

Preaching Christ from Proverbs

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Abstract

Most guidance for preaching Christ from the Old Testament focuses on narratives or prophetic books. This paper focuses on the specific challenges of preaching Christ from the proverbial literature of the Old Testament. It shows how to compare and contrast biblical wisdom with cultural wisdom (in both the wider culture and the Christian subculture). Since wisdom is often indirect law, it can function as other biblical law does: convicting us of sin and driving us to Christ, who is the wisdom of God and has thus lived with perfect wisdom in our place. It can also exhibit the third use of the law, which is as a guide to wise Christian behavior.

When we think about preaching Christ from the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs is not typically what first springs to mind. We usually think of narratives, like Moses nailing the bronze serpent to a pole in the wilderness (Num 21), or prophecies like the one in Isaiah 9:6: “To us a child is born, to us a son is given.”¹ Once in class when I made the point that I thought Christ can and should be preached from every part of the Scriptures, a student immediately shot up his hand. “You don’t really mean that we can preach Christ from *every* Scripture?” he said. I replied, “Yes, I do.” His next question was “What about Proverbs 26:11:

¹ Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version.

‘As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly?’” I repeated that Christ can certainly be preached from every Scripture and asked for a couple of days to think about that specific passage. Later that week, I gave him my outline. I really do believe that the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow are the central theme of the Scriptures and therefore must be the theme of all true Christian preaching (Luke 24:25–27).² If that is correct, it should be true every bit as much for wisdom literature as it is for narrative and prophecy.

All of this I learned as a seminary student. What I did not learn in seminary, however, was *how* to see Christ appropriately in the different genres of the Old Testament. Since those days, there has been much useful foundational material produced: Bryan Chapell’s *Christ-Centered Preaching* is a good primer,³ and Sidney Greidanus’s *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* is very helpful.⁴ Greidanus has gone further in producing materials that apply his method in practice to various Old Testament books.⁵ However, if you look at Greidanus’s *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, for example, it is quickly apparent that the seven categories for Christocentric interpretation that he developed in his earlier volume—redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast—do not all map equally comfortably onto wisdom texts. By its very nature, wisdom literature tends to be isolated from the flow of redemptive history (though the basic Old Testament–New Testament progression is, of course, important) and the category of promise-fulfillment is completely absent. Typology does not appear to be particularly relevant to the book of Proverbs, and there are few New Testament citations of the wisdom literature as a whole. It is not surprising, therefore, that we feel more comfortable preaching Christ from narratives and prophetic books than from wisdom literature.

² For a brief defense of this idea, see Iain Duguid, *Is Jesus in the Old Testament?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

³ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); *Preaching Christ from Daniel: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); and *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

I. *The Relevance of the Book of Proverbs*

Few parts of the Bible are as obviously relevant to the lives of ordinary people as wisdom literature. People are naturally interested in guidance on sexuality, wealth, relationships, parenting, suffering, guidance, and a host of other practical topics that the book of Proverbs addresses. This is where the rubber meets the road of real life for all of us. For evidence of that, you simply need to go down to the local bookstore (or Amazon.com). Among recent bestsellers, you will find *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life ... and Maybe the World*,⁶ *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*,⁷ and, my personal favorite title: *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*.⁸ The writers of these books are addressing the same issues as the collector of the biblical Proverbs. They are involved in the same process that we see in the book of Proverbs, a process of classification and analysis of the nature of the world in which we live, in order to teach others how to live “effectively”—whether at work, in their relationships, or in making sense of life.

The fundamental difference between many of these books and the Bible, of course, is that their counsel, their “wisdom,” flows from idolatry rather than from the fear of the Lord. Foundational to the book of Proverbs is the key verse, Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” This is the gateway through which you enter the book, the lens through which every statement in the book has to be viewed. Starting from that foundation, this book forms an intricate web of statements that together form an ordered worldview, or system of thinking, that we may call “biblical wisdom.” In many cases, however, the people in your congregations are not ordering their lives on the basis of biblical wisdom but rather on the basis of the conventional wisdom that showers them on all sides.

Now, of course, not all of that conventional wisdom is bad! There is a substantial overlap between biblical wisdom and the wisdom of the ancient Near East,⁹ and so too there is a natural overlap between contemporary

⁶ William H. McRaven, *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life ... and Maybe the World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2017).

⁷ The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, 2016).

⁸ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2013).

⁹ One hundred years ago, scholars often regarded Proverbs as being under the influence of Greek philosophy and therefore a very late stage in Israel's theological development. However, that changed significantly with the discovery and publication in 1923 of *The Teaching of Amenope*, an Egyptian wisdom document from the late twenty-first dynasty (1000–950 BC).

conventional wisdom and the Bible. Many of those bestsellers became popular because they have grasped, however imperfectly, some truth about the nature of the world in which we live. Of course, they have necessarily twisted that truth in order to remain non-Christians in a world that shouts the reality of the living God in their ears (Rom 1:19–24). But within limited areas, the wisdom of these gurus of self-help may be quite effective. In some ways, that simply makes their influence all the worse because they are usually selling people a more effective idolatry than anything they could construct on their own.

Because they are built on different foundations, there will often be significant differences between a biblical understanding of the nature of the world in which we live and that of the bestsellers. For that reason, we need to address these areas of conventional wisdom on the basis of biblical revelation. Conventional wisdom does not just bombard us in extended treatises from the bestseller list: it also constantly presents itself in proverb-like form on billboards and bumper stickers, and in poetic form in the popular songs on the radio and in movies.¹⁰ How better for your people to learn how to interact with the conventional wisdom that comes to expression in these forms than for them to be instructed from the pulpit? What more effective way of countering idolatrous proverbs than by teaching people how to understand and apply true biblical proverbs?

II. *Preaching Proverbs in Their Redemptive Historical Context*

But how to do we preach Proverbs? The first point to remember would be that even though wisdom makes relatively few references to its broader redemptive-historical context, it nonetheless comes to us in the context of a particular period of biblical history. Proverbs 3:9 (“Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine”) has a particular context within the Sinai covenant in which the tithe and firstfruits formed an obligation on Israel, as tenants of a land that belonged to God, to honor him with specific parts of their agricultural produce (see Deut 14:22–29;

Since that time, scholars have recognized that the book of Proverbs fits closely with the wider background of ancient Near Eastern wisdom, especially Egyptian parallels.

¹⁰ In addition to providing us with the book of Proverbs to critique conventional proverbial literature, God has provided us with the Song of Songs (“the Supreme Song”) to counter the erroneous views of love and marriage that we regularly encounter. On preaching Christ from the Song of Songs, see Iain Duguid, *Song of Songs*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

18:4). As a result, these obligations also came with promises of blessing and threats of curse (see Deut 28). Those blessings and curses do not operate in the same way under the new covenant, nor are we under exactly the same obligations as they were. Of course, many proverbs are of universal import, just as many of the laws of Sinai have universal significance as moral laws. However, we always need to understand biblical proverbs within the particular redemptive-historical context of the old covenant.

III. *Preaching Proverbs as Proverbs*

Second, we need to remember the nature of the genre of wisdom as a whole. Proverbs are proverbs, not promises or statements of absolute fact. For example, Proverbs 15:6, “In the house of the righteous there is much treasure, but trouble befalls the income of the wicked” sounds as if godliness is the most certain way to prosperity and success. Yet in a fallen world, wise behavior itself carries no guarantee of maximal “success.” Wise behavior is inevitably built on partial generalizations. It evaluates a range of the apparently unconnected experiences of life and generalizes them, forming principles of conduct from these experiences. It is wise to plan prudently for the future and to save rather than to trust your retirement to buying lottery tickets. Most people are more likely to prosper in that way. That does not mean that you will never meet people who have become rich through buying a lottery ticket. Wisdom deals with the ordinary, normal use of means rather than the unusual, unique distortions of circumstances. It provides you with an underlying analysis of the situation on which to make wise decisions. Wise behavior is still wise behavior, even when in a particular instance the outcome does not follow the regular pattern.

Moreover, what is wise behavior in one context is not necessarily wise behavior in another situation. That is why you can have entirely contradictory proverbs that are both true. For instance, within the biblical book of Proverbs there are two apparently contradictory proverbs side by side (Prov 26:4–5):

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Which is it? Should I answer the fool or not? It all depends. If I answer him, will I become embroiled in a useless controversy and so become like him? Or will I help him to see that he is not as smart as he thinks? It takes wisdom to know which proverb applies to a particular situation, and if you quote the

wrong proverb, it may encourage you in entirely the wrong direction. That is why only a few verses later we are warned that “like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a fool” (Prov 26:9). The fool does not know how to apply the proverb appropriately to a variety of situations, and therefore it becomes a thorn in his flesh rather than a helpful guide. Proverbs need to be understood within the context of their own genre.

IV. *Preaching Proverbs as Law*

It is worth noticing that, in general, wisdom literature will often fit under the broader category of “law” rather than “gospel.” The general motif of the book of Proverbs is “Do this and you shall live.” Sometimes the law aspect of wisdom is very clear, in the form of specific commands. Proverbs 14:7 says, “Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge,” while 16:3 commands, “Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.” Sometimes, wisdom gives you express “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” Many times, however, wisdom intends to shape your behavior more indirectly by illustrating what wise (or unwise) behavior looks like. So, the writer of Proverbs tells an example story about the foolish young man who goes wandering in the evening and is drawn into his destruction by the adulterous woman (Prov 7:6–27). You are invited to draw your own conclusions. At times, wisdom can be quite enigmatic. Proverbs 11:22 says, “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.” Yet even here, there is always some behavior or pattern of thinking that you are being led towards as you ponder this truth.

V. *Wisdom and Worldview*

Mention of patterns of thinking brings us to our third point, which is that wisdom literature functions as part of a system of wisdom, a worldview. It is not just about what you do; it is also about how you think. This is also true of the non-Christian wisdom literature on display all around us. “Proverb-like” statements in advertisements (“Around here, you have to love what you drive”), or on bumper stickers (“Attend the church or synagogue of your choice”) express a particular worldview as well as inviting a behavior that logically flows from it. In some situations in any given culture, biblical wisdom and conventional wisdom may be relatively closely aligned. At others, they will be sharply opposed. In different cultures, of course, the points of alignment and opposition will be different. In some cases, biblical

and conventional wisdom may argue for the same behavior for entirely different reasons.

Notice also that you also have to deal with conventional cultural wisdom at large and what we might call “conventional Christian wisdom.” Every subculture has its own characteristic ways of thinking, and Christian subcultures do not necessarily think biblically, or even alike. For example, when we lived in Oxford, England, it was always an interesting exercise in cultural dynamics to receive mission teams from a Presbyterian church in Jackson, Mississippi. To mix these brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom were well to the right politically, together with our Scottish friends, for whom to be a Christian is to be a socialist, inevitably led to some interesting discussions. Both sides needed to have their culturally absorbed presuppositions, which they thought “obviously Christian,” critiqued in the light of God’s Word. You can read the worldview of your Christian subculture in exactly the same way you read broader cultural worldviews: you see it in Christian bumper stickers and slogans, such as “Angels are watching over me” or “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” as well as through other ways in which our default patterns of thinking come to expression.

To put it another way, proverbs, both secular and biblical, work either by creating order or subverting it. They are beams and bombs: just as thick wooden beams support a house, some proverbs support the basic premises and cultural axioms that govern the behavior of a given group of people, while other proverbs are bombs designed to subvert it. “A woman without a man is like a fish without water” expresses the traditionalist cultural axiom that women are inherently dependent upon men. “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle” subverts that traditional order by asserting that not only are men not necessary for women to thrive, they are irrelevant and useless. In order to understand the import of a particular biblical proverb, we need to grasp whether it expresses and seeks to reinforce the existing cultural axioms of this group of Christians, or seeks to subvert them with a new dynamic. Likewise, does it express the existing cultural axioms of the society in which we live, or does it seek to subvert them?

Proverbs that align with the cultural axioms of both your church and your society—the beams—will primarily be directed at the next generation in your preaching, as you seek to pass on the same worldview to your children. The book of Proverbs is deeply concerned for the next generation: there is no easy assumption that of course our children will grow up to understand wisdom. On the contrary, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child” (Prov 22:15). That is why it is important to “train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6).

These “beam” proverbs—the one that fit apparently naturally with conventional wisdom both of your society and church—are the proverbs that seem so obvious when you read them as to be hardly worth bothering about. For example, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Prov 10:4). These proverbs create little resistance when they are preached; after all, everyone agrees with them, at least in theory.

VI. *Preaching Models*

One strategy for preaching these “beam” proverbs is “the roving spotlight model.”¹¹ Here we look for biblical or contemporary models of what this virtue or vice looks like in practice, so that we can get beyond generalities into the particulars in which wisdom consists. If “hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Prov 13:12), what are some biblical or contemporary examples of hope deferred or fulfilled? What are you hoping for? How does your hope shape your life, positively or negatively? How does your hope demonstrably fall short of that which Jesus calls us to and lives for us?

A second approach is the “sometimes, but not always” model. This model explores the limits of the applicability of the proverb, asking where and when it is appropriate for us to use this proverb and where and when it would not be appropriate. Thus Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” How might this proverb appropriately shape your marriage relationship, or be inappropriately used to encourage submission in an abusive situation? Is it ever right to be harsh with our words? If so, when? This approach can be combined with the previous one: sometimes biblical characters give us good examples to follow or bad ones to avoid. Jesus himself shows us that a soft answer is not always the right path to follow.

The “double take” model explores proverbs that seem too good to be true, for example, Proverbs 16:17: “The highway of the upright turns aside from evil; whoever guards his way preserves his life.” Of course, there are many situations where turning aside from evil endangers rather than preserves our lives, as the book of Daniel makes clear: Daniel and his friends endure the fiery furnace and the lion’s den for their faithfulness (see Dan 3; 6). So why does the proverb exist, if it is not true to our experience of life? The answer is that what you see in this life is not always what you get. There are deeper realities behind the visible, an eschatological order in which this

¹¹ The models in this section are drawn and adapted from Alyce McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

proverb is true, even where it does not match our present experience. Wisdom is a call to look to the unseen, not the seen, a call to faith: being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (cf. Heb 11:1). Wise behavior views the experiences of this world in light of eternity, not from the perspective of maximizing short-term pleasure.

Proverbs that express the cultural axioms of our church but are at variance with society at large call for a different approach. People first of all need to see the conflict between the two modes of thinking, which is often best achieved through a “dueling proverbs” approach, where the biblical proverb is placed side by side a contemporary proverb that expresses the opposite, such as “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:25) versus “He who dies with the most toys wins.” These proverbs can be preached in a way that either challenges or advocates for our hearers. They challenge those (Christians or unbelievers) who have consciously or unconsciously adopted the worldview of contemporary culture rather than a biblical worldview. At the same time, they support believers who are feeling marginalized in society by showing them that their way of thinking, although despised by the world, is supported by a higher authority.

Proverbs that subvert the cultural axioms of the people in your church are the ones that will provoke the most resistance among your hearers. Here, like Jesus, you will be saying something like “You have heard that it was said But I say to you”—except, of course, you will be appealing not to your own authority but to a more accurate understanding of biblical teaching. Thus, you might preach on “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Matt 20:26–27) and challenge the hierarchical view of power that predominates in some of our churches.

VII. *Moralistic versus Christ-Centered Preaching*

With all of these models, the more clearly you explain and illustrate what true biblical wisdom looks like, the more people should feel exposed and condemned. Like all biblical law, there is a gap between our theory and our practice. The things that we know we should do, we do not, while the things that we know we should not do, we find ourselves doing. It is at this point that the difference between moralistic and Christ-centered preaching will emerge clearly.

Moralistic preaching takes two forms: either it *denies* the gospel altogether and affirms that our good behavior is enough to please God or, more

commonly in evangelical and Reformed churches, it *assumes* the gospel and focuses entirely on the law as a guide to the life of the believer. So, a moralistic sermon on Proverbs 10:4 (“A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich”) might say, “You people need to stop being so lazy; get busy for Jesus and then our church will prosper. ... And by the way, there are sign-up sheets for the nursery and the evangelism program on the back table.” Such a sermon will tend to leave people either feeling proud that they are keeping the law, or guilty about their many failures. Instead of guilt, grace, and gratitude, the structure of the moralist’s catechism tends to be guilt, guilt and more guilt.

Christ-centered preaching, however, does justice to the legal aspect of the law’s demands within a guilt-grace-gratitude structure. It is true that many of us should feel appropriately guilty about the unbelief that finds expression in our self-centered and self-protective laziness. Our actions (or lack of them) reveal something that is true and significant about our hearts and our beliefs. Yet often our most diligent activity also reveals something equally toxic about our worldview. When we diligently serve, are we obeying out of the fear of the Lord and love for our neighbor, or is our frantic busyness actually equally rooted in our idolatry? Perhaps we need to feel every bit as guilty about the aspects of the law that we find ourselves keeping as we do about the ones we are so obviously breaking.

There is nothing wrong with guilt *per se*. Any serious consideration of God’s holy law ought to condemn us as sinners. The key is what happens next. Guilt that leaves us paralyzed and turned in on ourselves and our own efforts is a problem. Guilt is supposed to drive us to Christ and call us to the grace that he offers us in the gospel. How does this proverb show us even more clearly our desperate need of Christ? How did Christ not only exemplify this virtue or avoid this vice, but do so in our place? How was he properly diligent? What specifically did that look like? How is his diligence different from our best diligence, and how is it good news for those of us who are so often undiligent? Here we are thinking not just about the passive obedience of Christ but his active obedience as well—not just his death that paid the penalty for my sins but his lifelong obedience that clothes me with precisely the righteousness that I need.

VIII. The Law as a Blessing

Having been brought to see my need of grace (“guilt”), and the grace that is mine in Christ, I am now prepared to move on to the aspect of “gratitude” and see the positive role of the law as a blessing in the life of the believer.

The law is not merely intended to crush my pride; it is also to be a lamp to my feet. Like God's old covenant people, Christians are also supposed to be strangers and aliens in this world, distinct and different from those around us (see 1 Pet 2:11). The Old Testament scholar Daniel Block recounts the story of a time when his family was engaged in a rather heated discussion around the dinner table, during which his teenage son burst out, "Why do I have to live in such a prehistoric family?" He comments, "While his motives left something to be desired, I took this as a compliment: at least he recognized that our household was run by counter-cultural norms."¹² Exactly!

IX. *Returning to the Gospel*

However, even having started with the gospel, there is still a real danger that if I end with a focus on the law, my hearers may confuse their Christian obedience with their Christian identity. In other words, they may think that they are Christians because they do Christian things, not that they are called to do Christian things because they are Christians. Because the law is written on our hearts, while the gospel is alien to us, it is so easy for us to find our functional acceptance before God in our performance. As a result, we often feel more justified if we are more obedient, and vice versa. Because of this, I often find it desirable to return in the conclusion of the sermon to the fact that the gospel is still true even when I do not live out its implications for wise living. God's love for me is never dependent upon how good a week I have had, or will have; instead, my standing before the Father is constantly dependent upon Christ's perfect, finished righteousness, not on any flawed and failing righteousness to which I can attain.

In other words, I do not start the Christian life as a sinner and then gradually progress through hard work and cooperating with grace to being a justified saint. I am always *simul justus et peccator*—at the very same time a desperately wicked sinner throughout my life, yet equally a fully justified and beloved saint. Any ways in which I begin to keep the law—as expressed in the book of Proverbs—are only the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in my life, as is my ability to repent of even one of my many daily sins. God's grace is sufficient for me in my weakest and darkest and least diligent hours, as well as in those few minutes when I may feel like an obedient follower of Christ.

¹² Daniel I. Block, "Preaching Old Testament Law to New Testament Christians," *Hipphil* 3 (2006); online: <http://www.sec-j.net/hiphil/ojs-2.3.3-3/index.php/hiphil/article/view/27>.

X. The Sluggard (Prov 6:6-11; 26:13-16)

In this case, I have combined a couple of passages that both deal with a single issue: the lazy sluggard. The only direct command in either passage is the instruction to consider and be wise. The rest is purely descriptive, but that description wants to shape your behavior so that you become wise and *not* like the sluggard. As soon as you read the passage, some people in your congregation will identify with the sluggard, while others will be like the Pharisee in the temple in Luke 18, saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like this sluggard.” Your task is to speak to *both* groups and show how their wisdom falls short of biblical wisdom about work and leisure.

To begin with, though, what is a sluggard? Derek Kidner identifies four features of someone who is a sluggard.¹³ First, a sluggard is someone who will not begin things. The questions, “How long will you lie there?” and “When will you arise from your sleep?” have no answer except “Not yet.” A sluggard is in no rush to do things. Just a little longer. “A little [more] sleep, a little [more] slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest” (Prov 6:10). Second, a sluggard is someone who will not finish things. If he does by some chance or force of necessity actually get going on a project, it comes to nothing in the end. In the graphic image of chapter 26, he puts his hand in the dish, but he is too lazy to bring his hand to his own mouth (v. 15). Third, a sluggard is a person who will not face things. He has plenty of excuses to justify his lack of action: there may be a lion out there on the streets of the city (v. 13).¹⁴ Better to stay inside, therefore. The result of all of these things the fourth feature of the sluggard: he is a person who is restless and unproductive. He tosses and turns in his bed like a door banging in the breeze (v. 14). His field is overgrown with weeds; his vineyard filled with nettles; the wall that would protect it from marauding animals broken down. Poverty comes upon him like a bandit. Kidner concludes,

The wise man will learn while there is time. He knows that the sluggard is no freak, but, as often as not, an ordinary man who has made too many excuses, too many refusals and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible, and as pleasant, as falling asleep.”¹⁵

It seems to me that conventional wisdom in our society generally divides sluggards into two groups: rich sluggards and poor sluggards. Rich sluggards

¹³ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964) 42–43.

¹⁴ There were lions in ancient Judah, just as there are bears in many North American states. But your chances of meeting one on your daily business were equally slim.

¹⁵ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 43.

float around the Caribbean in their yachts or retire to their country club homes next to the golf course. Poor sluggards sit on their doorsteps in the inner-city ghettos, living on welfare. Conventional wisdom regards poor sluggards as a problem: we need to *do* something about poor sluggards, because otherwise they will get into drugs, crime, or rioting and make a nuisance of themselves. Yet conventional wisdom rather envies the position of rich sluggards. Many people spend their whole lives slaving away at jobs with the career goal of retiring so that they can become such sluggards. Biblically, there is no difference between rich sluggards and poor sluggards: both are living worthless, empty lives.

It is not coincidental that fear is a central feature of the life of the sluggard. Fear often makes us reluctant to start things and slow to finish what we have started. For some, it is the fear of failure. If your idol is success, then to fail means your idol will curse you and call you worthless. To avoid that painful feeling, we may decide that it is better not even to start something. Or if we leave it half done, we can still believe we would have succeeded if we had finished, so we have not really failed. Alternatively, we may be driven by the fear of what others think of us. If we do something, we may offend someone; not doing anything means not offending people. Still, others may have an unspoken fear of what God thinks of us. We feel God is perpetually disappointed with us, so to avoid having to face up to that painful feeling, we hide in doing a thousand meaningless things that distract us from our feelings. It is not always mere laziness that makes us sluggards: often there is a way in which that behavior makes sense to us in terms of our desires and our idolatries. That is why we persist in it, even when its negative fruit in our lives is so clear and painful.

At this point, even while some are feeling convicted that they are sluggards, others may be feeling a little smug. No one in their right mind would ever accuse *you* of being a sluggard. You are the kind of man or woman who puts the busy ant to shame with your constant doing. You are not a sluggard, but an overachiever. Yet the very same fears and avoidance strategies that make some of us sluggards make others overachievers. Our behavior may be completely opposite, but our heart struggles are identical.

For example, some are driven by a success work ethic. We believe that if we are highly successful in our work, then our life is worthwhile. What we most fear is being useless. If that is our idol, every day we have to justify our existence and prove to ourselves that we are worthy of our breath by the things we do. This idolatry is tailor made to make a fear-driven overachiever out of you, as long as you are able to keep up with your idols' demands. Kids who struggle with this idolatry tend to perform well in academics and

sports. Adults are very committed to their careers or to raising a successful family. All of these are good things, but underneath it all is the engine of our idolatrous fear.

This idolatry is a particularly potent temptation for those of us with jobs in ministry because, after all, we are on a mission for God. As a result, it is easy for us to think that our value as people hangs on what we do for God. We may feel wonderful when our ministry is growing and going well, and inordinately depressed and frustrated if it shrinks or no one seems appreciative of our labors. But our elation or depression has nothing to do with God's approval and everything to do with whether our success idol is smiling on us or not.

What happens when all of that relentless effort does not lead to success, though? Perhaps you get to college and discover that many other people are smarter than you and better at sports, or music, or whatever you previously excelled in. Perhaps you get passed over for a promotion in your career or laid off, or health prevents you from being able to work. Perhaps your ministry gets little response, or you are criticized in spite of your hard work. Then your idol starts to curse you, telling you that you are a worthless person; that can easily begin a spiral down into the sluggard's path, as we seek to escape our idol's curses. We become discouraged and bitter, apathetic and lazy. Notice that our hearts are no different when we are active and prosperous than when we are sluggardly and slothful. The only difference is in our external circumstances: as long as we thought we could satisfy our idol we were overachievers, but when we become discouraged idolaters, we turn into sluggards.

In general, we may say that sluggards are often frustrated idolaters, while workaholics tend to be more successful idolaters. But the reality for all of us, whichever temptation we face, is that a fundamental fear of our idols drives us. That is why the remedy for our malady is not simply an admonition to just work harder. Working harder is not the goal. The goal is a balanced biblical understanding of work and rest that is rooted in the fear of the Lord rather than the fear of our idols. That is no surprise, of course, since "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7).

Why are we to work hard instead of dribbling our lives away in a life spent in "littles"? In the first place, we work because we serve a hardworking God. In the very beginning, God worked. Six days he labored in creating the universe. What is more, this God created us to work as he does. He made us in his image, and he placed man in the garden of Eden, a garden without weeds, to work it and keep it. It is not that there was no rest in the garden of Eden; on the contrary, they experienced delightful encounters with God

day after day, and a Sabbath on the seventh day. Yet paradise, as it was originally created, was not to be a place of eternal leisure.

But the fall came, and work has been forever affected. It is affected on the one hand by all the frustrating intrusions of chaos that now make work such a hassle. It is the fall that fills our lives with endless meaningless tasks that are never done. It is the fall that introduced the conflicts in relationships that so often cause chaos and pain in our work. It is the often frustrating and miserable nature of work—whether your work is regular employment, parenthood, being a student, or ministry—that explains the temptation to become a sluggard and check out of reality. Life is full of challenges, brokenness, and failure. Why not escape from all of that through laziness, sleep, or some other diversion? How do we resist that temptation without on the other hand becoming driven workaholics who do not know when to stop?

The answer is to fear the Lord. The fear of the Lord means remembering that my work is not first and foremost about me. My work is not who I am; it does not define me, nor is it primarily about my enjoyment, satisfaction, fulfillment, or success. Rather, I am called to work hard to glorify God and to serve those around me. If I fear the Lord, however, I will recognize that the frustrations of work are also a gift of God, an opportunity to glorify him and serve others. How would I grow in submissive patience and grace without trials and failures at work? When I fail at my work, my heart is exposed. If I respond with patience and grace, the world sees the gospel at work in my heart through the power of the Spirit. If I respond with anger and frustration, as I so often do, I come to recognize more clearly the grip that the idol of success still has upon me, which may cause me to treasure the gospel of God's enduring love to me all the more. It is not just when work is going well, when your gifts are being used, and when you are being respected and successful that you can feel God's pleasure. In the midst of intense frustrations and hassles, in work, or relationships, or ministry, you can give glory to God as you do it all for him.

We not only serve a hardworking God, but we also serve a resting God. On the seventh day, God rested, not because he was tired from creating the universe, but to set a pattern for us in our labor. He wanted to teach us that our work is a temporary reality, part of this world order, not for eternity. No matter how important or unimportant your work here and now is, you will not take it with you on that last journey. We do not have to work the garden and keep it in the new Jerusalem.

Even now, God gives us a foretaste of that final rest in the Sabbath, a rest which we celebrate each Sunday. Sunday by Sunday we are called to share in a rest that is re-creational in the fullest sense of that word. You have a

whole day given to you so that you can fill it with new creation blessings. You have an entire day in which you may fellowship with God and ponder his greatness. You have a day in which you can take the time to reorient your life in line with the values of eternity, putting aside the claims of your idols and seeing yourself in light of God's evaluation of who you are. Of course, an hour and a half in church on Sunday morning can never be enough "eternity time" to see you through the week. How can you cram your whole life of knowing and worshiping an infinite God and fellowshiping with his people into such a short span? That is why we seek out other opportunities during the week to study the Scriptures together and fellowship with one another.

Fearing God and living in light of eternity challenges both the sluggard and the workaholic. It shows us how we have all loved and feared the wrong things in our hearts, even though our outward behavior may demonstrate that in a variety of different ways. So where is there hope for people like us, who have neither worked as we ought, nor rested as we ought? I have not labored properly during the six days given to me to glorify God through my work, nor have I rested as I ought on my Sabbaths, and neither have you. Our hope rests in the one who left his seat at his Father's side to come down and labor perfectly in my place. Jesus was not merely beamed down to the cross to suffer in your place. He came first to live and labor as a carpenter perfectly in our place, neither lazily rocking his life away in a comfortable chair, nor overworking and placing his value in his carpentry. His faithful labor is credited to my account as if it were my own. His perfectly punched timecard now bears my name! Yet Jesus also rested perfectly. In the midst of a world-changing mission for God, he found the time regularly to retreat and to rest, spending his rest time not on trivial activities but fellowshiping with the disciples and with his heavenly Father. Jesus has now ascended into heaven and entered his heavenly rest. Because he rests there, so I too will rest, for I am united to him by faith.

If you are not a Christian, Jesus invites you to come and lay down the fears that are making you so burdened. You may be responding to those fears by laziness or overwork, but either way Jesus Christ invites you to come and lay down your heavy burden of laboring to win God's favor, to earn respect and justify your existence by your own efforts; come and enter the rest that he freely offers to all those who trust in him, resting in his work on your behalf.

Christian, Jesus invites you too to lay down the burdens and fears that make you a sluggard or a workaholic as well and to enter his true and perfect rest. We all face the same temptations, sluggard and overachiever alike. Entering his rest will not make you a sluggard; far from it, he invites you to

take up a new yoke, the yoke of serving him (cf. Matt 11:28–30). But equally, entering his rest will not make you a driven “doer,” for his yoke is light and his burden easy. His yoke is easy because God has already prepared in advance the good works that he has for you to do (Eph 2:10). He has prepared both work for you to do and rest for you to enjoy in this world. And he will give you the strength by his Spirit to do every good work that he has prepared for you without growing faint or burning out. What is more, one day he will welcome you into your eternal rest, not because you have tried really hard and done well enough to earn it, but because Jesus Christ has worked and rested perfectly in your place. Jesus thus became the true savior of lazy sluggards and driven doers alike, who by faith come to find in him true rest for their souls. Come today and receive that rest.