

Sinning Like a Christian: Sloth #5

Seven Deadly Sins

January 3, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

What is a mental picture that comes to your mind when I say the word sloth?

If you are having troubles let me help you.

Powerpoint picture: (Woman eating potato chips on the sofa)

From the surface you would think that sloth is one of those sins that we pragmatic, hardworking, high-achieving, Mother-I'd rather do it my self Americans, are not guilty. We are purposeful, driven nation that resonated to Ben Franklin, *Early to bed, early to rise...* and all of that. If we think about sloth, which we probably don't think much of, we don't consider it much of a sin or least a sin that doesn't apply to us.

Sloth is an Old English word, seldom used anymore. What I want to suggest to you this morning is being slothful is much more than sitting on a sofa, eating spaghetti out of a can. **Sloth is a sluggishness of spirit, a lack of real desire for anything, a lack of passion.** Ironically the other Seven Deadly Sins suggest an over-abundance of passion. Lust, greed, gluttony.

Another word that is a first cousin to the word sloth is a Latin word, "**acedia**," Let me give you a dictionary definition of *acedia*: *laziness or indifference in religious matters.*

A slothful person does not make it a priority to do what should be done, or to change what should be changed inside their soul. Being slothful, in the minds of the early Church Fathers, is a lack of carrying out one duties with **passion**. Going through life with this low grade fever. Going through life saying, *Whatever.*

John Cassian (360-435), the 4th century monk who promoted discussion of the Seven Deadly Sins, founded several monasteries in southern France and Palestine--Cassian saw sloth as a **low-grade disgust people feel in fulfilling obligations and duties.**

It's not only negligence, but a negligence coupled with a and I quote John Cassian, *low-grade weariness of heart, a gradual wearing away of devotion. When it seizes some wretched mind, it begets a horror of his place, ... Every task to be performed seems to make him listless and inert... He groans that he has made no progress...He complains and sighs; He says, "There is no spiritual fruit here, whole spiritual quest has been in vain."*

Sloth is the attitude of being an Eeyore in Winnie the Pool. *What's the use. Nothing works out. Why am I doing this.* It is a low grade spiritual fever that prevails throughout your life.

Sloth is not just physically sitting on the sofa eating potato chips and drinking coke, but it is your spirit, your mind, that sits on the sofa eating potato chips and drinking coke, not being satisfied with life, the glass is half empty, and you have no desire to make any changes. When a person is given over to sloth, it gives birth to **Apathy**. Apathy, at its worst, is chilling

William Williamon, who taught religion for years at the University of North Carolina, writes,

I sit there, flailing away in a lecture, desperate to grab their attention, and they sit there, masters of the vacant state, eyes open, looking forward, living elsewhere, being nowhere. School is training in detachment, that ability to look upon all that the world has to offer - the history of ideas, the great achievements of Western Civilization, all the available options - and say, with a shrug of the shoulders, Don't care.

Another commentator on the Seven Deadly Sins describes sloth as the sin that "*believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.*" (Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*)

It's one thing to be an **Ebenezer Scrooge** and say "*Bah, Hum Bug*" At least there is some passion in that. It is quite another to simply say, "*Ho Hum*" *Whatever.* Spirit of Apathy

Rather than call Sloth lazy, the early Church Fathers defined sloth as excessive self-pity, a sad self-centeredness of the heart all curled up in itself.

A Christian theologian says of the sin of Sloth: *The soul, in this state (sloth), is beyond mere sadness and melancholy. It has removed itself from the rise and fall of feelings; the very root of its feelings in desire is dead. That is why, for the medieval moralist, sloth was...the most terrifying of sins. To be a man is to desire. The good man desires God and other things in God. The sinful man desires things in the place of God, but he is still recognizably human, inasmuch as he has known desire. The slothful man, however, is a dead man, and arid waste...his desire, itself, has dried up.* Sloth is thus a sort of slow, cowardly suicide.

Here is the point that I would like to make. One can be very slothful and yet be very busy in carrying out one duties. It's the attitude. Chuck Swindol, Attitude is 90% everything.

Slothful people want to take the easy path, especially when it comes to personal growth and spiritual growth. They don't want to put the hard work in what it takes to develop strong relationships, or a vibrant spiritual life. They don't want to work through conflict or junk that is prohibiting them from having strong relationships. They harden their hearts toward any changes that requires sacrifice or surrender on their part. They want the sentiment of pop songs that speak of love as always being on this perpetual high. Hallmark Romance. Slothful people want a vibrant relationship with God by only listening to good feeling sermons at their convenience. As it suits them.

Being slothful, according to **Rebecca DeYoung**, is that resistance to the disciple and transformation that is **demanded** on us when we become born again, that new person in Christ.

The slothful like the comforting thought of being saved by love, of being God's own, but balk at facing the

- * discomfort of transformation -
- * the slow putting to death of the old sinful nature -
- * the discipline it takes to sustain that transforming relationship over the long haul.

Change? I'm suppose to give up certain habits? I didn't know I was suppose to change certain life style patterns. This is more than I bargain for.

The slothful are the ones that want the benefits of what the spiritual disciplines produces but they don't want to take that step of commitment. The slothful person mentally and emotionally checks out. *Too much work. It's not worth putting the effort. What's the use.*

Fredrick Buechner: *Like somebody with a bad head cold, slothful people have mostly lost their sense of taste and smell. They know something's wrong with them, but not wrong enough to want to do something about it. Other people come and go, but through glazed eyes they hardly notice them. They are letting things run their course. They are getting through their lives.*

The slothful person disconnects himself with God, with other human beings, and even himself.

As a wife accusingly says to her husband, *You could never love anyone but yourself!*

The husband replies honestly, *that's not true: I don't even like myself.*

Rebecca DeYoung says that the *slothful are inwardly unwilling to be moved; they are stuck between a self they cannot bear and a self they can't bear to become.* *Their outward behavior - sluggishness and inertia - reflects the state of their heart.*

Slothful people are stuck at this halfway point. They don't like the person that they are, but they don't want to take the steps to become the person that they ought to be.

Dante wisely places Sloth in the middle of his Purgatory, halfway up the mountain, or halfway down, depending on how you read it. It's the failure of taking that next step to become the person that God wants you to be.

Christian life is often referred to as running the race. **Running that Marathon.** Hit that wall. Emotional wall. There are all types of walls that we hit throughout life.

- * Wall within your marriage.
- * Wall within your spiritual walk,
- * Wall within your work,

When you hit that wall it is going to be a **defining moment** of whom you are as a person.

Are you going to dig deep and say to yourself, "*I Can Do All Things Through Christ Who Strengthens Me*" or are you going to slump into the sin of sloth and say, *What's the use. It will never work out anyway. I'll just do the minimum to get by.*

The truth be known, we have all fallen into self pity. Into apathy. We need to take concrete steps in avoiding it like a plague. The problem is sloth is a vice for which it is difficult to find a **remedy**. Like envy, it has a self-perpetuating dynamic, refusing the very thing required to cure it.

The ancient strategy against sloth is rather than seek something new, new excitement, new thrill, or new buzz, this is what **Evagrius**, early church Father, writes to his fellow monks: *You must not abandon the cell (living quarters) in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside, exercise perseverance...Fleeing and circumventing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly, and evasive.*

In a nutshell, Evagrius is telling his monks not to run away from what you're called to be and do.

God is calling you to do today. What wall are you faced up against? Our flesh wants a quick fix. It looks for the easy out. Doesn't want to put the hard work in.

Our verse for today is from **Philippians 3 13b-14 NLT** *I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

The Christian walk is not to run away from what you've been called to be and do. No matter how difficult the situation might be, break through the wall. Joshua 1: Strong & Courageous.

But rather accepting and staying committed to your true spiritual vocation, Satan side tracks us through unnecessary busyness or through imaginative diversions.

Evagrius is telling his monks to stay in his cell, rather than fleeing to the city. To leave the cell was equivalent to abandoning their spiritual purpose and vocation. Given our human condition, our sinful nature, both physical frailty and fickleness of will, what we need most against the daily weariness of acedia is steady commitment and daily discipline, even when we don't feel like it.

We are always looking for a quick buzz. We are always looking for that next motivational speaker, but chasing after our feelings will not keep us grounded for the life battles that we face.

The practice of Spiritual disciplines are vital because it equips us so we can respond **immediately** and **appropriately** in battle or a crisis. Our daily training carries us through the hardships of life.

* Do I always feel like going to church? No.

* Do I always feel like reading my Bible? No.

* Do I always feel like going to small group? No

Satan diverts us from the Spiritual Disciplines by keeping us busy. Don't expect to win life's battles when you have a spirit of being slothful.

Acedia, *laziness or indifference in religious matters.*

Acedia's greatest temptation is **escapism** - when we don't feel like being godly or loving anymore, we slowly drift away inwardly and outwardly toward something more comfortable or immediately comforting, where we eventually abandon ship and give up.

A light breeze bends a feeble plant; a fantasy about a trip away drags off a person overcome with acedia, write the desert fathers.

I'm challenging you to resist the urge to be a slacker or give up, and instead to stay the course, stick to your commitments, and persevere.

As one person wrote, *Love flourishes in a context of daily action and lasting commitment and sloth flourishes in a context of conveniently easy escapes.*

There is a musical rendition of the Seven Deadly Sins; **Ballet for Wind Ensemble, 1984.**

Do you know which musical instrument represents pride? Trumpet.

Sloth is represented in the same musical piece by the lower brass, playing at a much slower tempo. It's the shortest movement of the ballet: twelve simple chords from muted trombones and tuba, accompanied by a gong which is submerged in a tub of water.

You don't want to go through life like that, do you?

You don't want to go through life playing only 12 simple chords and then have your life end with a gong submerged in a tub of water?

If that is the case, stop going through life giving the bare minimum.

Don't take the easy way out, because if you do you are not going to find any personal fulfillment. Worse of all, *you'll be stuck between a self you cannot bear and a self you can't bear to become.*

"I believe that deep within us – each of us has a desire for more of life – to do more and to become more – to get the very most out of our lives as we possibly can.

There is a country song with a great line in it,

"If my life was a horse – I'd have to take it out and shoot it." Would that describe your life?

Sloth is the sin of unreached potential – it is the sin of wasting the time, talent, and treasure entrusted to us by God and it mixes up our values and priorities in life.

This New Year I want you to do 3 things:

1. Pay attention to the here and now. (If we're gonna beat sloth.)

It is vital for us to live in the present. Don't allow yourself to be plagued by living in the past or the future. When we live in the past, we fight emotions of – regret, guilt, anger, and bitterness. These emotions prevent us from moving to the here and now. When we live in the future, we play this game of *what if's* or *if only*. God has given you today, make the most of it.

2. Pay Attention to the state of your relationships.

The typical average married couple spends 12 minutes per day in any kind of conversation. (12 minutes!) A typical father only talks to his children 4½ minutes a day. I gotta ask you → How valuable are your relationships? Slow down.

Think with me – just for a moment. I want you to make a mental list. Which 9 or 10 people would you include in your inner circle of relationships. Which people would you consider most precious to you - if they were to die in a car accident today. Would there be any regrets?

3. Pay attention to the state of your soul.

God says to us in **Isaiah 5:53**

"Come to me with your ears wide open – listen for the life of your soul is at stake!"

Are you going to be so busy in 2010 that you fail to pay attention to your soul. Are you going to give God whatever left over minutes you have out of your busy schedule? Pay attention to the state of your soul. I would hate for you to be spiritually sitting on a sofa eating spaghetti out of a can when God has a wonderful banquet for you to enjoy.

"The Glory of God is a man who is fully alive." **Iraeneus**

Jewish Proverb - *"In the day of judgement every man will be held accountable for every blessing he refused to enjoy."*

The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors:

Resources:

Angell, Dean. "The Seven Sloth" www.LakeviewChurch.com

DeYoung, Rebecca. [Glittering Vices](#)

Friesen, Don. Ottawa Mennonite Church: www.ottawamennonite.ca

Willimon, William. [Sinning Like a Christian](#).

