

“Practical Wisdom”
Proverbs 6:1-11
2019

Week Fifteen, “Father Knows Best,” Proverbs 1-9

INTRODUCTION:

Tonight, the father turns from wisdom about women to wealth, and he (and God, of course) again uses negative examples to teach us positive wisdom.

This text is eminently practical, about two things that folks still struggle with generations later . . . and the struggles are perhaps best framed in our lives by a simple question: am I a sluggard or an ant?

Well, let’s break it down. First:

I. About Legal Entanglements:

READ PROVERBS 6:1-5

Now, a few big picture points here. This idea of surety is much like what our culture calls “co-signing” on a loan. It’s the same general principle — the idea of pledging oneself as a guarantor for someone else’s debts . . . with the implied thought being that their credit or net worth was not significant the secure the loan.

Now, understand something here in the Bible’s big picture — this practice is not banned or forbidden. It is frowned upon, generally, but it is not entirely forbidden. To some degree, this is what Paul offered to do for Onesimus in Philemon 18 — but that still doesn’t make it wise.

Especially for a young man. As you see in verse 1, this section is targeted at the son, while the section section, regarding the sluggard, is written about the sluggard — not to the sluggard.

Just worth noting.

And, as we begin to break this down, the sense that is conveyed is that the father is warning the son against this unwise practice . . . but he has arrived too late. The deal has been struck — so now what?

Well, let’s bread down the scenarios the father mentions.

A. The cases

READ PROVERBS 6:1-2

“[1] My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,

have given your pledge for a stranger,

[2] if you are snared in the words of your mouth,

caught in the words of your mouth . . .”

First off, please understand that the father is not addressing all promises, pledges or covenants — don’t bleed this over to a covenant such as marriage. That is binding. That is unbreakable.

He is just talking about one principle here and one practice along — and the warnings he attaches to it.

1. Surety

READ PROVERBS 6:1

“My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, have given your pledge for a stranger . . .”

We’re talking about surety or co-signing, period. And I hope we can all understand the general warning: risking home and liberty over an enterprise over which one does not have direct control is consummate folly. Period.

And you might ask: what would motivate someone to do this? Well, pride could do it. Wanting to appear like a well-financed big shot. Or wanting others to feel like they owe you. Or just wanting to be liked and be helpful.

But are you really willing to leverage your financial future for those reasons?

And, of course, surety for a neighbor or friend is one thing. But that’s not where this warning stops.

2. Strangers

READ PROVERBS 6:1b

“Have given your pledge for a stranger . . .”

Why trust a stranger, friends? Especially in such matters. Are you really willing to give your word to cover the potential debt of someone you don't know?

In such a situation, God's word does not prohibit us from being generous. We can always give money away . . . but to sign on as surety? Not going to happen.

Even as a church, we have practiced this in the past. In our benevolence ministry, we never issue loans to folks who are not members of our church — we just give away what we can.

With church members, in particularly difficult situations, we have offered assistance which involved some pay back over time — again, this are usually really difficult circumstances — but we would never do this with a stranger.

It's just a good way to destroy a relationship. And such loans rarely pay off . . . so why would you become surety for someone in such a case?

It only leads to the last warning or case.

3. Snares

READ PROVERBS 6:2

“If you are snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth . . .”

Again, the sense here is that the father has been too late — the son spoke too soon and the deal is on. Which, in the father's eyes, means that the son has gone from being the hunter to the hunted — he is trapped or ensnared by his words. Verses 2 and 5 both use this idea of the snared.

A fowler, as it states in verse 5, is a hunter of bird. It was familiar Biblical imagery.

READ PSALM 91:3

“For He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence.”

And it follows the practices of the days among the Jews. The Jews sold debtors into slavery — literally, people's debts snared them and imprisoned them.

Is that really what you want to do? To mortgage your future on someone else's behavior?

Obviously, the father is making a case that the son should never do this — but, again, the feeling is that it's already happened . . . so, in that case, what is to be done?

B. The cure

READ PROVERBS 6:3-5

“[3] Then do this, my son, and save yourself,

for you have come into the hand of your neighbor:

go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbor.

[4] Give your eyes no sleep

and your eyelids no slumber;

[5] save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,

like a bird from the hand of the fowler.”

By inference, in this scenario, it seems that the gullible person — i.e. the son — is still in the hands of his friend or neighbor and not their creditor. But, as we see in the language involved, the time is short and the clock is ticking.

If the son is to extricate himself from his foolish pledge, there's a few things he must do.

1. Haste

You see it there in those words very clearly: “Go, hasten . . .” “Plead urgently . . .” “Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber . . .”

The clock is ticking — why are you wasting time? The longer you wait, the more entangled it gets . . . you should be running to extricate yourself from the promise.

Again, the feeling is as if the son has given his word — but the final deal hasn't been struck. Certainly, it's clear that no one has defaulted on a loan yet.

So, if they son will go running back to the parties involved, there's a chance to end his foolish pledge.

Of course, haste won't be enough.

2. Humility

Again, the imagery here involves the son considering himself like the prey, the bird, so to speak. He is going to have to humble himself — swallow his pride — and beg out of his hasty promise.

This, of course, could involve admit the truth — maybe he really couldn't cover the potential debt involved. Or, maybe just the humility to say, "Look, I was a fool. I didn't think this through. I made a mistake."

No one likes to do that — then or now — but sometimes we have to do it. The father is certainly making that plain in this scenario, at least.

Back when I was a young man, just entering ministry, I had a great opportunity to serve with a great church. But there was just one problem — that church was carrying a massive amount of debt — in the 1990s, it was over \$15 million.

I was young . . . but I had read Proverbs, and I just had a sense that, if I took that position, I would be pledging myself as partially responsible — as a staff member — for that \$15 million . . . and I just couldn't get a peace about it.

When I walked away from that position, my next conversation was with Stephen Davis about FBC . . . almost 18 years ago. The rest is history, so to speak.

I'm thankful that I was able to swallow my pride — trust me, if I told you everything, I could make that other job look like a sweet, sweet deal — and see the negatives as clearly as the positives.

And, finally, the last thing. Do all this:

3. Honorably

It's just a sense in the text, but the father is not telling the son to be a jerk, to be selfish, to cut all ties. He's telling him to approach the people involved humbly and honorably and ask what can be done to extricate himself from his hasty, unwise promise — there may be a financial penalty involved.

If so, so be it. Better to pay a little today than a lot tomorrow.

But, one way or the other, honesty and speed need to be conjoined and a solution needs to be found. Time is short!

But enough about legal entanglements . . . on to the next practice the father sees worthy of a warning.

We can become poor through something we do (surety) or something we don't do: laziness. Either way, the theme of self-inflicted economic impoverishment continues here.

II. About Laziness:

READ PROVERBS 6:6-11

Now, again, before we break down this section about the ant and the sluggard, let's establish a couple of big picture ideas.

First of all, work is good! Remember our Genesis study?

READ GENESIS 2:15

"The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

That's before the fall — work was instituted and called good, by implication, before the fall of man. Work is not the problem. Sure, the curse makes work harder — but work is not the problem.

Our flesh, and our laziness, is.

But's break down his warning.

A. Consider the ant

READ PROVERBS 6:6-8

"[6] Go to the ant, O sluggard;

consider her ways, and be wise.

[7] Without having any chief,

officer, or ruler,

[8] she prepares her bread in summer

and gathers her food in harvest.”

The ant, of course, is the model of diligence in this text. I mean, have you ever kicked over an anthill? Their response to disaster is not to huddle up and hide — but to work.

The ant is the perfect picture of hard work, industry, tenacity — you name it. And it’s as if wisdom’s precepts goad us to work hard, especially if we’ve been slothful, by trotting out the picture of the ant.

The picture, of course, is repeated later.

READ PROVERBS 30:24-25

“[24] Four things on earth are small,

but they are exceedingly wise:

[25] the ants are a people not strong,

yet they provide their food in the summer.”

The ant is good. Their hard work is good. And, ultimately, all work is good — God does not divide the secular and the sacred, and we need never to forget it.

READ I CORINTHIANS 10:31

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

And, as well, it’s worth pointing out the Bible doesn’t really promote the union model our culture likes so much — more pay/less work. The Bible consistently emphasizes that you will be compensated for your work — more work, more pay. Period.

Again, my family has had personal experience with this and union labor. My dad worked the same factory job for 43 years, and he retired in the early 2000s making less per hour than he did in the early 80s because the unions had destroyed the system of incentives that he had once labored under — incentives that rewarded hard workers.

The ant, of course, would not be a fan of unions. But let’s break them down a bit.

1. Problems

READ PROVERBS 6:7

“Without having any chief, officer, or ruler . . .”

It’s interesting what the father chooses to emphasize here. If we keep in mind the contrast between the ant and the sluggard it comes into view a bit easier. So what’s his point here?

The ant has initiative, which the sluggard lacks. The ant doesn’t even need a leader — he doesn’t require someone breathing down his neck to get work down.

The queen in an ant colony is not really in charge — that’s not the way things work. But all the worker ants know their roles and execute them — without any force or overt direction. Instinct and efficiency drive them on.

In a sense, the father is emphasizing that they have inner motivation and a passion for hard work . . . and the reality is that man was created to work like the ant.

READ COLOSSIANS 3:22-23

“Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”

A good church should look like an ant hill, and it functions best without coercion from the top. It’s okay for a pastor to set the tempo or culture . . . but he shouldn’t be goading everyone into doing or fulfilling the roles.

Thank goodness FBC has plenty of worker ants!

But there’s more here about the ant, beyond internal motivation and hard work.

2. Prudence

READ PROVERBS 6:8

“She prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.”

The move here to refer to the ant with a feminine pronoun is a curious one — but it makes me think of the Proverbs 31 woman.

READ PROVERBS 31:15

“She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.”

The sluggard, on the other hand, has a masculine tilt . . . and let’s be honest, friends — even in our modern society, I’ll have to admit that I’ve known far more lazy men than women.

I’ve been blessed with a lot of great male role models in my family, but even then, they have a hard time competing with my grandmothers, my mom, you name it — they were all industrious as ants, rising early, laboring long, providing continually for their families.

And it’s that work ethic that is emphasized here — the ant, or the ant-like person, provides for their family. In fact, they are always making provision for their family, looking to the future, sweating, stewarding.

Ants look ahead. While the season is favorable, they prepare for potential hard days ahead. Or, as the old sayings go, “Strike while the iron is hot,” and “Make hay while the sun shines.”

Anyone heard those from their parents or grandparents?

It seems like, to some degree, America was built on these values, but we’re losing them. Anyone here still saving for a rainy day?

For generations, that was normative, ant-like behavior . . . now we just take out loans, don’t we?

We need to recapture the ant’s work ethic!

READ II THESSALONIANS 3:10

“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

Now, obviously, we aren’t talking about the exceptions here — the physically disabled, etc. — but we’re talking the norm. We need to work like the ant, in season and out of season.

And there is a real spiritual picture here — poverty and want follow slothfulness, as we’ll see in a minute — particularly when it comes to our spiritual conditions.

Let’s combine a few thoughts here and we’ll see the Gospel.

SHARE THE GOSPEL

READ JOB 17:3

“Lay down a pledge for me with you; who is there who will put up security for me?”

Job was looking for a surety — is there a surety? Sure there is, even when our hard work doesn’t pay off. Even, spiritually speaking, when our best is not good enough.

And never will be.

Even when we are under the curse and can’t possibly pay for our sins. God, through Christ, is our surety.

READ COLOSSIANS 2:14

“By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Oh, friends, don’t misunderstand this text. It isn’t saying the ant’s work ethic can save you — only Christ can do that — but it is saying the ant understands how the world works.

And, as we’ll see in a moment, the sluggard does not.

As Adoniram Judson said, “A little more sleep, a little more slumber, and thou shalt wake in hell to sleep no more forever.”

B. Consider the sluggard

READ PROVERBS 6:9-11

“[9] How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

When will you arise from your sleep?

[10] A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the hands to rest,

[11] and poverty will come upon you like a robber,

and want like an armed man.”

From the outset, the father emphasizes something very plain: the sluggard has brought this fate upon himself. He is not an object of pity here.

Which again tells us to separate out the exceptions — the disabled, the victims of crime, the sufferers of accidents or storms or anything else — the sluggard represents those capable of hard work and industry . . . and those who, instead, turn to sleep.

Sleep is not a virtue when it comes to labor unless you are a mattress tester, and I don't know any of those.

We do need balance and we do need sleep, but please don't confuse this text by silly objections. The father is not talking about our natural need for 8-hours or sleep or even the power of naps — he's talking about the lazy sluggard who abuses things.

1. Pleas

READ PROVERBS 6:9-10

“[9] How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

When will you arise from your sleep?

[10] A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the hands to rest . . .”

Why do I list this as “pleas?” Because the sluggard is always pleading for more sleep. Which causing the father to respond with a plea of his own: “How long?”

“How long?” implies that is has already been too long!

READ EXODUS 10:3

“So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, that they may serve me.’”

READ PSALM 74:10

“How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?”

The sluggard does not need more sleep. It's already been too long! Not to mention that the phrase, “a little sleep,” is nothing but a rationalization.

The sluggard does not need more sleep, even a little sleep. He will not make up his mind. He will not finish things. And he will not face things as they are.

And, so, he will pay the penalty — both on a spiritual level or on a purely physical, financial level.

2. Poverty

READ PROVERBS 6:11

“And poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.”

Poverty and want are likened to external forces that bring about destitution — they are like robbers, like armed men, striking the sluggard in such a way that he cannot resist their power.

The lazy man will be helpless when his poverty comes calling! And it's not just the father of Proverbs who makes this point. The Psalmist paints the same picture by a contrast.

READ PSALM 37:25

“I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.”

And the Apostle Paul paints the same picture for the church.

READ I TIMOTHY 5:8

“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

READ II THESSALONIANS 3:10-12

“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

And, speaking of the father and the son, we have one last, lingering picture of how it should really be when we look at labor and rest.

READ JOHN 4:34

“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.’”

Work is not the problem — it is actually a privilege. And how did Jesus leave things on this side of eternity?

READ JOHN 17:4

“I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave Me to do.”

So, do you want to be like the sluggard or like your savior? We must labor while it is day . . . or continue to slumber.

READ EPHESIANS 5:14b

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

CONCLUSION: