

Proverbs: Skillful Living - Diligence

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Date: 09 October 2022

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[0 : 00] We have been walking through the book of Proverbs that we started earlier this fall, and we have been looking at what wisdom is, and that is one who is skilled at living, and the attributes of one who is skilled at living that the book of Proverbs declares.

And so we have looked at cheerfulness, we have looked at kindness and contentment, and today we find ourselves with this beautiful attribute and characteristic of one who is diligent.

I was at a memorial service earlier this week, remembering the life of a dear person, and I saw a friend of mine who was a contractor that I had not seen for many years, and we were talking and catching up, and one of my questions to him was, what is one of the things that you find most difficult right now in your profession?

And he was quick to answer, and he said, good employees. He said, I have all the work that I could ever want or dream.

I just can't find employees to do the work. And the modern view of work which leads us into our study today on diligence, much of the time, but not all the time in the book of Proverbs, diligence is with regard to work.

[1 : 34] So the modern view of work today is that what you do for a living, or a way to get what you really want is how people often view what work is.

And the real aim is to get money, the real aim is to get status, it's rare to find a medical doctor who does not work to alleviate suffering primarily, but to make a living, or a lawyer to take cases not to seek after justice, but to make money.

It's rare to find an elected official who gladly serves and represents their constituents rather than to serve for their own personal gain. And also sadly, those of us in vocational ministry can fall into this and serve for all kinds of other purposes other than to proclaim Christ and make Him known.

We all can be guilty of this, having a wrong view of what work is and being diligent in it. So I thought today before we get to the topic of diligence, let's have an understanding of what work is.

And I will define at the very end of this conversation, or this opening here of what work is, of definition, I thought about waiting till the end before we understand the theology of work.

[2 : 56] So with that I wanted to say, what is a theology of work? Let's start here. And I would say firstly that we have to understand that God has worked and He is working.

And we see that in a number of ways. Firstly, we see that we see it in God's creative work, that we read the opening line of the Bible. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And day one, He created light. Day two, the atmosphere and the firmament. Then day three, dry ground and plants. Day four, the sun, the moon, the stars.

Day five, birds and sea creatures. Day six, land animals and the crown of His creation, humanity. Adam and Eve.

And then on the seventh day, He rested. In this record of this creative event, when the Ten Commandments are given in Exodus 20, it says, this for six days, the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them.

[4 : 03] And on the seventh day, He rested. We see that God has worked. Secondly, we see God worked through His redemptive work.

That we see His redemptive work primarily through the person in work of Jesus Christ. That Jesus, He lived perfectly. He died sacrificially. He rose victoriously.

And He did all of that to forgive sin for all of those who repent and believe. But God worked a work of redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we see that God is at work in His providential hand. That God is sustaining human life and sustaining His creation. He is actively involved in it.

We read in the book of Colossians 1.17 that He is before all things. And in Him, all things consist or all things hold together.

[5 : 07] God causes life and He brings forth death. He knows the number of our days. He is at work to bring about justice in due time. He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

He is the convictor of sin in the person of the Holy Spirit. And not one thing happens without God's providential hand and care.

He gives snow to the mountains and rains to the field. He does all of this all the time, every day.

Including my own very next breath is a gift of the Lord. So God has worked and He is at work.

Secondly, we see that God has created Adam and Eve to work in the garden. So a theology of work God has worked and is working.

[6 : 05] Secondly, God created Adam and Eve to work in the garden. We read in Genesis 2, we see this, that the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and to keep it.

This is what we read in Genesis 2. Many think that work is the result of a fall rather than God's created order. But they would be mistaken.

That work is then designed as something beautiful to be a part of humanity's life and that is to be cherished. I remember being convicted of this when I was a few years back and I began to pay attention to my language and others language and I heard myself say some things that I thought that does not reflect truth.

It was a simple word get. Or a simple word have because I would say, I would hear myself say, I have to go to work, I have to go to work. But you think about it, God created work as a gift to humanity before sin, before the fall.

So work is to be this beautiful thing that is untainted by sin. So it's a privilege, it's not a have to. We wouldn't say something we don't look forward to as a have to.

[7 : 24] For example, you say, the clearest thing in my mind would be something like, let me just say this, you would not want to be married to me nor go on vacation with me if this is my attitude.

So let me say it this way. Yeah, I have to go on vacation with my wife. We have to go to some nice hotels and sit on some beach and probably have to have food out watching the sunset and have to have some meaningful conversation that we have delayed because of the tyranny of the urgent.

And we just, we have to do this and probably we have to like spend five or six days there. You would never use the word have to to describe something that you look forward to that is good.

You would say, I get to go on vacation with my wife. I get to spend several days there and we get to, can't believe we get to have a meal overlooking the, on the beach overlooking the sunset.

I can't believe we get to have conversation that has had to be delayed because of the tyranny of the urgent and I look forward to delighting in my wife. Those stand radically different.

[8 : 41] And so why do we use, so I began to ask myself, why do I use the word have to to go to work? Yeah, I have to go to work. I get to go to work.

I get to do that. That is such a privilege. That is something that God has created us for to work. Why do I have to, why do I use that language?

And so I ask, I say it to myself and I ask others when I ask, hey, when do you get to go to work today? You get to do that. You don't have to try unemployment for a while.

You'll want to go to work. Number two, work is a gift.

Work is a privilege. Adam and Eve rebellion resulted in work becoming difficult and became frustrating. God curses the ground and the result of Adam and Eve's rebellion, as a result of Adam and Eve's rebellion and suddenly work became frustrating and more difficult.

[9 : 49] And the curse altered the creative order, but it didn't change necessarily the essence of work, of what it's intended to be, of this privilege. Work is not the result of the fall, but the difficulty in work of the fallen world is what is emphasized in those verses.

Fourthly, God instructs his people to regularly rest from work. Let's read Exodus 20.

It reads this, remember the Sabbath day. This is when God is giving the 10 commandments and he comes to this commandment of the Sabbath rest. And so he comes to this and he says, remember the seventh day to keep it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all of your work. But on the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord, your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your livestock, your sojourner who is with you in the gates.

For six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them and rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
[10:59] God rested on the seventh day and let's be clear about this, not because God grew weary or he was exhausted from all that he created. No, God is omnipotent.

He never tires. He never grows weary. He doesn't need a recharge. So why did God rest? And we will get to that here in a moment.

But before we get to that, I just want to, I want you to think how wonderful and beautiful and powerful God is to not need rest, but he did and we'll get to why.

But notice the links in these verses that God goes to explicitly tell us to stop working. On six days you should do all your labor is how the verse opens and then it makes it very clear.

I want you to stop and let me share with you what I mean by that. He says on it you shall not do any work and let me be even more clear.

[12:07] You, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, even the livestock and even those so journeying who just happen to stay with you do not work.

And I think why be that explicit? Why not just say rest, stop working on that day? Why be so explicit even down to the livestock and the guests you have with you to not work on that day?

Could it be that the implication is that you and I would work all the time because we get to work. We wouldn't stop.

But he's so explicit and he gives a day of rest for Israel. And then he says this, why did God then now create this rest?

We turn into the New Testament and we find this verse and it says, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. God knew in his creation his created beings would need rest.

[13:15] That's why he created. That's why he ceased is to set an example for the one who would need rest and it was created for man. And so the Sabbath was created to stop one's regular work and for the sake of giving laborers and livestock a break and not to cease being beasts of burden and to have a day where one focuses on the Lord, to have a day set aside unto the Lord.

And that was for Israel. And so God instructs his people to regular the rest from work. I find it interesting when I went to China on several trips, but on the second trip I made an observation that I didn't, sometimes you just make observations and you didn't go looking for them, but you noticed something.

And I just noticed how hard the Chinese people work and skyscrapers continued to be built 70s a week, brick layers, concrete pores, construction, everything kept going seven days a week.

Office building lights would be on, people bustling about seven days a week without rest. And if you think about that being a culture that is foundational in communism, you think, well, communism begins with there is no God.

And if there is no God, you have no moral basis to give time off or anything like that. And so no wonder a culture may work like that anyway.

[14:57] So God instructs his people to regularly rest from work. Fifthly, all work is to be done for the glory of God and for the benefit of others.

So why do we work? We glorify God in it and we benefit others. Why is this, while this principle is in the Old Testament, is most clearly seen in the New Testament?

I love this verse in Habakkuk. We think this verse in Habakkuk says this, that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as waters cover the sea, that the earth someday will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.

And I think about Spokane, let's not go through the whole world, but is the gospel represented in the people who believe in Christ saturating Spokane?

Does the whole earth, while all Spokane will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, that there are believers saturating Spokane, working hard, proclaiming his name, that the knowledge of the glory of God would fill it as water covers the sea, that all things are to be done for the glory of God and for the benefit of others.

[16:24] That's why we work. Do we work in such a way that the preeminent value of God's character and actions are revealed in the way we work?

Is there a submission and obedience to the Lord? Is there worship and praise? We also work to please God, not man.

And we mirror our master as creator in our work. There is no such thing as menial or degrading or sword work. All work can glorify God, including eating and drinking, and all that we do glorifies God. I think about my eyeglasses. I need glasses to see. And I think about this is some rubber plastic thing, and I think about those who find oil in the ground and make a product.

I'm sure there are a lot of people who do very hard work to produce the things that make for these frames that I have. And then I don't know how you get sand and silica out of the ground to make glass.

[17 : 37] I don't fully understand that. So I have benefited by someone working hard. If we work to all things to the glory of God and for the benefit of others, there's probably a lot of people who would consider some of their jobs as menial work.

But I have benefited greatly for people in the oil industry and those who make glass. That's not menial work. Nothing.

Nothing is menial or degrading. All work can glorify God. All work can benefit others.

Thirdly, lastly, sixthly, on this point of work, this isn't a comprehensive theology of work, by the way, just a quick overshoot. But I do want to mention in the new heaven and newer, God's people will continue to work.

It says this in Revelation 22.3, No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city and the servants will serve him.

[18 : 44] The servants will serve him. This may come to a shock to Christians who perceive the eternal state as nothing more than baby cupids sitting on clouds shooting people with arrows or eating bonbons or something in total relaxation.

No, we serve the king. We serve him. Part of what makes...

But it's a stunning portrait of the eternal order that in that place God's people serve him. Part of what makes the New Testament, the new heaven and the new earth rather so beautiful is not the absence of work, but the absence of the curse that makes work difficult.

Can you imagine being able to serve the Lord without any hindrance of sin, any fatigue, any frailty, or anything else that hinders one's ability to serve the Lord?

I look forward to that day. So now we come to a definition of work, and perhaps I should have started here.

[19 : 56] One of the things I like about this definition of work is it doesn't limit us to our vocation. Some of you say, I can't keep a full-time job. I'm retired. I'm a stay-at-home mom.

I raise my children. Great! That's work. It's the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of God and for the benefit of others.

It's this gracious expression of creative energy this week. I had to communicate a complex scenario using an Excel spreadsheet and an email to articulate the Excel spreadsheet.

It took me time to do that. What I loved is trying to both create, and I had help from Shelley, our office manager, and my wife, who understands the calculations in Excel spreadsheets far better than I do.

I knew what I wanted, but they were helpful in putting it together. But I loved the creative energy in putting together an Excel spreadsheet that communicated the scenario well. Then I loved trying to put words to a page to communicate well the reality that this Excel spreadsheet was referencing.

[21 : 13] To send that email, it's work. What was I doing? It's the creative expression.

It's the gracious expression. Clarity is kindness. It's the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of God for the benefit of others. I don't know what you did this week.

I don't know what work is. I almost want to say this. It's what you do when you're not sleeping.

Because I don't want you to limit work to the idea that it's a vocation.

If your eyes are open, let's work. Then we come to the concept of diligence.

We have to understand what God has said about work to understand that which we were supposed to be diligent in. Keep in mind, diligence is not necessarily in reference to a vocation. Then you come to three Hebrew words that articulate the concept of diligence.

[22 : 30] That may be translated with the English word diligence from the Hebrew language into English. I want to take those three Hebrew words and to find facets of this word diligence of what is Proverbs talking about.

In other words, it's not necessarily, diligence responds promptly or promptly responds to accept a challenge. We see in this verse in Proverbs 22-29, do you see a man skillful in his work?

He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men. This word skillful is derived from a word that means to hasten, to quickly.

That's why I say to promptly respond. Diligence promptly responds to accept a challenge. It describes readiness. When I was a young man, I had worked by the age of 14.

I drove a harvester for a farmer. In the second year, when I was 15 years old, there was a discussion that rain is coming. If you know when you're a farmer, when you hear rain, it will shut down harvest and you can no longer harvest the wheat.

[23 : 39] There were six combines. He was a large farmer and it takes about an hour to fuel up all of those machines, to get all the machines greased, check the oils, get ready for the day before he can perhaps start harvesting for the day, half hour to an hour, to get all that done.

I remember my farmer, he said, tomorrow we have to take all six machines and we have to travel several miles that will take about an hour with the combines to get all of these six machines to that field over there.

We need to get started because rain is coming. I could hear the sense of urgency in this farmer's voice. No one without anyone telling me to do anything, without anyone saying anything.

I wasn't going to get paid to do this, but I just felt burdened for that farmer. I thought, we have got to get this field cut in one day. I woke up early, perhaps an hour and a half to two hours early.

I made my way to the field, I got the fuel truck, and I fueled up every machine. I started greasing every machine, checking the oil of every machine. By the time everyone showed up, everything was done.

[24 : 56] My farmer said, why did you do that? I had a sense of the urgency of the day, we need to get that field cut. I just thought I'd come out.

He said, you're not getting paid more. That wasn't the point. What's interesting is notice, there's a skillful person, a man.

There's some promptness, there's some quickness to eagerly hasten to challenge. That's what you do. That's what diligence does in a person. But notice the reward of that.

He will stand before kings. He will not stand before... So what was the result of that? My boss, after that year, he said, Scott, if you want to continue working, I'd love to invite you to help me clean out the machines after harvest is all done.

I spent several days after harvest was all done, blowing out all the machines, winterizing them, getting them ready for winter, parking them away. I never would have... I thought back.

[26 : 03] I don't think I would have been invited to do that had I not done. Because it was a few days later after that event. I didn't do that to get that promotion, if you will, to handsomely get paid to do menial work.

I loved that. And then the next year, he said, hey, if you want, not only can you help clean out the machines and things, I'd love to teach you how to disk a field.

Put you in a tractor before school starts, and I'd love to have your help if you're willing to. And I think about... I think back. My relationship with that employer, that farmer, changed.

After I fueled up those machines that early morning, everything changed after that. A diligent person responds promptly to accept a challenge.

And unless you think that I'm disillusioned by my own diligence, I have something else I'd like to share with you. This is my bathroom door that you'll find in my bathroom.

[27 : 11] It's a pocket door that goes into the wall, and when it's retracted. But when I pulled it about three months ago, I noticed that it's tight on the top, and there's a gap of an inch or two on the bottom of the door.

And so we have a housemate that stays with us, and it's into her bedroom. So when someone's going to the bathroom, they can see into her bedroom. When someone's on the bathroom, she can see into the bathroom. It makes this real awkward moment.

So I mentioned that because diligence is often contrasted in Scripture with a lazy person or a sluggard.

So now I want us to see the opposite of what a diligent person is. A sluggard starts a job and fails to finish it. In verse 19, it says, A sluggard buries his hand in a dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.

Can you imagine that? A sluggard, he puts his hand in the dish to aim to eat, but just can't seem to bring it back out of the dish to his mouth.

[28 : 20] Because a sluggard starts a job and he fails to finish it. And this week when I was preparing for this message, my pocket door in my bathroom came to my mind that has been there for three months in the same state.

And have I added it to a list of to-dos? No. Have I phoned a friend? Have I chosen a lifeline, like calling a friend, to get help? No.

Have I done any YouTube videos to figure out how to fix it? No. I'm being sincere. I'm deeply convicted by that. And I'm exhibiting more traits of a sluggard than one who is diligent.

So what do we do with this? I would ask, what is it? And remember, work is not a vocation.

Work is not your vocation alone, I should say. What is it that the Lord has put in front of you that you need to take action toward?

[29 : 27] And what is it that you have started that needs to be brought to fruition? Is there a conversation that needs to be had? Is there a task in front of you? Is there something at work that you have neglected?

What is it? May we be a diligent people? Secondly, the second aspect, one of those words in the Hebrew language that we get this word diligence from, is found in this verse. It says this.

So diligence also seeks early for good. And so this verse says in Proverbs 11, 27, says, whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor, but evil will come to him who searches for it.

This word here for diligently seeks good, it means to seek early. It has this concept of seeking early. But there's a failure to this in two ways.

But notice first, before I get to the failures, notice the one who is seeking will find what he's looking for. If you search for evil, you will find it.

[30 : 32] And if you diligently seek for good or do good, it will find you. It's the general principle, but there's a failure of this on twofold. First, a person can focus on the wrong things.

One of these persons says, but evil comes to him who searches for it. So you can look for the wrong things such as power or fame or convenience or popularity or fun.

It will lead you to ruin. And secondly, what's the other failure?

On the other hand, one may search for the right thing, but be unfocused in it. So this person is aimless. True diligence then focuses on that which is crucial.

True diligence focuses on that which is crucial. And in doing that, a person searches intently for what is good and he will find it. I was blessed to hear a testimony of someone in the church recently who made a meal for someone, brought it to someone in need, lingered to have conversation to a lonely person, and delighted in them, and blessed that family in multiple more ways that I won't describe.

[31 : 53] But I thought, but this was, this is the person who has their own life, who has children, has their own responsibility, has their own job, and that this person made time for that.

And there was some diligence in it and diligence in that she was seeking to do good very early on. I appreciate that.

Thirdly, another aspect of diligence and the last word I want to focus on here is found in this verse. The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.

So diligence acts decisively. This expression refers to something as sharp. The word here behind diligence refers to something sharp.

That's in contrast to hasty or impulsive. So the diligent person not only works hard, but they plan well as well. They make measured steps in the process to carefully implementing a strategy.

[32 : 59] The result is plenty. The diligent leads surely to abundance. And when you have abundance, what do you get to do? You get to share. You get to bless.

And those who plan poorly, so to speak, it comes to poverty. So this is then contrasted with some other words or some other acts decisively.

Concept is found in these two verses and then we'll get to some contrasting verses. The diligent act decisively. The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance. Sorry, the second one is what I wanted to focus on.

The slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. And this is contrasted with the slugged. The slugged postpones the task at hand.

How long will you lie there, oh slugged? The image is someone has a task at hand, but they know it. Everyone knows it, and so the author is asking, hey slugged, how long are you going to lie

there?

[34 : 08] And when will you rise 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.

No one expects to be robbed. No one expects an armed man to hold you up. No one expects this, and that unexpectedness is what will come to a man who is a slugger.

Poverty will come to that person. Little does this slugger know that he is inviting himself into a position of poverty by not being diligent.

The slugger also goes to ridiculous lengths to avoid work. There is a lion outside, and I shall be killed in the streets, says the slugger.

I can't go to work. I mean, Mount St. Helens might do its thing again. You just never know. And if you have worked with individuals, you have heard people who make all kinds of excuses.

[35 : 27] I will say a word to parents, a cute little excuse as to why they may not want to do their chore or homework or go to school at four or five years old.

It's not so cute when they're 35-year-old and married and have children and have much responsibility. I would give them incentive to stay at the task and be diligent, even though it's cute at four.

It's not so cute. Help them learn what diligence looks like.

And so when that person makes all kinds of excuses, the author writes, I pass by the field of a slugger by a vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was overgrown with thorns and ground had covered with nettles and stone walls were broken down.

So this person who is a slugger, who invites unintentionally poverty into their life, it's evident by some times the excuses they may make, and it's evidenced by this man who walks by this guy's property, the slugger's property.

[36 : 49] But keep in mind, I am not talking about vocation. I am not talking about vocation when I'm describing work and when I'm describing being diligent.

We need to work hard and be diligent at work, but we also need to be diligent when our eyes are open and we are not asleep. That everything in your day can bring glory to God and can bless others.

Do we go home and seek? I was convicted recently of Peter's verses about dwelling with one's wife with understanding.

Am I a student of my wife? Do I seek to dwell with her with understanding? Do I come home from work and I may diligently be at work, but do I also come home and am I diligent in the home with the responsibilities that I have as a husband or as a father that you may have?

Am I diligent in my relationships with my extended family, my relationship with friends? Am I diligent in my relationship with the Lord?

[38 : 12] Both in the ancient world and in contemporary society, diligence is rarely a rare virtue. So the diligent person stands out from the crowd. The counsel of Proverbs is clear.

I would say it this way, determined to be diligent. Determined to be diligent. Diligence motivates a person to move quickly, to accept challenges. Diligence focuses on that which is crucial.

It avoids that which is convenient at the present and then diligence grasps decisively opportunities that God provides.

Are you diligent? I am grateful that each of these attributes that we have been studying, these qualities of that which is wise, someone who is skilled at life and living, have their source in the Lord.

And so in conclusion, I want to say I am so grateful for the Lord for modeling diligence. Jesus did not stop at the Last Supper when he declared who would betray him.

[39 : 27] The Lord Jesus did not stop in the Garden of Gethsemane when the other disciples fell asleep and he wept sweats of drops of blood.

I am glad he did not stop in Caiaphas' house where he was falsely tried. I'm glad he didn't stop at Pilate when he was scourged and he was crowned with a crown of thorns.

And he was mocked. I'm glad he didn't stop carrying his cross to Golgotha being mocked and spat upon along the way. I'm glad he didn't stop. I'm glad he said, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

And I'm glad he finished his task to forgive sin by declaring it is finished.

A task worth starting is worth finishing. And I'm glad our Lord did that. Let us pray. Father, thank you so much for this day. Thank you for the privilege to look at your word, to see what you have to say about diligence.

[40 : 45] Lord, I pray that we would be a faithful people, wise unto you, that we would be diligent in our relationship with you, that we would be in step with your spirit in our relationship with you.

I pray that we would be diligent from the moment our eyes awake until we fall asleep. That we would be faithful for what you have given to us each and every day, whatever that may be.

Lord, forgive us for being lazy. Forgive us for being sluggards. For you have warned us the end of that. I thank you, Lord, that work is not just our vocation.

That we can do all things to glorify you and benefit others in all that we do. Thank you for this day to study your word and to sing that which is true of you. And we do that now. Amen.