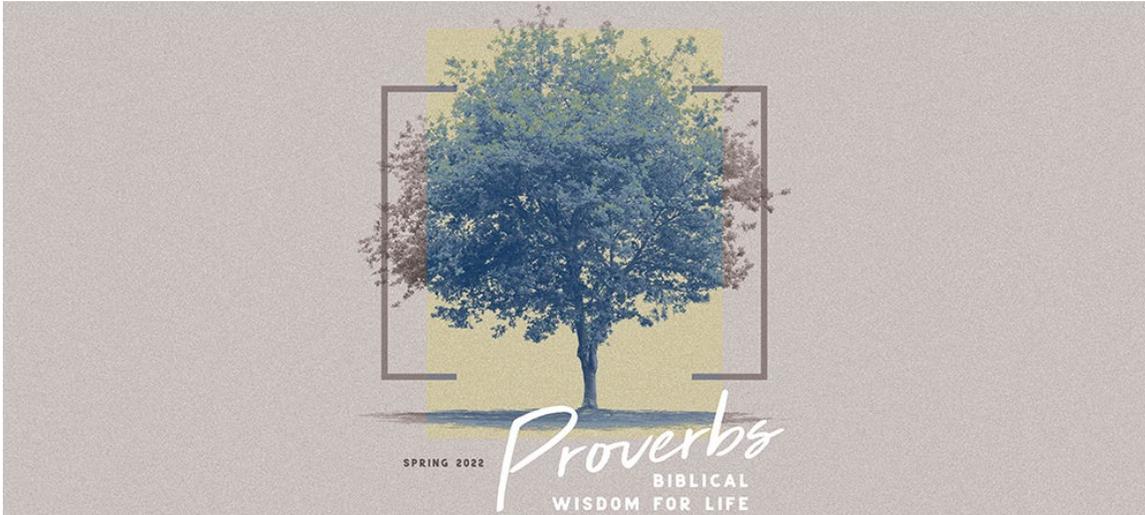


Week 23: Proverbs: Wisdom in the Workplace

Hook



Main Point: Followers of Jesus commit their work to the Lord and practice biblical principles in all that they do in the workplace.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average male held 12.6 jobs (“job” here is defined as an uninterrupted period of work with a particular employer) and the average female held 12.3 jobs in their lifetime.¹ Teacher, engage your LifeGroup with the following questions:

Q: How many jobs have you held up to this point in your career and which one did you enjoy most?

Q: If money did not get in the way of your decision, what would you choose as a dream job?

Q: What would the workplace environment be like in your dream job?

Q: What do an ideal coworker, employee and boss look like?

Week 23: Proverbs: Wisdom in the Workplace

Book

Main Point: Followers of Jesus commit their work to the Lord and practice biblical principles in all that they do in the workplace.

Proverbs 10:5; 10:26; 12:11; 16:3; and 20:13 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Commit your work to the Lord and give it your all.

Q: What practical advice does Solomon give in these passages?

Q: What does it mean to commit your work to the Lord?

Proverbs 10:5 uses contrasting (or antithetical) parallelism: the prudent son who gathers crops versus the disgraceful son who sleeps during harvest. This is in the context of an agrarian society in which most families grew their own food on their own family farms, so the imagery of harvest and “working the land” were quite universal.ⁱⁱ Today we could apply these same principles to all kinds of work. It is prudent to work hard to provide for your family, but disgraceful to be lazy when you could be working. This proverb isn’t talking about people who can’t work because of a disability, but specifically those who are lazy.

The imagery is of he who “loves sleep” (20:13), but it doesn’t have to literally mean someone who sleeps too much; their laziness could take on other forms. It’s just an idiom for slothfulness. “Staying awake” doesn’t literally mean never sleeping (it’s wise and healthy to get good rest!); it’s an idiom for vigorous, active conduct.ⁱⁱⁱ This doesn’t mean the “prudent son” has to make a certain amount of money or have a certain kind of career or that in order to be successful you can’t ever sleep, but that all of us should work hard to provide what our families need.

Proverbs 12:11 contrasts the one who “works his land” with he who “follows worthless pursuits” or as the NIV translates it, “chases fantasies.” Commentators tell us this isn’t about chasing other things besides work but chasing get-rich quick schemes instead of being diligent to do the necessary work before you.^{iv} This is possibly even more tempting for us than it was for those in ancient Israel, as there are so many more offers for get-rich-quick schemes in our world. Working your “own land” can be applied today to doing the work laid out before you at your current job (and at home), even if it’s difficult or mundane or not what you would have dreamed. Both because it’s the right thing to do and because prudence and diligence will get you farther than any schemes. If

you aren't happy with your work, you can get trained in something else or switch jobs, but don't neglect the work before you today to chase fantasies.

Proverbs 10:26 gives us very vivid imagery – vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes are both irritants and hindrances to progress.^v If you send a lazy person on a mission for you, the mission won't get done and you will be frustrated or irritated. “Sluggard” doesn't just mean someone who is slow at getting things done. Lots of people are slow because they're meticulous and careful to do a good job. This is talking about someone who is lazy and doesn't really care about his or her work.^{vi} We've likely all experienced this truth in the workplace, when you've been put on a team with lazy people or have lazy people working for you or even working above you! It not only makes it harder to get the work accomplished, it's also frustrating for those who are working hard to have to work with someone who is lazy.

Solomon also tells us to that if we want our plans to be successful (literally “established” or “firm”), we must “commit our work to the Lord” (16:3). The word for “commit” here literally means “to roll” – the imagery of rolling your burdens onto the Lord (Psalm 37:5; 55:22). Committing our work to the Lord doesn't mean that we have to make our careers a “ministry” in the traditional sense of the word. If you're a writer, you don't have to write explicitly Christian books for your work to be a ministry. A teacher doesn't have to work in a Christian school for his or her work to be ministry, any more than a Christian plumber doesn't have to work only for Christian clients or play Christian music as he's working or have a fish symbol on his business card. Committing your plans to God means trusting Him with your career and future. It means seeking His plan for your life and following that, not just what you think you want to do. When we trust God with our careers and lives, it gives us a supernatural peace that even if things get tough, we know that we are where we're supposed to be, in His will.^{vii}

It also means, as Paul writes, doing your work “heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Colossians 3:23), no matter what your job is, whether it's a “secular” job or a “ministry” one. Because for Christians, *every* job is a ministry whether it seems overtly so or not, simply because we reflect Christ to others in all that we say and do. What makes your job a ministry isn't that you play Christian music while you work or have a fish symbol on your business card or have a Bible study at work (though those are good things to do). It's the way that you treat people and your integrity and work ethic. If people see you doing shady things with money or treating coworkers poorly, that will be more of a reflection on Christ than anything you overtly say about your faith.

Q: Describe a time when you were a witness for Christ in your workplace.

Q: What would it look like for you to do your work heartily “as unto the Lord”? Is there anything you should change about the way you work in order to fit that description?

Q: How has your faith impacted the way in which you work?

Proverbs 15:22; 20:18; and 25:11–12 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Learn to take criticism graciously and welcome feedback.

Q: Describe how workplace gossip can create a “fire” that spreads and destroys.

Q: Why is it especially important to be able to take constructive criticism and feedback well in a workplace environment?

We’ve already talked about these next two concepts (talking point #1 and #2) in general in our study of Proverbs. But today, we specifically want to apply those things to the workplace. First, welcoming correction is not just a wise thing to do, it is absolutely essential to success in your career. You simply will not grow in your skills, acumen, and working relationships if you don’t accept constructive criticism, learn from it, and apply it to your work.

Proverbs 25:12 describes listening to reproof and correction like “a gold ring” – very valuable.^{viii} We should *want* to receive rebuke and correction, especially in the workplace. It can only help us get better at our jobs. People who are always defensive about feedback, or who never agree that they did anything wrong, or can’t admit that they could do it better, will find it difficult to grow – *and* they will probably not be given more opportunities by their bosses. Employers are looking for people who are teachable. You may think that asking for help or admitting you don’t know something at work is a sign of weakness, but actually both employers and recruiters prefer someone who is willing to learn and improve. No one wants an employee who already thinks they know it all!^{ix}

Proverbs 15:22 tells us that plans with many advisers will succeed, while ones without counsel fail. In the workplace, the more advice, feedback and help you can get, the better your work will be. Of course, you want to “consider the source” and make sure the people you’re getting advice from know what they’re talking about. And if you do, getting advice, help and correction can only make your work stronger, just like having a coach work with you on correcting your tennis swing or basketball shot. Many people even ask coworkers or bosses for feedback on their own to improve themselves. Some professionals even suggest doing a regular “360-Degree Feedback” which is confidential,

anonymous feedback from people who work “all around you” – above, below and with you. The most successful leaders are great at giving productive feedback to those who work for them and are humble enough to want to receive feedback, too.^x

Q: Describe a time you received feedback that helped you grow in your work.

Q: What has prevented you from receiving and implementing healthy feedback and correction in the past?

Q: How can you use feedback and correction more effectively in your career?

Proverbs 11:12–13; 20:19; and 26:20–21 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Do not engage in workplace gossip.

Q: Describe how workplace gossip can create a “fire” that spreads and destroys.

Q: In what ways might the workplace foster gossip?

Gossip can easily spread like wildfire in the workplace (26:20–21). Not only do you have typical gossip and backbiting that you would have in any community, such as high school, PTA, or even church, but in the workplace, you also have some people who use gossip and slander and putting others down so that they may get ahead in their own careers. The word for gossip in Proverbs literally means “slanderer” (20:19). Gossip is not just “joking around” or spreading silly stories, it’s intentionally trying to tear another person down. Those who participate in it are being hurtful. The workplace can be one of the worst places for slander because so many people are stepping on other people to “climb the ladder” themselves.^{xi}

Proverbs tells us that slanderers can’t be trusted (11:13). If someone gossips to you about a coworker, how can you trust that he or she isn’t gossiping *about you* to someone else? Solomon also calls gossips “simple babblers” (20:19). It is “simple minded” to gossip about people – it doesn’t take any special intelligence or skill. And often, the gossip just goes on and on (“babbling”) because the more they babble, the more people listen and the more attention they get. *Strong’s Concordance* even uses the term “scandal-monger” because slanderers feed off scandals and drama.^{xii}

Proverbs tells us simply to not associate with a gossip (20:19) and thereby take away the fuel of the fire (26:20).

Q: Describe a time you have seen gossip or slander destroy a workplace?

Q: Why is gossip in the workplace alluring? What techniques have you used in the past to avoid associating it or putting a stop to it?

Week 23: Proverbs: Wisdom in the Workplace

Took

Main Point: Followers of Jesus commit their work to the Lord and practice biblical principles in all that they do in the workplace.

Describe the most impactful mission trip you've experienced. What kingdom impact was made? How long were you on the trip? Now, imagine that the trip was expanded to 83 days. That's roughly the number of days that a full-time employee devotes to the workplace each year ((40 hours x 50 weeks) / 24 hours per day). Imagine what the Lord might do at your job if you considered it a mission field. Take a few moments and pray that the Lord would convict of ways in which He could use you to make an eternal impact on the lives of your coworkers.

CHALLENGES

THINK: How do you view "opportunity" at work? Apart from advancement within the company, consider the opportunities for the Gospel that are present in your place of employment. Prayerfully evaluate how you have stewarded the mission field that the Lord has placed before you to advance the kingdom within your office. Imagine the joy and fulfillment that would accompany this kind of perspective.

PRAY that the Lord would use you to make a difference in your workplace. Ask that He bring to mind unbiblical practices that surface in the way that you work; repent of these things. Even now, lift up lost coworkers and petition for their salvation.

ACT: Be a light in your job. Choose to sacrifice selfish ambition, bitterness, apathy or any other sinful attitude that you carry with you to your office. Work heartily this week as unto the Lord and build a reputation for being a faithful employee, employer and worker. Building this goodwill honors God and makes it easier to share the Good News of Jesus to those at your workplace.

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- ⁱ <https://www.bls.gov/nls/questions-and-answers.htm>
- ⁱⁱ "Agro-technology in Israel" *Agriculture in Israel: History and Overview*, Jewish Virtual Library - <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-agriculture-in-israel>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).
- ^{iv} Gunther W. Plaut, *Book of Proverbs: Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers* (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961).
- ^v Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).
- ^{vi} *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Electronic Edition (Biblesoft, 2002).
- John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).
- ^{vii} Julius H. Greenstone, *Proverbs with Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950).
- ^{viii} F.F. Bruce, ed., *New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979).
- ^{ix} Joseph Folkman, "How Coachable Are You?" *Forbes*, July 26, 2017 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joefolkman/2017/07/26/how-coachable-are-you-5-quick-ways-to-improve/?sh=48ed6d5826f5>
- ^x Glenn Llopis, "The Most Successful Leaders Do 15 Things Automatically Every Day," *Forbes*, Feb 18, 2013 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/glennllopis/2013/02/18/the-most-successful-leaders-do-15-things-automatically-every-day/?sh=7d5310d469d7>
- ^{xi} Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).
- ^{xii} Strong's Concordance #7402 "rakal"