

## Work Like An Ant Proverbs 6:6-8

Four of us from Wooddale Church visited Mozambique, the southwestern African country that is a place of tragedy and triumph. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. Seventeen and a half percent of the adult population is HIV positive. There are tens of thousands of orphans. Yet the number of people becoming Christians in this place of great difficulty and tragedy is breathtaking. Some say the church of Jesus Christ is growing more rapidly in Mozambique than anywhere else in the world.

While we were there we were offered ants for breakfast one day. Don't get the wrong impression—they were optional, sort of a side dish. The ants had been captured, boiled, deep-fried and then served to us. Mine tasted better than you might imagine. They were crisp like KFC with a honey-like sweetness to the juice inside. You should try one sometime. Maybe one day General Mills or Nabisco will sell deep-fired ants as a snack food to hungry Americans.

As I ate the ants I wondered if I ought to feel guilty about eating them because ants are heroes of God. See how they are described by the wise sage in Proverbs 6:6-8: *“Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.”*

Most of us don't think of ourselves as sluggards and few of us think that an ant could teach us anything. But, let's ask ourselves the question, “Are you a sluggard?” and take a quick 4-point quiz.

Do you do the wrong thing? Usually we think of a sluggard as someone who doesn't do anything, but everybody does something. Even if we sleep 23 hours every day, we are still doing something . . . we are sleeping. So it is possible to be a very busy sluggard. The busy sluggard spends many hours every day working hard at not working. Some busy sluggards develop elaborate reasons not to improve their marriage, not to pay their bills, not to go to work or not to get healthy. If they spent equivalent time and energy doing the

right things they could save their marriages, keep their jobs, get in shape and get out of debt.

Consistently doing what is right is hard work. Some sluggards just can't be bothered and often do the wrong thing.

Do you misuse your resources? Some sluggards are wonderfully gifted but terribly misuse their resources. We all know the type. They are highly intelligent but get very poor grades. They are high-potential people with low performance. They have plenty of money but squander it badly. The sluggard never thinks he has enough. Instead of using what he has, he waits for more. If he gets more, he is likely to squander what he gets.

Great inheritance can destroy a sluggard. She will not use it wisely; it will soon be gone.

Lottery winners frequently destroy their lives, damage their families and end up in debt. The sluggard seldom appreciates the blessings of God and rarely uses those blessings very well.

Do you let others do it? Some sluggards work hard when they must but they readily allow others to carry a disproportionate share of the load. The sluggard does not pick up litter; she lets someone else do it. The sluggard does not wash the dishes; he lets someone else do it. The sluggard does not volunteer in church and community; he lets someone else do it. The sluggard does not

advance the business; she just works there, gets a paycheck and assumes that someone else will make the business better.

A physician told me a story from his resi-

dency. One of his cardiac patients was wearing a portable heart monitor when he went into cardiac arrest. The medical team ran to his rescue but the bed was empty and they couldn't find him. While they searched the ward, he died. Later his body was discovered between his bed and the wall. They asked his roommate if he knew where he was, and he said yes but no one had asked him. That roommate was a sluggard.

Sluggards let someone else do the work, pay the bills and take the responsibility. One of the favorite sluggard lines is, “It's not my problem!”

***Be wise. Work smart. Be part of the team.***

Are you just plain lazy? There are sluggards who are just plain lazy. They don't like to work. They don't want to work. All they think about are themselves. Sluggards can be very selfish.

The term "lazy sluggard" is redundant because sluggard means lazy. But, that's what they are—lazy sluggards. Almost all work is avoided at all times at just about any price.

Some lazy sluggards blame others for all their problems. Every problem they have is someone else's fault. Sadly, the lazy sluggard may actually believe what he says. He does not see himself as a sluggard; he sees himself as a victim of the attitudes and actions of others.

Most of us don't think of ourselves as sluggards. We think we are overworked, over-achieving workaholics. We don't work too little; we work too much. But the truth is that there is some sluggard in us all. We all have a tendency to take the easy way, to get more money so we can work less, to take unfair advantage of others. We all need to heed Proverbs 6:6-8: *"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest."*

There are 9,000 different species of ants, but compared to most of the rest of the animal world, they are very tiny. Size-wise they are nothing compared to soaring eagles and thundering elephants, but they are numerous and they are smart. In the Amazon rain forest ants are so numerous that their total weight is four times the weight of all mammals, reptiles, birds and amphibians combined. Some ant super colonies are one square mile with 45,000 interconnected nests and more than 300 million ants.

Ants are small but they are wise. They work together. They flourish under adversity. They provide enormous benefit to ecosystems. They dig tunnels, fertilize seeds and provide aeration for the soil. They have tunnels that allow moisture to get into the ground.

In Mozambique we stopped to visit one of the many roadside ant hills. They are large and hard. (I kicked one and it was like kicking concrete.) A woman came from a nearby village with a pick ax to chop a hole for us to see inside. The ants heard the noise, ran downstairs, hid underground and we saw the inside of a nearly empty ant hill. Wise! Small but smart.

Therein is a lesson for us sluggards: It's not what you've got; it's what you do with what you've got. The ants don't have much. They're not very important. But, even if you are small and insignificant, leverage your resources. Be wise. Work smart. Be part of the team.

Ant colonies are organized around division of labor. Every ant has a job to do. The queen ant lays eggs. That's about all she does. Other ants feed her, groom her and take care of her. The queen among the African Driver ants lays three to four million eggs per month and lives almost seven years. Imagine being the mother of 300 million children! That's her job.

Male ants mate and die. They live just a few weeks or a few months. That's their job.

Female worker ants dig tunnels, collect and process the food and care for other ants. That's what they do.

The ant colony survives and thrives as long as every ant does its part.

We sluggards need to do our part. For example: If you are the boss, your part includes good working conditions and fair wages for employees. Your part is not just to make a profit but to help others succeed in doing their part. We all need to do our part.

August 14, 2003 brought the largest blackout to date in the history of the United States, darkening much of the northeastern United States and causing enormous strains on our commercial airlines. USA Today reported that one airline handled the crisis better than any other—Northwest. When baggage machines failed, employees moved the luggage by hand. When jet ways couldn't move, workers rolled up stairs. When airports closed, flights were efficiently diverted to airports that were open. When Detroit Metro couldn't cater meals, they were flown in from Minneapolis. Just like the ants in the Bible—everyone doing its part.

That is exactly what we are to do. It is the lesson we are to learn. It is that not any one person is responsible to do everything, but all of us are responsible to do our part.

Proverbs 6:7 says that the ant *"has no commander, no overseer or ruler."* Ant colonies have no kings. When an ant dies, the others immediately carry away the body. When the colony is under attack, the soldiers come to fight. When the ant hill caves in, workers rush to rebuild. When

the colony is invaded a warning is issued. When anything needs to be done they do it without command, without hierarchy and without a general or commander. That is because ants are internally motivated. They are wired to work. They don't need to be told what to do. They just do what needs to be done.

In Johannesburg I met some people who are like these ants. They work with people who are suffering from AIDS. Some of the people they work with are so weak they cannot get food to eat, so these workers bring food. They baby-sit for their children. They give counsel. They provide transport to medical care. They do the most menial of tasks for those who are desperate for help. They are part of a cadre of workers who put in very long hours with discipline. They show up early in the morning wearing T-shirts that identify them as AIDS workers, all under the supervision of a South African woman whose mother gave her the unlikely name "Waitress".

But what is most amazing is that they are all volunteers. They are a part of the thousands of AIDS worker volunteers among the churches and Christians of South Africa. Part of the reason they are volunteers is that South Africa has 40% unemployment. The AIDS volunteers are mostly unemployed and can't get jobs because there are few jobs to get. These are people who want to work but can't work. But they are internally motivated and so when they can't get jobs they volunteer to help the people who are more desperate than they are. They don't have supervisors. They don't have paychecks. They don't have benefits. They don't have much of anything. But they are internally motivated to serve others and they do it in the name of Jesus Christ. They are like the ants.

So are we to be like the ants. Work like the volunteers. Don't wait to be recruited. Don't wait for someone to tell you what to do. Don't expect someone else to be a commander or overseer or ruler. Just do what needs to be done.

***Ants seize the opportunity when it is there, even if that opportunity seems to be less than the best.***

Minnesotans know that ants are normally a summer phenomenon. They show up at 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnics but never at snowmobile races. It's a seasonal thing. Ants must gather food when it is available.

The biblical ant was probably the Harvester Ant which is common in the Middle East. They gather seeds when the season is right and bring them to the colony for future processing. If they don't gather the seeds in season it is too late and the colony starves.

Sluggards are those who are always waiting for a better tomorrow. But ants seize the opportunity when it is there, even if that opportunity seems to be less than the best.

When I was a young pastor in Colorado, the church needed a part-time custodian. The only applicant for the position was an out-of-work executive. It wasn't his dream job. The pay was inadequate. He lived with his

family in a house by the tracks that literally shook when the trains regularly went by. He was an excellent custodian. He did a great job. He was my friend, my co-worker and a colleague. He seized that day's opportunity, even though it was less than he would have dreamed for and what he would not normally have chosen.

Why do ants do this? Why do they seize today's opportunity, even if it is less than their dreams? They do it because they are preparing for the future. Proverbs 6:8 says that the ant "*stores it provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.*" That's because the ant is getting ready for winter, for drought, for famine or whatever tomorrow may bring.

One of the clearest characteristics of sluggards is a lack of preparation for the future. Sluggards live only in the present. Ants and other good workers don't just live for today; they anticipate and prepare for tomorrow. Practically, that means don't spend all the money you make. Save some for the future. It means, contrary to what some advertising may tell us, don't just live for the moment. Think ahead.

This does not lack trust in God. It is the forethought and preparation of a faithful and wise worker.

On the first Monday of every September our nation celebrates Labor Day. It is a day set aside to honor those who work hard for a living. Not because they're famous or rich or powerful, but because they work. Work is honorable and good. Blessed are all who labor.

With God, every day is a "labor day" to honor those who work—from the industrious ant in its hill to the employee downtown in the high rise. Labor union workers, company managers and executives, farmers, mechanics, clerks, physicians, nurses, teachers, students, truck drivers, homemakers and soldiers, pilots, the self-employed, job seekers and engineers and maintenance workers, accountants, writers, musicians, technicians, administrators, and the list goes on.

May we all "*Go to the ant . . . consider its ways and be wise!*"

God, bless each one of us and bless the work we do that we may be faithful to you, that we may avoid laziness and do what is good and right with the resources you have entrusted to us. This we do as Christians, in the name of Jesus, whom we serve. Amen.

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