

What's wrong with me? Sloth

Message for Sunday, November 19, 2017
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 3:11 and others

Children's Message:

I wish I could have found an ant to bring here today to show you; but they've all gone deep underground for the winter.

But I'm sure you remember what an ant looks like. Show me with your fingers how big an ant is.

OK, now how big is the ant's head?

And if you were a doctor doing brain surgery on an ant, you open up the head. How big is the brain of an ant? Right! It's about the size of tiny piece of dirt, just a speck. But listen to this passage from the Bible, which describes how smart ants are.

Proverbs 6:6-9, Good News Bible:

Lazy people should learn a lesson from the way ants live. They have no leader, chief, or ruler, but they store up their food during the summer, getting ready for winter. How long is the lazy man going to lie around? When is he ever going to get up?

Ants know how important it is to work hard, to gather food, to get ready for winter. And their brain is just this small. Your brain is about the size of this bag of brown sugar! So you and I should know how important it is to do our best, whatever job we're doing.

Message: "What's wrong with me? Sloth"

1) Sloth: the deadly sin of not caring

We're looking at the ancient list known as The Seven Deadly Sins. It was developed by people who got away from society to live in the wilderness, so they could purify their lives and be closer to God. But they found that all the troubles they were fleeing from followed them wherever they went. To their dismay, they discovered the problems were *in* them, and there was no escape. So they developed strategies to deal with these sins.

With all of these deadly sins, the question isn't, "Do I have this?"—because we all do—but rather, "To what extent is this dominating my life?"

Today we're looking at # 6 on the list: sloth. There are many verses about this in the Bible. Here's one:

2 Thessalonians 3:11

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.

Sloth is a deadly sin?! Really? I can see anger being a deadly sin: you could kill someone in a fit of anger. And gluttony: you can eat yourself to an early grave. But sloth? Can you imagine the coroner's report listing the cause of death: "Too many naps"?

The reason they're called "deadly sins" is that they bring about spiritual death: they create a barrier between us and God; they rob us of the abundant life which Jesus promised. And sloth certainly fits that description.

What is sloth? The dictionary defines sloth as "reluctance to work or make an effort; laziness." That is true, but there's more to it than that. *Why* is a person reluctant to lift a finger? The ancient Latin term for sloth is *acedia*, which means "not care." The person who is slothful is like that simply because they don't care about whatever it is. So a person might be slothful in their work, or slothful in their marriage, in personal grooming, in looking after their home, in their walk with God, or whatever area where they don't care.

You could say that sloth is the enemy of love. When you love someone or something, you are passionate about the object of your affection. Sloth says, "Yeah, so what?"

The other six deadly sins are sins of *commission*: we think or feel or do something that we know is wrong. Greed, lust, envy, and so on: they're all about what we do with our life. Sloth is the sin of *omission*: we fail to think or feel or do something we know is right. We haven't really done anything bad; but we failed to do something good.

We find it easy to make excuses for our failure: "Right now is not a good time." "Someone should do something about that"—meaning someone *else*. And so on and on...

2) Pursue the Healthy Virtue: Devotion

Sloth is the deadly sin; perhaps diligence or self-discipline would be the alternative, the Healthy

Virtue. That would make sense... except it doesn't address the underlying reason. If the root cause of sloth is not caring, then perhaps the Healthy Virtue is devotion. If I was truly devoted to something, then I would care about it; I would do something about it.

Can you imagine the words "I can't be bothered" or "I don't care" coming from the lips of Jesus? He was someone who lived life with immense passion, with immense care. Everyone around him knew he cared. They knew that they mattered to him. Here's what Jesus said about how much he cared:

John 15:12-13, New International Version:

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

This past week, I led worship services at Stirling Manor and Stirling Towers. The theme I chose for my message was "It's never too late." It's never too late to ask God to forgive you for the wrong you've done, and to surrender your life to him. It's never too late to seek out someone who used to be a friend, but you had a falling out and haven't spoken to each other in years. It's never too late to say to someone, "I'm sorry for what I did. Please forgive me." It's never too late to say, "I love you."

I told this story as part of my message.¹ John Powell is a Roman Catholic priest, a member of the Jesuit order, and a professor who taught a course at university called "Theology of Faith." The course is for anyone who is interested in Christian faith, not just people preparing to be priests. John tells about one of his most difficult students, a young man named Tommy. Tommy didn't believe in God, and continually pointed out problems with the idea of a God who loves everyone. Tommy eventually graduated, and that was the end of that. Until a few years later, when Tommy came to Professor John's office.

Tommy had developed terminal cancer throughout his body. He came just to tell his old professor about what had happened. Tommy remember one thing John had said:

It would be sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.

Tommy's story:

So, I began with the hardest one, my Dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. "Dad."

"Yes, what?" he asked without lowering the newspaper.

"Dad, I would like to talk with you."

"Well, talk."

"I mean. It's really important."

The newspaper came down three slow inches. "What is it?"

"Dad, I love you, I just wanted you to know that."

Tom smiled with obvious satisfaction at the memory, as though he felt a warm and secret joy flowing inside of him.

The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him ever doing before. He cried and he hugged me.

We talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning.

It felt so good to be close to my father, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me.

It was easier with my mother and little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other, and started saying real nice things to each other. We shared the things we had been keeping secret for so many years.

I was only sorry about one thing—that I had waited so long. Here I was, just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to.

Then, one day I turned around and God was there.

He didn't come to me when I pleaded with him. I guess I was like an animal trainer holding out

¹ From John Powell's book *Unconditional Love*.

a hoop, “C’mon, jump through. C’mon, I’ll give you three days, three weeks.”

Apparently God does things in His own way and at His own hour.

But the important thing is that he was there. He found me! You were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for him.

Do you see the difference that comes in a person’s life when sloth is changed to devotion? When laziness is replaced with love? This is something all of us need, all of us desire in our lives. Here are some ideas how to move to that place.

Next Steps:

) Ask: “Where have I lost my passion? Where have I stopped caring?” Pray for God to give you insight, and then for God to rekindle the flame in your life.

Psalm 139:23, New Living Translation:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

) Recognize God’s presence and purpose in what you’re doing.

Colossians 3:17, New Living Translation:

Whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father.

Whatever you do, give God your very best. See God’s beauty all around you. Tomorrow morning, instead of doing what you normally do when you wake up, dedicate the next hour to God. That doesn’t mean you do all kinds of “religious” stuff. You still eat your bowl of Rick Krispies, but this time do it for the glory of God. Marvel at how they make those puffs of rice, and listen for the crunch as you eat them. God is behind all that. God made it all possible. And if you can see God’s hand in your breakfast cereal, then you will be able to see God at work in everything you do that day.

) Set godly goals for your life.

Proverbs 16:3, New International Version:

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.

Start with a small, specific goal that can be achieved in a short period of time, maybe a week or a day or even an hour. You know the law of inertia in physics? An object which is at rest will tend to stay at rest; a moving object will tend to stay moving. The idea here is to start moving. Once you’ve done that, then you can make bigger goals with a longer view.

Did you notice that all of these steps begin with God? You can’t just wave your hand and make sloth disappear all by your own power. Self-discipline is a great thing; but it’s even better when you are working with God as your partner to fulfil his purpose in your life.