

## A Life of Diligence

### Proverbs

I suspect that some of you saw the title of the sermon, A Life of Diligence, and your heart sank. You thought, “Oh no. I’m already tired and he’s about to tell me that I’ve got to get busy work harder. Diligence is going to be no fun.” Or perhaps you think that somehow diligence is incompatible with your temperament or personality. When you think of diligent people, you think of high-energy, go-getters who accomplish more in a day than you do in a month. The idea that you need to be like them might wear you out.

If I’m describing you, let me put your heart at ease. I suspect that you’ll be challenged by what the Scriptures say about diligence. But you will not be challenged to be somebody you’re not. A life of diligence is compatible with every temperament and every stage of life. It will look different for each of us.

And you will not be challenged merely to get busy and work harder. We’re going to see that a diligent life is not a frantic, hectic life. There will certainly be hard work involved in different areas of life. But ultimately a diligent life is a peaceful, satisfying life. That’s because at the end of the day diligent people have a settled sense that they have done what they’re supposed to do. If we understand a life of diligence properly, we will run toward it instead of away from it.

We are toward the end of a sermon series in the book of Proverbs on the fear of the Lord. The person who fears the Lord is convinced that the best way to live his/her life is in alignment with God and His ways. The virtue of diligence is essential for cultivating the fear of the Lord. Next week we’ll wrap up this series by looking at Proverbs 31 and “how to find a good wife.” Not surprisingly, we’ll see that a good wife fears the Lord. Today we’ll first try to understand the essence of the virtue of diligence. Then we’ll see how diligence can be lived out in different areas of life.

### ***The Virtue of Diligence: a decisive, intentional approach to life.***

Let’s consider a couple of occurrences of the term diligence to get the basic sense of what it means. In Proverbs 12:27 we read this:

27 A slothful man does not roast his prey,  
But the precious possession of a man is diligence.

The root of the term translated “diligence” has a number of different connotations. The most literal connotation is to “cut or sharpen” something. Metaphorically the term is used of sharpness as an attitude – being decisive and intentional. Perhaps the connection is that when you cut something, you’ve done a very decisive (and in some cases irreversible) thing (as in the expression “Measure twice, cut once” because when you cut something it’s hard to undo). If you are “diligent” you act in a decisive, intentional way.

Back to Proverbs 12:27: “A slothful man does not roast his prey.” This person has hunted and trapped an animal, but he is too lazy to dress it out and cook it. Because he lacks diligence, he has wasted time and energy and food that his family could have been eating. This is like the

person who plants a garden but lets the fruit rot on the vine. A lack of diligence means a lot of waste and unfulfilled potential.

By contrast, the precious possession of a man is diligence. (NIV understands this differently: *the diligent man prizes his possessions*.) A diligent man would not only trap an animal; he would see that it actually made its way to the dinner table. Whereas a slothful man loses focus and lacks follow-through, a diligent man is decisive and intentional. He remembers why he has gone hunting (to put food on the table) and doesn't quit until that purpose is accomplished.

Or consider another example of diligence from Proverbs 21:5.

5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage,  
But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.

Here being diligent is contrasted with being hasty. In Proverbs, if you're "hasty" you aren't content with the normal, ongoing processes of life; you want things to happen quickly and so you take short-cuts and bounce around from one thing to another. The classic example is the person who is drawn to get-rich-quick schemes. Proverbs 28:20 states, "A faithful man will abound with blessings, But he who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished."

Similarly, here in Proverbs 21:5 we read that "everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty." By contrast, "the plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage." Deciding on a wise, sane course of action and sticking with it pays off in the long run. As we'll see in a few minutes, this is true in all areas of life. A diligent person has a strong sense of what s/he is supposed to be doing and is therefore decisive and intentional.

Of course Proverbs isn't advocating a life of monotonous drudgery in which we make our plans and carry them out no matter what just because we're supposed to. Rather, we are diligent because we want to align our lives with God and His ways. We are diligent because we don't want to waste our lives and all the opportunities that God gives us. We are diligent because life is too short to fritter it away.

A diligent person is wholehearted in whatever s/he does. Instead of being tentative or passive or luke-warm, a diligent person has a sense of *what* s/he should be doing and therefore "goes for it." Another way to talk about it is to say that the diligent person is "passionate" about life. If you're diligent, you live "like you mean it."

[NOTE: Scripture uses the term "passion" with negative connotations – usually denoting sexual compulsion as in Proverbs 14:30; I don't have a problem with the current usage of the term. The connotation of a word changes over time; what matters is the underlying concept. The term Scripture uses is "zealous." It was said of Jesus that "zeal for God's house [the temple] consumed Him." We are told to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14).]

An important qualification needs to be made: It is possible to be diligent in almost every area of your life and not really be living the life God wants you to live. In other words, it's possible to be diligent *and* still be self-centered or faithless or mean/unkind. Just because you're diligent doesn't mean that you have the mind of Christ. But if you do have the mind of Christ, diligence will be a great asset in doing the will of God.

The basic virtue of diligence involves having a decisive, intentional approach to life. Let's see how Proverbs (as well as other passages of Scripture) advocates diligence in different areas of life. We'll just take a sampling; hopefully this will give us insight into how we can apply this in other relevant areas of our lives.

***A Lifestyle of Diligence (decisive, intentional pursuit):***

***Seeking God (and wisdom).*** Throughout Proverbs we are urged to seek after wisdom as we would seek after hidden treasure. Such an all-out pursuit is appropriate because wisdom leads to life whereas foolishness leads to death. Wisdom is so valuable that it only make sense to seek it diligently. In Proverbs 8 Wisdom is on top of the heights, at the intersection of roads, at the gates of the city, etc. lifting up her voice offering instruction, knowledge, and wisdom to anybody who will accept it. In verse 17 we read:

17 "I love those who love me;  
And those who diligently seek me will find me.

This is a different term for diligence than we've been considering, but the sense here is the same. If we eagerly, persistently seek after wisdom, we will find it. Wisdom wants to be found and experienced. God Himself promises over and over, "Those who seek Me will find Me." As C.S. Lewis says, God is the father playing hide-and-seek with his young children who hides in the closet and leaves the door open or his foot sticking out; he really wants to be found. God so wanted to be found that He sent His one and only Son to live among us and die for us. In Jesus God was saying, "Here I am! Come to Me and find life!"

But, we have to seek Him diligently, whole-heartedly. Because God wants to have a mature relationship with us, He expects us to engage our wills and seek Him intentionally. Deuteronomy 4:29 is representative of God's expectation of us:

29 "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul."

How would you evaluate your own diligence in seeking after God? Would you say that you seek God decisively and intentionally every day? Are you seeking God like you mean it – or are you going through the motions? Remember that your diligence will look different from my diligence. And we would all say that we could be more diligent than we are. But I believe that we should be able to say, "Though imperfectly, I am seeking God diligently every day."

For example, a foundational way to seek God is through the Scriptures. Many people have found great benefit in having a simple, systematic Bible-reading plan. You could actually decide, "Because I want to experience more of God, I am going to begin reading the Bible every day whether I feel like it or not." That would be a way to be decisive and intentional. One way to do this is to get two bookmarks, put one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament, and read a chapter in each every day. Simply pick a time and read every single day. Instead of mindlessly reading just to check it off your list, you pray, "God, show me what I need to see in Your Word." If you carry out this plan, you will be able to say, "Though imperfectly, I am seeking God diligently through the Word today."

***Spiritual gifts.*** Let's think about how Paul urged Timothy to be diligent in the way he used his spiritual gifts. Timothy was a teacher in the church at Ephesus. His primary spiritual gift was evidently teaching. Paul wanted Timothy to use that gift whole-heartedly. He said things like, "Fan into flame the spiritual gift within you. . ." (2 Timothy 1:6) and "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you . . . take pains with these things; be absorbed in them so that your progress will be evident to all" (1 Timothy 4:14-15). In a similar way, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:15:

15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.

A spiritual gift isn't something that you put on "automatic pilot"; a spiritual gift needs to be used in an intentional, decisive way. (See Romans 12:8.) You can do this throughout your week as you have opportunities to serve, give, lead, encourage, or show mercy. You can do this through formal ministries. Brian is going to be teaching our spiritual gifts course (Networking) in the fall; that course is designed to help you discern how God has gifted you as well as the best context for using that gift(s) – whether adults, youth or children; whether in larger groups or smaller groups; whether in front of people or behind the scenes. However you and I use our gifts, we are supposed to exercise them diligently so that the body of Christ can grow up as God intends.

I would ask you, are you using your spiritual gift(s) like you mean it? Or are you going through the motions?

***Parenting.*** Diligence in parenting is advocated throughout Scripture. Proverbs 13:24 reads:

24 He who spares his rod hates his son,  
But he who loves him disciplines him diligently.

I'm going to take a pass on the whole issue of whether "sparing the rod" means not spanking your children. Whatever the specific interpretation, "sparing the rod" is a negligent approach to parenting. We have several notable examples in Scripture of parents who were negligent in teaching and disciplining their children. Eli, for example, was the priest in the day of Samuel. He was an incredibly godly man, but his boys were scoundrels. He heard that they were doing all sorts of immoral things and confronted his sons, but he was largely passive in disciplining them (See 1 Samuel 2).

"But he who loves [his son] disciplines him diligently." Discipline is motivated by love – wanting the very best for his son. Instead of looking the other way when issues need to be addressed, this parent "disciplines/trains him diligently" – in an intentional, decisive way. He doesn't just tell him what to do; he trains him in how to live. It is a standing, ongoing commitment. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 6:7, we read Moses' challenge to the people:

7 and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Parents, are you training your children like you mean it? Or are you going through the motions?

**Work.** Proverbs has much to say about diligence in work. In Proverbs 10 we read:

4 Poor is he who works with a negligent hand,  
But the hand of the diligent makes rich.  
5 He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely,  
But he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully.

Here the emphasis is upon how a diligent person works hard. He works when he's supposed to (he gathers in the summer). Such diligence makes the diligent person "rich" – it pays off financially to work hard. By contrast, the person who sleeps when he's supposed to be harvesting is negligent (and shameful) and ends up "poor." In Proverbs 6 the sluggard is told to learn from the ant – who is the poster child for diligence.

The New Testament also stresses the importance of working hard to provide for those in your household (2 Thessalonians 3:12). But it also advocates a God-centered focus for our work. In Colossians 3:23-24 we read this:

23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

Scripture doesn't make the type of sacred/secular distinctions that we sometimes make. Our relationship with God should affect the way you do your work every bit as much as the way you pray or read the Scriptures. Scripture doesn't suggest that we should be passionate and wholehearted when it comes to spiritual things, but when it comes to normal, everyday responsibilities we can be luke-warm and apathetic. "Whatever you do" – whatever your line of work – "do your work heartily, as for the Lord . . . it is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

You probably don't have the perfect job, but are you doing your work like you mean it? Or are you going through the motions?

**Conclusion.** By now you're probably convinced that Scripture advocates a diligent life. We are supposed to live with a sense that we will whole-heartedly pursue the things God wants us to pursue – whether seeking Him, using spiritual gifts, parenting, work, etc.

But you may not be convinced that a diligent life is really a better life than the alternative. A diligent life may sound like too much work, or you might be afraid that if you pursue a diligent life that you'll burn out or wear out.

About a month ago I was wrestling with something that I knew God wanted me to do. I'm going to be vague about this for the sake of confidentiality. It involved taking initiative in a relationship. If I told you about it, you'd agree, "Yeah, there's no doubt that God wants you to do this." Up until that time I had a luke-warm, half-hearted commitment to this relationship. Consequently I always felt guilty. I had this floating anxiety over not doing what I knew I should be doing. About a month ago God prompted me to "go for it" in this relationship. Instead of initiating once a month (which often didn't happen), I decided to initiate once a week. I wasn't thinking about it in these terms, but God was prompting me to be diligent. It turns out

that being diligent is a lot easier than being half-hearted and lukewarm. Being lukewarm absolutely wears me out. There is real satisfaction from being whole-hearted. It's satisfying because I have the sense that I'm doing what God wants me to do (even though imperfectly). The anxiety and guilt is gone. That's worth a lot to me.

My encouragement to you is simply to choose an area of your life in which you need to be more diligent and "go for it." Through Scripture, prayer, and talking with others come to a clear sense of what God wants from you in that area of your life. And then pursue the will of God in a decisive, intentional way. Do so in a way that fits your temperament and your life, but go for it. I think you'll find that being diligent is much more satisfying than being lukewarm. There is great fruitfulness and satisfaction in living like you mean it.