

The Hand of the Diligent

Proverbs 12:24

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“The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute.” - Proverbs 12:24 (10:4; 13:4; 22:29).

One of Solomon’s concerns throughout Proverbs is the matter of “diligence”. The Hebrew word doesn’t have any special or unique meaning contrasted with our modern English word. The form here is what is called a “passive participle” meaning that it speaks to the verbal sense of being diligent because something outside of yourself has caused you to be so. It also implies an ongoing action which isn’t really much different from the English idea. In our world we are diligent largely because we are motivated to be so for some exterior reason: gain, family, advancement, approval, and the like.

Interestingly, it is translated as “gold” six times, our current rendering “diligent” five times, of a “decision” twice, and of what was known as a “threshing instrument” twice, something “sharp” once, and the multiple of that, of “sharp things” once, and even of a “wall” once. Notice that all of those renderings are of something that does its’ “job” faithfully and without any failing. Of course, a number of those uses speak to inanimate things or actions, but the idea translates well to the human experience.

Note that the use here is joined with a “hand”. When Solomon speaks, as he does here, of the “hand” of the diligent he is speaking of the agency of mind and heart in the doing of what is referred to. The “hand” of course is most often used to refer to the appendage at the end of the arm. It is what, many times is used to do what is the aim of the individual. Most kinds of work or other physical accomplished by the person in view.

In this use it speaks generally to all kinds of things that a person sets themselves to. Combined with the idea “diligence” already address it speaks of Solomon’s concern that a person not only do a given thing, but that he/she do it with a real aim to seeing it done, rightly and “sharply”, the idea of doing what is needful to getting it finished.

That “diligence of hand” will yield a reward according to the Prophet. “Rule” is used quite a number of times in the OT to refer to that which a King or Emperor does over his or her (in the case of Cleopatra whom we see coming visit Solomon later) kingdom. In view of our perspective here we must note that it is evident that Solomon is NOT speaking of ruling a Kingdom. The word speaks of having superiority or the ability to exercise authority or ability over whatever is in view. Just as an example, we can think of a work of skill that is seeking to accomplish a project. Solomon’s point is that “diligence of hand” will get that job finished in short order, it will give you “rule” over that project. It is not that it will make you an expert by any means, just that, without “diligence of hand” or good and solid effort, the work will take longer than if it is applied.

One last thing to consider is that “diligence of hand” should be viewed, also, as a godly quality. It is a matter that God has seen fit to cite in His Word as a thing that all believers ought to pursue.

Note that the first and second phrases are divided or joined by what is called a “contrastive” conjunction. It is a form of language that sets one phrase against or in contrast to another.

²⁴ *The hand of the diligent will rule,
But the lazy man will be put to forced labor. (Proverbs 12:24)*

The second or contrasting phrase actually does a very good job of illuminating for us the meaning of the first phrase. That spoke of the need to and benefit of being “diligent” in our pursuit of what we set our “hands” to doing. In contrast to that Solomon tells us that the “lazy” man, or person, will see very negative results.

“Lazy” speaks of being slack, loose, or negligent either in a single activity or as the habit of ones’ life. It can even speak of “deception” with the idea of getting out of doing something but reaping the benefit of it. By the way... the word “man” is one of those “words” in English that is actually a part of the word that it follows. That makes it very general in the sense that it applies to anyone (or thing) to which is used.

“Put to” is one of the very normal expressions of the following verbs. “Forced Labor”. This is a verb that can be used of pretty much anything from slavery, to prison work, to conscription into to military. The “put to” part of the phrase is a “supplied” part of the idea. The entire second phrase here can really be seen to suggesting the idea that, if one is not “diligent” as they ought to be and as God has told them to be in His Word; it pretty much like they have chosen to have to work harder and in a more “conscripted” kind of sense.

So, by way of summarizing our interpretation - “The hand of the diligent and the slothful (hand)” represent severally the diligent and slothful man. The first becomes rich and powerful, comparatively so at least; the second fails in carrying out his desires, and remains or sinks into a state of servitude, while his energetic neighbor rises far above his station, even to be the valued associate of great men, ay, of kings.

As always, there are some illustrations for this we can look to:

- Of individuals (as of nations) this proverb is surely seen to be true.
- Jeroboam’s first step on the ladder of promotion was through Solomon taking notice of his industry, and on that account making him a ruler (1 Kings 11:28).
- The energy of Saul and Jonathan is commemorated by David, and compared to that of the eagle and the lion (2 Sam. 1:23).
- Pharaoh chose out “men of activity” from among the Israelites to be preferred above their fellows (Gen. 47:6).

- The faithful servant in the parable becomes a “ruler over many things,” while the “slothful” is deprived even of that which he had, and pays tribute to his brother.

We also want to think by way of application before we are finished. To wish to rise in the world, by lawful means, is an honorable ambition, approved by Holy Scripture. Else why such incentives to industry as those here and elsewhere set before us? It is not, indeed, given to many to ascend out of their sphere, but all may hope to rise within it, and ought to try. For diligence is not a moral virtue separate from religion, but a component part of it. Our blessed Lord pursued His glorious avocation upon earth regardless of rest, indifferent to meat and drink. His Apostle charges Christians to be “not slothful in business,” and severely condemns idleness. God has affixed conditions to success in any calling, and one of the first of these is industry.

This is more to be relied on than brilliancy of parts, and often supplies their place. Doubtless he who has both combined with character, will rise the highest, and may even become a favorite at court and stand before kings, to whom dispatch and energy are most acceptable. But without soaring so high, I may count upon the reward attached to exact, conscientious, persevering discharge of duty in whatsoever my hand finds to do. I shall rise, win influence, respect, independence, it may be power. And if this be so in worldly matters, not less is it in spiritual. Through indolent acquiescence and slothful remissness I may easily become a slave to sin. But in proportion to the energies of the spiritual life will be my nearness to the throne of God. And oh, what happiness (far beyond that of Solomon’s servants), to stand continually before the King of kings, and hear His wisdom (1 Kings 10:8)!