

Introduction

- Murray Watts, a Christian actor, tells the following story:
 - I was talking to members of the audience after a street-theatre performance in a pub car park. "Oh, I know all about Jesus and his miracles," said one person. His hand swept through the air. "Oh, yes. Turning bricks into water. Things like that."
 - I tentatively suggested that, generally speaking, Jesus performed rather more useful miracles than turning bricks into water. "I will dissolve this temple in three days" somehow didn't sound right!
 - "Oh well," his friend interrupted, "the Bible's full of contradictions anyway."
 - I asked him which ones he had in mind. "Well, the book of Proverbs, for a start: 'Many hands make light work' and 'Too many cooks spoil the broth.'"
- We are turning not to popular wisdom, merely human sayings and insights, but to God's word, to what the book of Proverbs actually says and not what those folk in that pub car park thought was in it!!
- Now when I told Helen what I was preaching on, she laughed, because what we'll be thinking about this evening is not my strongest area! (Physician, heal thyself!!)
 - and also because tonight's sermon is basically a sermon I preached in Motherwell!!
- *Laziness - working hard - using time well...*

Exposition

- The core message of these verses, and the clear thrust of the book of Proverbs, is very simple:
 - *work hard - otherwise you'll be poor!*
- *Now this is practical, common-sense, obvious even...*
- Uses a number of methods to drive the point home:
 - *examples from nature* - the ant;
 - *pithy sayings that will lodge in the mind and carry the teaching around day in, day out* (number of phrases Helen and I have found we actually picked up from our parents as we come to parent our kids...!);
 - *comparison* - sluggard with vinegar and smoke!
 - observation of real life - I went by the field of the sluggard...
 - *character study of the sluggard* - the sluggard says...
- Essentially saying: "*you know it - but make sure you let it affect your life!*"
- All the more acutely so since it was written to a world where labour directly affected wealth:
 - work in the fields, more weeding, watering, scaring away birds, mending tools, etc that you did, the more prosperous you became
- Not quite so simple today:
 - you can work really hard, maybe as a nurse, and not earn a huge amount;
 - with the right qualifications (which admittedly may have taken work to achieve) can wander along earning much more, without the same level of effort
- Yet still true in general today, effort (rightly directed) is rewarded

Conclusion

- Could summarise saying: "*you have to work to achieve that which you aim for.*"

Application

- Proverbs meant to be practical...
- As well as applying the core message of this passage to ourselves in the obvious way - work hard, don't be lazy in your work, do your homework, take your share of the housework - it will be valuable to explore three other areas where this theme from Proverbs has particular relevance

To our Relationships

- Often we have problems in our relationships:
 - people we used to see often who we don't see now;
 - people who we should get on with, work with, but now time with them is tension filled, ready for the next explosion
- We can all come up with our own examples
- Reasons are many and varied, but worth applying what Proverbs has to say about working hard here:
 - one of the things we are sometimes afraid to do is work at our relationships
- Can be **hard work** going and saying **sorry** for something you've done that you know is part of the breakdown of a relationship
- Can be **hard work** going and saying "I don't know what's caused you to fall out with me, but I want to get it sorted out"
- Can be **hard work** raising things that are really getting to you about how someone else is treating you that are causing a relationship to breakdown
- Can be **hard work** to go and offer to help someone
- **But those kinds of hard work are necessary if we are to see the result we want: reconciliation & restoration**
 - example in Jesus - hard work for him to take the first step, leave heaven, work hard for 33 years living an upright life in a sinful world with all the pressures, hard work to go to the Cross... yet a cost he paid to reconcile us to himself!

To our Evangelism

- The same kind of principal can be applied to our mission as God's people:
 - **do we want to see people saved?**
- If the answer is really yes, then we'll be prepared to put in the **hard work**:
 - of **building relationships** with non-Christians;
 - of **being involved** in activities or organisations that brings us into contact with people who are not yet saved;
 - of **genuinely sharing our lives**, our weaknesses as well as our strengths, being real with people;
 - of **getting to know our faith better** so we can share it better;
 - of **cultivating the courage** to speak about that which is so important to us, getting over the falsehood that faith is a private matter;
 - of **getting involved in particular mission projects**, like Summer Focus or Alpha or whatever;
 - of **praying consistently** for people to be saved!
- Not the whole picture:
 - **work alone won't save people, that is God's job!**
- But - **we are called to be fellow labourers...**

To our Discipleship

- Finally, this biblical imperative to work hard can be applied to our own lives in Christ:
 - do we want to see our lives increasingly modelled on Jesus' example?
- If the answer is really yes, then we will **work hard** at growing more like him, and in helping our fellow believers also to grow
 - will include regular bible study and prayer, but also more than those things...
- Don't hear much these days about "**mortification of the flesh**":
 - an old fashioned phrase which meant a conscious effort to resist and put down the draw of temptation by sometimes giving up on pleasures which are otherwise good in themselves;
 - for instance, give up the TV for an evening - give up the pleasure as an exercise in self-discipline;
 - in exactly the way that regular training is required in advance of an athletics race, regular training in self-control, in knowing what is right, in cultivating good habits of behaviour can be helpful!

- There should properly also be an element of discipleship of others:
 - actively helping others to grow by what we do;
 - by taking time to pray with another Christian towards your mutual growth, sharing successes and failures, and covenanting to pray together - someone you already know, but putting in the **hard work** to taking the relationship further for your mutual spiritual benefit...
 - maybe by developing one or two particular friendships with younger Christians who we encourage and challenge to grow in their faith, who we pray with as well as for....
 - *(this is a large element of what the eldership was originally meant to be about!)*

Conclusion

- All of these require hard work! Conscious effort!
- **But the reward for such effort is success in what we apply ourselves to!**