

Faith Lessons from Father Figures

Proverbs 6:6-11

June 17, 2018



Read Proverbs 6:6-11. Proverbs 6:6 commands us, “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!”¹ Our Scripture reading this morning is always one that makes me chuckle a bit.² It’s one of those texts that I read while thinking to myself, “Is this really something that’s recorded in the Bible?” And yet, there it is. Whether it’s work for a paycheck, doing chores around the house, or volunteering in your retirement, it is wise to work. If you can find an honest day’s work, you should make the most of it. If you are generally healthy and able to work, then work. This is God’s good design. Even from the very beginning of creation, Gen. 2:15 tells us that, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” God designed mankind for work. He didn’t drop off a bag of McDonald’s at each meal time, while Adam and Eve lounged in their hammocks. He blessed them by providing the food they needed. But mankind still had to take care of the garden and gather the food.³⁴ If you heard my sermon on Mother’s Day then you already know that for the first part of my life, I was raised by a single mom. But, when I was 4 years old, my mom married a man named Ken, who has been my dad for the past 43 years. During my growing up years as a kid, I didn’t understand why my dad worked SO much. Other than Sundays, he seemed to always be working. Whether at his carpentry job or doing side jobs in the evenings or on Saturdays. Even when he was at home, he often seemed to be cutting, splitting, or stacking firewood. My dad enjoys work. Just this week he told me once again, “I like working until I’m tired.” There’s something satisfying about a hard day’s work. So, one of the key faith lessons that I learned from my earthly father is to...

Embrace hard work.⁵

It wasn’t until I was well into my adult years that I better understood why my dad worked SO often and SO hard. He liked to work but he also worked hard because that’s what it takes to get the bills paid. To provide for his wife and feed us three kids and keep a roof over our heads was a big job. It takes money for all those things. Fortunately, as a kid, I never really worried about those things. Both of my parents had jobs and they worked hard and didn’t complain or burden us kids with that financial pressure. But, all the while, I was provided for. I’m grateful for all the days my dad got up early in the morning and went to work. And, for the many evenings he worked late making a few extra dollars so that we could occasionally do something special, not always just barely scrape by. If you have been blessed by a dad who provided for you financially, thank God for that today. If your dad or father figure is still alive, thank them directly.⁶

Hard work allows us to provide financially for ourselves but also for others.⁷ As I mentioned, Ken isn’t my biological dad. It shouldn’t have been his responsibility to provide for me. My biological dad

¹ “It is well known that ants are exceptionally strong... Although estimates vary, the average ant can carry between 10 and 50 times its own body weight... This is equivalent to [a person] carrying between [2-10,000 pounds].” (<http://www.curiousmeerkat.co.uk/questions/how-strong-would-a-man-sized-ant-be/>) That’s like me carrying a full-grown elephant over my head. However, the Bible doesn’t marvel so much at an ant’s strength as it does at its wisdom.

² My family actually often teases me because I love ant farms. I love watching them tunnel and work, the whole time marveling because ants eat almost nothing and need very little water.

³ Note how even Genesis 2:5 foreshadows, “there was no one to work the ground.”

⁴ I would argue that even after the fall, work continued to be a blessing from God. Now, to be clear, Genesis does tell us that Adam’s sin brought a curse to the ground. God says in Genesis 3:17-19, “...Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food...” But, it’s interesting to me, how even though the toil is painful and thorns/thistles/weeds are a real hassle, there’s still a blessing in it. Even though we have to work up a good sweat, it results in the blessing of food; good, delicious food that God provides for us. Notice how it repeats the phrase 3 times, “you will eat.” I know that many of you like to garden. There are few things better than picking something fresh from your own garden and eating it right there, on the spot.

⁵ I continue to recommend the book, *Work Matters*, by Tom Nelson, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2011.

⁶ Recently, my dad has been talking more about retirement. I’m not sure he quite gets the concept though. I wrote down something he said over the phone, “After I retire, I’d still work. I can’t just sit in a recliner.” My dad does take time to rest. And, as a pastor, I want to promote a healthy balance of work and rest. I actually preached on rest last summer. You can find that sermon at www.efcbemidji.org/media. The title is “Rest Matters,” from 7/2/17. There’s a healthy rhythm in Scripture to working hard but also prioritizing regular periods of rest and relaxation.

⁷ Reminds also that we need to be thankful for our ability to work. God is the one who gives us the opportunity to make money. Deuteronomy 8:17-18 reminds us, “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...”

should have provided child support but he didn't. So, my dad, Ken, took on that responsibility. For a good 14 years or better, he helped take care of my financial needs. There's a beautiful description of God in Psalm 68:5-6, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families..." Lots of us are part of a family that is NOT the ideal, traditional nuclear family with just one mom and one dad and with all of the kids being 100% blood related. Many people in our church have invited in extra members into their family. What a beautiful tapestry of godliness this creates. I commend you for that. Adoption, foster care, and other forms of family blending can reflect the goodness and the heart of God. These are all opportunities for us to bring God great glory. So way to be!⁸

One of the reasons that we embrace hard work is so that we can provide for others. Last year, in our study of Ephesians, I was really struck by Ephesians 4:28, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need." In this verse, Paul isn't just telling them to stop stealing, he is urging them to do something useful. And then, they will not only be able to meet their own needs, but even have something extra to share with those in need. Hard work allows us not only to provide for ourselves but also for others. This is part of why we give financially to church. We are working hard and then sharing part of our income so that the church can minister to and bless other people, not just ourselves. Many of the people we minister to in our community will never give any money to the church. But, that's ok. That's not their responsibility; that's our responsibility and our privilege to join God in what He is doing in and through this local church. (In the Bemidji area and around the world.)

Some people don't like to work though. Or, they just don't want to work. The Apostle Paul shares an interesting detail about his ministry in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat." I have a couple of friends in Bemidji who have some disabilities which limit what kind of work they can do. But, for both of the young men I'm thinking of, they WANT to work. They aren't looking for a hand out. They appreciate places like the MN Workforce Center which train and prepare them to find work that fits their skill set. They are excited when they have the opportunity to contribute, to do what they can to work and provide for themselves. I admire such determination and godly character. It rubs us the wrong way when we meet young men who could work, who are well able to work, but they just don't feel like it. It's not doing themselves or anyone else any good to live off of others. Hard work is God-honoring. It honors human dignity and purpose, and it also gives us a healthy dose of self-respect. The first faith lesson is to embrace hard work! Another faith lesson that I learned from my dad is to...

Keep learning. My dad should have graduated high school in 1969 but he dropped out 2 weeks short of finishing his 11th grade year. He was a D- student at the time. For many years, he managed to make a pretty good living even without his high school degree. But, in 1998, at the age of 46 years old, he got his HS diploma.⁹ I'm currently 47 years old, so that would be like me getting my high school diploma last year! He worked on his HS diploma concurrently with his college degree. Therefore, one year later, at the age of 47, my dad got his college degree. This former D- student, finished college with a cumulative GPA of 3.8.¹⁰

The Bible commends life-long learning. It urges us to pursue wisdom and to gain more and more knowledge. Consider Proverbs 1:1-7, "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young —let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the

⁸ Consider James 1:27 as well.

⁹ During the 3rd year of pursuing of his college degree, someone noticed that he didn't have his high school degree yet. So, they made him take an English class and a few others things and he graduated with a bunch of 18-year-olds at the school he was attending.

¹⁰ That's impressive at any age, but maybe a little more impressive at 47 years old. Two years after that, he got his pastoral license.

wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”¹¹ It’s helpful to recognize that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. The book of Proverbs seems to indicate that both are equally important. Knowledge¹² is more about the principles and facts about what is true. Wisdom¹³ is more about the skill of rightly applying the principles and facts that we’ve been instructed in. Here’s a question I’d like to ask you: are you a teachable person? Proverbs 13:10 says, “Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.” And Proverbs 9:9 says, “Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.”¹⁴ It’s best for us to keep learning; to admit that we don’t have everything figured out. Consider this warning from Proverbs 29:1, “Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.” The imagery of “stiff-necked” is not very flattering. The word is a picture of an unresponsive farm animal.¹⁵ Sometimes in northern MN our fierce independence and survival mentality leads us to being rather stubborn, to being obstinate. I believe the phrase is “stubborn as a mule.” But as Christ-followers, we need to continue to learn and grow and accept instruction and correction. No matter how old we are, how wise we think we are, or how educated we’ve become, let’s keep learning. Let’s remain teachable. My dad told me one time, “Your mind is like a field, it grows what’s planted there.”¹⁶ As you finish up planting your spring flowers and vegetable garden, what are you planting in your mind this summer?¹⁷ Another faith lesson that I learned from my dad is to keep learning! The final faith lesson that we’ll talk about this morning is one that really humbles me. It’s pretty challenging:

Serve the disregarded. Much to my shock and amazement, about 10 years ago, my dad did something I never would have guessed in a thousand years. I just did NOT see this one coming. My dad, who is physically very strong (I didn’t get those genes), my dad who was a blue-collar laborer for over 40 years,¹⁸ decided to take a desk job. He moved over to the “white-collar division.” Years of construction and cement work and brick laying take a toll on your body, even if you are as strong as an ox. Eventually, you can’t do all the physical things you used to do as a younger man.¹⁹ So, my dad embraced hard work in an entirely new way. My dad now works for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. He is the chaplain at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake Schools. It’s a Type 1 secure juvenile correctional facility, which means it’s the highest level of confinement. They specialize in taking in some of the roughest juvenile criminals out there. My dad’s job is to offer them spiritual direction and encouragement. He tries to bring hope and a message of life to young people who’ve lost hope. Some have committed armed robbery or violent assaults, others have destroyed property. Some have actually taken someone else’s life. Somehow my dad sees beyond all the mess. He sees not only a need for the gospel but also the possibility of it taking root and transforming a life that many others have disregarded. Those who have been written off as a lost cause by many, are not forgotten nor forsaken by him. Perhaps that’s because of his own background. God’s amazing grace rescued my dad from his own past. As he puts it, “I deserved much worse.” He identifies with the Apostle Paul who said in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain...” (NKJV²⁰)

¹¹ See also Proverbs 15:14 and 18:15.

¹² מוסר “instruction, i.e., the teaching of a principle or axiom for life” (Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.)

¹³ תבונה “wisdom, i.e., the capacity to understand and so have skill in living, implying adherence to a set standard” (Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.)

¹⁴ Just last week, we talked about 2 Timothy 3:16. God’s Word is useful in many ways, including rebuking and correcting us.

¹⁵ See Exodus 32:9 and text note in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 145.

¹⁶ My dad, Ken, actually quoted this to me last week over the phone.

¹⁷ Reflect on Matthew 13:1-43.

¹⁸ He started working around 1968 and worked fulltime until about 2009. He still continues to do side jobs from time to time even though he’s now in his 60s.

¹⁹ One of my favorite short stories is called “A Piece of Steak,” by Jack London. It pits a young rookie boxer against an experienced older fighter. The end of the fight is particularly impactful.

²⁰ I used the *NKJV* in honor of my dad because that’s the version he prefers. His other favorite verse is Luke 7:47, “Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” (*NKJV*)

I don't actually know that much about my dad's past. He just says that there were some rocky roads. I do know however, that he grew up in a large family with significant financial and relational challenges. My dad had 4 sisters and 7 brothers. At least 6 of those brothers have served time in jail, at least 1 did prison time as well. My dad could easily still be somewhere down that road himself. But God rescued him. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:12-14 that the Heavenly Father, "...has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Each and every Christ-follower has been rescued from the dominion of darkness. Oh, maybe we haven't done hard time in prison, but our sin and depravity still had us walking in darkness. And, were it not for the grace of God, who can guess where our lives might have ended up by now? Romans 12:16 gives a firm command, "...Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."²¹ There is no place in a Christ-follower's life for arrogance or a haughty spirit that looks down on other sinners. Romans 5:6-10 reminds us, "You see, at just the right time, **when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly**. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, **while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him** through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" My dad has the gift of faith. I think that's what keeps him from losing sight of one very important truth: **the gospel will do what it's designed to do; it will transform lives.**²² Sometimes we get so overwhelmed and distracted by the messiness in people's lives, that we just can't see past it. We lack the faith to see how these train wrecks can be transformed by God's love and power. Perhaps you know someone who is in jail. Why not write them a letter or call them today? Let them know that they have not been forgotten, that they have not been disregarded by everyone. Remind them of God's love and the hope that is offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of our church's global partners is named Jim Frick. I had the privilege of meeting with Jim this week. Jim has been serving as the chaplain of the Beltrami County jail for 38 years. He told me that the inmates he ministers to are very receptive to teaching from the Bible. Because of the jail's limited space, he offers multiple service times and they sometimes fill up to the point where there is a waiting list. Jim is supported entirely by church's in the area. When you designate a gift to our "Global Partner's Fund," some of that money goes to Jim and his ministry as chaplain at the Beltrami County Jail. Keep him in your prayers.

I recently read an article by another jail chaplain named, Dan Matsche. He serves in Colorado. He shares about a time when he was ministering to an inmate on death row. He'd trusted Jesus as his Savior and Lord. Here is the inmate's testimony: "**God has given me an endless hope rather than a hopeless end.**"²³ Whether it's someone in jail or a neighbor next-door or someone at work, may we never tire of seeing God take someone who might otherwise be disregarded by the world, and totally transform [them] into a godly person who is committed to Jesus Christ. Dan Matsche summarizes it well: "Some of the finest men I know were [once] some of the most unlovely men I'd ever met. **What happened? The gospel!**"²⁴

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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²¹ Earlier we read from Proverbs 6. A few verses later Proverbs 6:16-17 goes on to say, "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes..." The first thing it lists is "haughty eyes." Haughty eyes reveal a proud heart. This is when we look down on someone else because, in some way, we feel superior to them. We think that we are smarter, wealthier, cleaner, or more important than someone else. This is something God hates; it's detestable to Him.

²² Matsche, Rev. Dan, "Loving the Unlovely" article in *Tabletalk magazine*, Ligonier Ministries, March 2018, p. 25.

²³ Matsche, p. 26.

²⁴ Matsche, p. 26.