

Wisdom in Work: How to succeed in work

Bible readings: Proverbs 31:10-31; John 17:1-5

Introduction:

What does success look like in work?

Does success in your work mean climbing up the ladder or getting a pay rise?

Does it mean getting your assignments done early, or getting HDs in most of your assessments?

Does being successful in your work mean you are optimising and capitalising every moment of your day?

Or are you really succeeding if you don't have to work anymore, because your business has expanded so much that others do the work for you now and you can just sit back and relax?

This is an important question.

Whether you are at home mothering children, or working at a fast-food restaurant, maybe studying at uni, or possibly even retired or unable to work due to health or other circumstances, what does success look like?

As a Christian, who's Lord and saviour is Jesus, how can we succeed in life?

We have just heard Caitlyn read from Proverbs chapter 31. That woman sounds like a picture of a success!

She is married, has a loving husband, has great responsibilities and is very successful (in fact, seems quite wealthy). She is raising children and seems to be very busy with her time.

Is this what Proverbs is saying? We should all be like her, an entrepreneur in our own way?

No, I don't think so, but I do think there are many lessons to be learnt from the Proverbs 31 woman and also from the wisdom found in the rest of the Proverbs.

Now, I know the thought of a sermon on work can cause mixed emotions. Work could be a sore spot, maybe you're struggling to find work, maybe you're experiencing difficult conditions in your job, maybe you can't decide what you want to do, or you can't work at this time.

This is a topic that can easily divide, but it is an important topic for everyone to think about. It is a topic we should be biblically informed about and not just floating along with what the world is telling us to do.

The Proverbs were penned in an agrarian society, how can they apply to us? These people cultivated the land enduring tiring work; I study at a desk and use a computer. Gladly, succeeding in our work in a biblical sense hasn't changed too much over the centuries.

So as we look into the Proverbs to search out what success is for a Christian, I am going to make 3 points:

First, we will look at how not to succeed. That is the unwise way of work embodied in the Sluggard of Proverbs.

Second, we will look at some good examples of what success actually looks like in work. And in the **third** point, we will think through how we are going with being successful in our work and where we might need to change to apply this.

I will be referring to lots of verses scattered throughout Proverbs.

As I do that, the verses will also come up on the screen and they can be found in the outline and transcript.

So **first off**, we look at a bad example of work.

This bad example is seen in the Sluggard or Slacker.

We are first introduced to Slacker in chapter 6:6-11.

It says: Go to the ant, you slacker!

Observe its ways and become wise.

⁷ Without leader, administrator, or ruler,

⁸ it prepares its provisions in summer;

it gathers its food during harvest.

And then there is the comparison:

⁹ How long will you stay in bed, you slacker?

When will you get up from your sleep?

¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the arms to rest,

¹¹ and your poverty will come like a robber,

your need, like a bandit.

The Slacker is a habitually lazy person.

Laziness isn't just seen in his dread of getting out of bed, it encompasses everything he does.

20:4 says "The slacker does not plow during planting season; at harvest time he looks, and there is nothing."

That is certainly no way to succeed at work.

Unfortunately, it is not just in the ploughing and harvesting seasons that he is slacking off.

24:30-34 says: I went by the field of a slacker

and by the vineyard of one lacking sense.

³¹ Thistles had come up everywhere,

weeds covered the ground,

and the stone wall was ruined.

³² I saw, and took it to heart;
I looked, and received instruction:
And see again, the same refrain. Poverty will strike.

³³ a little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the arms to rest,
³⁴ and your poverty will come like a robber,
and your need, like a bandit.

The Slacker hasn't bothered to mend the stone wall and pull out the weeds when it is the off season, when there is no harvesting and planting to be done.
You might walk past and wonder if anyone even lives there or owns that land!

The plight of the Slacker is quite bleak

19:15: Laziness induces deep sleep,
and a lazy person will go hungry.

That is the result. There won't be any food because work hasn't been done.

Now we need to remember that times have changed a little bit.
I myself have never planted or harvested crops.
I don't plough and I don't have a vineyard with a stone wall.

It is the principle of work behind these Proverbs that we must learn from.

Many of the Proverbs make comparisons and contrasts between the way of wisdom and the way of the fool. This is done by using parallelism.

In the verses we have looked at so far, the Slacker is being a fool, and neglecting the wise ways of wisdom.

This wisdom is not like the wisdom of the world.
Although common sense tells us that if we don't make money, we won't be able to buy food, the wisdom of Proverbs goes deeper than that.

9:10 says:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

If fearing the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then surely this means that the way of wisdom is through love and obedience to God.

Therefore, practicing the ways of folly, like the Slacker, goes against God's will for us.

The Slacker ignores God and his wisdom, and consequently does not succeed in his work.

13:4 says: The slacker craves, yet has nothing,
but the diligent is fully satisfied.

It really doesn't make sense to chase after the ways of this world and its wisdom which lead to dissatisfaction and poverty.

15:19 says: A slacker's way is like a thorny hedge,
but the path of the upright is a highway.

Practicing the ways of a Slacker doesn't only affect the person themselves.

Besides potentially not providing for their family, a Slacker causes others trouble.

25:19 says: Trusting an unreliable person in a difficult time
is like a rotten tooth or a faltering foot.

No one wants a tooth ache!!

And 10:26 says: Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so the slacker is to the one who sends him on an errand.

He's going to let you down!

This reminds me of when I used to work in telecommunications.

We often had a set outage window. And within that window we would swap old equipment
for new equipment as part of an upgrade.

Often we were adding new systems that required upgrades to power and so on.

On one occasion, we had installed the new equipment and went to power it up to find it
was not working!

To my disappointment, the person responsible for the power upgrade had only done half
the job.

So as the end of our outage window drew closer, we had to complete someone else's work,
to ensure our work would power up.

Its not only frustrating when a job is only half done, but it also burdens others!!

And the Slacker is just the same. He is lazy, unreliable, more concerned about sleep than
providing for himself and his family, and he also makes up excuses for his habits.

26:13: The slacker says, "There's a lion in the road—
a lion in the public square!"

It's like he says: What if I go outside, or what if I twist my ankle in the field, what if I get
attacked by a bear???

The proverb goes on:

¹⁴ A door turns on its hinges,
and a slacker, on his bed.

¹⁵ The slacker buries his hand in the bowl;
he is too weary to bring it to his mouth!

¹⁶ In his own eyes, a slacker is wiser
than seven who can answer sensibly.

This is not success.

It is not success in the world's eyes, and it is certainly not success in God's eyes.

So, what is the alternative?

How can we succeed in our work?

What is the wise way to go about our work?

This is **point 2**

A start to this is by listening to instruction.

If we are going to succeed in our work, we can't just do it on our own.

We need instruction and wisdom, not just our own knowledge and skill.

Proverbs 6 warns against adultery, but verse 20-23 gives wisdom that goes beyond just sexual temptation.

It says: (6:20-23) My son, keep your father's command, and don't reject your mother's teaching.

²¹ Always bind them to your heart;

tie them around your neck.

²² When you walk here and there, they will guide you;

when you lie down, they will watch over you;

when you wake up, they will talk to you.

²³ For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life.

We are told here that commands and instruction are to be valued for their guidance in life.

To put it a different way, to succeed in work is to be FAT. F-A-T.

You may be familiar with this acronym which stands for faithful, available, and teachable.

Making some small changes to that, it can be applied to work.

To be FAT in our work is to be: Faithful, accountable, and teachable

Faithful to God and our responsibilities

Accountable to God and diligent in our actions

Teachable, willingly accepting correction and instruction

If we practice being FAT people, it will help us in learning the way of success in work.

If we are to succeed, we will never be content with knowing and doing the minimum required of us.

We might be tempted to only learn enough to get the bare minimum done. And this might save energy,

but 18:15 says: The mind of the discerning acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks it.

You shouldn't just scrape by in life, but you should seek to be well informed for every task.

To succeed in your work, you don't only need to have knowledge, you also need to plan. That seems to be part of the problem with the Slacker, he doesn't plan, therefore nothing gets done.

21:5, The plans of the diligent certainly lead to profit,
but anyone who is reckless certainly becomes poor.

The way of the wise worker reflects this:

Proverbs 12:14:

A person will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth,
and the work of a person's hands will reward him.
If we put the necessary work in, we will receive the reward.

We don't work aimlessly without a plan or goal in mind. We seek an outcome when we work at something.

16:26 says: A worker's appetite works for him
because his hunger urges him on.

At the most basic level, our stomach spurs us on to work. If you hear your stomach rumbling, it is a reminder that to feed yourself, you need to work.

But it is not okay to earn money by any means to feed ourselves.

15:27, The one who profits dishonestly troubles his household,
but the one who hates bribes will live.

We must be honest in our work and dealings.

16:11, Honest balances and scales are the LORD's;
all the weights in the bag are his concern.

The way of success is in the fear of the Lord.

If we fear the Lord, we will not extort people for our own gain.

In fact, 15:16 says, Better a little with the fear of the LORD
than great treasure with turmoil.

We are far better off living in humble circumstances than to have great wealth and troubles. It is better to meet only the essential needs in life than to make a living by dishonest methods or by wronging our neighbour.

And if fear of the Lord guides our actions, we will complete our work before seeking our own interests.

Proverbs 24:27, Complete your outdoor work, and prepare your field;
afterward, build your house.

In other words, don't pursue your hobbies or home improvements at the cost of getting
your work done and fulfilling your responsibilities!

The verses we have looked at are scattered throughout Proverbs, and it can be hard to get a
sense of what all this wisdom looks like in practice.

Earlier we heard Proverbs 31 in the bible reading.
It describes a wife of noble character.
These verses give us an example that goes beyond just work for money.

This woman succeeds in all areas of her work.
Turn to chapter 31 with me and see her amazing attitude to work!

Verse 11: She is trustworthy, her husband trusts her
She is industrious and works with her hands:

Verse 13: she selects wool and flax

14: she buys

24: she sells

She doesn't roll over in bed and hit the snooze button

Verse 15: she rises while it is still dark!

And 27: she is never idle.

Verse 19: She works with willing hands and isn't afraid of hard work.

Her family is well provided for: Verse 21 & 22

She even extends her hand and cares for the poor: verse 20

Her words don't tear down, but (verse 26) she speaks wisdom and loving instruction

And near the end in verse 30 it concludes with these words:

Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting,
but a woman who fears the LORD will be praised.

This is success in work!

So what about us?

How do we compare to the Proverbs 31 woman?

If we're honest, she sets that bar very high!!

So how are we to understand and apply it?

In reality, not many of us find ourselves in situations where we are engaging in many different areas of business. This lady is raising children, feeding the family, making linen and clothes.

She buys land and constructs a vineyard, she is physically strong and capable.

This list is not only exhaustive, but I find it exhausting to think about!

But that is why the description is so helpful.

It gives us a big picture of what being successful in lots of different areas looks like.

For you, that success could be in the work of keeping the home and raising children.

Succeeding in your work does not mean you have to earn the big bucks and have investments properties like the world tells you.

The point is, whatever circumstances you find yourself in at this time, whatever gifts and opportunities God has placed before you, it is what you do with them that determines your success in your work.

Let's apply this to ourselves in **point 3**

If success in your work is doing your best where God has placed you.

Where might you need to change?

It is clear from Proverbs that we should be faithful with our time, resources, and skills, but work has been ordained for us from the beginning.

In Genesis, God both sets an example himself in his work of creation, but also commands Adam to work the land and watch over it in Genesis 2.

We are made to be fruitful and not idle in our work.

As everyone has their own unique circumstances, there will be different ways of applying this for each of us.

Some of us work, some study, some are unable to work, for some our work is unpaid, maybe its at home with children or grandchildren.

For most of us, our work is actually a combination of these.

Whatever your circumstances, are you practicing the wisdom of Proverbs?

Are you succeeding at your work?

With so many distractions in the world and things at our fingertips, are you making excuses for your laziness like the Slacker?

Do you procrastinate at work or with your study?

Do you neglect to plan and never end up getting things done? At least not early enough anyway.

Is your time consumed, being busy with lots of things, but those things are not God-honouring uses of your time?

Have you got an amazing work ethic 9-5, Monday to Friday, but when you get home, you switch off and neglect your responsibilities?

You leave the dishes for another person to do, you spend hours on your phone scrolling social media or playing games when you could engage with your housemates or spouse.

Are your weekends all booked out because you are busy doing sport or other activities, but you haven't set aside time to rest, time to read God's word, time to meet with other believers?

In your study at uni, do you research for assignments and study for exams just to get a pass grade?

Do you only focus on the areas you think will be on the paper, but neglect to completely learn the content?

Have you read the book you are writing a review on, or are you seeking to just get by doing the minimum, just "wing it"?

These are probing questions, and I know myself that I fail to live the wise way of work. I'm a student. With physical labour I don't have to think twice about getting on and doing the work, but I find it much harder to be motivated with academic studies.

Although it might be difficult, that doesn't make it right to procrastinate.

I'm convicted that just because I struggle to start writing an essay, this is no excuse for laziness!

Even when the start of semester is busy, I still need to plan so things are not left to the last minute.

Being married, I see how my lack of planning or tendency to procrastinate doesn't only affect me. Like the Slacker, being lazy or doing a half-hearted job affects those around us too.

So hear these words

In Colossians 3:23, Paul writes:

²³ Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, ²⁴ knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.

Whether you are a Christian or not, if you have been convicted by what we have looked at tonight, if you recognise that you have not been faithful in your work, don't lose hope.

Even better than the example of the wife of noble character is the Lord Jesus.

From the earliest age, Jesus was succeeding in his work. Whether that was debating the law in the temple as a teenager or learning the tricks of the trade in carpentry, he diligently and faithfully did his work.

And when it came to his biggest task, the mission he was sent down to earth to do, he completed it without procrastination.

He didn't cut corners by quietly proclaiming the truth of the gospel and shying back from controversy with the religious leaders.

He came down, he revealed God to us and died on the cross to cover our sin!

In John 17, Jesus says: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him. ³ This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent —Jesus Christ. ⁴ I have glorified you on the earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with that glory I had with you before the world existed."

Jesus' work was not easy, but he did not shrink back from completing it, even to the point of crucifixion to pay for sins that weren't even his own!

So, as you recognise your short fallings, whether that be in your work or other areas of life, come to the cross and embrace Jesus as the Lord of your life, the director of your destiny, and the saviour of your soul who has redeemed you from the death your sins deserve.

In these moments of conviction, confession and repentance, may you be filled with joy as you thank our Heavenly Father for the faithful work of the Son that brings us every good and perfect gift!

So as we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight, this is a chance to remember and give thanks for the death of Jesus on the cross for us.

I'll finish with the words of Colossians 3:17,

And whatever you do, [whether] in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Let's pray.