we know it is, then why do we have this strange, inconsistent relationship with it? Why is that? Just as an example, before we go on to the second part, let's just think out about our attitudes towards holiday.

Do we work to go on holiday? Or is holiday a rest so that we can work better? Which way around is it? Are you going to work so that you can save up for a rest?

Or are you resting so that you have the energy to work? It's quite revealing how we think about that, isn't it? The reality is that despite the goodness of work, our attitudes and motivations towards it are all over the place.

[9 : 08] The good and wise way of living has become a burden and we're tempted by foolishness. And so as we move to our second point, which is looking at our sinful approach to work, I want us to think carefully about the corruption maybe of our own hearts and how we veer towards these kind of foolish motivations.

And it's obvious, isn't it, that being lazy is foolish. It's the opposite of what we've just looked at. It's not what we're made for. It's looked down upon, I suppose, and there's no rewards for it.

And we see this wisdom in the Bible. In Proverbs, we get this word sluggard. It appears quite frequently. It's not a word we often use today, but it means a lazy, sort of sluggish kind of a person. Back in Yorkshire, my old man had the phrase regarding somebody. He used to say, oh, he's work shy. Meaning he or she was lazy and in for an easy ride. Doesn't want to work or doesn't have an attitude that wants to work.

And just look at what the Bible says. We've got some brilliant imagery here. Just look at chapter six. Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

[10 : 26] How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

The wisdom here is saying you can learn a lot from an ant. You can learn a lot from an ant. I don't know about you, but that to me sounds a little bit degrading. We're made in the image of God and we're told the ant knows better than you.

I mean, it's got to be one of the smallest creatures. It must be. I mean, if I had one in my hand now, you wouldn't be able to see it. And that's it, it's gone. It's lost.

It doesn't have anyone telling it what to do. And yet it knows it will die if it doesn't gather food. The ant knows better than us. How much more should we know that if the ant knows it?

And if that isn't clear enough for us, the language gets quite strong. What about chapter 10, verse 4? Lazy hands make for poverty. Verse 5, and this is pretty strong, isn't it?

[11 : 32] He who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son. Chapter 20, verse 4. Sluggards do not plough in season, so at harvest time they look but find nothing.

In some of these verses here, the sluggard here is working but has been so lazy that he's not done his job properly. And he's ended up with nothing.

He's put it off and now it's too late. And I wonder if this hits home with us a little bit more because I think we can be a bit like that. I know this for myself sometimes. Do you get that?

Sometimes I feel like I need to be in the right mood before I begin it. I sort of warm myself up to it. I'll do it in a minute. I'll just finish this first. And there's so many temptations in there.

If you're sat behind a desk, how tempting is it to just keep on browsing the internet instead of working? For me, it's especially true over the summer with BBC Sport and the football transfer gossip.

[12 : 30] The temptation is just to click away, to just keep on looking at it. Now, that's kind of an obvious one, but I think there is a more subtle temptation when it comes to work. And I suppose it's, what are we working for?

What is our motivation to work? The motivation, esteemed in the world, is that you work hard. And the reason that you work hard is to gain more money.

And that's so that you can build up a good pension and then retire as early as you can to enjoy your remaining years not working. And the dream is sold to us. The bigger pension you've got, the more of the world you can enjoy, sworn in off to do this and that for the remaining years that you have.

And I think we've got to be very careful that we don't adopt the way the world is thinking here regarding work. Because just, if you read through the whole of Proverbs, or in fact, if you look through the Bible, if you look for the word retirement or pension, it's not there.

In the Ten Commandments, we're told to work six days and rest one. Remember the Sabbath. That means all of us until our dying day we're called to work. It's immensely challenging. The world is

encouraging us, telling us all, enjoy yourself.

[13:44] You've worked hard all your life. You deserve a bit of me time. And you think, yeah, I do, don't I? As we work, it's easy to look at people in that situation and idolize what they have. I want a bit of that.

I'm going to slog my guts out so that I get a bit of a good life. A bit of me time. I deserve it. Just look with me at chapter 23, verse 4 on your sheets.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich. Do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they're gone. For they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

I want you to hear me rightly. What I'm not saying is that we're expected to work to the same level all our lives. I'm not saying that. Our bodies get older, and what we can do changes.

I'm not saying we shouldn't put towards a pension. It's brilliant. If we've managed in our lives, we've had a job given by God. If we managed to save up, to provide for the end of life, it's wonderful.

[14:43] But that doesn't mean that we should spend that time just doing nothing. In fact, it could free us up to do things we couldn't do before, which are wonderful things.

We could visit the sick and needy, do charity. We could help out at church, maintaining the building, or coming alongside a younger brother in faith. That's all work too. But what we must not do is look forward, or if we have retired, there's a free pass to do diddly squat.

We mustn't do that. And so what's the answer to all this? So we've seen so far that work is good, that we're made for it, it brings reward, and is commended, and yet our approach to work is marred by sin.

But there is another way as we look at our third point. There is another way as we look at our third point, the gift of work. The gift of work. I'm sure we've all had that experience of receiving a gift, and we're not entirely sure what it is or what we should do with it, and we're not really grateful for it.

I remember when I was about 12 or 13, my mum was going on a business trip to America, and when she was going, she asked me and my sister if she saw anything that was cheaper over in the States, what would we want?

[16:02] I said, I'd love, if you can get them, I'd love some Nike trainers. And so she was away for a couple of weeks, and when she came back, she had, she'd got us some gifts from her time and away.

I remember coming home from school, and there was an unopened box of trainers, and I opened the box and a lovely pair of Nike white, nice Nike white trainers, but then as I pulled them out of the box, written on the side, they were called Nike walking trainers.

Nike walking, and I was, because for some reason, being a 12 year old, because they weren't Nike Air Max, and because they said walking on the side, I was totally ungrateful. I didn't want to wear them, I wasn't into walking, I was into running and playing football.

I thought my mates were going to rid me, because they were called Nike walking. Now I know that's ridiculous, but I was 12. And we can all say the reason I wanted those trainers, it was about what I could gain, respect and acceptance from my mates because of my trainer.

That was my idol, tied up with what I could get by wearing those trainers, not that I just received a nice gift. I want to suggest that maybe, maybe our approach to work is a little bit like that, because we look at it about what we can gain from work.

[17:16] Is that how we view our work, as a free gift from God, or do we look into work as the source of gain? The world approach treats work as a source of where we get stuff.

It's where we gain a purpose for life. It's where we gain money. It's where we gain power. It's where we gain respect. It's where we gain a position on the social ladder. Our identity is totally tied up with that.

And depending on which things you want to gain, money, purpose, power, respect, social position, it'll dictate your attitude towards work. If work is there to serve you so that you have a purpose and feel satisfied, but you feel like you're in a dead-end job, you'll hate it thinking, what's the point in this?

If you go to work to gain money and you want more, you'll either be a slave to it, doing more hours, or you'll hate your job and be very bitter about your pay. If it's just a means for an end, you'll long for the weekend and holidays and just to finish.

If you go for power and you've not got enough, you'll trample over people to get it or you'll feel powerless and hate it. If any of these attitudes dictate why we go to work, you'll end up dissatisfied

with what it gives us in return and tempted towards the foolish ways of life.

[18 : 31] But there is a better way. There is a better way. There is a way to know full satisfaction with purpose, knowing you have everything you need. It is seeing your work as a gift from God, but it requires something new.

Just look with me in chapter 27, verses 18 and 19. Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honoured.

As in water, face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man. We need a new attitude towards our work, a new way to tend to the fig tree to honour the master.

It needs something radically different. We need a transformed heart. We need a transformed heart. What's in your heart, this verse is saying, reflects who you are.

It means how you approach your work, it shows what's going on in your heart. We need a new heart that honours the master. In this verse, we get this picture of work tending to the fig tree.

[19 : 34] It's a picture of stewarding God's good world, echoing Genesis, which we saw before, but we need a new heart. As in water, face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man.

We need a heart that sees work as a gift from the master that understands grace. We need a heart that says something like this, Lord God, thank you that you've given us this wonderful world to steward.

Thank you for giving me skills to work, and thank you for your provision for me and my family through it. We need to see work as a gift from God. It's gift, not gain. Gift, not gain.

And if you're here tonight and you do feel shackled by work, you detest going every day, and you want more from life, you desire purpose, and you'd love to have a different motivation for your work, it's the gospel.

It's the good news of Jesus Christ where you'll find it. It brings freedom from making work about what we can gain and enables us to see it as a gift because he made each of us in his image with gifts and skills to do the job he's made you to do.

[20 : 41] Your work has purpose. He bestows honour on you if you do it with thanksgiving to him for the good gifts he's given you. It frees you to do anything for him, anything and everything, no matter the value that the world puts on what you do.

God is pleased when you do it for him with a heart that seeks to honour him whatever you do. And so we've thought a lot this evening about work.

Firstly, we thought about work being good, it's good to work and it's wise, it benefits us and society and it's what we're made for. And then we looked at how we're tempted, tempted to laziness and cut corners, tempted by our aises to make work about what we can get, tempted to idolise retirement as me time.

But then we thought about the better way. The work is God's good, gracious and wise gift to us but we need new hearts to be set free so that we can work knowing that every task is given value from the one who made us.

Jesus Christ is the master, our master, our boss. He's the one who's made it all possible through his finished work at Calvary.

[21 : 53] In dying for our sins, being raised to life and uniting us to him by being in relation with him, he's given us new hearts. Hearts that thirst for what is good, that thirst for life and wisdom, seeing everything as a gift.

It sets us free from comparison and desiring stuff that we don't have. This is the life that is on offer. A life free of running after work that doesn't satisfy because we're totally satisfied being known and valued by our Lord whatever we do and free to give everything in our work.

We can do all those things for him. Let me pray. Father, we praise you and thank you that you've made us and we thank you that you've gifted us with unique skills and gifts and abilities.

We thank you that you've made us for work and we thank you that when we work we reflect who you are. And yet, Lord, we're sorry that at times we've had the wrong approach to work and we often work with thinking about what we can gain from it.

But Lord, we thank you that you bestow value and honour on anything when we do it for you. We thank you that you give us new hearts that help us to see all these things as grace and not for gain.

[23 : 29] And so we just commit our working lives into your hands. We commit the week ahead as we go to work and we pray that you'd help us to go to work with a wise attitude that loves to work for you knowing that we can honour you with all that we do.

So we just commit all this into your hands and pray for your sustained blessing upon us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.