Sermon Series: Words of Wisdom in a Whacked-Out World
Sermon Title: Working Hard or Hardly Working

Text: **Proverbs 6:6 -11 -- 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. 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**.

Introduction: This past Monday was **Labor Day**, an annual celebration of workers and their achievements. This national holiday was signed into law on **June 28, 1894, by President Grover Cleveland**. **It was established in part to repair ties with American workers who were routinely exploited by their employers**. ***By the way, just in case you think your employers are currently taking advantage of you, listen to what it was like for workers in America in the 19th century***. Here is a list of some recently discovered OFFICE WORK RULES that the employees of one company were expected to follow: **(1)** This firm has **reduced** the hours of work, and the clerical staff will now only have to be present between the hours of 7 AM and 6 PM (**WITH THE AVERAGE WORKER OF A MANUFACTURING JOB, PUTTING IN 60-70 HOURS PER WEEK ACCORDING TO THE U. S. GOVERNMENT**); **(2)** Daily prayers will be held each morning in the main office. The clerical staff will be present. **(3)** Clothing must be of a sober nature. The clerical staff will not disport themselves in raiment of bright colours. **(4)** A stove is provided for the benefit of the clerical staff. Coal and wood must be kept in the locker. It is recommended that each member of the clerical staff bring four pounds of coal each day during cold weather. **(5)** No member of the clerical staff may leave the room without permission from Mr. Rogers. The calls of nature are permitted and clerical staff may use the garden below the second gate. This area must be kept in good order. **(6)** No talking is allowed during business hours. **(7)** The craving of tobacco, wines, and spirits is a human weakness and as such is forbidden to all members of the clerical staff. **(8)** Now that the hours of business have been drastically reduced, the partaking of food is allowed between 11:30 a.m. and noon, but work will not on any account cease. **(9)** The owners recognize the generosity of the new Labour Laws, but will expect a great rise in output of work in compensation for these near Utopian conditions. Aren't you glad you live in the 21st century?

This morning, I want to look at what Proverbs and several other passages in Scripture have to say about **THE VALUE OF HARD WORK**. Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote a lot about this particular topic. Here is a small sampling of the verses that mention it:

- **Proverbs 12:14 – From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him**. This is saying that just as a sincere blessing spoken to another brings good to the one who issued it, so hard work brings a blessing to the one engaged in it.
- **Proverbs 13:11 -- Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it**. You and I both know that when people come by money without working for it, they tend to lose it quickly. (**Just look at what happens to most lottery winners**.) However, when they acquire wealth slowly over time by working for it, they not only keep it but increase it!
- **Proverbs 14:23 – In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty**. This is a warning to those who talk a lot about the value of hard work but never get around to it. They end up poor.

- **Proverbs 16:26 -- A worker's appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on**. When I was interviewing for a job, the man conducting the interview asked me, "**Why should I hire you**?" I told him I was highly motivated because I had seven children and a wife to feed. Hunger is a good motivator. That's why the Bible tells us in the New Testament, "**If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat**" (**2 Thessalonians 3:10**).
- **Proverbs 21:25 – The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor**. Any able-bodied person who refuses to work is committing slow suicide.
- **Proverbs 24:27 – Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house**. Before you take care of your personal affairs, take care of your business affairs first because that's what makes it possible to have a home.

As I said, the Bible has a lot to say about a good work ethic. Allow me to make **a few GENERAL observations** from the Scriptures about the subject of work before we get to the core of this message.

- **There is no such thing <u>for the believer</u> as secular work because everything is to be done to God's glory** (**1 Corinthians 10:31 -- whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God**). **This was the perspective of Martin Luther**. A cobbler was said to have asked him how he could glorify God after being converted to Christianity. Luther's answer was not that the cobbler should join the ministry or even sell a "Christian shoe." Instead, he told the man that he should make a good shoe and sell it at a fair price. You see, Luther believed and taught that every person is gifted by God and called to employ those God-given gifts in loving service to their neighbor. Christian cobblers, he said, should not make shoes with little crosses or fish symbols (ichthuses) on them. They should make the best shoes they can make and sell them at a fair price so their neighbors can have good shoes. This will be to the glory of God!
- **God esteemed work by commanding it** (**Genesis 2:15 -- The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it**; **Exodus 20:9** – (In the commandment to keep the Sabbath) -- **Six days you shall labor, and do all your work**).
- **God sets the example for work** (**Romans 8:28 – God works all things together for good; John 5:17 -- Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working"**).
- **We are expected to work** (**1 Thessalonians 4:11 -- We urge you, brothers, … to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and <u>to work with your hands</u>, as we instructed you**).
- **The Bible makes allowances for those who are <u>legitimately</u> unable to work** (**1 Timothy 5:3-4 -- Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God).** **Here Paul tells Timothy to care for older widows who have NO family to care for them. In James 1:27 we're told something similar only this time it includes children-- Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction). Why don't these verses include caring for men?** I can only assume it's because men were expected to work. There was no such thing as retirement in the 1st century. If a man was physically unable to work either because he suffered some sort of infirmity or was too old, he would be considered poor and Proverbs speaks to that situation when it says, "**Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor**" (**Proverbs 22:9**).

Alright, now let's take a look at two different ways to approach work. The Bible indicates that there is an easy way and a hard way.

THE EASY WAY. This is the way of PROCRASTINATION. It's all about the person who sleeps in when he knows he shouldn't; who doesn't care if he works today or not; who isn't particularly concerned with showing up on time or leaving a few minutes early. The easy way is the way of goofing off when the boss isn't around. It's the way that says, "***There's always tomorrow***." The person who chooses this way has no plan and gives no forethought to the future.

Now, it's important to remember that all of us were born "on the easy way." Proverbs 22:15 says, "**Folly is bound up in the heart of a child**." Because of the fall of man, we come into the world ready and willing to take a shortcut, to cheat whenever we can. This is because we have INHERITED OUR SIN NATURE FROM ADAM (**Romans 5:19 – By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners**). This seems to be the way our society is going today. Many people want to do as little as possible so they can have as much time for their own selfish pursuits as they desire. I'm reminded of a motorist who noticed a lady standing beside her car, looking helplessly at a flat tire. He stopped and offered to help. "***Oh, thank you***," said the woman. "***I don't know a blessed thing about changing a tire***." "***You don't have to ma'am***", the Good Samaritan replied. "***This is no job for a lady***." After the tire was changed and the man began to put everything back into the trunk of her car, the woman held a finger to her lips and politely said, "***Shhhh! Please put the jack down easily sir. My husband's taking a nap in the back seat***." He was taking the easy way.

THE HARD WAY. It's getting up early and staying up late. It's about doing your very best. The author of much of Proverbs (Solomon) likely wrote Ecclesiastes and there, in **Ecclesiastes 9:10**, we read, "**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might**." That's the hard way – working your very hardest! It means showing up when you're supposed to, putting in eight hours of good labor for eight hours of pay, doing what you're told and even doing more because it needs to be done. **If we're honest, we'd rather be on the easy way, but wise people realize that God is calling us to the hard way**.

Perhaps the ant is the best illustration in nature of the value of hard work. That's why we're told to **consider her ways and be wise** in **Proverbs 6:1-6**. It says, **"She prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest."** Or to put it another way, she makes hay while she can. Somehow God has built into this tiny little creature a sense that good weather will turn to bad and the time for gathering a harvest will end. That's why whenever you see an ant, it's always busy working! **When you can no longer see them crawling about, it's because the weather has changed and the time for work, at least above ground, has passed**. And the fact that they gathered food when they could, means that there will be plenty of food for the colony to make it through to the next harvest. ***We can learn a lot from the ant***.

There's one more thing I want you to know about **the EASY WAY** and **the HARD WAY**. The EASY WAY looks easy, but once you choose it, it takes you down a path you would not prefer. **Proverbs 26:14** says, "**As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed**." At first, this looks like the perfect lifestyle of the lazy person who simply rolls over in his bed to sleep another hour or two rather than get up and go to work. But it also says this in **Proverbs 10:4** – "**A sluggard does not plow in season, so at harvest times**

he looks but finds nothing." Starvation is at the end of the easy way. **Those who choose this way end up on the bottom of the pile**.

The HARD WAY, on the other hand, which appears to be so difficult turns out to be the way of prosperity. It leads to abundance and personal satisfaction. **Those who choose the hard way are the ones who finish on top of the pile**. Sure, it's tough and requires great diligence and perseverance, but the reward is worth it.

Let me close with two simple applications:

- ***If you're able to work, but not working***, make it your job (at least eight hours a day) to find a job. My advice is that you take any position you can get and then look for a better one. **And when you are gainfully employed, show up every day on time, work hard, and get along with others and you'll find that you'll always have a job because many people will short their employer in at least one of these ways**.
- ***If you're able and you're working***, do your best because it honors the Lord, be content with the salary He is currently providing for you, and as you prosper, use your surplus to advance the cause of Christ in the world and do good to all men.

Conclusion: If you ever pass through **Corbin, Kentucky**, you will have the opportunity to visit the very **first Kentucky Fried Chicken**. Back in **1940,** a man named **Harlan Sanders** who was a follower of Christ by the way lived there. He bought an old, run-down restaurant and built a motel beside it. The number one food item at his eatery was FRIED CHICKEN. In fact, it was acclaimed to be the best fried chicken in the entire state of Kentucky, made from 11 herbs and spices. In **1956**, Harlan Sanders discovered that a major interstate was going to be built that would cause most of the traffic to bypass the town of Corbin. Obviously, this was not good news! If his enterprise was going to survive, he had to make a difficult choice. So, he sold his two businesses and went into the chicken spice business. Then at the age of 66, when most people are retiring, he opened a restaurant off the interstate where people could only buy his one specialty food item made from 11 herbs and spices and decided to call it **Kentucky Fried Chicken**. And the rest, as they say, is history. Today, you can still purchase food at that first KFC, but there is also a museum there where you can read the credo of **Colonel Harlan Sanders**. It's called (you guessed it) **THE HARD WAY**. Here's what it says: "**It is comparatively easy to prosper by trickery, the violation of confidence, oppression of the weak, sharp practices, cutting corners, and those methods we are so prone to (hold up) and condone as business shrewdness. It is difficult to prosper by the keeping of promises, the deliverance of value and goods and services and deeds, and denouncing the so-called shrewdness with sound merit and good ethics. THE EASY WAY is efficacious and speedy, THE HARD WAY … arduous and long. But as the clock ticks away, the easy way becomes harder, and the hard way becomes easier. As the calendar records the years, it becomes increasingly evident that the easy way rests upon a hazardous foundation of shifting sands, whereas the hard way builds solidly a foundation of confidence that cannot be swept away. Thus, we build it**." The next time you go to a KFC, remember that every one of those restaurants was started by a man who at the age of sixty-six decided not to take the easy way, but the hard way. **And may I encourage you … Don't give in to laziness. Don't be like the man described in Proverbs 19:24 who buries his hand in the dish, but will not bring it back to his mouth. Instead, work hard, do your best and you and those you love will be glad you did.**