

Proverbs 19:15
Matthew 25:26
Romans 8:22-25
II Thessalonians 3:6-13

A YEAR TO REMEMBER
WEEK EIGHTEEN

SLOTH

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

PRIDE

ENVY

ANGER

SLOTH

GREED – GENEROSITY

GLUTTONY – TEMPERANCE

LUST – LOVE

It is getting harder and harder to preach these sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins because I keep wanting to stop and tell you all the interesting conversations I am having because of them. For instance, a young person who missed the sermon on lust but read it later came to me and said, “You say lust is about power, not about sex, and that lust kills sex. But I don’t think that’s right. When I think about having complete control over a woman, it’s sexy as hell.”

Think being a preacher is a piece of cake? Every Sunday you open your mouth – ready or not – and each week you only make more trouble for yourself. Aren’t kids great?! Nobody was going to put some idiot theory over on this young man. Plus he *wanted* to know – honest, open, and straight to the point. (I would love to stop and ask how each of you would have replied.)

So I said to him: You are right, of course, but it’s an aberration, like a mirage. You imagine the situation in your mind and it seems very sexy. That is the power of lust’s temptation. And if you were actually to experience what you imagine, it might be a tremendously exhilarating and sexual experience. But lust is a Deadly Sin. It kills sexuality. When you kill something, it generally puts up quite a fuss for a little while. For a brief period, lust seems to enhance sexuality. But if you actually gain control over a woman and use her as a thing, the potential for real relationship will shrivel almost instantly. The sexual appeal itself will not only die very quickly, it will actually reverse. You will feel loathing or repulsion for the very person who once attracted you so strongly.

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My young friend then asked me, “How do you know these things?” I know he recognized that I was telling him the truth. I could see it in his eyes. We are born knowing more than we let on, especially to ourselves. But now he wanted to play games. So I said, “My mommy told me.”

I also told him that he could find out in two ways: he could watch and listen to others, or he could find out for himself. And that whichever way he chose, he could know with equal certainty, but that the second way would cause him and a lot of others great pain. And I told him that, among other things, I read the Scriptures and the saints and the fathers of the church – St. Augustine, for instance. And I made him promise to read the thirteenth chapter of Second Samuel. And I hope you will too, because some of you had the same questions and reactions as my young friend, but you have not had an opportunity to mention it to me yet.

After that conversation, we got to talking about the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins. When we came to sloth, he said, “Sloth? Yuck! What’s that?” Since then, I have talked to many people who literally could not recall ever having heard the word “sloth,” and who did not have any kind of definition in mind. Starting with people in their late forties, familiarity with the word increased, taking a dramatic jump from those in their sixties on up. Apparently three generations of people have not even *heard* of one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Moreover, those who *had* heard of sloth were not much closer to its real meaning than those who had not. They all identified it with laziness. When pressed for an explanation, they said sloth referred to people who were too lazy to work for a living, like people on welfare who should not be. Pressing further, I got nowhere. Why was it deadly? Because it was bad for the economy. Were retired people or wealthy people slothful? No; retired people had already done their work and earned their keep. Rich people could not be slothful because they would not be a burden on the state.

In summary, sloth seemed to be a vague sort of sin, applied to nobody we knew personally, but “a lot of shiftless people out there somewhere are not carrying their fair share of the load, and it’s making it really hard on the rest of us honest, hard-working folk.” I gathered that sloth is the basic insult to the so-called Protestant work ethic. So I have really tried to get an understanding of what

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the concept means in our day. My dictionary says: “aversion to work or exertion; laziness; indolence; sluggishness” (also, “a flock of bears”).

Sloth (which means “slow” in Old English) is actually a lazy and inadequate translation of a much more powerful concept. Two different words appear in this slot, depending on whose list of the Seven Deadly Sins you are using. Gregory the Great calls it “melancholy” – Latin, from the Greek *melankholia*. It means an excess of black bile: sadness, gloom.

Sloth does not mean lazy; it means depressed! At least that’s the word in today’s language that comes closest to what the ancients were talking about. Depression is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and anybody who has ever messed with it knows how deadly it can be.

“But that’s not fair,” you say. “Depression is a disease.” Ain’t it the truth! Aren’t they all! “I know,” you say, “but if I’m depressed, I cannot help it.” Then I cannot help it if I am lustful either, and the gluttonous say they cannot help it, and the greedy say they cannot help it.

They are all diseases – the very worst – and not one of us feels we can help it or extricate ourselves if we ever get very deep into any of them. That’s the way it is with the Seven Deadly Sins, and that’s what they are about. Funny how the depressed can look at the lustful and say, “But you could do something about your behavior if you really wanted to.” The greedy look at the gluttonous and say the same, and so on.

An even more famous name for sloth appears on many lists. Thomas Aquinas uses *acedia* instead of melancholy: *a* = not, plus *kedos* = care. I not care! The most devastating and inhuman sentiment in any language: I don’t care. Depression, aimlessness, purposelessness, boredom, listlessness, loss of meaning. The slothful become slow and lazy and stop striving or producing because they have too much black bile – because they become depressed, lose their way, or lose their purpose. No human being is ever lazy, but we can lose our incentive, our purpose, and our aim, and begin to wonder if there is anything left worth striving for. “Lazy” is only a lazy word for the deeper problems of depression and loss of incentive. Sloth means to stop caring.

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T.S. Eliot describes it in the poem “Ash Wednesday”:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn

And in “Choruses from ‘The Rock’”:

There is no beginning, no movement, no peace and no end
But noise without speech, food without taste....
And the wind shall say: “Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls.”

In ancient writings, sloth is a sin of terrible magnitude. Sloth is the cause of ignorance. The ancients perceived that human beings do not spend sufficient time and conscious effort to become spiritually aware – to come awake to true identity or discover purpose under God. Ignorance is considered no excuse. We are ignorant because we have not cared enough to spend our “forty days in the wilderness,” our “nights in prayer,” our Sabbath days in studying the Scriptures.

The Buddha puts tremendous emphasis on strenuousness – meaning, the strenuousness of spiritual discipline and development. In all the great spiritual paths of the world, there is a strange mixture of calm and patience together with urgency. “It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God’s will for our own lives on a daily basis.” Some of us get tired of hearing that, especially if we do not do it. And if we do not do it, we corrupt or trivialize whatever contribution we are supposed to be making to the church, to the people of God, to life.

The very core of the concept of sloth is spiritual indifference. It can take many forms. Helen Luke puts her finger on the real concept rather than on a rigid definition, as she comments on Dante’s “Purgatorio”: “Always the suffering is precisely the sin itself known in the perception of its true effect on the individual (or collective) psyche. The envious, for example, sit with sealed eyes unable to see anything, for envy kills all true discrimination of values; the wrathful are choked and blinded by the smoke from their burning fires of resentment; the slothful never stop running and that is particularly obvious in

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the driven busyness which is the bane of our society and which is, fundamentally, a slothful escape from the hard work of the journey within.” (*Dark Wood to White Rose: Journey and Transformation in Dante’s Divine Comedy*)

Depression and workaholism – two of the greatest banes of our time – are both synonyms for sloth. If you are hoping I am making this all up and you want to chide me for always changing the meanings of our words, what are you going to do with Dante? Or let me quote from Thomas Aquinas: “We might say that all the sins which are due to ignorance can be reduced to sloth, to which pertains the negligence by which a man refuses to acquire spiritual goods because of the attendant labor; for the ignorance that can cause sin is due to negligence” (Question 84, Article 4, Reply to Objection 5)

Aquinas put *acedia* at the bottom of his list of sins because, as he imagined it, we sink down through the sins to a lower and lower state. Finally we sink into ignorance and depression: we lose sight of God’s will and purpose, feel despair, and no longer see any reason for striving to extricate ourselves from the black hole. Sloth is at the bottom because it is most death-like – nearest to death. So sloth means avoidance of the thought, study, and discipline necessary to make spiritual progress.

It makes me wonder more and more about what sort of values I have mindlessly taken in from the society I live in. Ease is better than effort. Great strenuousness takes place in the hope of gaining a place of ease. Leisure is the goal of life, is it not? How many days have I spent daydreaming of one day getting to a place where I will have no more hard challenges? If I can just make it through this one more big problem or struggle or issue, then maybe the road ahead will smooth out and I can have a calm, peaceful, prosperous future.

Is that really what we want from life? From God? From our friends? From the church? To be put out to pasture – to be told nothing more is required of us? The Kingdom moves on, the battle surely continues, and so many people still have so many needs – including our affection, respect, and encouragement – and we do not want to be part of it? Sometimes I think our whole culture is in the throes of some kind of low-grade depression.

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Maybe another word for sloth is exhaustion. It is indeed a Deadly Sin to be so out of touch with our Lord that we work ourselves into a state of exhaustion: I not care.

“I am ashes where once I was fire, and the bard in my bosom is dead; what I loved I now merely admire, and my heart is as grey as my head.” (Lord Byron) I used to love that poem. Self-pity plays a very big part in sloth, alias depression. Some dirty so-and-so finally pointed out to me that the reason I get burned out is because I do not bank the fires. I try to do it all alone, without God or my friends – with no trust in God, with no faith. So what else could I expect, except to end up exhausted, depressed, and burned out?

The matching virtue has to be hope. Hope is vision: an awareness of the Kingdom in our midst – always growing; something to be part of; something apart from which no effort or labor seems worthwhile for very long. In the presence of God, we have hope, and our hope is continually renewed. Without that presence, it’s only a matter of time before we sink into *acedia*: I not care.

This time the Holy Spirit has buried a hook in Satan’s schemes. Exhausted, depressed, burned-out people eventually come to a standstill – to a place where they do nothing, or do as little as possible. If it gets severe enough, they even turn off the television and just stare into space. And then sometimes they sink into the secret: *“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles”* (Isaiah 40:31) Poor Satan has to start all over again.

Sloth is the first of a new category within the Seven Deadly Sins. Lust, gluttony, and greed have focused us on the external affairs. They are terrible enough, and we can see how they are the sources for deeds and behavior that corrupt and foul the earth.

The second three sins are more devastating still. They move to interior battles: Why bother? Who cares? Who am I? Many saints who learn to handle lust, gluttony, and greed are still picked off by sloth. Likewise, hope is a much higher virtue than temperance. (I am not talking about optimism, which would not survive ten seconds against an enemy as powerful as sloth.)

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As we consider the second three, we are surveying the field of the enemy against us, checking the terrain we must travel through. Some people think it is weak or cheating to look for or need a companion for the WAY. Against the Seven Deadly Sins, if the choice is to walk alone, no human has a chance. So far in human history, those who have claimed it otherwise have proved it most.

If you do not want to go with Jesus, find someone you trust more, but try not to pick someone who is already an agent for one of the Seven Deadly Sins. If we try it alone, that is how we end up – an agent for one of the Seven.