

Proverbs 6:6-11, “Wisdom for Working”

Written by Rev. Ken Labbé and delivered at Community CRC on 19 October 2025

I’ve had a number of different jobs in my 35 years of employment. Paper route. Painter. Customer service representative. Tow truck dispatch. Summer camp counselor. Welder. Warehouse stock boy. Convenience store clerk. Agricultural electrician. And of course, pastor. Each of them had its ups and downs, its good and bad, its miserable tasks and peculiar joys. For one, the paycheck was really the only thing I was after; for others, I found the time flew past and I had had fun; for still others, it was the relationships that made it worthwhile. It might have taken awhile, but I think I’ve arrived finally in a job that suits me. In fact, it’s a calling: this is what I was *made* to do.

Work is what we were made for. Have you ever thought about that? In Genesis 1:27-28, God gives Adam this famous creation mandate: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.” Our first ancestors were *called* to work.

And that works out well for us, because *everything* is work. Multiplying and filling the earth takes work. I don’t have any of my own, but raising kids seems like a lot of effort. Subduing the earth sounds like work. Ruling the animals, even in Eden, was certainly work. And of course, growing everything from alfalfa to zucchini is work. Genesis 2:15 has Adam “in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” *Before* the fall it was already work, and that’s what God told people to be doing from the start. It got harder *after* the fall, of course, when God cursed the land in Genesis 3:18-19: “It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.” And even when we arrive at our eternal home, there will still be work to do. What I want you to see first and foremost is that God is the one who created work, and as part of the original design of creation, it was and is and will always be *good*. That’s what makes it more than wages and profit, but an actual *calling*.

Now there are plenty of Scripture texts that speak to the meaning and method of our work in this world, and just as it changed between the creation and the fall, it was also transformed when we were redeemed in Christ, as it will once again when everything is made new. The question for us is, why and how should we go about our work in *this* age as followers of Jesus, where on one hand we’re already set free from the curse, but on the other we’re still dealing with its effects?

I’m going to use the book of Proverbs as a guide. The Proverbs are so wonderfully practical, if maybe a little bit brief and scattered, so I find the best way to approach them for a topical exposition like this one is to find all the Proverbs that talk about “work” and then put them together in a way that makes sense. I chose this reading because I think it’s the best summary of the theme, but I’ll be quoting from the whole book.

My outline is this: I’ll give you a definition of work, then pitch some ideas of what the world has to say about it (just for curiosity’s sake), then show you how the Proverbs invites us to understand it. From there I want to lead you to what Jesus has to say about it, how the gospel redefines it, how the confessions address it, and then give you some practical application points to take home.

So here’s a definition. Anthony Selvaaggio, who wrote a commentary on the Proverbs, says work is “a set of tasks performed in pursuit of a goal.” If that’s true, then literally everybody works. Kids perform tasks at school that will eventually grant them passage to the next grade. Young people go to college and perform tasks to get them a degree – that’s work, even though they’re paying for it! Mothers on maternity leave are hard at work growing a little one. Men doing renovation projects at home or coaching soccer on the weekend are working. All you retired folks never stop working, whether it’s helping with the grandkids, improving your golf game, or making quilts and slippers. We are all working right now, even, attending to the task of listening to God’s Word in pursuit of the goal of understanding God’s will for our lives. Work is

therefore a broad title for any exertion or effort we make, be it physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other.

Now the world around us gives us mixed messages about work, although their own definitions are more limited than the one I've just given you. We'll sort them out in a minute. Here's a quick list of some of the repeated statements I've heard from a wide variety of famous people on the topic of work:

1. Work is the curse of the drinking classes (Wilde)
2. Choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life (Confucius)
3. It is your work in life that is the ultimate seduction (Picasso)
4. Every man's work is a portrait of himself (Sam Butler)
5. Life grants nothing to us mortals without hard work (Horace)
6. Work is a necessary evil to be avoided (Twain)
7. Work isn't to make money, you work to justify life (Marc Chagall)
8. Everybody's working for the weekend (Loverboy, 1981)

You can see already that there are many perspectives there that seem to contradict one another. Work is bad. Work is good. Work is seductive. Work is oppressive. Work is what allows you to rest. Rest is hard work. Well, which is it?

Bearing in mind that work is a calling from God and a means to achieving a goal, we need to be aware of the two dangers that are immediately obvious just by reading those simple quotes. I'll introduce you to them now, and we'll come back to them later: on the one hand, we have a tendency to *reduce* our work to something that interrupts what we really want to be doing in life, which is *not* working, and therefore to begrudge our work; on the other, we have a tendency to *elevate* our work to something that we never want to stop doing, even finding our identity and joy in it. Both of these are wrong. One is a kind of simple gnosticism, debasing something God gave us for our good; and the other is outright idolatry, elevating something above God's intended purpose for it. Essentially, what I'm saying is that God gave us work for a purpose, so let's not say it's no good, but let's not get obsessed with it, either.

Let's turn to the Wisdom of the Proverbs, asking first *why* we work, and then *how* we should work.

Why we should work usually finds a simple answer like this one in 12:11, "He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment." 16:26 puts it like this: The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on." So positively, we work so we can pay the bills. On the more negative side he says things like, "One who is slack in his work is a brother to one who destroys" in 18:9 and "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty," in 14:23. There's a warning in there that pools folly, destruction, poverty and hunger together. 19:15 puts it like this: "Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry." And 12:24 caps it off, "Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor." Not working amounts to living on someone else's coin, and unless you're a Rockefeller, that means you're going into debt, enslaved to someone else's demands on your life.

But even more than that, our working represents the image of God existing in us. As God worked to create the universe, as Christ worked to set us free from the power of sin and death, and as in fact he still works now, interceding for us at the right hand of God. So we should be working for our own good and his glory in this world. 13:4 says, "The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied." There is value in our work that gives us satisfaction. And 16:3 tells us, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed." By seeking his glory in our work, he promises success. That success will not always be financial or temporal, but it will always be for ultimate good. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well." Matt. 6:33.

How we should work is really the crux of the matter in Proverbs. Wisdom is demonstrated in the attitude one brings to work, and not just the fact of doing it. 10:16 tells us that "The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment." The first order of business is to act in ways that are *right*. 16:11, for instance, says "Honest scales and balances are from the Lord; all the

weights in the bag are of his making.” We must work honestly. Other words that come up are *diligent, upright, discreet, hard work, skilled* and so on. Wisdom requires that we do our very best in the work we do: to quote Paul in Col. 3:23, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.”

Solomon spends a lot of time talking about the *sluggard*, the person who does not demonstrate wisdom in his work. He warns us against becoming like him in passages like 10:26, “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.” He’s an employee, but a poor one. 19:24, “The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth.” He’s so lazy that he can’t finish the task of eating. 26:14 says, “As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed.” Maybe he’s constantly late for work. 22:13 shows how he makes excuses: “The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside!’ or ‘I will be murdered in the streets!’” 21:25 summarizes the problem, “The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.” And finally in 26:16 we get the attitude behind it all, “The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.” The real problem is that he thinks he knows it all, and he doesn’t need advice.

The real issue, then, comes down to one of idolatry. As I said earlier, our tendency is either to debase work, which God created as a good thing, setting ourselves above the creator as knowing what’s best for us; or else to elevate work to a matter of identity and self-worth, again ignoring God’s position as the one who gives us those things. When we do the first, we become sluggards, lazy and unwilling to participate in God’s plan for our lives. The fear of our own unhappiness or discomfort plays higher than the fear of the Lord. When we do the second, we become self-obsessed workaholics, determined to make our own way. The fear of losing control or not achieving our own goals overrules the fear of the Lord. Either way, we choose to play God to ourselves. The sad reality is that we do this all the time! We worship our work, or we worship our rest. Which one is more like you?

If I can be honest with you, I flip flop between the two like a fish out of water. I’m an equal opportunity idolater. When I’m doing well in my work and getting good feedback, I find it so easy to depend on my work for happiness. Then when it all falls apart on me, I come home and tell my wife I’m done with this and I’d rather be pulling wire again. But why does my fulfillment depend on my success in ministry? It’s Jesus’ church. I need to do what I’m told and leave the results up to him, you know? But when my winter vacation arrives and I’m on a hot sandy beach reading a Clive Cussler novel, and then somebody tells me that if I sold my house I could retire in this paradise at 46, I have to admit I’m going to give it some real serious thought before I come to my senses. Why is the temptation to abandon the call of God on my life so alluring? It’s not time for that yet. And wouldn’t I feel sheepish if Jesus returned to find me wasting my life and his blessing for a lesser paradise than what’s in store?

What I need, and what you need, is the good news of the gospel to set us straight.

Some of us need the Jesus who came to show us that we can’t save ourselves, that money isn’t everything, that power is an illusion, that God does not see our achievements the way we do. He undercut our self-obsession and gave us a right image of a God who loves us so much that he paid our penalty for sin in the blood of his own Son. We cannot earn God’s grace, we can only receive it as a gift, as Heidelberg 60 so beautifully points out, or the hymn Rock of Ages, which sings, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Jesus gave his life for legalists and Pharisees who think they’ve earned merit before God because of their hard work, so they could rest in his finished work for them.

Some of us need the Jesus who came to show us that work is a good thing for everybody, that our family name is not enough to free us from the effort and personal commitment to holiness that he requires. This world is not our final destination: permanent rest is not an option for us here. None of us is better than another, and as Paul said in 2 Thess. 3:10, “The man who does not work will not eat.” Moreover, it’s good for us to work to demonstrate our thankfulness to God, to bring honor to his name, to be assured of our own faith by its fruit in our lives, and to win over our unbelieving neighbors. That’s Heidelberg 86. Jesus gave his life for the slothful, the lazy, the sluggard, so they could be free to work hard for his glory.

Friends, when we receive the gospel, when we trust Jesus to do the great work of earning our salvation in our place, we can finally let go of our need for self-fulfillment, and we can finally let go of our need for rest. Jesus is the one who fulfills us. Jesus is the one who give us rest. We are left to awaken the dawn every day saying, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." And we can get to work, "loving our neighbors by providing useful products and services," as *Our World Belongs to God* said it, knowing that whatever we do, and why we do it, and how we do it, demonstrate Jesus' likeness in us and bring him glory.

Let me leave you with just a few practical suggestions to take home.

If you're a young person still in school, you need to give it your very best effort. Don't get cocky when you do well, and don't beat yourself up if you do poorly. Only work hard at it, and trust that God's got your future in his hands. If you do this, God will be pleased, your parents will be happy, and you'll be successful and satisfied.

If you're in the workforce now, give your very best effort at work, even if you think your job is menial and unimportant. It's important for somebody that you do that work, and that's why they're paying you. If you want to get a better job, that's great, but don't slack off on this one until you get the perfect position. You never know when your hard work will get you noticed and promoted.

If you're in the workforce now, and you like your job, and you take pride in what you do, and you're an important person in the company, remember that there are other things in life that you need to attend to. Your work should not be your life, and it most certainly should not interfere with your relationship with God. Take time to rest, to play with your kids, to build relationships, to go on vacation, because I've never once heard someone say on their deathbed, "I wish I'd spent more time at work." What you build on earth can be lost, but what you build for heaven lasts forever.

And finally, if you're retired now, don't get to thinking your work on this earth is done. Every day you're alive is another day to love and serve others, and to worship God. If you're not doing that, in whatever capacity you can, you need to remind yourself that you're not in heaven yet. It shouldn't be hard. Just watch the news.

I encourage you again to look to Jesus Christ as the author and perfecter of our faith, who worked hard in his life on earth for us, who for the joy set before him endured even the cross, scorning its shame, and finally sat down in victory at the right hand of the throne of God above. Our victory is secure but not yet here, so we can let go of whatever accolades or comforts we think are worthy in this place, and live free lives to serve our God and King, until such a time as he sees fit to bring us into the promise of eternal rest.

Would you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, thank you for creating each one of us with a purpose. As you have called us out of a life of sin, for a life of righteousness, help us to see with our eyes and understand with our hearts that everything we do has potential to bring honor and glory to your name, or else to take honor and glory from your name. Give us courage and endurance for the former, even when it's hard, trusting that you are more than capable to lead and guide and provide and protect us, until we should finally come home to you. Until then, help us to follow after, and rest in, Jesus our Redeemer, in whose name we pray. Amen.