

The Hard-to-Define Deadly Sin of Sloth

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2 Samuel 11:1-5, Matthew 9: 35-38

A number of years ago, Dave Roy and I were standing where some of you are seated. There wasn't a building at the time. We were trying to determine the best location for a sign, when a fellow in an ultralight airplane swooped down and landed nearby. What's going on?

We told him there was going to be a church building on the site, and that did not set well with him. After telling us that this piece of ground was his favorite landing strip, and that he hoped our plans fell through, he flew off. And not only that, but a couple of days earlier I'd had a conversation with an acquaintance who had long lived in this neighborhood. He wished the church would go elsewhere. This was where he changed the oil in his car.

What to do? I suppose we could have flipped this land. Sold it to someone wanting a landing strip and a Lube-it-Yourself franchise, but there were a number of us who believed at the time that a church here mattered. And others who have believed it ever since. This in spite of THE ILLNESS of our times, which is being unable to find anything that matters, anything to care about, a cause in which to invest our lives.

Dorothy Sayers, the great mystery writer as well as commentator on the Christian faith, wrote that this illness "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." Its name: sloth.

Sloth is one of the seven deadly sins. Remember them? Number one, pride, the bad kind, also known as hubris or arrogance. Number two, envy, or covetousness. "Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's landing strip." Number three, wrath, which too often here in N.M. leads to road rage. Number four, sloth. And number five, six, and seven, the ever popular greed, gluttony, and lust.

We have a fairly good understanding of these with the exception of sloth. Obviously, there's an animal of the same name, but it's different from the sin. The animal is the way it is because of its physiology. The sloth mainly eats leaves, which have little nutrition, and so it moves slowly and sleeps 15 hours a day to conserve energy. It has a very low metabolism. (Actually, when chased by a predator a sloth is rather quick. Also strong. It is said that it is almost impossible to pry its claws apart when wrapped around a branch.)

The roots of the sin of sloth are spiritual, not physical. Dictionaries are by and large secular and miss the point for people of faith when they define sloth as "physical laziness." It's not. For us it's spiritual dejection, spiritual misery. Sloth produces a low level of interest when it comes to doing the right thing, a low metabolism for enjoying the good things God sends our way, and low expectations regarding the future. It's a spiritual malaise.

There was once a movie having to do with the seven deadly sins, titled, of all things, *Seven*. Detectives played by Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt investigate a serial murderer, played by Kevin Spacey, each of whose victims is intended to be a sermon based upon one of the seven deadly sins. This serial murderer is on a rampage because he thinks people regard the seven deadly sins as trivial, which many do, right? So, to make his point he shows just how deadly they are. The first victim, Mr. Gluttony, is forced to eat until he

literally busts a gut and dies. The second victim, Mr. Greed, is bled to death just as he greedily bled others.

The third victim, Mr. Sloth, is tied in a bed, all hope of escape removed, and reduced bit by bit over the course of a year to a state of just being barely alive. And this "barely alive" depiction of the nature of sloth is accurate. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Feel intensely. Enjoy immensely. Act decisively. Sloth is much the opposite of abundant life. Nothing matters. Who cares? Why bother?

Sloth is hard to define. Full-blown sloth is, in essence, suicide by not caring enough to live. (See **footnote** at end.) I don't think anyone intentionally chooses to be this way. Rather, sloth is one of those sins which overtake us, in part, because our thinking is wrong.

Gordon Gecko, of *Wall Street* fame, could say "Greed is good," and people believed him. No one says "Psst! Sloth is good. Want some drugs to make you feel slothy?" Yet, one's experiences and one's perceptions of the way things are contribute to our susceptibility to sloth. Also, I think that most people suffer from much less than a full-blown case. It's not like we think nothing matters 24/7. Still, sloth is fighting for control and calling the shots.

Several Christian commentators say sloth is the sin of our times. I don't know if that's true, but I have a question. If it's not, why do we just sit around and do nothing about the mounting problems of our world? Is it really that there's nothing can be done, or is it we don't care enough to bother?

We do know a bit about the causes of sloth. Os Guinness says, "When life is safe, easy, sanitized, climate-controlled, and plush, sloth is close. When comforts and convenience sap our energies and idealism, inactivity secretes sloth into our minds like a poison in the blood. Then, as lethargy, tedium and futility take over, we progressively lower our ideals and succumb." Instead of a purposeful life, we give in to a life of diversion. Find something to fill our time. Something to distract us from our lack of purpose.

How many times did David undergo hardship leading his army against his foes? Many times, but in our OT lesson he's king and stays in Jerusalem. Now he's enjoying the cushy life. 2nd Samuel says, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all of Israel with him... But David remained at Jerusalem."

And then it happened late one afternoon. David rose from watching U-Tube videos on his couch to flick Cheeto crumbs off his Derek Rose Cashmere hoodie and decided to see what he could see through his new telescope, when all of a sudden we spy an illustration of the seventh deadly sin.

Obviously, the sin of sloth lowers one's resistance to a variety of other sins. If nothing matters, neither do God's laws. The author of 2nd Samuel doesn't excuse David for taking Uriah's wife and then having Uriah placed in battle so he'd be killed to cover David's sin. But he does let us know that David has succumbed to sloth, which has lowered his ideals and sets the stage for poor choices.

Hyman Minsky was an economist who by and large was ignored until the financial crisis of 2008. Then as other economists were trying to figure out what had gone wrong they remembered a bit of what Minsky had said and scampered for copies of his books, which were out of print. But simply put, he said that during times when the economy is cushy, or seems that way, investors are led to excessive optimism and risk-taking in the markets which produce instability, the creation of bubbles that then pop. But that's simply Presbyterianism 101. We have always believed that anything that can go wrong will (and

unexpectedly), and so we'd better not have the regulators chosen by the business they regulate.

Another phenomenon that helps us understand sloth is that although you can catch it at any age, historically it has most often attacked people when they are middle-aged, when the disparity between the life they have and the life they imagined they would have begins to wear them down. Why bother? My life's not going to work out any way.

Young people tend to be idealistic. Young people still think their lives will work out as they want them to. Older people have had time to think things through. And so often, as it turns out, the life they have experienced, which wasn't the one they imagined, hasn't been that bad after all. You can see them in their silver sneakers sitting at IHOPS after an alleged work out at the gym, staring at the 55+ menu. Hey, it hasn't been half bad. Let's celebrate with pancakes!

It's the middle-aged folks, you middle-aged crazies, who haven't yet worked through the disparity between the life you have and the life you imagined you'd have. You're the ones most susceptible to sloth. All I can say is that maybe you should thank God for your bills. Knowing that you have to pay your bills will get you out of bed of a morning and on to work. And though your life may seem like tedium, hang in there with it until you are as smart as older folks. Mind your elders, those of us who realize it's good life in spite of it not working out as we hoped.

Sloth is hard to define, but guess what the big cause is? Loss of faith, which isn't surprising given that God, who cares, is the source of a meaningful life and the answer to why bother. But a world that doesn't even mention God is largely what we get out there anymore. The feeling that life lacks meaning rubs off on us everywhere. So, to combat the barely alive feeling of sloth, it may help to be attached to a church. Listen to the good news of Jesus Christ regularly as opposed to a steady diet of bad news and drivel. Give ourselves over to the purposes of him who came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Feel intensely. Enjoy immensely. Act decisively.

Over against the soul-sapping power of our world stands Jesus, who in our NT lesson cares for all who are harassed and helpless, and who comes to us curing every sickness, including sloth. And note this: inviting us to join in or help lay the basis for the abundant harvest of God's good work, which is hard not to consider meaningful.

Will Campbell, a Baptist minister, was one of the most interesting characters to ever have come out of the South, and that's saying a lot. He once said, "I don't think much of the way greatness is gauged and history is taught. History seems to center around a few of the rich and famous. Those we call the 'little people' seem not to exist." He said, "My phone rang years ago when the networks were trying to decide whether to carry the State of the Union address or the verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial. 'Mrs. Booker just passed,' my caller said. I turned off the TV.

"Mrs. Fannye Booker was a 90-year-old black lady in Mississippi. She didn't play football, but she ran a little camp school for rural black children during the Depression, when the state wouldn't educate them. She was never president, but while running quilting bees she taught black people how to register to vote. She never was a CEO, but she gave hope to hundreds of poor children. The papers didn't even mention her death. So," says Will, "let's speak her name now with awe. She was the stuff of authentic history and true greatness, Fannye Mae Booker."

Given her example of doing all she could do given the circumstances, Mrs. Booker confronts us with the question I raised earlier. Why is it the problems of the world mount up and so many do nothing in response? Is there nothing can be done, or is it we really don't care enough to bother? Is sloth THE sin of our times?

The first book in the world about "little people" was the Bible. Before it, characters in stories were only the powerful and famous. We who spend our time with the Bible ought to know then that Howard Zinn was right when he said, "What matters are the countless small deeds of average people who lay the basis for the significant events that enter history."

Or put from the viewpoint of the Christian faith, "What matters are the countless faithful deeds of average people who lay the basis for God to enter our world, changing lives and history." That's what matters. That's why we should care. Why we should bother. That's why we should strive by Christ's grace to live our ordinary lives extraordinarily well.

Footnote: In 1853 Herman Melville wrote a short story called *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. A scrivener was a person who copied legal papers by hand. A lawyer with an office on Wall Street already employed two scriveners when his growing business caused him to advertise for a third. Enter Bartleby.

The first two days on the job Bartleby worked hard, but on the third day when asked to help with a task, Bartleby confounded his boss by replying, "I would prefer not to," which is a nice way of saying, "I couldn't care less." Twenty-five times in little more than 25 pages Bartleby says, "I would prefer not to" – "I couldn't care less" – when asked to do a task.

The story eventually reaches its climax with Bartleby in "the Tombs," Manhattan's infamous 19th century House of Detention. Preferring not to do anything, even take food, he wastes away and dies. And why did Bartleby behave this way? He had a terminal case of sloth. He cared less and less until he finally cared for nothing and died. We could also say that not caring can lead a person, in essence, to suicide.