

## Study Notes: The Sluggard

### Introduction

We will begin our study of Proverbs with one of the most flamboyant and comical characters contained in the book. He is called *a-tsel* in Hebrew, and appears 14 times in the Old Testament, all of them in the Book of Proverbs. In older English he would be called “the sluggard”; in newer English we might use the less compelling term “lazy man”. Kidner rightly classes him as a sub-category of the fool. In fact, he is the one character I know of that is called more hopeless than a fool (compare 26:12 with 26:16). He is indeed in trouble! I hope that as we look at him you will both appreciate the humor of the Bible and learn the very serious lesson behind the sluggard.

A look at the sluggard is nostalgic for me. It was the first real Bible study I ever did. I had just learned how to look at structure in Howard Hendrick’s Bible Study Methods class, and decided a study of something in Proverbs would do me good. I was immediately hooked! I found this study immensely helpful because for the first time in my life I learned how to study a passage and immediately put it to use. But I learned a lot more than that. I learned the true nature of laziness; the delusions that cause it. I learned about the consequences; that sometimes what appears to be the crime is actually the punishment. I learned that slothfulness is not about whether or not I work in the end; it’s about stewardship of God’s resources. Everything he has entrusted to me from work to possessions to relationships. And I learned about how God looks at laziness.

I hope that you will learn some of these things in your class as you study and teach about the sluggard. As I mentioned in last week’s notes, we want our lessons to be heavy on application, so I encourage you to take the time in class to discuss how some of you might change your life to be less slothful.

### ***I. The Sluggard is a lazy and comical character.***

The sluggard is truly one of the class clowns of Proverbs. Look at the descriptions Solomon gives of him:

*As a door turns on its hinges,  
so a sluggard turns on his bed (26:14)*

The picture here is obviously of someone who is anchored to his bed like a door is anchored to its hinges. My children found this description quite comical and enjoyed illustrating it when they were younger!

*The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;  
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth (26:15)*

*The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!”  
or, “I will be murdered in the streets!” (22:13)*

Why the sluggard says this we will see in a minute, but for now just notice the comedy of someone claiming he will be murdered in the streets or eaten by a lion! Kidner is right when he says “the sluggard in Proverbs is a figure of tragi-comedy, with his sheer animal laziness... his

preposterous excuses...and his final helplessness” (1973:42). Here, in detail are a few of his characteristics.

## ***II. For a lazy man, any excuse not to work will do***

*The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!”  
or, “I will be murdered in the streets!” (22:13)*

This concept is mentioned in 26:23 (The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!”) and 26:16 (The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer) as well as here, but this is probably the one that is most interesting.

As mentioned last week, this passage may seem a bit mysterious at first. Why on earth would the sluggard be talking about lions? It is probably a synonymous parallelism, which means the second line is similar but slightly different from the first. The key to understanding the parallelism is the NIV’s (probably correct) addition of the word ‘or’. The idea here is that the sluggard is giving excuses. It is unlikely that a lion is outside. If there is one outside, it is even less likely that it is roaming in the city streets, something lions rarely do. Even less likely is the possibility that if he escapes the lion, he will face a murderer. What we are left with is the conclusion that the sluggard is a man who loves excuses. In fact he loves them so much that any excuse, so long as it prevents him from going to work, will do.

## ***III. The sluggard works, but he is not in control of his work.***

*Diligent hands will bear rule  
But the slothful will be under tribute (12:24).*

Here is a key concept that we must understand about slothfulness. The verse presents an antithetical parallelism (the second line contrasts the first in some way). The point of this proverb seems at first to be simply that the diligent will have it good, but the slothful will have it bad. But I think Solomon has much more to teach us.

I have deliberately used the KJV here because it is a bit vague. If you were to look at the word “tribute” in the Hebrew, you would find that it means “a tax in the form of slave labor.” Thus the ESV’s very accurate “will be put to forced labor.” And this is the key to understanding what the contrast is and is not.

The contrast is NOT between who works and who doesn’t. Notice that both the diligent, works in the first place, and the slothful, who is forced to work, end up working. The difference here (and elsewhere) is control. The slothful man has to work, but he is not in control of his work. Because he refuses to decide to work on his own, he has to work when and how others decide. This is so important because most people are slothful because they believe it will enable them to avoid work, but God says this is not true.

I am reminded of those poor souls who hold ‘will work for food’ signs all day at busy intersections. I say ‘poor souls’ not because they don’t deserve their lot in life (some at least do) but because that is really a miserable lot. We say to ourselves ‘they don’t have a job’ but the fact is, they do. They are doing the same job as the highway construction worker who directs traffic. They are doing it in the hot sun just like he is. And they’ll be working even harder if someone actually believes what is on their sign. But they aren’t being paid like the construction worker! We see the truth of Solomon’s words: everyone works; but not everyone is in control of the work they do.

As suggested in the introductory notes, I think this is a specific example of a general principle. So I believe this principle is also true with other areas of our stewardship. I see some parents who can’t be bothered to train their young children. Rather than exercise the diligence of training the child, and stopping what they are doing when discipline is required, they ignore the child until the child can no longer be ignored. Who do you suppose has the most difficult child soon? The child has learned that in order to get Dad or Mom’s attention, he needs to act out to the point that they can’t ignore him. Once again, the slothful man is doing work, but it’s now ‘forced labor’ in the sense that he doesn’t have the initiative.

#### ***IV. Laziness causes me to lose what I have taken the time to gain.***

*The lazy man does not roast his game,  
but the diligent man prizes his possessions (12:27)*

#### ***Other proverbs that express this truth...***

*The sluggard buries his hand in the dish,  
But will not even bring it back to his mouth (Prov. 19:24)*

*He also who is slack in his work  
Is brother to him who destroys (18:9)*

In 12:27 we have another antithetical parallel. But once again the contrast may be more than what appears on the surface. In societies without refrigeration (like Zimbabwe these days!) there is more than one reason to cook meat. You cook it to eat it of course, but you also cook it to preserve it. While the average westerner may read this and think the Lazy man simply skips a meal because he puts the meat in the frig rather than cooking it, that’s not Solomon’s point. The lazy man has gone to all the time and effort not just to slaughter a goat, but to hunt game; this is no small job under Ancient Near Eastern conditions! Having killed the animal (and butchered it?) there is one small thing left to do to make it usable for the next few days: he has only to roast it. But the short-sightedness of slothfulness causes him to think of how tired he is rather than how to make wise use of what he has taken the effort to gain. Thus slothfulness causes us to lose what we have taken the time to gain.

You can see that this is the point of the proverb by looking at the contrasting line. The diligent man prizes his possessions. He takes care of what God has entrusted to him. If the meat needs roasting, he roasts it. Thus he gets the full benefit of all his possessions.

I have seen this proverb carried out in tragic ways in Zimbabwe. Mugabe's 'war vets' have taken farm after farm from diligent people. When they steal a farm, they take all the tractors, buildings, irrigation equipment, etc. In essence they have a fully functioning farm. Yet the vast majority of these farms are not functioning now. Kelley and I have seen farm after farm where the irrigation breaks down and the crops die because the war vet who has it cannot be troubled to replace a couple of sprinkler heads on the irrigation. The country is starving because of this kind of slothfulness. You can also see in this the truth of 18:9; because of his poor stewardship the slothful man is closely related to one who destroys.

But it's not just war vets that fulfill this proverb. Every day we waste things we have made the effort to gain. We see it in the automobile we don't maintain. In the finances we don't take care of. We see it in the books we buy but never read. And we see it in the wife whose hand we work so hard to win, and then proceed to ignore. Slothfulness causes me to lose what I've taken the effort to gain, but diligence causes me to value my possessions.

***V. Not only is it more difficult for the Lazy man to motivate himself to work, it is more difficult for him to work.***

*The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns,  
But the path of the upright is a highway (15:19).*

*I passed by the field of the sluggard  
And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,  
And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;  
Its surface was covered with nettles,  
And its stone wall was broken down.  
When I saw, I reflected upon it;  
I looked, and received instruction.  
"A little sleep, a little slumber,  
A little folding of the hands to rest,"  
Then your poverty will come as a robber  
And your want like an armed man.  
(24:30-34).*

Proverbs 15:19 points out in a more brief way, what Proverbs 24:30-34 looks at extensively. Once again, this is an antithetical parallel: The path of the sluggard is blocked by thorns, but the path of the upright is clear as a highway. At first glance, we might associate this with the proverb about the lion above. That is, we might tend to think that the sluggard *imagines* his way blocked by thorns so that he has an excuse not to travel it. But I don't think that's the point. Rather, the point is probably that the path of the upright is clear *because he travels it so often*. Not only does the sluggard imagine it hard to work, it really is hard to work. Why? Because he has to undo weeks of neglect to even get to what needs doing.

This is true of the grass we should have cut a week ago; now it's long so it doesn't get cut straight; it's hard on the mower, and it exposes the stems so the grass is baked by the sun and can't grow properly. It really is harder to mow that lawn because it was left. It's also true of the garage we should have cleaned out, the car repair that has gone from minor to major, and the conversations we should have had with our children weeks, or even years, ago. It really is harder when you're slothful.

This is so true that Solomon compares it to being captured by an armed man. What started out as little decisions to rest here and there when we could have been doing more needful things, has now taken on status of an overpowering robber. What was such a little thing has become too powerful to overcome.

## **Application**

A few things should be said with regard to application and teaching of these proverbs.

- First of all, there is a little bit of the sluggard in almost everyone I know (but more in some than others). Even the Dad who is diligent at work may be a sluggard when it comes to helping his wife with the children. Too often the plumber is the one with the leaky faucet at home! The point is that these proverbs are not of use only to those who are comically slothful; they are of use to all of us. We all have ways in which we waste what we have taken the effort to gain, in which our life has become harder because of our slothfulness, in which we think we are getting out of work when we're not.
- Secondly, slothfulness is not just about employment proper. It should be obvious from these passages that they are really about resources; about stewardship. They apply to relationships, to possessions, to employment, to school, to our houses, etc. If we will take a good look at our lives, there will be no lack of places to apply these verses.
- Finally, this is a great topic to discuss with kids. My kids loved the comical images. And schoolwork and chores are an obvious place to apply these proverbs. Encourage your students to share these with their children. Encourage them to talk about the real meanings of these proverbs. And while they are telling the kids how it relates to homework, they might just throw in a few examples where *they* have been slothful and it cost them. This is one area where we can be good stewards of our families.

## Teaching Tips

If I were teaching this lesson, the first thing I would do is pick out 1-3 of these Proverbs to really home in on. I would cover the others quickly as an introduction to the sluggard, and then I would probably have tables discuss the meaning of a proverb and then have them discuss application of that proverb using a life grid (see Introduction notes). So the lesson would go something like this:

### I. Introduction to the Sluggard.

### II. Focus Proverb 1.

A. Break class into **tables**.

B. **Read** Proverb together.

C. Have tables work on the **meaning** of the proverb (what is the real contrast here, what general principle is Solomon giving a specific example of?)

D. **Discussion:** The meaning of the proverb. Talk it through until your class settles on a principle that expresses the meaning of the proverb.

E. Draw out a **life grid** (probably a pie-chart with home, work, family, marriage, finances, church, etc on it). Point out that these proverbs are really about stewardship of all the resources God has entrusted to us.

F. Have tables discuss where the proverb **applies** to various areas of their life.

G. Report. Have tables **report** the best or most interesting 2 or 3 applications they came up with.

### III. Focus Proverb 2 (repeat A-G above).

**Closing prayer for diligence in our lives.**