

# The Diligence, Justice, and Generosity of the Wise: The Ethic of Work in the Book of Proverbs

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## Introduction

A major theme in the book of Proverbs is the theme of work. This is largely presented through a contrast between the sluggard and the one who is diligent. It is surprising then, that not much has been written from a scholarly perspective on the theme of work within Proverbs.<sup>1</sup> It is not as if this topic has been neglected, but there does appear to be a general lack of focused thinking outside of commentaries and reference works. This is unfortunate because Proverbs has a more focused discussion on work than almost anywhere else in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Proverbs portrays a picture of two different types of workers, the wise and the foolish.<sup>3</sup> The wise worker is characterized by diligence in his work. Within Proverbs the wise pursue diligence and fools pursue laziness. As a general rule diligence leads to flourishing while laziness leads to poverty. This idea manifests itself in exhortations towards diligence and admonitions against laziness

throughout the book. Each of these exhortations and admonitions brings to light different aspects and attributes of those who are wise and diligent against those who are foolish and lazy. In regards to the subject of work, however, the book of Proverbs does not merely compare and contrast the diligent and the sluggard. The wise worker is just and righteous in the way that he earns his wages. And the wise worker is generous with what he has earned. This lies in stark contrast to the depiction of the foolish worker who is a sluggard and is characterized by laziness, oppression of the poor, and a squanderer of money. This contrast between the wise and the foolish worker provides the basis for the ethic of work within the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs portrays a proper understanding of work through a description of the wise worker, someone who is diligent, just, and generous.

### **Diligence of the Wise**

Throughout Proverbs diligence is praised as the work ethic of the wise person. Diligence is highlighted in three main ways within Proverbs.<sup>4</sup> First, diligence is highlighted indirectly through a portrayal of the sluggard/slothful fool. The majority of teaching on diligence within Proverbs comes through a description of the fool who is a sluggard or slothful. As Tremper Longman notes, “Proverbs is intolerant of lazy people; they are considered the epitome of folly.”<sup>5</sup> One of the larger sections regarding the sluggard (עצל) is found in an exhortation in 6:6-11 where the sluggard is told to look at the ant and be wise.<sup>6</sup> The ant prepares (כון) and gathers (אגר), but the sluggard sleeps (שנה), slumbers (נום), and folds (חבק) his hands (יד) to rest (שכב).<sup>7</sup> The result of the life of the sluggard is then poverty (ראש). Following the introduction in the book (1:1-7), this passage is providing instruction to the sluggard to no longer follow his foolish way, but instead to be wise. Being wise on this occasion means to have a diligent work ethic, like the ant.

The description of the sluggard elsewhere in Proverbs is not flattering. Proverbs presents the ideal of diligence by highlighting the folly of the sluggard by means of a harsh description that focuses on the ethic and morality (or lack thereof) of the sluggard. On the purpose of the description of the sluggard Leland Ryken writes, “Such a denunciation of idleness implies a positive and liberating attitude toward work.”<sup>8</sup>

It is through this negative portrayal of the sluggard that the reader is encouraged to be a diligent worker. There are several individual proverbs addressing the sluggard. Having a sluggard within one's employ is like drinking vinegar or getting smoke in their eyes (10:26). The sluggard's way is like a hedge of thorns (15:19).<sup>9</sup> The sluggard desires and craves, but it comes to nothing except the grave (21:25-26). The sluggard is often associated with sleep (19:15),<sup>10</sup> a lack of work (20:4), making ridiculous excuses to be lazy (22:13; 26:13), and poverty (23:19-21).<sup>11</sup> This description of the sluggard shows that he is characterized by laziness. Almost all of these traits are found in the lengthy reflections on the sluggard in 24:30-34 and 26:13-16.<sup>12</sup>

Proverbs 24:30-34 shows that the sluggard is a fool who lacks sense.<sup>13</sup> The sluggard's fields are not worked or protected and are overgrown. The author attributes this to the sleep, slumber, and the folding of hands, which leads to poverty. In Proverbs 26:13-16 the sluggard is so lazy that he cannot get out of bed (26:14) and cannot even lift his food to his mouth (26:15, also found in 19:24).<sup>14</sup> These descriptions are hyperbole that serve the point of showing the gravity of the foolishness of the sluggard. When describing the sluggard Ben Witherington writes that, "the sluggard takes the path of least resistance; rather, he takes the path of least exertion. His life is one of avoidance—avoidance of things that require real effort or could prove to be challenging. He seems to respond only to real pressure or pain from a taskmaster or overseer."<sup>15</sup> The sluggard is truly the epitome of the fool in that he considers himself wiser in his own eyes than seven sensible answers (26:16).<sup>16</sup> The strong critique of the lazy person heightens the contrast between the sluggard and the diligent elsewhere within the book.

Second, diligence is extolled through a comparison between those who are lazy (most commonly referred to using sluggard) and those who are diligent. The description of the ant in 6:6-11 is similar to the contrast that is made for the wise (חכם) son (10:1) between the one who has a slack hand (כף), which causes poverty (ראש), and the one who has a diligent hand (יד), which makes rich (10:4). The wise (שכל) son gathers (אגר), but the son who brings shame sleeps (רדם).<sup>17</sup> The diligent rule, while the slothful (רמה) are forced labor (12:24). The slothful are so lazy that they cannot even cook their food, but the diligent are associated with wealth

(12:27). The sluggard craves, but the diligent are satisfied (13:4).<sup>18</sup> The diligent plan and it leads to excess, but hastiness leads to poverty (21:5).<sup>19</sup> This contrast between the hard worker, who has plenty and the lazy worker, who is impoverished is exemplified in 28:19 which states that “the one who works his land will be filled with bread, but the one who follows empty pursuits will be filled with poverty.”<sup>20</sup> The irony of being “filled” with poverty is striking. The life of a sluggard leads to nothing but emptiness. This is contrasted with the life of the diligent, who flourishes in all that he does.<sup>21</sup>

Third, diligence is embodied in the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31 who is described in very hard working terms and is said to not eat the food of idleness (31:27). On the theme of diligence, the description of the virtuous woman here fits well with the call of lady wisdom in the early chapters of Proverbs. On the connection between Lady Wisdom and the virtuous woman Jim Hamilton writes, “Lady Wisdom makes herself known in the markets at the beginning of the book (1:20-33), and the noble wife is active in the markets at the end (31:14-15).”<sup>22</sup> The wise and diligent wife works skillfully (31:14), provides for those in her house through long work hours (31:15, 18), and even cares for those outside of her house who are in need because she is generous (31:20). The characteristics that are exemplified within the virtuous wife are exemplified in the wise worker in the categories of justice and generosity.

### **Justice and Generosity of the Wise**

While there are many other characteristics besides diligence that describe the wise and ethical worker, two that are striking are the justice and generosity that the wise worker embodies. These two concepts are not always very easily separated and at times Proverbs discusses the two in tandem. First, the wise worker is just in the way that he works, particularly in the way that he earns his wealth. Proverbs 13:11 says that wealth hastily gained will dwindle.<sup>23</sup> Bruce Waltke notes that the way wealth is supposed to be accumulated in this proverb “symbolizes a slow, small, steady accumulation of wealth by the handful, not by a ‘windfall.’”<sup>24</sup> The word for hasty (לבה) in Proverbs 13:11 is the same word used to Proverbs 21:6 that says deceitfully earned money is only temporary, fleeting. Proverbs 11:18 says that wicked deeds bring false wages, but righteous

deeds bring reliable payment. This too shows the importance of earning money justly. This sentiment is also expressed in Proverbs 20:10 and 20:23 where unequal weights and false scales are called an abomination. Norman Whybray discusses the importance of earning wealth justly in these proverbs by writing, “If wealth is accompanied by injustice, hatred, strife, or (somewhat more vaguely) ‘trouble’ (*m<sup>h</sup>ūmā*), —and, it seems to be implied, this is often the case—then it is better to remain ‘poor.’”<sup>25</sup> Oppression of the poor for gain is also criticized. Proverbs 22:16 says that those who oppress the poor will themselves become impoverished. Even the ruler is supposed to operate with justice by hating unjust gain (28:16). While Proverbs 21:3 is not a proverb related to work, it does express a far reaching aim that the wise operate with justice. This proverb states that, “Doing righteousness and justice is more acceptable to Yahweh than sacrifice.” The wise person acts with the traits of righteousness and justice in all of life. Not only is it important to earn money in a proper manner, but being just and righteous is better than wealth.

Second, the wise worker is more concerned with uprightness than with monetary gain. There are multiple proverbs that indicate the importance of righteousness over wealth. Proverbs 19:1 says, “Better is the poor man who walks in his integrity than the one who is crooked and is a fool.” This proverb is echoed and given a slightly different nuance in 28:6 where it reads, “Better is a poor man who walks in integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his doings.” Both of these proverbs express the importance of integrity over wealth. Integrity is more valuable than wealth.

Third, the wise worker is also described as both just and generous. Proverbs 14:31 places the concepts of oppressing the poor and being generous to the needy with antithetical parallelism by stating, “The one who oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who honors him is generous to the needy.” Oppression to the poor is insulting to God, but giving generously to the needy is honoring to God.

Fourth, the wise are characterized by generosity. Proverbs 21:26 continues a discussion of the sluggard from v.25 that says that he only craves and craves, but the righteous (parallel with the diligent) gives and does not spare. Daniel Estes notes that “Generous people give when they can. In contrast to the sluggard, who craves for more, ‘the righteous give without sparing.’”<sup>26</sup> Norman Whybray discusses the theme of the wise

worker and generosity by noting, “in 11:25; 13:4; 28:25 it is promised that the generous, the hardworking and the pious respectively will be *enriched*.”<sup>27</sup> One of the reasons that generosity is logical is because wealth and riches are only temporary and it does not last forever (27:23-27). The fool is not generous, but squanders his money on prostitutes (29:3). But the wise person is generous towards the poor (22:9). Proverbs says that being generous to the poor is lending to Yahweh (19:17) and that those who give to the poor will not want (28:27). Those who are righteous know the rights of the poor (29:7) and the king is expected to operate with faithful judgment towards the poor (29:14). Each of these descriptions shows that the wise are just and generous in all of their dealings, especially towards the poor.

## Conclusion

The book of Proverbs presents an ethic of work through the description of the wise worker as one who is diligent, generous, and just. The wise worker is diligent, like the virtuous wife, and is not a sluggard or slothful in their work. Working with diligence leads to life and flourishing, whereas the life of a sluggard leads to death. The wise worker is also characterized by justice in the way that he gains his wealth in that in his work he cares for others. Finally, the wise worker is generous with what he has worked for and gives to the needy without sparing because wealth is only temporarily here. Proverbs shows that the wise worker fears Yahweh and loves his neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> There are almost no scholarly articles on this theme. Scanning the internet one can find several popular level blog posts. Within books that are written on work some treat the book of Proverbs in a surprising brief fashion. For example Gene Veith only cites three proverbs in his book *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). Most other works will mention specific proverbs in passing (and sometimes quote Proverbs frequently), but do not contain any sustained discussion on work in Proverbs (see Ben Witherington, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011]; Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work & Leisure* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995]). Some commentaries that have sections on themes in Proverbs will briefly discuss topics related to work like diligence or the sluggard (see *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004]: 114-115; Tremper Longman, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006]: 561-562). These brief summaries will usually only be a couple of pages in length. Similarly introductory works on wisdom literature will often have brief one to

two page discussions of topics like diligence and laziness (see Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005], 235-236; Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* [Nashville, TN: B&H, 1995]: 133-135). The most thorough (and focused) examination of work in the book of Proverbs is the *Theology of Work Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Joshua-Song of Songs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005): 155-198. This volume is also made available in totality online by the Theology of Work Project at <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/proverbs/>. It should be noted that there are several academic works on poverty and riches in the book of Proverbs, which does relate to the theme of work.

- <sup>2</sup> In sheer content Proverbs likely has the most, but the issues that Paul is addressing in 1-2 Thessalonians may be more focused.
- <sup>3</sup> When engaging in a thematic study within Proverb Longman note that three steps (with several implied sub-steps) should be followed: 1) The entire book of Proverbs should be read and the reader should determine all the texts that deal with the theme at hand, use judgment on what to include, and make a list of those verses; 2) All of the verses should be typed/written out and these should be systematized into the broad categories that they represent; 3) These texts and categories should be analyzed and read within the entire Bible's teaching on the subject first by seeing how they fit into the book of Proverbs, second, by how they fit into the Old Testament, and third, by how they fit into the New Testament (see Tremper Longman, *How to Read Proverbs* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002]: 118-120). This basic procedure will be followed here.
- <sup>4</sup> Certainly the diligent are discussed in more than three ways. Estes, for instance, notes that Proverbs 22:29, and its use of מָהֵר, "indicates that diligence entails quickness, promptness, and readiness as it moves quickly to accept a challenge ... The diligent person, then, is a self-starter who perseveres to complete the challenges that come," (in Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 235). *The Theology of Work Commentary on Proverbs* identifies several categories for the wise worker. Under the category of the wise worker being diligent it notes that the wise worker is diligent in hard work, planning long term, contributing to profitability, and smiling at the future (168-173).
- <sup>5</sup> Longman, *Proverbs*, 561. Similarly, Waltke notes, "Laziness in Proverbs is more than a character flaw; it is a moral issue," (in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, 115).
- <sup>6</sup> The term for sluggard (עֲצֵל) is used only in Proverbs, and is used thirteen times (6:6, 9; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:13, 14, 26). For a discussion of this and related terms see Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 115.
- <sup>7</sup> Note the use of synonyms to convey similar ideas, but with slightly different language.
- <sup>8</sup> Ryken, *Redeeming the Time*, 247.
- <sup>9</sup> In Proverbs 15:19 the sluggard is compared with the upright and just before a discussion of the sluggard in 21:25-26 there is a description of the scoffer and arrogant/prideful (21:24).
- <sup>10</sup> Proverbs 20:13 offers further exhortation to not love sleep, which leads to poverty, but to have open eyes, which leads to bread (the opposite of hunger). So here the themes of sleep and hunger are connected.
- <sup>11</sup> Waltke makes a helpful comment that the sluggard "is never equated with the 'poor' ... who are so by virtue of circumstances beyond their control, such as by tyranny (13:23), but the sluggard is poor by virtue of his moral degeneracy. He is not worthy to be called 'poor,'" (Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 115).
- <sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Proverbs 24:30-34 see Kojo Okyere, "The Rhetoric of Work in Proverbs 24:30-34," *Theoforum* 44 (2013): 157-171.
- <sup>13</sup> Interesting the Hebrew for "sense" here is actually "heart" (לֵב).
- <sup>14</sup> Note the connection here to hunger (implicit not explicit) and proverbs that say things like Yahweh not allowing the righteous to go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked (10:3). Note also the similarity in craving language (13:4; 21:25-26).
- <sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, 59.
- <sup>16</sup> Here the sluggard is clearly seen at the simple fool who hates advice, which is a framing element within the book (1:7). It is assumed in this that the sluggard has no fear of Yahweh.
- <sup>17</sup> Note that 10:1 and 10:5 both refer to the wise son with slightly different language. This section forms an inclusion collection (see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC, vol. 14; Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993]: 47, 117).
- <sup>18</sup> The word translated here as satisfied is more literally "fattened" (שָׂבַע).
- <sup>19</sup> As mentioned above with the description of the sluggard in 23:19-21. This idea is also found in other descriptions of the lazy/sluggard mentioned to this point (6:11; 10:4; 23:21). This is also found in texts like 14:23 where talk (as opposed to action) leads to poverty.
- <sup>20</sup> This is also found in Proverbs 12:11.

<sup>21</sup> The idea of flourishing in Proverbs should also be linked to the central idea of living in the fear of the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> James M. Hamilton, *Work and Labor in the Lord* (Short Studies in Biblical Theology; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017): 54.

<sup>23</sup> See also 12:11; 20:21; 28:22.

<sup>24</sup> Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 561.

<sup>25</sup> R. Norman Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990): 34.

<sup>26</sup> Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 241.

<sup>27</sup> Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty*, 33