

“How Do I Make Life Work? Take Initiative...”

A carpet-layer was putting new carpet in a home. As he finished he noticed two things; first a lump under the carpet and the fact that his cigarettes were gone from his shirt-pocket. He didn't want to go through the hassle of pulling up the carpet, he was being lazy, didn't want to make that initiative, so he found a two-by-four and tamped down the cigarettes so that you couldn't see the lump. Once the lump was smoothed out he picked up all his tools and went out to his truck. As he did two things happened, first he noticed his cigarettes on the seat of his truck, and over his shoulder he heard the voice of the woman who owned the house saying, “You haven't seen my parakeet have you?”

Sometimes we just don't want to take initiative and do what we need to do; what we know is the right thing! It's a lot easier to be lazy, to complain, to blame somebody else for our problems, than to take initiative.

We started a sermon series last week that asks the question, “How can I make life work?” We're taking a look at the most practical, down to earth book in the Bible, the book of Proverbs. It takes the ageless, priceless wisdom of God and makes that wisdom understandable and accessible to regular people like us. It puts God's ageless and priceless wisdom at eye-level so that we can really get to it. Our challenge is to take that wisdom, apply it to our lives so that our lives can really work! Last week we simply looked at the challenge in Proverbs to pursue wisdom, because the opposite of wisdom is foolishness and foolishness can literally destroy our lives.

So today we ask the same question, “How can I make life work?” And the answer from the book of Proverbs, from God's heart to ours is this: **“How do I make Life Work? Take initiative.”** In other words, look at life from the aspect of a problem-solver, not a complainer, not a blamer. Take initiative and do something, the right thing, to make life work.

One of the dangers of life is to settle into a mushy belief in some better future that's eventually going to “just happen” to us. In so many of our lives there's an unspoken belief that goes something like this: Some way, some day my life will improve. Some way some day, I'll drift into better circumstances. Some way, some day what I want will happen to me. The problem is that this way of thinking is built on the fantasy that rewards will come our way without hard work.

Some way, some day...I'll feel like doing something with my life...I'll start waking up earlier...I'll quit wasting so much time partying...I'll start to get my schoolwork done on time...my boss will notice me. Some way, some day I'll stumble into the job of my dreams...the perfect spouse will float into my life...the credit card companies will lose my records...and I'll win the lottery! Some way, some day my kids will stop getting into trouble...my marriage will transform itself. Some way, some day my metabolism will increase and the fat will just melt away...I'll quit craving another drink...I'll start wanting to help the poor...I'll feel like being a serious Christian...Some way, some day it'll just happen.

But have you ever seen life work that way?! I mean seriously, you know a lot of people, I know a lot of people... have you ever seen it work that way? From what I've seen the trend is downward. The natural slide in life seems to be down, not up. Down into hard knocks, and bad circumstances. If we don't take initiative in life that's what seems to happen. That's what seems to happen to “someday” people. I have a friend who says that the word “someday” really means “never.”

Well, the book of Proverbs has a word for someday people, people who operate according to this mindset. It's not a pretty word at all. The Bible calls people who fail to take initiative sluggards. Isn't that sweet?! Sluggards are, in a word, lazy. Proverbs asks this question, **“How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you lie a bandit and scarcity like an armed man” (Proverbs 6:9-11, NIV).**

You see, we don't become sluggards overnight. It's a progression that happens over time and it can happen to anybody if we're not careful. A little sluggardliness and any of us can find ourselves in a very bad way. Proverbs says that the first step down the path to becoming a sluggard is procrastination **“Steps toward**

becoming sluggard: Procrastination” Every time we respond to something that needs doing by saying, “I’ll do it later” we’re acting like sluggards.

When I was a kid, like most kids, my mom would ask me to help with stuff. “Aaron would you please help set the table, or wash the dishes...” or whatever. Most of the time I would say something like, “At the next commercial, Mom.” But she would always say, “No, Aaron, do it now. Don’t wait.” My mom is a do-it-now person. She does not have a procrastinating bone in her body. She’s a great role model for me in doing things when they need doing. I’m glad I learned that from her, for the most part, because procrastination is such a hard, difficult pattern to break.

The second step down the slimy path of the sluggard is to make excuses **“Steps toward becoming sluggard: Make Excuses”**. An able-bodied employee has a challenge, a big one, at work. She can channel her energy into that challenge, asking God to give her strength and insight, think about ways to creatively face that challenge with as much energy and enthusiasm as she can muster. Or she can make up excuses for not facing the challenge, for giving up. “I’m not smart enough. I don’t have enough time. Nobody will work with me. I don’t have the resources. I don’t know where to start. I don’t have the support I need.” Excuses.

The sluggard in Proverbs 22:13 comes up with a great reason for not going to work, “There is lion outside, I’ll be murdered in the streets.” Well, maybe that’s just a good excuse from a better imagination. Or if there really is a lion out there, go and join the lion hunt. Only a sluggard would sit around for the rest of his life because there are dangerous obstacles in his way. Listen, there will always be lions in the street. There will always be frightening responsibilities, overwhelming challenges, heartbreaking disappointments. Excuses don’t defeat these things. Initiative is what defeats these things!

Think about your own life. Do you make excuses for not getting things done, for lack of diligence, lack of discipline, lack of any good thing? You see, Proverbs is offering us a clear warning that procrastination breeds procrastination. Excuses breed excuses.

Maybe this is talking to you today. Maybe the Holy Spirit is nudging you about your procrastination, your excuses that just don’t hold water. But maybe you are here today and you’re thinking, “Are you kidding?! Being a sluggard is the least of my problems. In fact, I’d probably be better off if I **did** procrastinate now and then. I already have more than enough activities to be involved in, people to help, work to do. Too busy is what I am—not too lazy!”

But I believe that a lot of us who are so busy, and active, and look like models of diligence are suffering from what’s called **“Selective Sluggardliness”**.

What kinds of people suffer from selective sluggardliness? The student who succeeds athletically but fails to take seriously the education of his or her mind. It’s the dad who sets sales records at work and shoots a four handicap on the golf course but fails miserably to respond to the emotional needs of his wife and kids. It’s the mom who pours herself out on the job and at home but who continually neglects her relationship with God. You see, one reason that selective sluggardliness is so deadly is that we can convince ourselves that if other areas of our lives look good enough we deserve to be let off the hook. We join the nine-out-ten club and think that it’s good enough.

Let me tell you a true story from another church. A story that could quite possibly be told of some of us. It’s about a little girl in the children’s ministry at a church who has endured more than her share of life’s hardships. Some of her few joys are the relationships she has with the other kids at church and her teachers there. Her dad, who’s a good man, decides that he’d rather sleep in an extra hour on Sunday mornings than take his little girl to church. A friend saw what was happening and it broke his heart. This friend decided to talk to the dad he said, “Listen, you know I’m your friend, and I may have no right to tell you how to live your life, but what’s happening in your little girl’s life is breaking my heart. She needs to be reminded every week that God loves her, she needs the care of a loving Christian teacher, and she needs the fun and fellowship offered by Christian friends. She’s not going to get any of that unless you take initiative and get her to church. You’re an adult and you can decide for yourself what to do with your life, but what you do with this precious little girl that God has entrusted to your care...well somebody has to speak for her.”

Her father said, "Come on. Give me a break. I work hard. I travel during the week. I help people. I vote. I do jury duty. I follow the rules. But I get tired. I need a day off."

He was trying the nine-out-of-ten excuse but his friend wasn't buying it. He said, "Nine out of ten may be fine for you, if that's how you want to live. But the tenth part is about your daughter. Get lazy in another area. Don't get lazy in an area that affects the life and eternity of a precious little girl." Whoa! **The nine-out-of-ten club doesn't cut it!** Most of us, if we're daring enough to look beneath the veneer of our lives, can find at least one pocket of sluggardliness, one little area of carelessness or laziness. The question is, What should we do when we see it?

I'm going to spend the last few minutes looking at five different areas in life that we need to manifest initiative and diligence. As we go over these five things, let the Holy Spirit work in you. Listen with a spirit of surrender and let God say to you what he wants to say. You can trust the Holy Spirit to give you insights about these areas of life, even if you're a new Christian or somebody who is seeking but not yet a Christian.

The **first** area where we need to take initiative is in **the area of love**. "**Areas in need initiative: Love**". We have good intentions in loving others but life can be rough-and-tumble. We tend to bump and bruise each other. We get our egos and our souls hurt and our natural reaction is to withdraw. When that begins to happen it creates a breeding ground for ill feelings. We know we should do something to change things but it will take time and energy and we know it can be frustrating, and life is frustrating and complicated enough so we yield to selective sluggardliness and get lazy when it comes to relationships. We give up. We don't make the phone call. We don't write the letter. We don't walk across the hallway in the dorm, the floor at the office or factory, or across the aisle at church. Rather than taking initiative in making a fresh start we close our eyes.

Romans 12:18 says, "**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone**" (**Romans 12:18, NIV**). That implies a tenacity, an initiative-taking that doesn't give up on that friendship, that marriage, that broken relationship with that son or daughter, mother or father, co-worker or church member.

Is the Holy Spirit nudging you right now? Is there someone coming to mind that you need to take initiative with and heal a brokenness? If so listen and take action. Maybe you're doing great in this area, but maybe you're not. Listen, if God is speaking to you about this do something.

The **second** area to take initiative is in "**Work**" Colossians 3:23 says, "**Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for [people]**" (**Colossians 2:23, NIV**).

Here's the question: Are you "working with all your heart" at your job, at home, at school? Are you doing everything that comes your way to the best of your God-given potential, as if you were working for God himself? Are you setting the standard for ethics, honesty, love, conscientiousness, excellence, promptness? Are you pointing people to Christ when you get the chance? It's hard to work with all your heart when you've been at a job for long time. Over time it becomes easy to cut corners and develop bad habits. There are others that think that if you have to work hard then something must be wrong. Maybe you're always looking for the easy way out.

Is the Holy Spirit quietly and gently telling you there's room for change in this area? Do you need some initiative to turn yourself around so that you can work like you are working for God himself? Listen. What is God speaking to your heart?

The **third** area I'm going to talk about may cross the line into meddling, at least you might think so, but that's not my intent. This area of taking initiative has to do with our "**Physical well-being**" There's a sobering passage in 1 Corinthians that says this: "**Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body**" (**1 Corinthians 6:19:20, NIV**). Could that be put any more directly?! Our bodies belong to God and we need to honor God with them.

What does it mean that we honor God with our bodies? It means that we pay attention to where we take our bodies, who we let touch our bodies, how we take care of our bodies. It means that we keep our bodies away from sin. We protect them from abusive people and situations and we actively pursue physical

health. Maintaining sexual purity is one way of honoring God with our bodies, so is avoiding nicotine, excessive alcohol and caffeine, or any other drugs or any thing else that could hurt them.

We honor God with our bodies by exercising, not compulsively or to buy into distorted ideas of what is attractive, but to enhance our energy and longevity. It's also about eating the right amounts of good food.

So, what's the Spirit saying to you about this? What are you saying back? Excuses? Procrastination? Our bodies are alive with conflicting desires, so tempted by immediate gratification. Responding to these desires in a God-honoring way takes more discipline, initiative, and determination than almost anything else. But listen, if the Holy Spirit is speaking to you about this, don't put it off.

The **fourth** area of potential laziness is **the way we handle money**, "**Handling money**" whether we have a little or a lot. Some people with very little money figure that there's not enough to worry about. Why worry about good stewardship with what little I have! But that's twisted thinking! The only way to use what little you have wisely is to be more careful than ever!

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those folks with excess money who figure that they don't have to bother about careful money management because there's always plenty of money to go around, so why worry?! What they are forgetting is that how we handle money matters to God. How we handle money is a powerful indicator of our personal maturity and obedience to Christ. It matters to our kids because they'll learn how to handle money from watching us. It matters to the poor because their well-being may hinge on our generosity. It matters to the church. Our purpose of leading people to and active faith in Jesus Christ will either be helped or hindered by your giving. We can't afford to be lazy when it comes to money matters.

Is God talking to you about money matters right now? Have you been careless with what little you have? Have you been careless with how much you have? What is God saying to you about your money matters? Respond to what he's prompting you to do.

The **last** area in regard to taking initiative is in "**Our relationship with God**". We can be rich in many ways. In our talents, in our finances, in our relationships with others, in our health. But Jesus said to be rich toward God (Luke 12:21). Being rich toward God means giving God what he wants most...a relationship with us. Some of us give ourselves lavishly and freely—richly!—to all sorts of people, activities, achievements and responsibilities. We devote our time, energy, creativity and attention to our education, work, friends, families and pleasures. But we forget about God. Jesus says this in Mark, "**What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?**" (Mark 8:36, NIV). Take the initiative and become rich toward God.

What's God nudging you to do with that? What have you been neglecting in your relationship with God? Do you need to be more disciplined in personal reflection and prayer, in studying the Bible and other Christian readings, in fellowship with Christians and regular church attendance? Figure out your next step...and then take it! Commit yourself to spiritual initiative. You'll receive a payoff that will last for eternity!

You know, we have a great role model in taking initiative and that is God himself. He created the heavens and the earth and put it all into motion. He designed everything that lives and even made you and me.

Then he watched as people started to destroy each other with hatred and lies and murder. He saw us sink deeper and deeper into to sin as we pulled farther and farther from him. It would have been easy for God to close his eyes in despair and turn his back on how ugly the world had become. But what did he do? He responded with love and a plan. He provided an option. He took initiative in bridging the gap between himself and sinful creation. "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**" (John 3:16, NIV). That's taking initiative.

God could have sat idly by and watched the world go to hell. But love demanded that he take initiative to redeem it, to fix it, instead, so he so sent his only Son Jesus Christ as a sin sacrifice for your foul-ups and mine and by doing that he made forgiveness available as a free gift. All we need to do is make ourselves humble enough to receive that gift.

So, is that the next necessary step for you? To accept that gift of forgiveness? Or has there been something else that God is prompting in your life. Whatever it is, don't hesitate, don't wait. Decide now. Take action to make your life work. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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