**The Sluggard**
**Proverbs 6:6-11; 24:30-34; 26:12-16**

How much time do you spend at work? Or in your studies? Or keeping home going? Probably most of your waking day. What about your sleeping day? How much time do you spend in bed? Five, eight hours? Which means a huge part of your day is spent either at work or in bed. So it's no wonder that the Book of Proverbs, written to help us live life with skill, has plenty to say about your work *and* about your bed.

But it does so by introducing us to perhaps *the* great comic character of the Bible, the Sluggard. Even his name sounds lazy. Because if, as Proverbs teaches us, the alternative to wisdom is folly, then, according to Proverbs, one pathway to folly is signposted *sloth*. Laziness. And so the Sluggard is held up as someone we can learn from: Proverbs 24:30-32: 'I passed by the field of the sluggard… then I saw *and considered it; I looked and received instruction*.' In other words, Mr Lazybones himself should be an inspiration to us all - you don't want to become one!

But talk about preaching to the choir! Because when it comes to work and sleep, the risk of you being a sluggard is about as high as the risk of me winning a prize for best haircut. And probably most of us don't need to learn how to work harder but how to stop, and put work down.

But that's why what Proverbs has to say is so helpful. Because what it tells us is that the hard thing you're avoiding doing may not be work. And the Sluggard might just be the most hardworking person you know.

So, we're going to look at 4 things: The Sluggard's Nature, the Sluggard's Hallmarks, the Sluggard's Pain, and the Sluggard's Cure.

**The Sluggard's Nature**
Look again at 24:30-31, 'I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.'

Now, has this man inherited the vineyard, and somebody else had planted it, but now it's his and he's let it go to ruin? Or was the vineyard his work, only now he can't be bothered to maintain it? Has he always been lazy, or has he become lazy? We're not told. Either way he's neglected it. He's failed to put in the effort to nurture it and what should be as neat and ordered as any of the vineyards you've walked through in the Lavaux, is an overgrown mess.

Is Proverbs telling you that so you can hone you're gardening skills? No! This is about how someone's life can come to resemble that field. That if we don't apply ourselves to life, life can overwhelm us, and a decay can set in.

And Proverbs 6 tells us why: 'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. *How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?*' (v6-9).

Now, I was once told I had the attention span of a gnat. And things are pretty bad when you get compared unfavourably to an ant, aren't they? But the ant's a self starter. The ant doesn't need mum or dad, a supervisor or a boss on their back telling them what to do. They just do it… by instinct.

But what's instinctive for the sluggard is not work, it's comfort. 'How long will you lie there, O sluggard?' For as long as I can get away with it. For as long as people will leave me alone. For as

long as I can do the minimum and pass. And I'll do it - whatever it is - when I feel like it. The problem is, he never does feel like it.

So the sluggard won't do the hard thing; the thing he doesn't want to do. The problem is, when you've made that a habit of life, when you've been laid in bed for years, and your moral muscles have wasted, everything's hard to do. Everything disturbs your comfort. So, the Sluggard won't have that needed conversation, because it'd be awkward; he won't take that insult on the chin, because that would take self-control. He won't welcome the newcomer at church, because that would put him out.

And so, Proverbs 26:14, 'As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.' So it's not just that the sluggard likes her comfort, she's hinged to it. But, the thing about doors is that there can be lots of activity, lots of opening and closing, and people coming and going, there may even be lots of squeaking noises, drawing attention to it, but there's never any forward progress. And the same is true for the sluggard. There may be lots of activity but no growth, because there's no doing the hard thing. The sluggard just lives for now.

Proverbs 20:4, 'The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.' Why doesn't he plough? Because it's autumn and it's cold and he's just taken in this years harvest, so why worry about the next?

Compare that to the ant, 6:8, who 'prepares her bread in summer, and gathers her food in harvest' because her eye is on the future. But the sluggard lives for now, 'cos YOLO, you only live once! And it's the present moment, my present comfort, or this great experience, that matters! But it's like a sleeping pill to the sluggard.

So being skilled at life is not doing the least amount of work to pass the semester, or getting permission to work remotely so you can visit all the great Instagram sites. It's not even planning your investments so you can retire early and go play golf. It's doing that terribly unsexy thing of getting out of bed, rolling up your sleeves and doing the work today that prepares and provides for tomorrow.

And yet… the sluggard isn't just compared unfavourably with the diligent, hard-working person. In 15:19 he's contrasted with 'the upright', and in 21:26 with 'the righteous'. And in 24:30 he's called 'a man lacking sense'. So it's not just that he's idle about work, he's lazy about godliness.

You see, you and I can be workaholics - spending hours at the office or university library, running on a few hours sleep a day, and still be a sluggard about things that matter - like love for God or love for neighbour - for friends and family. Lazy about acts of service and sacrifice. And our work life, or our homes, can be as ordered and productive as a Swiss vineyard. But the vineyard and garden of our hearts… might that resemble an overgrown bramble patch? We may not be idle in the office or lab, but what about in our pursuit of virtue and growth in character?

I mean, imagine someone who stays working late at the office, rather than going home and helping put the kids to bed. Could it be because the office is easier? Or which is harder, getting to grips with that new project at work, or learning how to understand and pursue your wife, or husband. Or potential wife or husband? And when it comes to your relationship with God, what's easier, Netflix or trying to work out what Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans?

You see, Proverbs 26:15 says, ‘The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth’. And you might go, that is never going to be a problem for me, always happy to eat! But what about feeding your soul? Could there just be sluggardly tendencies there? Do you hit the snooze button rather than get up early to pray? Do you scroll through news websites on your phone rather than picking up your Bible to read? Is a night in way more attractive than the hard work of building relationships in a home group?

So, it’s not just a matter of our work but our hearts. So how can we spot sluggardly tendencies in our hearts?

**The Sluggard’s Hallmarks**

Firstly, the sluggard always has an excuse. Proverbs 26:13, ‘The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in streets!”’ Which, as an excuse for staying in bed, is a pretty good one! The problem is, the sluggard always has a reason why he can’t do what he should. ‘I’m not a morning person.’ ‘With colleagues like mine you wouldn’t be doing great at work either.’ ‘Look, you don’t know what it’s like to live with him.’ And whether it’s work or the spiritual disciplines, is there a habit of rationalising why it’s just not possible to do what you should do?

Secondly, there’s a kind of cowardice to the sluggard. Proverbs 22:13, ‘The Sluggard says, “there is a lion outside!” [Because if an excuse is worth using once, it’s worth using twice!] I shall be killed in the streets!”’ And when sloth gets a grip of our hearts, we start to *imagine* difficulties. As one commentator (Kitchen) says, ‘every shadow is a monster.’ Every challenge is a threat, every molehill becomes a mountain. A mountain way too big to climb.

But think how that unwillingness to do the hard work, for example of deep and clear thinking, robs you of moral courage. You see, if you swallow our current cultural platitudes of ‘you do you’ and ‘you can have your truth and I can have mine’, there’s no Right with a capital R to die defending, no Wrong to die opposing. All hills worth dying on are levelled to a mush of personal opinions and individual taste.

The problem is, *there is* a lion in the street, just not the one the Sluggard thinks. The apostle Peter writes, ‘Be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. *Resist him*, firm in your faith.’ (1 Peter 5:8-9). But the person who won’t do the hard work of thinking, who’s not putting in the effort to grow in faith, forgets he has an enemy, that he’s in a battle, a battle that might take courage to fight.

Thirdly, the sluggard is unteachable. Proverbs 26:16, ‘The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.’ So there’s not just a laziness about labour but about listening , about evaluating the viewpoints and critiques of others, because he’s already convinced he's right. And let’s face it, it’s a lot less work to dismiss people as ‘right wing nut jobs’ or ‘woke progressives’ than carefully examine what they might have to teach us. So you can be a workaholic, but are you doing the harder work of being teachable and correctable?

Fourthly, the sluggard doesn’t start things: Proverbs 6:9, ‘How long will you lie there, O sluggard?’ But neither does he finish things. Proverbs 12:27, ‘Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.’ So, he may go hunting, he may even shoot the deer, but it never quite makes it to the table. He never gets round to actually cooking it. He starts but he doesn’t finish,

So, how's that 'to do' list of yours coming on? Any unfinished DIY jobs around the home? I literally have a pile of timber in our bedroom because I've started a job and 3 months later still not finished it. But like every good sluggard, I also have a pile of excuses! Or what about those resolutions to bring some order to your spiritual life, or spend time in prayer, or read that great book? Do you find yourself starting but not finishing?

Fifthly, the Sluggard is restless. Proverbs 13:4, 'The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.' So it's not that the Sluggard doesn't dream, or have ambitions. It's that he won't do the work required to see those dreams fulfilled. And that leaves him perpetually dissatisfied and *un*fulfilled. Now compare that to the energy of the righteous person who spends herself for others: Proverbs 21:25-26, 'The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labour. All day long he craves and craves, *but the righteous gives and does not hold back.'*.

But notice again where Proverbs locates these desires: 13:4, '*The soul* of the sluggard craves and gets nothing.' So it's not just that he wants physical comfort or rest, or wealth and freedom. There are also desires of the soul, for a sense of worth and significance and purpose, desires for a sense of God and his love. But they remain unfulfilled because personal growth, even personal spiritual growth, requires effort. The effort of retuning our hearts to what God says about us, in his word, and am I willing to make that effort?

Years ago, I was told of someone who said, 'I'll go to church if God wakes me up in the morning.' Proverbs would say, No… you should go to church because you set the alarm and get yourself out of bed in the morning. And so, the sluggard may have the *desire* to grow, but his soul withers, while the diligent flourishes.

So… if we recognise any of those characteristics as being true for us, why should we want to change?

**The Sluggard's Pain**

Proverbs 6, again! 'A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man' (v10-11). A little, a little, a little. A habit of making small, seemingly insignificant decisions to put things off, but they have massive consequences. And it may be financial poverty, but it could just as well be spiritual or moral. And the crash, the moral failure, the deconstruction of faith, may be as sudden as an armed robbery, but the reality is the sluggard's been putting off doing the right things for years. And life has been frittered away a little, a little, a little.

But then look at Proverbs 12:24, 'The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labour.' Now, does that mean, 'if you just work hard enough you will get to the top of the tree, but if you don't it's the Siberian labour camps for you'? No! It's that diligence and laziness lead to different ends. And that habit of putting off doing the right thing, the hard thing, that unwillingness to grow in self-discipline, becomes enslaving. And while diligence at work, or in growth in character and love for God, may lead to increasing responsibility, avoid those things and you're going to find yourself constantly being told by others what to do. Which is deeply ironic, because one of the things the lazy person craves is freedom from others telling him what to do, and yet laziness confines us to a lifetime of being prodded.

But it's not just that he gets told what to do, it's that what he has to do always seems *so hard*. Proverbs 15:19, 'The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.' Now, that doesn't mean that the upright person never encounters difficulties in life, it's that if you compare his life to walking a well paved path, the sluggard's is like try to hack your way through a jungle and everything feels like fighting through a thorn bush.

Relationships seem a tangled mess. The application form for that job - it's impossible. My supervisor, he never gives me enough time. And as for the Bible, no one could understand this, so why try?

But that leaves you vulnerable. Look again at the Sluggard's vineyard, 24:31, 'The ground was covered with nettles, *and its stone wall was broken down*.' Why does a vineyard need a wall? To keep thieves and wild animals out. And to set a boundary, 'this is my property.' But the person who's not applying themselves to work, or the state of their soul, is also likely not protecting their heart. They drop their guard. They let small sins go… and grow. They think taking steps to avoid tempting situations is unrealistic, or close minded, or too demanding. And over time the protective wall crumbles… until the thief, or prowling lion, can walk right in.

And yet, it's not just the sluggard himself who experiences pain. If we don't address sluggardly tendencies they can be pretty irritating for others. I mean, have you ever cooked sausages out on a bonfire, but wherever you stand the smoke always seems to come for you? How enjoyable is smoke in your eyes? Proverbs 10:26: 'Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.' Like that team member who doesn't pull their weight; or the person you delegate something to who lets you down; or you ask someone to give a presentation but they don't do their homework. And you find yourself gritting your teeth, or, as Proverbs puts it, drinking vinegar.

And Proverbs point is, you don't want to be that person. You don't want to be that person to others, and you don't want to be that person for yourself. You don't want to experience the pain or inner poverty that comes with laziness, at work, or in love for God and others.

So, how can you avoid it?

**The Sluggard's Cure**

Number 1, look at nature: Proverbs 6:6 again, 'Go to the ant O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.' So… do it! Go for a walk in nature and look around you. Look at the birds building their nests or the beavers their dams. They're not lazy. Look how the crows hassle and dive-bomb the hawks to protect their young. They're not cowards. Look how the worms turn over the earth, or the bees make their honey. And think, if they're all working away according to their nature, what should I be doing according to mine? The American philosopher, JP Moreland says that is the crucial question today: do you as a human being have a nature? Because it's that nature that tells you how you'll thrive. And he says, a dog has a nature. Chain it in a cage, feed it scraps, never pet it, and it'll never thrive. But feed it and take it on walks and throw it sticks and scratch behind its ears and it'll be as happy as Larry.

So what's your nature. Well, the Bible says you are made in the image of God. You're an image bearer of the sovereign king. So go bring order out of chaos. He's the Creator, so go and make and create. He's the creator of beauty, so go create beautiful art, or music, or websites. He's a warrior, so

go fight for justice. He is love, so invest yourself in deep, lasting relationships. And he is God and you are not, so go glorify him and not yourself. As Paul writes, 'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' So… go do it!

Secondly, look at life. Back to the vineyard: Prov 24:32, 'then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.' So take time to reflect on the lives of people who have shown real fruitfulness or who haven't, and ponder why. One of the things Su and I have done is ask the people we admire how they've done it. What were your disciplines? How did you raise your kids? How did you handle this or that? Or pick up a biography of a great saint, or an effective leader, not just to enjoy the story but to learn from their habits. And when a friend is honest enough to share their failures, let their pain be your teacher.

But thirdly, look at Jesus. You see, when it comes to work, like writing that paper, or changing that diaper, or giving that feedback, or doing the washing up, you need a reason why diligence matters. You need an answer to the question, what's the point? And when it comes to your inner life, you need a reason why making the effort to grow in love for God or others matters.

And the Christian gospel gives you both.

Firstly, there's Jesus' example, because he said he was always about his father's business. He never needed prodding. He knew how to rest but he knew how to get back in the fight. And he models for us a life of prayer and service and work. So read through a gospel and see how he does it.

Then there's his teaching, like the parable of the talents - how God has given you gifts, so don't bury them in the ground, or under the duvet. Use them and multiply them, because a reward lies ahead for the good and faithful servant who does. Then there's the parable of the sheep and the goats: how the unsexy work of caring for the poor and needy and sick and suffering is work done to him. Then there's the parable of the sower, how the thorns and brambles of comfort and ease strangle the fruitfulness out of us. So, take a gospel and study his parables and hear what Jesus has to say about work and rest and the desires of your heart and the treasure greater than any other.

But finally, there's his own work. Because on the cross Jesus took upon himself all our selfish desires, all our missed opportunities, all those times when we have dropped our guard, all our laziness in whatever form, and he did the work of paying for it. So that in him we can find true rest, rather than the hard labour and endless torment our moral, or physical laziness deserves.

Plus, it's his resurrection that he gives our work meaning. You see, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul sets out all the implications of Christ's resurrection, and then, at the end, he says, 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, *be steadfast*, immovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain*.' Why should you be steadfast and courageous for truth? Why should you do the seemingly, trivial, insignificant things of life, like changing diapers or writing papers with diligence? Because Jesus' resurrection tells you, you don't only live once. And resurrection day will be reward day. So the way you live and love and work really does matter.

So look *diligently* at what Jesus has done for you, and let it fill your heart with love for him and then pray and read his word, and meet with his people, even if you have to set the alarm and not hit snooze to do it. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it for his glory. And those sluggardly tendencies will grow just that bit smaller.