

June 2, 2024

## Lesson 1: Work: More Than a Paycheck

Scripture: Proverbs 10:4-5; 12:11, 14, 24; 13:11; 14:23; 16:3, 26; 18:9; 21:25; 22:29; 24:27; 28:19

### **Context:**

Today we begin our summer series, “Finding Balance.” The series will focus on how we can find a balance in daily living as God gives us a pattern for work, rest, and celebration. The first unit, “Work,” focuses on how God frames work from a biblical understanding. Nurturing a life of faith includes having a healthy perspective on work and how it goes deeper than simply earning a paycheck. Today’s focus will be on understanding Proverbs’ classic wisdom teaching on the value and meaning of work.

The book of Proverbs can be found in the Old Testament, following the book of Psalms. The book is an anthology of anthologies as each section contains pithy statements giving wisdom and counsel.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the proverbs are grouped together by themes and other times they are randomly assorted together. There are two types of categories for the proverbs: some have insight to the human experience and others have a religious dimension.<sup>2</sup> All of the proverbs are meant to have practical counsel for daily living.

The wonderful thing about the proverbs is they do not just reflect one group of ancient Israelite society. As one reads the proverbs, there are glimpses into various social groups. While most of the proverbs depict the lives of the wealthy elite in royal courts, some of the proverbs also describe life in agrarian towns and villages with references to seasonal agricultural activities such as plowing, planting, and harvesting.<sup>3</sup> Yet all of them have a focus on finding ways to live with wisdom and discretion.

While many of the proverbs stand on their own, there are reoccurring motifs and characters. For example, several chapters focus on a “young man” labeled “my son,” who is to be aware of both the “foreign/strange woman” and “Woman Wisdom.” These two different women present dilemmas about life and how to approach them with goodness and virtue. The reader can have a visual presentation to the ethics of daily life.

The proverbs we look at today all deal with work. Throughout the book of Proverbs there is a repetitive theme of watching oneself with the time given in life. At the center of these words is the focus on how to lead a fruitful life and to see the gifts of hard work. Negligence and laziness are to be avoided. It is through work how one is given purpose and direction and not just a paycheck. There is a reminder to stay focused on the land to cultivate and things to be done. Talking and idleness lead to a lack of work and thus a loss of food and purpose. The proverbs remind the reader, whether a farm laborer or a court artisan, of how work is to be at the forefront of their lives and the rest will fall into place. As people work, they can be filled in multiple ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 463.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Application**

Depending on who you talk to, work can either be a joy or a drudgery. It is something we all must do whether we start it when we are fifteen with a part-time job or we go onto trade school or university to pursue a degree. Everyone must work for a living at some point in their lives.

Some of the greatest pieces of wisdom I have watched others give over the years focuses on what we should look for in work. For some people, work is also tied to the understanding of call. Many Christians I know believe call is part of what God called them to do something with the gifts and graces to be involved in the world. Yet for others, call may be more nuanced and there is the simple fact you possess gifts and graces alongside the fact of how you need to pay the bills.

As you read over the proverbs today, think of how they emphasize how work can be multiple things at once. Work can be a way to avoid laziness. Work is a way to put food on the table and avoid hunger. Work helps us to keep focused, not placing our tongues to idleness or gossip. Work gives us purpose and meaning, helping us to prepare for the lean times which might come ahead. Work is at the center of life because God made us in mind to do things with our bodies as well as the gifts God gave us.

When I was rereading these proverbs, I thought of all the people I see as “hard workers.” These people are usually focused on what they do as they do not have time for idle gossip or causing drama. Because they are focused on work, they truly flourish and do great things for the kingdom of God, whether they’re in the work world or in the church.

Recently at my church we started inviting different laity to take their vocation to share things with others who are younger and might need some assistance in thriving as adults. While I have learned a lot, I think I also enjoy seeing people I minister to every Sunday and week in a different light. These are people who do indeed work to make a living and yet they also see an opportunity to give back to the community and those around them. Their presentations inspired me to think about how I spend my time in work and if I am giving back to others in different ways.

I compared this experience to another which you’ve had too perhaps. It’s when you see people spending a lot of time not doing the work they’re called to do. You’ve probably seen these people. They critique others constantly. They seem to spend their time on social media tearing down others. Their time is spent running their mouths and spouting opinions instead of producing work or doing the things God called them to do.

This is why I think God gives us the book of Proverbs with all the statements on work. We are reminded of how we are called to be so focused on what God has put in front of us to do, we do not have time for things which do not bear fruit, put food on the table, or bring good to our community. All these proverbs in the lesson today focus on how God looks for laborers in the kingdom. God isn’t looking for busybodies or know-it-alls. Instead, God wants to find people who are focused on what is in front of them and what God has given them to do.

As Christians, our work should indeed put food on the table and help us to take care of our families and loved ones. Yet work should also remind us of how God made us to labor and there is beauty in being diligent and responsible. When we work, we are making meaning in life and parts of God’s story is told through our lives.

Whenever I preside over a Service of Death and Resurrection for someone who has died, I love hearing about what they did for a living. Whether they were an educator, a military veteran, or a homemaker, I can tell how those things represented aspects of their journey and

their character. One develops a better sense of who they were, and you can see where God used their gifts and graces in different ways. Through their labor, God did things for the kingdom, and we are reminded of how we are all given an opportunity to work. God made us to work and it is a beautiful thing.

What were some of your favorite proverbs about work? How have you seen God do things for the kingdom through the work of someone else? How do you think working prevents us from getting into trouble? Why do you think talking about work is so important in our world today? Who is someone who represents hard work to you?

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