

The Six-Legged Preacher

WISDOM'S WARNINGS (PART 2) • PROVERBS 6:6-11

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with all of you this morning! I hope all of you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, as we will be partaking together immediately after today's lesson. And following the Lord's Supper, we plan on singing, "There Is Much To Do," before we head outside for some long-distance fellowship.

As you can see, we are starting, once again, with the Plan of Salvation. Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised up on the third day, and in response, he invites us to believe the message, we are told to turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as the Son of God, and then we are commanded to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, at which point we are born into God's family. If you have any questions, please talk to one of the elders, or get in touch during the week, and we would be more than happy to study with you. The first picture this morning is of Kailie, who was baptized several days ago at the Mt. Juliet congregation down in Tennessee. We are thankful for her good example.

We also have a picture of Cindy who was baptized in Cameroon yesterday. Cameroon is several countries east of Ghana. We rejoice along with Cindy this morning.

But the greatest news I've heard all week came on Friday with the baptism of one of our campers from Beaver Creek Bible Camp! Leah was baptized just a few days ago in the middle of the night at the South Twin Cities congregation, just south of Minneapolis. She's in the water with her dad, getting hugged by her mom, and standing with her family (eight siblings)! We love this family, we love the South Twin Cities congregation, and we are sharing this by way of reminder: What Kailie, and Cindy, and Leah have done this week, you can do this morning! If there's anything holding you back, I would love to hear about it. Otherwise, we would encourage you to obey the gospel immediately.

This morning, we return to our mini-series within a much longer extended series of studies through the book of Proverbs. And right now we are working our way through Proverbs 6 in a series of four lessons. Last week we looked at Proverbs 6:1-5 as we looked at a warning against co-signing on a loan. We might have every intention of doing good, but we need to be aware of the danger, and we learned last week to be a bit more creative as we show compassion. There might be a better way. Today we come to Proverbs 6:6-11, as King Solomon

encourages his sons to take a lesson from the ANT. And since the ant is doing the teaching, I am referring to the ant this morning as a “six-legged preacher.” And I will admit that I have been a bit overwhelmed this week with all of the information on ants that’s out there. At times, I felt as if I was studying some kind of alien creature – so many things I had never heard of!

Scientists have classified roughly 12,500 out of a total of up to 22,000 species. So, there is much we do not know, but we are learning all the time. As we do know, ants usually live in colonies, and these colonies range in size from just a few up to groups numbering in the millions. In these colonies, they have varying roles and are highly organized – queens, and workers, and soldiers, and so on. Ants are located on every continent except Antarctica, and they make up between 15-20% of the biomass, meaning that there are more ants (by weight) than just about any other living creature. There are roughly 1 million ants for every human on earth.

The largest ants can be nearly 2-½ inches long. I have never seen an ant 2-½ inches long! And I am thankful. There is a benefit to living in Wisconsin, where it gets 37 degrees below zero from time to time. Ants do not have lungs, but oxygen and other gasses pass through tiny valves in the exoskeleton. Some queens can live for close to 30 years, while most workers live only a few weeks. Ants communicate using pheromones, sound, and touch. They mark trails to a food source using pheromones, and reinforce the marked trail the longer they use it. If it becomes blocked, a new trail is quickly established. When an ant is crushed, it releases an alarm pheromone, warning others: Don’t do whatever this guy just did! Various species defend themselves primarily by biting, but also by stinging, and also by injecting or spraying various chemicals. The sting of the bullet ant (from Central and South America) has been awarded the highest rating on the Schmidt Sting Pain Index (I had no idea there was such a thing)! The Southern Fire Ant is rated a “1” on a scale of 1-4, and the Bullet Ant is the only one rated “4” on the original pain scale. The creator of the scale describes the sting of the Bullet Ant in this way, “Pure, intense, brilliant pain, like walking over flaming charcoal with a 3-inch nail imbedded in your heel.” In combat, if things are not going well, one species ruptures its own head, taking its own life, but spewing a corrosive secretion that disables the attacker. Death itself unleashes an acid letting everybody else know you’re dead so that the undertaker ants can take you away. You can also mark an enemy with that substance, tricking the undertakers into taking away an ant that’s not yet dead. This seems to be the ant version of putting a “kick me” sign on somebody’s back.

Colonies have been known to create nests that are designed to regulate temperatures. Ants have been known to handle flooding by basically drinking floodwater and excreting it outside the nest. Some ants are able to build nests by weaving leaves together using silk produced by their larvae. Some ants have the ability to use their own bodies to build a bridge for other ants to cross over. Some have the ability to cultivate food. Some use landmarks to navigate, others use the earth’s magnetic field, and others use the angle of the sun. Ants can carry up to 50x their own weight, which is amazing! This would be a bit like one of us going out there and picking up a city bus or maybe a snowplow and carrying it home this morning. Ants are incredibly strong!

We could go on and on, but this morning we’re looking at one of two passages referring to ants in the Bible. Both are in Proverbs – here in Proverbs 6 and also in Proverbs 30. Today’s passage is Proverbs 6:6-11, so let’s look together at Proverbs 6:6-11, the words of King Solomon to his son,

- ⁶ ***Go to the ant, O sluggard,
Observe her ways and be wise,***
⁷ ***Which, having no chief,
Officer or ruler,***

- ⁸ *Prepares her food in the summer
And gathers her provision in the harvest.*
- ⁹ *How long will you lie down, 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 *Your poverty will come in like a vagabond
And your need like an armed man.*

As we look at Solomon’s advice to his son, we see two approaches – one is wise and the other is foolish. On one hand, his son can learn from the ANT (his son can learn by principle); this is the wise way of learning. Or on the other hand, his son might also learn by EXPERIENCE; and this is foolishness. And so, he can learn either the hard way or the much easier way. Let’s start with the easy way. Let’s start by looking at what we can learn by principle.

I. So, GO TO THE ANT, Solomon says.

And so, instead of learning the hard way, Solomon wants his son to take some lessons from nature, from God’s creation. And in this case, he refers to the ant. We know from the book of Ecclesiastes that Solomon is something of a scientist. He observes nature. He does research. And in his study of nature, Solomon notices a few things...

A. ...starting with the fact that ants seem to be SELF-MOTIVATED.

Nobody tells them what to do, nobody is “in charge,” and yet they always seem to be busy. And most of us can verify this. Like some of you, I remember having an ant farm as a kid. And as far as I can remember, ants are always busy! Ants are always doing something! In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen an ant standing still. But instead, they are always moving, they are always doing something. But at the same time, I also don’t remember seeing any ant “bosses.” I don’t remember seeing any managers. I don’t remember seeing anybody standing around saying, “You need to do this,” and “You need to go over there.” None of that, but instead, ants just seem to know what to do. You can run over an anthill with the lawnmower, and they don’t quit, do they? No! They get right back to work. They are always busy. They are self-motivated. They take the initiative. They are self-starters. They constantly work without being constantly threatened or harassed into working.

Based on experience, most of us have seen the difference between those who are and those who are not self-motivated. There are some people who always seem to need some kind of motivation. They need to be constantly observed, and corrected, and prodded, and encouraged, and without this encouragement, nothing would ever get done. But on the other hand, there are some people who are always ready and willing. They see a task, and they get to work without ever being told. They do what needs to be done. We see it in the church. We see it in secular work. I’ve seen it as an election official. It’s a very limited assignment, but even in that one day, there’s a clear difference. Some are there early, they’ve studied the material beforehand, and they jump in. But then there are always a few who need to be “encouraged.” There are always a few who need to be told, sometimes repeatedly. As a king, Solomon has seen this as well, and he’s telling his son: Go to the ant! Go to the ant and observe that ants seem to be self-motivated. And he encourages his son: Be like the ant.

B. The second part of this is: Ants seem to have some concept of PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE.

Even ants know that they only have a limited amount of time to get ready for the winter. As primitive as they might be, ants are constantly getting ready. And these two things are obviously tied together. Ants are self-motivated, because they instinctually know that winter is coming, and so they work especially hard in the summer. They do what needs to be done.

And we learn from all of this. Solomon wants his son to learn from all of this, that work is good. Work is honorable. Work is not beneath him, even as the son of the most wealthy king in all of history. Of all the people who could have been lazy, Solomon's son would have been at the top of that list, and yet Solomon wants his son to know the value of work. God honors work. Adam, and Cain, and Abel all worked – Adam and Cain as farmers, and Abel as a keeper of flocks. Moses was a shepherd. Jesus was a carpenter. Paul was a tentmaker, along with Priscilla and Aquilla. From cover to cover, the Bible encourages work, not as a curse, but as a blessing. As Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12,

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

First of all, then, Solomon tells his son to go to the ant to learn the value of work. What the ant does by instinct, we do by observing and deciding.

II. As we go back to the text, we find not only an encouragement to learn by example (in wisdom, the easy way), but we also find a warning to avoid learning the hard way, a warning addressed directly to SLUGGARDS.

As far as I can tell, the word we translate here as “*sluggard*” goes back to a Hebrew word that is also the basis of our English word “sloth,” and it refers to being idle or lazy. So, the translators have brought it over into English as “*sluggard*.” Literally, “like a slug.” As opposed to ants, slugs are slow, aren't they! And in their work, some people are slug-like, while others are ant-like. Some are self-motivated, planning for the future, and others are not.

And if I could summarize verses 9-11, the warning to the slug-like person is: **EXCESSIVE SLEEP LEADS TO POVERTY**. I would make just a few observations here, starting with the fact that laziness is very slowly progressive. In other words, being a sluggard isn't something we dream about and work toward, but it happens gradually, “*A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest.*” Notice the emphasis on a “*little*.” This isn't an outright refusal to do any work, but this is progressive. A little here, a little there, and before long, being lazy has a way of sneaking up on us – hitting snooze a few times, a game of solitaire here and there, checking in on social media when we should be doing something else – and before long, poverty catches up to us, like a vagabond, like an armed man. And we note here: We aren't actually robbed, but poverty sneaks up on us “*like*” we have been robbed. So, there's no robber, but instead, the sluggard robs himself. He destroys his own chances of getting ahead in life. Not only that, but in a group, a slacker has a way of messing up everything. As election officials, are supposed to rotate our crew through each position, but if I have a slacker on the team, sometimes I need to put them in the “greeter” position. Generally, that's where they do the least amount of damage. A few years ago, I had to put someone in that position, basically, “Can you at least say hello to people?”

“Okay, I can do that.” But after a while, I looked over, and she was on her phone. People would come in, and she was visibly annoyed that voters had interrupted her game. I had to make sure she was not invited back, because a slacker holds back the whole team. Unlike the ant, the sluggard is NOT self-motivated and needs constant attention, taking away from other issues that need to be handled.

I would also observe that sleep is not the real problem here. In this case, excessive sleep is more of a symptom than a cause. We know that God commanded his people to rest. Jesus rested on a regular basis. But let’s not miss something in the original commandment. In the “big ten,” God said,

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work... And the reason is, ***¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.***

So, yes, God wanted his people to rest, but let’s not miss the first part, ***“Six days you shall labor and do all your work.”*** Some people miss that part! It seems, then, that there is a lot more work than rest (a 6 to 1 ratio), even in the 4th Commandment. So, rest is good at the appropriate time, but work is good also.

Conclusion:

In this passage, then, we have two reminders: We can learn either the easy way or the hard way. The easy way, the way of wisdom, is to look at the ant. Watch and learn! The ant is self-motivated and prepares for the future. Do that! On the other hand, the sluggard loves to sleep a little too much – a little rest here, a little nap there, a snooze button here and there, and before he knows it, poverty comes in like an armed man. This is the hard way. King Solomon, then, reminds his son: Learn from the ant, and do not be a slacker.

The good news is: We can change! We can choose to work when we need to be working. We can choose to rest when we need to be resting. That’s almost as much of a challenge to some people as the other. But we can look to the ant as motivation and also as a reminder, and we can learn from God’s creation. What they do by instinct, we do because we honor God and we obey.

As we close, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God who works and does amazing things. You continually show us the importance of both working and resting. As your people, we truly want to follow your example. We want to lead the way in showing the world what Christian living is all about. If we have failed in the past, we ask for your forgiveness, and we pray that your word will take root in our hearts. Thank you for giving us the Proverbs of King Solomon. But we thank you more than anything for sending something so much greater than Solomon. Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his sinless life. Thank you for his example of hard work as a carpenter and as a teacher and preacher. We pray that we would follow his example as we serve you from the heart and with enthusiasm.

We are your servants, and we come to you today, in the name of your son. Lord, come quickly.
AMEN.

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