

## The Sluggard: 6:6-11

This morning we finish our look at Proverbs, and as we close out the summer holidays and you head back to your desks, we're going to look at what Proverbs has to say about work. And we're going to do that by paying a visit to one of my favourite characters in the Book of Proverbs – the Sluggard.

Now that name alone conveys so much: the slug-gard. And you picture a slug inching its lardy body along the ground, leaving a trail of slime as it goes. But when I think about the work-place and what it is to be a sluggard I'll be honest with you, I don't think many or any of you fit the description. The fact is most of you are here in Switzerland for the very reason that you work hard and your company sees that and invests significant amounts of money to relocate you here.

So what can the Sluggard have to teach you? Well, the truth is, you can be highly successful and effective in one area of your life and neglectful, even sluggardly in others.

So we're going to see the character traits of the sluggard and see how they might apply to us.

### The Sluggard

#### 1. He isn't wise:

Proverbs 6:6 'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.' Now Solomon wouldn't need to urge the Sluggard to go and observe the ant so he might become wise if he was already wise. But one of the fundamental problems the sluggard has is that he or she thinks they are wise when they're not: Proverbs 26:16 – 'the sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly'. You could have a panel of the great and the good, and the sluggard thinks 'huh, they can't teach me anything.'

So whilst others can see the issues in his life, the sluggard won't listen, won't take advice, not out of beligerance but because he genuinely thinks he has nothing to learn from others. So as Solomon addresses his sons, and throughout this book urges on them and us the pursuit of wisdom, we come back again to one of the first principles of what it means to navigate your way through life with wisdom: don't think you've arrived. The sluggard does. Don't think like him, stay teachable.

#### 2. He needs constant prodding:

Unlike the ant, he needs someone to constantly prod him to do stuff: Proverbs 6:6-8 '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.'

The ant doesn't need another ant behind her with a cattle prod. She just gets on with the work. But the sluggard is like a giant lump of lard. He's not going anywhere unless someone keeps pushing him. He has this built in inertia.

Now I'd be surprised if any of you were like that at work. But men, what about your duties as a father and husband. Does your wife have to prod you to take a lead spiritually in the family? To get away from the TV and lead? Ladies that's not a cart-blanche for nagging, but men just consider: are you type A at work and sluggard at home?

### **3: The sluggard doesn't plan or prepare:**

The ant does, Proverbs 6:8 – she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest' but not the sluggard. He won't do the necessary planning and preparation needed to reap the harvest, he thinks he can just reap: Proverbs 20:4 'The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.' Notice the sluggard still looks at harvest time, having not plowed or planted he still goes out into the fields looking and no doubt feels aggrieved that the crops he didn't plant haven't grown. It never dawns on him that to get crops out this end, he has to plow and put seed in this end.

Now could that be you? You're not as bad as the sluggard – he's deliberately exaggerated. But maybe you're not into planning, and you like spontaneity. The problem is your wife or husband or colleagues are frustrated because they can never pin you down, never get you to commit. They want to plan but you're like a butterfly, flitting around and maybe you'll land on something but maybe you wont. And that's the way you like but it's driving some one else bananas.

But Proverbs says that the wise man both plans and commits – Proverbs 16:3 'Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will succeed' so first he plans – so there's nothing unspiritual or restrictive about that, but then he commits it to the Lord: and if God chooses to bring it about so be it. He's happy, he's free in that: he's not hide-bound by his plans, because they're in God's hands.

### **4. When it comes to work life balance, the sluggard has it wrong:**

Proverbs 6:9 'How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?' The sluggard is so laid back he's horizontal. Proverbs 26:14 says 'As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.' – He's like a perpetual teenager: as one commentator has said 'he's not just chained to his bed, he's hinged to it!' He's the college guy or 30 something who's still playing computer games till 3 in the morning. He's the kind of guy who doesn't get up let alone grow up.

Now Proverbs presents a wonderful caricature. But could there be just a hint, the merest whiff of the sluggard about us? Have you ever resented work just a bit, or your responsibilities at home just a bit, because they are intruding on your time? And there are all these things that you want to be doing – like surfing the net, or reading the paper, daydreaming and work or the kids or your wife keeps getting in the way and you become increasingly negative and resentful about it, and if it's work you might even become half-hearted about it. Well, that's the seed of the sluggard. You can be type A personality when it comes to your needs and desires but the sluggard when it comes to those of your wife or husband or kids. Don't let that seed grow!

### **5. He doesn't start things:**

It's not that he's a slow starter, but you can depend on him in the end, sort of slow and steady wins the day. He just doesn't start. Proverbs 6:10 'a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest.' With the sluggard it's always 'a little, a little, a little.' I'll do it later, just let me have five more minutes. So, the next time you hit the snooze button on your alarm clock, remember that's the button the sluggard presses.

And the problem is those 'littles' build into 'bigs'. Proverbs 24:30-34 'I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. 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.'

Little things – the little choices of life - have a cumulated impact. Now I don't suspect for a moment that your working life resembles the sluggard's field. But just think about that with regard to the spiritual disciplines of your life. Or your physical body. Or the attention you pay your children. Or other key relationships. Are you in danger of dismissing the cumulative power and impact of the little things? Someone was telling me this week how by just instituting a short daily prayer time: committing the day to the Lord, thinking about him, praying for the day, had had a profoundly positive impact on his life over the last two years. That's a very small thing. But it was reversing the sluggard's tendency, who thinks the 'littles' don't count.

Now, none of us want our inner life, or our relationships, to resemble the Sluggard's field, overgrown with weeds, so take stock, survey the field and give attention to the little things.

**6. He doesn't finish things:** If the sluggard does get round to starting something, he never quite follows it through. Proverbs 19:24 'The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.' Proverbs 26:15 says 'it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.' He goes so far but quits halfway. Proverbs 12:27: 'Whoever is slothful will not roast his game' – if he sets off in pursuit, he doesn't stick with it till he catches it; if he manages to catch it, he doesn't ever get round to roasting it. The Sluggard doesn't last the distance.

Now the danger, especially in Christian circles is that the sluggard can be mistaken for a visionary, because they can seem very spiritual: they have all these great ideas, start all these ministries, but then they get bored, and they leave others to struggle and limp along while they dash on to the next thing.

Now I'm sure that there is a difference between pioneers and homesteaders. But sometimes it's less of the pioneer and more of the sluggard who doesn't finish what he starts, who ducks the responsibility of following through on a project, whose commitment wanes, and who doesn't want to be tied down by responsibility.

And in the home, men, if we are in the habit of starting a DIY project but never quite finishing it, or if at work you come up with great ideas but never quite complete a project. Just ask the question: am I a sluggard?

### **7. He's irritatingly untrustworthy:**

Proverbs 10:26 says 'Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.' – in the work place the sluggard is just plain irritating. And you've probably had a colleague or two like this. The more senior I got as a doctor, the more convinced I was that sluggards were over-represented amongst junior doctors. This is the junior colleague who you give a task to, but they consistently fail to achieve, not for lack of ability, but through lack of effort and application. You want them to succeed, you want to give them a go, but they just don't rise to it. And such a person is worse than neutral – Proverbs 18:9 my college friends favourite proverb – 'one who is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys'. It's not just neutral, it's destructive.

### **8. He always has an excuse:**

with the sluggard there's always a reason for why something can't be done: Proverbs 22:13 – 'The sluggard says, 'there is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!' 'I can't possibly do that', he says, 'get up and get a job?! Think of the risks!

Again, when it comes to your work, I doubt that's going to be you, but how easy it is to be a sluggard when it comes to our walk with Jesus and to obeying His call to radical discipleship on our lives. You sense him prompting you to talk to someone, and you think 'no I couldn't possibly do that, what might they think of me?' You feel the Holy Spirit convicting you about some area of your life, calling you to obedience, and instead of obeying you think 'no, think what I stand to lose.'

And so rather than respond in humble, dependent obedience and faith, the Sluggard ducks it. He thinks of the reasons not to. And slowly he even comes to believe it – maybe there is a lion out there! And for the spiritual sluggard his excuses, his fear, his evaluation of the risks and cost involved in following Jesus becomes bigger than Jesus and they dominate his thinking.

### **9. He may want to change but he does nothing about it.**

To understand the sluggard, you have to understand that his problems are not because he lacks desire. The sluggard wishes things were different, he just doesn't do anything about it: Proverbs 13:4 'the soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.' Whether it's work or his walk with God, the sluggard dreams of change, of being different, of getting this thing sorted, but he won't commit himself to a course of action to bring that change about. It's not a lack of desire, but it is a terminal, deadly lack of application.

And that unfulfilled desire for things to be different, that craving which the sluggard does nothing about it, those half-baked promises he makes to himself

that this time it's going to be different, when they're not met or acted on, slowly kill his soul. Proverbs 21:25-26 'the desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labour.'

Now have you ever known what that's like? Have you ever had that sense of dissatisfaction with your walk with God? You wish you knew Him better. You wish your prayer life had some life. You wish you read the Bible. You wish you had some measure of victory over the sin that you keep stumbling over. But whilst you wish things were different, you don't ever quite get round to doing anything about it. There's always a reason not to. Or if you do, it works for a bit, but you don't ever seem able to keep it up. And after a while the desire or the belief that things could be different, dies.

Well, the truth that the sluggard needs to hear, that we all need to hear, is that there are no shortcuts. The sluggard wishes there were, but there aren't: Proverbs 13:4 is right: it's the soul of the diligent that is richly supplied, literally, that grows fat. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews it's those who diligently seek God who get rewarded by Him. But stuck to that truth there is also the promise. That the soul of the diligent, the soul of the man or woman who sets themselves to seek after God and passionately pursue him, will be richly supplied, his soul will grow fat; and God will reward those who diligently seek him.

#### **10. And finally, for the sluggard, one bad choice leads to another:**

Proverbs 15:19 says 'the way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.' Just imagine a footpath overgrown with brambles. It's so thick with them you can barely see the path. That's what happens to the sluggard's life. His issues get more and more tangled, he won't address them, he doesn't take a hedge trimmer to the thorns, he leaves them to grow and slowly and steadily the path of his life is filled with them.

And the irony is that in taking the path of least resistance, in the end the sluggard's path is covered with resistance, one long hedge of thorns.

In contrast the path of the upright is a level highway. And yet Proverbs never sees life through rose-tinted spectacles. It doesn't pretend life is easy, that life won't be messy. Proverbs 14:4 says 'Where there is no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.' In other words, if you want to reap a harvest you have to put up with the mess the ox makes. And just as a spotless barn means no oxen, and no oxen means no crops, so a trouble free life is no indication of true success. And the farmer may get tired of the muck and the smell, but as someone has said: 'there's no milk without manure.' No muck, no milk.

And sometimes the path to the kind of success that matters, is messy. The path of the righteous may be level, but that's because he's sweated with the hedge trimmer to cut back the thorns. In the UK, our house was surrounded by these 10-foot high massive hedges. And it seemed that whichever day I picked to trim them would always turn out to be the hottest of the year. I would end up covered

in sweat and cobwebs and there would be hedge trimmings everywhere. And if you recognize anything of the sluggard in you with regard to your work, or your relationships, or your spiritual life, or how you care for your physical body, when you start cutting back the thorns, it may get messy and dirty and you might spill some sweat in the process. If you start doing stuff right, you may get some flack. Some of that ox manure might just hit the fan. You may do stuff other people don't like. You might make mistakes. But that's ok. It means the sluggard is getting unscrewed from his bed.

But there's a danger in all this, and that is that we can tip the other way and think it's only by getting all these areas sorted and applying ourselves and cutting out sluggardly tendencies wherever we see them, that we can impress God and get or stay in his good books. And in finishing Proverbs there's a danger that we go away thinking ok, I've got to pursue wisdom and make these kind of right choices and if I do I'll earn His favour on my life. If we do that then we have mistaken the root and the fruit.

### **The Root and the Fruit**

Jesus told the story of the prodigal son. A man, a farmer, had two sons. The younger one pretty much fulfills the character traits of the sluggard. He persuades his dad to give him his inheritance now and goes off and wastes it. His older brother made no such poor choices. He worked and served and led the moral, upright kind of life older brothers do, whilst his younger brother's life unraveled. But the younger brother came to his senses, realized what a mess he had made of things, resolved to turn back and throw himself on the mercy of his father. He had learnt the hard way that he didn't deserve anything from his dad, that he no longer deserved to be called his son, so would humbly serve him as a slave.

But his father had other ideas. This man who had been so misused, had waited for the day his son would come back. And one day as he scanned the horizon hoping to see his son heading home, he saw him, ran towards him and before the son had a chance to say anything threw his arms around him and embraced his son, who did not deserve to be called his son, as his son. That is a powerful picture of God's grace to us.

But what about the older son? When he learnt what was going on he bitterly resented it, and he told his father so. He had never taken a penny, he had worked and slaved whilst his brother played. He'd never taken a nap behind the haybales or taken a goat to roast for a party. And he resented, bitterly resented his father's grace towards his young sluggard of a brother.

Do you know who Jesus told that story to? It wasn't to sluggards, to those who were like the younger brother. It was to religious people, people like us, who are in danger of thinking we are made right with God by behaving right and having it all together like the older brother. And Jesus' point was that salvation is by God's grace, to people like us who don't deserve it, and can't earn it, but throw themselves on the Father's mercy. They don't earn it, don't deserve it, haven't worked for it: it's grace.

And getting our lives sorted: pursuing wisdom, serving God, cutting out the sluggard attitude at work or home or in our inner life, is not the root of our justification, of our being made right in God's sight. It's the fruit. The root of our justification is God's grace to us in Jesus, him taking the punishment on the cross for the things we do wrong, and our putting our trust in his work, not in our work. That's the root. But the fruit of that in our lives is a life increasingly like that of Jesus. And there's no room for the sluggard there.