

# Sloth

*Third in a series on vices and virtues.*

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*So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind (Ecclesiastes 2:17).*

After being at Westminster for nearly three and a half years, I finally got around to planning a sermon series months in advance, partly to help Chris pick anthems that would go with the message. Wouldn't you know, the next topic to come up in this long-range plan is sloth. I'm guessing the music library doesn't have many anthems on sloth. Maybe she'll have better luck with wrath, envy, gluttony, or lust.

Come to think of it, I suppose that's another thing the Seven Deadly Sins have in common: no one writes uplifting songs about them. People do write books about them, and plays, and movies, and television shows. In fact, the vices are staples of literature and film. Some of the most popular shows on TV are permutations of *CSI* or *Law and Order*, where in the first two minutes somebody kills or injures somebody else out of wrath or envy or pride or avarice. Much of the rest of television is driven by lust in one form or another, or the after-effects of gluttony. Flip through the channels some evening, or the daytime soaps, and see if that isn't true.

All those vices are interesting because they involve passions and desires: either too much passion, or passion for the wrong things or the wrong people. The one deadly sin that doesn't get much air time is sloth. That's because, while the other vices are about too much desire or misplaced desire, sloth is about not having enough desire. It's a kind of apathy, a lack of passion for anything. That can be deadly for the soul – and it's boring to watch. Sloth is a sin that can kill you without even making you interesting in the meantime.

Sloth is deadly because human beings were made for a purpose. Freud said that the two things we need to make us happy are love and work. That's pretty much what the Bible says too. In the creation story in Genesis, God puts Adam and Eve in the garden and gives them work to do: naming things, growing things, taking care of things. And God gives them each other, too, and children – people

to love. Love itself is a kind of work, especially with children. So when Jesus comes along and says that the great commandment is to love God and our neighbors, he's only reminding us what we were made for, and what will make us happy.

Sloth is the opposite of the purpose-driven life. It's a lack of will to do much of anything. If life is about having a purpose, then to be slothful is to be half dead already. It's like being a zombie, a dead soul walking around in body that's still alive.

Now we have to be careful here. Sloth is not the same thing as depression. People get depressed for all kinds of reasons, often for good reasons. Setbacks of any kind can be depressing. Suffering a loss makes us depressed, at least for a time, and the greater the loss, the deeper our depression. Some people's depression is biologically based, and we treat it the same way we treat any other illness, with medicines and other therapies. Some of us suffer mild depression just from living in Pittsburgh in the winter time. The sun disappears for days on end, and Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, breaks out all over town. A professor at the Seminary said once that February is the only month with "rue" built right into the name.

Sloth is not the same as depression. Sloth is a sin, depression is a sickness. Sins are behaviors we have some control over; illnesses we typically can't control. People are responsible for their sins, but not usually for their sickness. So we have to be sure that when we talk about sloth as a sin, we're not talking about people who are simply depressed.

Sloth is different. Sloth is when perfectly healthy people lack the will to do what's right, or even to do much of anything at all. Sloth is when people simply don't care – not because they're depressed, but because they are apathetic. Nothing moves them to action. Not love. Not another person's need. Not a desire to be creative, or productive, or even useful. Nothing moves them because they just don't care.

Sloth is a matter of the will, which is why it counts as a sin. Sins are things we choose. We're responsible for them. They're matters of morality, because we have the option to do them or not to do them. Sloth is a choice. It's the choice not to find something worthwhile to do.

How does anyone get to that point, to the place where he or she chooses not to do anything worthwhile?

One reason is pride, in the sense of egocentricity that cares only about itself. If the self grows massive enough, it becomes like a moral black hole: it draws everything into itself, but nothing comes out. No love, no caring, no commitment to anything other than itself. So one deadly sin begets another: pride gives birth to sloth.

Another reason for sloth is disillusionment. It's one option when we come to a fork in the road, after all the things we've chased after turn out to disappoint us.

In Ecclesiastes, the Teacher, who is usually taken to be King Solomon, tells of his disillusionment with all the things he thought would make him happy. He pursues wealth, and power, and alcohol, and sex on a grand scale, and he builds great monuments, and he even tries to become the wisest man in the world. In the end, when he's done all that, he says it's all in vain. There's no point. The wise and the foolish, the righteous and the unrighteous, human beings as well as animals – everything dies in the end, so life is just vanity, a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes can be a depressing book – so much so that you might wonder what it's doing in the Bible. It's depressing if you think that any of those things the writer thought would satisfy, really ought to satisfy. The truth is, many people do. Lots of people spend much of their lives chasing after some combination of the things Solomon sought.

And what happens? Some are satisfied with wealth or power or sex or drugs, or with their own sense of wisdom. Others are disillusioned with all that. They see the end, and they decide it's all for nothing, and they're tempted to despair. You have to wonder, which are worse off: the ones who are dissatisfied with what they've acquired, or the ones who are satisfied? Which is worse: to want all those things and be disappointed when you get them, or to think that's all there is to life, and be satisfied with only that?

If we follow the Teacher in Ecclesiastes all the way to the end, we come to a fork in the road. When we realize that all the things we thought would make us happy still leave a gaping hole in our heart, then we have a choice. We can give in to despair, and lose the desire for anything, even for life itself. Or we can look

up and ask whether we've missed something after all – whether we've missed the point of life because we've been looking in all the wrong places.

Disillusionment, which feels so painful when it comes, can drive us to despair – or it can set us free. If we choose the path of sloth or apathy, and decide that we just don't care about anything, then we've brought a kind of death upon ourselves, a suicide of the soul.

But there is another fork. When we learn that the things we wanted are not enough, then we're free at last to look for more. The problem, as C. S. Lewis said, is not that we want too much, but that we want too little. We were made in the image of God, to know love and truth and beauty and creativity, to long for those things and find them, but we settle for so much less. The sin of sloth is precisely the sin of not wanting enough, not wanting what we were made to live for.

And by the way, this points to another feature of sins in general. It's not so much that God punishes us for our sins, but that our sins bring about their own punishment. If the wages of sin is death, as Paul says, it's because of the sins' own consequences. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the case of sloth. The soul made in the image of God, for love and work and a life full of purpose and joy, is already dying when it refuses to care about anything beyond itself.

Of course, all of this is a matter of degree. We can be more or less caring and committed, or more or less slothful. Like all the vices and virtues, sloth is a habit of the heart, something that comes to characterize us the more we practice it.

In a world full of need there are plenty of things for each of us to do. The earthquake in Haiti underscores what is always true in this life: there are people who need us, whose suffering we could do something about if only we would care. Ultimately sloth is just a deeper pit of selfishness. We were made to love God and one another, but the apathy of sloth ironically destroys the very self that refuses to care for anyone else.

In sharp contrast to sloth, the Letter to the Hebrews recounts some of the great things people have done through the ages, by the grace of God: from Abraham's becoming the spiritual father of multitudes, to Moses' leading the slaves out of Egypt, to the women and men who suffered all sorts of trials but

remained faithful and even heroic, down to the present day. "Therefore," the writer says,

since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ... (Hebrews 12:1-2).

We were made for so much more than apathy and self-centeredness. We were made to be creative, and productive, and to reflect God's grace in all that we do. What a high calling we have! What a glorious thing, to be made in the image of God.