

WORKING & SHARING

When King Lemuel was a boy, his mother used to tell him this oracle.

Proverbs 31:10-20; 29-31

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. 14 She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. 15 She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

17 She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. 18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. 20 She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

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29 “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” 30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. 31 Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.”

If you had to describe this wife in one phrase, you might say, “hard working.” Some women I know love this passage in the Bible, and others are like, “Not her! Not the excellent wife! I can’t do all that.” But today, Lemuel’s mom provides us with a great starting off point for how we ought to work and share. And just like many of the passages in the Bible that address men but apply equally well to women, this passage works similarly. This woman is the embodiment of hard work—she is an example to all of us.

This “excellent wife”—what does she do?

- She does her husband good. Implied in that is her marital faithfulness. But that’s just the beginning. In verse 11, it says, her husband trusts her, **“and he will have no lack of grain.”** That might seem like an odd thing to say—but then you see why.
- She is a hard, hard worker. And she does so, with **“willing hands.”** Seeking wool and and flax. Securing food for the home—which is much bigger then 4-5 people. Staying up late; getting up early. Evaluating fields, buying them and seeing that vineyards are installed, **“with the fruit of her own hands.”** She knows that her merchandise is profitable and works at it. But, look at verse 20, she also shares. **“She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.”**
- For all this she is praised by her husband, **“29 Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”** And at the gates of the town.

She is the embodiment of so many of the Proverbs about work. Look at some of them:

Godly work is focused on the attainable.

Proverbs 28:19 “Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.”

- Did you notice all the details that show how savvy she is. She is not wasting time on “worthless pursuits.” She knows what pays and is not out wasting time on get-rich-quick schemes. She knows what she can do well, and what she can’t do well. This may seem obvious, but I’ve met a number of people in my life who are always cooking up something really big that never pans out. They have big dreams—but don’t want to “work the land,” in front of them. It’s not exciting, doesn’t pay what they think they’re worth. And for this, their families suffer and they often end up in debt.
- When it comes to raising kids—especially as they move toward the working world—if you see that tendency in them, you may have to be the ‘wet blanket’ at times. You may have to be the reality check reminder that some pursuits are truly “worthless.”

Godly work is done with integrity.

Proverbs 16:11, “A just balance and scales are the LORD’s; all the weights in the bag are his work.”

- Everyone is tempted to take short-cuts at work. In ancient cultures, that short-cut would sometime involve false weights. You pretend to be selling someone five pounds of flour—that’s what the scale says—but you’re really selling 4 ½ pounds. This is not the same as padding an estimate. If you’re estimating the cost of a project and experience has told you, there’s always unexpected costs in the range of 10%, then you add the 10%. That’s integrity. Adding 20% is not.
- Kids—young and old—plays out in school often. One of the tests of your heart and your integrity is whether you cheat on homework or tests, or help other kids to cheat. When you do that, you’re the one using false weights and scales. It’s better to do poorly on the test and work through the consequences, than it is to cheat and lie.
- The ‘excellent wife’ shows us that when we have the fear of the Lord in our hearts—when we have a right relationship with God—we do our work with integrity. There’s no fraud and no short-cuts. She knows, “**all the weights in the bag are his work.**” That means work done with integrity and honor; that’s the Lord’s kind of work.

Godly work is done with excellence.

Proverbs 22:29, “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.”

- The phrase that says, “he will stand before kings,” means he will stand, ready to receive his next assignment. It might sound exciting, but there was great risk in working for the king. You can’t get away with a poorly done job!
- Develop the gifts you have. Try to become as skillful as you can at your work. Seek to use the fulness of your talents in whatever field you’re in at the time and even if your heart isn’t it—doing your work before the Lord often leads to new open doors.

Godly work can lead to great wealth.

Proverbs 10:4, “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”

- We’re in a day and age where people are highly suspicious of the rich. Sometimes for good reasons. But this Proverbs is an important counter-point, reminding us that **“the hand of the diligent makes rich.”** This doesn’t mean that everyone who works hard becomes wealthy. But it does mean, very, very few people become wealthy without working hard. And becoming wealthy or rich is not a sin. Worshipping that wealth, and hoarding that wealth, is. Which takes us to the next point.

Godly work lets us be generous to the poor.

Again, look back to the “excellent wife.” **“20 She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.”**

Why? Why not just tell them to work hard like me! Get a job! Everyone can flip burgers! Because she understands the difference between “the poor,” and “the sluggard.”

Now, here we get to some of the funniest—not sure if that’s the right word—but in our house, they get a chuckle, Proverbs in the whole book. Proverbs about the sluggard are some of the most colorful. But they’re really important, because they illustrate the difference—the critical difference between, “the poor” and “the sluggard.”

Let’s compare some, shall we?

- THE POOR: **Proverbs 14:21, “Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.”**
- THE SLUGGARD: **Proverbs 20:4, “The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.”**
- THE POOR: **Proverbs 19:17, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.”**
- THE SLUGGARD: **Proverbs 24:30-34, “30 I passed by the field of a sluggard, the vineyard of a man lacking sense, 31 and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. 32 Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. 33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, 34 and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.”**
- THE POOR: **Proverbs 21:13, “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.”**
- THE SLUGGARD: **Proverbs 26:13-16, “13 The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!” 14 As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. 15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. 16 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”**

So, what did you notice? What’s the difference between ‘the poor’ and ‘the sluggard?’

- **The sluggard** is a lazy bum! He's sleeping, napping, his fields aren't plowed, his walls are broken down. He's too lazy to bring his food back from his plate, and—this is the kicker—thinks he (or she) is smarter than everyone else. The sluggard deserves an honest, loving, rebuke—but that's it. That's what Paul gave the sluggards in the church in Thessalonica:

2 Thessalonians 3:10–12, **"10 For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living."**

- **The poor**, on the other hand, are poor for reasons beyond laziness. They are poor, even though they work. The poor deserve our compassion and help—and not our judgmentalism and hypocrisy. **"For when you are generous to the poor, you lend to the Lord."** Just let that sink in. That means, who will repay you? The Lord will, and in ways you never expect.

Do you know how people became poor back in the days of Solomon? There were several ways:

1. **Some were born with a disability or got injured and crippled.** In a culture where most of the work was manual, injuries were common, and disabilities or injuries, often led to poverty.
2. **Some had their fields destroyed by flooding or marauding troops** from other neighboring nations who would literally come through and steal their crops. Just like today, the line between getting by and poverty was very, very thin for many, many people.
3. **Some women lost their husbands and they couldn't re-marry.** Widowed women were very vulnerable. So were orphaned children left to beg in the streets.
4. **Some were oppressed through taxation and high interest loans.** Solomon was famous for building, but infamous for beginning forced labor which ultimately led to the split within the kingdom of Israel. One of the warnings of the Prophet Saul, in 1 Samuel 8, was that when Israel demanded a king, he said the king would take. "He will take your daughter to be cooks, your sons to be soldiers, your crops to feed his servants, your servants to work his projects." And what happened when you couldn't pay the royal tax because you had a bad crop? Was your debt forgiven? No? You had to take out a loan from the wealthy—and if you couldn't pay that back, what would happen next? You sold yourself into slavery, hoping to buy your freedom in the next 6 years.

That is why the Scriptures teach from front to back, **"Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered."**

Teaching your children to work hard, should also include teaching them to understand the difference between **'the sluggard'** and **'the poor.'** If not, they will make the mistake of thinking that everyone who is poor and deserving of our help is really a sluggard in disguise. Or that every sluggard they meet with a sad story of woe is truly poor and needy.

This takes much wisdom, at times, but the crux is work. If someone is working hard, and spending wisely, and is still poor—then they're needy. But if they're not working hard, or spending beyond their means, then they're not.

Proverbs 21:25-26, "The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. 26 All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back."

God made us to work—and has chosen to provide for the poor in our town and in our church, through the generosity of everyone who has enough to share.

For children, this begins with the obvious:

- Forced labor! Or you can pay them, too, and teach them about saving and earning. But everyone agrees, Christian or not, that chores are important. Most kids should have regular weekly chores to do as soon as they're able. Encourage them to develop the habit of getting their work done, first, before their play—or you know as well as I—the work often doesn't get done..
- If you can give them an allowance, great. If not, still have them do chores—they are part of the family—and to raise a family requires work. But if they do get an allowance, encourage them to save their money for the things they want. If it's a big-ticket item and you can help them get there, that's up to you. But also teach them to tithe. To give back to the Lord, to share with others in need. There are many, many good groups that need financial help. Finding one or two for your child to contribute to is a good thing.
- What about panhandlers? Sluggard or Poor? Those are always tough calls, aren't they. You have competing data. One is that most people on the street suffer mental health; the other is most are addicted to some type of substance. Those two are not necessarily opposites either. Personally, and we may differ on this, I almost never give out money to people walking the street, because the substance usage is so high. Are there exceptions? I'm sure there are—but they are exceptions. If you know you're going to be interacting with pan handlers, and still want to demonstrate generosity, consider preparing a little bag with a water bottle, granola bar, and a slip of paper with an encouraging verse or phone number for a social service agency. They might sell those items, but they also might be incredibly grateful for them.

On that note, it's really important that we don't rush to judge the sluggard or think people are incapable of change. We have to ask God to help us see and minister to the heart of people, wherever they are in life. That's what Jesus did for us.

While we were still sinners—spiritual sluggards wanting nothing to do with God—Christ died for us. That's the gospel isn't it? While we were dead in our sins and our trespasses, God has mercy on us. Praise the Lord for that. So if you need to err, err on the side of mercy. And please, look to God's word, not politicians, to give you the wisdom you need.

In conclusion—encourage your children to work hard, but not become workaholics. God created us to work the earth and subdue it. But he also created us to worship Him and even gave us the Sabbath; a day off, to do that on. I encourage you, trust the Lord enough to stop checking your emails, your voicemails, your work schematics, your grocery lists, and rest. Because you know Monday's coming, and you've got to go back to work. And that's a good thing.