

Tamerlane's Ant

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"Go to the ant, you sluggard!" —Proverbs 6:6

In the fourteenth century, a man called Tamerlane rose from the breeding ground of conquerors, Central Asia. He had many titles, including Conqueror of the Earth and Lord of the Sun. He swept across Asia and Europe, conquering, raping, pillaging, and erecting huge mounds of human skulls to mark his passage.

Nevertheless, early in his rise to power, he was routed in battle by a powerful enemy. Tamerlane himself lay hidden in a deserted building while the enemy searched for him. As he hid, dejected and desperate to escape, he noticed an ant carrying a kernel of corn. He watched this ant try to carry the grain, which was much larger than herself, up and over a wall. Repeatedly, the weight proved too much, and the ant fell back. Undeterred, the ant would load up and begin her climb all over again.

Tamerlane began to count the attempts. Sixty-nine times the little ant fell back. On the seventieth try, she was able to push the piece of corn over the top. Tamerlane was so inspired by this display of perseverance that he was able to regroup his army and put the enemy to flight. So the story goes.

Another story tells a similar tale, though in a negative vein: Once upon a time, there were four men named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. An important job needed to be done, and Everybody was asked to do it. But Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about it, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, and Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody, and Nobody did the job that Anybody could have done in the first place.

What is the point of these two stories? We can begin to answer this question in Proverbs 6:6-8: "Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest."

Tamerlane watched that ant struggle to carry a kernel of corn over a wall and came away so inspired that he went on to conquer much of the known world! Could Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody have used some inspiration from the ant? Apparently so. A job that Anybody could have done was ignored by Everybody, causing Nobody to do the job, and Somebody got blamed!

Initiative

What Tamerlane's ant had, and these four Bodies lacked, was *initiative*, "the power or ability to begin or follow through on a plan or task." A person with enterprise and determination is said to have initiative. *Roget's Thesaurus* describes it as "an eagerness to do something." Some synonyms are "ambition," "drive," "dynamism," "energy," "get-up-and-go," "gumption," "inventiveness," "leadership," "resourcefulness," and "vigor."

Do any of these words describe us? Should they? Do any of them describe Christ? Of course they do! Christ's ambition is to have us in the God Family. He has drive, dynamism, energy, leadership, and so on. How about other influences in our lives, such as Herbert Armstrong? Not a single person, in or out of the church, would disagree that Herbert Armstrong personified initiative.

So, again, do any of these words describe us? Should they? Yes, indeed. Is our ambition to be in the Kingdom of God? Will it take drive, dynamism, and energy to pray, to study, to fast, to do all the things a Christian must do to grow in character and in his relationship with God? The answer to these questions is, again, yes.

What about success on a physical level, in our jobs and marriages? Initiative is needful here as well. In just about every human endeavor, initiative is necessary in being successful and reaching one's goals.

In Proverbs 14:23, Solomon warns "In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty." We have all known coworkers like this, who spend too much time in the break room or around the water cooler. They make a career out of keeping themselves from work, and commandeering anyone they can to listen to them.

The book of Proverbs is full of similar verses, exhorting us to work hard and to avoid laziness. However, our work is to be focused; we are to work intelligently. Proverbs 21:5 supports this point: "The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty." Recall that one definition of *initiative* is an "eagerness to do something." Yet, it is important that this "something" be part of an overall plan. In other words, the hole one is digging should have a purpose, and we should know what it is.

Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote that one could utterly crush a man by giving him work of a completely senseless, irrational nature. Thus, whether it is pushing a wheelbarrow or studying for a degree, we should have a good idea what the point of our work is. Some of the synonyms for *initiative* include "inventiveness" and "resourcefulness," which fit in well with Solomon's maxim, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty."

The Life of Ants

We can illustrate the concept of initiative by using the example of ants. While we review some of the habits of these insects, please keep in mind that *initiative* is "an eagerness to do something," and some of its synonyms are "ambition," "drive," "dynamism," "energy," "inventiveness," "leadership," and "resourcefulness." We should examine our lives to see if we can add any of these traits, or if we already have them, to improve on them. It makes no difference if our job is temporary laborer or Bank President, student or housewife—we need to show initiative.

Ants, being insects, have six legs, and each leg has three joints. They can run very quickly for their size. Ants are also quite strong, lifting twenty times their body weight. An ant's brain has about 250,000 brain cells, while a human brain has 10 million cells or forty times more. For its size, an ant packs a fair amount of brain power.

An ant's average life expectancy is 45-60 days. It has antennae, which it uses, not only for touching, but also for smelling. It has two stomachs: One holds the food for itself, and the second stomach holds food to be shared with other ants.

There are many thousands of different ant species, and many types of ant mounds. Some species build simple mounds out of dirt or sand, while others use small sticks mixed with dirt to make a stronger mound. Western Harvester ants make a small mound on top, but then tunnel 15 feet straight down!

Ant mounds consist of many chambers connected by tunnels. Different chambers are used for nurseries, food storage, and even resting places for the worker ants. A single ant colony can include over five million members. Each ant colony has at least one queen, as well as sterile female workers and males.

The sole job of the queen is to lay eggs, which the worker ants look after. She is a busy queen, laying up to two million eggs a month. She needs to mate only once in her lifetime to be able to produce eggs for at least 15 years!

Worker ants look for food, look after the young, and defend the nest. If a worker ant finds a good source of food, it leaves a trail of scent so that the other ants in the colony can find the food as well. At night, the worker ants move the eggs and larvae deep into the nest to protect them from the cold. During the day, they move them back to the top of the nest so they can be warmer. Unbeknownst to many, ants are very clean and tidy. Some worker ants are tasked with taking out the trash to special dumps outside the colony.

For any of us men who need a little humbling—probably all of us—dwell on this: Male ants serve only one purpose, to mate with future queen ants. Once they have carried out this purpose, they do not live very long.

Solomon advises, "Consider [the ant's] ways, and be wise." What can we learn from this brief overview of an ant's life?

Lessons to Learn

Even though the colony has a "queen," she is more of an egg factory than a ruler. Ants do not have a leader, yet God designed them to be efficient and organized. Unlike ants, human beings need leadership, but we can use their example in developing initiative.

Ants have a sort of language with which they communicate with one another, and each colony member has a task. No ants are hanging out at the entrance to a cubicle, coffee cup in hand, keeping another from her work with a long-winded story. No ants are complaining that the "loading dock is no place for someone with my talent." Each ant has a job, and she does it. Individual ants see the tasks that need to be done, and they do them without being told. For anyone who runs a business or manages others, this is a simply stunning concept.

Ants carry on complex social organizations, building projects, and communications, all without leadership! They can do this, perhaps, because they are not out for themselves. Each ant is concerned only with the health and well-being of the colony. Most of us have probably kicked an ant mound

and watched the thousands, if not millions, of ants rush out to defend the colony. Did we ever see any ants running the other way, trying to save their own lives? Of course not. Their innate focus is on serving the colony and maintaining its welfare.

Too many times, in human society, when someone shows initiative, he is shot down. Years ago, I was in a rental store to pick up a piece of equipment, and in line ahead of me were two county employees, a supervisor and a new employee. The clerk brought around the pressure washer they had rented, and the new guy started to walk off with it. His boss said, very sharply, "What do you think you're doing?" The new man replied he was just going to put it in the truck. The supervisor said, "You just slow down! We have all day to do this job." In other words, if they finished early, they would be assigned more work to do, and they could not have that!

Ants do not have these problems. They do not become jealous or suspect the motives of others—they just do their jobs. For many Americans, the very fact that they show up for work, in their minds, entitles them to a paycheck. If they actually *do* anything productive, it is cause for celebration!

We have probably all spent long periods watching ants go about their work, and it is a sure bet that we have never seen a lazy one. Are there any road-worker ants? That is, five ants watching one ant with a shovel? Of course not. No one told Tamerlane's ant to carry the grain of corn back to the colony. Most likely, the colony needed food, and the job of this particular ant was to forage for it. The idea of *not* doing her job was alien to this ant.

How we apply these examples to our own lives is up to us. However, the thought of *not* praying or studying each day should be alien to us. The possibility of us *not* doing our tasks well should never cross our minds, nor the minds of our employers. Whatever gifts God has given us, we should be eager to use them. Whatever our position in life, we should have ambition, drive, dynamism, energy, get-up-and-go, inventiveness, leadership, and resourcefulness. In short, initiative.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God." "Seek first" implies effort, striving towards a goal. It supposes a plan and a set of priorities. In addition, it is a directive to us individually from our Lord and Master. No one else will do our job for us! We will not ride the coattails of anyone into God's Kingdom.

Finally, in Proverbs 22:29, God tells us through Solomon, "Do you see a man who excels in his work [who shows initiative]? He will stand before kings." Will we allow the example of an ant to show us the way to initiative and the rewards it can bring?