

LAZINESS AND THE GRAPES OF SLOTH

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Before going overseas for an extended period of travel and relaxation, a wealthy businessman turned his financial portfolio over to three different money managers. To one he gave \$50 Million, to a second \$20 Million, and to a third \$10 million. When he returned home a couple of years later, one of the first things that the businessman did was to check up on his holdings. He was pleasantly surprised when he visited the first financial manager and discovered that his \$50 million had doubled in value to \$100 million. His praise and appreciation for that investor were great.

When he saw the second manager, he found out that this man also had been able to double his money through wise investments. But when the businessman came to the third individual's office, that manager pulled out the man's original \$10 million cashier's check and gave it back to him. The businessman was not very happy. The manager squirmed around and tried to make excuses: "The economy looked uncertain. There were signs of a recession. Stocks were overvalued, and the housing market was slumping." Why didn't you at least put the money in bonds or treasury bills or some other kind of savings instrument?" "Well, I wasn't sure that your money would be safe there either."

Such is the modern translation of a parable that Jesus told in Matthew #25. The thing which I find fascinating about this parable is Jesus' evaluation of this third individual. In v. 26 He calls this guy "a wicked and slothful servant." Our Lord identifies a central part of this man's problem as laziness. That is not the first description that comes to my mind. Overly cautious. Lacking in faith. Indecisive. Or maybe just a lousy financial manager. But Jesus traced his problem to laziness.

Perhaps more of the problems that we face in life should also be traced to laziness--- whether on the part of others or ourselves. That is the subject for consideration today in our ongoing study of the Book of Proverbs. The theme of the book is wisdom, or skill in daily, godly living. This book does not lend itself well to verse by verse exposition. But there are key themes which we find addressed here. Last week we saw in Chapters 6-8 that the author saw adultery as a major threat to wisdom and to the young men being trained for government service who were the original objects of this curriculum.

Today we find that laziness is another theme which takes center stage in this wisdom curriculum. First mention is made of it in #6. An early church leader by the name of Tertullian identified laziness as one of the seven deadly sins in the list which he compiled in the late first century.

Back in our first lesson we saw that King Solomon described three kinds of people whom we may encounter in the world: the wise man, the fool, and the naive individual.

In #6 v. 6 we are introduced to a fourth category of people. They are described in our translation as “sluggards.” We might simply call them “the lazy.”

There is no central passage in the Proverbs that describes the sluggard or that deals with the issue of laziness. The brief passage that Mike read for us has the longest treatment of the subject in one place in the book. But there are a number of other brief verses which talk about it. So we are going to do a topical study of Proverbs today to get a Biblical picture of what the lazy person is all about and to learn how to avoid the perils of laziness ourselves.

I.

Let's consider first what the Proverbs have to say about THE LAZY MAN'S CHARACTER. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE LAZY MAN'S CHARACTER) Hopefully none of us here would fit exactly into this description, but perhaps there will be some parts of it that sound uncomfortably familiar, or maybe there is a particular part of our lives where these descriptions might fit.

A.

(I. THE LAZY... A. A DREAMER) In this wisdom book I find the sluggard, or lazy man, described first as A DREAMER. There are good things about having dreams and ambitions. But the lazy man never gets beyond the point of dreaming. Look at #13 v. 4 (PROVERBS 13:4) The author writes, **“The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing/ while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.”** This is an example of antithetical parallelism. The first line of the proverb describes one kind of person. The second line describes the opposite kind of person.

The lazy man or woman has definite dreams and cravings and longings. He wants to be rich, but he avoids hard work. He wants to be wise, but he never gets around to studying. He wants to be slim, but he won't go on a diet and get exercise. He wants to be a great musician, but he just can't find time to practice. He wants to be on time, but he just doesn't seem to make it.

Dreams can be a good thing. But the lazy individual does not go much beyond that. Chapter 21 vv. 25 & 26 (PROVERBS 21:25-26) tell us: **“The desire of the sluggard kills him,/ for his hands refuse to labor,/ All day long he craves and craves,/ but the righteous gives and does not hold back.”**

The sluggard spends a lot of time thinking about what he wants in life. But the contrast with the righteous man in the second line of v. 26 implies that it is a selfish kind of thinking. The righteous person has an interest in giving while the lazy one is preoccupied with taking and receiving. But even then he puts forth no effort to help himself.

B.

The second characteristic of a sluggard is that he, or she, is A NON-STARTER. (I. A. B. A NON-STARTER) He just doesn't get going. That is suggested in the verses we just

looked at in #21 vv. 25 & 26. The lazy man spends all day craving, but his hands refuse to work. He never gets around to getting a project off of the ground.

Chapter 20 v. 4 (PROVERBS 20:4) adds, **“The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;/ he will seek at harvest and have nothing.”** The winter was the time when plowing was to be done in the Ancient Near East. It preceded planting. But the sluggard never gets around to plowing. As a result, at harvest time the next year he has no crop. He is left destitute.

C.

(I. A. B. C. A NON-FINISHER) The third thing about the lazy man pictured in Proverbs is that he or she is a NON-FINISHER. When the lazy person does manage to get started with something, he doesn't finish it. Such is what # 12 v. 27 (PROVERBS 12:27) tells us: **“Whoever is slothful will not roast his game,/ but the diligent man will get precious wealth.”**

The term for “whoever is slothful” here is a different word from the other one that we have seen used to describe the sluggard. The Hebrew word here comes from a root that means to be slack, or loose. This guy is a slacker.

The word translated as “game” refers to an animal that has been captured in a hunt. The lazy man has apparently been successful in hunting. But now he is all tired out--- not because of old age or physical weakness, but because he is lazy. So he does not go to the additional work of cooking his meat. Perhaps he eats it raw. Perhaps it simply spoils. The point is that he just doesn't finish the job.

Chapter 19 v. 24 (PROVERBS 19:24) describes the same quality in a humorous way. It says, **“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish/ and will not even bring it back to his mouth.”** This is an example of hyperbole, extreme exaggeration, to make a point. The lazy man is so lazy that he won't even feed himself. The point is that he doesn't finish what he starts. You visit his or her house or garage or yard or business, and you see these projects laying around that have never been completed.

D.

(I. ABCD. A RATIONALIZER) Then fourthly the lazy man is A RATIONALIZER. He is always making excuses for his lazy behavior. Chapter 6 v. 10 and #24 v. 33 (PROVERBS 6:10-11) quote the words of the sluggard. Both verses say this: **“A little sleep, a little slumber,/ a little folding of the hands to rest,/ and poverty will come upon you like robber,/ and want like an armed man.”** This is the snooze button mentality. “I'm tired. I need just a little more sleep. I'm not lazy. I'm just getting the rest that I deserve.

Consider #26 v. 13 (PROVERBS 26:13): **“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion in the road!/ There is a lion in the streets!’”** There were lions in Israel until about the time of the crusades in the Middle Ages. But the lazy man is just looking for an excuse for not

working. “If I go out to the field today, if I show up in the marketplace to work, I might get eaten up. I might catch Covid.”

Lazy people always have excuses for not working or not doing what they should be doing. “It’s too hot outside. It’s too cold, or it’s too wet. I didn’t show up because I was talking to so-and-so. I was too busy, or I had this other thing that I had to do.

E.

(I. A.... E. LOSES TOUCH WITH REALITY) Eventually this rationalizing leads to the fifth characteristic of the lazy man. He LOSES TOUCH WITH REALITY. He begins to believe his own excuses. In #26 v. 16 we find this warning (PROVERBS 26:16): **“The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes/ than seven men who can answer sensibly.”**

We human beings naturally tend to justify our own behavior. We develop over time the conviction that our behavior is right. So the lazy individual begins to think that not working is better than working. The task or job or project isn’t really worth our effort. The wise man can’t even dent his thinking. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This attitude has national significance for our economy. Jason Furman, the former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, points out that the share of prime age men in our country who are employed and working has been falling for the last fifty years. He says, **“They’re not spending any more time on child care, not spending any more time on chores. They are spending a lot more time watching TV than men who are in the labor force.”** (Brookings Institution Commentary, 8/15/2016)

I knew a guy once who was a classic illustration of the sluggard. His name was Kenny. Kenny came from a difficult family background. So my frustration and negative reactions to his behavior were tempered somewhat by my understanding of his background.

Kenny was first of all a dreamer. He had a great voice and natural musical ability. He used that talent at church on some occasions. He dreamed about making it big some day in the music world. He would also talk about his dreams and hopes for music. But he didn’t pursue anything.

Kenny was a non-starter. I remember one day when he came into my office with this idea about how he was going to make a lot of money by making these woodcraft things. I don’t remember exactly what they were. But of course I never saw him make even one of them.

When Kenny did start a project, he usually didn’t finish it. After one of the summer Olympics he told me that he was going to begin training for long distance running so that he could compete in the next Olympics. I had to restrain myself to keep from laughing. I had never seen much evidence of athletic ability in Kenny. But he was serious. He described the general time table that he had in mind for getting himself up to a competitive level. It sounded nice, and he went running three days in a row that week. But after that Kenny didn’t bring up the subject of running again.

Kenny was also a rationalizer. He had difficulty in holding down a job. He would be late for work or wouldn't show up for work. He would be quick to demand his rights when he felt that his boss was taking advantage of him. So he was often getting fired. Of course it was always the company's fault, or the boss's fault. Kenny had a good reason for being late, and the boss was just an unreasonable guy, and he just had it in for Kenny.

Kenny was out of touch with reality. A number of times he was forced out of apartments. He was late with the rent or messy or a pain of some kind to the landlord. But Kenny was always in the right. I would try to tell him in a nice way that he was acting like an idiot. But usually he was still convinced in his own mind that he had been the victim once again of unfair treatment in a world that was just out to get him. Such is the mind set of the sluggard, the lazy man.

II. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THE LAZY MAN'S DESTINY) The Proverbs also tell us about THE LAZY MAN'S DESTINY. There are at least four things that the Proverbs tell us about that. The first is that the lazy man faces POVERTY. (II. THE LAZY MAN'S DESTINY A. POVERTY) Chapter 20 v. 4 says, **"The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;/ he will seek at harvest and have nothing."** He or she ends up in poverty. He is always looking for financial help.

The Bible also recognizes that there are poor people who face poverty because of widowhood or because they are foreigners or because of health problems or because of financial reversals. The people of God are always commanded to help people like these. The lazy man gets less sympathy.

B.

(II. A. B. HUNGER) Secondly, the lazy man will face HUNGER. He will end up without the basics to sustain life. According to Proverbs #19 v. 15 (PROVERBS 19:15), **"Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep,/ and an idle person will suffer hunger."** I helped Kenny out a fair amount. One time he invited me over to his apartment for a meal to show something of his appreciation. He served me macaroni and soda. That was it. He never had very much money. But his situation was largely the result of his own laziness.

C.

(II. A . B. C. FORCED LABOR) Thirdly, Proverbs says that the lazy man will experience FORCED LABOR. He may have to sell himself into slavery. According to Proverbs #12 v. 24 (PROVERBS 12:24), **"The hand of the diligent will rule,/ while the slothful will be put to forced labor."** When finances got so bad for an Israelite that he went deeply into debt, his last alternative was to sell himself as a slave. That no doubt happened to some sluggards. In our society lazy people may become homeless, go on welfare, or simply remain at the bottom of the employment ladder.

D.

(II. ABC D. NOWHERE) Then fourthly the lazy man or woman may end up NOWHERE. Life becomes a series of dead ends. In #15 v. 19 (PROVERBS 15:19) we read, **“The way of the sluggard is like a hedge of thorns,/ but the path of the upright is a level highway.”** The sluggard is always running into roadblocks. He is being hedged in because of his own behavior and inactivity.

Listen to this picture in v. 14 of #26 (PROVERBS 26:14): **“As a door turns on its hinges,/ so does a sluggard on his bed.”** There is a little bit of motion, but there is no real forward movement, no real progress.

The National Enquirer several years ago had a contest for the King of Spuds, or top Couch Potato in the United States. Out of about a thousand entries the winner who was picked was a 35-year-old bachelor from Fridley, Minnesota. He kept three TV sets blaring 24 hours a day in his home. This winner said, **“There’s nothing I like more than sitting around with a six-pack of beer, some chips and a remote control. ... The TV station even featured me in a town parade. They went into my house, got my couch and put it on a float. I sat on the couch in my bathrobe and rode in the parade!”** (*New York Times Review of Books*, 6/6/1993) Such is the picture of the sluggard, or the lazy man.

III.

(III. THE LAZY MAN’S NEEDED LESSON) We come then to THE LAZY MAN’S NEEDED LESSON. What does the lazy man or woman need to learn for positive change to happen? Verses 6-9 of # 6 provide the needed direction. The author tells the man (PROVERBS 6:6) in v. 6, **“Go to the ant, O sluggard;/ consider her ways, and be wise.”** You don’t need to go to Harvard or Stanford. Just go to ant school.

A creature created in the image of God with the ability to reason, analyze, and observe is told to learn from a dumb little ant. Verse 7 (PROVERBS 6:7): **“Without having any chief,/ officer or ruler...”** The text goes on to point out that the ant manages to work and achieve a harvest.

Keep in mind that Solomon collected these proverbs and put them together in one collection, probably for the purpose of instructing young men who were preparing for government service. In that institutional setting they would have chiefs, officers, and rulers. The ants have no such obvious organizational structure. Yet they get a lot of work done.

A.

(III. THE LAZY MAN’S NEEDED LESSON A. SELF-DISCIPLINE) So the lazy man needs to have SELF-DISCIPLINE. He or she needs to be self-directed and self-motivated. He needs to get to work. Proverbs #25 v. 28 (PROVERBS 25:28) warns us: **“A man without self-control/ is like a city broken into and left without walls.”** Some measure of self-discipline is essential to success.

B.

(III. A. B. PLANNING AHEAD) Secondly the lazy man is in desperate need of PLANNING AHEAD. Such is the basic lesson to be learned at ant school. Verses 8 & 9 continue the lesson (PROVERBS 6:8-9): “...**she prepares her bread in summer/ and gathers her food in harvest./ How long will you lie there, O sluggard?/ When will you arise from your sleep?**”

The ants know instinctively that in order to have food in the winter, work must be done in the summer. The lazy man needs to understand this basic, simple principle. He needs to plan ahead. Then he needs to get up and go to work.

IV.

Finally, let's consider THE LAZY MAN IN OUR OWN LIVES. (IV. THE LAZY MAN IN OUR OWN LIVES) There is probably no one here who would see themselves as fitting nicely into this description of the lazy man or woman. But there still may be some applications here for us. Most of us may have areas of our lives where we may be lazy. In some areas that laziness may have severe consequences. In others it may not.

I tend to be lazy when it comes to household fix-it projects. I don't especially enjoy doing household improvement projects. I tend to put them off. We have been without a functioning door bell at our house for a couple of years. I tend not to get around to rectifying that situation. Fortunately I have a patient wife who doesn't get worked up by inactivity in this area.

In just a minute I will give you the opportunity to share areas where either you tend to be lazy or where you notice other people who tend to be neglectful. First, I want to look at one more passage. It is Proverbs #24 vv. 30-34 (PROVERBS 24:30-31) The author there says, “**I passed by the field of a sluggard,/ by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,/ and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;/ the ground was covered with nettles,/ and its stone wall was broken down.** (PROVERBS 24:32-34) **Then I saw and considered it;/ I looked and received instruction./ A little sleep, a little slumber,/ a little folding of the hands to rest,/ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,/ and want like an armed man.**”

The author walked by this field and saw three things wrong with it: It was overgrown with thistles. There were nettles all over it. And the wall was broken down. A broken wall was an invitation for invasion by wild animals and thieves. A lot of maintenance had not been done.

This particular observer walking by this particular field observes its condition. Verse 32 literally say in the original Hebrew, “**I put my heart on the matter.**” I thought about it. I learned a principle of life from what I saw. “**A little sleep, a little slumber,/ a little folding of the hands to rest,/ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,/ and want like an armed man.**”

Just a little bit of neglect leads to big problems. That vine grower could have stayed home for a day or two and not done his plowing or planting or pruning. No big deal. Just

a little folding of the hands to rest. But that course of behavior continued over time is dangerous. That is how major problems often develop--- from just a little neglect.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

This principle about the dangers of just a little laziness or neglect has application to more than just our lives at work. A little neglect can cause problems in other areas of our lives--- in our families, in our spiritual lives, in our friendships. So I would like you to help me with some more applications. Tell me about some other areas of life where this principle could be applied to your life and the lives of others, and maybe what dangers can result.

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Ray Ortlund in his book *Lord, Make my Life a Miracle* (p. 151) says, **“Your danger and mine is not that we become criminals, but rather that we become respectable, decent, commonplace, mediocre Christians. The twentieth-century temptations that really sap our spiritual power are the television, banana cream pie, the easy chair, and the credit card. The Christian wins or loses in those seemingly innocent little moments of decision.”**

I would like to conclude then with a time of silent prayer. If there are applications that have been mentioned that have struck home to you and that have exposed areas of potential danger to you, talk to the Lord about it. Some traits are difficult to change. They are the result of habit patterns formed over many years. We can't change them in our own strength. But our sovereign and all-powerful God can help us to do it if we trust him. Let's pray.