

## Labouring Together With God – Part 1

One of the hardest things for Christians to understand is the connection between God's grace and our actions. After the initial euphoria of being born again, the new believer soon starts to encounter this difficulty. He finds that he is straining to keep God's commandments and not succeeding. Otherwise, he finds he is being rigorously disciplined, but there seems to be little joy or life in his obedience.

Often, frustration and confusion set in. Where is the momentum that seemed to push one along without even thinking about it? The new Christian has been confronted with the need to understand cooperating with God's grace in his or her life. In fact, it is confusion over God's part in my Christian life versus my part in the Christian life that often leads believers to opposite dead ends.

The Christian life is a cooperative effort between man and God. Because this synergy is not something we automatically understand, there are two extremes which people go to.

The one extreme is to regard my obedience as irrelevant – this is the error of laziness. Here the believer thinks God's grace is so sufficient and sovereign, that my obedience is not even necessary. The lazy believer presumes upon the grace of God, using God's sovereignty as a cloak to be disobedient. He uses the excuse that adding works to grace will nullify grace and rob God of glory, so he shrinks back from his responsibility. He pleases himself by disobeying.

The other extreme is to regard God's grace as almost irrelevant and to regard my obedience as efficacious. This is the error of legalism. Here the believer thinks that God's grace is almost passive, that it is ultimately my obedience that carries the day. The legalist believer therefore depends upon his own willpower, his own discipline, his own wisdom, and makes up his own plans.

Such a person pays lip service to God's grace, but in the final analysis, he believes the dynamic in the Christian life is his own disciplined obedience. In truth, like the lazy believer, he pleases himself. He does this by seeming to obey but in fact seeking to control the Christian life with his own diligence and discipline. He is equally proud, as he refuses to submit even his discipline to the enabling grace of God.

The balance is to be a **Loving Co-Labourer**. This person recognises the Christian life is a love relationship with God. It revolves around working out what God is working in us and through us. Therefore, the labourer does not try to do things on his own initiative or strength, rather he waits for God and works out what God is doing. He is wholehearted in his obedience, but wholeheartedly dependent.

Let's take the time to look at each one. You'll probably find that you are actually a mixture of the extremes, for we have a remarkable ability to be inconsistent. As a general trend, you may find you lean one way or another. By seeing what the Bible says about such people, we can repent of these actions and attitudes and align our thinking and lives with God's pattern in the Word of God.

### Mr Laziness

We'll begin by looking at the lazy Christian. Sad to say, laziness is almost tolerated today as a weakness to be chuckled over, not a sin to be repented of. But the Bible has strong words regarding laziness and its end. Let's examine what Proverbs has to say about the lazy man.

#### 1. He wants change in his life, but not enough to obey.

*The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; But the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.*

**Proverbs 13:4**

The lazy Christian listens to messages and is convicted, but not enough to repent of specific words, thoughts and deeds. He wants change, and it frustrates him, but in the end he does nothing about it. He lives perpetually on the brink of a decision. “Almost persuaded” might be his motto.

He deceives himself into thinking that a desire to change is as good as change itself. He desires, but has nothing. He is always listening to messages, hoping that another author or speaker will be the one who jumpstarts him into a victorious Christian life. But in truth, his own disobedient laziness is what is short-circuiting spiritual desire in his life.

## **2. His desire for change makes him uneasy, but not busy.**

*The desire of the lazy man kills him, For his hands refuse to labour.*

**Proverbs 21:25**

It’s a terrible way to live – to be continually confronting oneself with what you want, while refusing to work hard enough to get it. It is the spiritual equivalent of dangling a carrot in front of a donkey, with the difference that at least the donkey will head for the carrot. The lazy Christian ruminates and meditates and commiserates over where he would want to be spiritually – but Proverbs pulls the covers off his heart by saying ‘his hands refuse to labour.’

His desire for change is in fact a smokescreen, a clever diversion tactic. It is the soft lies he whispers into his own ears. He soothes his conscience with the thought that his *desire* to be Christlike must count for almost as much as actually *being* Christlike. But all of this is a cleverly constructed disguise to remain disobedient under the cover of earnestly desiring to be obedient. It’s spiritual camouflage – keep telling yourself and others how much you *want* to do right, and it should hide the fact that you’re not *actually* doing right.

## **3. He wants a minimum of effort for everything he does, he always seek shortcuts.**

*The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl; It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth.*

**Proverbs 26:15**

Here is the pathetic nature of laziness. Even with food within his grasp, the lazy man is wearied by the effort to move his hand from the bowl to his mouth. The fact is, for a lazy person, even when the effort is minimal, he will seek to shirk it. Laziness is a continual march toward doing nothing while seeking to have everything. Do as little as possible to have as much as possible.

Sadly, that is very much the work ethic of the modern world. Cut corners, take shortcuts, come late, leave early, lie about your tax return, take unnecessary sick leave – basically you should have it all, and you should not be required to work for it. Much of the issue with crime in our country is not to do with poverty, unemployment or a lack of education. It’s to do with a sinful tendency in every human heart to feel entitled to things I have not worked for.

And this bleeds over into the Christian’s life. The lazy man thinks a minimum of effort exerted in the direction of God ought to bring a maximum of returns. He reads the One-Minute Devotional Bible, prays a hasty prayer in the car, says grace before his meals and pops his head in the door once a week at church. He feels frustrated and a little cheated that he does not feel like he is abounding in the love of the Lord, and that God seems far away. He’s somewhat annoyed that God should withhold spiritual mountain-top experiences from him – after all, didn’t he memorise John 3:16 last year?!

Like the man in Proverbs – what is actually happening is that he refuses to even eat the food in front of him. It's right there! God prepares great things for believers who will obey and seek Him.

*For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.*

**Deuteronomy 30:11-14**

But the lazy Christian will not even take that which is in his mouth and hear and apply it. He wants shortcuts, quick fixes, high-speed, broadband, microwave Christianity. Long seasons of prayer and meditation on the Word, seeking God's face in all of life, yielding to be His servant and ambassador, diligently seeking out sin and disobedience and replacing it with Christlikeness – this is not for the lazy man. It sounds too much like work, and after all, he doesn't have the time.

#### **4. He will start a spiritual commitment, but not finish it**

*The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, but diligence is man's precious possession.*

**Proverbs 12:27**

This is the ridiculous picture of a lazy man. There he is, seated on a log, his head down, panting heavily, the sweat pouring down his weary body. His bow and arrow are laid beside him, and next to where he has come to rest is the reward of his diligent hunting – a deer, slain by one of his arrows. Finally, he catches his breath, and you are ready to see him begin to divide up what will certainly make many meals.

But to your surprise, he looks at the deer with disdain, and then disgust, and then grabs his bow and arrows and strolls off. "Too much effort to bring this deer home", he reasons. I'll just have some fruit tonight." Unbelievable – you think – to expend all that energy to hunt a deer, and then to not roast it. But this is what we do again and again when we expend energy in beginning an endeavour and do not finish it.

The lazy Christian begins a commitment – to read through his Bible once a year, to seek the Lord's face every morning, to attend church more faithfully, to be involved in evangelism and discipleship – but soon, his commitment can only be described in the words God used to describe Israel's commitment: "...your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away" (**Hosea 6:4**).

#### **5. He thinks he is exempt from discomfort**

*The lazy man will not plough because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing.*

**Proverbs 20:4**

It's too cold, says the lazy man. I'll plough later, when it's warmer, and more sensible to go out ploughing. After all, we don't have to be fanatical about farming, do we? No sense in overdoing it and being a little too agriculturally-minded and of no earthly good. Let's plough when it's nicer outside. I'm sure we'll get more done then anyway, without cold and stiff limbs making it harder.

So reasons the lazy farmer – and the lazy Christian. Apparently discomfort and inconvenience are not to be tolerated in his walk with God. If it's raining, he can't go to church. If it's cold, he can't get up to pray and meditate. If obedience means sacrifice, he says no. If obedience means misunderstandings or loss, then he'll delay his obedience. And delayed obedience is disobedience. The lazy Christian thinks that we live in paradise already, and that self-denial, suffering and difficulty is for someone else, somewhere else.

## 6. He loves ease and particularly sleep

Along the same lines – he does not like hardship of any kind. This is reflected in his love of sleep. Sleep is the ultimate pleasure for the lazy man. It is enjoyable, requires no effort, it is warm and comfortable, and no one makes any demands on you – except maybe the one demanding that you wake up. But you can sleep on and on, and even dream of worlds and situations where you are in control and do not have to be accountable or responsible to any other.

Sleep is the garment that the lazy wishes he could wear all the time. The lazy man wishes he could be a cat – sleep for 16 hours a day – eat, groom yourself, be admired and petted by others, and go back to lying in the sun, tossing over for the best position.

*As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed.*

**Proverbs 26:14**

*Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest. How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep; so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.*

**Proverbs 6:6-11**

Solomon warns the lazy man that his excuse which he whispers to himself, “Just little more sleep, just a little more folding of the hands to sleep” will actually come to life. Poverty will come upon him in the same way – gradual increments of surrender, small concessions to the flesh again and again, until eventually it all strikes home one day with the force of an armed man – like a robber upon a traveller.

What does this have to do with the lazy Christian? Everything! Which Christian would not benefit from a little less sleep and little more meditation on God’s Word? Which Christian would not be further down the road for the Lord if they could say no to the flesh in the morning, and thus set the tone for the whole day – one of denying self to follow Christ and enjoy Him, rather than lesser things?

We tell ourselves our hectic schedules demand this much sleep, but the truth is – we are often carrying more than God wants us to, and sometimes, we are simply indulging the flesh. Ofttimes the average Christian’s way of relaxing after a hard day’s work is to watch TV into the late hours of the night, and then crash into bed, and then repeat the cycle of not being able to get up earlier.

The average person needs between 7 to 9 hours of sleep. The lazy man does nothing about seeing he is in bed early enough. Moreover, the lazy man makes himself more tired by sleeping longer than he should. It is no surprise that the New Testament describes the state of being spiritually sharp and alert as that of watchfulness, in contrast to sleep.

*And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.*

**Romans 13:11-12**

*Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming; in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning; lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!*

**Mark 13:35-37**

*Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."*

**Ephesians 5:14**

*Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

**Matthew 26:40-41**

Loving ease and sleep as a general rule of life stands in contrast to the kind of spiritual vigilance characterised by prayer, discernment and an observant spiritual eye. But this is the sad thing about the lazy man – his laziness makes life harder for him.

## **7. His own laziness makes life harder for him**

*The way of the lazy man is like a hedge of thorns, but the way of the upright is a highway.*

**Proverbs 15:19**

Someone has said, no one ultimately works as hard as the lazy man. He always has to cram before the exam, or work through the night to finish the assignment or presentation. His prolonged slothfulness toward study now means he must figure it all out before the exam – like trying to navigate through a hedge of thorns. His protracted messiness discourages him from getting started on cleaning. His continual breaking of appointments and late-coming makes it harder for him to see people and make progress.

And how true for the lazy Christian. His laziness in reading the Word of God catches up with him when it comes to a problem or a crisis in his life. Now he tries to take to heart various principles, which would have prevented the problem altogether. His laziness in obedience has left his marriage a mess, made his parenting a disaster, ruined his testimony at work, and caused such a trail of foolish decisions that he has to now work all the harder to undo the trouble he's caused with his protracted disobedience.

This is the deep irony of laziness. The lazy man thinks he is really smart – he is getting away with doing half of what everyone else is doing. He figures he has beaten the system, and is cruising. He attributes it to his own intelligence and streetwise sense that has allowed him to navigate the hardworking rat race of the all the others. But in truth, what is actually happening is a delay before he crashes. And then, to get anywhere near back to normality, he will have to work twice as hard as all the people he ridiculed.

The lazy man seeks ease, and ends up working extremely hard. But, if that is not enough, the lazy man is quite self-righteous.

## **8. He always has an excuse for his spiritual indifference**

*The lazy man says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!"*

**Proverbs 22:13**

Here's why he won't go to work: there's a lion in the streets! 'There's a possibility I'll get killed!' Here's why the lazy Christian will never commit to giving to missions – 'there's a petrol price increase coming, and I'll be stranded when I want to go to work.' Here's why he can't come to church Sunday evening – 'the drivers are

so dangerous at night – I might be slain.’ He’ll gladly drive those same streets at night for other reasons – such as to go to a movie or a restaurant, but Sunday night, apparently the danger level is high.

In short, he always has an excuse for his lack of commitment. It always has to do with his time, his family, his finances, his health, his security, his job, his studies – he can leave you quite speechless with his reasonable ramblings. But the bottom line is – he remains uncommitted to God, and committed to himself.

*The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.*

**Proverbs 26:16**

If you are going to sum up the lazy man – you can boil it down to this:

#### **9. He presumes upon God’s grace and sovereignty**

*I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction...*

**Proverbs 24:30-32**

The lazy man thinks that the laws of sowing and reaping do not apply equally to all men. He thinks he can obey less and still get more. He thinks God’s grace upon his life is something he can manipulate. He assumes God’s grace to him up to now will continue indefinitely in spite of his obedience. He acts as though God will obligingly continue to meet his needs, even when he is lazy.

He is like the farmer who Solomon describes. He obviously didn’t sow when he should have, or if he did – he didn’t sow in a diligent, consistent or thoughtful way. He presumes that previous harvests will mean future ones. He thinks that God will cause a crop to grow even where he hasn’t planted one. He thinks God’s grace will overwhelm and make up for his laziness.

The lazy man likes to think he is ‘laid back’, ‘mellow’ or ‘easy-going.’ Sometimes he may say he is ‘weak’ or ‘really tired.’ But if we examine his life, we will find he is disobedient. He refuses to obey God’s commands consistently and diligently. He rejects God’s ways of requiring obedience from us. He proudly considers himself exempt from discomfort, diligence or any form of disciplined, hard work. But God is clear what kind of fruit he will harvest.

- **He will be poor.**

*The lazy man will not plough because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing.*

**Proverbs 20:4**

He will not eat physically if he is lazy, and the same is true for the lazy Christian. He will not eat spiritually, he will not feast on Christ, his spiritual stomach will growl from the leanness in his soul.

- **He will be enslaved.**

*The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labour.*

**Proverbs 12:24**

He thinks he is controlling the situation. But in fact he is increasingly coming under bondage. He is coming under the control of his own desire for ease, sloth and sleep. He will find he is trapped in a world where the

smallest efforts seem monumental, and consistent work seems exhausting. As such, he will be sadly incapacitated to be effective in any realm, particularly the spiritual realm.

- **He will be continually frustrated.**

*The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands refuse to labour.*

**Proverbs 21:25**

He will long for something better but refuse to move in that direction. He is like man who is enslaved to a ball and chain. But upon closer inspection, you find that he is not actually held by the chain, he is gripping it tightly himself. If he chose to open his hand, he would be free. If the lazy Christian would repent of slothfulness and lusting after ease and shortcuts, he would be released to see many of his spiritual desires realised.

Clearly, laziness is not the way as far as the Christian life goes. Refusing to obey by presuming upon the grace of God does not glorify Him. But what about the other extreme – making it all about our obedience? We'll consider this in **Part 2** we continue to study **Labouring Together With God**.