

## **Introduction**

Normally I preach right on through a book of the Bible one passage at a time. But in the case of longer books, I think it is good from time to time to pause and go elsewhere in the Bible and then return. So I am going to put Matthew on pause for a few weeks. I have told a few of you that I am designating January as Pastor's Prerogative. There are some things on my heart that the Lord has been stressing to me over the last year and I am going to be sharing them with you over the next several weeks. Then we will return to Matthew where we left off at chapter 10.

This morning I want to exhort you here at the beginning of a new year with the importance of being intentional in your life. By intentional I mean being driven in what you do by purpose and by goals and by effort. Clearly the Apostle Paul was intentional in his life. To the Philippians he wrote, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul was driven by good intention. And every follower of Christ needs to follow his example. It is impossible to be successful in living as a follower of Christ without having the same mind as he did and being driven by purpose. We are going to be all over the scripture this morning, but we will start in Proverbs with the example of the ant.

[Read Text; Pray]

Salvation is a work of God. It started in eternity past when he determined to choose unto himself specific people out from among an entire race of lost and justly condemned humanity. After the fall, God worked to demonstrate to humanity its sin through the law. He prepared the way for a savior through a chosen people. In the fullness of time he sent his own Son, to become the God-man to fulfill the requirements of righteousness by living in full compliance with God's law and dying the death deserved by the chosen sinners. In the course of time, God causes humans to be born from above out of which birth comes faith in Jesus Christ as the sufficient savior. It is a salvation not of human works or effort but completely resting on the work of Christ. But this faith is a faith unto good works. Salvation is by grace

alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. But when one receives this gift of salvation, it is time to work. No time for coasting, it is time to get busy. God is at work in and through his people, and for that very reason, they should exert themselves to the highest level possible. God's people are called to holiness in life, and that holiness will not come through inactivity or complacency. Faith is active not passive, and holiness will not come through letting go. Christians, we need to go to the ant.

## **I. A Parable About Purpose.**

The sixth verse of the sixth chapter of Proverbs addresses a sluggard. A sluggard is a person who is sluggish, slow, lazy. A sluggard does not want to work, exert himself. He will be satisfied with any excuse to be sedentary. The Bible does not praise a sluggard. Rather it warns of the dangers inevitable to those who resist exertion. In this section the writer of Proverbs calls out to the sluggard to become wise by considering the ways of the ant. And what is the sluggard to learn?

A. First, the sluggard should learn from the ant that being industrious, being diligent, being purposeful, being intentional is fundamental to being alive. What the ant does, she does without having any chief, officer, or ruler. Nobody has to tell her to do this. No one compels her to do it. She just knows she needs to and so she does.

In laziness the sluggard is acting in defiance to what he should know. It does not take rocket science to realize that laziness is counter-productive. Even an ant knows that. So an ant diligently works without having to be told to do so. It is just in her DNA to work, to be diligent, to work to good purpose.

B. Second, the sluggard should learn what it means to be intentional. There are two parts here. First, being intentional means being driven by purpose. The ant is driven by a goal. She does what she does now because of what the future holds. Now is summer; now is harvest. When winter comes she will be in need. So she works hard now. There is a plan and purpose. There is a drive to be prepared.

Second, being intentional means being industrious. She prepares her bread and gathers her food. It is work. This is what consumes her existence. She is putting forth effort in accord with the plan.

What a contrast with the sluggard! The sluggard lays around and sleeps. There is no sense of purpose, no direction, and no effort. The sluggard is wrapped in the momentary desire of the flesh to indulge in relaxation. And the sluggard minimizes his laziness. "Just a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest." Is that not how every sinner treats his sin? It is just a little sin. It is not that bad. "I am only human after all." Any excuse will do. But that is not the ant. There is no excuse with the ant. Only diligence.

C. Third, the sluggard should learn the consequences of being sluggardly. It seems to the sluggard like just a little bit of laziness, but little by little it becomes big. A path is walked one step at a time. A carving is completed one cut of the knife at a time. The exponential increase is more pronounced when we are giving in to something we enjoy. The saying goes that "time flies when you are having fun." It is quite different when you are working or laboring. When you are laboring the time passes slowly. You look at the clock again and again. Quitting time cannot come quickly enough. But when you are indulging the flesh, the time flees away. Even so the sluggard indulges the flesh in the pleasures of inactivity and before he realizes it the day is gone. The results are catastrophic. They are sudden and overpowering. They come like a robber and like a an armed man. A robber comes when you do not expect him. He comes suddenly. An armed man comes with the force of his weapon and overpowers you. Either way the result is lack, is poverty. You don't have what you need. You fail to produce. You are victimized by your own laziness. It hits you before you know it and it strikes you with inevitable loss. With consequences so certain and so unavoidable, who would want to risk such an outcome? And all you need to do to avoid this kind of result is to get up, get moving, get busy, supply your resolve with determination. Be ant-like.

This is a parable for all of life for everyone in life. But it has particular application to our lives spiritually.

## **II. People with Purpose**

It is helpful for us to take a look at a few people in the Bible who exemplify the ant and who defy the example of the sluggard. These are people whose lives bore much fruit. And they are people who were driven by purpose.

A. First, let us look to Daniel. Earlier this morning we read from Daniel chapter 1. Here we learn that Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar, instructed his head eunuch to capture some of the cream of the youthful crop in Israel and bring them to Babylon to be schooled in the Chaldean language and literature in order to be groomed for serving in the king's palace. Among those brought to Babylon was Daniel. Now among the privileges to be enjoyed by the Israelite youths was a diet consisting of food and wine portions from the king's table. Undoubtedly quite tempting, but Daniel knew that consuming that food went against God's instruction. So Daniel made a decision. He made a resolution. Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or wine. Daniel purposed in his heart he would not defile himself in this way. And it was out of that purpose that he acted. He purposed; he resolved; and out of that purpose he made an appeal to the chief eunuch. His obedience to God began with resolve, with purpose, with determination, and it manifested itself in action.

B. The Apostle Paul is a second example of exertion which is driven by purpose. He earnestly wanted to attain to the resurrection from the dead. He wanted to be faithful to the end. He wanted to experience the power of Christ in his life and be conformed to the person of Christ. This was his goal. This was his pursuit. This was his resolve. So what did he do? He did not let up. He went after it with purpose and determination. He went after it like Clemson went after Alabama on Monday night. There was no let up. There was no snoozing, no folding of the hands to rest. Here is what Paul said to the Philippians in chapter 3. "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own . . . One thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

C. The most important person with purpose is Jesus. Jesus came with purpose. In John 6:38-40 Jesus declares, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." On another occasion Jesus declared that he "came to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10) Jesus came with the resolve not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And this he did. He understood the will of his Father; he resolved to do the will of his Father; and at last, he exerted himself to do the will of his Father. You do the Father's will by resolving and then following through with it. And praise God for Jesus' resolve and then his follow through. For going to the cross to the grave and then rising from the dead. This is how he did not lose anything of what was given him by the Father and how he will raise up every believer in him on the last day.

And in each of these examples we see ants. We see diligent men driven by resolution to complete their purpose. We see resolve, diligence, determination, and accomplishment. They are examples to us of how every Christian ought to live and pursue holiness. But we may still be asking how does this come about in the life of a Christian? How do we look at the ant gathering its food and apply that to our pursuit of godly character? Well, I want to show you.

### **III. Provision for Purpose**

A. God has supplied what we need to pursue godliness and holiness. In his second epistle, Peter tells his readers that God, by "His divine power, has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious promises so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Now the divine nature is holiness and godliness. So what Peter is doing here is explaining HOW we become holy in life as Christians. And it, for one thing, is through God's promise. Ultimately our growth in grace is the work of God. He works according to his promises which give us assurance. He

produces fruit. God brings it about that we seek him, that we trust him, and that we obey him.

B. And these provisions come through two important means. First, we must know God. "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, THROUGH THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM." We must know him and we must know him better. How do you know God? Read His book. Study his character. You worship him. You carry with you each day a sense of his presence with you and interpret life with him as you go. Knowing him is an indispensable part of standing firm in him. Daniel 11:32 says, "The people who know their God will stand firm and take action."

But not only must we know God, we also must lay hold of his promises. Peter says it is through His precious and very great promises that you become partakers of the divine nature. God will do it. We must know it and believe it. His promises assure us. Paul exhibited this assurance to the Philippians (1:6) when he said, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." So we experience provision for the purpose of spiritual development as we lay hold of the promises of God and are assured he WILL do it. So there are provisions for purpose.

#### **IV. Pursuing the Purpose.**

A. Knowing God's promise and being sure that God will do something never means that we should sit down and do nothing. Never. Knowing God's promise and being sure that God will do something never means that we should sit down and do nothing. In fact the fact that God is at work is reason not to do nothing but to do something. In fact it is the reason we should pour out ourselves and all the energy we have. Athletes speak of leaving it all on the field or on the court. What they mean is giving their all so that when the game is over they have nothing left to give. That is what I am talking about. Because God is at work I should leave it all on life's field.

B. Peter again makes this point. Having just said that God is the one at work and God has made these precious promises, he then says, "FOR THIS VERY REASON, for the very reason that God is at work and has made

precious promises, for this very reason, MAKE EVERY EFFORT." It might be compared to an inner assurance given to the ant that God will provide, but the ant takes that assurance and works all the more diligently. Jesus does assure us that birds of the air are important to the Father. And Jesus bluntly states that our "heavenly Father feeds them." But have you ever seen God just drop a worm in front of a lazy bird? No, God feeds the birds by impelling them to go out and search for food, to peck the ground, and seize the worm. And God works obedience in his people not through persuading them to be passive and close their eyes to rest, to "let go and let God." No, God works in and through the effort Christians exert.

Even the idea of growth is something to be pursued. Growth is given by God. Truly it is God who gives the increase, but the last exhortation Peter gives in 2 Peter is the exhortation to grow. He says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Growth itself is something to be pursued, to be reached for, to strive for.

Now, please hear me. I am not talking about justification. I am not talking about how a person receives salvation. I am talking about how the person who HAS RECEIVED SALVATION is to go about life, is to pursue godliness and holiness. Because of God's precious and very great promises, we should be all the more hardworking, all the more determined, all the more relentless in our pursuit. The New Testament bears this out.

Put off the old man/Put on the new man (Ephesians 4)

Hebrews 12:14 says, "Strive for . . . holiness."

Romans 8:13 says, "by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body."

Colossians 3:5 says, "Put to death what is earthly in you."

Paul tells Timothy in 1 Tim 4:7, "Train yourself for godliness."

And that is exactly what Paul did. 1 Corinthians 9:27 is where he declares, "I discipline my body and keep it under control."

Hebrews 12:1 exhorts us to "RUN with patient endurance the race that is set before us."

The call of the scripture is for effort to be put forth. The demand is for resolve and determination to be complimented by exertion and endurance and hard work.

C. These very strong exhortations point out that the way toward holiness is not through passivity or laziness. Some have taught that you grow most when you let go. Some have hoped to grow though they do nothing more than ask for growth. Many wonder why they continue to be defeated again and again by a given sin while they have not taken any meaningful action against it. They recognized the sin and confessed the sin but have not repented of the sin. Repentance involves resolve not to commit that again and therefore necessitates resolve and determination and effort. This is exactly what Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If you want to defeat sin, you must act. If you want to pursue righteousness, you must act. You must DO something. It starts with faith and an assurance that God is at work, but it does not stop there. Peter says that to our faith, we must add certain things. Faith alone receives the gift of eternal life. But the pursuit of holiness involves faith plus—faith plus resolve, faith plus determination, faith plus toil because it is God who is at work within you.

So I hope you get the point. I am urging each of you not just because we stand at the beginning of a new year, but because this is the essence of following Christ, to resolve afresh to put forth effort in your life, to lay it all on the line, to leave it all on the field of spiritual battle, to lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily besets and run with endurance, looking to Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

The grind is what they call it. It is the everyday, behind-the-scenes exertion in training and developing that leads to physical stamina, strength, and skill in the world of athletics. Whether running, shot-putting, bicycling, football, basketball, soccer, baseball, tennis, or whatever, the grind is essential for success. And it is no different spiritually. Godliness requires training. And what is this training? Practically speaking, it is regular time in God's word. It is time spent reading. It is time spent memorizing. It is time spent MEDITATING on God's word. It is time spent in prayer. It is a priority on worshiping God with the family. It is serving the family of God with your gifts. It is telling others the gospel. It is attacking and killing sin in your life. It is vigorously pursuing holiness. It is setting your face like flint to

obey God. It is doing what Peter writes in 2 Peter 1. "Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue and virtue with knowledge and knowledge with self-control and self-control with steadfastness and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. And Peter says if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . [and he goes on to say] so brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you PRACTICE these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

In late September, several Grace Community people participated in "The Great Pumpkin Run" in Franksville, Wisconsin. It was a 5k run. Our own John Torres finished in second place. I was not able to be there, but I heard that as runners completed the course they gathered around to celebrate and welcome subsequent runners as they successfully crossed the finish line.

The race for believers is a grueling one demanding resolve, effort, and endurance. But great is the joy and reward for the effort. Practicing the qualities of godliness ushers in a rich entrance into the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.