

One of the most colorful characters in all of Proverbs is the Sluggard. He is a caricature of laziness and short-term thinking that neglects the work, effort, and self-denial for a lifetime of flourishing and health.

My guess is, in a high achieving congregation like ours you as an individual may feel like giving yourself a pass on this sermon. Surely someone who works long hours, tends to multiple children, is involved serving their community, or gets high grades in school is safe from the incisive wisdom of Proverbs on this subject.

You might be right. But, as is often the case in life, it is more nuanced than that. Often the same person who is diligent in one particular area of life may be more like the sluggard in another. For example, this I asked my wife when I was writing this if I am more like the sluggard in any areas of my life. After she said, "do you really want me to answer that?" and I thought to myself, "No", for the sake of this illustration I said "yes". She replied, "Picking up after yourself." Ahh yes that pile of clothes I like to leave laying beside the bed. Some changes are hard to make. I determined that it is most likely we all have categories that need some review and where we have to address our inner sluggard. Maybe we get meet some of the "Sluggards" we might encounter is we take these words seriously in Proverbs.

MEET THE SLUGGARDS.

The Health Sluggard imagines that some day later they will find the diligence to change their exercise or eating habits.

The Spiritual Disciplines Sluggard expects to grow in their love for Christ and experience of God's presence without any engagement in studying God's word, prayer, or faithfulness in church attendance.

The Priorities Sluggard may spend a lot of time doing things but will not do the hard work of thinking through major priorities to be diligent in.

The Financial Management Sluggard doesn't keep a close watch over resources until a crisis hits and then feels like they lack the resources. Unfortunately the resources for the problem were spent on comfort in the previous season of life.

The Parenting Sluggard may work hard in many areas but when it comes to parenting and spiritual nurture will not find the effort to connect with their children, discipline them in healthy ways, and teach them the gospel.

The Relational Sluggard hopes to have a thriving community of relationships but doesn't take time to cultivate them in any real ways.

The Social Media Sluggard mistakes endless browsing on social media for doing something.

Now

Proverbs 26:16, does say "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." so you may be tempted to write this all off. But...as we consider what Proverbs has to say about the sluggard, we are going to start by asking the question, "When am I more like the Sluggard?" "What is characteristic of the sluggard?"

I am more like the Sluggard than the Diligent when...

1. I require motivation by authority to get things done. The Sluggard requires motivation by authority. The diligent person works on what is good without being told.

Proverbs 6:6-11. Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, 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? 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.

If you noticed, the analogy that the Proverb wants us to draw from the ant is not that it is merely hard-working. No, the ant does the work without a boss, or parent, or teacher, motivating them. Even lazy people can be motivated by authority or threat of punishment. The diligent person works toward what is good out of a recognition of what the future holds. That is why diligence is a sub category of wisdom. Diligence has enough perspective to know that winter is coming and the field needs to be plowed or when spring-time rolls around it will be difficult to plant. And if the planting is difficult there may be problems at harvest and who knows where the food will come from next winter. Wisdom recognizes that neglect (the fruit of laziness) compounds with time. The problems multiply when responsibilities are ignored. When you understand this, you will be less likely to be comfortable neglecting the work of the present. After all you cannot harvest the seed that is never planted. But the real question is, are we aware of this for ourselves without someone standing behind reminding us and motivating us.

2. I cannot be counted on to follow through. The Sluggard cannot be counted on to follow through. The diligent person has the confidence of those he represents.

Proverbs 10:26. Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.

Proverbs 12:27. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.

One sure sign of a sluggard is a lack of dependability. At the core of the sluggard's problem is the inability to finish what is important before fulfilling some other craving for relaxation, or recreation, or rest.

If you have to work with people who do not follow through then you probably know this experience well. There is no end to the problems produced by someone who is not dependable. Very little can be accomplished when a member of the team doesn't do their assignment. Ask yourself the question:

When I am working on a project with others, or a task for the family, or serving in the church, do I finish the job? Do the people around me in life feel like they can count on me? Most of my worst experiences in life fall into this category of forgetting or not following through on a responsibility I had with others.

3. I expect success rather than working to achieve it. The Sluggard expects success. The diligent person works/prepares for it.

Proverbs 20:4. The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

Proverbs 15:19. The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.

In this second passage we see really well the problem that the sluggard has with success. IT seems like the upright has it easy, a nice level path. But the point here is that the wise and diligent person has tended to the small tasks of trimming the hedge and keeping the pathway clear and now that they need to travel down the path to go somewhere it is all prepared. In that moment their diligence gives them a great advantage. Meanwhile the sluggard may all of a sudden feel powerful motivation and be willing to work hard. The problem is he has to work through thorns to get anywhere. He will likely give up before getting to the goal.

Much of what appears to be success is really just the faithful work of trimming the hedges and clearing the path until the opportunity can be seen at the end of the road. We often say to our church planters and have reminded ourselves when things do not seem to be progressing. "Row the boat until the wind blows." Let me apply this one to the parenting sluggard. There are many times where the work seems menial. But all that instruction is building. Without it you haven't given your children the building blocks that will fall into place in due time.

4. I am dominated by immediate cravings rather than focused on the long-term good. The Sluggard is dominated by immediate cravings and left unsatisfied. The diligent denies immediate cravings to focus on the long term and is satisfied.

Maybe this is best seen in the almost comical description where the immediate craving for rest cuts off the initial craving to eat.

Proverbs 19:24. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.

Proverbs 13:4. The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

Consider the insight the heart of laziness that this Proverb gives us. At the foundation the problem of laziness is the inability to say no to immediate cravings.

Proverbs 21:25-26. 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.

Here is an amazing thing. Satisfying every small craving leads to a real sense of dissatisfaction in life. IT is only in self-denial to focus on more weighty aspects of life that we ultimately find a real sense of satisfaction. The wise person has learned self-denial and is empowered here by the soul satisfaction of serving others well. That means that in our current cultural climate, "discipline is way under-rated".

5. I am quick to reach for excuses. The Sluggard can always find an excuse. The diligent can always find a reason. I definitely saved my favorite for last.

Proverbs 22:13. The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!"

Proverbs 26:13-14. The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.

So what do we do?

1. **Face the Lion.** Take away the excuses that keep you from diligence. “In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people’s we do not accept them easily enough.” C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*
2. **Roast the Game.** Finish the tasks of your important priorities instead of giving up and looking for a distraction.
3. **Clear the path.** Take the first step in what God has called you to regardless of how large the task may seem. “There are three stages to every great work of God; first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.” –Hudson Taylor
4. **Curb the cravings by practicing self-denial.** Occasionally, certain cravings get ahold of our lives. If we are honest enough to stop making excuses we will need to look at areas of our lives where we strengthen the muscle of self-denial. It may be the discipline of not hitting snooze. It may be the discipline of not eating dessert. It may be the discipline of turning off the television. It is not that any of these things we deny ourselves are evil in themselves, but our lack of self-control spills into other areas and the strengthening of discipline will as well. These periods of fasting teach us to say no to strong cravings and strengthen the soul to resist greater temptation and focus on longer term goals.

Look to Christ: As we close let’s consider the image that Proverbs 24 gives us and how it prepares us to rejoice in the gospel of Jesus for our slothful hearts.

Proverbs 24:30-34. 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. 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.

In Genesis chapter 3 after Adam and Eve sin. The consequences and curse of sin is pictured in the ground that brings forth thorns instead of fruit. It will now require hard work and discipline to get the fruit of blessing from the ground that God gave as a gift in Creation.

If we are honest with ourselves. Our lives have often looked more like the sluggard’s field than a garden of virtue. We have craved our own desires and left our responsibilities before God to become like a broken down wall. We have put off faithfulness for another day, to do the things that we have wanted to do. And maybe you are reading this today and you would admit that sin and selfishness have brought you to the point where doing what is good and right looks like the most difficult undesirable thing in the world. It feels like trying to clean up an overgrown field and you don’t even know where to start with God.

If that is you, we have good news today. You need to hear what Jesus had to say from the cross.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28-30 ESV).

Not only has Jesus been faithful and diligent in all that the Father gave him to do. He also bore the curse of thorns upon his head from the unkept garden of our lives. He took the thorns and sins of our lives and came into the midst of them. He was crushed by our failures and over run by our sin on the cross. He died not only for the evil we have done but also for the good that we chose not to do while pursuing our own way. And because he finished His work, we can be united with him through faith and be counted righteous with God through His death, burial, resurrection on our behalf.

Titus 3:5 says that it is “Not by works of righteousness, but according to mercy” that we are saved in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us that our Salvation and hope is “not of works, so no one will boast” but only through faith in Jesus and his finished work. Let us repent of our slothfulness today and everyday, but let us rest securely in God’s promise for us that His work is what brings us on to completion.