

Sloth

Disordered Loves: a journey into wholeness part 2

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Philpott Memorial Church

“His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”

2 Peter 1:3-7 HCSB

A personal note before we begin: this weekend is the third anniversary of my family's arrival here in Canada and at Philpott Church. It's been a wonderful three years. Thanks to each of you for welcoming us into your hearts and homes, and for allowing us to be part of this community of grace.

Vices overview

This is part 2 of our sermon series called *Disordered Loves, a Journey Into*

Wholeness.

This is a series about what is probably best known as the seven deadly sins: *Envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, sloth, and wrath*. Have you ever seen this list and thought, “why isn’t murder on this list?” Aren’t there worse sins than the ones on this list?

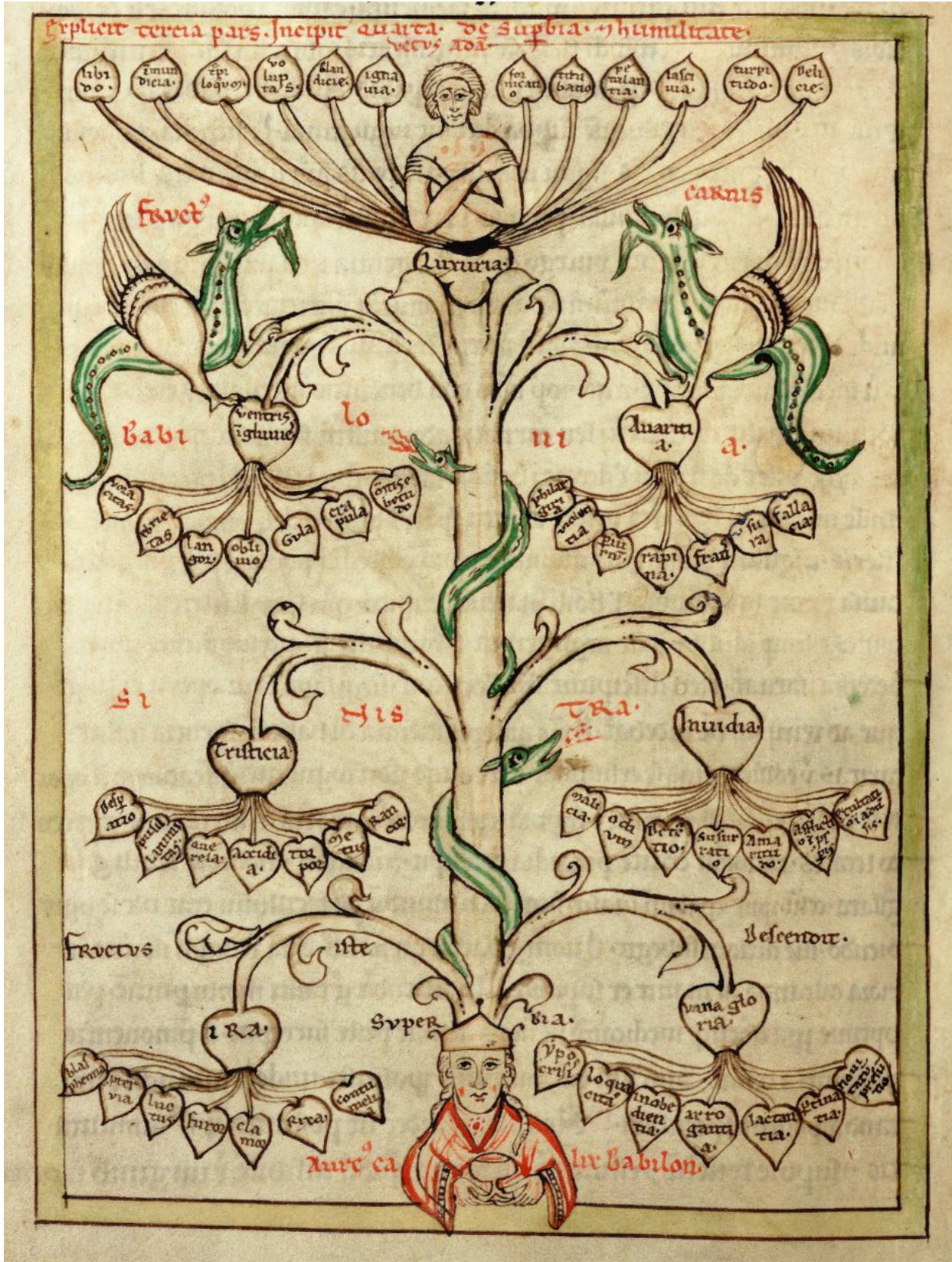
We often call these the seven deadly sins, but we would do better to refer to them as the **capital vices**.

A vice, as Lane said last week, is not a sin, but a habit of the heart. A capital vice is a spiritual habit which bears sinful fruit in your life, which is why these are known as the deadly sins. It’s not that these things are in and of themselves worse than other sins, the issue is that these capital vices produce all kinds of other sin in your life.

A brief history of the capital vices

The list of capital vices has been revised over the years, but was originally created to help monks in Northern Africa develop spiritually. The thinking was that if a monk could identify negative spiritual habits in his life, it would be easier to overcome these habits and thus to progress in Christlikeness. This list of capital vices has proved to be such a useful tool for spiritual development that it has been used continuously in a wide variety of Christian traditions for over 1500 years.

Over the years, different traditions have added or removed various vices from this list, or have applied the list in different ways. Many people have provided different tools to help Christians understand how the vices work, and what their various associated virtues might be.



Above, you can see an image front the Middle Ages that attempts to show

how the various vices might work. The artist has illustrated each of the capital vices as the branch of a tree, with smaller branches splitting off to illustrate the sins that a particular vice might produce.

Whatever the presentation, and however the list is presented, the ultimate purpose of the list has always remained the same: to become a better follower of Jesus.

Our hope is that this sermon series will help you to grow in Christlikeness, just like those monks in the desert 1600 years ago. To that end, we've planned a number of messages about the different vices, and we're also providing further study materials and weekly devotionals on our website as well as on the Lent resource table in the atrium.

Let's pray before we go too much further.

Heavenly Father, we pray that Your living word would pierce our hearts, dividing spirit and soul. Help us to identify and overcome the unhealthy spiritual habits in our lives, so that we can be fully formed into the image of your Son. Amen.

Sloth

Today, we are talking about the vice of sloth. Because this is a vice, we already know we are talking about a spiritual habit, not simply a sin. And we should expect that because this is a capital vice, it is a spiritual habit that bears much sinful fruit in our lives.

So what is sloth? We tend to think of sloth as laziness, perhaps like its namesake animal. And if you think of sloth as laziness, you probably think that

being lazy is not good, but certainly not that bad. If you think about it, the world would in some ways be better if more people were lazy; most of the suffering in the world is caused by people who are not lazy but overly industrious. How many lazy people have started a war?

Perhaps you think this is a teaching about laziness, and you're worried that now that you'll have to repent of binge watching *Gilmour Girls* on Netflix over March break.

Most of you, though, are thinking you really aren't lazy and that this is one vice you don't have to worry about. I don't think of myself as lazy; in fact, I enjoy my job and I work really hard at it. I don't mind doing hard things, so how could sloth apply to me?

I've been quite surprised as I've studied Rebecca DeYoung's book, *Glittering Vices*. Lane mentioned this book in his message last week, and I'll also say that reading this book has been a wonderful experience. In her book, DeYoung explains the capital vices with immense understanding drawn from scripture and from her study of church history. The book is very thorough but easy to read, and has revealed a number of areas in which I need to grow as a Christ follower.

As I've studied the vice of sloth in DeYoung's book and elsewhere, I've discovered that sloth is not really about laziness at all. Sloth is really a modern term for what the desert fathers called *acedia*, which is like spiritual torpor; a languishing of our spirits that leads to despair and a desire to escape from both God and from the self. Aquinas said that "Acedia is an aversion to the divine good in us." Acedia is a very old term, so today we use the word sloth to mean the same thing. So we can say that...

Sloth is a sickness of the soul that leads to apathy toward the transforming work of the Spirit. Much as clinical depression is an illness which affects our mind and emotions in a way that causes us to be apathetic about the goodness in life, sloth is an illness which causes us to be spiritually apathetic, ungrateful, and

uninterested in relationship with God, or in growing in our love for Him.

Here's how DeYoung describes sloth:

To be slothful is to be opposed to the joy we should have over being united with God and committed to Him in love. Instead of rejoicing at God's presence in us, the slothful chafe at it and resent the claims that God's love makes on them. Rather than being willing to dedicate themselves to developing and deepening the relationship, they resist its demands. Although sloth can appear symptomatically similar to chronic depression, it is not a matter of brain chemistry, but rather a habit of the heart. [...] in sloth, we resist our identity in Christ and his presence in our hearts. We balk at God's invitation to be imitators of God and to be transformed by Him over the rest of our lives.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* pg 88

So sloth is not laziness, but an apathetic habit of the heart towards God, particularly towards the transformation that always occurs in relationship with God. The slothful heart looks at God's gift of grace and at the opportunity to be loved by the maker of the universe and to be transformed into His image and says, "meh."

We've been studying the book of Ephesians this year, in fact, you could think of this sermon series we are in now as a mini-series within our Ephesians series. And we know, because we've been studying the book of Ephesians, that the Christian faith is not merely a faith that provides escape from Hell; instead, ours is a transformational faith. Scripture teaches us that just like every significant relationship, our relationship with God will have a transformative effect on us. Here's how Paul describes this in Ephesians 4:23-24, which we studied two weeks ago:

"You took off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires; you are being renewed in the spirit of your minds; you put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth. "

Ephesians 4:23-24. (See also Colossians 3)

We put off the old self and put on the new self. This is what it means to be a Christian. We are made to be transformed. Look at 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:2:

“We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit. Therefore, since we have this ministry [of grace] because we were shown mercy, we do not give up. Instead, we have renounced shameful secret things, not walking in deceit or distorting God’s message, but commending ourselves to every person’s conscience in God’s sight by an open display of the truth.”

2 Corinthians 3:18-4:2

If you are a believer in Jesus, this passage should fill you with anticipation, but the person overtaken by sloth looks at this passage without excitement. The slothful heart **encounters the glory of the Lord** with no enthusiasm, and considers the idea of being **transformed from glory to glory** without gratitude. Because of this, **sloth gives up**. Sloth does not **renounce shameful secret things**, because it is too hard to be worthwhile.

Suddenly, it is easy to see why sloth would be counted as a capital vice. This is not merely idleness, but a rejection of God’s transforming work in our lives. In other words, Sloth is a rejection of our Creator’s will for us to bear His image, a rejection of the cross of Christ which makes our transformation possible, and a rejection of the Spirit of God who actually reforms us.

Considering the seriousness of sloth, today we will follow in the footsteps of the desert fathers and mothers by attempting to identify the sinful fruit that sloth produces in our lives, as well as its roots, so that we can become better followers of Jesus.

Symptoms of Sloth

Let's take a look at some of the symptoms of sloth

The slothful heart is desperate to escape from both God and the self. This escapist tendency manifests itself through **three daily escape attempts**.

Escape through entertainment

The person afflicted with sloth attempts constantly to escape from him or herself, and to escape from God. Rather than joining with the Spirit in the sometimes difficult work of transformational faith, the person afflicted with sloth attempts to distract him or herself through mindless diversions. Binge watching tv shows on Netflix, constantly scrolling through Facebook, and obsessing over hobbies could all be manifestations of sloth.

Often times, sloth is a significant factor in addiction. Many people who struggle with an addiction to pornography, recreational drugs, or alcohol actually do so because they are desperate to find something to keep them from having to see themselves or to approach God. The slothful person who manifests an addiction knows he or she should change, but its always easier to have another drink, or to visit that website again, or to watch another episode than it is to change.

Of course, it is not necessarily wrong to watch a tv show, to read a fantasy book series, or to enjoy a drink, but if you find you are doing these things to escape from yourself or from God, you are suffering from sloth. If you don't seek some cure for your affliction, these minor diversions will own you, and you will soon find yourself enslaved to your need for another drink, another hour in front of the TV, or another quick scroll through Facebook on your phone.

For many of us, an easy way to identify our slothful tendencies is to consider the ways we use our phones. If you have to sit in the waiting room at the doctor's office, can you handle sitting there for ten minutes without opening your phone the whole time? Could you come to a prayer meeting without reflexively reaching for your phone every five minutes? We use our phones to fill up any moment of stillness or boredom in our lives, squeezing out every second

for possible self reflection or prayer. Again, there's nothing wrong with using a smart phone, but if it becomes the tool you use to escape from God or yourself, then you are suffering from sloth.

Escape through busyness

A very common symptom of sloth is actually busyness, rather than laziness. Rebecca DeYoung puts it this way:

Sloth *cannot* be defined as laziness, since slothful people often pour great physical effort and emotional energy into the difficult task of distracting themselves from the unhappiness of their real condition.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* pg 90

Just as some people afflicted with sloth attempt to distract themselves from their spiritual condition by seeking out entertainment, others distract themselves with work. A person afflicted with sloth will often become a workaholic, obsessing over work, taking on every task and project, filling every second of every day with some productive thing to do. Slothful people say to themselves that they are being diligent, good stewards of their time. The truth is that they are desperate to avoid any moment of stillness in which they might be forced to see themselves, to encounter God, and to actually acknowledge the ways that they need to change.

Do you feel busy? Perhaps you are more slothful than you thought. I'm in the same boat with you. A particularly significant symptom of sloth is busyness in the church. Many Christians, desperate to escape from God have actually attempted to fill their lives with church activities, becoming so busy that they never have to be still before God.

Imagine that there is a married couple who have realized that they don't want to be married anymore, but they also aren't willing to divorce. Perhaps they no longer love one another, or perhaps they no longer love themselves. Whatever the case, if they stay married, they will live like strangers in the same house. Eating meals in silence, watching TV to avoid conversation, falling asleep on the couch instead of going to bed together. Perhaps the husband will become

obsessed with a hobby or social club, spending every waking hour busy with his hobby. The wife may immerse herself in her career, working late, checking email from home, and reading trade magazines in the evening. If the couple is busy enough, they can pretend that their marriage is fine, because they never have to actually interact with the other person.

In the same way, the slothful heart, too apathetic to change, desperate to escape from itself and from God, will find ways to be busy with many distractions. Sloth makes you sign up for every volunteer opportunity, every bible study class, every extra assignment possible, all so that you are too busy to face God or yourself, too busy to admit you still need to be transformed.

Now keep in mind, volunteering is important, bible study classes are important, taking your kids to soccer is important. But, if you find that your loved ones say you are a workaholic, or if your answer to “how are you” is always “busy!” You are most likely suffering from a slothful heart. If you feel tired all the time, and if your weekends are as stressful as your workdays, you should ask yourself why you insist on filling every waking moment with something to do. Is it possible you are trying to escape from yourself? Are you trying to escape from God? Are you apathetic about God’s gift of transforming grace?

Escape through unhealthy relationships.

Sloth affects our relationships in a number of ways. One major way is that because sloth is in part an attempt to escape from the true self, the person afflicted with sloth will seek out relationships which enable this escape.

A person afflicted with sloth may seek out a relationship in which someone else controls them. If you are afraid of seeing yourself and acknowledging the ways in which you need to change, then having a relationship in which someone else dominates you by telling you who to be and how to act can become very appealing. Rather than experiencing change through relationship with God, the person afflicted with sloth seeks the illusion of change by letting another person

shape their identity for them.

This can work the other way, too. Rather than taking an honest look at oneself and acknowledging the ways in which he needs to change, the slothful person might choose to control another person. There's a great Bruce Springsteen song called "Thunder Road" that depicts a person afflicted with sloth:

The screen door slams, Mary's dress waves
 Like a vision she dances across the porch as the radio plays
 Roy Orbison singing for the lonely
 Hey, that's me and I want you only
 Don't turn me home again, I just can't face myself alone again
 Don't run back inside, darling, you know just what I'm here for
 So you're scared and you're thinking that maybe we ain't that young anymore
 Show a little faith, there's magic in the night
 You ain't a beauty but, hey, you're alright
 Oh, and that's alright with me

-Bruce Springsteen, "Thunder Road"

The singer "just can't face [himself] along again" so he seeks to escape himself through a controlling relationship with Mary ("don't run back inside, you know just what I'm here for"). He seeks to distract from his own flaws by pointing out her flaws instead ("you ain't a beauty but hey you're alright"). Because he is unwilling to change, he tries to meet his need for transformation by controlling another person.

Spiritual symptoms

Naturally, there are also a number of overtly spiritual symptoms. Here are three of them:

Dissatisfying prayer

The slothful person finds no satisfaction in prayer. When the desert fathers first identified acedia as a vice, the context was that Evagrius found it difficult to

pray in the middle of the day. He tried to pray, and instead thought about all the things he'd rather be doing. He thought about leaving the monastery and going back to the city he came from to be with his friends. He wondered if there was something better to do with his time.

For the person afflicted with sloth, prayer is a gruelling, obligatory experience. Slothful prayers are afraid of revealing too much about the self, afraid of discovering too much about God, and afraid of being transformed. As a result, the slothful person prays in a way that often feels like a chore list. "Dear God, help Aunt Edna with her back. Dear God, keep Mark safe on the road today. Dear God, help me finish all my work today."

For the slothful heart, prayer is corrupted. While prayer should be a chance to encounter the living God in conversation, prayer instead becomes a wrote experience, a laundry list of concerns and tasks. The slothful person does not pray to change. The slothful person never takes time in prayer to be silent and to wait for God to speak.

Imagine if I were afraid of relationship with my wife. I might come home and say, "Hi honey. I had an interesting day. Don't forget about my cousin who's having trouble finding a job, and when you get a chance I have all these things I need help with, you'll find my list on the fridge. Alright, it was wonderful talking with you. You're a great wife. Good night, I'm going to bed." If I never let her talk to me, what kind of relationship would we have? If our whole relationship consists of me asking for things and talking about people I'm concerned for, and then closing off the conversation, what is the use of our marriage?

In the same way, the slothful heart avoids relationship with God by filling prayer with words and then quickly saying "amen" to close the conversation. Prayer is meant to be an ongoing dialogue with God, empowered by the Spirit of God living within us; this is why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5 to pray without ceasing, giving thanks to God in all situations.

In time, the slothful heart will begin to pray less and less often, because prayer is a dissatisfying experience. Eventually, the person afflicted with sloth will cease praying altogether.

Dissatisfying study of scripture

The word of God is alive. When we read scripture, we encounter the living God because the Holy Spirit within us actively reveals the Father through his word. Sometimes, we read scripture, and find it to be a frustrating or dissatisfying experience. However, if you find that every time you read scripture, you are dissatisfied; if you can't remember the last time you actually encountered God in studying scripture, you should ask if there is something within you that is avoiding God. If you don't find that studying scripture changes you in some way each day, you should ask if there is something in you that balks at transformation. The slothful heart is apathetic about encountering God, and will attempt to avoid Him even while studying scripture. If left unchecked, the slothful heart will eventually cease studying scripture at all.

Dissatisfying times of worship

When we worship God, when we express His goodness, we invariably have a greater revelation of who He is. As Billy Graham said, to know Him is to love Him. When we worship God, our connection to Him actually deepens. The slothful heart doesn't care about knowing God better, because knowing God better always means we will be transformed. Remember the verse from 2 Corinthians earlier: as we behold His glory, we are transformed. The slothful heart is uninterested in beholding God's glory or in being transformed, and so true worship is unappealing.

As a result, a person suffering from sloth may go through the motions of worship, might sing the songs for a while, and might come to church, but there is no spirit or truth in his or her worship. It's a hollow gesture that means less than it should.

After enough time going through the motions of worship without actually ascribing worth to God, the slothful heart may begin to participate less frequently in worship. At first, the slothful person may continue to worship with others, but will cease worshipping in private. Eventually, worshipping God in private will seem like a strange thing to do.

Later, the slothful person may stop participating in worship gatherings with others. This person may still describe him or herself as a Christian, but may not be able to recall the last time he or she spent time doing nothing but worshipping the Lord.

Do you find satisfaction in worshipping the Lord, or is it just something you do just because you are supposed to? Do you worship God when you are alone, or only with others? Do you still know how to worship God on your own?

Prognosis:

Sloth will cause you to waste your life on things that don't matter, not even to you. If you are given over to sloth, you will spend your time, your creativity, and your love on things that you don't care about at all—just so that you can avoid having to face yourself and your Creator.

Sloth wants your life to count for nothing; it wants you to end your life having added no value to yourself or to the others. It wants to prevent you from becoming a complete human being.

Left unchecked, sloth will transition from apathy into fear of the self, of God, and of transformation. Many people remain slothful and passively waste their lives, but for some, their sloth corrupts their identity like a cancer, causing them to fear the things they were made for. The ultimate result of unabated sloth is suicide—not out of spiritual apathy, but out of fear of truly seeing oneself or of encountering God. David Foster Wallace described this in *Infinite Jest*:

“The so-called ‘psychotically depressed’ person who tries to kill herself doesn’t do so out of quote ‘hopelessness’ or any abstract conviction that life’s assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death seems suddenly appealing. The person in whom Its invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire’s flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It’s not desiring the fall; it’s terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling ‘Don’t!’ and ‘Hang on!’, can understand the jump. Not really. You’d have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling.”

— David Foster Wallace

Causes of Sloth

Root causes of sloth:

The root causes of sloth are a wrong view of oneself, and a wrong view of God.

Our wrong view of self

In sloth, there are two wrong self-perspectives we tend to vacillate between. The first is a kind of **self-hatred**. The reason the slothful heart avoids self-reflection is that we are afraid we will not like what we see. We believe we are so messed up that we are unworthy of love and incapable of change.

The second wrong self perspective is the obverse of the first. Just as we can

hate ourselves and sink into sloth, we can also become slothful through **static self-love**. What I mean by this is that we can love ourselves exactly the way we are without wanting to change at all.

Our culture preaches a message of static self-love at every turn. Yesterday our parking lot was filled with people going to see Disney on Ice. The core message of essentially every Disney movie is the message of secular humanism— Disney movies say you are perfect just the way you are. You do not need to change, you simply need to embrace yourself as-is. You might have seen Lady Gaga singing about this during the Super Bowl half-time show this year. She sang her song “Born This Way” which is all about the idea that God makes no mistakes, and that we are all born perfect.

Often, we experience static self-love and self-loathing simultaneously. We can see this at work in situations where we acknowledge a sinful habit but accept the habit as being part of our personality. For example, someone who has a habit of gossiping should acknowledge that this is a sinful habit that prevents them from being who God made them to be. Rather than working to change the sinful habit, the slothful person will instead decide that they are a gossip, and that gossip is just their “little cross to bear” or “a little thorn in the flesh.”

Thus, the person who once struggled with gossip has stopped struggling and has chosen to identify as something they hate (here is the self-hatred) but the gossip also chooses to accept this self-hatred and uses religious language to justify their unwillingness to change.

Obviously, it is not good for people to hate themselves. We are made in the image of God; remember again our passage from 2 Corinthians, which says we are being transformed from glory to glory. This means that we are made with some original glory, we are worthy of love. The message of the cross is surely that each human being is worthy of love in God’s eyes, regardless of our condition.

And yet, it is clear from scripture that we are also expected to change. We

know that relationship with God transforms us in some way. Because we've been studying Ephesians this year, we know that all believers are being molded into the image of Christ.

Our wrong view of God

Our wrong view of ourselves stems directly from our wrong view of God. We somehow get in the habit of thinking that God cannot or will not love us *and* want us to change. We think that God perhaps does not love us as we are, or that He loves us without wanting us to be transformed into something better than ourselves. We think that perhaps God is unable to change us, that our brokenness is too severe for Him. Perhaps we imagine that He is looking down on us hoping that we do the right things, but powerless to save us if we do not. We think that God is unwilling, unable, or unloving. It is because of these wrong perceptions of God that we develop a wrong view of ourselves.

Anne Lamott put it well when she said,

"The secret is that God loves us exactly the way we are, and that he loves us too much to let us stay like this."

-Anne Lamott, *Travelling Mercies*

Indeed, in sloth, we not only deny God's transforming love, we also deny our true humanity. Sloth leads us to a view of humanity that says either that humanity's condition, whether ideal or broken, is fixed—that is, sloth leads us to believe that change is impossible, whether we want it or not.

Sloth ultimately denies the idea that people are meant to change, but scripture teaches us that to be human is to be transformed in relationship with God. In Genesis 1, we are told that God made us in His image, and yet, Jesus is the only one who is the complete image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). If we are made to bear God's image, yet Jesus is the only one who has fully borne God's image, then it must be that God's intention is for humanity to be transformed into ever increasing Christlikeness.

Christ is the first person to actually bear the image of God. He demonstrates a new way to be a complete human. Humanity that does not completely reflect the image of God is incomplete humanity. Jesus shows a better way.

N.T. Wright puts it more clearly than I have:

What are we here for in the first place? The fundamental answer ... is that what we're here for is to become genuine human beings, reflecting the God in whose image we're made, and doing so in worship on the one hand and in mission, its full and large sense, on the other; and that we do this not least by "following Jesus." the way this works out is that it produces, through the work of the Holy Spirit, a transformation of character.

-N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* pg 25

The question is, how do we follow Jesus when we are suffering from the spiritual cancer of sloth?

Treating the Disease

It's important to remember that the process of sanctification is the fruit of grace. Becoming Christlike isn't about us working like crazy to improve ourselves and merit a place in God's favor. Sanctification is about effort—but not earning.

-Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* pg 87

Take a look at 2 Peter 1, which we heard read this morning.

“His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”

2 Peter 1:3-7 HCSB

I want you to notice three things here. The first is that *God’s divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness*. This means that even though sloth leads us to spiritual despair and says we cannot improve, we cannot become more godly, the scriptures say that God’s power has given us what we need. If you are struggling to overcome sloth, remember that you have everything you need because of God’s power.

The second thing I want you to notice is that this happens “*through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness*.” So while sloth erodes our self perception and makes us think that we are either already glorious, or that we are irredeemably without goodness, Peter tells us here that Christ calls us out of *His own* glory and goodness; this means that *our* own glory and goodness, or lack thereof, are not factors in God’s call or in our ability to grow in godliness. We grow into the image of Christ only because of His goodness and His glory.

So, if you are struggling with sloth, you should to seek to grow in the knowledge of Christ in order to have a bigger, wider experience of His glory and goodness. In doing so, you can stop focusing on how good or glorious you may or not be and focus instead on the Lord.

The third thing I want you to notice here is that there is *effort* involved in this. The word scripture uses for the process of growing in godliness is sanctification. Sanctification is a work of grace, meaning it is a gift that is extended to us based on God’s goodness, not our own merit. Yet, sanctification demands our

participation.

To overcome sloth, we need to recognize that nothing happens on our own strength. Overcoming sloth on your own strength is a guaranteed way to sink deeper into sloth. Instead, the way to overcome sloth is to trust in the Lord and to join in the transforming work that His Holy Spirit has already begun in you. In Colossians 1:29, Paul says that he labors, striving *with God's strength* that works powerfully in him. Sloth is a sickness that destroys our perception of God's grace so it is all the more important to fully lean on the grace of God in overcoming sloth.

Approaching God in prayer

The first step in leaning on God's grace is acknowledging that He alone can change you, and that you are willing to participate in what He does in your life. Naturally, this should happen in prayer, but it is hard for the slothful person to know how to pray because his prayers have been so hollow and unsatisfying for so long.

One way to get around this might be to consider practicing what is called *lectio divina*. *Lectio Divina* is a method for praying with scripture that consists of four simple steps:

1. Read the text.
2. Meditate on the text. Take a few minutes to repeat the text in your mind and to consider its meaning. These few minutes will be difficult for the person afflicted with sloth.
3. Pray with the text. Use the text as a prayer, or as a beginning for prayer. Speak to God out of the text.
4. Contemplate. Take time to sit and be still and to let God speak to you. Trust that God speaks through His word, and take time to be quiet enough to hear Him.

There is nothing mystical about this process; it is simply a way to give time to prayer and to hearing from God through His word.

If you'd like to try *lectio divina*, Psalm 119 is an excellent place to start for the slothful person. The Psalm is a prayer for those times when our spirit is weary and we have lost hope in changing based on our own strength. Consider this segment of Psalm 119 as a prayer against sloth:

“My life is down in the dust; give me life through your word. I told You about my life, and You listened to me; teach me Your statutes. Help me understand the meaning of Your precepts so that I can meditate on your wonders. *I am weary from grief; strengthen me through your word.* Keep me from the way of deceit and graciously give me Your instruction. I have chosen the way of truth; I have set your ordinances before me. I cling to Your decrees; Lord, do not put me to shame. I pursue the way of your commands, for you broaden my understanding.”

Psalm 119:25-32

There are twenty-two stanzas in Psalm 119, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Coincidentally, this is approximately how many days are left in the season of Lent. If you struggle with sloth, you might consider praying through each of the twenty-two sections of Psalm 119 for the next twenty-two days, asking God to give you strength to lean on Him. If you find that your time in prayer or your time studying scripture is unrewarding, perhaps practicing *lectio divina* will be a helpful practice for you.

Sabbath Rest

For the slothful person who has distracted herself with every kind of busyness and entertainment, the idea of rest is anathema. The slothful person believes the solution to their predicament is to be increasingly busy, which only worsens the problem. The solution to this is rest.

Jesus said in Matthew 11:

“Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. All of you, take up My yoke and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30.

Jesus invites those who are weary to come to Him for rest. Yet, rest means taking up Jesus' yoke. How could this be? Jesus is addressing people who suffer from sloth: those who are busy and weighed down with troubles, yet whose spirits are apathetic and inactive. Jesus offers us rest, but His rest means carrying a new burden, and taking up a new task. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this odd idea of rest this way:

“Grace is costly because it compels a person to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow Him; it is grace because Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The kind of rest that God offers is not just taking a nap—it's an active commitment of the spirit to trust in Him. This is the opposite of what sloth does, which is to languish spiritually but to be outwardly busy. Sabbath rest means to be outwardly still as the spirit actively, diligently rests in the Lord. Sabbath rest is a spiritual activity and a bodily inactivity.

Have you ever thought about what it must have been like for the Israelites to first hear the Ten Commandments and to discover that God wanted them to rest one day each week (Exodus 20:8)? In an agricultural society, people literally lived and died by how much they worked. To take one seventh of your time to offer as a Sabbath to the Lord would have required enormous faith that God would provide and keep your family from starving. For the other people groups living around the Israelites, this would have been a very strange, countercultural thing to do. Thus, taking a sabbath rest unto the Lord became a significant public statement of trust in God.

Today, if you go to a party, people often ask, “so what do you do?” We identify ourselves by our careers, and we consider ourselves to be successful or not based on what we have accomplished. In this culture that is obsessed with productivity and achievement, the sabbath is as countercultural as ever. When we take a day to not produce more work, to not obsess over responding to emails

on time or to prepare for Monday morning, we make a statement about who our God really is, and who we really are. We are not merely our careers, but we are people who belong to God. Our identity is not found in what we do, but in Who we belong to.

Jesus said that man was not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath for man (Mark 2:27-28). When we come to Jesus, and do the hard, spiritual work of trusting in Him and declaring a day of rest, it is a statement of who our God is, but it is also something that restores our souls and bodies and makes us better able to actually do the things we need to do.

To our point, taking holy sabbath rest is an effective way to kill the slothful cancer within.

As Augustine famously said, our hearts are restless until they rest in the Lord. Consider the famous prayer from his *Confessions*:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you – we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first. To call upon you, or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? [...]

But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise Him, for as they seek they find Him, and on finding him they will praise Him. Let me seek you then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you.

Augustine of Hippo

St. Augustine's Confessions (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5)

Intentional worship habits

“We need to cultivate the things of the Spirit by our wise use of our Sundays, our daily disciplined private devotion, our regular public worship and attendance at the Lord’s Supper, and our involvement in Christian service.”

-John Stott, *Through the Bible, Through the Year* pg 348

Intentional acts and expressions of worship, regardless of how we feel, prepare us to become enduring lovers of God. Every Christian experiences peaks and valleys in the journey of faith. Sometimes we feel that everything is wonderful, and find that our times of Bible study and prayer are life giving and exciting. Other times we feel that our spiritual journey is like wading through deep snow: difficult with little to show for our effort.

Of course, we know that the reality of our faith does not change. God is always near, though sometimes we are acutely aware of His presence, and other times we wonder if He even hears us. We see that even the heroes of faith in scripture had high points and low points in their spiritual walk, and we know that we are not alone.

However, for the unaware or immature Christian, the low points of faith present an opportunity for danger. The times when prayer is difficult and Bible study feels unrewarding are exactly the times that the heart can slip into negative habits, particularly sloth. If we experience a “dry” time in our faith and let our heart establish negative habits, we may soon find ourselves ceasing to pray, ceasing to worship, and ceasing to spend time in God’s word. Soon, we might find ourselves searching for satisfaction in other areas, and spurning the God’s transforming grace.

The solution to this is to not let our *perception* of faith dominate the *reality* of

our faith. Just because one particular day I am in a bad mood and might *feel* that God is distant does not mean that I should then *act* as though God is distant. I need to add spiritual discipline to my life so that I can persevere in difficult times and excel in easy times.

Here is an analogy that might help you understand what I mean. One of the central ideas of jazz music is improvisation. Every jazz song has sections in which one of the musicians gets to improvise a part. The rest of the band follows along and responds to this improvised part, and when you have a good band playing, there is something really amazing that happens when the musicians are all together “in the pocket.”

Learning to improvise well with other musicians is a tremendously difficult task. We might imagine that the life of a jazz musician is an especially laid back lifestyle, but in reality, jazz musicians practice and study obsessively. They work all day practicing scales, beating out paradiddles, syncopating behind and ahead of the beat, learning circular breathing, etc. Jazz musicians bury their heads in music theory books, write Coltrane’s counterpoint parts down note for note, and study chord structures. All this study is the opposite of our mental picture of the cool, relaxed jazz musician.

Cognitively, it might be that most musicians know how to do these things, but to really feel the music—to improvise with other people in a way that actually conveys a sense of emotion—takes something beyond just knowing how. Good improvisation requires that the musicians know their instrument and music theory so well that responding to the other musicians becomes a second nature. When the pianist plays an odd chord, or when the drummer syncopates the beat of the song, the saxophonist can’t think about how to respond—he needs to have become so skilled at his instrument that he responds reflexively, intuitively. He should play the right note before he can even *think* of the right note.

In the same way that jazz musicians practice and study music theory so that

music becomes a second nature, Christians need to be so immersed in the daily disciplines of our faith that we are able to respond to every situation as followers of Christ, never looking for the right note, so to speak, but always in perfect sync with the Spirit. We need to become people with a habit of worshipping that can help us to love God regardless of our circumstances. Our first response to every situation should be to reflexively trust God and to turn to Him.

“To do by feel what cannot be done by regular conscious thought”: that’s not a bad description of the goal of discipleship. To conform to the image of the Son is to have absorbed the gospel as a kinesthetic sense, a know-how you now carry in your bones, that you do by feel what cannot be done by conscious thought. [...] this kind of sense is deeper than knowledge; it’s a know-how you absorb poetically, on the register of the imagination. Formative worship speaks to us— shows us, touches us, shapes—on this level.

-James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* pg 108

To be conformed to the image of His Son is not only to think God’s thoughts after Him but to desire what God desires. That requires the recalibration of our heart-habits and the recapturing of our imagination, which happens when God’s Word becomes the orienting Center of our social imaginary, shaping our very perception of things before we even *think* about them. [...]. Christian worship doesn’t just teach us how to think; it teaches us how to love, and it does so by inviting us into the biblical story and implanting that story in our bones.

-James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, pg 85

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K.A. Smith says what we need is not just to be better at knowing what we ought to do as Christ followers; we actually need to become people who want what God wants. Smith says that the way to have our desires transformed is to become better worshippers of God. Worshipping doesn’t just teach us what to think, it teaches us how to love.

The problem of sloth is really a worship problem. Sloth makes us worship the wrong things; it teaches us to worship our distractions, rather than God. Sloth teaches that we cannot approach God in worship, because it obsesses over us,

instead of over Him. This means that sloth is also a love problem. When we worship the wrong things, our hearts make a habit of loving the wrong things, and soon, our many loves are out of order—with God near the bottom of the list. However, if we make new habits of worshipping God, we find that our loves are reordered, and that we begin to love what God loves.

See the resources at the end of this message for some tools that will help you to build new worship habits.

The Big Idea

Sloth is an apathy of the soul towards God's transforming work in our lives. As Christ followers, we should seek to remove the roots of sloth in our lives by becoming people who find holy rest in God alone.

Benediction

Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless actions, but be filled by the Spirit:

speaking to one another
in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,
singing and making music
from your heart to the Lord,
giving thanks always for everything
to God the Father
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
submitting to one another
in the fear of Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-21

Resources:

- Try practicing the *lectio divina* with Psalm 119 for the remainder of Lent. Let me know how it goes!
- David Crowder's book, *Praise Habit* is an accessible introduction to the *lectio divina*. Each chapter explores Crowder's experience using the practice with a different Psalm. His writing is simultaneously funny, profound, and simple. If you've never practiced *lectio divina* before, this is a great place to start.
- Rebecca DeYoung's *Glittering Vices* has been an incredible help to me as I've prepared this sermon, but it has also helped me to become a better Christ follower. Her book uses scripture and writings from church fathers and mothers to help readers draw closer to God in a beautiful way. I never knew how useful it could be to study the capital vices.
- James K. A. Smith's *You Are What You Love* is a true gift to the church. Smith explores what it is that shapes our spiritual habits, and how we can become people who better make habits as disciples of Jesus in several different arenas.
- If you want something to help you establish a pattern of daily worship and prayer, Shane Claiborne's *Common Prayer for Ordinary Radicals* is a simple, modern take on the classic you already know. Each day's reading includes a very brief story about a hero of the faith, a song, a prayer based on a psalm, a New Testament and Old Testament reading, and a guide to prayer for the day. The book can be used as a personal devotional, but is really meant to be used in a group (e.g. Growth group, family mealtime, etc.). Feel free to talk with me about some ways I have used this book in the past.

- Any list of this sort should include Kenneth Boa's contemporary classic, *Conformed to His Image*. *Conformed to His Image* is a collection of scripture-based practical exercises and advice to help Christians be intentional about spiritual growth.