

“7--Sloth”

Today we're talking about one of the 7 deadly sins called sloth. You may have heard of the animal called a sloth. It is one of the slowest moving animals. It lives in the Amazon jungle, eats leaves and sleeps. Some of them actually get covered with green moss and mold because they move so little and so slowly. Some of the traits of the sloth describe this deadly sin, but the sin of sloth isn't about us moving slowly. When we think of sloth we might think about people who lazy, don't do anything, sleep until noon every day, watch TV all day, they're lazy. But that's probably not us, right? We're very busy people. Our problem is that we're so busy we need a little more sloth in our lives. But listen, that's not what sloth is. Let's look at what sloth really is, how it manifests itself in our lives, and why it's so deadly.

The list of the seven deadly sins originated in the 4th century as a group of monks realized that these things became huge barriers between them and God. **The seven deadly sins: Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride.** They realized that these seven things were the root of so many other sins. But the thing about the seven deadly sins is that they are not uniquely Christian. If you're an agnostic, or an atheist, you still wrestle with these things. If you're a Buddhist, a Jew, a Hindu or a Muslim, you wrestle with these things because they're part of the universal human condition. We all wrestle with these things. We all wrestle with the sin of sloth.

So what is sloth? First, **it's the failure to act on the things we know we should be doing.** It's that phrase you've probably heard: The road to hell is paved with good intentions. That's the sin of sloth. Intending to do something, but never quite getting around to doing it. It's knowing the right thing to do, but, for whatever reason, not doing it. It's seeing a need and expecting somebody else to meet it. Scripture puts it this way. **“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17).** Faith without action is dead.

There are two broad categories of sin. Sins of commission, when we do things that violate God's will. Then there are the sins of omission. There was something you were meant to do, but you chose not to do it—also a violation of God's will.

One of the reasons that sloth is so deadly is because it's subtle, it quietly brings you down. Because you don't have to do anything, you just have to do nothing and your soul is in deep danger. “Somebody else will take care of it.” That attitude will derail your life and your faith and hurt other people. Remember, the ancients who created this list listed them from least deadly to most deadly. They saw sloth as more deadly than lust, gluttony, and greed because it is so insidious. Insidious means to produce harm in a stealthy, gradual manner. That's why sloth is so dangerous and so deadly.

So one meaning of sloth is not taking action when you should. But another meaning for sloth relates more to what goes on inside us that leads to the first kind of sloth—inaction. The ancient word for this is **Acedia which means to not care.** So on one hand, sloth is not taking action when you should. On the other hand, sloth of the heart, is not caring. It's seeing the pain and brokenness of other people and not being affected by it. It's believing, “I don't need to be involved. My contribution wouldn't really make a difference anyway.” Or it could be just convincing yourself that you don't have any responsibility, or what does it matter, what can one person do. And when acedia has really taken root in your heart, you begin to think, nothing really matters in end anyway and you find yourself listless, lethargic, purposeless and, in the end, you find life meaningless. That's what happens when sloth takes over and that can lead to despair and that's why it is so deadly.

So what does sloth look like when it's lived out? We think, “I don't really see this in myself. I feel like I do most of the things I should do. I don't find myself thinking that nothing really matters. How am I a sloth?”

Let me illustrate it this way, I'm a plant guy. We've got 15 or 20 indoor plants at home and it's my job to take care of them. I try to water them once a week, but occasionally I miss one. And most of them can handle that and let you know if they need watering, if you missed them, but this one was out of the way so I didn't see it for two straight weeks. And this is what it looked like after two weeks of not doing something that I was supposed to do. I didn't actively kill it, I didn't poison it or cut it off at the roots. I just didn't do something I

should have done for it to live. At this point, I don't think this is coming back. And this is the impact that sloth can have in a whole bunch of areas of our lives.

Like relationships. When sloth manifests itself in relationships, we stop paying attention. We stop doing the kinds of things that are necessary to maintain healthy relationships. With your parents, especially if you're grown and out on your own. Listen, your parents still have needs from you. If you don't water their souls, nurture that relationship, it creates a distance. And you didn't mean to create that distance, it just happened because you weren't paying attention.

Or our children have needs from us, especially when they're young, but also when they're grown and on their own. If you want to have a healthy relationship with them, or your grandchildren, you nurture that with your time and attention. Even if you don't feel like it. Even if you're tired and have a million other things going on, you invest in the relationship, you nurture it, if want it be healthy in the long run.

Sloth is really a killer of marriages. Especially when we stop doing the things we did at first. When you fall in love you stay up for hours talking to each other, and you brought each other gifts and loved on each other, and it was romantic. And you get married and over time you stop doing those things. You get slothful and don't nurture that relationship, and pretty soon "you don't bring me flowers anymore!" Why not?

If you're married your spouse has needs. They have emotional needs that you're meant to meet for them. We just did a series on relationships so I won't go any deeper here. And you get the point. If you don't nurture your marriage it starts to look like this [wilted plant]. To not do that is the sin of sloth and it will kill your marriage. It's ambivalence, apathy, neglect. Death.

Sloth can affect everything--our everyday lives, our jobs. So we get caught up the tyranny of the urgent that we neglect what's really important. Very few of us are lazy. We're constantly going, and busy, and packing our schedules, we're maxed out. And because of that, we don't nurture the important things. We fell busy and important checking each others facebook pages and when it comes to actually doing things we can't find the time. It's amazing how much time is wasted in doing things that aren't really nurturing. One woman wrote that **sloth begins as an excuse, continues as a habit, and ends as a cage.**

Maybe it's not facebook for you, for you it may be checking your email on your blackberry. It's your day off and you're supposed to be playing with the kids, instead you're with them but not really with them. I've done it. Take the kids out for a meal or picnic and hide the phone under the table and text somebody. How much time and energy is going into those things. Getting caught up in the tyranny of the urgent is sloth. It's forgetting the most important things.

The same is true in our relationship with God. If we don't nurture it, it withers. Sloth can kill our connection to God. That's why I tell you, don't make 52 decisions a year about whether or not you're going to be in worship. Make one decision so you're not trying to figure out on Saturday night or Sunday morning, am I going? You've already decided. It's that important. Things happen in this time that don't happen any other time. But you can begin to think, "It's a big church, nobody will miss me. We've had a long busy week. I wonder if God will even notice. I don't really like what the pastor's talking about, so I'll sleep in today." You do that often enough and pretty soon you're saying, "Why did we ever go in the first place?" And you forget how those moments in worship connected you to God, and built you up, and fired you up, and prepared you for your week, and encouraged you when you were down, and strengthened your relationships, and gave you courage to face anything. You forget all that. That's what sloth does.

It's not just worship, it's spending time in prayer—talking to God; listening for God. It's opening up the Bible and seeing what God says to you there. It's meeting with other Christians to do life together. When we don't pay attention to these things, when we're slothful, our souls start to look like this [withered plant]. God seems so distant and we no longer have a faith that's alive and strong.

We struggle with sloth in our relationships and we also struggle with sloth in our actions. Sometimes people get angry about God and say things like, "If there was really a God, and God really cared, why do 30,000 children die of malnutrition every day? Why are there wars, and bigotry, and violence?" I say wait a

minute! God put us on this planet and asked us to take care of it. And when we look at those problems all of them could be solved by human beings if we rolled up our sleeves and got engaged in the world. It's our responsibility to do those things! And God tells us this over and over again. In passages like this, **"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9).**

That comes up again and again all through the Bible. James said, **"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27).** Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats that at the end of time he will return and judge people and separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The criteria for judgment will not be how many Bible studies you took, it won't be how much of the Bible you memorized, it will be, **"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:35-40).**

That's the good news for the sheep. The sin of the goats was the sin of sloth. "You saw those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison, sick, (the least of these) and you did nothing." The Bible is filled with this message. We're meant to do something with our lives. With our faith. James said, "Faith without works is dead."

It's just too easy to live in a bubble when it comes to poverty, and homelessness, and hunger. It's easy to take the roads to work that avoid the poorest parts of our city. It's easy to focus on ourselves and our needs and forget about kids going to bed hungry. It's easy to do nothing with alcoholics and drug addicts by simply saying, "They did it to themselves."

It's easy to live in the bubble of, "I'm going to take care of me and mine and that's all God really cares about." But that is not all that God cares about! We're meant to be concerned about the issues in our world. We're meant, as Christians, to stand up and speak for people who cannot speak for themselves. We're meant to help those who cannot help themselves.

In fact I want to invite Jennifer Statler up on to the stage to visit for a minute. Jennifer has a vision about helping kids in need right here in Joplin. One facet of this is related to foster care. Jennifer, why has this become important to you? Tell us some of the facts about the foster care system around here? How many kids? How many families? Are numbers increasing or decreasing? What are the main reasons kids go into foster care in our area? What can this group of people do to help? Get foster care training, open up their homes, give time, tutor, donate clothing, gift cards, be trained as respite givers...

What does it take to get trained? How do people get plugged in to that system? Phone numbers... Web site...

Playwright Wendy Wasserstein said this about sloth: "When you achieve true slothdom you have no desire for the world to change. True sloths are not revolutionaries, but the lazy guardians at the gate of the status quo." Jesus said it this way, "When you pray, pray like this, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'" That's not some pie in the sky prayer. That's meant to inspire is to work so that our world looks more like the kingdom of God when we're finished that when we started.

At the church we give you opportunities week after week after week to serve in some way, around here or out there in the community. And many of you do. We have people from Saint Paul's serving at almost every single helping agency in this city, and/or serving on their boards. But there are lots of us who, many weeks go by, and we don't do anything for anybody outside ourselves. And I'm not trying to make you feel guilty if that's you. But I want to create a tension, that tension between taking care of you and yours, and pushing out those boundaries of your comfort zone and being willing to own the mission that Jesus gave you if you have said you're one of his followers. He didn't give the mission to help the helpless to somebody else, he gave it to you. And, listen, you don't have to be perfect to take on that mission, and you don't have to have all

your questions answered to serve in some way, and you don't have to go a long ways away, but you can own the mission of Jesus more than you do right now.

A few weeks ago I met with the Joplin Free Thinkers. It's a local group of mostly atheists and agnostics. They've asked me twice now to be a guest speaker. And, no surprise, we don't see eye to eye on a lot of different things. But one thing we do see the same is the need to help people. I met with them for 3 hours, that night, and as I wrapped up I said to them, "If you have projects that you are doing to help people, let us know, and we will join you. We don't have to believe the same to make a difference. And likewise, I invite you to join us as we serve our community. As we partner with schools to help tutor kids that don't get that kind of support at home. As we partner with Foster Care to help families. As we work on homes during Hearts and Hammers, as we respond when there is a natural disaster." I told them, "Please come join us." And do you know what they did, they applauded. Some of them stood and clapped. I put them on our email list so they can know what we're doing and join us in doing it.

I don't mean for this to sound bad, but I hope that we as Christians are at least as ready to serve as atheists are. And shouldn't we be even more so knowing the mission that Jesus gave us?

We are already part of a miracle here at Saint Paul's. What God has done through this place is something incredible as you have said "yes" to God's invitations. But nothing will kill that miracle faster than you and me saying, "Ok God, isn't it good enough now? Can't we just sit back for the rest of the ride and not be so concerned with the needs of other people?" Sloth is mighty tempting, isn't it? And it's mighty deadly, too.

Throughout this series we've not only talked about the deadly sins, but also the virtues, that if we cultivate them in our lives, we don't leave room for the sins to operate. I've already hit on one of the virtues I believe is crucial to cultivate, and that's vision. To have a vision of what can be, and what God would have us do. And if you couple vision with diligence, the world changes. If the sin of sloth says, "Somebody else will take care of that, I don't really care, or know how to." If that's what sloth says, then diligence leads us to say, "What next? **What** would you want me to do next, God? **How** would you have me serve next, Lord? **Who** would you have me serve next, Lord?" And that may take us to places and opportunities to serve that make us a little bit afraid, but guess what, that's part of the Christian faith--being a little afraid sometimes because we're going outside our comfort zones.

Let's name sloth for what it is, be alert to how it can insidiously do damage, and let's be on this mission of serving the world. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his message series on this topic, as well as R. Curtis Fussell for his book Deadly Sins and Living Virtues.