

Sloth

Introduction: This is a great message in preparation for our 28 days of Prayer & Fasting, Jan.3-31. I preached in the first time in 2012.

Tonight, Jan.3, 6-8 PM a time of prayer and seeking God. 6-7 PM is congregational prayer; 7-8PM is a time of seeking God.

This message is the result of numerous articles, sermons and my own study.

Introduction:

After shopping for a church, Susan finally found a spiritual home at Christ Church. The busy Christian counselor and mother of three teens appreciated the dynamic preaching and lively worship. But now, three years later, her initial enthusiasm has begun to fade. The worship feels routine, the sermons have become predictable. Her small group, once a source of challenge and comfort, seems flat. "I can't grow in this church anymore," she sighed to a friend. "I feel stuck here; I haven't had much time to pray about it, but I'm thinking of moving to Grace Church."

Antonio is a successful banker, a leader in his congregation, and a devoted father and husband. His life is a whirlwind of activity: meetings for work and church, coordinating a fair housing project, children's lessons and soccer games. Unfortunately, his devotional life is almost nonexistent. "I love God," Antonio confessed to his men's group, "but I can't find time to pray and meditate on His Word. Well . . . to be honest, I could probably make the time. But it's so hard to get started. I try to read and pray, and then I hit a wall. My mind races with a hundred other projects."

Even though they seem to have different struggles, Susan and Antonio may be battling the same sin. It probably won't cause them to forsake Christ, but it can block them from continued spiritual growth. What is it? The sin of sloth.

Are you surprised? After all, Susan and Antonio hardly seem like slothful people. They are busy, dedicated, energetic, and productive. Is it fair to slap the label of sloth on them?

What is sloth?

One of the reasons we're surprised is that we rarely talk about sloth in spiritual terms. Instead, we often view it as simple laziness. We may wrongly think that relaxation is slothful or confuse the inertia produced by grief or depression with sloth. However, enjoying a good book, taking a nap, sipping coffee on Saturday morning, or vacationing in the sun are *not* indicators of sloth.

When our predecessors in the faith mentioned sloth they defined it as a "spiritual listlessness," or "joylessness when faced with God as our supreme joy."

Others define it as weakness or despair that overwhelms your spiritual pursuit. It's a dullness of soul than can stem from restlessness or inactivity. One Christian leader said, "It's a dryness or barrenness of soul that makes the sweet honey of worship seem tasteless and turns times of prayers into empty trials. It is a waning confidence in the power and importance of prayer.

Like waking up from a nap and really don't want to move.

Sloth can be a crippling spiritual disease. The church at Laodicea was infected with it. Jesus said of them:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.—[Rev. 3:15–16](#)

Sloth causes a rupture in our relationship with God. In contrast to pride, which responds to God with a defiant "no," sloth responds with a quiet "yeah, whatever." The initial glow of coming to faith has faded. The road ahead looks long, dusty, and tedious. We come to an awareness that walking with Jesus over the long haul requires inconvenience and discipline. This raw reality of spiritual life leads to a reluctance, and then a sadness or sorrow, and finally a passive refusal to respond to God's initiative of grace. Rather than moving *through* this tedium and resistance, the slothful person looks for a way *around* it.

On an intellectual level, this sadness and refusal is completely absurd. Who wouldn't respond to God's invitation to experience overwhelming joy? And yet that is the essence of Jesus' parable in [Luke 14](#) about a man who prepared a great banquet. "He sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'" However, "they all alike began to make excuses" (vv. [17–18](#)). All three of the original invitees respond to this incredible invitation with a shrugging "whatever." An equivalent might be someone who says, "Hey, sounds like a great party, but it might require a lot of effort to get there. Besides, I just called for a pizza."

In more spiritual terms, sloth says, "Thanks for the great invitation, God, but I can't come. You see, I may have to change. I may have to make a long-term commitment to spiritual growth. Quite frankly, I'm not sure it's worth the effort."

Reading the Signs

Let's consider some of the symptoms of a "whatever" lifestyle.

Max Deprea offers these: 1. Superficiality in relationships and life. You don't

go too deep; tension in key relationships and an unwillingness to deal with underlying issues of your own heart that are causing the tension (blame rather than surgery); 2. a loss of gratitude/appreciation and an increasing critical spirit (little smiling and lots of negativity);

3. In churches the focus shifts from "what is God calling us to do in this world?" to "what's the church doing for me?" We move from being servants to consumers.

4. Restlessness. The slothful believer is often characterized by a rootless or restless spirit. It's a peering over the fence and desiring something else. According to 5th-century spiritual director John Cassian, sloth initially produces a dislike for the place where we are (marriage, family, church, small group, relationship, job) and a contempt for the people in that place. He starts dreaming of an ideal place, a place where people are actually "sweet and full of spiritual life."

Sounds like Susan, doesn't it? Certainly, her church, her pastor, and her small group aren't perfect models of spiritual maturity. But the root of Susan's restlessness may lie elsewhere. The prospect of building community with these sinful people, plowing through her "contempt of the brethren," and curtailing fantasies about an ideal church dredges up a certain spiritual fatigue. Spiritual maturity is a long, painful journey. Naturally, we would rather excuse ourselves from that refining.

5. Addiction to busyness. We often immerse ourselves in a frenzy of activity. We think that if we are busily rushing about, we cannot be suffering from sloth . . .

[Luke 10:38–42](#) offers a classic example of this. Martha's activity became a distraction, a flurry of fluff that propelled her backward in her journey with Jesus. Rather than focusing on Jesus, her tasks (Jesus called them "many things") became her focus. Jesus lovingly rebuked her and gently instructed her to imitate Mary's attention to His presence.

Like Martha, Antonio is distracted by an alternative focus. Encountering God through Scripture reading and prayer will change Antonio. The Holy Spirit will nudge him to confess sin, cleanse wounds, face immature habits, and put off the old self. Yes, great joy waits on the other side of this discipline, but just thinking about the journey makes him weary. Like a man under a blazing desert sun, Antonio feels sluggish, worn, and sad. Just about anything—his job, his favorite TV show, even a responsibility at church—seems less tedious and demanding than the spiritual disciplines. So he crowds his life with alternatives.

Sluggishness. Sluggishness is the final marker of sloth. We let the warm, cozy blanket of our spiritual reluctance lull us to sleep. The book of Proverbs has an unpleasant name for this person—a sluggard. The classic sluggard demands what is easy, convenient, and comfortable. He habitually blames circumstances and

manufactures excuses. "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside!' or, 'I will be murdered in the streets!'" ([Prov. 22:13](#)).

Prov.24.30-34

A productive vineyard is a thing of beauty, but vineyards don't just happen. Someone is behind them. In the ME, a piece of land that could provide a livelihood was one of the most valuable things in the world. To be a vineyard owner was the opportunity of a lifetime but this person squandered it.

Sloth begins we you forget that this is the only life I have. It's my only chance at this level of existence and quality of my next life is tied directly to what I do or don't do in this life. Parable of Stewards in Mt.25

Everybody get a vineyard when you're born - a body, mind, will, some relationships, a soul, etc. This is your vineyard and it's your only shot in this life. God will partner with us, but he never forces anyone to care for their vineyard.

The writer sees what the vineyard could have been - beautiful, a source of joy, an income to the owner. It could have been a blessing to everyone around it. It fell tragically short of what it could have been. Was it this way because of a natural disaster, tragedy or death? No. It was negligence/neglect. Just throwing away an opportunity.

One proverb says: Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies lack judgment. The proverb is talking that I must work the land that I actually have - my body, mind, relationships, my job not the ones I fantasize about.

Some of us have these fantasies about the perfect - job, relationship, outcomes, marriage, education. You're like the sluggard looking at his vineyard who sees a lot of work with current reality and wishes and moans for a non-existent reality. Sloth has overtaken you.

Moving Forward: Slothaholics Anonymous

At this point you may be thinking, "Ugh, I am such a sloth." I certainly see myself in this description. But don't be discouraged. As with every temptation, God provides a "way out, so that you can stand up under it" ([1 Cor. 10:13](#)).

The first step in dealing with sloth is humbly to acknowledge its reality. In one way or another, I may battle sloth all my life. Running to the next conference, reading the latest best-seller, attending a more upbeat worship service, injecting new techniques into my devotional life—these may be good things, but they won't eliminate the resistance and struggle of spiritual growth..

Second, the early saints who battled the "noonday demon" recommended one quality to counteract sloth: *hypomone*, a Greek word meaning patient endurance or "staying underneath" something. It implies working through difficulties rather than running from them. We might call it perseverance, stick-to-itiveness, or hanging in there.

Unfortunately, this quality is often absent from our spiritual lives. Author and pastor Eugene Peterson says:

Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach, and teach want short cuts. . . . They are impatient for results.

This is the spirit of sloth. Resisting it requires the cultivation of its polar opposite: a spirit of patient endurance.

The concept of patient endurance has a rich presence in the New Testament. James reminds us how blessed are those who persevere or remain under various trials.

The testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. . . . Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.—[Jas. 1:3–4, 12](#)

By practicing patient endurance, standing firm rather than bailing out, we will obtain God's promise and lay hold of the hope set before us. Quit looking for quick fixes, easy road and press ahead. Focus on doing good.

Third, stay away from the slothful who are idle, restless and busybodies - 2 Th.3.6f, 11ff. Bad company corrupts good character. We tend to take on the characteristics of those we are closest to.

Fourth, meditate/set your heart upon what is praiseworthy (Phil.4.8f). People caught in sloth often think on the negative, unattainable, critical and escapist terms. Think on what the Lord has done, is doing and will do. Think about your blessings and the joys of life you have experienced.

Fifth, from a Early Church Father, having an eschatological perspective. Live as if you will die tomorrow and then face God's assessment of your life. How would that affect how you interact with others and live before God?

Feasting Ahead

For Susan, "remaining under" may mean staying at Christ Church and enduring her restlessness until she is sure God is leading her elsewhere. By persevering, she may be on the edge of a new level in her spiritual journey. Antonio has already taken

the first step in moving out of sloth: admitting he struggles with his devotional life. Now he may need to consider that his busyness is simply an attempt to dodge the sloths of distraction and boredom.

Neither Susan nor Antonio will find a quick fix. The unique ways they struggle with sloth may nip at their heels throughout their lives. But through humility, honesty, confession, prayer, and the wise guidance of trusted spiritual friends, they can begin to walk through—rather than around—the walls of resistance, weariness, and tedium. And so can we.

For all of us, there is marvelously simple—but good—news: God loves slothful people. Christ died for sluggards. Ask Peter. He was one of the disciples who slid into sloth in the Garden of Gethsemane.. Peter, who also, after the resurrection thought about returning to his fishing trade.

Yet Peter learned that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross ([1 Pet. 2:24](#))—even the sin of sloth. So when you feel like the disciples and can't stay awake with Jesus, or when you feel like Jill and can't remember the "signs" of Jesus, or when you just feel like a spiritual slob, don't let Satan accuse you. Don't let him whisper that you are worthless and deserve self-hatred. God can transform our slothful ways. The Spirit can empower sluggards for renewed service.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" ([Gal. 6:9](#)). As we walk through our struggles and stick with our God-given callings, we experience a great harvest.

So even if your life, your commitments, your marriage, or your devotions don't seem like a feast, stick with it, don't run away. Be faithful to God's call, and He will lead you to the banquet table.