



Sloth: Resistance to the Demands of Love

Tim Suddarth for October 17, 2010

Picture a hairy, long-toed sloth hanging from a branch, with headphones on, listening to "sloth motivational tapes": "Relax, take your time, what's the hurry? Life goes on whether you're asleep or not." I think this is how we most often think of this supposed sin. "Supposed," because on first glance hardly anyone would think of sloth as a serious, much less deadly, sin! Why is this? It's mostly because, we typically think of sloth as laziness. Does laziness really rank with sins like envy and lust in their evil and destructive power? Since when was sitting on the couch watching reruns of *The Office* and munching on a bag of cheesy poofs a moral and spiritual failure of the highest order? Our first reaction might be to say that sloth doesn't belong on the list of the seven deadly sins. I mean, come on, if putting it on the list in the first place wasn't a mistake, surely keeping it there now is certainly outdated.

If only we were all guilty of being lazy, we'd wouldn't commit any other sins, because it'd take too much effort. One ad man put it this way "If sloth had been the original sin, we'd all still be in paradise."

If only Adam and Eve were guilty of being lazy, they certainly would never have put forth the effort to find the tree, much less pick the fruit.

We often equate sloth with laziness, inactivity, and inertia.

Is this an accurate understanding of sloth? Maybe, but I think there's more to it.

I should confess that when I started studying sloth, I was fairly confident that this would be the one vice I would never have to worry about. I'm too busy to be slothful. Carelessness, apathy, laziness, and lack of effort would definitely not be my problem!

Then I picked up a book that pointed to busyness and workaholicism as sloth's classic symptoms.

It turned out that the apathetic inertia of the lazy person and the perpetual motion of the busy person could both reveal a heart damaged by sloth. How could this be?

Looking back through sloth's long history, it is striking how different our understanding is from sloth's original spiritual roots. Returning to the traditional definition of sloth will help us see how sloth has more to do with being lazy about love than lazy about work.

For early Christians, sloth was a spiritual sickness. Sloth drove a person away from God and from their community. The Greek word they used literally means "lack of care." The symptoms of this disease were the feelings of distaste, disgust, sorrow, oppressiveness, and restlessness because they felt trapped by God and community.

The slothful feel that it is a burden to stay true to God with all its daily drudgery and discipline (prayer –yuck!), (caring about other-people – c'mon!) (forgiving and showing grace – really?). The slothful would rather escape and run away and be free of their exhausting life.

I think we all know what this is like. I certainly do. I am married to Rachael, and have been for 7 years. Before that we dated for years. Overall, we have been together for 10.5 years. Rachael and I have a relationship of genuine love and friendship. But say one night, we get into a fight at dinner and head off to opposite ends of our apartment for the rest of the night. We might find it much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than to do the work of apologizing, forgiving, and reconciling. Learning to live together and love each other well after a fight requires giving up our anger, our desire to have our own way, and our insistence on seeing the world only from our own perspective. Saying "I'm sorry" takes effort, but it is not simply the physical work of down the hall and saying the words that we resist. It might be that this is another wearying version of the same fight we've been fighting for years, and it doesn't feel like we're getting any nearer to resolving it. What's the point of going through the motions of apologizing one more time?

Do we want the relationship? Yes, walking away is never on the table, but do we want to do what it takes to be in this relationship—do we want to honor its claims on us? Do we want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Well, maybe tomorrow.

Another example is ministry. I have no doubt at all that God has called me to be right where I am, doing exactly what I'm doing. I was supposed to be here to help get DR Tucson off the ground and

then go back to the Midwest and do it again. But even though I know this is what I'm supposed to be doing and that you are who I'm supposed to be doing it with, sometimes I really don't want to do the work that's required. When we're in a meeting and I bite Ryan's head off, I don't want to apologize. I want to pretend that my embarrassing outburst never happened and resist the demands of love and friendship. But I do apologize, well most of the time I do. Why? Because of love. I love you guys and though I might want to walk away from the meetings, responsibilities, and relationships sometimes, love keeps me here.

Why do marriages and friendships make good pictures of what goes wrong in the vice of sloth? For all its joys, any intense friendship or marriage has aspects that can seem burdensome. There is not only an investment of time, but an investment of self that is required for a relationship to exist and grow and nourish.

Love compromises our plans. Relationships demand sacrifice. It will alter the pattern of our thoughts and desires and may transform our vision of the world. It's not just "your life" or "my life" anymore—it's "ours." Staying at arm's length and not engaging or investing seems easier and safer—even if ultimately unhappier—than risking openness in relationship.

It is through daily practices and disciplines, whether we feel like doing them or not, that the decision to love is renewed and refreshed, and the commitment of love is kept alive. The slothful person is one who resists the effort of doing day after day after day whatever it takes to keep the bonds of love strong and living and healthy.

If we think of our relationship to God like a marriage, we'd understand the early Christians' view of sloth. The Apostle Paul puts our relationship to God this way:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.
(Galatians 2:19–20)

For Christians, God is present in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, empowering us to become new people. The key, is that our new identity in Christ is both "now" and "not yet," a present reality and a promise. For now, the Spirit is a promise and a beginning, a new self born but not yet perfected. Why not yet? Because the Spirit doesn't jump in and transform us overnight. The project of growing into our new identity takes a lifetime, and a lifetime of cooperation on our part. It's called sanctification. In one sense, we *are* Christians, and in another sense, we are still *becoming* Christians. God is both "already" and "not yet fully" present in us. Because of this, it makes sense for Paul to encourage Christians to grow in faith and become more and more like Christ. We can't just say, "I'm saved! Praise the Lord!" and then sit back and assume God is done with us.

It may take years of struggle and confession, battle and failure. The places in my life where I struggle with deadly sins are matters of a decade or more of focus, repentance, shame and grace. I've

traveled some long roads simply to lessen the depth of my failures and addictions. Often that is how change occurs. The Great Wall of China took centuries to build, and one day your soul and mine will be far more impressive.

Being a Christian is like being married: both involve accepting a new identity that needs to be lived out, day by day, for the rest of your life. A man and a woman take their vows on their wedding day, and from that moment on they *are* married. Yet *being* married, living out those vows and making them a living reality, will take all of their efforts for a lifetime. Their love and identity have a now and not-yet character. It is both a gift and a life-transforming task. It is this transformation of our identity by God's love that the slothful person resists.

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 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. Sloth is not primarily a feeling: it is willful resistance. 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" (Eph. 5:1) and to be transformed by him over the rest of our lives.

But, how could we possibly feel put out by God's presence in our heart? What could make us *unhappy* about the gift of love that is the secret to our own happiness? God's love and grace is the greatest gift that we could ever possess! Why would anyone who received it want to keep it at arm's length?

Looking again to the Apostle Paul, we read in Galatians

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Galatians 5:17)

Sloth is caused by the opposition of the spirit to the flesh. Initially, this may seem confusing. Does Paul mean that sloth makes us prefer to be a lump of flesh on the couch than to pursue our spiritual duties?

It sounds like he is saying that sloth strikes when spirituality takes a backseat to bodily comfort. Is sloth laziness after all?

Paul would say, "No." When Paul makes the "spirit-flesh" distinction, he is contrasting the old sinful nature with our new redeemed nature in Christ. The battle here is not between body and soul, between the physical and the spiritual. Rather, sloth is the old sinful self resisting transformation into the new self in Christ. In sloth, we are literally divided against ourselves. We were made for relationship with God. If we are slothful, we have chosen to reject that relationship with God as the way to find fulfillment and chosen to try to make something else do its work instead. We are trying to make ourselves content with being less than we really are.

Think back to the marriage example—the way loving another person requires a thousand little deaths of our old individual selfish nature. *This* is the "work" the slothful one resists. In fact, 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. Slothful people can be very busy. This can take even seemingly virtuous forms: we can spend our whole lives avoiding the demands of true discipleship, love, commitment, and change, even if we constantly and busily engage in lots of religious activities.

At its core, sloth moves us away from everything that ultimately matters and directs us toward simple distractions. Sloth is not mere laziness. Sloth is indifference – indifference toward my soul, my neighbors, my world, and my God. Sloth is not restfulness. Sloth is escapism. Nothing is so clearly modern, so clearly Western as sloth. Despite our fast-moving, success-worshipping, ulcer-ridden society, we invest our energies and talents in what is trivial. Despite our frantic pace, our eyes are seldom focused on what is actually good.

The slothful person ultimately insists on their own way, and their own will. They try to find happiness while evading the daily demands of self-giving love. They prefer their own efforts to make themselves happy with shortcuts and quick fixes, but eventually sloth only leads to despair.

It is not to those who take up their crosses who find them an unbearable weight, but those who resist the demands of love—those who suffer from the self-imposed burden of sloth—that Jesus gives the invitation,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

It might seem hard to find a remedy for Sloth. But, it's actually very simple: rather than seeking some way to instill new life and breath into our relationship with God, we must commit to consistently practice courageous endurance and perseverance. How is staying the course supposed to help? The idea is that enthusiasm and energy will wax and wane, and sometimes we will feel far from God or spiritual burnout will threaten. Given the human condition and our sinful nature (both our physical frailty and decided lack of discipline), we must battle sloth with steady commitment and daily discipline, even when we don't feel like it.

It's kind of like running a marathon. I've never run a full marathon, but in high school I ran cross-country and I've done a half-marathon. This is not something I currently do. It's also not something that I can just jump right back into. You don't just wake up and run a marathon; you have to train for

it. Without training our bodies are not able to handle the stress. Let's look at the results in this clip from How I Met Your Mother

HIMYM Clip

In the same way that Barney finds out that his body wasn't trained for running a marathon, we can find ourselves sliding into sloth if we don't work on our relationship with God. That means praying, fasting, worshipping, confessing, studying – actively engaging in the spiritual disciplines.

A pastor once described worship as being like a military drill. It is not meant to be personally uplifting each and every time, but rather to discipline us and equip us so we can respond immediately and appropriately in a crisis. Our daily training is what we rely on in a crisis. But if we haven't trained ourselves, we have nothing to depend on.

Often we think too much of love as a feeling, and too little of love as an ongoing choice and commitment. In our worship services and our marriages, we expect emotional highs that will carry us through life's difficult times, when what we should expect is engaging in daily disciplines to help us keep our commitments. *Sloth's* greatest temptations are escapism and despair—when we don't feel like being godly or loving anymore, to abandon ship and give up, to drift away inwardly or outwardly toward something more comfortable or immediately comforting. The greatest remedy to sloth is to resist the urge to get out or give up, and instead to stay the course, stick to one's commitments, and persevere.

May we face up to the reasons we resist the demands of love.

May we turn our back on conveniently easy escape.

May we commit to helping love flourish through daily action and lasting commitment.

And may we train ourselves to consistently persevere.

Sloth alone will keep us from the life we are made for. Sloth will praise the ruts we dig, and even when we know they are unhealthy, sloth will tell us this is just the way life is. But it is all a lie.

Will you pray with me?