

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have called each of us to our home, our families, our places of work and our places of worship. May we honour You by respecting all with whom we share these blessings, and may we fulfil Your command to 'love one another'. Hear this our prayer, Lord God, and establish Your Kingdom in our midst for all to see. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire services

This week we will pray for fire services. In some nations, there are few fire services except in cities, but all over the world, people risk their lives in fire to save others; pray for them.

On-going prayers

- *Ask God to stir up leaders of industry to clean up their industries*
- *Give thanks to God for your health, and His power to heal*
- *Pray about the serious threat to world peace posed by N. Korea*

Meditation

Through the liberty of salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord,
We are set free to be the people we were made to be.

Through Him, we can forgive, over and over again;
So that nothing from our past can continue to hurt us.

Through Him, we are given true supernatural strength;
To achieve what might otherwise appear to be impossible.

Through Him, we can speak words of eternal truth;
So that others might find joy and peace and deliverance.

Through Him, we can discern the good from the evil,
To judge things rightly for ourselves and for our times.

Through Him, we are confident in the present and the future,
For we are secure in His hands, despite the troubles of the world.

Through Him, our death holds no more terror or fear,
For He has been ahead of us, to prepare us our way.

And this is our testimony of faith.

Bible Study - Proverbs 6:1-11

¹ *My child, if you are a guarantor for your neighbour,
or if you have struck a deal with a stranger*

² *you are ensnared by what you have said,
caught by your own words.*

³ *Do this quickly, my child, to extricate yourself,
for you have fallen into your neighbour's power.*

Go and be humble so that you can plead with your neighbour.

⁴ *Give yourself no time to sleep, nor let yourself rest;*

⁵ *save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter,*

like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

- ⁶ *Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.*
- ⁷ *Without a commander,
officer or ruler,*
- ⁸ *it prepares food in the summer,
and gathers supplies at harvest.*
- ⁹ *How long will you lie there, you lazybones?
When will you rouse yourself from your sleep?*
- ¹⁰ *A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,*
- ¹¹ *and poverty will come upon you like a thief,
and deprivation like an armed man.*

Review

There are two items of teaching within this passage, each of which are important for people of all ages, and all times and places. The first is about being in control of one's own resources to prevent being controlled by others (6:1-5), and the second is about paying due attention to work which must be done (6:6-11), using the very famous example of the working ant. There is a connection between these two, which is diligence in looking after one's own affairs. The whole point of this teaching is that it was intended to instil some elementary personal economics and work ethic in young people of ancient times, before they developed bad habits. Adults have always been concerned to teach young people their social and personal responsibilities, and it is interesting that in England at the moment, there is some discussion about the possibility of teaching children formally about lifestyle and citizenship issues. This advice would come under this category.

Right at the beginning in verse 1, we are warned against acting as guarantor for a neighbour. We might ask why we should avoid this. The point is that if we make deals with other people, then our own future becomes mixed up with theirs, and we may not be as free as we would like to do our own business. The advice goes further, we should not strike 'a deal with a stranger' (6:1), for the very same reasons. In the Hebrew of this passage, the two words for 'neighbour' and 'stranger' indicate those who are not part of an individual's circle of family. We tend to think of a neighbour as someone who lives next door to us who we know, but the picture here is of someone living in the same region, but not known to us with any intimacy. The passage goes on to declare that we become entrapped by such 'deals' and 'arrangements' (6:2) and should seek to get out of them as soon as possible.

What can we make of this advice? Today, we may think we can trust a friend for repayment of a loan, for example, but we do not really know what tomorrow will bring in terms of another person's ability to pay us back, and our own future will then depend upon what happens to others. What God seems to be saying is that if we are to be free to do His will, then we need to be free from obligations towards others for the future, as this text says, particularly in financial affairs. It is something each of us needs to consider very carefully, because most people find it hard to submit their financial affairs to the Lord; either because they have much or because they have little.

Verses 6 to 11 are very well known as advice about self motivation in work. It remains a powerful truth that if you want to get anywhere with something, then it will require work and self motivation. People respond to this in different ways, of course, but sloth and idleness are a short path to ruin, and this needs to be said even in the Bible, for it is true both

practically and spiritually. We find it relatively easy to read this passage and agree with its general sentiments in respect of achievement in work and employment, for example, but it is also a challenge to us in our relationship with God as well. Spiritual sloth is a disease of our times, and one that can be very hard to cure.

It is worth recalling that we are all called to be God's people for a purpose, and that purpose is the extension and growth of God's Kingdom. We do not go to church to satisfy our religious needs; such an attitude is rather like the 'sloth' of our passage; too many who are very content with their spiritual lives and their church fellowship fold their arms to rest and enjoy the peace they have found. But this will not help us walk with our Lord. We are our Lord's disciples because He has saved us, and we are called to follow Him on sometimes dangerous paths. We are also commissioned to be servants of the Gospel of salvation for the sake of others. It was, of course, those who were spiritually asleep who Jesus said would be surprised by a 'thief' in the night (Matt 24:43), at the time of His coming in Glory!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is the advice given in the first five verses of this passage helpful to you or unhelpful?
2. In what ways does the advice in this passage appear to conflict or agree with Jesus' teaching?
3. Is sloth a problem today, either in society or in the life of the church? How is this best dealt with?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The text we have read today is one that we need to apply carefully, because it will affect each of us in quite different ways. I suggest that the second half of the text is a timely reminder to each of us to be positively involved in the work of the Kingdom of God. Around us, there is too much evidence of spiritual sloth, and the consequences of this are to be seen in the apathy and slow death of some churches even today. May we not be guilty of such sloth!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *To what extent are your personal affairs, and perhaps your financial affairs, linked up with those of others? Is this wise? Pray about the warning found here in Scripture and seek God's guidance about how this might affect you.*
- *Pray about the subject of spiritual sloth in the life of the church. Repent if you feel there is something you need to confess to God, and seek His Holy Spirit, to help you move forward in faith.*

Final Prayer

Eternal and every loving God, You have been the help and refuge of Your people for generations. May we live in Your presence, love all that is good and true, and serve you in every part of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN