

“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS” SLOTH

Today in our series on the seven deadly sins we come to the sin of sloth. What’s interesting about this sin is that it’s the only of the seven sins to have an animal named after it. People go to the zoo to see bears and lions and giraffes, but nobody goes to see a sloth. The sloth is the epitome of laziness – they live in trees and spend 18 hours a day sleeping, and the hours they are awake they essentially do nothing. When they move – which is rarely – they move s-l-o-w-l-y. It takes them up to 30 days just to digest their food. One scientist in the 1700s labeled the sloth the lowest form of existence.

When we see that picture, all of us can think of someone who fits that description – who is lazy – who moves slowly – who sits on the couch and does nothing – who never seems to complete anything – and who isn’t passionate about much of anything. We say, “I have a brother like that or I have a neighbor like that.”

In preparing this message I was thinking about our church and if I could think of anyone who was lazy, and I even scrolled through the church directory to make sure I wasn’t missing anyone. I put a check next to a few of you... just kidding... we’re a pretty hard-working, responsible group of folk, so this is going to be a pretty short sermon.

But as I dug into the meaning of sloth, I’ve concluded that all of us, including myself, could have a check put next to our name – sloth just looks different from what we thought. This morning we want to look at what sloth is – mostly from the book of Proverbs, the result of sloth, the root cause of sloth, and what we can do to be free from it.

Sloth is a Latin word that means “without care.” It’s a person who is indifferent any kind of responsibility or obligation. It’s someone who is habitually lazy and inactive. The book of Proverbs has the most to say about sloth, and there Solomon uses the word “sluggard” 14 times, and it’s helpful to go through some of these verses to get a picture of what a sluggard is like.

To start with, a sluggard **lacks motivation**. Proverbs 6:9 says, “How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?” Like the sloth, a sluggard is slow to act. He’s lethargic. He’s passive. He hits the snooze alarm and goes back to sleep. There’s something going on inside that keeps him from action.

Second, a sluggard **lacks initiative**. Proverbs 21:25 says, “The craving of a sluggard will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.” The sluggard has desires – he wants to eat and he wants to have things – he just doesn’t want to work to get them.

Third, a sluggard **lacks effort**. He doesn’t want to do anything that’s hard or difficult or involves work. Proverbs 19:24 says, “A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth!” What an image – he can’t even muster up the energy to lift his fork from his plate to his mouth. It’s too much work, so he takes the path of least resistance.

Fourth, a sluggard **lacks courage**. Solomon loves using humor to drive home his point, and in Proverbs 22:13 he says, “The sluggard says, ‘There’s a lion outside! I’ll be killed in the public square!’” The lazy person makes ridiculous excuses about why he can’t work – there might possibly be a dangerous animal right outside my door – I better stay inside where it’s safe. He’s afraid to venture out and take risks, so he remains in his comfort zone.

Fifth, a sluggard **lacks follow-through** – when he does get around to doing something, he doesn’t follow through and finish it – he procrastinates. Proverbs 12:27 says, “The lazy do not roast any game, but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt.” Here the lazy man finally gets around to hunting for food, but when he brings his game home, he looks at all the work involved in preparing it and cooking it and lets it rot.

Sixth, a sluggard **lacks foresight**. He doesn’t think ahead. Proverbs 20:4 says, “Sluggards do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look but find nothing.” It never dawns on him that he maybe should have planted something. Solomon points the sluggard to the ant for inspiration... Proverbs 6:6-8 says, “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.” No one needs to prod or motivate the ant to work – the ant wisely thinks ahead and makes sure it has food.

Proverbs also describes the result of sloth, and the first result is **chaos**. Proverbs 24:30-31 says, “I went past the field of a sluggard, past the vineyard of someone who has no sense; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins.” Here is a picture of a life in disorder and chaos. His life is out of control and he doesn’t seem to care.

The second result is **poverty**. Proverbs 24:33-34 says, “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.” The Apostle Paul told believers in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” If a person is able-bodied and not willing to work, he should not expect someone else to feed him.

The third result is **burden**. A person who is unwilling to work has little to offer others, and he becomes a burden on society. He expects others to take care of him, and when he does work, he’s not worth the money you pay him. Proverbs 10:26 says, “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are sluggards to those who send them.” Nobody wants to hire a sluggard who doesn’t know how to work because he just creates more trouble.

Solomon paints a graphic picture of a sluggard, and it’s more than enough to conclude that sloth is a terrible vice that should be avoided at all costs. But when you look into the heart of a sloth or sluggard you have to wonder, “What’s really going on?” Is it simply because this person is lazy and doesn’t want to work, or is something bigger going on? What’s the root issue?

The root issue – the underlying cause – is a rejection of God’s purpose in their life – it’s not knowing or refusing to embrace God’s design for their life and what they’re made for – it’s a shirking of the responsibilities and obligations that have been placed on their life. The sluggard or sloth wants complete freedom to do what they want to do without the burden of responsibility – they have a disdain for any expectation or demand that might be placed upon them – they would rather pursue pleasure and comfort. If a rejection of God’s purpose is the root issue of sloth, then knowing our purpose is key.

From the very beginning of the Bible, it's clear that our purpose in life revolves around three things – our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, and our work. First and foremost, God created us to be in a **relationship with Him**. Genesis 1:27 says, “*Let us make man in our image.*” God is a relational person, and being made in His image means that we are designed to be relational. The plural “our” in “Let us make man in our image” speaks of the trinity. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoy fellowship and love with one another, we are created to enjoy fellowship and love with God – to know God and love God and pursue God.

Jesus said the greatest commandment, and most important priority in life is to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” We are to love Him with our whole being, and desire Him above all else.

A slothful person rejects this purpose. They don't sense the need or desire to know and relate to God – they don't have a zeal to love God with all their heart and soul and mind. In Revelation 2 Jesus commends the church at Ephesus for their hard work – they weren't lazy – but then He says, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (Revelation 2:4). A person can put in a 15-hour day and work hard physically, but be spiritually lazy and not desire God or pursue Him.

Secondly, God created us to not only be in a relationship with Him, but in a **relationship with each other**. Jesus said the second greatest commandment is to “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” After He created Adam, He created Eve, and He told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. We are made to pour out our lives in love to one another.

The primary relationship we are to pour our time and energy into is family. God's will for most is to get married and have a family – unless a person feels called to devote their time and energy to serving God – but many today do not want the obligations and responsibilities of marriage – it's seen as an intrusion on their freedom – and so they put it off. As the family goes, so goes the nation, and our nation is suffering the fallout of slothfulness in family responsibilities. Another problem plaguing our culture is fatherlessness – rather than men stepping up to the plate and being a provider and protector and role model, many fathers abandon their obligations to live selfishly for their own pleasure and comfort. Slothfulness is the cause of many of the problems we face as a society.

God has also designed that every believer be in a relationship with a local church – not just attending church – but taking an active part in church community. The phrase “one another” is used 59 times in the New Testament – we are to meet with one another, eat with one another, encourage one another – God has designed us to intentionally be in relationships with one another – for encouragement, for support, and for accountability. The slothful Christian rejects God's purpose for church and says, “Relationships are too difficult, they're too risky, and they encroach upon my freedom,” and they stay on the fringes of church life. God's design to reach the world is the church, and yet many abandon their responsibilities towards the local body to pursue their own comfort and pleasure.

Third, along with being created to be in a relationship with God and with each other, we are also made to **work**. From the very beginning, even before the fall, God called us to work. In Genesis 1:28 He says to Adam, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” In 2:15 says, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

God designed us to rule over the earth, and to taking an active part in harnessing the resources of the earth so that creation can flourish and thrive. He wants us to build and create and grow and produce, so that the fruit of our hands bring glory to God and blessings to others. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Every believer is created with a built-in calling to do good things for God; every believer is designed to serve God and people in a way that builds up God's kingdom.

But the sluggard rejects this purpose. His focus is turned inward to where he only seeks his own comfort and pleasure. He doesn't do much of anything that contributes to society and benefits others. He had no purpose other than his own life.

We are created to work – to do something – and to give it all we have. Colossians 3:23a says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...” Anything that benefits someone else is valuable work, and we should see our work as a vital part of our purpose.

In the Parable of the Talents, the master gave each servant a unit of money to invest while he was away on a journey. Two of the servants were diligent to work hard and gain more for the master, but one servant was lazy. He buried his money in the ground and did nothing. He was focused on the here-and-now and rejected God's purpose for his life.

In Romans 12:11 Paul says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Zeal is the opposite of sloth. It describes a Christian who know their purpose and goes after it with everything they have. They serve the Lord with passion and fervor. They know they only have a short window of time to use their gifts and talents and resources for the kingdom, and they give it all they got.

All this to say that is what's going on with the slothful person is that they not simply lazy, but they reject God's purpose and design for their life in order to pursue their own pleasure and comfort. Instead of pouring out their life in love for God and others and the rest of creation, they love themselves.

So how do we break free from this? If slothfulness is my rejection of God's design to live a life of freedom from obligations and responsibilities, how do I get out of it? The easy answer is to borrow from the Nike slogan and say, “Just do it.” Get off the coach, stop being lazy, and get busy. But unless we are gripped by our larger purpose, we will most likely remain stuck in sloth. We must take three actions and choices to break free from sloth.

Number one: **We must embrace our purpose.** We must renounce the false freedom of this world and embrace our design and our responsibilities and our obligations. As one person I heard put it, “Let them be on you like yoke.” Wear your purpose – don't try to run from it or get out from underneath it – wear your purpose like a yoke.

Being free from sloth means that we desire a relationship with God, a relationship with others, and our work more than we desire comfort and pleasure. Our human nature loves comfort, where little demand is made on our lives. The American dream is to reach retirement age so that we are free of work obligations to pursue what we want. Who doesn't love that? The good news is that God has designed one day a week for us to take a Sabbath, to unwind and relax and be free from the obligations of the other six days. Just as God has designed for us to work, He's designed rest and leisure time – we need down time, and time to enjoy hobbies and entertainment and adventure.

But when our desire for leisure and entertainment becomes more important than our relationship with God or other people or doing His work, these things become idols. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” Sloth is more than just being lazy – it’s a heart issue – it’s a signal that our heart is more gripped by freedom than it is gripped by God’s purpose.

Our primary purpose in life is to know God and love God and pursue God more than anything else, to say with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25). Or the Apostle Paul who says in Philippians 3:7-8, “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” When our hearts are gripped by the love and grace of Christ, everything else in life will pale in comparison. Pursuing a relationship with Him will be our primary purpose.

To be free from sloth we must embrace our purpose, and second, we must **prioritize around our purpose**. There is a universal truth, and that is that we all have time to do what we want to do. We may be super busy, and we complain about not having enough time, but we always end up doing what is most important to us. When our lives are focused on God’s purposes, it is vital that we prioritize around those purposes, and follow the example of Jesus.

Jesus’ time on earth was very short, and yet He was laser-focused on His purpose. When He came to the end of His life He could say, “I have finished the things which you gave me to do.” He could say that He used the time before His ministry to learn and study and contribute to the well-being of His family by working with His hands as a carpenter. Jesus could say that He prioritized spending time alone with His Father, rising early each morning to seek guidance and commune with God. He could say that He poured out His life in ministry to people – traveling from village to village serving people, healing people, and taking time for children and interruptions. And He could say that He completed His mission for which He came to earth by giving His life as a sacrifice for sin.

We all have time and energy for what we want to do, but given that life is short, we must choose what is most important. In John 9:4 Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.” We are only given so much time in this life to fulfill God’s purposes, and we must take advantage of the precious opportunities we have. We only have one shot at this life, so we should make it count.

Perhaps you’ve heard the illustration by Stephen Covey about the big rocks and the little rocks. In front of a group of students, Covey filled a jar up with big rocks, and asked his students if the jar was full. They all said yes. He then proceeded to pour gravel into the jar, which filled in all the gaps. He asked if the jar was now full, and they all said yes. He then took a pitcher of water and poured into the jar, filling up any possible remaining space. He then made his point: If you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all. Every day there are multiple things that vie for our attention, and we have to make sure we prioritize what is most important. Otherwise, the little, trivial things will quickly consume our lives and leave no time or energy for the important things.

To free ourselves from sloth, we must embrace our purpose, prioritize our lives around our purpose, and third, we must **stick to our purpose**. We must stay under the yoke. We must resist the desire to be free of responsibilities and obligations, to be lazy and take the path of least resistance.

The opposite of sloth is diligence – it’s perseverance – it’s not quitting but staying with the job until you get it done. Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). To be free from sloth, we must practice self-discipline and say “no” to the comforts and pleasures that seek to pull us away from our purpose.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy, “Train yourself to be godly” (1 Timothy 4:7). God is the one who works in us – it’s by the power of the Holy Spirit that we accomplish His purposes – but it requires cooperation and effort on our part. The word “train” speaks of discipline and daily habits that are required to meet a goal. An athlete doesn’t just show up on the field and accomplish their goal of winning – they train – they lift weights, they run, they eat right, they go to bed early – they renounce their freedoms for the larger goal of winning the prize. They wear the yoke of responsibility.

A large part of overcoming sloth is developing new habits and routines, it’s through repetition where you do the same things over and over until it becomes a way of life. I’ve always heard it said that it takes about a month to develop a new habit. Whether it’s a month or more than a month, to overcome bad habits you must replace them with healthy habits that help you accomplish God’s purposes.

It starts with spending daily time with the Lord in which you slow down – you hit the pause button on everything else – you set your phone aside – and commune with the Lord – you talk to Him and you listen to Him – you pursue a relationship with Him. Some days your quiet time with the Lord will be fantastic and some days it will be a grind – but you stay at it – you develop a routine and fight off the temptation to do trivial things – and over time this new habit will pay off and pursuing God will become a way of life.

The same is true in developing habits in your relationships with others. You discipline yourself to nourishing your marriage and spending time with family. You discipline yourself to routinely coming to church – you come Sunday after Sunday after Sunday to where it’s a way of life. And over time it will make a huge difference – just by sticking to your purpose.

And it’s true when it comes to your work. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. If you’re a student, be the best student you can be. If you’re an employee, be the best worker you can be. If you’re retired, do everything in your power to serve God with the time He gives you.

One Christian author named Kevin Lehman was intrigued by how the book of Proverbs singled out the ant as a good model of hard work and industry, so he decided to buy an ant farm and sat it in his office and observed these little ants as they went about their business. After a few hours of observing, he said, “What am I doing this for? These ants aren’t doing anything.” He went away for a week and when he came back, they had built an entire city. He was amazed. At first sight it did not appear as though they were doing anything – all they could carry was one little grain of sand. But each grain eventually built a city.

Overcoming sloth happens one grain at a time, where you embrace God’s purpose for your life and prioritize all you do around His purpose, and you stick to that purpose one grain at a time until fulfilling God’s purpose becomes a way of life.