

*The Seven Deadly Sins 3: Sloth*

Matthew 25:1-13; James 1:22-25; 2:14-17

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Sloth is the one deadly sin that has the unique honor of having an animal named after it. Oh sure, animals are often associated with certain sins: peacocks with pride, pigs with gluttony. But the sloth was actually named for the deadly sin. If you've ever seen a sloth, you can understand why those first missionaries to Madagascar would have thought of the name. In all the times I've visited the sloth at our zoo, only once have I ever seen it move. Still, it hardly seems fair – or Christian! – to name an innocent animal after a sin. Besides, it's a rather whimsical way to treat a sin that is described as deadly.

Still, it is tempting to treat sloth frivolously. Compared to the more dramatic ones like anger or lust, sloth seems lightweight. For these sermons I've been reading a series of lectures on the seven deadly sins, and I was disappointed to find sloth treated as a spoof of self-help books. Why stress over diet and learning and other attempts at self-improvement? Sloth your way to happiness and contentment! The author even suggested sloth as a cure for the other deadly sins because they take too much effort.

It's not really surprising, though, that we Americans would mock sloth. Sloth is not really one of our big sins. We are the nation, after all, that introduced the Protestant work ethic to the world. Americans almost by definition are productive, industrious and hard-working. We get fewer vacation days than any other industrialized nation in the world, and yet we rarely use all of those vacation days. You could make a good case that busyness is America's deadly sin. But in this we are perhaps unique.

Eight years ago I was traveling in Spain, where they still have blue laws. Everything is closed on Sundays, which was horribly inconvenient to me, the industrious American tourist who was trying to hit all the required sights in as efficient a manner as possible. Since I had nothing else to do on Sundays, I went to hang out in a little park, and there I found scores of dads pushing their kids around in strollers, or kicking soccer balls with their kids, or having a siesta on the grass with their kids. All dads and all kids: now that's a sight I have never seen in the US. The US, where we emphasize productivity, yet fathers spend an average of 30 minutes a week talking to their kids. That's four and a half minutes a day! In that Spanish park I had an epiphany, that maybe we in the US chose the lesser part when we put productivity ahead of leisure and rest.

But I said at the beginning of this series that I didn't want to become an apologist for these sins, looking for their good side. Rather, I want to take them seriously, to look at why the church would call them deadly, and since the book I read took it so lightly, I had to seek elsewhere for insight.

I found it in a history of the deadly sins. You see, originally there were eight, and sloth was not one of them. In its place were sadness and something called "acedias," which I had to look up. It means apathy or boredom. Now, if sloth seems like a strange thing to call a sin, surely sadness and boredom are even stranger! But think about that condition which we now call depression. Today we see depression not as an emotional state but as a mental illness. But look at the symptoms: a general malaise, a lack of appetite, excessive sleeping. But more than that. People who are depressed take no interest in anything around them, not even their family and friends. They cut themselves off from the world, wrap themselves in a

blanket and stay in bed because they can't muster up the energy to care. I'm not saying that depression should be labeled a deadly sin, but before it was understood as an illness, you can see how it could have been interpreted that way.

These, then, are the characteristics of sloth and its forebears, sadness, apathy and boredom. Sloth means isolating yourself, not caring about anything or anyone around you. It means indifference or apathy, even a loss of hope. It means losing interest even in the simple pleasures and joys of life: good food, music, companionship, even a good nap – because sleep itself becomes a quest for oblivion, not rest.

With this understanding, then, can we see how we today might be guilty of sloth? Ironically our very busyness and productivity can be symptoms of sloth, a way to keep ourselves occupied so we don't have to deal with our friends and families, and we don't have to engage the world around us. The spoof book on sloth made one insightful comment in describing über sloths, people who do a lot of things, whose calendars are always full and who are constantly running here and there, yet who accomplish nothing meaningful in their lives, people whose lives are busy but empty.

Our modern culture of infotainment has a lot of sloth-like qualities. Just look at all of our electronic gadgets: the internet, cell phones, video games, iPods, and large-screen TVs. None of these things are bad in and of themselves, but they do make it very easy for us to cut ourselves off from one another.

When I was a youth minister in Houston, we'd pile the kids into the church van to go somewhere, and all the kids would immediately plug themselves in to their iPods and sit staring silently out the window. In my day, we couldn't escape that way. We had to talk to each other! Or the time I was in a restaurant and saw a man and his kid sitting eating together. Yet throughout the entire meal the dad was talking on his phone, while the kid sat eating in silence.

Even the plethora of news magazines and stations, blogs and podcasts can be slothful. We usually think it's a virtue to be well informed. Yet that endless stream of news about hurricanes and earthquakes, about genocide and terrorism, about all the complicated mess of politics – all of that "news" can be overwhelming. It can create a spirit of paranoia, as when we hype up stories about kids being snatched from Wal-Mart bathrooms by predatory strangers – even though 95% of abducted kids are taken by a family member in a custody disputes. Or it can create a sense of helplessness and apathy, as when people feel that there's nothing they can do in the face of so many problems in the world.

These are the symptoms of sloth: when we're involved in so many activities that we never see our loved ones; when we know so much that we are paralyzed into inaction; when we are so used to instant gratification that we lose the ability to slow down and savor life.

What, then, is the cure for this malaise? The heavenly virtue that counteracts sloth is diligence. Think about that. The opposite isn't productivity, but diligence. That's a word that I can use, but I can't really define, so I had to look it up in the dictionary. It can mean haste or speed, but it also means persistent application; careful, unremitting attention. Not busyness, but alertness.

Finding biblical passages on sloth was quite difficult, but this story of the wise and foolish maidens fits the bill well, though it never mentions sloth. Think about it: it's not that the wise maidens were bustling about making lots of oil and setting the table or anything. In fact, when the bridegroom was delayed, all of them lay down for a nap! What distinguished the wise ones was their readiness, their attention to details that enabled them to respond when the time finally came. The foolish ones were not attentive. They were not prepared.

Keeping that in mind, consider the letter of James where the apostle urges us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Indeed, I am reminded of our obsession with news, an obsession that rarely leads to action. What does it profit you to have faith but no works? James asks. Faith by itself without works is dead. In other words, faith must move us to action, to readiness and attentive care for one another. Faith is no virtue if we don't throw off our sloth and do something about it.

As we look at our model, Jesus, we see that he was hardly the king of productivity and busywork. That wasn't the point! Jesus could get busy when he needed to, but he could also party and pray and even take a break for a rest. Sometimes we read of him gathered with a crowd, sometimes he's meeting with just a few people, and sometimes he's even off by himself. What distinguished Jesus was not how full his day planner was, or how many Email addresses and phone numbers he had in his Blackberry. Rather what marked him was his careful, unremitting attention to whoever or whatever was before him: whether a Roman soldier or a poor leper; whether it was the sacred scroll in the synagogue or a meal with his friends. Jesus did not fall prey to sloth. He was not apathetic or uninvolved. Quite the contrary. And he never lost hope.