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## *God's Twitter: Wisdom for Work* Proverbs 6:6-11; 26: 13-16

I want you to meet my dearest friend when I was growing up. This is my Grandpa Bert. Bert Spicknall. Grandpa grew up dirt poor. His mom used to serve the kids feed corn that normally went to the cattle. To his dying die, Grandpa would eat just about anything... but he hated hominy because it reminded him of the days he ate cattle feed. It was all his family could do to scratch out a living with their 8 kids in a tar paper shack in Nebraska. Bert Spicknall's future didn't look very promising.

But out of that adversity my Grandpa determined to make a life for himself. He learned how to cut meat. Before he could his own butcher shop, he got a trailer and drove off before dawn, delivering meat right to your door step. He worked from dark to dark every day and began to climb out of poverty. This advertisement from the Contra Costa Gazette in Martinez, California, from December 7, 1944, was a proud moment in Grandpa's life: "Barnett's Market announces opening of meat department. We are very happy to announce that Mr. Bert Spicknall will be our butcher."

That was only the beginning. Eventually, Grandpa had his own meat market. I loved "helping" my Grandpa in his butcher shop...the smell of the sawdust on the floor, the perfectly arranged slices of meat...and grandpa running his boning knife across this steel so fast, I could hardly see it. By the time Grandpa died in 1993, I realized this about him: **he was the hardest working man I have ever known.** Even in his eighties, he could work guys half his age into the ground.

We are not born knowing how to work. Someone has to teach us. Just ask my kids. When we are loading our car for a trip, it is a cardinal sin for them to arrive at the trunk with one hand empty. You always fill both hands. It is a Toone packing rule. **Solomon had some rules about work, too.** Listen. (Read)

For the first time, Solomon mentions work. To whom? Sluggard! 13 times "sluggard" appears in Proverbs. What does "sluggard" mean? Lazy! Unmotivated. The other evening, I saw a 5 inch slug on the side of our house oozing its way up the wall. No one understands "sluggishness" more than Washingtonians. And MOST of Solomon's proverbs on work are directed to the sluggard. In fact, 21:25 defines this person: *The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, **because his hands refuse to work.***

A sluggard is one whose "hands REFUSE to work." There are folks who CANNOT work. They are too old or infirm. Or they live in a part of the world where catastrophe or economy make it impossible to work. The Bible says we have a responsibility to those who **cannot** work for some reason. Listen.

(3: 27-28.) *Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"—when you now have it with you.*

Those who DESERVE help...those who are impoverished, not because they are lazy, but because of circumstances beyond their control...those folks we are to help if it is within our power to do so...and do it quickly. Thursday night we heard a report from the deacons telling us that over the last year, this congregation handed out \$122,000 to 874 different families in need...the largest ever! Do you think that pleased the Lord? Solomon is merciful toward the person who CAN'T work. But he is brutal toward the person who WON'T work...the sluggard. Listen. 26:(13-16)

*The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!" As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth."*

Wow! Would you like a little sarcasm with your lesson? Sluggards ALWAYS have excuses as to why they won't work. A lion in the streets. A sore back. A mean boss. Something. They would rather stay up late, watch TV, play on the computer and sleep 'til noon. In fact, Solomon's sluggard is so lazy, he sticks his hand into the food pot...and doesn't want the strain of raising the food to his mouth.

Pretty harsh...and it intends to be. Solomon says to the intentionally lazy person, "If you don't learn how to work, you will destroy yourself. So—you large human being with the huge brain –I want to introduce you to your teacher. Look down. Lean down, into the dirt. See that little creature? Quarter of an inch long. Fraction of an ounce. A brain the size of a pin point. Meet your tutor. If you want to learn how to work, humble yourself, bend over and study the ant."

What does the ant teach us about work? First of all, **initiative**. Verse 7: *[The ant] has no commander, no overseer or ruler...*" The sluggard waits for the supervisor to tell him what to do. Or for the politician to make laws to meet his needs. The ant doesn't need anyone to tell her what to do. She knows. She notices. And she does it...without direction, without permission...she just does it.

One of the things I've pounded into my kids is the importance of initiative. Look for what needs to be done and do it...before you are told. Keep your eyes open. A good worker does what she is told. A GREAT worker notices what needs to be done and does it BEFORE they are told. You will rarely get in trouble on the job for taking the initiative to do something that needs doing, even if no one has told you to do it...even if you make a mistake. Isn't that right, bosses? Don't you WANT employees who aren't sitting there, waiting to be told what to do, but who see the mess and clean it up, see the bottleneck and fix it, see an opportunity and grab it...even if it isn't in their job description. THOSE are the workers who rise to greatness.

But the sluggard has no initiative. He may do what he is told...but only barely. Just enough to get by. He will wait for someone to direct him and he will look for someone to blame when things aren't going right. My supervisor doesn't like me. My boss is mean. The customers are demanding. This job is beneath me. One of the things I fear most about our culture and the direction we are headed politically and economically is that we are killing initiative and self-sufficiency and breeding entire generations of people who are looking to someone else to

make decisions, looking to someone else to provide for them, looking to someone else to take care of them.

Listen, beloved...we are running out of "someone elses" in this country. There is only us! And anyhow, nothing rots a culture faster than an ever-increasing portion of the population who are perfectly capable of caring for themselves but have never learned the dignity and the empowerment that comes with taking personal responsibility for their lives.

The ant takes initiative. She also **plans ahead**. 8 **"...it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest."** She understands that there are seasons when she must work, must harvest, must store away. She also knows there will be seasons when food is hard to come by. She paces herself, setting something aside for the unknown future.

Again, as a culture, we know almost nothing of this discipline. We live for right now; for immediate gratification. The idea of saving up...of waiting to buy something until we can afford it...is un-American. So we slap it on the credit card; we mortgage ourselves to the hilt. Part of the reason for our current economic crisis is that we consider it heretical to do with less right now in order to have enough for our future. Young people are not taught to save for college, assume they will have a car in high school and expect that their parents' lifestyle will automatically be theirs. And working people who know better pay almost no attention to their looming retirement. They assume Uncle Sam will take care of them and are shocked to discover too late that they do not have enough to live on.

The little ant teaches us initiative and teaches us to plan ahead. And, of course, simply teaches us the dignity of hard work. Aren't you inspired when you look down and see a lone ant carrying around a branch ten times its size? **We were created to work.** Work can be holy. Think about it...we worship a working God. He worked to create our universe. And when he created Adam, he gave **him** a work to do...to tend the garden. Our savior was a carpenter for 30 years before he became a preacher. Paul had a full-time job. What was it? Tent-maker. Nearly any work can be a blessing and a witness.

Paul speaks to this in his letter to the Colossians: 3:23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." How hard would you work if Jesus were your boss? Well...he is. The way we work is a witness to our Lord. Whatever we do...even if it is flipping burgers...we ought to be the best, hardest-working burger flipper that ever came down the pike. Because we are working for the Lord!

We talk about retirement as the golden years because, finally, we can stop working and start playing. But some of the most fulfilled retired folks I know...the Delaneys and the Leighs and the Martins...are working harder than they have ever worked...and not getting paid a dime. To paraphrase Jesus, "Man does not live by golf alone." There is a goodness and healthiness to work that inspires and fulfills us. Remember, God's divine work to rest ratio is 6 to 1. That doesn't change because you turn 65.

The sluggard doesn't understand any of this. And Solomon lets him have it in 9: "**How long** will you lie there, you sluggard? **When** will you get up from your sleep?" Do you hear the frustration in those questions? **How long** will you sit there and whine like a victim? **When** will you get up off of your blessed assurance and start doing your part? The sluggard isn't even willing to carry his own load...much less help with those who also have to carry the young or the old or the infirm.

Think about this in terms of our life together as a church. We have hundreds of little Chapel Hill ants...working hard, taking initiative, planning ahead, storing away resources for the kingdom. Thank GOD for you people who understand that you were created to work for Christ's kingdom...who have discovered the fulfillment that comes from doing your part. Thank God for you ants. Now...You ARE an ant, right? You are one of the hundreds actively engaged in Christ's mission in some way, right? Surely...surely there are no sluggards in this building today, right? (We will be checking for slime trails after the service, by the way.)

Solomon asks every one of us this morning, which is it? Ant or slug. Which are you? Busy about the Father's work? Or sitting with your hand in the foot pot, waiting to be fed. Go Sunday is a perfect opportunity to rouse ourselves...to shake off the slumber...to join with the rest of the Chapel Hill ants and do something great for God. Hundreds of you have signed up; hundreds more will do so this morning. You are excited to worship God by serving our community. Excited to work hard and get filthy and be thrilled with it. Do you know what ants do when they get excited? They rub their antennae! Let's all do a little celebratory antennae rub right now, shall we?

But if...for some reason...it hadn't crossed your mind to be a part of Go Sunday, don't you want to reconsider? If you are reluctant to sign up because it sounds like a lot of work...well, doesn't that sound a little sluggardly? I know that hundreds will leave this service this morning and sign up! Go ants!

Most of the proverbs dealing with work warn that laziness leads to disaster. If you are not willing to work...your reputation, your relationships, your self-worth...all of them will suffer. But there is an opposite side to this work issue that we must touch on. What is it? Workaholism. Michael Ramsden spoke last week of the treadmill; running faster and faster to maintain the same level of false "happiness" which we think we can acquire if only we get that next raise or promotion, that new car, that bigger house.

Perhaps there are a few here this morning who **are** lazy and need a good Solomonic kick in the rump. Who need to pull their hands out of the food pot, get out of bed...and start taking more responsibility for their lives. But Solomon ALSO has something to say about workaholism. 23: 4-5

**Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.**

As I described the sluggard some of you were sneering, weren't you? A little disgusted with THOSE people who refuse to do their share; refuse to work hard. That can't be said of you, right? You know how to work. Early mornings, late nights, most of the week on the road, your Blackberry never far from your ear. Interrupted meals, missed meals, missed band concerts, missed basketball games...your children are shooting past you, you hardly know your wife anymore...**but you know how to work!** Beautiful home. Fat IRA. You can vacation anywhere you want to...if only you had the time.

Solomon has a warning for you, too. **Don't wear yourself out getting rich.** Show some restraint. All those riches you've worked so hard to accumulate...tomorrow they might sprout wings and fly away. And when you look around you will discover that all of the relationships that could have anchored you, even through tough times, have melted into nothing. There are some sluggards here who need to repent of their laziness. There are also some who need to repent of their workaholism. In your mad dash to build a life, you are destroying

everything around you that matters... destroying the only things that you will carry with you into eternity...your relationships.

Remember, the ant understands the seasons. There is a time to work hard. And, there is a time to rest. There are seasons when you go full tilt...and seasons to relax and enjoy the fruit of your labor. The ratio is about 6 to 1. Six days of work, 1 day of rest. If you do not keep the Sabbath...if you do not obey the fourth commandment in your life...you will burn yourself out and your family with you.

So, there are some who ought to work but are lazy. There are some who ought to rest but are addicted. But there is a third group here this morning. You WANT to work! You would LOVE to have the job that someone else is whining about. But this economy has hammered you. You've lost your job, lost your retirement, lost hope! I spoke this week with a man who has TWO professional degrees ...he **is** a hard worker ...and he and his wife are about to lose their home.

Solomon's words are probably painful to you! You want to work. You are willing to do anything. But as hard as you have looked, there is nothing. Here is my prayer for you. I pray that the job you lost will turn out to be an opportunity to discover something even better. I pray that this time of loss and hopelessness will be an opportunity for you to discover God's power and presence. I pray that those who mean the most to you will link arms and hearts and you all will become stronger because of this crisis. I pray that your church family will embrace you and support you. And I pray that God will provide you work.

In fact, that is how I want to end this sermon. I want to pray for you. I want all of us to pray for you. (Invite to stand, church family prays together.)

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Proverbs 6: 6-11; 26: 13-16; 23: 4-5.
2. How did you learn to work? Who taught you? What lessons did you find most valuable?
3. What does "sluggard" mean? What does it not mean? What is the difference between the sluggard and the poor?
4. What work qualities do you find in the story of the ant?
5. The Proverbs present three possible scenarios: the sluggard who tends to be lazy, the workaholic who tends to chase riches, and the worker who lives in balance...who understands the "seasons" of life. Honestly, which of the three best describe you?
6. Where are you right now in your own work life? If you are employed, are you happy? Why or why not? If you are unemployed, can you share what this season has meant in your life? How are you dealing with it? If you are retired, is it meaningful or emptier than you had expected? What kind of "work" have you discovered you need to be doing, even in retirement?

Please pray for each other.