

Idol vs Idle

Imagine for a moment Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. How do we typically see them? What do we imagine is the daily routine of Paradise? One of the signs of our fallenness is that we usually do not imagine them working. We see a scene of some leisurely picking of fruit, but mostly they are lounging around the Garden, lying down, sleeping. To our mind, Paradise equals permanent leisure. But while they certainly would have had leisure, an unfallen Adam would have been happily working: cutting, pruning, picking. An unfallen Eve would have been working: gathering, picking, preparing. Both of them would have been cultivating and shaping and decorating their home, for six days a week. The fact that we have difficulty picturing Adam and Eve working shows that we struggle to see the godly and unfallen kind of work.

Unfortunately, our fallenness has affected work in two opposite ways. One is to refuse work, and to seek to do as little of it as possible: the man who is lazy, the sluggard, the slothful, the idle. The other is to turn work into your very meaning for being, your existence, your life and fulfillment: the workaholic, the idolater of work.

Both the idolater and the idle have a problem with motive: why they work. Both pursue something other than the glory of God at work. One of them pursues something that makes him work less than he should. The other pursues something that makes him work far more than he should. But neither is really much better than the other. Both are chasing something that will not bring them satisfaction, and will not glorify God. They look very different, and of course, they have different motives. But they are both pleasing self in different ways.

In reality, the same person can be idle in one vocation, and an idolater in another. He may idolise his work and work unceasingly at the office. But at home, he is an absent father, a barely communicative husband, and basically a sluggard. Or she may be completely consumed with her family, and throw herself into it 110% all the time. But her church gets the bare leftovers of her time, the throwaways of her effort and interest.

It is quite possible to be lazy in one area of your life and laborious in another. You can be a workaholic in one area and a waster of time and effort in another.

So what I want us to see today is the portrait of a sluggard: what he does, and then why he does it. Then we'll look at the opposite error: the workaholic: what he does, and why he does it. From these we see what to put off, what to repent of, as we seek to be faithful and fruitful.

A. The Portrait of a Sluggard

a. The Sluggard's Actions

1. He loves ease and leisure inordinately.

As a door turns on its hinges, So *does* the lazy *man* on his bed. (Prov. 26:14)

How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? 10 A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to sleep-- 11 So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, And your need like an armed man. (Prov. 6:9-11)

Laziness is always in pursuit of ease. Less work, less demands, less responsibility. The pleasure of rest, of relaxation, of sleep, of leisure time to do his pleasure- the sluggard wants these pleasures. But everyone wants these, and it is no sin to want it. Rest and sleep is a gift from God. Leisure is a

gift from God. The problem is the lazy man wants it too much and he wants it when he cannot or should not have it: when there are pressing needs, deadlines, responsibilities. He is a glutton for an easier life.

But paradoxically, his approach to life fills him with disgust and chronic boredom. It's because too much of a good thing makes us sick.

Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, Lest you be filled with it and vomit. (Prov. 25:16)

2. He looks for dangers and difficulties that prevent him from starting his work.

The lazy *man* will not plow because of winter; He will beg during harvest and *have* nothing. (Prov. 20:4)

The lazy *man* says, "*There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!*" (Prov. 22:13)

It's too cold to plow the field and sow the seed. It's too dangerous to go out, I might get attacked.

The lazy man has many reasons why he can't do what you ask him to do, why it's either not the right time, or it is too risky, or it's uncomfortable. The lazy man is always looking for less responsibility, and looking for ways to shed what he already has.

It's not the right time. It's too far. Too dangerous. Too demanding. Too expensive. It'll take too much to learn that. I could never manage that as well. He can't serve in church, it would affect his family time at home. He can't start a business, because it might never work. She can't tend to the children, because it would affect her career progress.

Procrastination is his middle name. He postpones all the hard tasks, hoping they'll go away or someone else will do them.

3. He remains disorganised to prevent more work from coming his way.

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

Whether he is aware of it or not, he has a strategy to discourage people from asking him to do anything. He keeps his life mostly cluttered, disorganised, disorderly. His way is a hedge of thorns, a massive barrier to block progress. If you need him to find something, sorry, his desk is too cluttered. If you need him to make an appointment, sorry, he forgot he already has another one. If you ask him to complete a report, oh, his computer crashed and he didn't back anything up. He can't get anywhere because deliberately or through further sloth, his life is perpetually in disarray.

4. He does not finish what he starts if he finds it difficult.

The lazy *man* buries his hand in the bowl; It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth. (Prov. 26:15)

The lazy *man* does not roast what he took in hunting, But diligence is man's precious possession. (Prov. 12:27)

He might hunt, but getting that animal into food form is too much work. He might even have a meal in front of him, but the hand to bowl and hand to mouth motion is just too much.

He prefers not to start, but if he does, his second strategy is not to finish, and hope that someone else will pick up the tab. His life is a long list of things to-do that were never done. Why? Because he loses interest halfway. Because he doesn't plan and organise so his work is harder. He often has ideas, but no implementation. He takes on a task, but other people have to finish it for him.

This is why he is often frantic with busyness later on, because he refuses to start what he should and finish it on time. Never think the lazy man is not a busy man. He is often busier than many, because he has so much to catch up on. Someone said, "Nothing makes a man more productive than the last minute." Most of his life is last minute because he procrastinated to begin with, hoped someone else would do it, and is now frantic to get it done.

5. He does not work unless there is a threat or a leader urging or forcing him on.

Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, Which, having no captain, Overseer or ruler, Provides her supplies in the summer, *And* gathers her food in the harvest. (Prov. 6:6-8)

The hand of the diligent will rule, But the lazy *man* will be put to forced labor. (Prov. 12:24)

Whereas the ant works in a self-directed, self-motivated way, without ant-captains cracking ant-whips, the lazy man has no such initiative and motive. He can only work for what is right in front of him. Only the threat of losing his job, or getting a warning moves him to keep going. That's why so few people serve in the local church: because there is no threat to them if they don't. That's why many homes are a mess: because many men and women put very little effort into their marriages and into their parenting, since there doesn't seem to be an immediate threat to them. No danger, no problem, says the sluggard. I will do as little as I can get away with.

But, as 12:24 reports, his perpetual lack of initiative and work means that he ultimately ends up ruled by those who have initiative and diligence. He resents them, he murmurs against them, but it is inevitable that those with initiative will end up leading, managing and ruling those who have none.

6. He destroys time and resources and disappoints those who rely on him.

As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, So *is* the lazy *man* to those who send him. (Prov. 10:26)

He who is slothful in his work Is a brother to him who is a great destroyer. (Prov. 18:9)

Because of laziness the building decays, And through idleness of hands the house leaks. (Eccl. 10:18)

The slothful man treats time like an infinite resource. But he is actually a destroyer, because time is precious. He throws it away on his idleness, continual distraction, endless checking of his phone, useless searching on the web.

Place your trust in a lazy man, and it will be like toothache or like a blast of braai smoke to your eyes. You feel pain. The lazy man will disappoint again and again.

Now what's behind the sluggard's actions?

b. The Sluggard's Attitude

You might think the sluggard is weak, tired, and maybe we should pity him for his fatigue. But that is not what the Bible reveals about his motives. You might even think that busy people are not lazy people. But those are caricatures of what is really going on.

1. He is a rebel against God's command for compulsory work.

The desire of the lazy *man* kills him, For his hands refuse to labor. (Prov. 21:25)

He is not weak or accidentally clumsy. He *refuses* to labour. That means, he knows that God requires in this age compulsory labour for all who would eat. But he rejects that. He feels exempt from what others labour for their whole lives.

He feels that the laws of steady hard work don't apply to him. He believes he is so smart, or so gifted, that he will find a way around this hard work, and get maximum returns for minimum inputs. He will get-rich quick, he will be set for life.

Or he believes he has been so victimised, so disadvantaged, so hindered and hampered, that he cannot be expected to do what others do. But either way, he refuses God's law of sowing and reaping.

Whether it is in the home, in the church, or in the marketplace, his hands refuse to labour.

He is hitting his head against a brick wall, because God is not mocked. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. (Gal. 6:7) If God's law of sowing and reaping could be circumvented or set aside – He would be mocked. If you could “hack the system” and get around God's Laws, then God would be just another programmer who left a flaw in his programme that could be exploited. But He is not mocked precisely because you can get no more than His law allows you.

But not only is the sluggard a rebel, he is something else.

2. He is self-righteous about his laziness.

The lazy *man* is wiser in his own eyes Than seven men who can answer sensibly. (Prov. 26:16)

He feels completely justified about how he works. If you gathered seven masters of logic to show him he was wrong, he would keep arguing, keep insisting that it is not his fault, it is his boss, his firm, his church, his wife, the economy, other people. No, no, he is not lazy, he is just distracted. No, he's not lazy, he's just unmotivated. He's not lazy, look how busy he is. He's not lazy – look at how many hours he is working.

No, no one understand his situation, her situation, how unique it is.

Oh, he acknowledges that he doesn't always work like he should. But it's just a little folding of the hands, just a little sleep, a little slumber. Haven't I earned it? Shouldn't I be left alone?

The sluggard deceives himself through the ‘smallness of his surrenders’– (6:9-11)

But in fact, for all his justifications, he hates his life.

25 The desire of the lazy *man* kills him, For his hands refuse to labor. (Prov. 21:25)

He wants a different life to the the one he has, but he refuses to do the work to change it. He wants it to be easier, he looks for excuses not to start, he doesn't like to finish, he remains permanently disorganised, he only works if there is a threat or an immediate reward, he destroys what is entrusted to him. But he does this because whether it is at home, or at church, or at the office, he has rebelled against God's laws, and feels justified.

Remember the steward in the parable of the talents? He felt that it was too risky to work for someone who reaps where he hasn't sown. So he didn't even begin. He buried the talent, wasting time and resources. And when judged, he remained self-righteous, arguing with the master that it was too tough and risky to work for him. He felt justified in giving it back, saying, at least here you have what is yours. I didn't steal it, or damage it.

But the master doesn't accept the excuses. “If you were just going to drop it off somewhere, you could have at least dropped it off at the bank to let it gain interest.” It shows that all he cared about was dispensing with the task, and trying not to be blamed.

The sluggard is not working for God's glory, so he is entirely self-focused, self-protective, self-interested.

He needs to repent of rebelling against God's order. He needs to embrace that in this world work is toilsome, it is frustrating, and it is compulsory.

Well, we turn now from the man who is idle at work, to the man who makes an idol of work.

B. The Portrait of a Workaholic

a. The Workaholic's Actions

1. His desire for worth or wealth is never satisfied.

Ecc 5:10 He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.

Pro 27:20 Hell and Destruction are never full; So the eyes of man are never satisfied.

Do not overwork to be rich; Because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; They fly away like an eagle toward heaven. (Prov. 23:4-5)

This is the man or woman for whom the pursuit has become the goal. The desire to earn more, or be more goes from being a means, to becoming an end, to becoming a master, and eventually a tyrant. There is always more to be done, more problems to solve, more projects to take on. He can't stop, and he can't say no. The famous quote from John D Rockefeller, was when he was asked, "How much money is enough money?" His answer, "Just one more dollar".

The workaholic might have begun just wanting to be successful, or have more than enough provision. But good desires become bad desires when they become all-consuming desires. Soon the desire becomes a lust, a burning thirst for more. But the more success and wealth that comes, instead of quenching the thirst, it inflames it even more.

Ambition is a good thing. Obsession is a terrifying thing. A desire to succeed is fine. Looking to your work to bring you ultimate joy, ultimate satisfaction, ultimate pleasure and happiness is idolatry.

2. He becomes so consumed with work, he forgets about relationships.

There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also *is* vanity and a grave misfortune. (Eccl. 4:8)

Here is a man toiling alone, and doesn't stop to ask why and for whom. This is not restricted to the man without family. How many married men lose their marriages because their wives complain that they were married to their jobs? How many children drift far from parents because they sense that their parents were mostly concerned with work? Even at home, the work computer never goes off, the phone is constantly beeping and ringing and being checked and answered.

But the workaholic doesn't stop to tell himself: one of the reasons I'm working is for these people here in my home. What is the point of succeeding and accumulating goods if I lose these people?

That's the problem with idolatry: your gods always demand all of you. No man can serve two masters, but that's the hard life of the one who makes an idol out of anything. Whatever you serve will demand more and more of you, and take more and more of you away from everything else, till

it finally has all of you, and then you lose all those other things your work was supposed to bring: family, health, protection, fulfillment. The tragedy of idolatry.

3. He does not rest when he should.

For all his days *are* sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. (Eccl. 2:23)

It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep. (Ps. 127:1-2)

Dorians: “The Lord worked for six days and rested one, setting both a pattern and a limit for humanity. Work and rest. God sets an example that corrects sluggard and workaholics. It is not laziness: you must work six days. It is not ceaseless toil: you must rest one day.

The idolater of work does not take even God's one day in seven to rest, worship and rejoice. Even on Sunday, he is anxious, wanting to get back to the computer, wanting to check emails and messages.

Yes, there are reasons why people overwork. Longer hours bring more pay, and more pay is desirable whether you are at minimum wage or higher. These days employers would prefer to have five guys working fifty hours each than having six guys working forty hours. And when jobs are scarce, no one wants to be the one who looks like he is working less.

But the believer needs to know that God is separate from His work, and so should you be. God and creation are not the same, and you and your work need to be separated one day in seven.

The American fast food company Chick-fil-A was begun by a believer, Truett Cathy. In keeping with this principle, he chose to make sure all his stores were closed on Sundays. He wrote in his book, “Closing our business on Sunday, the Lord's Day, is our way of honoring God and showing our loyalty to Him.” Some economists calculate that Chick-fil-A loses more than \$1 billion dollars a year by closing on Sundays.

But that's not the end of the story. For the fourth year in a row, it was named America's' favourite restaurant chain, and has now become the 3rd largest in the U.S. after McDonalds and Starbucks, bringing in 10,5 billion a year. God does honour those who honour.

b. The Workaholic's Attitude

He places his ultimate love and trust in creature over Creator.

Work is part of creation, money is part of creation, business and commerce and trade is part of creation. When you love your work more than God, you love creature more than Creator. You look to what has been made over the Maker. You seek love, hope, joy, security, satisfaction from the creation, instead of the Creator. And it is bound to disappoint.

Not only so, but the workaholic places his trust in himself. He believes it is all up to him, so one more minute, one more hour, one more check of the email, is always needed. His trust is in himself, a creature, and in his abilities. He cannot stop to pray, to trust, and to rest.

The rich young ruler had made an idol of all his goods. Jesus challenged him to choose between his idol and following Him. The young ruler, the Bible says, went away sorrowful, for he had many goods. Jesus didn't need those goods, and selling them wouldn't have earned him salvation. It was

that Jesus needed to dislodge the idol before He could be Lord of the man's life. But that man sadly chose creature or creation over Creator.

Now between the one idle at work, and the one making an idol of work, we can talk about the biblical ideal.

18 Here is what I have seen: *It is good and fitting for one* to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it *is* his heritage.

19 As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor-- this *is* the gift of God.

20 For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps *him* busy with the joy of his heart. (Eccl. 5:18-20)

Verse 18 tells us to toil and work all our days. No laziness allowed. Adam was not lounging around the Garden waiting for Eve to feed him grapes.

Verse 18 tells us to eat and drink and enjoy what we have earned. No workaholism allowed. Adam was not feverishly pruning even when the moon was shining at midnight, night after night.

Verse 19 tells us that riches and even the ability to eat comes from God, that it is grace. In other words, the ideal worker is diligent but dependent. He is hardworking and humble. He is a go-getter, but always grateful. He lives submitted to God, keeping God first and ultimate.

He realises even his ability to work and to earn comes from God. He gives God thanks, and makes sure he takes the time to be merry before God and rejoice in what God has blessed him with.

That's how Adam worked before he fell, that how Jesus the Second Adam worked all his life. That's our calling: the ideal: diligent but dependent.