

The Wisdom Literature

Lesson #15

Wisdom In The Workplace

Introduction

- Every person who holds a job will spend almost one quarter of their life at the workplace. Thus, it should come as no surprise that God has legislated, via numerous proverbs, proper and godly conduct within the workplace. God's children are not left to wonder how best to please God in the realm of industry and commerce.
- Proverbs 14:35 says, "The king's favour is toward a wise servant: but his wrath is against him that causeth shame." The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:2-4). It is the specific application of wisdom in the workplace that we will endeavor to examine in this lesson.

Instructions Concerning Slothfulness

- The ant is in contrast to the sluggard (6:6-11; 30:25).
 - There is scarcely a more industrious creature than the ant. It is a remarkable creature for its foresight and initiative and it serves as a perfect illustration for the sluggard.
 - The words "sluggard" and "slothful" both come from the same Hebrew word. It is translated "slothful" eight times in the Proverbs and is translated "sluggard" six times in the Proverbs. The word means "laxity and languor." It also carries with it the idea of the hands hanging down in inactivity.
 - The ant needs no overseer, whereas the sluggard must be prodded because he waits resigned about the prospect of working. For all the sluggard's procrastination, his poverty will come upon him slowly but surely. His want will also come upon him like an armed man, which cannot be resisted.
 - The Christian is not to be lazy like the sluggard; he is to be a hard and conscientious worker (Romans 12:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12; Hebrews 6:12).
- To the employer, the sluggard is annoying (10:26).
 - Vinegar sets the teeth on edge and smoke irritates the eyes. The sluggard has the same effects upon the person who employs him.
 - When we take on the responsibility of work, we are to work with all our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The employer pays us a wage and expects a certain level of production from us. To do anything less is contrary to the law of God.

- The sluggard gets nothing for his effort (12:27; 13:4; 19:15).
 - The slothful man cannot roast his dinner because he did not put forth any effort to catch anything. In contrast, the diligent man's catch is precious because it has the blessing of God. Industrious labor is always commended by the Lord!
 - The irony of the sluggard is that he has the same wants and desires as we do, but because of his indolence he cannot provide for anyone. However, the diligent man's soul is "amply supplied," "abundantly gratified" and "prosperous."
 - In 19:15, the word "deep sleep" is the same word used for the sleep into which Adam was put before Eve was taken from his side (Genesis 2:21). Sloth renders a man utterly unconscious of all interests of life.
- The slothful man's way is always problematic (15:19).
 - Laziness and indolence will cause one problems all their life. Financial problems, family problems, health problems, etc., have all been tied to slothfulness.
 - Those that have no heart in their work pretend that their way is "hedged with thorns," and they cannot do their work without hardship and danger.
 - Whereas the slothful man faces a "thorn hedge," the way of the righteous is "made plain," or is like a well-constructed highway. Note how the industrious man is likened to righteous. It is wrong to be a sluggard!
- The slothful and the wasteful are cut from the same cloth (18:9).
 - The work of the slothful and the wasteful have the same end. They are bound together by the fact that both efforts, or lack thereof, have the same result.
 - A slothful man neglects his works and the materials go to ruin; the waster destroys the materials. In essence, both are destroyers.
- A slothful man will, through his laziness, starve (19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 26:14-16).
 - The proverb writer uses a comically extreme illustration to show the uselessness of the sluggard. He would rather starve than feed himself!
 - Under the pretense of unfavorable weather, the slothful man neglects cultivating his land until the proper time has elapsed. He does indeed starve rather than feed himself!
 - The sluggard lives in a world of wishing rather than working because he simply refuses to labor. This is easily contrasted with the interest and energy of the righteous man.
 - The slothful person is attached to his bed as a door is to its hinges. Perhaps the greatest enemy of the sluggard is that he regards him-

self wiser than a multitude of the wisest men. Truly, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

- The sluggard puts forth excuses instead of effort (22:13; 26:13).
 - If one were to remove the slothfulness, these imaginary difficulties and dangers would be no more.
 - The reason that excuses are put forth is the desire to cease from all activity! The Bible in Basic English calls him a "hater of work." Are we excusing ourselves from the Lord's work? If so, then we fall into the same category as the sluggard.
- The sluggard can give great instruction to the wise (24:30-34).
 - If we will "look" upon the sluggard and "receive instruction" from him, we will avoid the poverty and problems that come upon the one who refuses to act righteously in honest work (cf. Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1).
 - Here was an individual who had the ability to provide by way of his vineyard, but preferred a "little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep." Are we willing to be "fervent in spirit" (Romans 12:11) or will our outcome be like that of the sluggard?

Instructions Concerning Inequity

- False balances are an abomination to the Lord (11:1-4; 16:11; 20:10, 23).
 - The balances mentioned are ones constructed for the express purpose of deception. The law required a just weight (Leviticus 19:35), although the people often disobeyed (Amos 8:6; Micah 6:11).
 - It was common for weights and measures to be standardized by royal authority (2 Samuel 14:26). However, their authorization actually goes further back. The humblest device to promote fair dealing is God's, like the humblest servant of orderly government (Romans 13:6).
 - God is concerned even with the mundane matters of life. All are under His control and authority. The person in business who tries to cheat his customers will answer to the Lord Almighty.
- Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord (12:22).
 - Much like the false weight, the Lord also hates lying or deception. False balances and lying lips go hand-in-hand with one another.
 - Different versions illustrate the true nature of false balances and lying lips. Words such as "detest," "abhor" and "loathsome" provide ample evidence of just how much the Lord hates this sin.
 - The Lord is holy, just and cannot lie (1 Peter 1:16; Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2).

- These two sins are perhaps more antithetical to God's nature than any other sin. Is it any wonder they are warned against in Proverbs?
- The businessman or businesswoman who delights in cheating and lying to others will find their reward in the day of judgment (Revelation 21:8).
- It is better to be poor than to be unrighteous (16:8; 20:14).
 - A maxim of life is that it is better to live with less than to gain by injustice. The NEB states, "Better a pittance honestly earned than great gains ill gotten."
 - A good example of this principle is found in the buyer who proclaims that a product or service is bad in order to negotiate the price down and then boasts of his accomplishment.
- Inequity will lead to want (22:16, 22-23).
 - The exploitation of the poor for personal gain and the bribery of the rich will both lead to want or poverty.
 - The oppression of the poor is dangerous and sinful, not just because it is unjust, but also because the Lord looks out for those who are poor.
 - Taking advantage of someone who is less fortunate than you runs completely in the opposite direction as the Lord's commands to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 19:19; 22:39). The Lord is sure to judge those who do not treat one another fairly.

Instructions Concerning Surety

- Avoid surety (6:1-5; 11:15; 22:26-27).
 - These proverbs concerning surety does not banish generosity; it is nearer to banishing gambling. If one takes the pledge for another, he may unwittingly do the borrower a great disservice by exposing him to the temptation of skipping out on his debt. Clarke writes, "Give what thou canst; but, except in extreme cases, be surety for no man."
 - If one does become a surety, the text vigorously states to press the borrower to pay his creditor. He is to be given no rest until he pays his debt.
 - If someone assumes the surety for a debt and does not have the wherewithal to pay in the case of default, then fraud has been practiced. Suretyship is fraught with many dangers. It is interesting to note that in the New Testament, Paul accepted Onesimus's past liabilities, but not his future ones (Philemon 18-19).

- The borrower is the servant of the lender (22:7).
 - This is the natural order of the economic affairs of man. The RSV says, "The borrower is the slave of the lender." Some sell their liberty to gratify their luxury.
 - When one goes into debt, it is the creditor who has the power to legislate the transaction. When we borrow money, we must understand that we live by the rules of our creditors. Young people need to take note that repayment of our debts and financial obligations is demanded in God's law (Romans 13:8).
- The extortioner will ultimately lose (28:8).
 - This process, even if extremely slow, is as sure as the promise, "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). How often have we seen unlawful and exorbitant sums being charged for basic goods and services in times of distress under the guise of "supply and demand"?
 - Proverbs teaches us that God's providential care is upon the poor and underprivileged. If any of us own businesses and think we can cheat the poor, we had better think twice about the consequences of our actions!

Instructions Concerning General Principles

- Honor the Lord with your substance (3:9-10).
 - Whatever God sends to us by way of secular prosperity, there is a portion that we need to give back to Him. We were created ultimately to honor and praise God. We are to offer the Lord our "firstfruits;" that is, we are to give to the Lord as we prosper, not out of the leftovers (2 Corinthians 9:7-8).
 - Giving of the firstfruits was a part of both the law (Exodus 23:19) and the prophets (Malachi 3:10). God, who is first and best, must have the first and best of everything. His rights have priority over all others (Psalm 24:1; 50:10-12).
 - When we give to God of our best, He will bless us with "plenty." Giving in the face of so many material pressures is a simple test of faith. If we are willing to show our hard work, faith and gratitude, the Lord will make sure that we are never in want (Matthew 6:33).
- The merchandise of wisdom is better than silver or gold (3:13-14; 14:24; 16:16).
 - No matter how many material possessions we amass, they pale in significance to the attainment of understanding and wisdom. Without these two, man degenerates into the type of person all the proverbs we have examined condemn.
 - How difficult it is to get Christians to see that wisdom will make you a richer man than money ever will! This certainly does not detract from

the teaching concerning slothfulness, but it does seek to put work in its proper perspective.

- Generosity will be rewarded (11:24-26).
 - The bountiful man who gives to the poor will receive the blessings of the Lord. In fact, the man who gives liberally to those who are without receives greater blessings than the one who receives the gifts. Truly, it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35).
 - It is a paradox that sometimes you must lose to gain. In giving liberally to the poor, the one who is rich secures for himself God's pleasure. Although the application is left open, one should see the obvious benefit in respect to financial giving (Psalm 112:9; 2 Corinthians 9:6-9).
- Do not trust in riches (11:28; 13:7; 23:4-5; 27:24; 28:20, 22).
 - If we have worked hard and are blessed, let us always learn to never place our faith in silver and gold. It is always God that gives the increase (James 1:17). The righteous man, who sees all blessings as from the hand of God, is the one who will continue to flourish as a branch.
 - There is another great paradox in life in that the one who works so hard for material possessions finds that they do not satisfy (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Money is a small ingredient of wealth or poverty. The true measurement is righteousness toward God. In this respect, the poor man can have nothing materially, but his cup runneth over spiritually (James 2:5).
 - The covetous man is one whose aim is to be rich. Frequently, this results in dishonest dealings and selfish motives. The honest and industrious man may very well end up with great amounts of wealth. There is a difference. If one does acquire wealth by providing everything honestly in the sight of all men, then do with it what is pleasing and just in the sight of God (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Always realize that it may be "here today and gone tomorrow." Riches are not forever.
- Frivolity does not satisfy (12:11; 28:19).
 - God's blessings are again promised to those who labor honestly. Different versions render "vain persons" as "vain pursuits," "idle pursuits," and "useless interests." A fully symmetrical saying is found in 28:19.
 - Opportunities of achievement are being frittered away. This person lacks discrimination, not energy. Could it be said of us that we uselessly pursue worthless hobbies while the greater work of the kingdom of God goes undone?

- Hard work does satisfy (13:11).
 - Wealth that is not the result of honest industry and hard labor is seldom permanent. One might readily think of the saying, "Easy come, easy go."
 - More and more of us are gaining wealth in this country in the stock and bond markets. We are getting rich without expending any real effort. However, these kinds of gains are quickly removed in fickle economies.
- God requires proper management (13:22-23).
 - A good man, by being good and doing good, by honoring the Lord with his substance and spending it in His service, secures it to his posterity.
 - A good man's estate may last and continue to accomplish good while God, in His providence, often brings into their hands what wicked people had laid up for themselves (Exodus 12:36).
- Do not be greedy (15:27).
 - Just as those who are honest and generous are blessings to their families, the greedy are curses upon their families. Sooner or later, ungodly actions bring about trouble to the home; it never fails.
 - The one who "hates gifts" abhors all sinful ways of obtaining wealth. This is a person who will live with family and reputation intact. Concerning this proverb, Knox said, "Let avarice lead thee away, thy home shall be ruined; long life is his, who scorns the bribe."
- Wealth creates fair weather friends (19:4, 6).
 - Mankind's love of money is strong. Any man will be loved if he has enough money. Wealth enables a man to gain many friends who are hoping to "cash in" on their newly found acquaintance.
 - Mankind's love for each other is weak. While a man prospers, he is loved and respected. When he is destitute, he is separated from his neighbor.

Instruction By Wonderful Example

- She is persistent in her endeavors.
 - Could a more glorious exemplar ever be found? Here is a woman who "seeketh" and "worketh willingly" (31:13). She "riseth while it is yet night" and "her candle goeth not out by night." She "eateth not the bread of idleness" (31:27).
 - What diligence there is compared to the sluggard! What consideration and fairness there is compared to the unjust!
- She is a provider for her family.
 - She "giveth meat to her household" (31:15). She "maketh herself coverings of tapestry" (31:22). She works and supplies wages for the upkeep and support of her household.

- She is a true career woman! All her endeavors are able to be accomplished at home in her rightful place. Is she missing out on the “working experience”? No! “Strength and honour are her clothing” (31:25).
- She stands in wonderful distinction from the sluggard who will not work, the surety who risks all and the unjust who will cheat to make a living. If only all God’s children were as zealous and upright as this virtuous woman.
- She is praised for her efforts.
 - Her children call her blessed and her husband praises her, and rightfully so. The world impresses upon us the temptation to either let someone else provide or to cheat if you have to provide. It does not and must not be that way.
 - The preeminent principle in all this is that she “feareth the Lord” (31:30). If all of us will be diligent and fair in the workplace and set a good example for others by demonstrating Christ in us, we will be worthy of praise.

Conclusion

- No matter how wise we are in the workplace, we need to always remember that the ultimate desire should be toward heaven (Proverbs 15:16-17; 22:2, 4).
- Christians should remember to always work our hardest with a good and honest heart. The workplace can be an great area of evangelism. Do our coworkers see us glorifying God with our work ethic? Are we setting a good example of integrity before those with whom we deal? Do we truly understand the proper place of labor within the framework of our lives? May God help us to, at the end of the way, be called forth as a “good and faithful servants.”