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Proverbs and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Proverbs and Work

Introduction to Proverbs

What is the difference between being smart and being wise? Wisdom goes beyond knowledge. It is more than a catalog of facts; it is a masterful understanding of life, the art of living, and an expertise in good decision-making. We can be smart yet never become wise.

Where can we turn to gain wisdom? Wisdom goes beyond knowledge but cannot be had apart from knowledge of the proverbs. [1] The book asserts this connection: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight” (Proverbs 1:1-2, TNIV) [2]. But to produce wisdom, this knowledge must be mixed with the fear of the Lord. The book of Proverbs declares that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10). Knowledge without commitment to the Lord is as useless as cement without water to make mortar. Paradoxically, accepting the proverbs by faith into the heart produces the fear of the Lord. “My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you . . . then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God” (Prov. 2:1, 5).

True wisdom for the Christian involves the whole revelation of God, especially as known in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It starts with insight into who the Lord is, what he has done, and what he desires for us and for the world we live in. As we grow in our understanding of the Lord, we learn how to cooperate with him as he sustains and redeems the world. This often makes us more fruitful, in ways that benefit ourselves and in ways that help others. It causes us to revere the Lord in the midst of our daily life and work. “The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm” (Prov. 19:23).

In Proverbs, gaining wisdom also makes us good and vice versa. “The wise are cautious and turn away from evil” (Prov. 14:16). “The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom” (Prov. 10:31). Proverbs anticipates Jesus’ admonition, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Wisdom comes from the Lord. “I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness,” the Lord declares (Prov. 4:11). In Proverbs, the mental and the moral come together, and wisdom reflects the truth that a good God is still in charge.

[It Takes Wisdom to See the Good \(Click to watch\)](#)

Bob Sakata is one of America's biggest vegetable growers. His farm in Brighton, Colorado produces corn, onions and sugarbeets. In 1999 he was inducted into the Agriculture Hall of Fame.

The book of Proverbs also warns those who neglect to grow in wisdom. Wisdom, personified throughout the book as a woman, [3] speaks. "Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death" (Prov. 8:35-36). Wisdom brings greater, fuller life. Lack of wisdom diminishes life and ultimately leads to death.

About the Book of Proverbs

Throughout the ancient near east, rulers often commissioned sages to gather the accepted wisdom of their nation for the instruction of young people entering professions or government service in the royal court. [4] These wise sayings, distilled from the observation of life and the realities of human experience, became the text for future generations as they reached adulthood. The book of Proverbs, however, claims King Solomon himself as its principal author (Prov. 1:1) and claims its inspiration from the Lord. "The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov. 2:6). The book demands faith in the Lord, not in human experience.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own insight" (Prov. 3:5). "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil" (Prov. 3:7). Other ancient near eastern manuals imply or assume a divine origin of the wisdom they teach, but Proverbs is emphatic in attributing wisdom solely and directly to the Lord. [5] The central message of the book is that true wisdom is based on our relationship to God: we cannot have true wisdom apart from a living relationship with the Lord.

[John Solheim on Trusting in the Lord at PING Golf Clubs \(Click to watch\)](#)

Thus the proverbs in this book are more than mere common sense or good advice; they teach us not only the connection between our deeds and our destiny, but also how to create a peaceful and prosperous community under the Lord, the source of true wisdom.

At the same time, these short pithy sayings we call proverbs are generalizations about life, not atomized promises. God works through them to guide our thinking, but we must be careful not to dice the collection into a grab-bag of fortune cookie inserts. No isolated proverb can be taken as expressing

the whole truth; it must be nuanced by the broader context of the whole book. [6] Only a fool would read “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6, NASB) and conclude that a child is a programmed robot. The proverb teaches that parental training has its effect, but it must be nuanced by other proverbs recognizing that each person bears responsibility for his or her own conduct, such as, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Prov. 30:17). Mastering the proverbs requires weaving a garment of wisdom from the whole collection. Gaining wisdom from the Book of Proverbs takes life-long study.

This is no trivial task. Some of the proverbs are in tension with each other, though not in outright opposition. Others are stated with an ambiguity that forces the reader to reflect on a number of possible interpretations. Close attention must be paid to whom the proverb is addressed. The warning, “Do not love sleep” (Prov. 20:13) is a proverb addressed to all of God’s children (see Prov. 1:4-5) but the reassurance, “Your sleep will be sweet,” (Prov. 3:24) is addressed to those who do not let wisdom and understanding out of their sight (Prov. 3:21). The Book of Proverbs is timeless, but the application of proverbs must be timely, as the Book of Job illustrates (see *Job and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org). The proverbs are touchstones in the slow development of virtue and they take a long time to understand. “Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles” (Prov. 1:5-6).

The book of Proverbs contains seven collections. Collection 1 (Prov. 1:1-9:18) contains extended lectures to prepare the disciple’s heart for the pithy sayings in the collections that follow. Collection 2 (Prov. 10:1-22:16) are “proverbs of Solomon.” Collection 3 (Prov. 22:17-24:22) covers “the words of the wise,” that are probably adopted and adapted by Solomon, [7] and collection 4 (Prov. 24:23-34) extends that with additional “sayings of the wise.” Collection 5 (Prov. 25:1-29:27) covers “other proverbs that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied,” combing through ancient records from Solomon’s time. (Hezekiah reigned about 300 years after Solomon.) Collection 6 (Prov. 30:1-33) and collection 7 (Prov. 31:1-31) are attributed to Agur and Lemuel, respectively, about whom little else is known. [8] The final result is a single work of sayings, advice, instructions and warnings, structured as a manual for young people beginning their working lives and people of all ages, challenging them to seek the wisdom of the Lord (Prov. 1:2-7).

Click [here](#) to go to a table of verses included in this article, with links to the sections in which they are discussed.

The proverbs most often are paired in contrasts: diligence vs. laziness, honesty vs. dishonesty, planning vs. hastily taken decisions, dealing justly vs. taking advantage of the vulnerable, seeking good advice vs. arrogance, etc. More proverbs in the book talk about our wise speech than any other subject, with the second largest number covering work and its correlate, money. Though the book divides into the seven collections referenced above, the proverbs within these collections circle back over the same topics repeatedly. For that reason, this article will discuss work-related teachings by topic rather than by moving through each collection in the order in which it appears in the book. [A table of verses](#), with links to the places they are discussed in the article, may be found at the end of the article. This is intended to aid readers in locating where in the article a particular verse or passage is discussed, not to encourage readers to read individual verses in isolation.

What Do the Proverbs Have to Do With Work?

[Awe of God Informs the Heart \(Click to watch\)](#)

Ken Duncan lives in awe of God. You can see it on his face and in his work. Mr. Duncan is one of the world's most important photographers and here he tells how God directed him to his passion.

The central concern of the book is the call to live life in awe of God. This call opens the book (Prov. 1:7), pervades it (Prov. 9:10), and brings it to a close (Prov. 31:30). The proverbs tell us that good work habits generally lead to prosperity, and that work habits grow out of character, and that character is formed by our awe of God. Indeed the fear of the Lord and wisdom are directly equated. “You will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:5-6).

The proverbs, in other words, are intended to form God's (or godly) character in those who read them. This is the reason many of the proverbs ground themselves explicitly in God's character:

There are six things that the Lord hates... (Prov. 6:16)

A false balance is an abomination to the Lord. (Prov. 11:1)

The eyes of the Lord are in every place. (Prov. 15:3)

Godly character—that is, wisdom—is essential in all of life, including work. A glance over the proverbs demonstrates that the book has much to contribute to work. Many of the proverbs speak directly about the workplace activities of the ancient near east, including agriculture, animal husbandry, textile and

clothing manufacture, trade, transportation, military affairs, governance, courts of law, home making, raising children, education, construction and others. Money—which is closely related to work—is also a prominent topic. Many other proverbs cover topics that apply significantly to work, such as prudence, honesty, justice, insight and good relationships.

The Valiant Woman (Proverbs 31:10-31)

A remarkable connection between the book of Proverbs and the world of work occurs at the end of the book. Lady Wisdom, who we meet at the beginning of the book (Prov. 1:20-33, 8:1-9:12), reappears in street clothes in the final 22 verses of the book (Prov. 31:10-31) as a living, breathing woman, termed “the virtuous woman” (KJV). Some translators use “wife” instead of “woman,” probably because the woman’s husband and children are mentioned in the passage. (Both “wife” and “woman” are possible translations of the Hebrew *ishshah*.) Indeed, she finds fulfillment in her family and ensures that “her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land” (Prov. 31:23). But the text focuses on the woman’s work as an entrepreneur with a cottage industry and its servants/workers to manage (Prov. 31:15).^[9] Proverbs 31:10-31 does not merely apply to the workplace; it takes place in a workplace.

The book of Proverbs is summarized, then, in a poem praising a woman who is the wise manager of diverse enterprises ranging from weaving to wine making to trade in the market. Translators variously use the words “virtuous” (KJV), “capable” (NRSV), “excellent” (NASB), or “of noble character” (NIV) to describe this woman’s character in Prov. 31:10. But these terms fail to capture the element of strength or might present in the underlying Hebrew word (*chayil*). When applied to a man, this same term is translated “strength,” as in Prov. 31:3. In a great majority of its 246 appearances in the Old Testament, it applies to fighting men (e.g., David’s “mighty warriors,” 1 Chronicles 7:2). Translators tend to downplay the element of strength when the word is applied to a woman, as with Ruth, whom English translations describe as “noble” (NIV, TNIV), “virtuous” (NRSV, KJV) or “excellent” (NASB). But the word is the same, whether applied to men or women. In describing the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, its meaning is best understood as strong or valiant, as further indicated by Prov. 31:17, “She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.” Al Wolters argues on account of such martial language that the most appropriate translation is “Valiant Woman.”^[10] Accordingly, we will refer to the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 as the “Valiant Woman,” which captures both the strength and the virtue carried by the Hebrew *chayil*.

The concluding passage in the book of Proverbs characterizes this woman of strength as a wise worker in five sets of practices in her workplace. The high importance of this section is signaled in two ways. First, it is in the form of an acrostic poem, meaning that its lines begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order, making it memorable. Second, it is placed as the climax and summary of the

entire book. Accordingly, the five sets of practices we observe in the Valiant Woman will serve as a framework for exploring the entire book.

To some people in the ancient near east, and even to some now, portraying a woman as a model of wise entrepreneurship would be surprising. Despite the fact that God gave the gift of work to men and women equally (Genesis 1 and 2), women's work has often been denigrated and treated with less dignity than men's. Following the example of the book, we will refer to this wise worker as she, understanding that God's wisdom is available equally to men and women. She functions in the book as an affirmation of the dignity of every person's work.

As always in the book of Proverbs, the way of wisdom flows out of the fear of the Lord. After all the Valiant Woman's abilities and virtues are described and honored, the source of her wisdom is revealed. "A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Prov. 31:30).

The Wise Worker is Trustworthy (Proverbs)

The first characteristic of the way of wisdom personified in the Valiant Woman is trustworthiness. "The heart of her husband trusts in her" (Prov. 31:11). Trustworthiness is the foundation of wisdom and virtue. God created people to work in concert with each other (Genesis 2:15), and without trust this is not possible. Trust requires adherence to ethical principles beginning with faithfulness in our relationships. What are the workplace implications of being trustworthy depicted in the book of Proverbs?

A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful to His or Her Fiduciary Responsibilities (Proverbs)

The first requirement of trustworthiness is that our work brings good to those who trust us. The Valiant Woman works not only for herself, but also for the benefit of those around her. Her work benefits her customers (Prov. 31:14), her community, (Prov. 31:20), her immediate family (Prov. 31:12, 28), and her co-workers (Prov. 31:15). In the economy of the Ancient Near East, these spheres of responsibility all come together in the economic entity called "the household." As in much of the world today, most people then worked in the same place they lived. Some household members worked as cooks, cleaners, caregivers, or artisans of fabric, metal, wood and stone in rooms in the home itself. Others worked in the fields immediately outside as farmers, shepherds or laborers. The "household" refers to the whole complex of productive enterprises as well as to the extended family, employed workers and, perhaps, slaves who worked and lived there. As the manager of a household, the Valiant Woman is much like a modern-day entrepreneur or senior executive. When she "looks well to the ways of her household" (Prov. 31:27), she is fulfilling a fiduciary duty of trust to all those who depend on her enterprise.

This does not mean we cannot work for our own benefit as well. The Valiant Woman's duty to her household is reciprocated by its duty to her. It is proper for her to receive a share of the household's profit for her own use. The passage instructs her children and her husband and the whole community to honor and praise her. "Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.... Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates" (Prov. 31:28, 31).

Our fiduciary duty requires that we must not do our employers harm in the pursuit of meeting our own needs. We may dispute with them or struggle against their treatment of us, but we may not work them harm. For example, we may not steal from (Prov. 29:24), vandalize (Prov. 18:9) or slander (Prov. 10:18) our employers in order to air our grievances. Some applications of this are obvious. We may not charge a client for hours we didn't actually work. We may not destroy our employers' property or falsely accuse them. Reflection on this principle may lead us to deeper implications and questions. Is it legitimate to cause damage to the organization's productivity or harmony by failing to assist our internal rivals? Is access to personal benefits—trips, prizes, free merchandise and the like—leading us to steer business to certain suppliers at the expense of our employer's best interests? The mutual duty that employees and employers owe each other is a serious matter.

The same duty applies to organizations when they have a fiduciary duty to other organizations. It is legitimate for a company to negotiate with its customers to obtain a higher price. But it is not legitimate to profit by taking secret advantage of a customer, as several investment banks were found to have done when they instructed their representatives to recommend collateralized mortgage obligations (CMOs) to customers as solid investments, while at the same time selling CMOs short in the expectation their value would fall. **[11]**

The fear of the Lord is the touchstone of fiduciary responsibility. "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil" (Prov. 3:7). All people are tempted to serve themselves at the expense of others. That is the consequence of the Fall. However, this proverb tells us that fear of the Lord—remembering his goodness to us, his providence over all things, and his justice when we harm others—helps us fulfill our duty to others.

For an application of this passage, see "Have a Banker When You Don't Need One" in *Texas Nameplate Study Guide* by clicking [here](#), and see "Grow with Retained Earnings" in *Country Supply Study Guide* by clicking [here](#).

A Trustworthy Worker is Honest (Proverbs)

Honesty is another essential aspect of trustworthiness. It is so important that one proverb equates truth with wisdom itself. "Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding"

(Prov. 23:23). Honesty consists both in *telling* the truth and in *doing* the truth.

HONEST WORDS

[Make Your Word as Good as Gold \(Click to watch\)](#)

The Souto Brothers sold their Miami-based coffee roasting company in 2011 for \$360 million. They proved that honesty and hard work can create a strong return on investment.

Chapter 6 contains a well-known list of seven things God hates. Two of the seven are forms of dishonesty: “a lying tongue” and “a false witness who utters lies” (Prov. 6:16-19). Throughout the book of Proverbs the importance of telling the truth is a steady drumbeat.

I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. (Prov. 8:6-7)

A truthful witness saves lives, but one who utters lies is a betrayer. (Prov. 14:25)

The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death. (Prov. 21:6)

A false witness will not go unpunished, and a liar will not escape. (Prov. 19:5)

Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. (Prov. 24:28)

Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech. (Prov. 10:18-19)

Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully. Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy. (Prov. 12:17-20)

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. (Prov. 12:22)

Like a war club, a sword, or a sharp arrow is one who bears false witness against a neighbor. (Prov. 25:18)

An enemy dissembles in speaking while harboring deceit within; when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it, for there are seven abominations concealed within. (Prov. 26:24-25)

Although the Bible does condone lying and deceit in exceptional circumstances (e.g., Rahab the prostitute in Joshua 2:1, the Hebrew midwives' lies to Pharaoh in Exodus 1:15-20, David's lie to the priest in 1 Samuel 21:1-3), Proverbs does not allow lying or deception to have a role in daily life and work. The point is not only that lying is wrong, but also that telling the truth is essential. We avoid lying, not so much because there is a rule against it, but because in our awe of God, we love the truth.

Lying is destructive and leads ultimately to punishment and death.^[12] We are warned not only to avoid deceit, but we are to beware of the deceivers around us. We are not to allow ourselves to be taken in by their lies. Even here we recognize that we ourselves may be prone to believe the lies we hear. Like gossip (which is often a lie wrapped in a tissue of truth), we find a lie drawing us into the circle of those who are in the know and we like that. Or we find that in our own perverseness, we want to believe the lie. But the proverbs warn us forcefully away from those who lie. A workplace where only the truth is spoken (in love, see Ephesians 4:15) is utopian, yet God calls us to be among those who avoid the lying tongue.

About half of these proverbs prohibit false witness in particular, echoing the Ninth Commandment (Exodus 20:16). If misleading others in general is ungodly, then falsifying an account of someone else's actions is a crime that "will not go unpunished" (Prov. 19:5). A false witness is a direct assault on an innocent person. Yet it may be the most common form of lying in the workplace, second only perhaps to false advertising. Whereas false advertising is at least directed against outsiders (customers) who know to be wary of sales pitches and generally have other sources of information, a false witness is usually an attack on a co-worker, and is likely to be accepted without skepticism within the organization. It occurs when we try to shift blame or credit by misreporting others' roles and actions. It harms not only those whose actions we mis-report, but the entire organization, for an organization that cannot accurately understand the reasons for its present successes and failures will not be able to make the changes needed to improve and adapt. It is like shooting someone on a submarine. Not only does it maim the victim, it sinks the ship and drowns the whole crew.

For a fuller discussion of honesty in the Bible, see the article [Truth & Deception](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at www.theologyofwork.org.

HONEST DEEDS

Not only words, but also deeds, can be either truthful or false. "The righteous hate falsehood, but the wicked *act* shamefully and disgracefully" (Prov. 13:5, emphasis added). The most prominent form of

dishonest action in the proverbs is the use of false weights and measures. “Honest balances and scales are the Lord’s; all the weights in the bag are his work” (Prov. 16:11). Conversely, “a false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight” (Prov. 11:1). “Differing weights are an abomination to the Lord, and false scales are not good” (Prov. 20:23). False weights and measures refer to defrauding a customer about the product being sold. Mislabeling a product, short-cutting the promised quality, and misrepresenting the source or origin—in addition to blatantly falsifying the quantity—are examples of this kind of dishonesty. Such practices are an abomination to God.

God Loves Honest Scales in Finance

Brian Bauer, a financial manager at Boeing, points out that the scales we use today abstract. “Modern finance is the set of scales relied upon by business leaders, owners, and customers. Accounting reports tell owners about the performance of their business. A cash flow analysis tells a buyer whether or not they are getting a good deal when acquiring a company or manager when launching a project. And here’s where things get interesting. Accounting is governed by a set of rules, but the rules must be interpreted and the methods for adhering to those rules spark vigorous debate.... [Click here](#) to continue reading.

There are practical reasons for acting honestly. In the short run, dishonest acts may produce a larger income, but in the long run, clients or customers will catch on and take their business elsewhere. Yet ultimately, it is the fear of God that corrals us, even when we think we could get away with dishonesty on human terms. “Diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 20:10).

Apart from false weights and measures, there are other ways of being dishonest in the workplace. One example from the Old Testament concerns land ownership, which was certified with boundary markers. A dishonest person could stealthily shift those boundary markers to enlarge his own holdings at the expense of his neighbor. The proverbs condemn dishonest acts like that. “Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you” (Prov. 23:10-11). The proverbs do not enumerate every kind of dishonest act that could be done in ancient Israel, much less in our world today. But they establish the principle that dishonest acts are as abhorrent to the Lord as dishonest words.

What does honesty—both in word and deed—look like in today’s workplace? If we remember that honesty is an aspect of trustworthiness, the criterion of honesty becomes, “Can people trust what I say and do?” not “Is it technically true?” There are ways to break trust without committing outright fraud. Contracts can be altered or obfuscated to give unfair advantage to the party with the most sophisticated lawyers. Products can be described in misleading terms, as when “increases energy” in a food label means nothing except “contains calories.” In the end, according to the proverbs, God will plead the cause of those so deceived and will not tolerate these practices (Prov. 23:11). In the

meantime, wise—that is, godly—workers will avoid such practices.

When Do You Fire Your Customer?

The senior management of Software Dynamics, Inc. had just completed its Business Roadmap, spelling out SDI's Vision, Mission, Values and Guiding Principles.

One section described the company's position toward its customers: "We realize we are dependent on close relationships with our clients, and will go the extra mile to assure we are meeting their requirements and serving their needs."

To continue reading, click [here](#). You can return to this page afterwards.

The proverbs return again and again to the theme of honesty. "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them" (Prov. 11:3). "Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterwards the mouth will be full of gravel" (Prov. 20:17). An amusing proverb fingers another form of deception: "'Bad, Bad,' says the buyer, then goes away and boasts" (Prov. 20:14). Deliberately denigrating a product we want in order to get the price reduced, then gloating over our "bargain," is also a form of dishonesty. In the realm of haggling between knowledgeable buyers and sellers this practice may be more of an entertainment than an abuse. But in its modern guise of spin doctoring—as when a political candidate tries to convince English-speaking voters that he or she is tough on immigration, while also trying to convince Hispanic voters of the opposite—it betrays the fraudulence behind intentionally misrepresenting reality.

For an application of these passages, see "Price to Turn" at [Country Supply Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

The Wise Worker is Diligent (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman is diligent. Proverbs portrays her diligence in three ways: 1) Hard work; 2) Long-term planning; 3) Profitability. As result of her diligence in these ways, she is confident about the future.

A Diligent Worker is Hard-working (Proverbs)

[The Art of Making, Red Dress \(Click to watch\)](#)
[The Art of Making, Red Dress](#) from [Deep Green Sea](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The Valiant Woman "works with willing hands" (Prov. 31:13), meaning that she chooses, of her own

volition, to work tirelessly in pursuit of the household's goals. "She rises while it is still night" (Prov. 31:15). "She makes linen garments and sells them" (Prov. 31:24). "With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard" (Prov. 31:16). It adds up to a lot of work.

In an agrarian economy, the connection between hard work and well-being is easy to see. As long as they have access to land to cultivate, hard-working farmers do much better than lazy ones. The proverbs are clear that a lazy worker will lose out in the end.

A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame. (Prov. 10:4-5)

I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior. (Prov. 24:30-34)

In the ancient near east, hard work brought prosperity, but even one week of laxity during the harvest could spell a hungry winter.

Modern economies (at least in the developed world) may mask this effect in the short term. In good times, when virtually everyone can find work, the lazy worker may have a job and appear to do nearly as well as the diligent worker. Likewise, in economic downturns (and at all times in many emerging economies), a hard-working person may have no more success than a lazy one in finding a job. And at all times, rewards for hard work may be blunted by discrimination, seniority rules, union contracts, bosses' favoritism, nepotism, golden parachutes, flawed performance metrics, ignorance by managers and many other factors.

Does this make the proverbs about hard-working diligence obsolete? No, it does not, for two reasons. First, even in modern economies, diligence is usually rewarded over the course of a working life. When jobs are scarce, it is the diligent workers who are most likely to keep their jobs or find new ones faster. Second, the chief motivation for diligence is not personal prosperity, but the fear of the Lord, as we have seen with the other virtues in the proverbs. We are diligent because the Lord calls us to our tasks, and our awe of him motivates us to diligence in our work.

[Faith, Work and Quality \(Click to watch\)](#)

Dale Crownover attributes the success of his company to II Chronicles 15:7 where it says, "work hard and work strong and you will be rewarded."

Laziness or the lack of diligence in the workplace is destructive. All who have experienced lazy coworkers can appreciate this pungent proverb: “Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are the lazy to their employers” (Prov. 10:26). We hate to be stuck on the same team with people who don’t shoulder their share of the burden.

For an application of these passages, see "Do the Tedious Work to Target" at [Country Supply Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

A Diligent Worker Plans for the Long Term (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman plans ahead. “She brings her food from far away” (Prov. 31:14), meaning that she doesn't depend on last-minute convenience purchases of questionable quality and cost. She “considers a field” (Prov. 31:16) before buying it, investigating its long-term potential. She is planning to plant this particular field as a vineyard (Prov. 31:16), and vineyards don’t yield their first crop until two to three years after planting. **[13]** The point is that she makes decisions based on their long-term consequences. Proverbs 21:5 tells us that “the plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want.”

Wise planning requires making decisions for the long-term, as seen for example in the cycle of agricultural asset management.

Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds; for riches do not last forever, nor a crown for all generations. When the grass is gone, and new growth appears, and the herbage of the mountains is gathered, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field; there will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and nourishment for your servant-girls. (Prov. 27:23-27)

Like the Valiant Woman planting a vineyard, the wise herdsman thinks years ahead. So too, the wise king or governor takes a long-term view. “With an intelligent ruler there is lasting order” (Prov. 28:2). The proverbs also turn to the ant as an example of long-term diligence.

Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.

(Prov. 6:6-11)

Planning ahead takes many forms in workplaces. Financial planning is mentioned in Proverbs 24:27: “Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house.” In other words, don’t start building your house until your fields are producing the necessary funds to finish your construction project. Jesus picked up on this in Luke 14:28-30: “Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’”

There are many other forms of planning, and we can’t expect the proverbs to serve as a planning manual for a modern enterprise. But we can note again the link in proverbs between wisdom, in the form of planning, and God’s character.

The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. (Prov. 16:1)

The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established. (Prov. 19:21)

God plans for the *very* long term, and we are wise to plan ahead also. But we must remain humble about our plans. Unlike God, we do not have the power to make all our plans come to pass. “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring” (Prov. 27:1). We plan with wisdom, speak with humility, and live in expectation that God’s plans are our ultimate desire.

Attention to long-term consequences may be the most important skill we can cultivate for success. For example, psychological research has shown that the ability to delay gratification—that is, the ability to make decisions based on longer-term results—is a far better predictor of success in school than IQ is. **[14]** Regrettably, Christians sometimes seem to take passages such as “Do not worry about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34) to mean, “Do not plan ahead for tomorrow.” The Proverbs—alongside Jesus’ own words—show that this is both incorrect and self-indulgent. In fact, the entire Christian life, with its expectation of Christ’s return to perfect the kingdom of God, is a life of planning for the long-term.

A Diligent Worker Contributes to the Profitability of the Enterprise (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman makes sure that the work of her hands is marketable. She knows what the

merchants are buying (Prov. 31:24), chooses her materials with care (Prov. 31:13), and works tirelessly to assure a quality product (Prov. 31:18b). Her reward is that “her merchandise is profitable” (Prov. 31:18a), providing the resources needed by the household and the community. The proverbs are clear that an individual worker's diligence contributes to the profitability of the entire undertaking. “The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want” (Prov. 21:5). The converse example is shown in the proverb, “One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal” (Prov. 18:9). A lazy worker is no better than someone who deliberately sets out to destroy the enterprise. All of these anticipate Jesus’ parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

When we keep in mind that these proverbs about profit are grounded in God’s character, we see God wants us to work profitably. It is not enough to complete our assigned tasks. We must care about whether our work actually adds value to the materials, capital and labor consumed. In open economies, competition dictates that making a profit can be very challenging. The un-diligent—lazy, complacent, or dissolute—can quickly decline into loss, bankruptcy and ruin. The diligent—hard working, creative, focused—perform a godly service when they make it possible for their businesses to operate profitably.

Christians have not always recognized the importance of profit in the biblical perspective. In fact, profit is often regarded with suspicion and discussed in a rhetoric of “people vs. profits.” There is a suspicion that profit comes not from taking inputs and creating something more valuable from them, but from swindling buyers, workers or suppliers. This arises from an inadequate understanding of business and economics. A truly biblical critique of businesses would ask questions such as “What kind of profits?” “What is the source of the profit?” “Is the profit extracted by monopoly or intimidation or deception?”, and “How is the profit shared among workers, managers, owners, lenders, suppliers, customers and taxation?” It would encourage and celebrate workers and businesses who bring a wholesome profitability to their work. CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: See the article **Economics and Society* at www.theologyofwork.org for more on this subject.

Not all workers are in a position to know whether their work is profitable. Employees in a large corporation may have little idea whether their particular work contributes positively to profitability of the enterprise. Profitability, in an accounting sense, does not play a role in education, government, not-for-profit corporations, and homes. But all workers can pay attention to how their work contributes to accomplishing the mission of the organization, to whether the value they add is greater than the pay and other resources they extract. To do so is a form of service to the Lord.

The Valiant Woman’s profitable management of her household draws a word of exalted praise. “She is far more precious than jewels” (Prov. 31:10). This is no sentimental metaphor. It is quite literally true. A well-run enterprise can certainly earn profits over the years far exceeding the value of jewels and other stores of wealth.

A Diligent Worker Can Smile at the Future (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman's diligence gives her an eagerness for the future. "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come" (Prov. 31:25). While the proverbs are not promises of personal prosperity, in general, our diligence does lead to a better future.

Those who till their land will have plenty of food, but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense. (Prov. 12:11)

Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty. (Prov. 28:19)

The hand of the diligent will rule, while the lazy will be put to forced labor. (Prov. 12:24)

Diligence is not a guarantee against future sorrow or even disaster (see [Job and Work](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at www.theologyofwork.org). Yet the wise person trusts God for the future, and the diligent can rest in the confidence that they have done what God asks of them for themselves, their households and their communities.

For an application of these passages in Proverbs about diligence, see "Require Every Employee to be Accountable" in [Texas Nameplate Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

The Wise Worker is Shrewd (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman sets an example of exceptional acumen in her work. The proverbs describe this virtue as "prudent" (Prov. 19:14) or "shrewd" (Prov. 1:4). We may tend to think of shrewd people as those who take advantage of others, but in Proverbs it carries the idea of making the most of resources and circumstances. If we understand shrewdness as "clever discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen"[\[15\]](#) then we see the kind of shrewd wisdom God intends for workers.

A Shrewd Worker Employs Keen Awareness and Judgment

This Valiant Woman's shrewdness is displayed in the keen awareness with which she sources her materials. "She seeks wool and flax... She is like the ships of the merchant" (Prov. 31:13-14). Today's manufacturer or craftsperson can be shrewd in the selection of materials or can unwisely settle for materials that will not hold up well. Investments in research and development, market analysis,

logistics, strategic partnerships and community involvement may yield large payoffs in the future. On an individual level, good judgment is invaluable. An investment adviser who can match a client's future needs with the risks and rewards inherent in various investment vehicles is performing a godly service.

A Shrewd Worker Prepares for All Known Contingencies

The Valiant Woman “is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple” (Prov. 31:21-22). Her material preparations cover every eventuality of the coming winter weather. She prepares the variety of clothing and blankets (“coverings”) her household may need, whatever the season may bring. The descriptions indicate fine or rich material (“fine linen and purple”), and the Hebrew word translated “crimson” (*sanim*) may be a copyist's mistake for “double” (*shenayim*), that is, layered and warm.^[16]

This woman is alert to possible problems and works toward solutions before the problems arise. Consider her preparations for her husband. In the middle of her preparations of clothing and coverings, she keeps in mind her husband's role as a public figure: “Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land” (Prov. 31:23). What would happen if it snows while her husband is in the midst of a civic affair? Not to worry, for “all her household”—including her husband—are suitably attired for any occasion. A modern image may make this a little clearer. Imagine a prominent statesman exposed suddenly to a chance storm. He reaches immediately for a crisp fedora and matching overcoat and overboots, while those around him cover their heads with scrounged newspapers and their ruined shoes pour slush onto their freezing feet.

A Shrewd Worker Seeks Good Advice

A persistent myth in some circles is that the shrewdest leaders scorn advice. Their very shrewdness consists of seeing opportunities that others are too low to glimpse. It is true that just because many people advise something, that doesn't make it wise. “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord” (Prov. 21:30). If an idea is bad or wrong (“against the Lord”), no chorus of yes-men can make it good or wise.

[Seek Out Advice \(Click to watch\)](#)

Albert Black, founder of On Target Supply & Logistics, humbly asked for help and John Castle responded. Mr. Castle is one of Dallas' leading executives and he has become one of Albert Black's key mentors.

But the myth of the genius who succeeds against all advice is seldom true in reality. Creativity and excellence build on multiple points of view. Innovation takes account of the known in order to step into the unknown, and great leaders who reject the conventional wisdom have usually mastered it first,

before moving beyond it. “Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed” (Prov. 15:22). And in Proverbs 20:18 we read, “Plans are established by taking advice; wage war by following wise guidance.” The wise person uses the complementing strengths of others, even when striking into new territory.

A Shrewd Worker Improves His or Her Skills and Knowledge

The Valiant Woman “girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong” (Prov. 31:17). That is, she takes steps to improve her ability to do her work. She makes her arms strong; she girds herself with strength. A shrewd person acts to improve her skill set or knowledge.

As the industrial economy in the developed world has given way to a technological economy, continual training and education have become indispensable for employers and employees. In fact, this is becoming the case in many emerging economies as well. The work you are prepared for today is not likely to be the work you will be doing 10 years from now. A shrewd worker recognizes this and retrains for the next opportunity in the workplace. Likewise it is becoming harder for employers to find workers with the skills needed for many of today’s jobs. The highest-performing individuals, organizations and societies will be those who develop effective systems for lifelong learning.

The Wise Worker is Generous (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman is generous. “She opens her hands to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy” (Prov. 31:20). We are accustomed to hearing generosity praised in the Bible, and here the Valiant Woman is praised for it. But we must not reduce her generosity to a pleasant quirk in her personality. Her generosity is part and parcel of her work, as we can see in the relationship between verses 31:19 and 31:20:

She puts her hands [Heb. *yade*] to the distaff, and her hands [*kappe*] hold the spindle.

She opens her hand [*kap*] to the poor, and reaches out her hands [*yade*] to the needy.

Two different Hebrew words are translated “hand” (or plural “hands”) in these two verses. If we look at the original Hebrew, we see they occur in the order *yade*, *kappe* in the first verse, and in the reverse order *kap*, *yade* in the second verse. (*Kappe* is the plural of *kap*.) This “chiastic” structure of ABBA is common in the Bible and indicates that the entire structure forms a single unit of thought. In other words, her work is inseparable from her generosity. Because she is successful in spinning, she has

something to give to the poor, and conversely, her generous spirit is an essential element of her capability as an entrepreneur/executive.

[Be the Person People Want to Work For \(Click to watch\)](#)

David Fluker has grown into an excellent leader because he is smart, respectful of all people and generous. David Fluker is CEO of Fluker Farms located in Port Allen, Louisiana.

In other words, Proverbs claims that generosity and fiduciary duty do not conflict. Being generous to the needy out of the household's resources does not reduce the owner's wealth, but increases it. This counterintuitive argument appears throughout Proverbs. Most people curb their generosity out of fear that if they give away too much, they will not have enough left for themselves. But the proverbs teach the exact opposite:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water. The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it. (Prov. 11:24-26)

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full. (Prov. 19:17)

Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse. (Prov. 28:27)

The Wise Worker is Just (Proverbs)

The proverbs do not stop with commending generosity but go further to claim that caring for the poor is a matter of justice. First, the proverbs recognize that people are often poor because the rich and powerful defraud or oppress them. Or, if they were already poor, they have become easy targets for further fraud and oppression. This is abhorrent to God and he will bring judgment against those who do it.

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the

needy honor him. (Prov. 14:31)

Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss. (Prov. 22:16)

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them. (Prov. 22:22-23)

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. (Prov. 22:8-9)

One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the poor. (Prov. 28:8)

[Give People a Job for Life \(Click to watch\)](#)

Joseph Semprevivo, founder of a Joseph's Lite Cookies in Deming, New Mexico believes that creating a job is creating a sacred trust. He promises security to every person he hires. Today his company generates \$100 million in annual sales.

The bottom line is found in Proverbs 16:8, "Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice."

Second, even if you have not defrauded or oppressed the poor, God's justice requires that you do what you can to set things right for them, beginning with meeting their immediate needs.

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.
(Prov. 21:13)

Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor. (Prov. 14:21)

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again; tomorrow I will give it."
(Prov. 3:27-28)

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished. (Prov. 17:5)

To regard helping the needy as a matter of justice, not merely generosity, is no surprise if we remember that wisdom rests on the fear of the Lord. That is, wisdom consists of living in awe of our God so that we seek to do what he desires for the world. God is just. God desires that the poor be cared for and poverty be eliminated. If we truly love God, then we will care for those whom God loves. Therefore, to relieve the poor and to work to eliminate poverty are matters of justice.

Notice that many of these proverbs assume personal contact between the rich and the poor. Generosity is not only a matter of sending a donation, but of working and perhaps even living alongside poor people. It may mean working to break down the segregation of the poor away from the middle class and wealthy in housing, shopping, education, work and politics. Do you come into contact with people of higher and lower socio-economic status on a daily basis? If not, your world may be too narrow.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY?

We can see how generosity and justice are important for an individual worker, but do they have any application for corporations? Most of Proverbs deals with individuals, but the section on the Valiant Woman addresses her as the manager of a household business. And as we have seen, her generosity is not a hindrance to her work, but an essential element of it.

Regrettably, many businesses today seem to lack the imagination or skill needed to operate in ways that benefit shareholders while also benefiting the people around them. For example, a quick read of any newspaper's financial section will find many stories about companies attempting to defraud or oppress the poor: pressuring poor and powerless people into selling property below its full value, taking advantage of ignorance or misinformation to sell questionable products, wringing excessive short-term profits from those who are vulnerable or who lack alternatives.

Why do such companies believe that grabbing wealth from others is the only—or best—way to make a profit? Is there any evidence that a zero-sum approach to business actually improves shareholder return? How many of these practices really lead to higher long-term profitability or power? Quite the opposite: the best businesses succeed because they find a sustainable way to produce goods and services that benefit customers and society, while providing an excellent return to employees, shareholders and lenders. Business and other organizations that meet social needs have an advantage when they need community support, worker commitment and social protection from economic, political, and competitive threats.

GOVERNMENT POLICY?

Proverbs also demands justice from institutions other than business. In particular, the realm of government receives attention in the many verses dealing with kings. The message to them is the same

as that to businesses. Governments can survive long-term only if they care for the poor and vulnerable and bring them justice.

If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established forever.
(Prov. 29:14)

By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it. (Prov. 29:4)

Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. (Prov. 25:5)

Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves those who speak what is right.
(Prov. 16:13)

It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. (Prov. 16:12)

As with all wisdom, the foundation of wise governance is the fear of the Lord. “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just” (Prov. 8:15).

In speaking to kings, the proverbs would seem to apply primarily to political leaders and civil servants in modern society. But in democratic societies, all citizens have a role in government and public policy. Contacting our representatives and voting for candidates and ballot questions that bring justice to the poor and vulnerable are ways we enact the justice that comes from wisdom today.

COMPETITION?

The Proverbs even extend the demands of generosity and justice to competition and struggle. “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you” (Prov. 25:21-22). The apostle Paul quotes this proverb word-for-word in Romans 12:20, and concludes with the challenge, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Moreover, “Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble” (Prov. 24:17). What? Are we to be generous even toward an enemy? Paul and the authors of the proverbs are convinced that when we do so, the Lord will reward us.

Does this apply to our attitude toward our competitors, whether individually (e.g., rivals for promotion)

or corporately (e.g., competitors)? The proverbs do not discuss modern competition. But if they promote service even to an enemy, it is reasonable to infer they also promote service to competitors. This is not the same thing as collusion or oligarchy. The near-universal ascendancy of market economies is arguably due to the benefits of competition. But business, politics and other forms of competition are at heart forms of cooperation, albeit with significant competitive aspects. Society fosters competition in order that all may thrive. The proper penalty for failure in competition is not to be crushed or driven to poverty, but to be transformed or diverted to more productive work. Companies go out of business, but their successful rivals do not become monopolies. Elections have winners and losers, but the victors do not re-write the constitution to ban the losing party. Careers rise and fall, but the proper penalty for failure is not “You’ll never work in this town again,” but “What help do you need to find something better suited to your talents?” The wisest individuals and organizations learn how to engage in competition that makes the most of each player’s participation and offers a soft landing for those who lose today’s contest, but may make a valuable contribution tomorrow.

CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: For more on this topic, see the article **Competition* at www.theologyofwork.org.

The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue (Proverbs)

The Valiant Woman exercises care in what she says and how she speaks. The proverbs remind us that “to watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble” (Prov. 21:23). Sometimes, tongue-in-cheek, they also remind us that “even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent” (Prov. 17:28).

There are more proverbs about the tongue than about any other topic. (See Prov. 6:17, 6:24, 10:20, 10:31, 12:18, 12:19, 15:2, 15:4, 16:1, 17:4, 17:20, 18:21, 21:6, 21:23, 25:15, 25:23, 26:28, 28:23, in addition to Prov. 31:26). A righteous and gentle tongue brings wisdom (Prov. 10:31), healing (Prov. 12:18), knowledge (Prov. 15:2), life (Prov. 15:4, 18:21), and the word of the Lord (Prov. 16:1). A perverse and unguarded tongue sheds innocent blood (Prov. 6:17), breaks the spirit (Prov. 15:4), encourages evil (Prov. 17:4), brings on calamity (Prov. 17:20) trouble (Prov. 21:23) and anger (Prov. 25:23), breaks bones (Prov. 25:15), works ruin (Prov. 26:28) and becomes “a snare of death” (Prov. 21:6).

Communication in some form is an integral part of nearly every job. In addition, social talk at work can improve working relationships, or damage them. What do the proverbs teach about wise use of the tongue?

The Wise Worker Avoids Gossip

Is gossip really a problem in the workplace or is it merely innocent gab? The proverbs point to its danger. “A gossip reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a babblers” (Prov. 20:19). Gossip causes strife. “A fool’s lips bring strife, and a fool’s mouth invites a flogging. The mouths of fools are their ruin, and their lips a snare to themselves. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body” (Prov. 18:6-8). “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife” (Prov. 26:20-21). “Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends” (Prov. 16:27-28). Gossip is a violation of trust, the founding virtue of a wise person. “Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent. A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence” (Prov. 11:12-13).

Gossip casts other people in a questionable light, raising doubts about a person’s integrity or a decision’s validity. Gossip projects evil into someone else’s motives, thus showing itself a child of the Father of Lies. Gossip takes words out of context, misrepresents the intentions of the speaker, reveals what should have been kept in confidence, and attempts to elevate the gossiper at the expense of others who are not present to speak for themselves. It is not hard to see how destructive this can be in a workplace. Whether the gossip places a question mark over a person’s reputation or the worth of a project or a position taken by a superior, the shadow cast by such words causes everyone around the gossiper to be more guarded and suspicious. This cannot help but inject division among workers, whether in an office, on a factory floor, or in an executive suite. Not surprisingly, St. Paul included gossip in his list of sins that are an abomination to God (Romans 1:29).

The Wise Worker Speaks in Kindness, Not Anger

The Valiant Woman “opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (Prov. 31:26). No one likes to be on the receiving end of an angry outburst, so we easily recognize the danger noted in a number of the proverbs: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1). “Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is to their glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11). “Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention” (Prov. 15:18). “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city” (Prov. 16:32).

The Frustrated Customer

It had been one of those long, aggravating days—the kind where the nerves of everyone in the company were on edge. At least it's almost over, thought Carlos, the customer service representative for Ace Windows and Doors. Just as he reached for his coat, his phone rang.

To continue reading, click [here](#). You can return to this page afterwards.

The beauty of these proverbs is that they also provide a picture of the person who can deal successfully with anger. We should be “angry” (morally indignant) against sin, but we must not allow our “anger” (wrath) to control us. “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). The wise person gives a soft answer, overlooks an offense, and calms contention. The “teaching of kindness” is on the Valiant Woman’s tongue. Such people are “better than the mighty.” In the workplace such people are essential when irritations increase or tempers flare.^[17] As followers of Jesus Christ we can live out the fruit of God’s Spirit when we control our tongue, not only by avoiding angry speech ourselves, but also by being a calming influence in a sometimes-contentious atmosphere.

The Wise Worker Blesses Others

The blessings from a wise tongue rest on the reality that “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver; like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise rebuke to a listening ear” (Prov. 25:11-12). In the workplace we are often surrounded by anxious coworkers, and a good word may be just what they need. “Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up” (Prov. 12:25). We stand ready to give that good word because “a gentle tongue is a tree of life” (Prov. 15:4). Truly, “death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (Prov. 18:21).

In today’s electronic workplace, the “tongue” isn’t confined to our audible words. Gossip, lies, and angry words can travel at light speed through emails, blogs, tweets, and social media. We are called to be discerning, to recognize that death and life truly are in the words we use with or against one another in the workplace.

The Wise Worker is Modest (Proverbs)

The proverbs commend modesty, both in attitude (avoid excessive pride) and in the use of money (avoid lavish spending). These virtues do not appear in the description of the Valiant Woman. But they appear so strongly elsewhere in Proverbs and apply so directly to work, that we cannot do justice to the book without mentioning them.

A Modest Worker is Not Proud

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Prov. 16:18-19). Verse 18 may be the most famous proverb of all. There are others.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble. (Prov. 11:2)

Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the lamp of the wicked—are sin. (Prov. 21:4)

A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor. (Prov. 29:23).

Are these proverbs commands against self-respect? No, they are calls to live in such awe of God (the “fear of the Lord”) that we see ourselves as we really are and we can be honest with ourselves about ourselves. If we fear the Lord, we no longer have to fear our own self-image, and we can let go of trying to puff ourselves up. It is to rest in the knowledge that God will ultimately triumph over this broken world of sin and destruction. The Lord knows the path of the righteous—even in the workplace. In the end, God lifts up those who put their trust in him.

A Modest Worker is Not Driven by the Lure of Wealth

The ancient sage, Agur—the source of the next-to-last collection of sayings in the book—left us a wise prayer. “Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:7-9). These are wise words for us in the workplace, “Give me neither poverty nor riches.”

We work to earn a living, to enjoy a measure of comfort and security, to provide for our families and to contribute something to the poor and the wider community. Is that enough or are we driven to strive for more? Agur links that desire for more to leaving God out of our lives, to ignoring our Creator and his purposes for us. Agur also prays that he will not live in poverty but that God would provide the food

he needs. This is a legitimate prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11).

But if we turn our work into a quest for ever-increasing wealth—greed, in other words—we have left the path of wisdom. We may seek wealth—consciously or not—because it seems to offer concrete evidence of our success and self-worth. But the comfort of wealth is imaginary. “The wealth of the rich is their strong city; in their imagination it is like a high wall” (Prov. 18:11). “The rich is wise in self-esteem, but an intelligent poor person sees through the pose” (Prov. 28:11). In reality, wealth does not bring an end to troubles. It merely substitutes the troubles of wealth for the troubles of poverty. “Wealth is a ransom for a person’s life, but the poor get no threats” (Prov. 13:8). Wealth cannot actually make us feel more secure. “Those who trust in their riches will wither” (Prov. 11:28). We should be on guard, especially against sacrificing the richness of life to obtain the riches of money. “The miser is in a hurry to get rich and does not know that loss is sure to come” (Prov. 28:22). “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist” (Prov. 23:4). In particular, the wise care more about their honest reputations than about their bank accounts. “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold” (Prov. 22:1).

The proverbs are not opposed to wealth itself. In fact, wealth can be a blessing. “The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it” (Prov. 10:22). It is the obsession for wealth that causes harm.

If nothing else, the proverbs of modesty remind us that our exploration of the book through the lens of the Valiant Woman may be a helpful guide, but it does not exhaust the contributions of the book to the theory and practice of work. All the proverbs are well worth further study beyond the glimpses seen in this article! We encourage those who find this article helpful to continue reading the proverbs to discover further meanings and applications, and to reflect on their own experience in the light of God’s wisdom.

Conclusion to Proverbs

[Work is Committed to the Lord \(Click to watch\)](#)

Michael Cordone, CEO of CORDONE Industries, talks about how faith is put into action everyday at his company.

Used with permission from [The Center for Faith & Work at LeTourneau University](#).

In the end, our work habits are shaped by our character, which, in turn, is shaped by knowledge of our Lord’s revelation and our awe of Him. As we come to know our Lord more intimately, our character is transformed to become like God’s character. Indeed, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”

(Prov. 9:10). Wisdom brings life to all spheres of life, including the workplace, where most of us spend the largest part of our waking hours. Wisdom leads us to trustworthy actions, to diligence, to wholesome shrewdness, to generosity and justice for those in need, to controlling what we say, and to humble living. In wisdom, we trust God to shape our destiny and take charge of our ends. “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established” (Prov. 16:3).

Index by Chapter-Verse (Proverbs)

Verses	Link to Section
<u>Verses from the Book of Proverbs</u>	
Prov. 1:1-2 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight. (TNIV)	Introduction About the Book
Prov. 1:2-7 For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight . . . The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.	About the Book What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work?
Prov. 1:4 Teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young.	About the Book The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 1:4-5 Teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill.	About the Book
Prov. 1:5-6 Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.	About the Book

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 1:20-33 Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice . . . Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.</p>	<p>The Valiant Woman</p>
<p>Prov. 2:1, 5 My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you . . . then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.</p>	<p>Introduction</p>
<p>Prov. 2:5-6 You will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.</p>	<p>What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work?</p>
<p>Prov. 2:6 The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.</p>	<p>About the Book</p>
<p>Prov. 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own insight.</p>	<p>About the Book</p>
<p>Prov. 3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil.</p>	<p>About the Book A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful</p>
<p>Prov. 3:21 My child, do not let these escape from your sight: keep sound wisdom and prudence.</p>	<p>About the Book</p>
<p>Prov. 3:24 Your sleep will be sweet.</p>	<p>About the Book</p>
<p>Prov. 3:27-28 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again; tomorrow I will give it."</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>

Verses	Link to Section
<p>Prov. 4:11 I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.</p>	<p>Introduction</p>
<p>Prov. 6:2 . . . to preserve you from the wife of another, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 6:6-11 Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise . . . A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 6:16 There are six things that the Lord hates...</p>	<p>What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work?</p>
<p>Prov. 6:16-19 There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.</p>	<p>What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work? A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 6:17 . . . haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 8:6-7 I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 8:15 By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 8:35-36 Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.</p>	<p>Introduction</p>
<p>Prov. 9:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight.</p>	<p>Introduction What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work?</p>
<p>Prov. 10:4-5 A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 10:18 Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 10:18-19 Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 10:20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the mind of the wicked is of little worth.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 10:22 The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Prov. 10:26 Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are the lazy to their employers.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 10:31 The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off.</p>	<p>Introduction The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 11:1 A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight.</p>	<p>What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work? A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 11:2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Prov. 11:3 The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 11:12-13 Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent. A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 11:24-26 Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want . . . The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Generous</p>
<p>Prov. 11:28 Those who trust in their riches will wither.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Prov. 12:11 Those who till their land will have plenty of food, but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 12:17-20 Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully. Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 12:18 Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 12:19 Truthful lips endure for ever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 12:22 Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 12:24 The hand of the diligent will rule, while the lazy will be put to forced labor.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 12:25 Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 13:5 The righteous hate falsehood, but the wicked <i>act</i> shamefully and disgracefully.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 13:8 Wealth is a ransom for a person's life, but the poor get no threats.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Prov. 14:16 The wise are cautious and turn away from evil.</p>	<p>Introduction</p>

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 14:21 Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 14:25 A truthful witness saves lives, but one who utters lies is a betrayer.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 14:31 Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 15:2 The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 15:3 The eyes of the Lord are in every place.	What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work?
Prov. 15:4 A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 15:18 Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 15:22 Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 16:1 The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.	A Wise Worker is Diligent The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue

Verses	Link to Section
Prov. 16:3 Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.	Conclusion
Prov. 16:8 Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 16:11 Honest balances and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 16:12 It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 16:13 Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves those who speak what is right.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 16:18-19 Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 16:27-28 Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 16:32 One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 17:4 An evildoer listens to wicked lips; and a liar gives heed to a mischievous tongue.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 17:5 Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 17:20 The crooked of mind do not prosper, and the perverse of tongue fall into calamity.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 17:28 Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 18:6-8 A fool's lips bring strife, and a fool's mouth invites a flogging . . . The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 18:9 One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal.	A Wise Worker is Diligent A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful
Prov. 18:11 The wealth of the rich is their strong city; in their imagination it is like a high wall.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 19:5 A false witness will not go unpunished, and a liar will not escape.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 19:11 Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is to their glory to overlook an offense.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue

Verses	Link to Section
Prov. 19:14 House and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 19:17 Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.	The Wise Worker is Generous
Prov. 19:21 The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 19:23 The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm.	Introduction
Prov. 20:10 Diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 20:13 Do not love sleep.	About the Book
Prov. 20:14 “Bad, Bad,” says the buyer, then goes away and boasts.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 20:17 Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterwards the mouth will be full of gravel.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 20:18 Plans are established by taking advice; wage war by following wise guidance.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 20:19 A gossip reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a babblers.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 20:23 Differing weights are an abomination to the Lord, and false scales are not good.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 21:4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the lamp of the wicked—are sin.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 21:5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 21:6 The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 21:13 If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 21:23 To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 21:30 No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 22:1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 22:6 (NASB) Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.	About the Book

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 22:8-9 Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 22:16 Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 22:22-23 Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 23:4 Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 23:10-11 Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 23:23 Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest
Prov. 24:17 Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 24:27 Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 24:28 Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips.	A Trustworthy Worker is Honest

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 24:30-34 I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person . . . A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 25:5 Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>
<p>Prov. 25:11-12 A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver; like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise rebuke to a listening ear.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 25:15 With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 25:18 Like a war club, a sword, or a sharp arrow is one who bears false witness against a neighbor.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 25:21-22 If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>
<p>Prov. 25:23 The north wind produces rain, and a backbiting tongue, angry looks.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 26:20-21 For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 26:24-25 An enemy dissembles in speaking while harboring deceit within; when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it, for there are seven abominations concealed within.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Prov. 26:28 A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 27:1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 27:23-27 Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds; for riches do not last forever, nor a crown for all generations . . . there will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and nourishment for your servant-girls.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 28:2 With an intelligent ruler there is lasting order.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 28:8 One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the poor.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>
<p>Prov. 28:11 The rich is wise in self-esteem, but an intelligent poor person sees through the pose.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Prov. 28:19 Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 28:22 The miser is in a hurry to get rich and does not know that loss is sure to come.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 28:23 Whoever rebukes a person will afterward find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue.	The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue
Prov. 28:27 Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse.	The Wise Worker is Generous
Prov. 29:4 By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 29:14 If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established forever.	The Wise Worker is Just
Prov. 29:23 A person's pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 29:24 To be a partner of a thief is to hate one's own life; one hears the victim's curse, but discloses nothing.	A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful
Prov. 30:7-9 Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the Lord?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.	The Wise Worker is Modest
Prov. 30:17 The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.	About the Book

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 31:3 Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.	The Valiant Woman
Prov. 31:10 A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.	The Valiant Woman A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 31:11 The heart of her husband trusts in her.	The Valiant Woman A Wise Worker is Trustworthy
Prov. 31:12, 28 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life . . . Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.	A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful
Prov. 31:13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 31:13-14 She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 31:14 She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.	A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 31:15 She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.	The Valiant Woman A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful A Wise Worker is Diligent

Verses

Link to Section

Prov. 31:16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 31:17 She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.	The Valiant Woman The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 31:18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.	A Wise Worker is Diligent
Prov. 31:19 She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.	The Wise Worker is Generous
Prov. 31:20 She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.	A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful The Wise Worker is Generous
Prov. 31:21-22 She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.	The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 31:23 Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.	The Valiant Woman The Wise Worker is Shrewd
Prov. 31:24 She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.	A Wise Worker is Diligent

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Prov. 31:25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Prov. 31:26 She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Prov. 31:27 She looks well to the ways of her household.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful</p>
<p>Prov. 31:30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.</p>	<p>What Do the Proverbs Have to Do with Work? The Valiant Woman</p>
<p>Prov. 31:31 Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Faithful</p>
<p><u>Verses from other books of the Bible</u></p>	
<p>Genesis 2:15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Trustworthy</p>
<p>Exodus 1:15-20 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live . . . So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>

Verses	Link to Section
<p>Exodus 20:16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Joshua 2:1 Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>1 Samuel 21:1-3 David came to Nob to the priest Ahimelech. Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” David said to the priest Ahimelech, “The king has charged me with a matter, and said to me, ‘No one must know anything of the matter about which I send you’ . . . Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.”</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>1 Chronicles 7:2 The sons of Tola: Uzzi, Rephaiah, Jeriel, Jahmai, Ibsam, and Shemuel, heads of their ancestral houses, namely of Tola, mighty warriors of their generations, their number in the days of David being twenty-two thousand six hundred.</p>	<p>The Valiant Woman</p>
<p>Matthew 6:11 Give us this day our daily bread.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Modest</p>
<p>Matthew 6:34 Do not worry about tomorrow.</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Matthew 10:16 Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.</p>	<p>Introduction</p>

Verses

Link to Section

<p>Matthew 25:14-30 For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability . . . “To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Luke 14:28-30 Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”</p>	<p>A Wise Worker is Diligent</p>
<p>Romans 1:29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>
<p>Romans 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker is Just</p>
<p>Ephesians 4:15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.</p>	<p>A Trustworthy Worker is Honest</p>
<p>Ephesians 4:26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.</p>	<p>The Wise Worker Guards the Tongue</p>

ENDNOTES

- [1] On the inseparable connection between wisdom and knowledge, see Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 76-87.

- [2] The NRSV translation “learning about” distorts the Hebrew *da’at* (root, *yada*) by missing its essentially experiential nature.
- [3] For an explanation of the feminine personification, see Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 83.
- [4] Richard J. Clifford, S.J., “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 3-4. For more about government service in a Christian perspective, see Robert Banks, “The Role of the Bible in Bureaucratic Decision-Making” in *Private Values and Public Policy: The Ethics of Decision-making in Government Administration* (Lancer Books, 1983), 35-40.
- [5] Roland Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 22, Proverbs*, (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 289.
- [6] Cf. Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, pp. 107-109.
- [7] See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 23ff.
- [8] See Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 31-37.
- [9] See Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, p. 528.
- [10] Al Wolters, “Proverbs XXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-critical Analysis,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 446-457.
- [11] “Wall Street and the Financial Crisis: Majority and Minority Staff Report” (Washington DC: United States Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations). Accessible on the Web at http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_file...isisReport.pdf
- [12] See M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, 2nd ed. (Touchstone, 1998).
- [13] “Vine Growing” at vinegrowing.com, accessed on Nov. 11, 2011. This link is no longer active, but an archived copy may be available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20111113045248/http://vinegrowing.com/>.
- [14] Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E.P. Seligman, “Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents,” *Psychological Science* 16:12 (2005), 939-944. Similar results have been reported by Mischel and Shoda (*Science*, 1989), Rosenbaum (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1986) and Bialer (*Journal of Personality*, 1961), among others.

- [15] Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition.
- [16] Roland Murphy, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 22, Proverbs* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 247. The LXX and the Vulgate adopt this reading, although the Masoretic does not.
- [17] See Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), for more on this topic, especially chapter 5, "Orchestrate the Conflict."