

## A Trademark of Fallen Humanity

So far we have covered pride and envy in our series on the “Seven Daily Sins”; today we cover the sin of sloth. Our society really doesn’t consider the seven deadly sins to be all that serious. The famous kid’s cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* has characters that are representative of each one of the seven deadly sins. The characters in *The Goonies* are also each representative of one of the seven deadly sins. Our society considers them to be utterly ubiquitous, to be even kind of funny. They deal with them in cartoons, saying, “That’s just what it means to be human.”

But Christians see the seven deadly sins not as a trademark of humanity but as a trademark of *fallen* humanity. We see them as truly deadly, as the cause for all the brokenness in the world—the brokenness between friends, between families, between nations, and in churches. They are deadly to us physically, spiritually, and emotionally. If we can nip them in the bud, we can stop a lot of the damage that they do in our own lives and in the Church’s life.

Pride leads to arrogance, conceit, and eventually a fall. But if we nip pride in the bud we can perhaps alleviate some of those other problems. Gluttony leads to self-hatred, which might manifest itself with more gluttony. They all lead to bigger, worse, and more external sins. But we don’t want to wait till lust turns into adultery and pornography to deal with it. We want to see it in our hearts as it is and do warfare before it gets to that point. Today we cover the sin of sloth. We want to define it, diagnose it in our own hearts, and then prescribe weapons to fight it. Let’s define it.

### Defining Sloth

There is not one particular chapter in the Bible that is the “sloth chapter.” There are, however, several places in the Bible that talk about sloth. We are going to start with Romans 12:11. If I were to ask you right now what you think sloth is, I feel fairly certain that you would answer, “Laziness.” But it’s not laziness. John Piper preached a whole sermon

because he didn't know the definition of the word "acedia," which means "sloth." Sloth is a sin that is incredibly hard to define and it's also so "American" that we miss it. It's the air we breathe, so prevalent that we don't notice it. We're like fish in a fishbowl trying to define what water is. How do you define darkness, for example? To define darkness, we would have to contrast it with light. If there was no light and all we knew was darkness, would we be able to define it? We wouldn't know that it even existed. Darkness is the absence of light.

### *Defining it by what is missing*

Let's try to define a donut. How do you define it? It's fried lard, I think. A circular suicide for the gluten-intolerant. We know what it is. But what is the hole in the middle of a donut? How do you define that space of nothingness? You can only define it in regards to the donut around it, because it's not a something, it's a nothing. And that's what sloth is: not a something, rather a nothing. If pride is misdirected love or worship—love and worship for the self that should be directed toward God—sloth is the absence of love in worship.

Martin Luther said that pride and sloth together are the root of all sins. Pride is the root of all sins of commission and sloth is the root of all sins of omission. It's the foundation of all "do-nothingness." If lust is misdirected passion towards that which doesn't belong to us, sloth is an absence of passion—apathy. The ESV translators decided to use the word "slothful" in Romans 12:11, which says, "Do not be *slothful* in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord" (emphasis added). Paul doesn't want Christians to live a life characterized by an absence of zeal. Sloth is an absence of zeal, of passion. Another way of saying "zeal" is "fervent in spirit." And then flowing from zeal is service to the Lord. We need deep fervency in spirit to serve the Lord.

But there's something we need even deeper than zeal, which is the very heart of all sacrificial service and zeal for others and God. This is the fruit of the spirit that we call love. It's love for another that produces zeal in the heart and goes forth in sacrificial service. The book of Isaiah says that the zeal of the Lord would accomplish the gospel of Jesus

Christ” (9:7). It was the love God had for us that produced the zeal to send his son to the world in sacrificial service.

Sloth is ultimately the absence of this love that drives passion, zeal, and service. It is the black hole of all sins that absorbs everything else into the self. Jesus describes it well in the parable of the talents. There are multiple servants who are given different bags of gold. One is given ten, one is given five, and one is given one. Their only “calling” in life is to invest the bags of gold, to turn a profit. Maybe take some risks and get out there. The master goes out of town and when he returns he expects to have a profit. All of the servants except one invest their bags of gold. The one buries his bag of gold in the ground, not investing what he has or fulfilling his calling. He is not zealous, he has no fervency, and he does not serve the master in any way. He simply sits on what he has. He maintains the status quo. He conserves but he doesn’t progress. When the master returns, he calls this servant “wicked and slothful” (Matthew 25:14-30).

### *Indifference*

Sloth is the mother of inactivity. If sloth were a painting, it would be a painting of a big, comfortable armchair. There is a man sitting in the armchair next to the fire. That’s what we call leisure, or rest, and we are called to rest as unto the Lord just as we are called to work as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23). But this man’s life is characterized by sitting in a chair next to the fire. His wife is standing over him holding out a Bible and he is waving it away, because he doesn't have the zeal and fervency of spirit to maintain spiritual disciplines that he might grow in faith in the knowledge of the Lord.

If sloth were a child, it wouldn’t be the child who shakes his fist at you, the child who curses at you, or the child who defiantly says, “No!” It would be the child who pretends not to hear you. It’s the child who says they’ll do it, but they casually and often forget to carry out their obedience. This forgetfulness is apathy toward following the will of the parents.

If sloth were a highway, it would be the “Exit Only” lane all the way to the right. If you stay in that lane, you’re going to drift off. Sloth is not the type of sin in which you leave the path as you are lured away by other temptations; sloth is the type of sin that pulls you away from the Christian faith simply by tempting you to do nothing.

If sloth were a life verse (a verse that people pick for themselves that have special meaning for their lives), it would be the second half of Titus 2:14, which says, “Jesus gave himself for us.” Sloth fails to read the rest of the verse, which says, “to purify for himself a people who are zealous for good works.”

If sloth were apostasy, it would be deadly for sure, but it would kill you slowly and softly. A lot of people leave the faith due to a big blow-up; that’s not how sloth operates. With sloth, you don’t backslide; you *slouch* toward apostasy. Slothful apostasy is one day after the next following the status quo, conserving your energy in a sleepy faith that is filled with apathy and a lack of concern; day by day your faith slowly ebbs away.

Your children notice it. And then it dawns on you that the only thing Christian about you is the title. You’re a nominal Christian, a victim of sloth, slowly pulling away and drifting, refusing to change, to answer his call, and to push through the pain. If a mother is pregnant and the baby is about to be born, she must push through the pain. If she stays inactive, the baby dies a slow suffocation. But if she pushes through with fervency of spirit, the baby is born. Sloth causes the slow suffocation of our faith, not because you’re doing anything evil, but because you’re not doing anything.

### *Sins of omission*

Jesus came head to head with the government officials and declared himself king. The crowds worshipped him, whether they knew who they were following or not, and the leaders did not like this. They envied him this power and so planned to kill him. On the day Jesus was delivered up to Pilate for judgment, the crowds were shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” And Pilate, according to Matthew 25, knew that the crowds wanted to crucify Jesus out of envy. They were jealous of his power, his popularity, and his position. But Pilate was not envious nor had

he any beef with Jesus at all. He knew Jesus' innocence. Yet he gave him up to the crowd to be crucified (Matthew 27:15-26, Mark 15:1-15, Luke 23:13-25, John 18:28-40). From this account, it seems that Pilate not only gave way to fear of man but also to apathy. He washed his hands of the situation. Someone who has zeal about a cause does not give it up so easily.

Sloth is the mother sin of all sins of omission. He should have stood up for justice as a government official, but he stood by and watched as they crucified Jesus. And our own sins are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—not only our envy, but also our sloth. It is not only those who are actively against Jesus who are against Jesus; it is also those who pretend not to hear him. It is those who say they're going to follow him but never fulfill their calling. And that's why Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30).

You can either be at the top of the mountain or the bottom of the mountain. He will not allow you to hold the middle ground of sloth. You either crown him or kill him. And when you crown him, that means you bow to him, worship him, trust him, love him, and submit every single aspect of your life to his power. Or you kill him. The middle ground of sloth is simply a more American, churchy version of rebellion against God.

## Diagnosing Sloth

Because sloth is that serious, we need to see if we can identify it in our own lives. If you don't see sloth in your life, wisdom is at least suspecting that it might be there. Let's look at a few symptoms.

### *Sluggardliness*

The first symptom of sloth is sluggardliness. Another word for it might be "laziness," but usually when we talk about laziness we think of inactivity. That's not what laziness or sluggardliness is in the Bible. However, we don't have a predisposed definition for sluggardliness like we do laziness, and Proverbs is a good place to define it. See if you can

spot this symptom in your life looking at Proverbs 6:6-11, a meditation written by the wise king Solomon:

Go to the ant, O sluggard;  
consider her ways, and be wise.  
Without having any chief,  
officer, or ruler,  
she prepares her bread in summer  
and gathers her food in harvest.  
How long will you lie there, O sluggard?  
When will you arise from your sleep?  
A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
and want like an armed man.

According to Proverbs, when it's time to work, the sluggard is not working. When he has time to prepare for the future, he's not working. When he doesn't have a boss or someone to tell him what to do, he's not working. Solomon and I do not mean that the sluggard isn't doing *anything*. He's just not bringing in a harvest. Sluggardliness does not mean inactivity. It means all sorts of activities—hobbies, games, television, video games, socializing, etc.—but the one thing that the sluggard is called to do, he won't do. When you confront the sluggard, she may say she's "so busy," but the one thing she's called to do is to bring in the harvest, and there's no harvest to be seen.

To apply this to our lives, we'll follow Solomon's admonition to "go to the ant." That simply means to think about ants and meditate on their ways. It may sound silly, but Christians are not only to meditate on scripture, but also on the revelations that God gives us in nature. Every ant has a particular function. There are ants in the Amazon that make life rafts in the water, with the queen sitting on top. There are all these little ants that are specially designed to care for the egg, and there are all these little ants that are specially designed to stand in the water and

“take one for the team.” They hope to float off and find land at some point, and when they find land, they carry the queen onto the ground.

Every ant has its gifts, talents, and skills to use for the good of the colony. Of course, you are much more than an ant, but you also have gifts, talents, and skills to be used for the good of the community. You have areas of your life where you have been able to bring in a harvest. Not everyone is a shovel, not everyone is a rake, not everyone a combine tractor, not everyone a fertilizer, and not everyone an irrigation specialist. But everyone has to be engaged in bringing in a harvest.

If you’ve been working a shovel for years and you’ve come up with nothing, you probably need to get a different job. You’re not going to be happy if you’re not in your calling. I understand that you need money to support your family. To that, I say, obediently do your best to be where you need to be and trust God to provide. In other words, do what you can do to bring in a harvest and quit all activity that doesn’t bring in a harvest.

Another manifestation of sluggardliness is procrastination. Maybe the sluggard *wants* to bring in a harvest, but he’s putting it off. He’s “waiting for a better time.” Procrastination is rampant in our culture and we may not treat it too seriously. But when we take the word “procrastination” and put it in the context of sloth, shouldn’t we be a little more suspicious of it? It might just be a refusal to do what God has called us to do. We’re just putting off that one thing that we’re actually supposed to be doing, and we’re covering that guilt with other activities. For example, college students are no strangers to procrastination. Why do you think that is? As a college student, you are currently called to study and make it through school. Do you keep yourself busy so you can avoid it? Do you constantly find yourself spread too thin?

### *“Big-talking”*

Another symptom of sloth is big-talking. The book of Proverbs depicts a character called “the fool.” The fool runs his mouth all the time. There is some overlap between the fool and the sluggard. The sluggard is a big-talker, too. Proverbs 26:13 says, “The sluggard says,

‘There is a lion in the streets.’” The sluggard is a big excuse-maker. In this particular situation, he’s laying in his bed and turning like a door on its hinges. He won’t get out to work and fulfill his calling because there are so many obstacles that he has dreamed up. It’s not just in the bed where the sluggard turns like a door on its hinges; it’s in life in general that he turns to this and that and makes up excuses to not do what he’s supposed to do.

He’s not only a big-talker in excuse-making, but according to Proverbs 26:16, “The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.” Why is there a connection between ignorance and sluggardliness? Because a sluggard won’t take the time to partake of the spiritual disciplines and train himself in godliness. As time goes on, she’s not only a big-time excuse-maker with all sorts of fruitless activity filling her days, but she is also ignorant. It’s okay to be ignorant. Everyone of us is ignorant of certain things. What’s not okay is wilful ignorance mixed with arrogance. There’s nothing worse.

### *Fruitlessness*

Proverbs 10:4 says, “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” There is a scale in the Bible, especially in the book of Proverbs, between “slackness” and “diligence.” The scale we usually think about is between laziness and workaholism, but the biblical scale of slackness and diligence is not the same. The scale of laziness and workaholism shows that there are people who do nothing and there are people who are working too much. On the scale of slackness and diligence, however, people who weigh on the slackness end are not necessarily doing nothing. And on the scale of laziness and workaholism, people who weigh on the workaholism are not necessarily being fruitful in diligence. In actuality, working too little and working too much can both be symptoms of the sin of sloth.

The word “slackness” is used to describe a bow string that has *slack* in it. Can a bow string with slack be fired? Yes. And the slothful person fires away, but they never hit the target. They work foolishly and frantically; they might even be a workaholic. But the one thing they’re

not is diligent, which is working wisely. Sloth sometimes does produce inactivity and laziness, but it also produces someone who fires shots anywhere but never hits the bullseye. The slothful person is not found working at their calling. They're being pulled apart by all sorts of sin and temptation. A diligent person identifies the bullseye and determines to hit it, and so they shoot there every time. A diligent person determines to do their work to bring in the harvest. Day after day they bring in this harvest, thereby producing fruit.

Fruitlessness is a symptom of sloth. If you are in a job and not producing any fruit, then you're probably not in your calling. If that's the case, find another job or figure out a way to work that out. Are there jobs that are inherently evil out there and you shouldn't work? Yes. Don't be a crack dealer. But there are some jobs that have more potential for fruit and diligence than others. In America, God has given us the freedom to find another job, for the most part.

### *Selfishness*

Proverbs 10:5 says, "he who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings *shame*" (emphasis added). In this agricultural world, everyone in the village had a part to play in bringing in the harvest. There were very strict social codes to ensure that everyone was doing their part. In those societies, a family gained great status by having a lot of boys to bring in more harvest than anyone else. Notice in that proverb the word "shame." Guilt is when you violate a rule, but shame is when you break a heart. It's when you let somebody down. In the agricultural society, the son who didn't bring in a harvest, who refused to play his part, was a shame to his community.

Not only is a slothful person fruitless, they are also selfish, sinning against the community. As a Christian, you should find a job that benefits the community. If you don't have the ability to produce fruit in your current job, get another one. If you are in a job in which you are not able to serve the community—if you're not useful in any way—you're not going to be happy or fulfilled. You're not going to reach all that God intends for humans to reach. You need to find a different spot. Most of the time,

with a few tweaks, you can figure out how to produce more fruit in the job you currently have. Talking to other Christians in your field is beneficial; they can keep you in the loop of what is best for the community. That's what we need to do as a church. We have a whole community to help us figure out how can we can answer our callings in our careers. Some careers are more communal than others, but make sure as a Christian that you're doing something to serve the community.

### *Restlessness*

Do you get back from vacations only to think that you need a vacation from your vacation? Another mark of a life consumed by sloth is always frantically trying to get rest but never quite getting there. Sloth is probably ruining your ability to rest. If you're not producing fruit in all the activity that you do, you're not going to be able to rest. You will be able to sit and do nothing, but the spirit of restlessness will plague your life. The sabbath principle from the Bible says that we are supposed to work six days and rest on the seventh day, just as God did in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3). But there will never be any rest on that seventh day if on the other six days of the week you are frantically shooting off arrows and hitting nothing or if you are sitting around doing nothing.

For every one of the seven deadly sins so far I've given a diagnostic test. These are the pastoral "check engine" lights. When you have a new vehicle and the "check engine" light comes on, you pop the hood and take a look. It might be serious, or it might be no big deal. When you have an older vehicle and that engine light comes on, sometimes it's just a sensor problem. You've checked everything you could and the sensor is still on. You might have already checked under your hood and you know you're good to go. But if an engine light comes on as I read these diagnostic check points, just pop the hood and take a look just in case. These are not Bible verses, but they are what I think might be evidences of a life embroiled in sloth. So, you might be a sloth if...

...you no longer see a goal in life. You don't have a bullseye.

...you love to point the finger at workaholics because it makes you feel justified in your inactivity.

...your attempts at rest are frantic, complicated, expensive, and ultimately *restless*.

...you have no time to meditate on the word of God and pray.

...you are constantly sapped of energy and can never get around to work.

...you very often leave your projects unfinished because you just don't care about them anymore.

...you find yourself fantasizing about running off to other, "more fulfilling" places, but wherever you go you take sloth with you.

...you have given up on life and are just going through the motions.

...in school and in church you are shifty and restless; your mind is vacant, distracted, and sleepy.

...you often forget to fulfill your responsibilities and promises.

...you are forever busy but barely fruitful and get very offended if someone challenges you on it.

...you are constantly reminded of things you should be doing but never get around to doing them.

...you fail to grow and profit from Bible teaching.

...you casually attend church, admitting laziness nonchalantly.

...you casually study your Bible, pray, and shepherd your children because you're "just so busy."

Would you admit it if you recognized any of these in your own heart? It's okay and even good if you did admit it. That's what Christians do. We do it because we don't have to be afraid of judgment, because Jesus loved us before we were even born and he loves us in spite of our performance. He loves us because *he loves us* and our admitting sin does not take away from that one iota. After we openly admit we have sloth, we turn to Jesus for help fighting it.

## **Fighting Sloth**

The first step in fighting sin is very often getting your beliefs and theology right. Theology means “the study of God.” If you open your Bible and commit to studying God, one thing that you will discover is that God *works*. Jesus said in John 5:17 that he and God are always at work, and we also know from the book of Genesis that God works. Before mankind was created, God was a gardener. He was the first gardener and the first person to toil in the dirt, bringing life to the formless and void earth (Genesis 1:2). In other words, God is blue collar. His very character gives dignity to all professions—other than certain inherently immoral ones. We need this theology of work. You don’t have to be a preacher to serve the Lord. We have enough poor preachers. We don’t need anymore. What we need is for you to work at your calling in the community, producing fruit and bringing in a harvest.

God was a gardener before he was a preacher. Other religions, including the American religion of our society, don’t believe this. These religions believe that work is part of the curse. The origin myth of Pandora’s box, for example, says that when it is opened, it unleashes bad things like decay, disease, and death, but also work. In the Enûma Eliš, which is another origins myth from Mesopotamia, the gods create the earth but they realize it needs a lot of work, so they then create mankind to be their slaves, to do all the menial work so they can rest and be the aristocrats. Not our God. Our God worked before we were ever born.

Not only do we need theology of work, you need anthropology of work. Anthropology is the study of man. If you open the Bible and commit to studying mankind, another thing you will discover is that God made man in his own image (Genesis 1:26-27). God works; therefore, man works. Sloth has a particular way of attacking your God-imaging work. It takes the fruitfulness, community, joy, love, and passion out of your work. By killing your work, sloth kills you, because you are human and you were made to work. Work is to your living as lungs are to your breathing. Work is a part of who you are in your very essence. When we go to heaven, we will work. Sloth is hitting us right where it hurts. And why is it so easy for sloth to take advantage of us in this world?

We will discover the answer to that with hamartiology, the study of sin. Sin comes into this world, and the ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17). It

is so easy for sloth to take over our work because it is being choked by thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). Because of the fall and the curse, it's laborious, sometimes very slow-going and very stressful. Sloth comes in lures us away from this laborious work with temptations of "better" occupations.

To understand and fight sloth, we also need christology, the study of Christ. Jesus Christ came into this world, and the thorns that came into our careers and callings were placed on Jesus Christ's head. Galatians teaches that he became a curse for us by bearing the curse of our sin (Galatians 3:13). The gospel of Jesus Christ means that you can have victory over sloth, that you can be fruitful and answer your calling to work. Your labor is not in vain on account of what Jesus accomplished for us on calvary. Do you have zeal for this truth, or is sloth sucking your joy out of the very gospel that I am preaching at the moment?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." "Immovable" means, in some sense, "Don't change lanes." Don't drift off or be pulled off the path by the temptations of sloth. To always abound in the work of the Lord, however, in some sense, means to change lanes. Don't be sucked into the inactivity caused by sloth. Stay strong and unmovable, but also move forward.

There may have been a time when you were younger and you wanted to "do something great" for the Lord, but now you may feel it's too late. But the cross of Christ says it's not too late. According to the old hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," his love is so amazing and so divine that it demands our lives, our souls, and our "all." 2 Corinthians 5:14 says, "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (NIV).