

“Sloth”

Proverbs 6:6-11

July 26, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

In a way, our topic this morning doesn't fit in with the rest of these sermons. We've been talking about the “little” sins of Proverbs, those sins that are seen as minor sins in our day but which the Bible says are not small at all. Our topic this morning, the sin of sloth, doesn't fit that pattern simply because it is seen in our day as being a major sin. Every culture sees some sins as being major and others as being minor. One of the indicators to how significant a particular sin is judged to be is the extent to which attempts are made to hide that sin. Many of the sins we have looked at so far are regarded as minor by that standard. For example, people no longer make any attempt to hide the sin of irreverence, hating reproof, mockery or a babbling tongue. Some of these sins are actually flaunted rather than hidden. For example, consider the way our culture encourages internet blogs and twittering, two technologies that encourage the chatty multiplication of words. But the Bible discourages multiplied words, saying **“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent”** (Prov. 10:19).

In contrast to many sins, vigorous attempts are made to hide the sin of sloth. For example, I think the second most common response to the query, “How are you?” is the reply, “Keeping busy.” Or consider the common reticence most of us have to admitting that we were awakened by the ring of the telephone. I sometimes think that if someone called at 2:00 a.m. and asked, “Oh, did I wake you?” that many would be tempted to say, “Oh no, I was just working on some things.” It is easy in some circles for sloth to become the unforgiveable sin. So we need to consider the biblical perspective on this sin, lest we under or over-emphasize it.

I. The Errors of Sloth

The sluggard prefers not to be put under too much scrutiny, preferring to slide through life without anyone noticing him. But what he needs is to be exposed, to have everyone see his life in detail. Perhaps in that way he can be shaken from his inertia. So the writer of Proverbs gives us a detailed look into his life, looking especially at his errors. I notice four of them.

The first error of the sluggard is pointed out when the writer contrasts him with the ant. Unlike the ant, the sluggard is not self-motivated. The ant needs no boss hovering over it to force the appropriate work to be done. There is ample internal motivation for doing what needs doing. Do you remember that cartoon

where a boss walks up to one of his loafing employees and asks him, “Why aren’t you working?” The loafer replies, “I didn’t see you coming.” An indication of laziness is when a person performs differently when alone than when being observed.

The second error of the sluggard is a timing problem. Unlike the ant, he has a very short time horizon. The ant shows the ability to anticipate long-term needs and is willing to make sacrifices in order to see those needs met. It works hard to store its food in summer for the coming winter. The sluggard, on the other hand, chooses only to look at the present. His sleep is sweet to him, and he is unwilling to make the sacrifice of giving up his delicious slumber for something as distant as next winter’s food supply. Another aspect of his timing problem is that when he does work, he does the fun work instead of the needful work. We read elsewhere of him, **“The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing”** (20:4). Here we see him preparing for work, the work of harvesting. But since he didn’t do the needful and less satisfying work of plowing the hard ground three months ago, there is no harvest to be gathered. I must say that I can identify with the sluggard in this, because I too often resort to just getting something done rather than doing the right thing. For example, I don’t really enjoy planning things. I find it much easier to do something that gives me a sense of accomplishment. It is more fun to do the work of harvesting rather than the work of plowing hard ground. But diligence is willing to do the work during its season, even if it is hard work. Another aspect of his timing problem can be seen in his sleep. In its proper place, there is nothing wrong with sleep. It is a wonderful gift from God, as indicated by the promise to the one who finds wisdom. **“If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet”** (3:24). There are times when going to sleep is the most spiritual thing a person can do. Sloth is not seen in sleeping, but in sleeping at the wrong time.

The third error of the sluggard is the failure to realize the cost of small surrenders. When he is forced to answer the question, **“How long will you lie there?”** he responds that it will only be for a short while. **“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”** (6:10). He tells himself that he has no intention of spending half the day in bed—just a few minutes more. But we all know what happens, don’t we? Once the first concession is made to just a little more sleep, the second becomes easier, and each one becomes progressively easier after that. Eventually, after a long series of concessions, the work is forgotten. We have all seen this error at work in our own lives, I am sure. There is some unwanted task that lies before us, and we know we need to do it. Perhaps it is some phone call that needs to be made, some bills that need to be paid, or some planning work that needs to be done. It begins with just a little surrender. “As soon as this television show ends, then I’ll do my work.” But that is followed by another concession, and then another, until the entire task is postponed to another time.

The final error of the sluggard is the failure to act because of excuse-making. He can't be expected to go out and work because he heard the rumor the day before that someone had spotted a lion. That's all it takes to persuade him to stay indoors. **"There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!"** (22:13). What excuses have you made to justify your inaction? One that I see frequently is the excuse of complexity. It goes like this: "Since this situation I'm facing is so complex that I don't know what to do, I will do nothing." Since I don't know what to do about this particular child-rearing situation, I will do nothing. Since my finances are a big mess and I don't know how to begin straightening them out, I will do nothing.

II. The Outcome of Sloth

One of the many ironies involved in sloth is that it brings about many changes both in the world and in our individual lives. The problem with sloth is that all the changes are negative. Our text is clear in teaching that sloth leads to poverty. **"Poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man"** (6:11). How does the robber come? He comes suddenly, without cause, and with devastating results. You don't see the robber coming from a long way off. Poverty comes the same way. One day everything seems to be fine, and the next it becomes clear that there are no resources available. Poverty comes not only suddenly, but without cause. Like the robber's victim, who thinks that nothing was done to cause the robber to take his money, so the sluggard thinks that his actions could not have been the cause of his poverty. All he did was take just a few more minutes of sleep. The result is also the same. Just as the robber doesn't negotiate with his victim concerning how much to take, poverty takes it all. I think it needs to be added here that though various sins are always listed as the cause of poverty in the book of Proverbs, when we look at the rest of the Bible, other non-moral causes emerge. Poverty is also caused by injustice and by natural disasters such as drought, disease and pests.

A second result of sloth is also filled with irony. The sluggard's plan in grabbing just a little more sleep was intended by him to make his life just a little easier. But what he was actually doing was making it more painful. The second result of sloth is to increase the pain of life. That's why Proverbs 15:9 says, **"The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns."** Since God has designed us for work, it is far more painful to be idle than it is to be active. We are not made for sitting still. I came across an interesting world record a while back. Do you know what the world record is for sitting perfectly still? It's held by a woman named Melody Schick, age 24. The record was set at a Dallas shopping center as hundreds of shoppers looked on. Melody was dressed as a rag doll and held a teddy bear in her left arm while staring into space from a revolving platform. Only her eyes moved. Then, five hours and 43 boring minutes later she rose slowly and tried to smile. She had broken the previous record of 5 hours and 32 minutes.

A third outcome of sloth is diminished capacities. Proverbs 19:15 says, **“Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep.”** It leads to a dulling of our abilities, like we are moving through life as sleepwalkers. We are like the butterfly that needs to struggle while emerging from the cocoon. I understand that if some outsider helps the butterfly emerge from the cocoon in a way that takes away his struggle, the butterfly will be irreparably harmed. When we take the slothful, easy way out, the result upon us is the same.

Sloth also results in destruction, both for those around the sluggard as well as the sluggard himself. Proverbs 18:9 says, **“Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.”** The slothful would object to this comparison. The verse is saying that they are in the same category as the person who sets out to destroy. The lazy teacher is in the same league as the vandals who enter the school at night to destroy the property. The destruction brought on by sloth takes longer to be seen, but is no less real. Not only does sloth bring destruction to others, but also to the slothful him or herself. Proverbs 24:30-31 features the observant reporter’s eye as he sees the sluggard’s house. **“I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.”** The crumbling wall is an apt metaphor for his life. A stone wall in this day wasn’t just decorative; it served to protect the vineyard from those who would destroy it. In the same way, a life of sluggardly behavior is one where the protective walls are crumbling.

III. The Solution to Sloth

Now that we have uncovered the errors associated with sloth, as well as seeing the bad outcome of this type of behavior, we will all stop being lazy from this point forward and for the rest of our lives. Won’t we? Actually, this is a sin that is not quite so easily overcome. There are three more truths to be grasped and believed if slothful behavior is to be left behind. The first one is another lesson that we learn from the ant. The ant has perfect clarity on its goal—storing up food in order to prevent starvation in the winter months. One of the causes of sloth is confusion about our purpose. We become lazy when we lose sight of what we’re supposed to be doing. What are we supposed to be doing? The memory verse I have chosen for us this week provides us with an answer to that. **“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”** (Micah 6:8). You may want to try meditating on that verse this week as you review your purpose in life.

Second, the sluggard must deal with his pride. Proverbs 26:16 shows us something going on in the heart of the sluggard that lies at the core of all his problems. **“The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”** He has a big problem with pride, and until that problem

begins to be addressed, he will remain powerless over his sloth. Where do we see pride in the life of the sluggard? His pride is in the fact that he is trying to live his life apart from God because he believes he is wiser than God. The number “seven” in the Bible is symbolic of completion. So this verse is saying that the sluggard thinks of himself as wiser than complete wisdom, wiser than God himself. He believes that he knows better than God how to provide himself with rest. All pride takes God’s good gifts and uses those gifts apart from God. So the sluggard misuses the gift of sleep, a wonderful gift God has given to us. God’s intention is that we take eight or so hours out of 24, one-third of the day, and let God run things in our lives while we sleep. But the sluggard takes this good gift and seeks to find his meaning here instead of in God. Ironically, the workaholic does the same thing with work. The workaholic and the sluggard are actually much closer to one another than appears to be the case if we just look at their outward lives. But if we look at the heart, we will see that they are doing the same thing. They are using God’s gift, whether it be the gift of rest or of work (both are gifts from God), to find their meaning in life. So the sluggard must see his sin chiefly as an expression of his pride, and repent accordingly.

Finally, the sluggard needs to remember the grace of God for all sinners, including the one guilty of this sin. He needs to remember that God’s gift of forgiveness comes to those who don’t work. He doesn’t need to work to provide his rest, because he has received the love of God for those who don’t work. Jesus tells a great parable about this. It’s the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. A man needs to hire laborers for his vineyard and agrees to hire a group and pay them one denarius, the normal wage for a day’s labor. Several hours later he hires another group and says he will pay them a fair wage. At the eleventh hour, he hires the last group, even though they will work only one hour. At closing time, they all line up to receive their pay, beginning with the last hired. Even though they only worked one hour, he pays them the entire day’s wage, one denarius. The ones hired first think that he will pay them more, but when he gets to them, they get the same amount. He has paid them what he agreed to pay, though they think he has been unfair. This is a parable about the grace of God, about those who receive more than they work for. We are the ones hired in the eleventh hour. Paradoxically, it is as we receive this grace and learn to rest in what God has done for us through Christ that we begin to be able to overcome the sin of sloth.

CONCLUSION:

As we come today to the Lord’s Supper, let us celebrate the grace of God through our Lord Jesus. As we do so, let’s ask God to help us rest in all that he has done for us, rather than attempt to achieve rest ourselves.