

## WORK AND REST

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; Exodus 20:8-11

The problem I have with the verses we are studying this week is thinking of people here at Hamblen to whom they might apply. I have yet to meet anyone at our church that I would call lazy. If anything, you are all obsessive compulsive. You work overtime at demanding jobs while taking classes, coaching soccer, maintaining beautiful yards, volunteering in schools and hospitals, serving in community organization, performing in Ham on Regal, making mittens and hats for needy school children, baking cookies for memorial services, going to school events for your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, and now we even want you to teach Sunday School. You people hardly need a sermon on the dangers of being lazy.

Interestingly, however, the book of Proverbs was written for people a lot like you. If you look at it closely, the book of Proverbs is not addressed to lazy bums. It is addressed to ambitious upwardly mobile palace officials. For example, Proverbs 23 describes in great detail the etiquette one should observe when eating with government officials. The book of Proverbs was written for achievers—the kind of people who want to get ahead, the kind of people who want their children to get ahead, the kind of people who are obsessed with education and advancement. So why does it contain all these warnings against laziness?

I think the book of Proverbs is trying to warn all of us, high-achievers and under-achievers, that there are two false notions about work that we must avoid—two traps into which we can fall as God’s people. I have provided a space on the back of the bulletin where you can write these down.

The first false notion is the idea that we don’t need to work because God will take care of everything for us. Look at Proverbs 10:3—“The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the carving of the wicked.” Verses like this and many others in the book of Proverbs imply that if we trust in God, God will supply our needs. That is true, but it does not mean we can sit back and do nothing. Look at the next verse: Proverbs 10:4—“A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” Or Proverbs 20:4—“The lazy person does not plow in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found.” It is true that God provides for us, but God created us so that we could participate in the process.

A vivid image of this is found in Proverbs 24:30-31. It says, “I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.” You have probably heard the story about the gardener who was told by a neighbor, “You and God have done a great job with this garden.” She replied, “You should have seen it when God had it by himself.” Proverbs 24 describes a vineyard when God has it by himself. God will in fact provide for us, as Proverbs says, but God gives us the dignity of participating in that process.

I suspect that most of you here already know that and believe it. As I said, you folks don’t tend to be lazy, you tend to be driven. I don’t think any of you here expect God to take care of you without you doing anything, unless ... unless it is in the area of your spiritual lives.

None of us expect God to put food on the table without a little effort on our part, but a lot of us expect God to take care of our spiritual lives without doing anything to help make that happen.

Occasionally, I have woken up in the middle of the night in a sweat wondering if I remembered to shut the garage door. I lay there thinking I almost always remember to shut the garage door ... I'm sure I remembered to shut the garage door. Then my obsessive compulsive nature kicks in and I go check. This is a terrible thing to confess, but I have never woken up in the middle of the night wondering if I remembered to pray for somebody. It is not because prayer for people is less important than the garage door. It's because I figure that God will take care of my prayers whether I pray them or not, but the garage door is up to me.

Proverbs reminds us that all work, including prayer, is an opportunity to participate in God's work. God could of course take care of the garden without us, but God created us to add our own personal creativity and care to the process. The same thing is true in our spiritual lives. Praying, worshiping, bringing our children to church, even teaching Sunday School are ways that God lets us add our own personal creativity and care to the process of shaping people's lives, including our own.

The first false notion about work is that we don't need to work because God will take care of everything for us. The second false notion about work is that it does not matter what we do as long as we do our best. Look at Proverbs 12:11—"Those who till their land will have plenty of food, but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense."

A while back I was browsing through a copy of *The Guinness Book of World Records*. It told about a guy in England named Steve Perritt who set a world record for driving 3031 miles on a riding lawn mower. I hope he was at least moving the grass along the highway. What is the point of driving 3000 miles on a lawn mower? Another record belongs to Lang Martin of Charlotte, NC, who set a world record by balancing seven golf balls on top of each other in a straight line without using any adhesive. In doing this he broke his own previous record of six golf balls set three years earlier.

I want to know is what kind of person spends three years trying to break his own record for stacking golf balls? People put extraordinary effort into some pretty crazy things, and maybe that's okay if you do it for fun as a kind of challenge. There is nothing wrong with doing something for fun. But if your whole life is wrapped up in that kind of thing: if your whole life is devoted to your own ambitions, your own projects, your own self-aggrandizement without regard to who put you here on this earth and why, you may end up accomplishing your goals and wasting your life, because the goals you accomplish won't mean anything.

False notion #1: We don't need to work because God will take care of everything for us.  
False notion #2: It does not matter what we do as long as we do our best. Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established." I don't think this means your plans will always work. It means that if you commit your life to serving Christ, even your failures may produce an unexpected good.

Proverbs is big on work, and work is a good thing. But the fourth commandment, which we heard in our call to worship, reminds us that sometimes we need to rest from our work so that we remember why we are here. Let me read again Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, you male or female slaves, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

At this point the sabbath commandment is an important corrective to the book of Proverbs. There are two implications of God's command to rest on the sabbath that should be added to what Proverbs tells us about work. First, our relationship to God also requires time and work. You cannot expect our garden to produce unless you participate in cultivating it. In the same way, you cannot expect God to produce faith in you or your children unless you participate in cultivating it. Prayer, worship, Bible study, acts of service to others—these things take time. You have to take a break from other pursuits to make room for them. If you don't, you may lose track of what your hard work and frantic pace is supposed to be about.

The first implication of the sabbath command is that our relationship to God also requires time and work. The second implication is this: remembering who put us here and why can re-energize us to do the things we need to do. Proverbs 19:15 makes an interesting observation. It says, "Laziness brings on deep sleep." Normally we think of it the other way around. Normally we think that fatigue causes laziness. But Proverbs says that laziness causes fatigue. In other words, if you don't have a reason for getting up in the morning, you probably won't have the energy to do it.

That is another reason for the sabbath commandment: to remember why we are here. Taking out time each work to worship God and hear God's word reminds us that God made us and endowed us with special gifts. It also reminds us that there is a Savior who loved us enough to die for us on a cross and who wants to live with us forever. Remembering these things—remembering who put you here and why—can re-energize you to do the things you need to do, because in the Lord your labor will not be in vain.

- Ken Onstot