

# Study Notes: Proverbs 6:6-11

January 8, 2012

## The Sluggard

### Introduction

- There are many ways to lose your shirt in this world. Many ways to manifest one's folly! One is through adultery (5), but another is through poor financial decisions. Proverbs 6:1-19 deals with three different types of *personae inferiors*: the surety, the sluggard (vv. 6-11), and the troublemaker (vv. 12-19).
- On poetic structure: The first is addressed to "my son" while the other two are not reckoned as sons. Notice also the escalation of folly beginning with surety, ending with malevolence. The surety and the sluggard harm themselves, but the troublemaker harms others. On that latter two, judgment will come suddenly and without remedy. The first comes purely of naiveté; the second, sluggishness; while the third is purely out of evil.
- The sluggard is the explicit audience, but the implicit audience is the son and the naive ((1:4-5). So even the hard working and honest can listen and learn even more wisdom.
- The theme of "self-inflicted economic impoverishment" continues in vv. 6-11. First the unchaste wife who takes all he owns, then the debtor who naively gives it all away and now the sluggard. The sluggard fights against the created order in the predictable patterns of the seasons. Even a 'fool' should know that 'winter is coming' and that certain preparations must be made.
- Either this person takes no thought of the future (simple foresight) or else assumes to "get something in another way than through honest work (arrogance). Here is the suitability of the ant as it is to the smallest of creatures he must go to gain wisdom. Even the ant knows what he so stubbornly ignores. One Egyptian proverb from Ankhsheshonq says: "Whoever does not collect wood in the summer, has no warmth in the winter." (9:17)
  - There is a certain sense of retribution built in as working with God's created order brings rich harvests in return for honest work. But to those who defy this order lose produce by the very same order.
  - These two ways are contrasted frequently in Proverbs:
    - Proverbs 10:4-5: "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. <sup>5</sup> He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame."

- Proverbs 13:4: “The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.”
- Proverbs 15:19: “The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.”

*Commending the ant*

**<sup>6</sup> Go to the ant, O sluggard;  
consider her ways, and be wise.  
<sup>7</sup> Without having any chief,  
officer, or ruler,  
<sup>8</sup> she prepares her bread in summer  
and gathers her food in harvest.**

- *Go* The first word rouses the sluggard out of his/her lethargy. This is not far from Paul’s admonition in Eph. 5:14-17: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”<sup>15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,<sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.<sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” There is yet remedy for the sluggard who is admonished to learn wisdom by considering the ways of such seemingly insignificant creatures.
- *to the ant* (feminine noun) Kidner thinks this refers to the harvester ant which is common in Palestine. This tiny creature works diligently, storing up grain within its nest and is therefore used as an illustration of industry.” The Hebrew root for ‘ant’ could be derived from “to toil.” If so, this makes a nice pun with ‘sluggard’ in the original language. See 30:24-28 for comparable ‘animal wisdom’: “Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise:<sup>25</sup> the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer;<sup>26</sup> the rock badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs;<sup>27</sup> the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank;<sup>28</sup> the lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in kings’ palaces.” In each case an animal which is seemingly small and powerless is nevertheless able to accomplish much, one tiny exertion at a time. What’s more, the ant does all this without the consequences of the law or ruler lording over them. The ant needs no Sargent to tell him what to do, they don’t argue over who does what or complain about the workload, they work without a whip (Exod. 5:6...)! Ants raise the question: What would I do if I didn’t *have* to do anything? The ant possesses God-given self-discipline, foresight, and prudent industry—wisdom!

- Sluggard: “A habitually lazy, idle, and inactive person.” The sluggard is a particular genre of folly in Proverbs. The term ‘sluggard’ occurs 13 times in the OT, all in Proverbs. Other parallels: “slack in his work (18:9) and “a man of want” (21:17). The opposite is “the diligent.” The profile of a sluggard:
  - Proverbs 10:26 <sup>26</sup> As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.
  - Proverbs 13:4 <sup>4</sup> The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.
  - Proverbs 15:19 <sup>19</sup> The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway.
  - Proverbs 19:24 <sup>24</sup> The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth!
  - Proverbs 20:4 <sup>4</sup> A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.
  - Proverbs 21:25 <sup>25</sup> The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.
  - Proverbs 22:13 <sup>13</sup> The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!"
  - Proverbs 24:30-31 <sup>30</sup> I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; <sup>31</sup> thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins.
  - Proverbs 26:13-16 <sup>13</sup> The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!" <sup>14</sup> As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. <sup>15</sup> The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. <sup>16</sup> The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.
- In summary, the sluggard is a pain in the neck to do business with (like smoke in the eyes), lives a very unfulfilled life, seemingly has an excuse for everything; is shockingly lazy, extremely nearsighted, paralyzed by his own irrational fears, and perhaps worst of all, views himself as “wiser than seven men who answer discreetly”. Laziness in Proverbs is more than a character flaw; it is a moral issue that eventually leads to the loss of freedom, perpetual frustration, and the loss of life. The sluggard is contrasted with the “upright” (15:19) and the “righteous” (21:25-26).
- Don’t confuse ‘the poor’ with the sluggard! Proverbs never equates the sluggard with the poor who are poor by virtue of their circumstances beyond their control, such as by oppression. The sluggard is poor by virtue of his moral degeneracy. Thus, the

sluggard is left begging in harvest and has “plenty of poverty,” a telling oxymoron (20:4; 28:19). Source: Waltke, pp. 114-115.

- Through self-discipline, foresight and prudent industry, the tiny ant secures its daily bread in the harsh lean times. It is needless to say, but in an agrarian society if one does not work with the seasons then one dies! Perhaps we don’t see such immediate results but it still works the same way. Another phrase which would suffice is: “Make hay while the sun shines.”
- The sluggard is to observe the ant “with moral discernment”. “The three admonitions aim to generate enough energy to get the sluggard up... and in that way begin the process of restructuring his life.” (Waltke, 337)

### *Condemning the sluggard*

**<sup>9</sup> How long will you lie there, O sluggard?**

**When will you arise from your sleep?**

**<sup>10</sup> A little sleep, a little slumber,**

**a little folding of the hands to rest,**

**<sup>11</sup> and poverty will come upon you like a robber,**

**and want like an armed man.**

- The prudent industry of the ant is contrasted with the inopportune sleeping of the sluggard.
- *How long...?* presumes that the harvest has been in progress for quite some time. This is his “wake up call”.
- *sleep* is plural “a few of sleeps” and refers to untimely instances of sleep. Sleep is the defining characteristic of the sluggard. Sleep is pure escapism—a refusal to face reality in God’s created order, in contrast to the sweet sleep of the laboring person (4:16; Eccl. 5:12).
- The question is: “When will you get up from your sleep and work?” Like our daily appointment with an alarm clock, the sluggard is being pestered by Wisdom. Wisdom says, “Get up!” The Sluggard says, “Not now” and hits the snooze button. “If not now, when?” “Sometime soon...” “Now is the time you must get up.” “I’m thinking about it.” “Get up right now, or else!” “I’m getting up...” BOOM! Kidner comments: “He does not commit himself to a refusal, but

deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away.”

- This is not a prohibition against sleep. God made us with limits. We need sleep. No one need feel guilty for needing sleep, nor should anyone take pride in not sleeping! The issue is the sluggard’s carelessness and indolence and inopportune sleeping.
- Now we fast forward to view the unseen consequences of his behavior (vv. 10-11). We can see him dozing away, comfortable in his indolence! By contrast the diligent person plans and takes action.
- *your poverty* found exclusively in the book of Proverbs—denotes destitution. At least 14 proverbs relate idleness, either explicitly or implicitly, to poverty, the bitter end of the sluggard. It is not riches the lazy person misses out on, it is food, the necessity of life.
- Again, the adjectives “poor” or “oppressed” are never used of the lazy person. The term “the poor” are used primarily of those who are poor, by virtue of circumstances beyond their control. The poor are objects of the LORD’s special concern. Roberts notes: “The lazy are generally not those who have few desires. Rather, their daydreaming leads to exaggerated desires, and exaggerated desires to a despair of realization”
- Proverbs 24:33-34 <sup>33</sup> A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest-- <sup>34</sup> and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.
- *will come of necessity* Deprivation is due to folly—to “sloth, tyranny, meanness, idle talk, carelessness, or love of luxury, not to natural disasters, such as drought, diseases, and pests.” (Waltke, 340) On the other hand, Proverbs does not link disaster with folly like job’s friends.
- *like a vagrant*, “robber” “armed man” “highwayman” This simile personifies poverty as a shiftless, disreputable wanderer who goes about with no visible means of support but, like a parasite, “panhandles” whatever he can. The form means literally, “one who walks about.” Mr. Poverty “has no home, no security, and no support and so wanders aimlessly trying to steal them wherever they can be found.

- *like an armed man* He comes unexpectedly by force to rob a person of their daily bread. There is a surprise attack against which one cannot defend. The easiest victim of an armed man is the sleeping sluggard who lacks vigilance and diligence to exercise caution.
- In that society there were no “safety nets” against poverty. making the sluggard’s inaction all the more foolish.

*Does this say “Work like Dogs!?”*

- We all have our favorite passages in Scripture... and likewise the ones we totally ignore or twist in order to avoid dealing with our idols... the workaholic sins by worshiping activity as an idol.
- The book of Proverbs does not have a word for a “workaholic”. In the sage’s world with respect to one’s work habits, there is either vice or virtue, the sluggard or the diligent. There is no contrast between two equally bad extremes of working too little or too much. But Proverbs certainly teaches the enjoyment of God’s created order, the importance of training ones children, and moderation. Proverbs 30:8: “...give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”
- Likewise, Sleep is a gift from God, but it is not to be used as a narcotic to avoid reality in God’s created order. This is not a prohibition against sleep. God made us with limits. We need sleep. No one need feel guilty for needing sleep, nor should anyone take pride in not sleeping! The issue is the sluggard’s carelessness and indolence and inopportune sleeping. Boasting about not sleeping is boasting about living outside of God’s limits. Even Jesus took a nap! Who do we think we are?

*Does this say all poor people are lazy?*

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his moral degeneracy. Thus, the sluggard is left begging in harvest and has “plenty of poverty,” a telling oxymoron (20:4; 28:19). Source: Waltke, pp. 114-115.