

Proverbs: The Sluggard

A few years ago survey was conducted to ask people who they thought were the best role models for today's youth.

- Richard Branson topped the ratings with four-fifths regarding him as a good influence. Linford Christie came in next, and Michael Owen and Prince William after him.
- Just over half thought Tony Blair a good influence, but the majority thought William Hague was neither a good nor bad influence.
- Noel Gallagher, Madonna and Vinnie Jones were definitely bad examples.

Well who do you go to, where do you turn, who do you look to learn how to live life. And the answer of the book of Proverbs is – listen to wisdom. There are all kinds of influences and examples around us but in Proverbs Solomon says listen to wisdom.

Because Proverbs is a book full of practical wisdom – it's a manual on how to do life. And how not to do life. And this evening the topic is laziness. We're going to meet a character which the Proverbs call the sluggard. We might know him better as the slob, or the slacker or the waster. But whatever we call him, we're going to ask four questions about him and here's the first.

1. *What's he like?*

Well now we're going to try and get to know this character the sluggard. And I've managed to arrange a day's work experience with the sluggard – we're going to find out what he's like, we're going to see what a sluggard gets up to – we're going to see how a sluggard spends his time – we're going to discover what makes a sluggard tick. We're going on work experience with the sluggard. Only in the sluggard's case it's not exactly *work* experience – it's *no work* experience. Because that's the mark of the sluggard – he's not a worker, he's a shirker. So don't worry, it's a hot evening - it won't be too strenuous – this is going to be a master class in laziness – and in fact as we turn up at 8.30 am to meet him, he's not particularly ready for us – in fact he's still in bed. Because that's the first thing about the Sluggard:

He won't get up

Just take a look at Proverbs 26:14:

¹⁴ *As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.*

So we get to the sluggard's house – we let ourselves in – we tip toe up to his bedroom, poke our head round the door – and there's nothing to see – except for the heap under the duvet. So let's just wait politely for him down stairs - 9 o'clock, 9.30, 10 o'clock, 10.30, 11 o'clock – still no sign of the sluggard. 11.30, 12 o'clock, 12.30 and then...One o'clock...2 o'clock.

Maybe something's happened to him, so up you go to check on him, but no – everything's fine – it's just the same as it was 5 hours ago. Well not quite the same,

because whereas before the sluggard was asleep on his right hand side, at some point in the last 5 hours he's rolled onto his left hand side.

¹⁴ As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.

You can imagine someone making up one of those little riddles about him –

- What moves without going anywhere?
- A door on it's hinges and a sluggard on his bed.

That's the sluggard for you – he loves to sleep – he loves his bed. He's not just anchored to it...he's hinged to it.

Now we need to be careful – there's nothing wrong with a lie-in...that's what Bank Holiday's are for – unless of course you've got children I guess. But for the sluggard a lie-in isn't the exception – it's the norm.

And the point is this: it is a picture of sheer self-indulgent laziness. Because of course there is more than one way to be lazy. I guess the *modern* sluggard might practice his laziness in front of the TV – which of course maybe means he's *more* of a fool than the sluggard here because at least this sluggard gets the sleep he needs.

So here's the thing about the sluggard – he's an idle worshipper. That is – I D L E – he worships idleness.

Now maybe just for some v14 is an exact description. Given the chance we'd lie in as long as we could. One of my mates at university was a v14 sluggard – and his all time record was when he got up on Tuesday and didn't get up until Thursday – in fact he didn't realise he'd slept in so long and got up and went to his Wednesday lectures and of course no one was there.

Now I'm not wanting to tar every student with that brush but being a student probably gives more opportunities to be a v14 sluggard than most people have. So if you are a student let me ask you the straight forward question – does this describe you? If you don't *have* to be up for a nine o'clock lecture – does that mean you *don't* get up?

Well we might say don't be so harsh Joe, if you've got the time to lie in, why not, it won't be like that forever. But take a look at Proverbs 19:15:

¹⁵ Laziness brings on deep sleep,
and the shiftless man goes hungry.

Do you see what happens to the fundamentally lazy person? He gets lazier - **Laziness brings on deep sleep**, In other words according to the Proverbs idleness isn't neutral - laziness breeds laziness. It's sometimes said how strange it is that a busy person is often more able to fit more in and take more on than a lazy person. Once idleness gets a grip, it's hard to shake it off.

Look if you are a student I'm not having a dig at you and in any case here's a question for the rest of us. If you did have the opportunity to be idle day by day – would you jump at it?

You see I guess that many of us could look at v14 and think – that's not me – I'm up at the crack of dawn and off to work. But the thing is maybe the reason *some* of us work so hard is so that we've got plenty of money to spend on leisure time. It's been said that our forefathers rested in order to work. Whereas our generation works in order to rest. In other words our goal is leisure, it's idleness, it's self-indulgence. It is perfectly possible to be a busy idle worshipper – the very reason I'm busy is so that I can save up enough money to be idle.

Well anyway back to our master class in laziness – because when the sluggard does eventually get up...

He won't get out

So he's come down stairs, he's in his dressing gown, he's slouched in the kitchen – he's still tired out, he'd much rather be back in bed, the prospect of getting out to work is all a bit much for him and so look what he says – Proverbs 26:13

¹³ The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!"

In other words the sluggard can't bear the thought of getting out and doing something useful, so he makes excuses. And it's often been said that the point here is that he makes just outrageous excuses – he'll make up any excuse rather than get out to work – he'll even say there's a lion in the street! Now of course in Sevenoaks that would be an outrageous excuse. But actually in Israel in those days there were lions.

Now of course you'd be unlikely to meet one on your way to work I imagine – and there were ways to protect yourself.

- But do you see the real problem here is his laziness.
- And the real reason this excuse is so dangerous is that it is just plausible. It's just believable – believable enough to persuade a sluggard that he'd better not get out.

They say where there's a will there's a way.
But in the sluggard's case – there's no will.

And I wonder if from time to time the sluggard's excuses surface in our Christian lives?

- So when there's an opportunity to serve Jesus – he says no it's too difficult for me – I wouldn't be up to that.
- Or when there's a chance to volunteer to help out she says – well it's not really my gift.
- Or when there's something down there on the notice sheet that needs doing – he says...well works really busy at the moment.

And that may be true – it might be too difficult – it might not be your gift – work may be overwhelming. But it's just worth asking ourselves – is that true – or is it just a plausible excuse? In other words could it be possible to be diligent in the work place, but something of sluggard in relation to church life?

Well somehow you manage to drag the sluggard to work. But once he's there we soon discover that

He won't get going

The sluggard can't be bothered to start things. In other words he's puts things off, he's a procrastinator. Just turn back with me to Proverbs 24 – it turns out that our sluggard is a farmer, he's quite well known to people round about him and here's what one of his neighbours says about him, Proverbs24, starting at v30

³⁰ I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
³¹ thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.

So here's a perfectly good vineyard, it's in a perfectly good field, it's protected by perfectly good wall – so why's it in such a mess? Well v32

³² I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
³³ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest --
³⁴ and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

That's the reason it's such a ruin – the owner is a sluggard. There's things to get done – but he won't get going. Do you see the word that gets repeated in v33:

³³ *A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest –*

That's the danger of putting things off – we just do it bit by bit, little by little.

- So she says – oh I'll do it tomorrow, one more day won't hurt.
- He says – yeah, don't worry, it's on my list, I'll do it later
- Yeah we're seeing to it, sure we're dealing with it.

Do you see the sluggard just puts things off little by little – he never decides outright that he's not going to do something. Quite the opposite in fact - I imagine he says to himself and to others that it's in the diary. But that's not enough – or as Chapter 14v23 says: Proverbs14:23

²³ *All hard work brings a profit,
but mere talk leads only to poverty.*

That's the sluggard's problem – he's all talk, and no action.

So the sluggard – he won't get up, he won't get out, he won't get going, or at least not very easily, and in any case when he does...

He soon gives up

So here's the sluggard, he's had a hard day at work, if that's what you can call it! And he gets home, it's dinner time, he's hungry, he chops some veg, he grills a chop, he boils some rice – well alright let's come clean - he warms up last night's curry in the microwave, but then look - Proverbs26:15 ¹⁵ **The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.**

He's hungry, he's cooked it, it smells good, he dips in his fork, but...it's too much effort – and he drops off to sleep.

Now of course it's not meant as a serious picture as if anyone actually does this – Solomon is having a joke at sluggard's expense. But there's a serious point.

- When the sluggard does start things
- When at last he does get going
- He does it with the best intentions
- For once he's keen, for once he's enthusiastic
- He starts with gusto... but he soon gives up

And so his house is littered with half read books, and half written letters, and half finished jobs and half done projects.

That's the sluggard – he soon gives up and never finishes things.

Now the problem with a sermon like this is that it will hit certain people between the eyes and more often than it will be the wrong people. So some of us may have already have started to feel unnecessarily guilty.

- These proverbs aren't haven't a dig at the unemployed person who would love to work.
- And they're not criticising the volunteer who can never say no and takes on too much.
- And they're not attacking the ME sufferer who's frustrated that they haven't got the energy.
- And they're not laughing at the depressed person, who's finding it harder and harder to face things.

But Solomon is poking fun at the sluggard. But the problem is that he the very one who is unlikely to be listening: Proverbs26:16 ¹⁶ **The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.**

So he says to himself

- I'm not lazy I'm just laid back
- I'm not a sluggard it's just that I prefer to pace myself.

Because ¹⁶ **The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.**

Well we've met the sluggard now, we've had our master class in laziness, we know what he's like, so here's the next question:

2. What should he do?

What do the Proverbs, what does Solomon tell the Sluggard to do? Well the answer is in chapter 6 – so I wonder if you'd turn to it with me. Proverbs6:6

⁶ Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!

That's what he's got to do – get out into the garden, find an ant and watch it. **consider its ways and be wise!**, he says. It's not saying much for the sluggard that he has to go to an ant to get wisdom. Do you see what King Solomon is implying – he's saying the sluggard is so unwise, he's so foolish that it won't do him any good to listen to Solomon himself – he's at a much more basic level than that. The kind of things the sluggard needs to learn can be learned from an ant. He needs to enroll at the ant hill not the academy. So what is it that the ant can teach the sluggard?

Well first of all the ant is a self-starter

Do you see that in vv7 and 8: **⁷ It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, ⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.**

In other words Mr Ant is the exact opposite of the Mr Sluggard. The sluggard constantly needs prodding, he constantly needs reminding, he even needs nagging.

- But the ant is completely different: the ant thinks to himself – if he's a very intelligent ant that is – the ant thinks to himself – what is there to do? How can I be helpful?
- Whereas the sluggard thinks to himself...well the sluggard doesn't think at all.
- So without anyone to tell him what to do, the ant takes initiative
- But precisely because there isn't anyone to tell him what to do, the sluggard takes a break
- So instead of thinking, how could I be useful to mum over the holidays – mum has to hint that the grass might need a cut and the wall might need painting
- And instead of thinking how could I push this project further, how could I make things better than they are now, the sluggard has to wait to be told.

So sluggard, go to the ant – he's a self starter.

And he's a hard worker

It's not so much spelled out in the verse as implied – he's an active, busy little thing...well it says **Go to the ant, you sluggard;** and so that's what I did this week, I found the ants in my garden and the thing about them is this – you never see an ant sitting still. They're always busy, v8, always storing and gathering. In fact the ants I found were busily marching in through my patio doors over the lounge carpet so I had to get out the insect spray and kill them all – I'm not sure that's what Solomon had in mind when he said go to the ant – but that's why they're often a problem – they're such hard workers

And I'm going to take my life in my hands now and say something about retirement. Because there is just a danger that men and women who have been ant-like in employment become sluggard-like in their retirement.

I read recently of a man called Raymond Lull – he lived a while ago in the 1200s and he grew up on Majorca. As a youth he was a bit of a waster but in later life he learned Arabic, and gave his life to witnessing Muslim's – and at the age of 80 he was finally put to death for what he was doing. Ralph Winter puts it like this:

- He says where in the Bible do you see retirement? Did Moses retire? Did Paul retire? Peter? John?

In other words retirement is not a Bible concept. There are always ways in which to serve Jesus. Someone at St Nick's pointed out to me last week that they weren't retiring they were just redirecting their energies. Oswald Sanders apparently continued ministering until he was 89 and wrote a book a year after he was 70. In other words, the ant is a model of hard work whatever age we are. A self starter, a hard worker...

And a forward planner

V8: **it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.** In other words the ant knows that if certain things aren't done now, then it'll be in a mess later. If it doesn't gather the food when it's harvest time, then there'll be no food when harvest's gone. And the sluggard would be less of a sluggard if he looked forward and thought about the consequences of leaving things undone.

Well do you see what the basic message is – it's this: work is a good thing. Which is a contrast often with our own outlook – because often when we discuss our work we're moaning about it, or complaining. But do you see the picture here: work isn't bad, it isn't evil, it's not something which entered the world at the Fall – it's harder now because of sin – but it predates sin – Genesis 2: God gave Adam a job – he made him a gardener. Work is good, and that's the lesson that the sluggard learns from the ant. But then...

3. Why should he care?

And that's our third point. Why should the sluggard care? Well because of the consequences of laziness.

He loses out

And if you're still in chapter six you'll see what he loses out on – verses 9-11
⁹ **How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?** ¹⁰ **A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest --** ¹¹ **and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.**

He loses money.

So because he didn't save, there's nothing left for retirement.

And because he didn't paint the woodwork sooner, the whole lot needs replacing now.

And because he didn't fix the car when it first started leaking oil, it's going to cost more to fix now – that's a personal one that is.

And it's not the Bible is advocating a kind of greedy approach to our money – it's just that it's not actually our money, it's God's - so it's bad stewardship to let it trickle away through our fingers because of laziness.

He loses out on money, and he loses out on promotion. **Proverbs 12:24 ²⁴ Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labour.** I imagine that may have been

literally true in Solomon's day – if someone lost their money through laziness perhaps their only solution was to sell themselves into slavery. But it's a picture for us too – because in general the hard worker gets noticed and then trusted and then promoted. Now of course this is one of those glaring generalizations in the Proverbs that don't always hold true – because in our day and age many a conscientious hard worker has been rewarded with redundancy. Which is deeply painful and frustrating. But the point still stands – if we're lazy at work, we lose out at work.

He lacks satisfaction

Life for the sluggard is never fulfilling or satisfying. Things never quite go the way he'd like them to. For one thing he'll always be frustrated – Proverbs13:4 ⁴ **The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.** Do you see the similarity? Both men want things – the sluggard craves, the diligent man desires. And good desires and cravings are good God-given things. But they're not enough on their own.

- The diligent man desires something – and then sets out to get it done.
- Whereas the sluggard craves something – and then sits down and carries on craving.

And because that's all he does, he ends up being disappointed. Proverbs20:4 ⁴ **A sluggard does not plough in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.** Which is another way of saying you get out what you put in. And because he never puts in – he gets frustrated and disappointed. So the sluggard lacks fulfillment. He's a sad man.

But he's also a bad man.

Because – third thing - he let's other people down.

He's not just his own worst enemy, he's your worst enemy too. We saw last week how risky it was to employ a fool, well it's just as risky to employ a sluggard. Chapter 10:26 ²⁶ **As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.**

- Imagine gulping down a glass of wine and then discovering it's vinegar – how disappointing – that's not what you wanted.
- Or imagine lighting a fire for some warmth and some light and then the smoke gets in your eyes – how irritating – that's not what you wanted.
- And then imagine sending someone off to do something for you and discovering they never did it – how disappointing and irritating – that's not what you wanted, but that's what you get when take on the sluggard.

He let's people down. But it's worse than that because laziness can actually be dangerous. Proverbs18:9 ⁹ **One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.**

- The slack cleaner on the underground risks causing a fire which will kill
- The slack employer who won't get the health and safety right risks endangering his employees
- And the slack preacher, or Bible study leader, or youth leader who won't prepare properly risks leading people into error.

So no - laziness isn't just inconvenient and disappointing to others, it's unloving and unloving and dangerous to others.

So although Solomon often pokes fun at the sluggard, at the end of the day being a sluggard isn't really a laughing matter. So one last question...

4. How can he change?

Well just turn back with me to chapter 1 and v7: Proverbs1:7

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,

We said last week that that verse is fundamental to the entire book. If we want to grow in wisdom and knowledge, then we must Fear the Lord. And to put it in a nutshell *to fear God means to live in the light of his greatness.*

Now where is God most clearly revealed. Where do we most clearly exactly what God is like? Well the answer of the Bible is this: you see exactly how great God is when you look at the Lord Jesus.

Do you see how Jesus is the exact polar opposite of the sluggard?

- Remember how we started, the sluggard wouldn't get up. He was utterly self-indulgent. Whereas Jesus Christ spent many a night or early morning in prayer – seeking God's way, praying for sinners, putting the interests of others before his own self-indulgence. What a great God.
- And whereas the sluggard wouldn't get out to work – he made excuses – Jesus Christ left the glory and wonder of heaven, he left the throne room of God, and was born a man, to live among sinners, and to work for their good. No excuses – he went all the way for you and me. What a great God.
- And whereas the sluggard wouldn't get going – he avoids starting things – Jesus set his face determinedly to the cross – even though it filled him with dread – he knew that he had to do the most significant thing anyone has ever done. Far from failing to start things – Jesus got on with the work of salvation. What a great God.
- And then last, whereas the sluggard soon gives up – he won't finish things – what were those words Jesus breathed on the cross? It is finished.

- So do you see Jesus is the exact opposite of the sluggard – he embodied this wisdom – and if we want to be wise like that then Proverbs 1 v7 says fear the Lord. In other words, live in the light of Jesus greatness.
- He's great in his goodness...he worked hard for sinners, for people like you and me.
- He's great in his forgiveness...it is finished he said – forgiveness is now available for sluggards – personally I've found this study very convicting – and there's probably something of the sluggard in all of us.
- But he's also great in his resources...Jesus continues to work in us by his Spirit helping us to change

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So fear God, fear Jesus, let's live in the light of what we know is true about him – let's come to him in sorrow, come to him for forgiveness, and come to him for help. The fear of God, the fear of Jesus – that's the beginning of wisdom, and the end of sluggard.