

TOO LAZY TO GIVE IT A TITLE

Sterling UMC
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Proverbs 24:30-34

Today we're finishing our series, "Breaking Free – The Seven Deadly Sins." We have looked at the deadly sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, envy, and gluttony. We have seen how these sins wreak havoc in our lives, how they destroy our relationship with God and others, and how they can enslave us. But we have also learned from a Biblical perspective how we can break free from these deadly sins and have freedom and victory in our lives. And so this morning we conclude our series by looking at the final deadly sin, the sin known as sloth.

Now I did a little research, and as you know there is an animal called a sloth. I've included a picture of a sloth in your handout. A sloth lives in the trees and basically stays there all week. A sloth will go down once a week to relieve itself. Sloths move so slow that in an hour it will only move a few feet. So if you put a sloth in a hundred-yard dash it would finish in... October.

Sloths are sluggish and inactive. They sleep fifteen to twenty hours a day rising late in the afternoon to eat leaves that are within its reach. They move so slowly that algae forms in their hair. They are so passive that they are virtually un-trainable. Also you occasionally find one working at the DMV... in a supervisory role.

Unfortunately here's what's happened. The sloth image that we have, I think has given us an inaccurate picture of what the sin of sloth is all about. Often when we think of sloth we think of people who are lazy. They're not doing anything. They sleep till noon every day, they watch TV all day, they play video games, they're lazy. And you know that's none of us, right? You may have come in and seen the topic today and thought, "This series has been killing me. We're talking about envy, pride, lust and gluttony but this week you're not going to get me. Laziness is not my gig. I'm productive. I work hard. I've got a lot going on. I manage my time. You're not going to get me on this one." I mean we are very busy people. Our problem is we're too busy and we need a little more down time in our lives. But I will suggest to you that that fundamentally misunderstands what sloth is.

Just because you're busy does not mean you're not guilty of sloth. Just because you're organized and all your spice racks are alphabetized and your pencils are sharpened on a perfectly clean desk and your garage looks like a show room doesn't mean that you can't be a sloth.

So what is sloth? Well typically we mean two things when we talk about sloth. We mean first of all the failure to do the things that are necessary. The failure to act on the things we know we should be doing. It is the sin of inaction. It's intending to do something and yet never quite getting around to doing it. It's knowing the right thing to do, but for whatever reason, whatever excuse ultimately not acting upon it. It is seeing a need and expecting someone else to meet it. It's knowing the right thing to do but choosing not to do it. It is faith without works. And it is the sin of omission.

Now in addition to this idea of inactivity, there is the idea of the sloth that happens in the heart, and actually that often leads to the other form of sloth and there is a Greek word for this, the word is acedia. And acedia is a word that means "to not care". So on the one hand sloth is not acting when you are supposed to, but on the other hand, the sloth of the heart is simply not caring. It is the sin of attitude. It is seeing the pain and brokenness of other people and not being affected by it. It is believing that, "I don't really need to be involved. My contribution wouldn't make any difference anyway." Or maybe convincing yourself that you don't have any responsibility. Acedia is also coming to the place where you think, "What does it matter, really? What can one person do? God doesn't really care about that." And then in the end, acedia, when it really begins to take root, in your heart, it leads you to a place where you begin to think, "Maybe nothing matters in the end. And you find yourself listless, lethargic, purposeless, and in the end you find life meaningless. That's what happens when sloth takes over. And that can lead you to despair, which is why sloth, acedia, sloth of the heart and depression are often seen in tandem.

Well what does that actually look like when it is lived out? You say, "I'm not really sure I see that in myself. I do most of the things I'm supposed to do. I don't find myself feeling like nothing matters, so how am I a sloth?"

Well let me just paint a picture of both some of the ways that we can be sloths, and the impact of choosing not to act when we're supposed to act. And I'm going to give you a little illustration.

About a week ago Robin got this beautiful flower as an end-of-the-year gift from one of her students. It was a beautiful plant with beautiful flowers when she got it. But I want to show it to you today. You see I forgot to water the flower. This was just one week of not doing something that we were supposed to do. We didn't actively try to kill it. We just didn't do something we should have done. We didn't take care of it. And this is the impact that sloth can have in a whole host of areas in our lives.

Take relationships for example. When sloth manifests itself in relationships what happens is we stop paying attention, we stop doing the kinds of things that are necessary to maintain healthy relationships. And they can be any kind of relationship.

What about with our relationships with our children? If we are not careful sloth can creep in and damage our relationship with our children.

How many of you remember the song "Cat's in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin?

My son turned ten just the other day
He said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let's play
Can you teach me to throw", I said "Not today
I got a lot to do", he said, "That's ok"
And he walked away but his smile never dimmed
And said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah
You know I'm gonna be like him"

And you know how it ends? Time passes and the last verse goes like this:

I've long since retired, my son's moved away
I called him up just the other day

I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time
You see my new job's a hassle and kids have the flu
But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad
It's been sure nice talking to you"

And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me
He'd grown up just like me
My boy was just like me

That song puts a lump in my throat every time I hear it. I don't want that, do you? But we give in to sloth. We don't water their souls. We don't nurture that relationship. And over time we find there's some distance that's created there, and we didn't mean to create it, it just happened because we weren't paying attention to the relationship.

Sloth really is a killer of marriages. And it's here that we stop doing the things we did at first. You know we fell in love and we stayed up hours talking and we brought each other gifts. And we did all these wonderful things. And then you get married and over time you know they just sort of begin to fall away. So was it Barbara Streisand that sang, "You don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore?" Well, why not? Somehow that began to fall aside. And we don't mean to but we just become slothful. We just become indifferent, ambivalent, apathetic, and death in relationships occurs.

Well there are several areas where we struggle with sloth in the spiritual realm, and I want to mention those briefly.

The first has to do with the challenge that God has for us in how we're meant to live our lives toward other people. God has called us as Christians to do his work in this world. We see this over and over again in passages like this from Proverbs 31:8-9. He says, "'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

James 1:27 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Then Jesus in Matthew 25:32 talks about when he will come in final judgment and he will "...separate the sheep and goats." And the criteria for judgment? Not how many Bible studies you took. Not how much of the Bible you memorized. It was, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." You see the sin of the goats, was the sin of sloth. "You saw me, you saw one of the least of these hungry and thirsty... and you didn't do a thing." You said, "Someone else will take care of it."

And it's so easy for us to allow sloth to say, "You know what, I'm going to take care of me and mine, and that's really all that God cares about." But that's not all that God cares about. We are meant to be engaged in the problems of the world. That's part of what it means to be Christian. But sloth would say let them take care of themselves.

Wendy Wasserstein, a playwright, says, "When you achieve true slothdom, you have no desire for the world to change. True sloths are not revolutionaries, but the lazy guardians at the gate of the status quo."

Here at this church there are many opportunities to sign up for something, to do something to reach out, to help others, to serve one another, our community and our world. And my hope, my prayer as a congregation is that every single one of you looking at me right now that somewhere this year you have rolled up your sleeves and you have helped someone in need. You have engaged in an act of service to another person in the name of Jesus Christ. Somehow this year you have gone outside the walls of our church and you were actually engaged in helping the world to look more like the kingdom of God. And if you haven't yet you will very soon.

Now the second challenge in the spiritual realm with sloth is when it comes to our spiritual relationship with God. This is just like the relationship that we have with other people. All relationships need nurturing. If you don't put anything into a relationship you're going to move farther and farther away from the person. And the same is true in our relationship with God. It needs to be nurtured.

Take worship for example. Something happens when you come to worship, it changes your life. But here's what sloth does. Sloth says, "You know its Sunday morning, and I'm tired from a long week. It's my only day to sleep in. What if we sleep in and then get up and go and have breakfast. And you sort of convince yourself, "It's okay because, probably nobody will really even miss me or know I wasn't there." And then over time you think well what does it really matter anyway. I've got other important things to do. And I wonder really if God even notices that I'm not there. And then over time, you ask well what's the point of going to church anyway. I can't even remember why we go. And one day you find yourself asking, I wonder if God is really there. I mean I really don't feel his presence in my life anyway. And actually you find yourself when you quit nurturing your soul; you find your soul begins to look like this.

It's not just worship. It's spending time in prayer. Having that quiet time, that actual conversation with God. It's not just having conversations with God; it's opening up the Bible and allowing God to speak to you. You know you should right? I think I'm going to do that sometime. But sometime never rolls around, because you just don't have time, do you? Or do you? And in all of these things, we find when we don't pay attention to these spiritual things, when we're slothful in them, God seems a distant reality, and we no longer have a faith that's vibrant and alive, and life transforming, and life giving.

So in closing I want to give you two things that are important that you and I have to care for or we'll battle sloth forever.

First, I must care about God's big picture. What is God's big picture?

God's big picture is that I am a manager of my time and my talents and my treasures. That the time that God has given me, the talents that God has given me, the treasures that I'm allowed to manage are simply on loan to me. That I get to manage them, I'm a steward of them, and God wants me to be faithful with them.

1 Corinthians 4:2, *"Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful."*
I've got to be faithful to the time God has given me. That's the big picture.

I want to give you a very clear example of this. Matthew 25 Jesus tells this story. In telling this story He sets the big picture up in a beautiful way. Jesus says there were three servants and there was one master. The master was going away on a trip so the master said I'm going to give you three servants some money to take care of. He called the servants together and gave them the money to invest for him while he was gone. He gave five talents to one, two talents to another, and one talent to the last. Dividing it in proportion to their abilities. And then he left on the trip.

Long story short: he comes back. The person who had five comes to him and says, "Master, I have doubled it. You gave me five, I return ten." The master is full of praise, *"Well done my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling a small amount. Now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together."*

The second servant says, "You gave me two. I doubled it." And the master again was pleased and said, *"Well done my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling a small amount. Now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together."*

Then the third guy. He has one talent. He says "I was afraid I would lose your money so I hid it in the earth and here it is." And he gives him the talent back. What I want you to capture is the master's response. *"The master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant.'" That's pretty strong isn't it? Why did he say that? Verse 29 "To those who use well what they are given even more will be given. And they will have an abundance but from those who are unfaithful even what little they have will be taken away."*

What's the big picture? God's big picture that I must care about is this: God has made me a manager, made you a manager of your time, of your talents, of your treasures. He wants you and I to be faithful with what we do with that. He doesn't want us to bury our time. He doesn't want us to bury our talents or our treasures. He wants us to be faithful with them and invest them.

The second perspective I want you to capture is that I must care about the gift of today. Every day is a gift. If I really believe that God wants me to be a good manager, a steward of His time, talents and treasures then I've got to look at today and view that as a gift.

Here's what I see a lot of people doing. I hear it in conversations. I hear it all the time. They're regretting things that happened in the past. And they're worried about things that might happen in the future. Many of us live our lives that way. We live our lives in the past and we live our lives in the future. But not in today. Jesus kind of calls a time out and says this in Matthew 6:34, *"So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today."*

So what's the perspective? I've got to learn to use today, see today, view today as a gift. That my life and your life is made up of tens of thousands of gifts of Today. If I view each day as a gift I wake up in the morning saying, "God, You've got gift for me today!" And I don't treat it as an obligation but as a passion. It changes everything.

In the end overcoming sloth is a matter of just doing it. There's no magic pill. That would do so much for your Christian life if you would just start doing it now. Not next week, next year, *now!* Every time you catch yourself saying "I'll do it later" that is a warning light that says, "You're procrastinating." There's not a better time than now. This is the moment of truth. There's got to be a time in your life when you stop intending and start acting. Stop making excuses and start today!

I want you to look one more time at the picture of that sloth that I gave you in your handout. I don't want you to be sloths. I don't want to be a sloth. Anymore. I don't want you to look like this (picture). I don't want to look like this (plant). Spiritually, relationally. And so if you've been feeling like a sloth, you've been living like a sloth, if spiritually you've been acting like a sloth, it's time to stop being a sloth.