

When I was 19 years old, back in 1888, I had the opportunity to spend 6 weeks in Israel. But I was not there to tour. I went there to work. I went with a ministry that gathered teens together from North America into teams. They would send us to do work or evangelism projects around the world. In Israel, our job was to build a large chicken house for an Arab boy's orphanage in a village called Beit Jala just outside of Bethlehem.

Now if you've ever been to Israel, you know that it is a very rocky land. Of the six weeks that that we were there, we spent 5 of them moving rocks and soil by hand. It was hard and boring work in the summer sun. But we were there to serve the Lord. So we were all supposed to be excited. Our leaders were very kind and gentle seniors. The husband supervised the work while the wife supervised the cooking. But the husband's eyesight was declining. Our motivation to work declined as the summer progressed. Some members began to disappear especially during the hottest and hardest afternoon hours. They found some hiding spots to take an hour or more nap out of site of the supervisor. Or they claimed they weren't feeling well between 1 and 2 in the afternoon. Our leader was a kind grandfather-like person. So he accepted all the explanations and just assigned them wherever was needed when they decided to return. But those of us who didn't take unauthorized breaks knew they just skipped work. Our resentment grew. Before we knew it, the summer was over. We headed back to our homes and moved on with our lives.

Yet it was very strange for me to see people actually go out of their way to avoid the work we were all supposed to do. I was raised not to do that. We weren't allowed to get out of the dirty or hard jobs. My parents didn't really hammer us on this. They just modeled and expected us to help when needed. Now that time in Israel is a distant memory in my life. But perhaps some of you have worked or are working with people who do the same thing. They try to get out of work. They pretend to work in their cubicle. Or they disappear when the hard or dirty jobs need to be addressed.

Sometimes this avoidance of work is celebrated among friends. I hear this when I'm listening to a sports radio stations on Mondays, on my day off. Some big sporting event is happening during working hours. It might be the Hockey trade deadline; it might be world cup soccer games on another continent; It might be Olympics. People joke or text in to the radio station talking about how they've made it look like they're working but are really watching the game or listening online. It almost becomes this badge of honor to get paid for not really working.

But did you know that work-avoiding-behavior actually made it onto the list of the 7 deadly sins? It is called something we don't use that much today. But it still portrays this sin well. Sloth. Today, we will talk about sloth or work-avoiding-behavior and how it can negatively impact our spiritual and everyday lives. This continues the series on God's transforming work in our hearts from the book of Proverbs. We're now looking at the 7 deadly sins. 2 weeks ago I explained where this list came from and how it earned the title deadly. We learned every sin is deadly but with these 7, we can at least identify specific areas that may need transformation in our lives. So we're going to ask 3 questions about this topic. 1 – What is sloth and what does it have to do with us? 2 – What's the problem with sloth-like living according to Proverbs? 3 – How does God transform the sloth into someone different?

What is sloth? The dictionary defines it as “**a person who is habitually inactive or lazy.**” Now this does not refer to someone who has a condition that makes it impossible for them to be more active or work regularly. It refers to someone who could work but has developed a habit of avoiding it or finds excuses to get out of it. In the Old Testament, one Hebrew word that refers to this kind of sin means to be idle, slack or negligent. But it is translated as either **sloth or sluggard**. In fact sluggard is the more common translation in the Proverbs occurring 12 or 13 times.

But how did “idle or lazy” get translated into English as sloth or sluggard? Well somewhere along the line, an English speaking person noticed these slow-moving animals of South and Central America called **sloths**. They hang from branches downward and feed on leaves and fruit. But they move very slowly. Someone thought that would be a great picture of slowness to work. The word sluggard is based on the **slugs** – who are snail like gastropods (whatever that means) who have no shell and feed on plants. Slugs move very slowly. So sloth and sluggard became the go to words to describe the person who was slow, idle or lazy when it came to looking after their duties in life. Now this behavior must have been quite a problem during the compiling of the Proverbs because it shows up fairly often. But we might conclude, this does not really have much to do with us. If we have jobs or are going to school, we can dismiss sloth as having any relevance to us.

But sloth can show up in a variety of forms. The most obvious is idleness or laziness at work, school, home and even church. But people can have sloth like habits in their hearts that aren't as obvious. You might be dabbling in sloth if you live on autopilot. You go through the motions. You put in your time. You earn your paycheck. But there's little or no passion for life. Maybe you know something is wrong but not wrong enough to do anything about it. So you're letting

things run their course. You just want to get through life until you retire or reach the goal where you can then sit back and enjoy life.

Or you might be leaning sloth if you do your job at work or homework from school. But then you routinely waste your evenings or weekends on TV or some other non-productive pursuit. Some might be slothful if they refuse to get involved with the suffering or the hardship other people go through. Instead, our own comfort and peace takes precedence in our lives.

But we can still dismiss sloth as not that big of a deal. So maybe this definition will help. Sloth is “**soul decaying apathy and carelessness towards others.**” It comes from a little book called “Killjoys” that you can get free from the Desiring God website. Tony Reinke, in his chapter on Sloth writes this definition. Now that’s a bit more serious. Soul decaying apathy – not caring about much or anything. I’m hearing about more and more young people who live with apathy and little passion for life. Carelessness towards others has become a plague in our culture. Why are there so many lonely people? One reason is the lack of care and concern of neighbors. Reinke ups the ante on sloth. He writes “the Proverbs paint the slothful person in a comical way. But they reveal some deep heart issues that can not only lead to hard financial times but away from God himself.”

Might there be sloth lurking beneath the surface of our lives? Let’s look at some Proverbs that speak about this. So please take your Bibles or your devices and find Proverbs 21. Page 470 in the Bibles in front of you.

Proverbs 21:25-26

The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor.

All day long he craves and craves but the righteous gives and does not hold back.

What is the problem with sloth like behavior or attitudes?

Sloth doesn’t love anything enough to get moving. Tim Keller writes “Lazy people have excessive (inordinate) cravings for ease, rest and comfort.” They crave and crave for comfort. But in the end such a craving can lead to their death as this Proverbs describes. If they don’t ever work, they can starve to death.

Dorothy Sayers was a renowned English crime writer and poet. She lived and wrote through World War 2 and eventually died in 1957. She was also a Christian. In her book *Creed or Chaos* she writes “Sloth is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing,

finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing they would die for.” (Creed or Chaos; NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1949, 81). Keller writes “Lazy people do not love life enough to work hard to enjoy more of it, and they don’t love people enough to work hard so they can – as the righteous – give without sparing (21:26). Another commentator writes “the sluggard lives in a world of wishing which is his substitute for working. He or she craves comfort and looks for a way to get out of anything uncomfortable.” So sloth doesn’t love anything or anyone enough to get moving.

Another problem with sloth is found in Proverbs 12:27 and then 19:24.

12:27 – Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth. 19:24 – The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth.

Sloth doesn’t start or doesn’t finish things. Usually we think of a slothful person as unwilling to start anything. They are idle or slow so they avoid starting work. But sometimes sloth can show up in an unwillingness to finish something. The first proverb talks about someone who will not roast his game. It seems they actually went out hunting. They did catch some game. But they didn’t roast it. Maybe they didn’t want to do the work of bringing the game in from the field. Maybe they thought it was too hard to prepare the meat for roasting. They started the process but didn’t finish it.

The second proverb is a little more humorous or satirical. Here the sluggard starts the process of eating. They bury their hand in the dish. They grab so much food that you can’t see their hand. But they find it too much of an effort to bring the food up to their mouth. They started eating but didn’t finish.

Keller writes “When we think of a lazy person, we think of someone who doesn’t start things. But there is also a kind of person who always makes plans and always starts but never finishes any project. They don’t stay at jobs long and they always blame the job itself rather than their own lack of stick-to-it-iveness. Either they lose interest because of a lack of inner passion for anything or they have failed to count the cost and so find themselves overwhelmed.”

So it is with the sluggard. He fails to roast his game or get the meal from his hand into his mouth. If you are someone who doesn’t finish things, remember the one who loved you to the very end. Jesus did not give up until he was able to say “It is finished.”

The next problem is found in Proverbs 26:13-16.

Proverbs 26:13-16 (ESV)

¹³The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road!

There is a lion in the streets!”

¹⁴As a door turns on its hinges,

so does a sluggard on his bed.

¹⁵The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;

it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

¹⁶The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes

than seven men who can answer sensibly.

These powerful Proverbs start with the sluggard claiming that there is a lion in the road or on the streets. This would justify staying home from work. You can’t go to work if there is a lion on the road that might attack you. So the sluggard stays home. What does he do? “As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. The door merely swings on its hinge and goes nowhere, just as the sluggard in his bed. Then we see an expansion of the Proverbs 19:24 which we just looked at. Remember the sluggard buries his hand in the dish but does not bring it to his mouth? Here he can’t bring it to his mouth because he’s too lazy. Yet to the sluggard, none of this is questionable. “A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than 7 people who answer discreetly.”

This teaches us another problem. **Sloth doesn’t face things.** Keller writes, “This portrait of the slothful is a satire. They exaggerate the danger of doing things (“there may be a lion on the road!”) They are as tightly attached to their leisure as a door to its hinges. The effort of eating exhausts them too much to finish. But the theme running through all this is a tragic blindness. His excuses look ridiculous to everyone else but not to him. As with all other kinds of fools in Proverbs, there is the problem of denial. Sluggards are wise in their own eyes. They cannot face things and especially, they cannot face what they have become.”

Now this one hits maybe a little closer to home. I think all of us have problems in our lives that we don’t want to face. Or maybe there’s something about ourselves that we’d prefer not to deal with. I get it. I don’t wake up in the morning and think “I really hope there’s a bunch of difficult problems that land on my desk today.” There’s times I don’t

want to tackle a difficult tasks. But if we linger in that state of mind, we can slide into sloth. We can develop a habit that avoids, ignores or gives up when things get hard.

That is not the way of the fervent Christ follower. Jesus faced the hardest task anyone will ever have to face. He endured the cross because of the joy He knew would come on the other side. He is our Lord. When we face something difficult, we need to turn to Him for His strength to face it and walk through it.

Another problem of sloth is found in Proverbs 20:4 **“The sluggard does not plow in the autumn, he will seek at harvest and have nothing.”** Now if you come from a farming or gardening background, this proverb doesn’t make sense. Here farmers and gardeners plant most of their crops in the spring. But in Israel one time of planting occurs after the autumn rains. So you planted and then you could harvest in the next season. Yet though the planting time is different, the principle is the same. You can’t plant whenever you feel like it. You have to act when the prime planting season arrives. Otherwise you won’t get a crop.

But what does this sluggard do? He doesn’t plant at the appropriate time. Maybe he was too consumed with his comfort. Maybe it was a little cold that day. So he plants when he feels like it. But by the time of harvest his plants are not ready. And they dried up or froze before the fruit matured. So what’s the problem? **Sloth doesn’t notice or act on opportunities.**

I remember one time when I did this in Ottawa. A lady in the church I served at that time approached me one day and asked to be baptized. But I wasn’t planning on having a baptism class anytime soon. We were going into the summer and it involved a fair amount of work on my part. So I answered that it was great she wanted to get baptized but she’d have to wait until after the summer. She seemed a little disappointed but said ok.

Then September came. I called her up to let her know we were starting a baptism class. I was ready and it fit well into my schedule after all. She said, “No thanks, I’m not interested anymore. I’m too busy this fall.” I tried to persuade her but she wouldn’t have any of it. Some might say that she wasn’t really sincere the first time. But I think there was an open door there. And then through the summer, the enemy did his work in stifling her passion and discouraging her spiritually. After all, there’s a battle going on for souls. Thankfully, she did go ahead with baptism about 3 years later. But when she first asked, the real reason why I said no was convenience. And I resolved never to do that again as much as I was able, especially when it comes to deep spiritual moments in a person’s life. Do you let your schedule for comfort

or leisure take precedence over an opportunity to help someone or go deeper with them about life? That can be a form of sloth.

Let's look at one more problem of sloth before we get to God's help for us. This one comes from **Proverbs 19:15** – **"Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep and an idle person will suffer hunger."** What does this mean? With most Proverbs, there is a relationship between the first and second phrase. Sometimes it can be a slightly different restatement of the first phrase in the second phrase. Sometimes it can be a contrast. But here it seems that the second phrase is a progression from the first phrase.

So the sloth first falls asleep. But it's no light sleep. It's a deep sleep. This seems to intoxicate him for more sleep. In fact, they love sleep so much, they don't go out to work or plow or harvest. But in the end, it costs him hunger. So he may have started just loving sleep. But now it's led to the serious problem of hunger. So **Sloth can bring progressive decline in one's ability to work hard.** Keller writes "Just as a person who has lost physical conditioning cannot suddenly run a marathon, so the slothful finds him or herself less and less able to endure sustained periods of mental exertion or labor. There can be a slow perhaps irretrievable loss of the basic attitudes and habits necessary for good work. These include: keeping commitments; getting work done on time; not being controlled by outside circumstances; being a self-starter who does not need reminders and coercion and taking pride in high quality of one's work. Once these habits are lost – or if they are never formed – it is extraordinarily hard to recapture them."

But it's not impossible. **God can transform the slothful into the spirited by the Gospel.**

What do I mean by spirited? I mean someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit, someone who is moved and led by the Spirit to engage in life in a God-glorifying way.

How does God transform sloth into the spirited by the Gospel? When we come to Christ, we receive the Spirit.

So if you don't know Christ and you have discovered some slothful tendencies in your heart, the first step to dealing with them is to come to Christ in prayer and confess the sin of sloth in your life. Christ paid for this at the cross. Then put your trust in Christ. Put the trust of your life upon Him. Then live in Christ. Live with Him as your Lord, Savior, Guide and Strength. Read your Bible, pray, connect regularly with other Christians. So to become spirited we must first receive the Spirit by receiving Christ.

Yet we can still find sloth among Christians. So what happened to the Spirit? He's still with us. But if we don't cooperate with God and walk with Him, we can grieve Him or quench the Spirit's work in our lives.

But there's a solution. Two verses where sloth is used in NT ESV. Matthew 25:26 "You wicked and slothful servant". Romans 12:11. "Do not be slothful in zeal; be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." The zeal talked about here is zeal for the Lord. We can "lose steam or passion in our lifelong responsibility to reverence God in every aspect of our lives." (Douglas Moo, Romans). We can become lazy and complacent in our pursuit of what is good, well-pleasing to God and perfect. So to counter act this tendency, we must be fervent in spirit. But in this context, I think that the author of Romans is speaking about the Holy Spirit. So be fervent in the Spirit or be set on fire by the Spirit. This is key to living the Christian life from God and not for God. When we open ourselves up to God and the empowering of the Spirit, we regain that zeal for life and all God has for us. We don't have to manufacture that zeal from within our own limited resources. Instead we live by the fuel of God's riches in glory. That's key in overcoming the draining sin of sloth. Do not be slothful in zeal but be fervent or set on fire by the Holy Spirit. Serve the Lord.

Friends, you may be stuck in sloth. You may be pretty apathetic about life. You may have settled for a life of going through the motions. You may have concluded that life is little more than putting in your time until you reach retirement and then hope for health to enjoy it. Or you may think that your purpose is finished or diminished. But God has not given up on you. God wants to do much in you and through you if only you will open up yourself to Him. He will show you how to live life with a well-fitted yoke. He will lead you in the way everlasting. When you live from the Lord, you will be empowered and strengthened to leave behind sloth and live a spirited life. May this happen in all of us individually and collectively as we serve our Lord.