

Sloth

SCOTT HOEZEE

In nature, the animal known as the sloth is a wonder of inactivity. Sloths always look like they have been filmed in slow motion and that is when they are moving at all. If you see a sloth in a zoo, odds are it will be sound asleep and wrapped around a tree branch. When it comes to the sin of sloth, a lot of people think that is what sloth is; it is laziness, it is the couch potato, it is having low energy in life; but is that really what the deadly sin of sloth is? Or is it something that can consume perfectly active people, too? Today on Groundwork, let's think about sloth.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I a Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are continuing this series on the traditional list of sins called the seven deadly sins. Today we come to a sin that is often rather misunderstood. As we have been saying all along, these are more attitudes than actions, and so we want to think today about what is the attitude of sloth, and if these attitudes of the deadly sins give rise to actions, what are the actions, or maybe in this case the lack of action, that sloth gives rise to?

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; I think this is probably the hardest one for modern people to get a handle on. We know what anger is, clearly, and we know what gluttony is, and we know what lust is, certainly, to our shame; but, what is sloth, and am I guilty of it? I like to relax and maybe take a nap in the afternoon or watch a football game and lie on the couch. Am I a slothful person?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Most people hear the word *sloth*, if they even have heard of it at all; it is probably not even the most common word; of the seven deadly sins, it is the least common word to a lot of people, but if they know anything about it, they probably think it is just that as I said a minute ago, a couch potato, mere laziness, just not being very industrious, and that is part of it. Even in the Bible, especially in places like Proverbs, you get warnings like this. This is from Proverbs 6:6ff:

⁶Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. ⁷It has no commander or overseer or ruler, ⁸and yet it stores provisions in summer, and gathers its food at harvest. ⁹How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? ¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

DAVE BAST

Right. Yes, laziness is bad and we are warned against it, not only in the Old Testament, but I think of what Paul wrote – I think he was writing to the Thessalonians – where he said, “If a person will not work, let him not eat.” That is bad, but that is really not getting at the heart of the deadly sin of sloth; a sin that, incidentally, the ancients called *acedia*. Actually, all of these, because the list is traditional, go way back to the early Church. They all have Latin names; and *acedia* was the noonday sin, according to the monks. It was a sin that was especially common in the monastery, interestingly enough. They were really concerned with

this one because they would have this rhythm of prayer and worship and work and about the middle of the day when it began to be a struggle to get on with your duty, to do what was next, that is what they meant by the noonday sin. The sin that took over and built in inertia and made you just want to quit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And quit not just work, but also quit having interest in the very things of God that were supposed to consume your thoughts and the rhythm of your prayer life. *Acedia*, the sloth, as we now call it, as much as anything else, it was not so much laziness as it was boredom – just being bored; bored with creation, bored with songbirds and mountains and sunsets, bored with morality or virtue; everything is just a yawn, and you do not get excited about things that you should get excited about because they are the things of God.

DAVE BAST

There is a great quote, I think, from Dorothy Sayers; we have mentioned her in earlier programs in this series. She wrote a little book, now probably 50 to 75 years ago on the seven deadly sins, and this is how she describes sloth: It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There you go. So, prayer is boring for this kind of person; sermons are boring, church is boring, songs are boring, everything is boring, lifeless, colorless; but, it might be useful to point out at this point, just in case some are wondering about this; some of this will correctly sound to some people like, “Well, that sounds a lot like depression, clinical depression.” I think it is important to point out that, even though depression shares some characteristics with sloth, being depressed is not itself a sin. It is a condition, a medical condition that needs to be treated, even though it does bear some resemblance to some of what we are saying.

DAVE BAST

Right. Yes, that is really important. We have tried to distinguish this from laziness, which is a problem and which we are warned against. Depression really is an illness, and it is a terrible illness, as anyone who has struggled with a loved one, or perhaps they have had it themselves, and it will have a lot of the same symptoms; but, in sloth we are talking about healthy people. We are talking about people with normal brain chemistry, normal psychology, and yet they are apathetic.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They do not care. The author, Henry Fairlie, who years ago wrote a book on it, said: One of the ways you can see where sloth shows up in perfectly healthy, active people, people who are not lazy in the least, they go to the gym and they work, but one of the ways sloth shows up today is in tolerance of everything. Relativism. He said, “Here is where you hear sloth in our culture today. Whenever you hear people say, ‘Live and let live, hang loose, go with the flow, don’t get uptight, play it cool, I’m okay, you’re okay, don’t ever get into a twist about anything, just live and let live.’” Fairlie says that is called sloth. There is a moral boredom, a moral inactivity and inertia behind that, which is finally going to hurt God’s creation and other people by not standing up for the right.

DAVE BAST

Well, if you happened to hear our last program, which was looking at the sin of anger, we pointed out there that there is a time when we ought to be angry and there is such a thing as moral indignation, and anger is called for in the face of grievous harm being done to others, being done to God’s creation. For example, ecological sin or exploitation of others, and anger is the sin that makes us address those things and drives us to do something. Sloth is just the exact opposite of that. You look at all of that and you say, “Eh, that is somebody else’s business. You know, I don’t care that much. I’m not going to judge.” Again, we often then pose as if this is some virtue – there is a virtuous kind of tolerance, where we respect other people and their beliefs and their opinions – but the apathy that just says, “I don’t care. It’s not my problem.” That is a deadly sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Most of the time when we think of sins and actions that are sins, we think of, indeed, active things. You steal something, you hit somebody, you break a window, you say something you shouldn't; but, sloth gives rise to what has traditionally been called sins of omission. Things you should have done, words of encouragement you should have spoken, but you just did not have the energy to do it, and so you did not do anything, you did not say anything. That is the kind of sin that sloth gives rise to.

DAVE BAST

The really deadly thing about it is that this sin can cut us off or almost insulate us against the work of God's Spirit in our life. He is called the Holy Spirit for a reason; because He prompts us, not just to avoid wrong things, but to do the right things. When we come back, we are going to look at a Bible story that shows us the power of sloth in action as a guide to how we might combat this sin.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today we are talking about the deadly sin of sloth and we are trying to get a handle on it, help people understand what it isn't. It is not, on the one hand, just mere laziness or simple garden-variety laziness, nor is it the disease of depression – the psychological condition that can certainly hurt people. It is, rather, something more along the lines of moral indifference; of a kind of anything goes; the catch phrase, "Whatever," or, "Neh, so what, so what?" That is sloth, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things preachers often do, and we talk about these things, and that we have been trying to do here on Groundwork as well, is to find Bible stories to illustrate this. It is kind of hard to do for sloth; there aren't too many; but there is one story in Matthew Chapter 8, which I am going to read for a moment. You might not think this has anything to do with sloth, but it actually does and we will explain why in a moment. From Matthew 8, beginning at verse 28:

²⁸When Jesus arrived on the other side, in the region of the Gergesenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. ²⁹"What do you want with us, Son of God?" They shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" ³⁰Some distance from them, a large herd of pigs was feeding, ³¹and the demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into that herd of pigs." ³²And He said to them, "Go." So, they came out and went into the pigs and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. ³³Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all of this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. ³⁴Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus, and when they saw Him, they pleaded with Him to leave their region.

DAVE BAST

Well, there are a lot of interesting things going on in that story, but one of the most interesting is the very last line; the reaction of these people who have just seen an incredible act of healing and deliverance. Here is a completely demonized person who is absolutely being tormented, and Jesus sets him free, and their only reaction is, "Would you please leave."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nobody could pass that way. It was a dangerous situation. In addition to a miracle, which it was, in addition to an eye-popping spectacle, which it was, it was a community service. Things were safer now. You wouldn't have to worry about your kids walking down that one road because the demon possessed guys are going to get them; and yet, they say, "Leave." Why? Well, this is where some commentators think the sin of sloth is

here. If God moves into the neighborhood, things might change. What is going to change next? We lost a herd of pigs, what is next? It is easier to stay the way we are, easier to just not do what needs doing, live and let live, and this guy is shaking things up, so get out of here. The power of God had moved into their neighborhood and they say, "Leave."

DAVE BAST

Here is the other side of the coin, perhaps. If we see an illustration of the problem here, the Apostle Paul gives us an encouragement to combat this sin, to persevere in doing what God calls us to do in undertaking that change that He wants to bring in our lives, and this is a text from Galatians Chapter 6; I will start at verse 7:

⁷Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow. ⁸Those who sow to please their sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction. Those who sow to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is Paul, encouraging us to keep on keeping on; to not give in to the slothful tendency of saying, "Things aren't going to change in my life. Things aren't going to change in my church. It is what it is; let it go, let it slide." And Paul is saying, "Don't do that; don't do that." We all get tired; we all want to give up and just give in to whatever. Paul says, "Don't do that."

DAVE BAST

Yes. There is a wonderful verb, really a command, in this verse, where he says, "Let us not become weary in doing good." That is a paraphrase; what he literally writes is, "Let's not loosen our belts." If you think back, you maybe have heard this explained before, but in the ancient world men wore robes; and when they had any work to do or any task, the first thing they had to do was to gather that robe up and put a belt on; which is why in the older translations of the Bible, it says things like gird up your loins, which is weird to us, but what he is really saying is, roll up your sleeves and spit on your hands and get going. And here Paul says, "Don't quit. Don't take your belt off and let your robes fall back down." You keep going because in due season we are promised at the right time. You do not get a harvest in the spring; not usually; not in our part of the world. The harvest comes in the fall. The spring is for planting, the fall is for harvesting, and that is how it is with obeying God, with serving God, with doing good.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we help each other do that with the importance of community here. Individually we do get tired. What is interesting, when you think about sloth, even in some of its caricature versions, you think of the solo person, off by themselves saying, "Whatever." Paul is saying in community you encourage each other to keep on keeping on, and we can do this together. We can encourage each other, not to get tired or sick and tired, of doing good things, but you keep on. And you help each other to do what is necessary. Doing good in a world that has fallen is work, and sometimes it is frustrating work.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think we have all been there, where we have felt perhaps the uselessness of further effort. It is significant that Paul is speaking to the Church here: Let us not grow weary. Because the community is the key, and if you drop out, then you are really going to be in danger of giving into the sin of sloth; but as long as we hang together and keep persevering, there is a law at work, Paul says, a spiritual law: You are going to reap what you sow. So, if you are sowing to your sinful nature; if what you are planting is, you know, the kind of actions and the kind of behavior that ends in death, then that is the harvest you are going to have; but, as long as you are still planting to the Spirit, to life, to obedience, to good works, then from that habitual lifetime you will reap a harvest of eternal life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a harvest of joy and aliveness, even for now. Sloth cuts us off from all of that. Sloth will never let us get at the joy; and so, what can we do, in community as we talk with each other to recharge our joy, to recharge our aliveness? We will wonder about that in just a moment.

BREAK: 0:16:59.0]

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are talking about the deadly sin of sloth and we have seen some examples of that in action. We have heard from Paul as he urges us not to grow weary in doing well, in doing what is right. Do not become discouraged, do not give up, do not give up the ship, do not quit, because there is a harvest that will come in God's own time, as long as we are faithful and keep going.

Let's talk now, Scott, about some of the practical things. This is somewhat theoretical so far. What are the things that we can do to encourage either ourselves or one another as a community of followers of Jesus to hang in there and keep going?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And also to be able to be motivated to hang in there and keep going by getting excited about the right things. One of the things we said earlier in this program, Dave, was that one of the key things of sloth is that you are just bored. Nothing excites you, or you are excited about the wrong things. You are excited when your football team wins or when you find your favorite flavor of potato chips in the cupboard: Oh, that's exciting! But the things that should excite you, the beauty of creation, moral beauty, virtue, service, that just elicits a yawn. So, how do you do that? You know the traditional prayer: O Lord, restore to me the joy of Your salvation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, wonderful word from the Psalms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the prayer of, not someone who has never had faith, they have had faith, they are losing their fervor. What can we do to keep the fervor and to not give in to the temptation to say, "Nothing matters." How might the Holy Spirit work in us to restore that kind of joy?

DAVE BAST

There are some obvious answers to that, and one of them has to do with avoiding what you know to be downers for you. It is easy to look at the negative and focus on that, and there is a sort of soul-eroding effect of the wrong kinds of television programs or movies, or even today – let's name it and be specific – websites. I know people who are always reading a news site, for example, that is slanted in a certain way that reinforces their pessimism. It is all about how horrible things are and how the battle is being taken to us and we are losing and things are slipping away, and oh dear, oh my, and maybe even conspiracy theories.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or cynicism.

DAVE BAST

There are places where we just have to say, "I am not going to feed that part of me."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or even, as anybody who is on Facebook knows, there are some people, and all of the things that they post on Facebook are just downers, and they are negative, and oh, the politicians are bad, and this is bad, and this is stupid... Don't read that stuff. Don't click "Like" on that. Get away from things that are going to bring you down, and instead, ask God to help expose you to things that could bring you joy.

I think of the great Psalm 63, where the psalmist says:

¹“You, God, are my God. Earnestly I seek You. I thirst for You. My whole being longs for You in a dry and parched land where there is no water. ²I have seen You in the sanctuary. I have beheld Your power and Your glory. ³Because Your love is better than life.”

So, as the Psalmist, you say, “I have to get excited about the right things,” and that starts with God, and seeing God in my everyday life, and being enthused about it.

DAVE BAST

Or God’s creation. Get outside and look at beauty; enjoy; praise the Creator for His wonderful works; the marvelous things that He has done. Read a good book. Listen to good music. Feed that side of your soul and then let it engage you, and fight against the kind of despair. We mentioned *acedia*, the ancient word for the sin of sloth, and if you let sloth go long enough, where it leads to ultimately is despair. And despair is about as horrible a place as you can get to. So, to combat that, we need to feed our souls with beauty and what is positive and all that, but feed our faith with the promises of God’s Word. In the end, He will do something with our efforts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And His beautiful creation, which Jesus died to redeem, tells us that. It reminds me, many people are probably not familiar with this film some years ago called, *Grand Canyon*. It was set in Los Angeles; it was about a half-dozen people whose lives were tough. There was gang violence in Los Angeles. There was a marriage that was on the rocks. The whole movie charts sadness and things that could lead you to despair. Just to say, “Nothing matters. Nothing is ever going to get better.” But, at the very, very end of the movie – this is where the title of the movie comes from – one of the characters organizes a trip for all of these people whose lives have somehow come together and they go to the Grand Canyon in Arizona and they stand on the lip of the canyon and there are no words, they just stare out; including this young, tough kid who just seemed like the epitome of cynicism, and his face softens, and they look at the canyon, and the last line of the movie is: One character says to the other, “Well, what do you think?” And the guy says, “I think, it’s not all bad.” Something revived in them through the beauty of creation. That is one way to combat sloth. Go see something beautiful and remember, God made it; God redeemed it; it has a future.

DAVE BAST

And then, remember these promises from scripture as well. I love the way I Corinthians 15 ends. It is the great chapter on the resurrection and the promise that death is not the end – death is not the end for us – because Christ has been raised, we have hope. We are not, of all people, most to be pitied. And then Paul talks about how it is going to be different. We cannot really imagine it. But at the very end, that great passage: Death, where is your sting; grave, where is your victory? And then he concludes with an exhortation:

⁵⁸Therefore, brothers and sisters, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is never in vain.

I just think, nothing we do in the name of Christ or for the good of another is ever lost. It is never wasted. It is never futile.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why even the lowliest acts of service, and service as well, and engaging in virtuous work, also combats sloth. Every little thing you do matters because in our Father’s Kingdom, it endures. And in that there is hope and a way to combat *acedia* or sloth.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/sloth>

Printed on February 22, 2025

©  ReFrame Ministries