

Working on Our Work Ethic

Lessons on Laziness

While a core of practical people continues to value the foundations undergirding a strong society, current trends seem to be undermining these pillars. Justice is compromised as crime rates rise. The biblical family unit, consisting of one man and one woman with distinct roles and responsibilities, has become passé, and we wonder why entire generations become unstable and hopeless. Cheating and lying are excused in the name of success and personal happiness, while the link is seldom made to the emptiness that immorality brings. Trying to construct a stable life on foundations that are being destroyed leads many common-sense thinkers to the exasperation the Psalmist expressed. (Ps 11:3).

Although these issues have been around since humanity fell into sin, it seems we are increasingly being called to build in an era where these fallacies are promoted in the name of progress and personal liberty. Diligent, hard work is another of these societal foundations, and the justification of laziness is one more jackhammer, chipping away at the base.

While hardship in labour became expected after the fall (Gen 3:19), work was always a wholesome part of God's purpose for man (Gen 2:15) and a building block of personal and social stability. To many, the Bible's view on laziness is judgmental and offensive; however, the proverbial nail must be hit directly on the head. Laziness is not just unhealthy and unhelpful; it is un-Christian. Let's consider the Bible's counter-cultural condemnation of laziness in secular work, specifically identifying and addressing this sinful attitude.

Deflecting and Excusing: The Sluggard in Proverbs

God knows the legitimate limitations and real reasons possibly preventing people from being able to work, but if there is one thing you learn from the Proverbs, it's that the Sluggard is an expert at excuses. This man sees all of the barriers to work, but not the responsibility to push through those hindrances. Knowing he must plow now to set up his farm for success, he says, "It's too cold", and he looks for handouts at harvest time. (Pr 20:4). Others go about their business, while he justifies laziness through creative stories that keep him from leaving the house.

(Pr. 23:13, 26:13). The excuses seem plausible to him, but silly and irresponsible to everyone else.

He's blind to the connection between daily work habits and the inevitable consequences: just a little sleep, a little slumber. Just a little ended up costing a lot. He doesn't see that his thorn-filled field is a result of his own daily, slack cultivation practices. (Pr. 24:30-34). Longing for the nice things that the diligent earn, he would gladly take them if they were given to him; however, he refuses to put in the work. (Pr 21:25-16). Between excuses, procrastination, and whining, he sets himself up for failure and becomes an unreliable irritant in the workplace. (Pr 10:26)

Can a Christian slide on this slope? Perhaps a brother or sister abuses their employer's HR policy by taking a mental health day, just because staying home is easier. Do believers pass up a job offer and remain unemployed indefinitely because the line of work doesn't align with their "core values"? Do we complain about people who have earned homeownership and financial stability, while we sleep through our alarms and blame the economy for our struggles? We know believers shouldn't neglect their health or engage in activities that violate scripture, and we all recognize that "this isn't your grandfather's economy," but let's be cautious not to justify laziness with seemingly plausible excuses. The sluggard's overgrown field yields much food for thought.

Reflecting an Example: The Sacrifice of Paul

Paul was encouraged by the Thessalonians' turn to God from idols and their expectation of the Lord Jesus' imminent arrival. While this anticipation should have promoted holiness (1 Jn 3:3), was it possible that some could use this as a sluggard's excuse to shirk responsibility? Whatever the case, Paul saw the importance of setting a good example of work ethic in Thessalonica.

As a gospel labourer, Paul could assert that being supported by the believers was not wrong. After all, by devoting himself to work in the gospel, he had the scriptural right to that support. (1 Cor 9:14). But here, he decided to forego that right for the sake of setting a good example. Thus, the Christian message is reinforced: don't depend on others to provide for things that you can supply by honestly working yourself. A Christian is to be a "no excuse" worker. And if a believer who can work is unwilling, then they should not be supported. (2 Thess 3:10).

Correcting and Exhorting: The Serious Problem

But some were behaving very irresponsibly. They weren't labouring, but they were meddling in people's business and depending on support from others. While being a busybody is harmful, this is not the primary problem in this context. The sin here is laziness. Let's be clear: this was not a person who could not work, but one who refused to work and looked to be enabled in their slothfulness. Many believers face health issues that prevent them from being employed, and we should never assume the role of medical assessor. Still, a person who can work and does not is to be instructed "that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. (2 Th 3:12)

Should that person not respond to the exhortation, the assembly must act. That's how serious laziness is. The discipline here is not excommunication; it's a separation from social interaction and support. The offender is not to be looked at as an enemy or put outside of the fellowship, but is to be instructed and warned as a brother, with the intention that the withdrawal of social connection and practical support will cause him to turn from that lifestyle in shame. (2 Th 3:14-15).

Social safety nets, combined with the care of closely connected Christians, could make it easy for a brother or sister to inadvertently fall into the trap of taking advantage of supports and foregoing work. However, while others may use creative and convenient excuses to abuse government programs and exploit the kindness of friends and family instead of working, it should never be so with believers. Using programs and support is entirely acceptable in cases where a person cannot work or is underemployed, but their use is never justified solely because a person refuses to work.

The bulk of the articles in this issue approach the idea of employment from a much more positive angle. Still, the negative lessons of the Sluggard and the positive pattern of the Apostle should set the tone for our attitude toward work in the secular world.