

# Wisdom in the Workplace

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. Show of hands, who here has enough money in their bank account? Okay, good, we've got one. Excellent. Who here would like more money in their bank account?

Oh, come on. See number nine? Come on. Okay, but it's a pretty universal fact that everybody would like more money. Let me ask you another question. What would you be willing to do to get it? Would you say perhaps rob a cash-in-transit van? I don't know if you heard about the one in Boxburg a couple of weeks ago. It was a full-on military-style operation, explosives that were used, and they took it on.

And clearly there are some people who see that as an option. And here's a literal case where somebody, or a couple of guys, sat down with their buddy and said the words of Proverbs 1, verse 11, Come along with us. Let's lie in wait for innocent blood. Let's ambush some harmless soul. And that's a hectic, quite extreme example, and I certainly hope there's nobody here that's even considering that. But let's bring it a little bit closer to home. Would you smudge the figures on your SARS tax return?

[ 1 : 12 ] I mean, after all, come on, the government. They're the biggest crooks of them all, aren't they? And maybe a daily example. Would you keep quiet if the cashier forgot to swipe an item while scanning an item to put it in the bag at the till?

Or if the waitress left an item off your bill, would you say something? And hopefully you would not keep quiet to all of these.

And hopefully you've chosen to earn your money the way most people do, by getting a job. But for many, a job is simply a means to an end. It's how we earn the paycheck to get what we need, or perhaps what we want to do in our leisure time, or as the old song from the 80s goes, everybody's working for the weekend.

So what is the right attitude to have? How should we view our jobs? How should we view money? And because societies across the ages have always been plagued by materialism, it's not surprising that Proverbs is full of wisdom on how we should behave with our money and how we should behave at work.

And so this morning we're going to dig deep and explore the Proverbs to discover the proper biblical attitude towards money and to work. And we're going to do that by looking at the Proverbs that teach on this particular topic, but I've grouped them into six main instructions that we need to take into the workplace.

[ 2 : 45 ] But now, before you who are retired or housewives or students switch off and go to sleep, these instructions apply to everybody. Work, as we're going to look at it today, does not require a paycheck to qualify as work.

And if you don't believe me and are very brave, I dare you to go tell a stay-at-home mom, it must be so nice not to work. Go on, I dare you.

Nick does good funerals as well. So if you want to be successful in your work, what according to Proverbs must you do? Well, the first instructions are actually quite obvious.

Be hardworking. In fact, it's really obvious, isn't it? And it's puzzling that despite how obvious it is, it's one of the most repeated ideas in Proverbs.

So very clearly we need to hear it. And the basic principle that Proverbs tells us is that laziness will result in poverty and hunger, while hard work results in food and wealth.

[ 3 : 52 ] And here are two examples. 10 verse 4. Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. Or 28 verse 19.

Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty. Sounds logical. So why does it tell us what we should actually know instinctively?

After all, we've been created to work. That was a task God gave to Adam and Eve in the garden when he put them there in Genesis chapter 1. We've been designed to work.

God himself is a working God. As we saw from two Thessalonians, Paul, the apostle, was a working apostle. He worked hard. And so we should want to, and we should expect to work.

You may not like this, but work is actually good. But obviously, since the fall, it has become difficult. It's now a toil and a slog, and it doesn't reward us as we should.

[ 4 : 56 ] And so the warning against laziness is there in Proverbs, because laziness is a sign of our active rebellion against the created order that God has made.

And on the other hand, when we obey wisdom and we work hard, we honor God because that is what we were created to do. Now, there are consequences to being either lazy or hardworking. And the most common one I've already mentioned throughout Proverbs is that poverty results for laziness, whereas wealth is the consequence for the diligent.

But I want to look at two others, one a warning and one a reward. One a warning, obviously, for being lazy and one a reward for being diligent. And so first, the warning. 18 verse 9.

One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys. What is happening here is God is equating laziness to being destructive.

[ 6 : 03 ] And it's important to remember that laziness isn't neutral and doesn't just affect you. Sitting at work playing Candy Crush or surfing the net isn't just doing nothing.

It's costing your company money and time that they can't get back. There are, however, rewards for the hardworking and diligent person who gives of their best when they work.

22 verse 29. Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings. They will not serve before officials of low rank. Now, I'm not sure how many of us are ever going to have the opportunity to serve royalty.

But do think back a couple of weeks to the royal wedding. Do you think, for example, the musicians who played at that wedding were lazy types who did things in a half-hearted way? No.

They're all skilled people who practiced their talents very, very hard. And in the same way, skilled and hardworking people who develop their skills are more likely to get the better jobs and get the promotion.

[ 7 : 05 ] So Proverbs warns against laziness because sleeping our lives away when there's work to be done will result in failure, as we saw from Proverbs 24 that Nick read to us earlier.

And yet we are so blinded by our sin and rebellion that folly has us believing the complete opposite. That it's the life of leisure and luxury that one needs to seek.

But at this point, I want to just pause and take a step back. I'm an insurance broker, which basically means I sell fine print for a living. And so I need to highlight some fine print that we need to be aware of, some conditions and exclusions, so to speak, that we need to remember when we're dealing with Proverbs.

What we need to remember is that Proverbs are not promises that are to be taken literally in every occasion. And the reason for that is Proverbs are general observations and are deliberately oversimplified.

And so as a result, Proverbs, if viewed just one by one, often give very opposite ends of a point of view. And so we need to read Proverbs together to get a more balanced view.

[ 8 : 14 ] And Proverbs also have a broader application than just the literal meaning. That one about serving kings is a good example. And the last thing we need to remember is that Proverbs can be true in a here and now way, but they're always true in an eternal way.

So why do I mention this? Because as we look at what Proverbs is telling us about hard work, I know that there are some of you here this morning who are really struggling financially, but you are also very hardworking.

And so to you, I can say take heart, because regardless of what we have here on earth, our wealth lies in heaven. And there's a lovely balancing proverb in 19 verse 1 that says, And this encouragement from chapter 10 in verse 3, The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the cravings of the wicked.

So we're to work hard. But let me ask you a question for the husbands. And maybe don't raise your hands. I can because my wife's gone out to Sunday school.

But have you ever had your wife moan at you about how late you've got home from work? And then you've indignantly replied, But I'm putting bread on the table.

[ 9 : 39 ] And at least I'm actually at work and not out drinking like the other guys. Or maybe wives, has your husband ever complained because you're exhausted in the evenings when he gets home late? And you've been baking all day for the cake sale, and you're cleaning the house because you've got guests coming over tomorrow.

And you in turn give him an earful because about him expecting the house to be cleaned and the washing done and the food cooked. Proverbs has a gem of wisdom to counterbalance the instruction to hard work.

And it's a call to stop and check our motives. Proverbs 23 verse 4 and 5 says, Yes, work hard, but be careful not to overdo it.

Don't wear yourself out for things that won't last if it's going to harm your health, your family, and most importantly, your walk with God. And here we are challenged.

You've got to ask yourself, are you constantly working to the point that you can't make it to church or you can't make it to growth groups? You need to stop and listen and take and heed the wisdom of Proverbs.

[ 10 : 55 ] And also keep your wealth and your possessions in perspective because they are fleeting and they won't last forever. So work hard. But how you work is as important.

And that brings us to our next instruction from wisdom, which I've grouped as be honest. And to that I've added and fair and law abiding. And that's another very obvious instruction, just like the previous one.

And Proverbs has a lot to say about being honest. But it must because we need constant reminding because our sinful nature constantly rebels against God and what he wants.

And God, according to Proverbs 11 verse 1, hates dishonesty. The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him.

The image here is of a scale used for business transactions. And they would have set weights that the merchants would have. They'd agree on a price, put the product on one side, the weight on the other.

[ 11 : 57 ] And when the scale balanced, you had that amount of whatever produce you were buying. Now, of course, if the merchant had tampered with the weights, he could use it to cheat when buying or selling. Now, we don't do many deals with scales every day anymore.

But depending on what industry you're in, I'm sure that this proverb would show itself up differently. And you'd be able to come up with examples. In my industry as a short-term insurance broker, it's not so much the merchants you've got to look out for.

It's often the clients. I've had clients who've come to me wanting to insure an item after it's already been damaged. Or clients will add items to a claim that weren't actually stolen.

Or in one case, we had a client trying to claim for a TV that was this big. When the assessor got to the house, the TV cabinet in the space where the old TV was was only this big. It's fraud.

It's lying and stealing and a blatant contradiction of the Ten Commandments. And yet the Israelite merchants were doing this, even though they knew those Ten Commandments. And they were accused of this by the prophets.

[ 13 : 03 ] For example, in Micah chapter 6. And we're no different. And again, there are consequences. Chapter 10, verse 2. Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value, but righteousness delivers from death.

Stolen items have even less value than any other item. And also, like all material things, have no lasting value and can result in death.

Ask some of the guys involved in their cash-in-transit heist. Well, you can't. They were dead when the cops shot them. And people must be able to trust you and know that they can deal with you fairly without being ripped off.

Don't be like the merchant in Proverbs 20, verse 14. It's no good. It's no good, says the buyer. And then goes off and boasts about his purchase.

The image that comes to mind of this proverb is a little old lady who's selling her car to the sharky car dealer. And he tells her, no, it's worthless. And gives her a pitiful price for it. And then goes and brags to his colleagues about the profit he's going to make when he sells it on.

[ 14 : 10 ] It's one thing to drive a hard bargain. It's quite another to take advantage and oppress people, particularly the poor. And Proverbs warns us of that in 14, verse 31.

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker. But whoever is kind to the needy honors God. All people are made in the image of God and deserve dignity and justice.

Particularly in our nation, we have so many who are poor and desperate for work. And Proverbs challenges us. Do you pay your staff a fair salary?

More personally, do you pay your domestic worker and your gardener a fair wage? What conditions do you expect your staff to work in? Are you honoring God in the way you treat others?

Or are you showing contempt for him? But let's stop picking on the bosses for a second. And let's talk to the employees. Because that's most of us. And there's a proverb that speaks to us too. 19, verse 6.

[15:15] He who obeys instruction guards his life. But he who is contemptuous of his ways will die. While this proverb is referring to the instructions of God, scripture also tells us to obey our earthly masters and leaders.

Colossians chapter 3, verse 22. Because God has placed them in authority over us. Romans 13, verse 1. It's like a chain of command. And so the question that we need to ask ourselves as employees is, do we obey our employers?

Or do we treat them with contempt? Do we treat government with contempt? Are you complying with all the regulations of your industry? Or are you deliberately cutting corners?

Do your staff members who drive your company vehicles or wear your company logos on their shirts obey the law? Because they represent you. Personally, do you obey the law?

Do you stop at the stop street in the corner there? Because I know not many people do. Do you speed? And as Christians, we need to strive to be inscrutably honest, trustworthy, and above reproach.

[16:18] Because firstly, God expects it from us. But secondly, our witness hangs in the balance as the world looks on at how we behave. And so we need to try our best to be hardworking and honest.

But the people that we do business with, or hire, may not be. And so the next instruction from Proverbs is to be careful. And as we saw back in chapter 1, one of the purposes of Proverbs is to give prudence.

And Proverbs gives us some very plain, good, practical advice. For example, about who we hire. 26 verse 10. Like an archer who wounds at random is the one who hires a fool or any passerby.

The image here is of the archers shooting over their own troops into the enemy. Now, of course, if your archers were no good or shooting at random, they're going to shoot people on their own side. And what we're warned here is to be careful about who we hire. Particularly, as we saw in the last point, we need to obey the law, and you can't just fire somebody without good reason. And so if you're not careful, you're going to harm yourself and your business if you hire the fool.

[17:30] It warns us to be careful about securing loans. 22 verse 26 and 27. Do not be one who shakes hands in pledge, puts up security for debts.

If you lack the means to pay it back, your very bed will be snatched from under you. It's not prohibiting us from giving loans, but it makes it very clear that there are very real dangers with signing security for someone.

Particularly a stranger, because you could lose everything. It also reminds us that we need to plan carefully and not to rush into deals. And that slow and steady growth is much better than get-rich-quick schemes.

21 verse 5. The plans of the diligent lead to profit, as surely as haste leads to poverty. Or 13 verse 11.

Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow. And linked to this, Proverbs also tells us to get our priorities straight. 24 verse 27.

[18:34] Put your outdoor work in order and get your fields ready. After that, build your house. Now it's an agricultural example, but what it's telling us is to get the source of income in place before we start spending our money.

So don't go rush out and buy a great big machine that makes some device if there's no market for that device. We're in our personal capacity. Don't go out and buy that flashy new car the day you get offered the new job.

And so we're called to be hardworking, honest and wise in how we do business. But how are we to respond with what God has given us?

And the next instruction from Proverbs is be generous. Proverbs calls us to be generous with what we have and that generosity, if done with the right motive and wisely, will be rewarded.

11 verse 24 to 26. One person gives freely, yet gains more. Another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.

[ 19 : 40 ] A generous person will prosper. Whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. God's, sorry, people curse the one who hoards grain, but they pray God's blessing on the one who is willing to sell.

And so we as businesses and individuals must be generous in helping the poor. That's not to say we must just give. Our giving needs to be tempered with wisdom. And as we saw from the New Testament reading that Rowan did, read to us from 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, those within the church who are lazy and not willing to work shouldn't get to take advantage of those who are.

But our generosity isn't aimed just at people. We're also called to be generous towards God.

Chapter 3 and verse 9. Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops.

Then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats brim over with new wine. Notice how we're not to wait until we flush with cash before we give.

The barns overflow after we honored God with what he's given us. We were reminded last week at the AVM that as a church, as Marks, we were only just breaking even.

[ 20 : 54 ] And we need, as a congregation, to increase our giving. As a church, we want to be able to pay our staff fairly. We want to take on new staff so that we can grow and reach more people with the gospel.

And so the challenge that Proverbs levels at us is are we being generous with what God has given us? Or do we think that it's mine, it's ours, and that I can hold on to it while in fact it's all given to us by God?

And because everything we have is given to us by God, regardless of how much we have, little or lot, we need to then take the next instruction from Proverbs and be content.

Now up till now, almost everybody would agree with the logic of the instructions that Proverbs has taught. But at this point, that Proverbs gives some wisdom that's completely counter-cultural, particularly to our current Western culture.

12 verse 9 says, Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be a somebody and have no food.

[ 22 : 04 ] That's completely different to what pop culture tells us. It yells folly at us, telling us to fake it till we make it. Current culture also tells us that our worth is measured by what we have and that we need to keep up with the Joneses.

And every day we get bombarded with advertising that tells us, you know, you deserve it or because you're worth it. It's the hair product ad. Clearly I'm not. But, basically, advertising is telling us that there is something bigger, better, or faster out there and you need it.

And there's an electronics company that's almost their entire marketing drive. You've got to have the next one. You've got to have the next one. It's a fruit, by the way, and it's not blackberry.

But what does wisdom say? Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice. And folly shouts at us from the internet and from the tabloids that there's no such thing as bad publicity.

But wisdom quite discreetly says to us, a good name is more desirable than great riches. To be esteemed is better than silver or gold. Why is a good name so desirable?

[ 23 : 20 ] Because as Christians, we're here with an ultimate purpose, to glorify God and share the gospel with the world. And we can't do that if we're not living the gospel out. If what we claim to believe and how we behave don't match up, we've got no credibility in the eyes of the world.

So how do we gain wisdom in the workplace? And the last piece of wisdom is from Proverbs chapter 16. And I've called it Be Prayerful.

Proverbs 16 and verse 3. Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans. The word plans here in the NIV is translated as work in other translations.

And the original Hebrew word is the same word that Exodus 23 uses. For six days you shall work or labor. And so it's very applicable to this topic that we look at this morning.

But the question I want to ask you is are you committing your business, your work, your job to the Lord in prayer? Are you asking him to help you to do it well and skillfully, to keep you hardworking, to keep you honest, to give you a generous heart, to give you contentment so that you may glorify him in your work?

[ 24 : 40 ] Proverbs 16 continues in verse 4 and 5. God works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for the day of disaster. The Lord detests all the proud of heart.

Be sure of this. They will not go unpunished. And that's a wonderful reminder that regardless of what we face now, even if we don't experience these in the here and now, God works out everything to its proper end ultimately.

But it's also worrying because we're wicked. We're proud. And therefore, we should go punished. We deserve to be punished.

But praise God that verse 6 continues, Through love and faithfulness, sin is atoned for. Through the fear of the Lord, evil is avoided.

Solomon, who wrote this, was the wisest man ever, but he never had the privilege of fully understanding these words. We do, though. Through love and faithfulness, sin is atoned for.

[ 25 : 47 ] The love and faithfulness that's been spoken of here isn't our love or faithfulness, thank goodness. It's Christ. He loved us. He was faithful to us and died on the cross to atone for our sins.

He took the punishment that you and I deserve if we trust in him. And so Christians must work in a way that's appropriate to the gospel. exactly the idea that the book that Nick was promoting earlier. We can live out the gospel by doing the most mundane tasks like washing the dishes. And so we should work in fear and reverence of the God who saved us.

Not to try to earn his favor because Jesus has done that on our behalf already. But because, as we saw in 2 Corinthians 5 in growth groups this week, we are a new creation in Christ.

And we must work in a way that's appropriate to that new identity. Which is what these proverbs help us to do. And the way we work should be different to those around us.

[ 26 : 53 ] But is it? Last week, God reminded us to guard our hearts above all things for from it our life flows. Our actions reveal the state of our hearts, particularly when we come to dealing with work and money.

So as you go about your work this week, consider whether your work and your conduct at work with your work colleagues is what you would expect from a child of God. Amen.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise for your word. We thank you that you see us in our need with what we struggle with and you've given us wisdom to challenge us and encourage us and correct us.

And so Lord, we pray that as we go from here that these words of yours would lay on our hearts that we be changed by it and that we go out into the workplace whatever we do, be it at home, or at school, as we study, in our jobs, that we would live lives that glorify you, that reflect the amazing salvation that we have in you, this gift of, this free gift of salvation that you have given to us and that we would glorify you and present you to the world in all that we do.

We ask this in your name. Amen. And thank you. Yo, thank you.