

The Sluggard and Covenant Faithfulness: Understanding the Nature of True Virtue and the Call to Industry in Proverbs

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The purpose of this paper is to postulate that within the book of Proverbs the call to the sluggard to work is not merely a call to industry, but to covenant faithfulness. I will demonstrate this through three points. First, I will demonstrate that the book of Proverbs is to be read through the lens of the Torah. Though different in genre, wisdom literature serves as an illustration of life lived according to the commandments of Yahweh. Such a reading of the Proverbs as a whole shatters the contemporary emphasis upon categorizing individual proverbs into sacred and secular categories by understanding the so-called “secular” proverbs as necessary explications of the Torah. Second, I will show that New Testament (NT) evidence corroborates this understanding by insisting that work is considered ethically virtuous only when it proceeds forth from faith. This

NT emphasis continues the theme that the Scriptures are interested not just in excellence in execution but upon a restored covenantal relationship with the Lord. Third, I will argue that a desire to glorify God is a requisite presupposition for human industry and work to be considered genuinely morally laudable. The Framinan discussion of “civic righteousness” helpfully gives grounds to understand the work of unbelievers as socially beneficial but morally bankrupt in an ultimate sense. Throughout this paper “industry” and “work” are used interchangeably to denote human labor and effort, whether vocational or otherwise. Similarly, “virtue,” “ethical,” and their variants are used synonymously to designate work and industry that is considered morally acceptable by God.

The Relationship between Proverbs and the Torah

The relationship between wisdom literature and the other elements of the Old Testament (OT) is substantially debated. James Hamilton asserts that “Proverbs serves as an exposition of the Ten Commandments. Solomon is teaching the Torah to his son and, by extension, to his people.”¹ John J. Collins posits the exact opposite understanding:

Later Jewish tradition would identify the way of Wisdom with obedience to the Torah. There is nothing to indicate, however, that this identification was implied in Proverbs. There is overlap between the commandments of wisdom and those of the Torah, but there is nothing here to correspond to the ritual Torah or the more distinctively Israelite commandments.²

The distinction between exposition and overlap is hermeneutically significant. If the Proverbs are written without reference to the Torah, then the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people is not fundamentally necessary for obedience to the Proverbs. If, however, Proverbs functions as an extended explication of Torah, then genuine obedience toward each individual proverb requires a reconciled covenantal relationship *a priori*. The mere performance of the ethical commands would not constitute obedience, for the motive behind performing the action is an implicit requirement of the command itself by virtue of canonical connections.

There is a tendency within certain corners of scholarship to subdivide individual proverbs into “secular” and “religious” categories. Michael V. Fox provides an example of these two variants. Proverbs 13:14a stands as a “secular” proverb with its instruction being “The teaching of a wise man is a fount of life.” Conversely, Proverbs 14:27a falls in the “religious” category by virtue of a slightly different formulation: “The fear of Yahweh is a fount of life.”³ Fundamental to Fox’s assertion is the assumption that “the fear of Yahweh” is not essential for one to be a “wise man” within the Proverbs’ internal assessment.⁴

The strongest argument for reading the Proverbs as being distinct from the Torah comes from the Proverbs’ lack of interaction with the major biblical-theological arc. Graeme Goldsworthy writes, “For many biblical theologians the wisdom literature has presented certain difficulties because its authors display little interest in the main biblical themes of covenant and salvation-history.”⁵ Indeed, the book of Proverbs displays only the most cursory references to the entire form of worship set forth in the Torah or in the national history of the people of Israel. Likewise, there is no mention of Israel’s national identity or history. The only internal references that particularly set forth the book of Proverbs as being connected to the national life of Israel are the Solomonic subscription and the 88 references to Yahweh placed at intervals throughout the text.⁶

Some scholars see these 88 references as an attempt to transform otherwise universally applicable material to being exclusive to the worship of Yahweh.⁷ Such assertions are typically derived from the belief that the material contained therein is extensively drawn from Egyptian and Assyrian sources and is not Solomonic in origin. The similarity of pagan literature in genre and form to the biblical text does not necessarily demonstrate dependence or appropriation, however. Derek Kidner helpfully discusses how the existence of extra-biblical proverbs merely situates the book of Proverbs as writing done in a culturally-appropriate, contextually-relevant genre.⁸ The uniqueness of biblical content does not depend upon a uniqueness of genre and form, but upon the orientation of the material with eyes towards a covenantal relationship to Yahweh.

When the internal testimony of the book of Proverbs is taken at face value and not reinterpreted as the handiwork of a much-later editor, the connection between Proverbs and the Torah is certainly visible.⁹

The attribution of the book to “Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (Prov 1:1) locates the material within the kingly courts of the nation of Israel. If Solomonic authorship is taken seriously, the Proverbs must be understood within the context of Solomon’s plea for wisdom in 1 Kings 3:5-9. Twelve times during this exchange Solomon specifically references Yahweh’s relationship to people: four times towards David, three times towards himself, and five times towards the nation as a whole. These references are covenantal in nature, as Solomon invokes the promise from Yahweh to David for a descendent upon the throne, the selection of Israel for a special relationship with Yahweh, and Solomon’s subservience to Yahweh as ultimate ruler of the Israelite people.

The use of the tetragrammaton likewise strengthens the understanding of Proverbs as a covenantal book. Solomon pervasively uses the name of Israel’s covenant God, revealed to Moses at the burning bush and further elucidated on Mount Sinai. R. B. Y. Scott helpfully identifies that even though the majority of the individual proverbs “make no direct appeal to the authority of a revealed religion ... their occasional exhortations to piety toward Yahweh presuppose an accepted belief.”¹⁰ The use of the tetragrammaton imports Yahweh’s prior self-disclosure through the Torah into the text of the Proverbs. Goldsworthy helpfully summarizes, “The idea that the wise men of Israel had no understanding of the covenant simply does not stack up with the evidence.”¹¹

Fourteen times the phrase “the fear of Yahweh” is used throughout the text, sharpening the gaze of Proverbs from mere general reference to Yahweh’s character to a particular relational posture before Yahweh. Waltke states, “To fear [Yahweh] means essentially to submit to his revealed will, whether through Moses or Solomon. Each in his own way seeks to establish the rule of Israel’s covenant-keeping God. Moreover, the theology of proverbs compliments the unified theology of Moses and the prophets.”^{12,13}

Of great importance to this study is not merely the covenantal cohesion between Proverbs and the remaining OT corpus, but rather the understanding that the Proverbs contain within them the understanding that all ethical action requires *a priori* a covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Put another way, Proverbs does not leave room for human action to be genuinely moral when it is performed outside of a covenant

relationship with Yahweh.

To this point, Proverbs 1:7 is widely recognized as being the textual gatekeeper for the remainder of the book. Solomon holds that to possess ultimate wisdom, one must stand in submission to his revealed will, namely through the Torah and other Scriptures. The Proverbs are written to make the foolish wise (1:1-6), however, the mere reading and application of the principles found in individual proverbs does not automatically confer wisdom upon the reader. Rather, the fear of Yahweh is seen as being necessarily prerequisite for the book to accomplish its stated purpose. Waltke again is helpful, “What the alphabet is to reading, notes to reading music, and numerals to mathematics, the fear of the LORD is to attaining the revealed knowledge of this book.”¹⁴

Consequently, when the Proverbs calls a sluggard to abandon sloth and be industrious, it does so with the assumption that genuinely virtuous industry can only exist within the framework of a restored covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The sluggard is wise in his own eyes (26:16). Being wise in one’s own eyes renders a person more hopeless than a fool (26:12), and the fool is one who mocks the covenant rituals of the people of Israel (14:9). In short, the sluggard has breached the covenant and it is not mere industry that is required of him, but repentance and restoral.¹⁵

Virtue and Industry in the NT

The NT continues the theme of covenant faithfulness being an *a priori* condition for work to be considered genuinely virtuous. Such continuity is not surprising given the moral consistency between the two halves of the Scriptures. This section will analyze the teaching of the NT that elucidates faith in Christ as requisite for human industry being considered virtuous.

Interestingly enough, much of the NT’s teaching on the connection of faith and virtue sits within the context of ritualistic food laws. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate as to the reason for this consistent context; however, it is instructive to note that such a context provides an excellent setting for exploring virtue in connection with human activity.

1 Corinthians 10:23-33 is a discourse on the proper NT understanding of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul insists throughout the section that an individual’s personal desire should not be the controlling impulse of

his heart.¹⁶ Verse 31 serves as Paul's capstone teaching on the issue – "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." "Whatever you do" extends the broader principle of action mindful towards God's glory beyond the immediate context of eating and drinking. Ciampa and Rosner helpfully comment, "[Believers'] overriding concern should not be with the exercise of their own rights and freedom or desires but with the potential implications for God's honor and glory."¹⁷ Hodge likewise sees a broader principle expressed, "God cannot be glorified by our conduct unless it be our object to act for his glory ... It is by thus having the desire to promote the glory of God as the governing motive of our lives, that order and harmony are introduced into all our actions."¹⁸ Paul's charge to the Corinthian believers regarding food and drink customs therefore serves as an explication of the required aim of all of life for the believer. The sum purpose of our existence is to bring honor and glory to God.

Romans 14:23 further details the connection between faith and virtue within the Christian ethic. Writing to the Roman church on the topic of food laws in the broader section of 14:13-23, Paul declares that "[W]hatever does not proceed from faith is sin." As in 1 Corinthians 10:31 this statement serves as a universal principle that Paul then applies to the particular situation at hand. Put another way, Paul declares that because whatever is not from faith is sin (universal), therefore eating in a way that compromises conscience is sin (particular). Hendrickson acknowledges, "[W]hatever thought, word, action, etc. does not spring from the inner conviction that it is in harmony with a person's faith in God ... is sin."¹⁹

These two passages clearly delineate the boundaries of Christian virtue. If action is performed from some fountainhead other than faith, the sum total of that action is sin. Bridges helpfully articulates, "Men of the world have themselves for the end of their actions. Philosophers tell us to make the good of others the end; and thus destroy the sentiment of religion, by margining it into philanthropy or benevolence. The Bible tells us to make the glory of God the end."²⁰

The Scriptures are replete with examples of otherwise laudable action that is tainted by being performed for the wrong end. Ananias and Saphira gave generously to the work of the church, but their gifts were for a self-serving purpose (Acts 5:1-11). Simon the magician believed Philip's

preaching and became his disciple, yet his desire to purchase the power to bestow the Holy Spirit was met with a stern call to repent (Acts 8:9-24). Paul mentions proclaimers of the gospel who preach with wrong motives during his imprisonment, calling their ministry insincere (Phil 1:15-17).

In sum, NT evidence clearly demonstrates that all things must be done from a heart of faith towards the demonstration of God's majesty in order to be genuinely virtuous. The unbeliever's actions fail on both counts. He is incapable of the faith required for his actions to be considered not sinful. And secondly, he does not perform his actions to the glory of the God but rather stands in unsubmitive opposition to him. Consequently, a restored covenantal relationship stands prerequisite for work and industry to be considered virtuous.²¹ The declaration in Romans 8:8 serves as both an overarching summary of mankind's ultimate state before God, but also of the individual actions that comprise his life: "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

Civic Righteousness and Genuine Virtue

Having demonstrated that the book of Proverbs is to be read as an explication of the Torah and that the NT further advances the idea that covenant faithfulness is required for work and industry to be considered obedience to God's revealed order, we shall now turn to the last assertion of this paper. It is the purpose of this section to demonstrate that a desire to glorify God is a requisite aim for human industry and work to be considered genuinely morally laudable. Such an assertion does not negate acknowledging that work done by those at enmity with God is valuable and has been used by God to mitigate human suffering and advance the comfort of human life. However, the work of unbelievers ultimately is of no absolute moral value due to its improper aim.

John Frame addresses the matter of virtue in his magisterial *Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Citing Romans 8:8 he notes a seeming contradiction,

Apart from grace, none of us can do anything good in the sight of God. Yet all around us we see non-Christians who seem to be doing good works: they love their families, work hard at their jobs, contribute to the needs of the poor, and show kindness to their neighbors. It seems that these people are virtuous apart from Christ.²²

This question of the “virtuous pagan” has been a consistent point of contention for those who would seek to deny the doctrine of total human depravity. A uniquely Christian ethic may be gestured to in matters of spirituality and religious duties, but the topic of work and industry presents a more difficult challenge to the idea that the Christian worldview necessarily creates a different product than competing ideologies. Keller notes, “[M]uch work that Christians do is not done, at least not in its visible form, any differently from the way non-Christians do it.”²³

Harry Emerson Fosdick recounts an exchange with a set of parents within his congregation who were concerned for their son’s infatuation with literature to the exclusion of all things Christian. Fosdick calmed their fears by assuring them that if their child served to have so great an influence on humanity as Longfellow, they would have raised an exceptional boy who stood as the best kind of individual regardless of his spiritual inclinations.²⁴ This kind of thinking is unsurprising from a leading liberal intellectual such as Fosdick who expressly denied the doctrine of original sin.

Frame helpfully categorizes the work of unbelievers that contributes to the “betterment of society” as “civic righteousness.” The Westminster Confession details this category more fully:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful and cannot please God.²⁵

In order for any activity or action to be considered genuinely virtuous, three elements must always be present: (1) a heart purified by faith, (2) obedience to God’s word, and (3) the right end, namely the glory of God.²⁶

These three elements can be clearly seen in the above exegesis of NT passages regarding faith as prerequisite for pleasing God. Likewise, the theological presuppositions of the book of Proverbs make clear its implicit understanding that its aim for the sluggard is right action motivated by right motive. Returning to Fosdick’s young man, writing

poetry to the scope of *Evangeline* or *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* serves the good of mankind and constitutes civic righteousness.²⁷ However, Fosdick's insistence that acts still could be virtuous without reference to a covenantal relationship with Christ illustrates a failure to understand the Siniatic presuppositions of the book of Proverbs and the expanded teaching on ethics in the NT.

Building upon the work of Van Til,²⁸ Frame again helpfully connects the importance of covenant and virtue:

Right motive corresponds to the lordship attribute of covenant presence, for it is God's Spirit dwelling in us who places faith and love in our hearts. Right standard corresponds to God's lordship attribute of authority. And right goal corresponds to the lordship attribute of control, or it is God's creation and providence that determine what acts will and will not lead to God's glory. God determines the consequence of our actions, and he determines which actions lead to our *summum bonum*.²⁹

Every ethical action will have as its cornerstone presupposition that Christ is Lord over the universe, has been granted all authority (Matt 18:28), and therefore every has every right to be considered the motivation and the object for which every act is performed (1 Cor 10:31).

Jonathan Edwards further details the necessity of love of God for any act to be considered virtuous in his *A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue*. According to Edwards, "All true virtue must radically and essentially . . . and summarily consist in [supreme love to God]."³⁰ Indeed, "love to God is most essential to true virtue; and no benevolence whatsoever to other beings can be of the nature of true virtue without it."³¹ Fundamental to understanding biblical teaching on work and industry is its insistence that the end of work and industry is of critical importance to the ethical value of the work being conducted. Keller expounds, "As an extension of God's creative work, the Christian's labor has its orientation toward God himself, and we must ask how it can be done... for his glory."^{32,33}

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that within the Proverbs the call to the sluggard is not a call to mere industry but to covenant faithfulness. This task has been undertaken in three ways. First, it has been demonstrated that the book of Proverbs expects to be read within the context of the Mosaic Law. As such the injunction to work contains an implicit understanding that work is an expression of loving God and loving neighbor as required by the law. Second, it has been demonstrated that the NT further details the divide between mere industry and virtuous work. Whatever is not from faith is sin (Rom 14:23) and all human activity is to have as its aim the glory and honor of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 10:31). Lastly, it has been demonstrated that civic righteousness does not constitute genuine virtue by failing to pass the tripartite test of motive, goal, and standard. Genuinely virtuous work requires conducting that work with the goal of bringing honor to God. Taken in unison, these three arguments serve to demonstrate that the call to the sluggard is a call for him to be restored before Yahweh and work out the covenantal charge to love God and love neighbor.

¹ James M. Hamilton, Jr. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 292.

² John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 255.

³ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31* (Anchor Yale Bible; Vol 18b; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 482.

⁴ It must be noted that scholars such as Scott and Fox are not arguing that there is no religious backdrop to the "secular" proverbs. Previous authors such as McKane drew a hard line between the two, viewing the origin of the secular proverbs as being the administrative court rather than the religious community. Whybray comments on such an understanding in *The Composition of Proverbs 10-29*, "[A] distinction between 'secular' and 'religious' was unknown in the ancient world" (109). Scott and Fox retain the language of "secular" and "religious" as a way of distinguishing between universally sourced and exclusively Israelite proverbs.

⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, "Proverbs" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, et al.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 208.

⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 80.

⁷ See John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* as a representative summary of this commonly held position.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1964), 13-21.

⁹ This is not to deny that the Proverbs were edited. Rather, I insist that the editor did not transform the content of Proverbs *ex post facto* from being primarily secular to primarily religious through the rewriting of Yahweh's name into the text.

¹⁰ R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs – Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), XVI.

¹¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 70.

¹² Bruce Waltke. *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 64-65.

¹³ Goldsworthy also helpfully connects the fear of Yahweh with covenantal submission: "Such fear is a reverential submission to the revealed truth of God, which focuses on the covenant and redemption. Godly

wisdom in Israel is based on life's experiences, which ideally are steered by the redemptive revelation of God." (Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 129)

¹⁴ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, 181.

¹⁵ James Crenshaw follows this line of thinking when he observes the moral binary set forth by the sages: "The wise were righteous and fools wicked. This surprising conclusion arose from the operative assumption that anyone who strengthened the order upholding the universe belonged to God's forces, while those who undermined this harmony were enemies of the Creator." Crenshaw's viewpoint regarding the integrity of the book of Proverbs is suspect, but the conclusions he draws regarding the moral landscape of the book are insightful (James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 73).

¹⁶ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 495-496.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 496.

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 202.

¹⁹ William Hendrickson. *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 468.

²⁰ Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, 202.

²¹ Once again, the assertion is not that work performed outside the bounds of faith is of no benefit to humanity. Rather, the assertion is that such work does not constitute genuine virtue. An analysis of this concept will be provided in the third section of this paper.

²² John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 27.

²³ Timothy Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 185.

²⁴ I encountered this vignette while listening to original Fosdick sermon cassette tapes while conducting research for another project. I do not have notes as to which cassette tape contained this account, though if someone is entirely desperate to fact-check this, they may listen through the catalogue of Fosdick's sermons in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary library.

²⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 16.7

²⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 28.

²⁷ The matter of Longfellow's connection to Christianity is of some debate. Regardless of Longfellow's personal beliefs, Fosdick's point was that it did not matter the existence of belief or unbelief in the biblical God so long as one was pursuing civic righteousness.

²⁸ Frame comments in the footnote stating Van Til's tripartite identification as foundational for his understanding of lordship and obedience. See Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, A Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol 1* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

³² Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 184.

³³ Leland Ryken further explores Puritan teaching on the connection between God's glory and industry in his work *Redeeming the Time* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 1995), 106-108.