

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE



8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



PROVERBS VOL.2

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matthiasmedia

Living the Good Life

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. Introduction

In this second volume, we will approach Proverbs topically. While these studies can stand on their own, we hope you have worked through *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Proverbs volume 1), which gives both the framework and the rationale for this topical exploration of Proverbs. By way of reminder, these were the studies in volume 1:

1. The purpose of Proverbs
2. Madam Folly and Lady Wisdom
3. Wisdom from the world?
4. The fear of the LORD
5. Does Proverbs promise too much?
6. Wisdom beyond Proverbs
7. How to get wisdom

We pray that as you get a taste of just a few of the many areas of life dealt with in Proverbs, it will whet your appetite as well as give you an approach that will allow you to look at other areas of life that Proverbs addresses. More importantly, we pray that you will experience the satisfaction of *living the good life* in the fear of the LORD.

2. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

3. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

4. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.

- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

5. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.
- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they’d like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don’t work through the study in advance, it’s extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular,

the leader will need to select which of the ‘Implications’ to focus on.

- We haven’t included an ‘answer guide’ to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

6. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

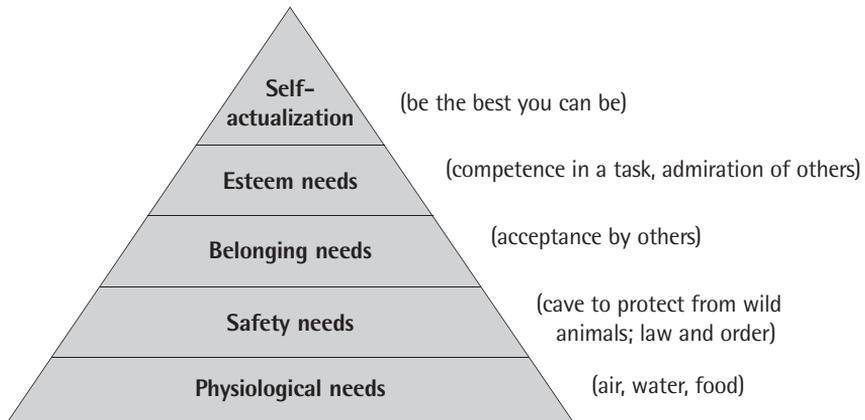
» STUDY 1

WORK AND CAREER

Maslow's triangle

ABRAM MASLOW (1908-1970) was a psychologist who sought to understand what motivated people to do things. He suggested that we have a hierarchy of needs, summarized in the now famous 'Maslow's triangle' (see below). We need our basic low-level needs fulfilled

first (air, water, food), then we move upwards to seek the satisfaction of higher needs. At the top of the triangle is the need for 'self-actualization': the "desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming".¹



1. In the light of the above:

- Have you ever seen a job advertisement for a professional or semi-professional role? They almost always describe the job in ways that appeal strongly to the upper levels of Maslow's triangle: self-actualization and esteem needs. Why do you think this is?

- The wisdom of the modern world encourages us to have a 'career', not just a 'job'. What is the difference between the two?

God's wisdom on work and career

BEFORE WE EXPLORE GOD'S WISDOM in Proverbs on work and career, here are two preliminary reminders concerning this topical approach. The first is that (as we saw in volume 1 of these studies) Proverbs is not just a collection of random clever observations, but reflects the wisdom that is 'hardwired' into our world by the God who made it. This is why acknowledging God and fearing him is the beginning of all true wisdom.

Secondly, like all the Old Testament, this wisdom comes as part of Yahweh's revelation to his covenant people Israel, and looks forward to the fulfilment of

God's promises in Jesus. So as we seek to apply these proverbial sayings to ourselves (after the coming of Jesus), we will need to link them not only with other parts of Proverbs (where possible), but also to other relevant sections of the Old and New Testament—so that in this ever-widening context we might live wisely in the fear of the LORD.

With that in mind, let's consider in turn the questions 'Why work?' and 'How should we work?' before drawing some hopefully wise conclusions on work and career.

Why work?

2. What *motivations* and *reasons* are given for work in Proverbs?

- Consider Proverbs 10:15, 11:26, 16:26, 19:24, 20:13, 21:20, 21:25, 27:23-24 and 30:7-8, and summarize your findings below.

- Read Proverbs 31:13-27. Why does the wife and mother work?

3. How do these reasons compare with:

- the reasons for work given in the creation account (Gen 2:5-8, 15-16)?

- the reasons or motivations Paul gives for work (2 Thess 3:6-12; Eph 4:28; 1 Thess 4:11-12)?

Work and society

If you have time, pause for a few minutes and talk further about how our work contributes to the good of those around us:

- "A garbage collector does more for the health of the community than a cosmetic plastic surgeon." Do you agree? Why/why not?
- What other comparisons can you make between different jobs regarding their contribution to society? Is how much a job pays a good indicator of how much it promotes the good of others and society in general?

GIVEN THAT WISDOM IS hardwired into the LORD's creation, it should not surprise us that Proverbs echoes the creation account in explaining why we should work. Just as Adam was to serve by working the ground through cultivating fruit for food, so our work is to **serve society** by providing goods and services that sustain not only ourselves but others, promoting the good of society. That's why we are told, "The people curse him who holds back grain [presumably for his own gain], but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it" (Prov 11:26). We work to provide food for ourselves and our families, and to have something to share with those in need. Some wealth beyond daily necessities enables us to have a degree of security and safety (10:15, 21:20, 31:21, 31:25).

But what about 'being the best _____ that I can be'? (Fill in your desired profession/field.) What about the drive to succeed, and to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment (the upper levels of Maslow's triangle)? None of this gets much of a mention in what the Bible says about work. Work is about providing for ourselves and for others, not trying to be a 'somebody'. As Proverbs 12:9 aptly puts it, "Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread".

God's wisdom is that work is about fulfilling the lower levels of Maslow's triangle, not the higher ones. If I seek my identity and self-actualization through my career, and my career takes a dive, then it's not just my job that has failed. *I have failed.*

In God's wisdom, our identity is not found in our work but in Christ—in being a new creation, in being his child (2 Cor 5:17). Indeed, our aspiration is to live quietly, to mind our own affairs and to work with our hands (1 Thess 4:11). This is a far cry from seeking the approval and accolades of others by pursuing our careers. Even the noble wife of Proverbs 31 is not seeking to be the superwoman of the 80s and 90s who can keep up with the best of her male colleagues; nor is she trying to 'find herself'. Her industriousness is for the sake of providing food, clothing and safety for her family and for the needy.

Neither Proverbs nor the rest of the Bible encourage us to have careers. All we need to do is work.

How should we work?

“Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise”. So begins the famous proverb on being diligent in work (Prov 6:6–11). Because God’s wisdom is built into his creation, we can gain wisdom on how to work even by looking at ants.

4. Consider these proverbs on **diligence** in work: 10:4–5, 12:14, 12:24, 13:4, 18:9, 20:4, 22:13, 24:30–34, 26:14–16.

- What are the excuses of the sluggard? What are the consequences?

- How are we to be diligent? What are the benefits?

Besides diligence, the LORD desires honesty and integrity at work.

5. Read Proverbs 10:9, 10:16, 11:18, 15:6, 20:17 and 29:27. Contrast the consequences of integrity versus wickedness in the sphere of work.

More on diligence

If you have time, look up and discuss these other proverbs about diligence. Are they still true today beyond their original agricultural setting? What has or hasn’t changed?

- 24:27

- 14:4, 27:23–24

- 12:11, 13:11, 28:19

- 22:7, 22:26–27

- 15:22, 16:3, 19:21, 21:5, 27:1

- 22:29

- 10:26, 25:19, 26:6, 26:10

-
10. Read Ephesians 4:28 and 6:5-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and Titus 2:9-10. How do these New Testament passages echo the wisdom of Proverbs regarding the *how* of work? Are there any differences in motivation or emphasis?

Work and career

I ONCE MET A CHRISTIAN man who was CEO of five companies. After hearing the radical wisdom from the Scriptures on work and career, he commented, “I have been living my life so far according to the motto, ‘Seek to be *successful at work*, and faithful as a Christian’. Are you saying that instead I should seek to be *successful as a Christian*, and faithful at work?”

What a beautiful way of putting it! This is quite a paradigm shift for we who are so easily fooled by the world’s perspective. The world encourages us to think, “I *am* my work”, rather than regarding work as being a good and important activity we do to put food on the table and to serve society. Faithfulness—in diligence and in integrity—is what God wants for us in work—not the success, recognition nor self-actualization that the world yearns for. This is the wisdom of God that leads to success in life in God’s eyes.

Career

Did you know that ‘career’ is also a *verb* in the dictionary? “The car went *careering* down the mountain and over the cliff.” The desire for excellence in our careers can lead many a Christian to *career* off track and make a mess of their Christian lives. Moreover, even the slave (which is hardly a high-status job) can adorn the gospel through the integrity of *how* he works (Titus 2:9-10). Very often, rhetoric about ‘needing to excel in my field in order to glorify God and draw people into the kingdom’ is a Christian attempt to ‘sanctify’ careerism.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- "*How* we work is far more important to God than *what* work we do."
 - Do you think this is true? Why/why not?

- What wisdom does this give us when we are looking for guidance as to which job we should work in?

- Do you have any experience of employers playing on people's desire for significance in order to get them to work harder? How should a Christian respond?

-
- How do you think Christians sometimes 'sanctify' careerism?

- What have you been encouraged or challenged about in terms of your attitudes, patterns and practices at work or study?

» Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for the work and food/shelter he has given us. Thank him for revealing to us the right and therefore wise way to view work.
- Pray that your wisdom at work will show that you are different and will make the gospel attractive to your non-Christian peers, adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour.

Endnote

1. AH Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation', in PL Harriman, *Twentieth Century Psychology: Recent developments in Psychology*, The Philosophical Library, New York, 1946, p. 34.