

## **“The Ant and the Grasshopper, Continued”**

*Reading: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Ephesians 2:11-22*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

The fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper is thousands of years old. You’ve probably heard some version of it at some time or another; as one of Aesop’s Fables it has been told and retold in countless ways and in countless generations. The story is that the grasshopper spends his summer dancing and singing and generally enjoying life, while the ant works tirelessly through the summer, collecting and storing food. But when winter comes, the ant hears the grasshopper knocking on his door, asking for food because he is now cold and starving. The ant asks the grasshopper what he did during the summer when there was food in abundance, and the grasshopper replies that he danced and sang. And the ant responds that he should have planned ahead, he should have gathered food while it was abundant, and then he could dance and sing in the winter.

It’s a fable, not a dissertation, so it’s meant to give us a simple lesson that is broadly applicable, rather than giving us an exhaustive examination of a topic. The moral of the story is, of course, to work while you can, to be prudent with your time, to think ahead and plan ahead and work hard so that you’ll be provided for when leaner times come. And that’s just good thinking. It’s wise and true, and we could point to more than one proverb in the Bible saying much the same thing.

But we could also continue the fable to tease out its shortcomings, because there is more to say on the subject of work and leisure. The ant is the hero of the story, so to speak, or at least we are meant to emulate the ant and learn from the grasshopper’s foolishness. But maybe the continuation of the story for our time would include a look into the ant’s future. Maybe the ant works hard and has plenty of food stored up for the winter, but maybe down the road he finds himself alienated from his family because he failed to spend time with them, and maybe he has a heart condition brought on by stress and overwork, and maybe over time his friends drift away from him because they’re hurt by his stinginess and lack of compassion for other people in their times of need. Maybe in his old age he realizes that wealth cannot buy happiness, and he regrets working quite so much. Maybe the ant is so successful that he starts hiring grasshoppers to do his work for him, and in his greed he doesn’t pay them a fair wage, and even though they’re working hard, they’re still starving through the winter, and the moral that hard work leads to plenty is called into question.

Working hard and planning ahead is indeed more likely to give you good results than frittering your time away. But we live in a culture today where the ant and the grasshopper are almost competing idols for worship. Some people idolize the ant and his work ethic, and work and success become the consuming goals of their lives. Others idolize the grasshopper, and leisure becomes all-important. Some people mix the two, and they work obsessively so they can afford their vacation time and their expensive toys and gadgets for leisure.

The kingdom of God offers us a different option. The ant and the grasshopper can both become snares for sin in our lives, and the fact is that many people simply don’t know any different. But our gospel passage for today points us to a balanced life of meaningful work and rejuvenating rest through the words of Jesus: “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” It’s this moment of beautiful quiet, especially in the midst of Mark’s gospel, which moves so quickly and is so full of action. There are these occasional pauses from time to time in the gospel stories, when Jesus

withdraws from the crowds or spends time in solitude or prayer. It's just a glimpse and a reminder of the balanced life of the kingdom of God, in which we are called to both meaningful work and life-giving rest.

Jesus calls His followers to this time of rest after a time of intense activity and great success. They have just returned from a mission to go out into the surrounding region and preach Jesus' message, to repent because the kingdom of God has arrived. They've gone out and cast out demons and healed people in Jesus' name as a sign that the kingdom really had come, and the result was that many people responded and wanted to know more about Jesus. Mark's gospel tells us that things were so busy that they didn't even have time to eat. So Jesus invites them to rest with Him, and they withdraw to their quiet place, but their withdrawal doesn't last long: the crowds manage to find them, and once again they're inundated with peoples' needs.

There is a need for both kingdom work and kingdom rest. Both are good, and both are needed. Not just work: *kingdom* work. And not just rest: *kingdom* rest. Work and rest that are both infused with the purpose of God's kingdom through the presence of God Himself. I love the combination that we see at work throughout this passage: Jesus and His followers are certainly busy, and they are certainly meeting needs, and in fact they're practically overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done. But it is the presence of Jesus, God Himself, who enables and guides their work. They do not simply do what needs to be done in their own strength; they are responsive to the leading of Jesus.

In fact, in our reading we skipped over the famous Feeding of the Five Thousand, which you've probably heard me preach on before in connection with Five Loaf House. As Jesus and His disciples see this overwhelming need of thousands of hungry people, Jesus tells His disciples to give them something to eat. Of course they think it's absurd, because they only have five loaves of bread and two fish for so many people. But they offer Him what meager resources they have, and they watch as He takes them, blesses them, breaks them, and multiplies them to meet the need. God does not simply give us a job to do, point us in the right direction, and then leave us to it on our own. No, He calls us to trust Him with what we have, no matter how much or how little it is, and then watch as He takes it, blesses it, breaks it, and multiplies it beyond what we could have done on our own. This is kingdom work: blessed by God as we trust Him with our resources, follow His guidance, act in compassion, and use the gifts He gives us.

But there is also kingdom rest. Jesus recognizes His disciples' need to take a break, but again, it's not just going off and relaxing. It's not just inactivity. It's resting in the presence of God. "Come *with me* and get some rest." Just as kingdom work is powered by the presence of God, kingdom rest is enlivened by the presence of God. This has its roots deep in the history of how God has saved His people and indeed within creation itself. Maybe one of the most important elements of the covenant that God made with His people in the Old Testament was the Sabbath, this seventh day of the week that was set aside for rest for all people and for their animals. And more than that, every seventh year was a Sabbath year, when even the land would be given a rest. It was a unique marker setting God's people apart from all other nations; no one else did anything like this. And the point was to demonstrate that the people survived by trusting in God, not through their own work or their own strength. God took care of them, and so He could take care of them through the Sabbath. That day was a gift from Him and a sacrifice to Him.

But it goes even deeper than that; even farther back into the story of what God has been doing. All the way back at the very beginning of the Bible, as Genesis tells the story of a God who created a very good world, the act of creation is structured around six days. And on each of those six days, God takes the chaotic void and speaks order into it. He puts boundaries around the light and the dark, and the water and the land, and the earth and the sky, and the different kinds of creatures. And in so doing, God makes it abundantly clear that He is the Lord over all of space. But then on the seventh day, God stops, and He blesses that day and sets it apart. In so doing, God makes it abundantly clear that He is also Lord over all of time, too. What's interesting is that all the other units of time — the year, the seasons, the month, the day, and even the hours and fractions of hours — are based on the movements of the sun and moon, but in the Bible, the seven day week is based on God. It's a sign that our God is Lord over all creation, over the sun and the moon and the stars, and over time itself. And in recognition of that reality, our time revolves around Him.

This is why Jesus calls us to come with Him by ourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. It's not just in recognition of the weakness of our flesh and our need for sleep, it's also our recognition of God's love for us, His Lordship over us, and His provision for us. When we take the time to rest in the presence of God, we declare that it is God's goodness, not our work, that brings success or provides food or builds kingdoms. When we take the time to rest in the presence of Jesus, we declare to ourselves that it is not our strength or our goodness that saves other people. We cannot feed everyone, or clothe everyone, or solve everyone's problems, or make everyone a Christian, and the call to rest reminds us of that and points those in need to God's strength instead. Kingdom rest is just as much a sign pointing people to the kingdom of God as kingdom work is.

Our world is confused by the ant and the grasshopper. People see this distinction between work and rest, both of which were given to us by God and were intended for our good, but when we are separated from God, work becomes purposeless toil, and rest becomes purposeless laziness. Many people simply don't know who they are apart from their work: they retire from a career, and they sort of wither away, because that source of purpose for them has been taken from them. Or it can be the work of child-rearing, and when the empty nest comes, their whole identity has for so long been nothing but the work of parenting, and they lose their identity. Or for other people, it's their leisure that defines them, and all their thoughts and actions are focused on getting away from work, working toward the evening or the weekend or vacation, and relaxation becomes their god. Our culture doesn't know how to work or rest.

But if you are in Christ, as we read in Ephesians, He Himself is our peace. He brings reconciliation, He brings us near, and it is His presence that gives our work and our rest meaning. This is not to say that all work must be "church work" for it to honor God: no, do the work that God has given you in a way that honors Him and points to His glory, that shows love to those around you and especially those in need. And all your rest does not need to be spent in meditation and prayer, though some of it should be: no, rest in His presence, in a way that honors Him and rejoices in His goodness to you.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)