

## The wisdom of hard work

### Various proverbs

Who remembers *Money for Nothing* by the British band Dire Straits? The video, released in 1985 and directed by Steven Barron, was a ground-breaking video; one of the first to feature computer generated imagery. What I love about the song is the background story as to how this song was written. The lead singer of Dire Straits, Mark Knopfler, he was in an electrical goods store at closing time, and you know how in these stores they'll have a wall of TVs set up? The TVs were all playing music videos, and he overheard what the shop workers were saying as they watched. He wrote down what he heard and turned it into a song.

Here's what these workers said as they watched these musicians on the screen. You can imagine them pointing at the Televisions: *That ain't working, that's the way you do it. You just play your guitar on the MTV. Maybe you'll get a blister on your little finger, maybe a blister on your thumb, but we've got to install microwave ovens, we've got custom kitchen deliveries, we've got to move these refrigerators. But look at that! That ain't working, that's the way you do it. That's money for nothing.* The workers in the song have a fantasy. How great would it be to amass a fortune without breaking a sweat? Maybe not even a fortune, what about simply a decent living? Wouldn't it be good to not have the stress of hard work? This is the same fantasy that we are sold with lottery ads. You see the guy throwing his tie away and flopping down by a pool, and then the slogan: *Spend the rest of your life!*

Perhaps we're not so foolish as to fall for this fantasy—perhaps we know that effort is necessary— but maybe from time to time we do feel frustrated that we aren't quite attaining the level of success that we are after. Perhaps we look at others and we see them getting promoted ahead of us. We see other people landing opportunities that we wish we had. We might be working but we're not getting the exact pay off we desire. Perhaps in that sense we *are* like the characters in Mark Knopfler's song, looking at others and wondering what the difference is between their success and our own mediocrity. Today we begin a three-week series in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. In particular we are looking at what this book has to say about *money*. And to begin with we're exploring what might be the difference between those who have money and those who don't. You have a sermon outline in your bulletin, and also an insert with various proverbs collected for easy reference.

As you read through the book of Proverbs our answer becomes obvious. What is the difference between those who find success and those who just stumble along? The summary lesson is there in Ch 10:4 Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. Proverbs tells us that more often than not the difference between wealth and poverty is simple hard work. This is a lesson repeated all the way through the book: 12:11 Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense. 12:27 The lazy do not roast any game, but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt.

The Bible makes it very clear that God is a provider, but God's normal way of ensuring we are provided for is to give us work to do. Manna falling out of the heavens was a one off; God's preferred method is to see us get working in the world that he has provided. As humans we have needs. As our creator God recognizes this, but he does ask us to co-operate with him by being diligent.

Within Proverbs the benefits of hard work are described using a bunch of different pictures. I like the image that we get in 10:5 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor. What does a fortified city give you? It gives you protection; it enables you to withstand assaults and dangers. Having a little bit of money enables you to pay for that medical treatment, to hire that lawyer, to ensure that your house continues to give you shelter. If you want a life where you're not constantly worried about the future then a commitment to hard and diligent work will take you a long way.

Hard work will also give you a better chance of maintaining control over your future. 12:24 teaches us that Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labor. If you want to have a greater say in what your life looks like, if you want to avoid others making all the decisions for you, then get working to put yourself in that situation. For some years I was a member of a school council, and the Head of the school was constantly trying to balance up the advice that parents would be giving their children. Parents would say things like "there's more to life than study! Choose the easy subjects, don't get too stressed!" And there's truth in that, God doesn't want us to be workaholics. But the Head found himself saying to parents, "Yes, but, getting a good mark in the HSC will open more doors for your child. A bit of hard work will give your child more control of the future". If you like the idea of self determination, of having more of a say in your future, then you need to get working. It's the same with those in the work place. I've seen a couple of articles recently speaking about how it's the workers who show initiative who get the promotions. If you just sit back and do exactly what you are told and no more. then you'll get overlooked. That can be frustrating. It may mean creating the time to do a bit more study, to 'up' your qualifications, perhaps to finish a course that you've already started.

One thing I noticed in these verses is that hard work can lead to more than a simple covering of our needs. These proverbs speak of diligent hands bringing *wealth*, of supplying *abundant* food, 12:27 speaks of the *riches* of the hunt. What *is* the difference between the store worker and the rock star on the TV? What *is* the difference between minimum wage and megabucks? Probably a lot of things: opportunity, background, personality. But one possibility *might be* that the rock star worked really hard. At one point in the lyrics of *Money for Nothing*, the store worker laments "I should have learnt to play the guitar, I should have learnt to play them drums!" Well, why didn't he? Maybe he had the opportunity but let it slip! One thing for sure is that despite any other advantage he might have had, the person who makes it onto the TV did not let opportunity slip by. Proverbs is not giving us a sure fire solution to becoming multi-millionaires but the book is opening our eyes to a

very important observation: In ordinary circumstances, hard work has a lot of benefits, and can actually lead us into the realm of wealth and abundance.

Let's dive a little deeper into this because I think Proverbs has some useful observations as to how successful people operate, or rather, how unsuccessful people make their mistakes. There are two habits that I think are worth noting. The first is illustrated there 22:13 The sluggard says, "There's a lion outside! I'll be killed in the public square!" What is the mistake made by the sluggard in this verse? He is way too quick to find an excuse, and, in fact, he's seeing danger when in reality there probably isn't any. Lions aren't generally found in public squares! How quick are we to find excuses for not having a go? "What if I fail? What if put myself forward and people laugh at me? What if take a risk and it doesn't work out?" It is important to think sensibly about taking risks, but it's also possible to convince yourself of dangers that aren't actually there.

By contrast successful people resist falling into those excuses. Instead of sensing danger at every turn they sense opportunity. Instead of admitting defeat at the first hurdle they try and work around the problem. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, but it took him 10,000 attempts before he found the right design. He didn't give up after his first failure, and he certainly didn't let any imaginary problem stop his experiments; He committed himself to working hard and we still use the result today.

Another habit of hard workers is that they know how to apply self-discipline. They know the discipline of delayed gratification, of saying *no* to luxuries in the here and now to enjoy a more profitable future. 21:17 Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich. In other words, apply some discipline to what you spend money on. I remember after Jas and I were first married we spent some time with other newlyweds and I remember being blown away by all the stuff people would spend money on. While Jas and I were saving for a deposit on a house, other friends were dropping wads of cash on all sorts of things. In particular I remember some young husbands who were collectors; walls of baseball caps put out for display, one guy liked to collect *limited edition* boxed sets of DVDs, and then they'd say "oh it's so hard to save for a deposit!" My thought was to say to myself "Well, part of your deposit is hanging there on the wall!"

Now, hobbies are a good and healthy thing, and hobbies cost money. If you love cinema and it helps you to relax in stressful world then it makes sense to spend money in that way. But Proverbs wants us to have our eyes open. Money spent in one area can't be spent in another, particularly money spent on luxurious consumables like wine and olive oil in our proverb. If we want to see a change our financial situation then maybe some discipline is in order.

There's also the discipline of building wealth slowly. 13:11 Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow. This proverb has in mind the temptation to cut corners for quicker riches. Dishonest money might include

blackmail, maybe false advertising, stealing. But dishonesty isn't the only way we might try to become rich quickly. I've come across people in churches who play cards at the casino, who love placing bets, who buy lottery tickets. One of the saddest pastoral situations I've ever encountered was an elderly woman whose 40-year-old son had fallen on hard times, and she announced to me that she'd started buying a daily lottery ticket to try and secure for her son a much needed windfall. On one hand it was a heart wrenching display of a mother's undying, desperate love for her son, but on the other it was a terrible strategy to pursue; one that would only serve to have the opposite effect to what was intended. Gambling is designed to take your money; the system is designed for the house to win and the punter to lose. Gambling is designed to be addictive, and it will not make you rich. It is much better to have a long-term strategy where you act little by little, whereby over time you do find yourself in a position to help others. But it's a step by step process.

What's really scary is that the same principle can work in the other direction. Poverty doesn't have to be the result of one single disastrous event. Poverty can be the result of a chain of small decisions over time. Our collection of proverbs begins and ends with this refrain: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man. What I find scary about these words is how easy it is to say them. "I won't get started just yet, I'm in no rush to get moving! Maybe I'll apply for that job tomorrow, or the day after. Perhaps this year isn't the year to revisit my budget, or to start studying properly. I'll just keep myself chilled for the moment" These are the words of the procrastinator, words most of us are familiar with, and Proverbs is firing an alarm to wake us up! Keep procrastinating and poverty will come upon you like a thief, like an armed man!

So hard work is worth pursuing, that's one conclusion that proverbs leaves us with so far. The book of Proverbs offers its advice based on general observations of life, and, generally speaking, hard work will pay off. But it would be a mistake to assume that hard work is a sure bet. Life also teaches us that even the most diligent workers can lose it all. I really like Ch 18:11 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city. So far so good, we've already encountered this concept; wealth is something that offers you protection. But listen to the next line: they imagine it a wall too high to scale. Is wealth *really* too high a wall to scale? Is it *really* an impenetrable fortress? It's the word *imagine* that strikes me. Sometimes our imaginations can fool us! We saw this in 2008 with the Global Financial Crisis. Some of those companies were billed as being *too big to fail*, but then overnight they were gone!

Wealth can be a fragile thing because there is always an element that is beyond our control. One proverb that I haven't included on your sheet in 13:24: An unplowed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away. Even if a poor man decides to not lie in bed but to get up and reap what he can from a vacant plot, then there is a chance that he'll lose what he's worked so hard for, either from a natural injustice like a flood or from a human injustice like a neighbor who steals or poisons his crop. There are occasions when hard work doesn't produce what we might expect, and it's in light of this very sad reality that we need to remember the last point that I've got

on the sermon outline: hard work has a bigger vision than simply working hard to feather our own nests.

We'll speak more about this in a couple of week's time, but Proverbs makes it very clear that wealth is meant to be shared. 19:17 Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done. When hard times hit, those who have worked hard and survived the storm have a responsibility to share the fruit of their labour with those who have taken a beating. We work not only for ourselves but for the benefit of others in our communities.

Moving into the New Testament and we see Jesus operating with this very principle. On Wednesday nights a group of us are meeting in the Whitbourn's home to study Mark's Gospel. This is the Christianity Explored group that I was advertising a few weeks ago. (You can still join us if you wish!) But one of the things that struck us in the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel is just how busy Jesus is. Preaching in this town, healing in that village. An exorcism here, a miracle there, getting up early before dark to pray. Jesus worked hard! But who was it for? Was it for himself? No way! It was for the people. It was for us! The hardest work he would perform was for us, with his death on the cross, dying to remove our sins. Both the Old Testament and the New encourage us to be diligent, but we're not understanding either if the fruit of that work is never shared.

Do you remember your first job? My first job was when I left school and worked at Toys R Us in Westfield Parramatta. As you can imagine summertime is a very busy time in a toy store with Christmas and the New Year period, and so I was part of an expanded team employed to fill shelves overnight. We had a great time doing that job. Can you picture thirty 18 year-olds let loose in a toy store after midnight? There wasn't a lot of shelf stacking going on. Lots of flirting, I remember lots of dancing, trolley races down the aisles. There were two nerdy guys who weren't much fun. They kept their heads down and got on with their jobs, they put their hands up to do things like extra administrative work, the kind of jobs we didn't want to do. And then as day broke we would all go out and have breakfast at Macdonald's. But summer ended and the store made everyone's job redundant. Everyone, that is, except for the two nerdy guys. They got retained. My first lesson in the world of work: hard work will pay off, while goofing off will mean you'll be shown the door. And it's a lesson the Book of Proverbs wants us to recognize.

I'll lead us in prayer.