

Go To The Ant!

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“In the Old Testament a sluggard is one who avoids the action that wisdom requires...In the broadest sense, the OT’s negative judgment on sloth is rooted in God’s purpose in creation, namely, that people be industrious stewards of the earth” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol. Four, Bromiley, ed., p. 550). According to Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:15, and Exodus 20:9 it was always God’s intention for us to be productive in some way, however we are best suited individually (see the varied talents in the parable in Matthew 25:14-30 or the analogy employed in 1 Corinthians 12:14ff). Avoiding work is never considered a noble pursuit in the Bible, and it is given special attention in Proverbs, with no fewer than three poems devoted to it (6:6-11, 24:30-34, 26:13-16) in addition to many scattered sayings (10:26, 13:4, 15:19, 19:24, 20:4, 21:25, 22:13). For this article, I want to focus on one Proverb, in particular.

“Go To The Ant”

“Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ‘A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest’— And your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your need like an armed man” (Proverbs 6:6-11).

“Observe her ways” – The verse immediately puts the onus on the sluggard for his failure to observe “what works” in the lives of others. I am amazed that with so many great examples there are still people who never learn the value of a dollar, or the satisfaction of honest labor, or how the *American Dream* is actually achieved. We live in a culture rife with the entitlement mentality – in other words, people believe that they have a right to everything they want and that it is somebody else’s job to facilitate such a right. The ants, on the other hand, work tirelessly in spite of having no taskmaster to push them along. They prepare for the inevitable trials of life in spite of having no administrative superstructure laying out their outfit for the day.

“She prepares...She gathers...” – This is a life of activity that needs no supervision. Also, notice the way that there are no surprises in this world. Both the ant and the sluggard know when it is harvest time. They know when winter is coming. Similarly, nobody in our culture should be surprised by:

- Tax season;
- Credit card interest rates;
- Slow seasons for certain jobs;
- A decline in an outdated field;
- Physical difficulties as we age, or the challenge of retirement.

“How long will you lie down?” – A subtle indication that the sleep of the sluggard goes beyond what is necessary or helpful. Obviously, we all need to lie down and rest from our labors. The difference is that the sluggard goes beyond the reasonable bounds of inactivity. His sleep becomes destructive and unpleasant, almost self-loathing, whereas the hard-working individual enjoys satisfying sleep (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

“Your poverty” – “This lesson comes too late. He will suddenly wake to find that poverty has arrived and there is no arguing with it” (Proverbs, Kidner p. 43). There does come a time in life when you cannot recover from wasted opportunities, when a condition is simply beyond repair. There will come a time when you will not be physically able to work as long or hard as you used to, or when your lack of experience and initiative have prevented you from making a livable wage. “Poverty...clings to the slothful like an incorrigible beggar who always lingers about the house and always wants more. Laziness will siphon off resources until the indolent have nothing left” (Proverbs, Garrett p. 97).