

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
How to Overcome Spiritual Laziness
Hebrews 6:9-12

9 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. 10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. 11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. Hebrews 6:9-12

I don't think there's a single person in this auditorium who has not, at one time or another, struggled with spiritual laziness. I know I do. In fact, maybe you're struggling with this right now! Your eyes are heavy. Your mind is wandering. Your thoughts are on that nap you're going to take after lunch. You had to literally drag yourself out of bed this morning at 9:00 o'clock leaving no time to prepare your soul for this time of worship. Your prayer life and time spent in God's Word, if it exists at all, is routine and dry. And your week is so full of just surviving in the rat race of life that any thought of using your gifts in serving others unthinkable. The truth is – the majority of us have gone through periods in our journey with Christ where we could be described as spiritual “couch potatoes.”

An article appeared in US News and World Report of October 27, 1998. It reads this way:

“On your mark. Get set. Loaf! This year's Couch Potato Marathon got off in true sedentary style with contestants relaxing on a well-worn couch and watching a videotape of the course they did not run...Participants in Sunday's non-marathon collected pledges for each of the 26 miles of open highway none would ever job. The proceeds will help finance Beaver's [the city's] first homeless shelter. Two couches – one a tweedy brown, one a floral chartreuse – were parked in front of a television set. On the screen was the course video, with a red arrow pointing to the center of the screen that said, “You are not here.” Mary Hamilton, the program coordinator ... came up with the idea while driving...”We were trying to think of something novel to help the homeless,” she said. Her first thought was to run a marathon, but as Ms Hamilton puts it, ‘That's too much work for us.’”¹

For some believers, that's a pretty good description of the Christian life: “On your mark. Get set. Loaf!” But when we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we find quite a different picture of what the Christian life is intended to be. One of the favorite images of the Christian life in the book of Hebrews is the marathon – and not one that we simply watch from the comfort of our “tweedy brown couches.”

Hebrews 12:1 says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

But just how do we do that? How do we overcome the tendency to spiritual laziness in our lives?

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL LAZINESS?

First, we need to understand just what spiritual laziness is. Let's go back to our passage and read again verse 12:

We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. Hebrews 6:12

We pointed out several weeks ago that the word here translated "lazy" is the same word translated "slow to learn" in Hebrews 5:11. "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain," he writes. But then he adds, "...because you are *slow to learn*." That is spiritual dullness, or laziness. The word in the language of the writer literally means "no push." In other words, they had no drive, no motivation. They were spiritually lazy.

This verse gives us further insight in to the nature of spiritual laziness by describing the opposite of laziness. He says he wants us to imitate those who through "faith and patience" inherit what has been promised. And in verse 11 this "faith and patience" is described as "diligence."

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. Hebrews 6:11

Our spiritual lives should not be characterized by laziness. They should be characterized by diligence. Diligence is earnestness, eagerness, and zeal. It is the perseverance to finish the race of the Christian life as described in Hebrews 12:1. In contrast to laziness, which is "no push," diligence is the spiritual vitality and zeal that gives much "push" in the marathon of the Christian life.

Don't get me wrong. The opposite of spiritual laziness is not "busyness." In fact, busyness can be the very thing that leads to spiritual laziness in our lives. The Desert Fathers, a protest movement against worldliness in the early church, referred to busyness as "moral laziness."ⁱⁱ Busyness, in our individual lives and even in the church, can be the enemy of true spiritual diligence.

So, how can we define the spiritual laziness that Hebrews 6:12 is talking about? Here's my definition that I believe reflects the context of the entire book:

SPIRITUAL LAZINESS is the tendency to drift away from the priorities that God clearly outlines for us in His Word.

These spiritual priorities include (as outlined in this book of Hebrews):

- Paying careful attention to God's Word (2:1)
- Listening to the Holy Spirit in our lives (3:7-4:13)
- The pursuit of Christ's rich reward for work well done (4:1-13)
- Coming boldly and regularly to God in prayer (4:14-16)
- Faithfully serving others in the Body of Christ (6:10)
- Remaining connected to the local church (10:25)

HOW DO I OVERCOME SPIRITUAL LAZINESS?

As we take Hebrews 6:9-12 in its context, we see that the first step in overcoming spiritual laziness in our lives is to *recognize what is at stake*. We are warned here about spiritual laziness, but this warning is in a series of warnings that increasingly become more and more severe.

Let me remind us of the five warning passages that we have in the book of Hebrews. So far, we have viewed them this way: [chart here on screen]

- Pay careful attention (2:1-4)
- Enter God's rest (3:1-4:16)
- Go onto maturity (5:11-6:20)
- Draw near, don't give up (10:19-30)
- Don't turn away (12:14-29)

Each one of these encouragements describes the *opposite* of spiritual laziness. But let's look at these warnings from another perspective. What if we *don't* pay careful attention? What if we *don't* go on to maturity? What if we *are* spiritual lazy?

Well, the consequences are not very attractive. Here they are: [chart on screen with these points in place of above points]

- Won't escape (2:1-4)
- Won't enter God's rest (3:1-4:16)
- Stuck in immaturity (5:11-6:20)
- God's judgment (10:19-30)
- Loss of inheritance (12:14-29)

Just a word about that last one. Turn with me to Hebrews 12:16-17.

See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

Just like Esau, you and I as believers can "sell our inheritance rights" through spiritual laziness. This does not change our status as children of God. Esau remained Isaac's son. But he did not receive the inheritance rights of the firstborn.ⁱⁱⁱ Our spiritual laziness in this life will not affect our entry into heaven. But it will affect our future reward – our inheritance – in heaven. I'll say more about this in a moment.

However, what makes all of this particularly serious is the way in which spiritual laziness can subtly creep up on us.^{iv} Essentially, a hardening of the spiritual arteries sets in and sooner or later we will reach a point of no return. This is what it means to "fall away" in Hebrews 6:6. No wonder these believers can't be restored. They are in a state of spiritual hardness that only the Spirit of God can remedy!

Remember, we can't "coast" in the Christian life. We can't "wade water." We're either moving forward or moving backward. This side of heaven, we are in the strong currents that will inevitably pull us away from God rather than toward God. And the first step to that happening is to separate ourselves from the people of God. For it's among God's people that we receive the encouragement necessary to move upstream, against the currents of this life.

So how do I deal with the problem of spiritual laziness? First, recognize what is at stake. But second, *get on in your life with what should accompany salvation.*^v

Notice the writer's confidence as he addresses these Hebrew believers:

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. Hebrews 6:9

For some believers, "salvation" is limited to "going to heaven when you die." And that's it. In other words, it's nothing more than a "fire insurance policy." And that's how they interpret the word "salvation" every time they come across that idea in the Bible. The "unsaved" go to hell, the "saved" go to heaven.

But "salvation" is so much more than that! The book of Hebrews tells us that there are certain things that should accompany salvation in our lives and that you and I should not be lazy in pursuing those things.

What are these things that should accompany salvation? He mentions at least two in this passage. One of them is "work" in verse 10: "God is not unjust; he will not forget your *work*..." In fact, this word is the very same word Paul uses in writing to the Ephesians when he says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by *works*, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good *works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2:8-10

We are not saved *by* good works, but we are saved *for* good works. Our salvation from hell and the promise of heaven is by grace through faith. This is taught consistently throughout the New Testament. But what is often not emphasized is that we were saved *for* good works. And it is these good works which determine our future reward. And our future reward is what the book of Hebrews calls our "inheritance."

According to Ephesians 2:10, you and I were created for certain good works and certain good works were prepared for you and me! And if we don't fulfill those good works due to spiritual laziness, who will? No wonder Paul reminds young Timothy, his son in the faith: "discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5). What is the good work God has called you to? Are you fulfilling it?

Another thing that should accompany salvation is *love*: "God will not forget...the *love* you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (Hebrews 6:10). By the way, did you just catch what I see here? It's this – our love for God is seen in our love for God's people! That's what it says! "The love you have shown *him* (i.e. God) as you have helped his

people...” And if that’s true, the opposite is also true. If we don’t love God’s people, God’s church – warts and all – then we don’t really love God, no matter how much we say we do! Our love for God as seen in helping God’s people is one of the good works to which God has destined us.

That lead us to the next thing these verses tell us about overcoming spiritual laziness. We overcome spiritual laziness *as we don’t forget that God doesn’t forget*. Let’s read verse 10 again:

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. Hebrews 6:10

Don’t forget that God doesn’t forget! Or put more positively, remember that God remembers! What a motivation to overcome spiritual laziness! Others may not notice our service. At other times, our service and love shown may be misunderstood. And we may never be publicly recognized for what we have done. But really, none of that matters. What matters is that the God of the universe notices. And not only does he notice, but he has a very good memory! He does not forget the work we have done and the love we have shown. And we must not forget that he doesn’t forget.

I think of many in this congregation who are a little further down the pathway of discipleship. I think of the costly investment so many of you have made over the years to serve Christ – your work, your love, your faith, your patience. My mind goes to one of our seniors who still, at the age of 92, faithfully mentors young men to carry on the work of the gospel long after he is gone. I think, too, of one of our seniors who weekly visits the nursing homes sharing the gospel. I think of another one who serves the internationals in our church, reaching out with love to the stranger and alien. I think of another who, also in her 90’s, still visits our shut-ins and those in the hospital. And then I think of the many who persevere in prayer, lifting up before God’s throne of grace the many needs represented by a local church like this. And as the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 12, “What more shall I say? I don’t have time to tell about...” so many more who have served, sacrificed and given of their resources and time over the years. But it really doesn’t make any difference that I can’t mention each and every one. God knows what each of us does in his name and for his glory. And it will not be forgotten.

What I would like to do is simply lead us in prayer of thanksgiving for those among us who are further down the road spiritually speaking. [PRAYER]

How do we overcome spiritual laziness? First, recognize what is at stake. Second, get on in your life with what accompanies salvation. Third, don’t forget that God doesn’t forget. And finally, *imitate those who inherit*. Verse 11 says, “...imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

First, what does it mean to “inherit what has been promised?” We must be careful not to read our contemporary understanding of inheritance into what the Bible says. In the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, an inheritance most often refers to a possession that is earned.^{vi} This is clear even in this verse. It is through faith and patience that some inherit what has been promised. Another verse that makes this very clear is what Paul writes to the Colossians.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Colossians 3:23-24

If inheritance has something to do with future reward for faith, patience, diligence, love, and completing the work God has given us to do, then we are to imitate those who have done just that! And this book is full of such examples, such as the many listed in Hebrews 11 which is often called the “Hall of Faith.” People like Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samuel, and the prophets all inspire us by their sacrifice, endurance, and faith against unbelievable odds. These are the “many witnesses” that Hebrews 12:1 talks about. They are the ones in the bleachers cheering us on as we run that marathon of the Christian life. They are the ones who, by their lives, encourage us to snap out of our spiritual laziness, strip off everything that holds us back, and to run with endurance the race marked out for us.

Can’t you hear them clapping? Can’t you hear them cheering? Can’t you hear them saying, “Keep your eyes on the best of all examples –Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down on the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful me, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:2)

COMMUNION

ⁱ Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations and Quotes*, 513.

ⁱⁱ James Houston in *The Transforming Power of Prayer. Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 5.

www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ Even in spite of his failure he received a secondary blessing. Cf. Genesis 27:38-40.

^{iv} In Hebrews, spiritual laziness probably starts out with (1) “drifting” (2:1) or “ignoring” (2:3) which leads to (2) a hardening of the heart (3:7, 15; 4:8) which leads to (3) “falling away” (6:6) which leads to (4) deliberately sinning (10:26) and finally (5) refusing God who speaks (12:25).

^v We must avoid the tendency to immediately limit the word “salvation” to mean “salvation from hell.” The problem with this perspective is that we impose upon the concept of salvation in Hebrews what we might read about salvation in other parts of the New Testament. It’s always best to look first at how a word or concept is used in the immediate context. The salvation spoken of here is the salvation already referred to in 5:9 – “...once made perfect, he became the source of *eternal salvation* for all who obey him...” If the “salvation” of 5:9 is salvation from hell, then how do we explain the condition of obedience?

The salvation spoken of in Hebrews is not just a salvation from hell. It is much more than that. There are certain things that should accompany salvation as by-products.

^{vi} Gen. 17:14; Ex. 23:30; Num. 14:24; Deut. 2:31; 11:11-24; 16:20; 19:8-9; Josh. 11 :23 ; 14:8-9; Matt. 19 :29; Mk. 10 :17; Heb. 6 :12; 1 Pet. 3 :9 ; Rev. 21 :7.