

**Eccl. 10:16-11:6, Diligence and Sloth**  
**July 8, 1988**  
**H. Van Dyke Parunak**

**A. Introductory Overview**

1. After warning against expecting too much from wisdom and labor in 8:16-9:12, Qohelet reject nihilism by showing the true value both of wisdom (9:13-10:15) and of labor (10:16-11:6, today).
2. Today's section has two parts:
  - a) The consequences of sloth (why not not work);
  - b) Exhortation to diligence (why work).

**B. The Consequences of Sloth, 10:16-20**

Focuses on sloth where it is most likely to happen and most visible, among those of high station. They are the ones who have the resources to indulge a slothful spirit.

1. The two poles, 10:16,17  
These verses offer two contrasts that exemplify the slothful attitude.
  - a) King is child/son of nobles  
"Child" here has sense of "servant," and thus contrasts with "son of nobles."
    - 1) A servant has no independent agenda, but does only what he is told, and if he is king, no one tells him to do anything. Thus he does nothing!
    - 2) One bred for the throne has (or ought to have) a sense of mission, a policy to pursue.
  - b) Princes eat in morning/in due season.
    - 1) In the first case, they feast all day long, and are too sluggish to do any work. They eat "for drunkenness," lit. "in drunkenness," in a state of perpetual inebriation, never recovering their sobriety.
    - 2) In the second case, they eat at the appropriate time, "in strength," that is, in a state of self-control.
  - c) Illustration: Visited Heidelberg Castle with Steve and Teri Mayhew; saw a wine keg that holds 234K quarts, nearly 60K gallons. 23 feet high and 28 long; needed 130 oak trunks to build. Wine was piped directly to the dining halls, which consumed 2100 quarts a day. Prominent figure: the dwarf Perkeo, court jester, who drank 16 quarts of wine a day, and reputedly died of a glass of water that someone gave him as a joke. This is a common mode of life in dissolute courts. Qohelet says, "Woe to the land whose rulers live this way."
2. The characteristics of sloth.  
Now we see the practical consequences of such rule.
  - a) Practical things decay

- 1) Qohelet reminds us that physical things decay. Our old Volvo was always needing a new muffler or a new transmission. The Nelson's garage floor; the Fleming's sump pump; our roof a few years ago.
  - 2) As homeowners, we know that if we neglect such problems, eventually the entire building will fall down.
  - 3) On a larger scale, if the rulers are negligent, the "house of state," the affairs of the entire country, will fall into disrepair. The house in this verse is emblematic of the country.
- b) Life becomes focussed on the trivial.
- 1) Not "is made for," but "they make," referring to the slothful rulers.
  - 2) These are the standards of their life: gluttony, drunkenness, and an attitude of solving all problems by throwing money at them, instead of exerting oneself to find and execute a proper answer.
  - 3) NB: Qohelet recognizes the value of food and drink, when it is seen as coming from the hand of God. Here, he recognizes how these blessings are wrong when they become an end in themselves and dominate one's life.
3. How not to respond to sloth in high places.
- a) Pragmatic advice: if you want to keep out of trouble, don't criticize those in power. They'll find out, and you'll suffer for it.
  - b) Seems contrary to our democratic ideals, which make reform a public duty. But remember:
    - 1) This is written under totalitarian rule; no provision for democratic reform.
    - 2) Even today, we must weigh the cost when we set out to reform. Are we willing to sacrifice "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honors" as the signers of the Declaration of Independence were? Qohelet's wisdom is still good advice.
    - 3) Our priority as Christians, whose citizenship is above, is to represent Christ to others. Be careful lest by taking sides too strongly in political matters, you alienate someone whom you might have led to Christ.

#### C. **Exhortation to Diligence, 11:1-6**

Now we turn from the examples against sloth to a positive

exhortation to diligence in our affairs. Chiastic, with exhortations on either side of the reason. Both exhortations urge the same two qualities: initiative and diversification.

1. First exhortation, 11:1-2.

These verses are usually understood to recommend charity, but in line with the context, I take them to exhort diligence in business. Two qualities recommended, in view of the uncertainty of the world.

a) Initiative

- 1) For "cast" read "send."
- 2) "Bread upon the waters:" Ezek. 27:17, the land of Israel traded in agricultural goods.
- 3) "After many days:" 1 Kings 10:22, took three years to see results.
- 4) The point: don't sit on your hands. Take reasonable business chances. Trust in God does not mean not being aggressive in business affairs.

b) Diversification

- 1) "Give a portion to seven..." can also be rendered, "Divide a portion into seven parts...." We would say, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." Urges us not to be a one-crop farm. Have more than one way to make a living, so that if one fails, you can fall back on the other.
- 2) Reason: can't tell what circumstances may bring. An enterprise that is profitable one day may produce nothing the next. E.g., how would you be doing right now if you were an umbrella manufacturer?

2. Reason

The reason for urging initiative and diversity is the uncertainty of our world. Here he sums up what has gone before w.r.t. man's ignorance and impotence and God's sovereign control of all things.

a) 11:3, "Que sera, sera." Whatever happens, happens. We can't control it or even predict it. This verse exemplifies the last clause of 11:2. NB: Even today, weather is the thing people most want to predict, and yet the least predictable. Butterfly effect.

b) 11:4, Don't be paralyzed with indecision.

- 1) Does not condemn reasonable rules of thumb.
  - a> The Lord condemns the Pharisees for not knowing the "signs of the times," Matt. 16:3.
  - b> Lk. 21:28,31. But cf. Matt. 23:36, no one knows the exact day or hour.
- 2) Cf. Prov. 20:4; 22:13. Does condemn always waiting one more

day for the perfect conditions. They will never come.

- c) 11:5, ultimately, all is in the hand of God, thus inaccessible to us.
  - 1) "Spirit" = "wind." This verse may lie behind John 3, wind/spirit/birth imagery.
  - 2) "God who maketh all," contrast 10:19, people who trusted in money to answer all their problems.

3. Second exhortation, 11:6

Same two qualities of initiative and diversification that were set forth in the beginning of the chapter.

- a) Put in a full day's work ("in the morning ... to the evening"). Corresponds to 11:1, initiative. Compare:
  - 1) Ps. 104:23, evening set as the end of man's work.
  - 2) Prov. 31:15-18 commends an early start and a full day.
  - 3) But in doing so, we are not to displace God's intended blessings, Ps. 127:2 ("sit down late" = to eat). It is "eating the bread of sorrows" that makes this whole complex "vain." You know that you are getting up too early and staying up too late, when you no longer enjoy the simple domestic pleasures that God intends to be our portion in this life!
- b) This lets one explore all the opportunities, cf. 11:2, diversification, because you don't know which will be the best.

D. **Summary**

We are to guard against two errors: feverish toil that becomes an end in itself, and slothful idleness. The first denies the sovereignty of God and seeks to control the world ourselves; the second rebels against God's law that we are to eat our bread by the sweat of our brow. What we need is diligent labor carried out trusting in God.

"Work, for the Night is Coming." 410