

Now is the Time for Love

Love Endures all Things

Confronting the Sin of Sloth

1 Corinthians 13:7-8

Sunday, February 27, 2005

Over the past three weeks we've been working our way through a passage in the Bible known as the "love chapter" – 1 Corinthians 13. From 1 Corinthians 13 we saw that love does not envy, love is not proud and love is not easily angered. Traditionally, those three things – envy, pride and anger – are part of a larger category of disordered love called "the seven deadly sins." The other deadly sins are lust, gluttony, sloth and greed. You won't find a list of the seven deadly sins specifically mentioned in the Bible. And yet, since the 4th century Christian writers have used these seven categories of sin as a framework to discuss how we fail to love God and one another.

Apparently, the deadly sins are still hot topic. Cambridge Publishing is issuing a series of seven hardcover books devoted to each of the seven deadly sins. In the introduction to the series they write, "*Our contemporary fascination with these age-old sins, our struggle against or celebration of them reveals as much about our continued desire to define human nature as it does about our divine aspirations.*"

Defining Sloth. You won't find the sin of sloth specifically mentioned in the Bible, but you will find a cluster of heart attitudes that converge to form the sin of sloth. And sloth is not what you may think. It isn't laziness. We say, "I can't be slothful; look at how much I do; look at how busy and energetic I am." You can get straight A's in school, tone and shape your body at the gym, make a few million dollars, cram your calendar with activities, never have time to read a good book or even think and you could still be a first-class sloth.¹ Consider "Ray," a successful businessman, a devoted father and husband, and a respected leader in his local church. But in the midst of his flurry of busyness, Ray's devotional life is almost non-existent. "I love God," he confesses, "but I can't find time to pray and study the Bible ... Okay, I probably have the time. But it's so hard to get started. I try to read and pray and then I hit a wall of resistance. My mind races with a hundred other projects. So I just walk away." Ray is infected with the sin of sloth.

What is sloth? As Christians have reflected on our spiritual journey in Christ, they have identified sloth as an attitude towards life. The Latin word is *acedia* or "to not care." In the 6th century a man named Gregory the Great defined it as "apathy towards the great possibilities of God." St. Thomas Aquinas defined it as "sorrow about spiritual good."

Sloth and our relationship with God. We could call it spiritual boredom or apathy towards God. Sloth creeps into our lives when we grow bored with the most interesting person in the world – God. Sloth enters our hearts when we grow tired and complacent about the most exciting journey in the world – following Jesus Christ. Pride responds to God with a defiant "No"; sloth responds to God with a weary shrug and a cold "Whatever."

Listen to how the Bible describes how our relationship with God is supposed to look:

- “Delight yourself in the Lord” (Psalm 37:4) and “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). The slothful person no longer delights in God. He may be busy doing things for God or for the church, but the delight has eroded until he finds the highest joy – God – joyless.
- “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8) but the slothful person sits at the banquet of God’s goodness, but she’s lost all sense of taste until everything looks like dirt.
- In one of his parables Jesus described the kind of person who is like seed that falls on rocky soil. “But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes ... they quickly fall away (Mark 4:17). The slothful person is like that. As soon as he meets resistance in the spiritual journey, as soon as he realizes that it requires perseverance and inconvenience and discipline, rather than walk through all of that he says, “It’s so hard and the road is so long. Maybe this just isn’t for me. I think I’ll go play golf (or watch TV or work or search the internet).” And the amazing thing is that he plows himself into golf or tennis or the internet or shopping with the utmost passion and delight.²
- If you want to see sloth in action, read the New Testament Book of Hebrews. The followers of Jesus addressed in that letter were in danger of slowly drifting away (2:1), taking their minds off of Jesus Christ (3:1 and 12:2-3), hardening their hearts (3:12), remaining spiritual infants and stagnating in their spiritual growth (5:11-14), becoming spiritually lazy (6:12), shrinking back (10:38-39).

Sloth usually enters our lives as a gradual chipping away of our faith, a slow wandering from the path. I spent my first eight years as a pastor in dairy farm USA in northeast Minnesota. Dairy farmers will tell you that cows never intend to slip away and wander on to the road. They just start nibbling at random, without purpose, without focus, without passion, and before you know a cow has nibbled right on to the middle of County Road 6. The Italian poet Dante called it *lento amore* or slow love, a love that no longer motivates us, leaving our souls stagnant. Our prayer life dries up. We know the right thing to do, but we lack the energy or the joy to move forward. We don’t make it a priority.

Sloth and our relationship with other people. We’ve been looking at 1 Corinthians 13, a passage which describes our love for one another in the church. How does sloth affect community? The same passion and joy we lack in pursuing God is also lacking in our relationships with other people. The same spiritual laziness in our relationship with God gets transferred into laziness in with other people. We may spend time with people, we may do things for people, but we remain on the surface in our relationships. We never work through conflict and hurt feelings. We never take risks in our love. We never share our heart. We never allow anyone else to share their heart. We keep it light, cheery, upbeat, cordial and completely unreal – but, hey, at least we all get along.

Consider “Alice.” After shopping for the perfect church, Alice finally found a spiritual home. For three years she appreciated the dynamic preaching and lively worship. But

now the initial enthusiasm has begun to fade. The worship feels dull and routine; the sermons seem predictable and unfulfilling. Her small group, once a source of challenge and comfort, seems flat and uninspiring. “I can’t grow in this church anymore,” she sighed to a friend. “I feel stuck here; I guess God wants me to move on to another church.”

The sin of sloth, this profound spiritual laziness or weariness, this apathy towards God and others, ruptures community. As we’ve been walking through 1 Corinthians 13 we’ve heard that love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy, love is not irritable or proud, and love does not seek its own. All of that is hard work! It requires a good, long look into our own heart, an honest confession of our failure to love. It also takes time and commitment and perseverance. There aren’t any short-cuts. So often we find it easier to bail on that kind of love. It’s far easier to brood on the ways that other people in our church or small group offend and disappoint us and perhaps how we’re really a cut above them (this was THE sin of the church in Corinth). Then we start to think “if only ... then I could really follow God and be happy.”³

Once again, rather than working through the wall of love, the slothful person would rather find a short-cut or an easy way around it or over it. In the classic film Monty Python’s *In Search of the Holy Grail* the warriors for the king keep encountering difficulties on their journey and they cry out, “Run away, run away!” as they flee any form of difficulty or danger. That’s what sloth does – we run away from relational difficulties.

Overcoming Sloth. Once we’re in the grip of sloth, how do we overcome it? The Bible gives us some guidelines. Let me summarize it in three phrases:

1. **Draw near** – (Hebrews 10:22). One of the constant themes of the Book of Hebrews is summed up in two words: draw near. Because Jesus is our great high priest, because of his shed blood for us, you and I have confidence (boldness, courage) to enter into the presence of God – even in the midst of our struggles and sin and even the sin of sloth. You can start today. We tend to shrink away in fear and guilt and condemnation. God tells us to draw near. “Since we have confidence” is stated as a fact. In view of who Christ is and what he has done, there is no reason why all believers in Him should not approach with confidence.

A friend of mine recently watched the movie "Chariots of Fire" and made the following observations about God’s grace and our confidence in Christ: Two Olympic gold-medal athletes: Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell. Two perspectives on the race: “If I can’t win, I won’t run... I have ten seconds to justify my existence” - Harold Abrahams. "I believe God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure" - Eric Liddell. One man running to prove who he was...another man running because he knew who he was. And here's the thought: we are Christ's beloved. We don't earn that. This life is not about trying to prove our worth, grabbing at achievements or wealth or whatever else we believe would make us respectable in other people's eyes or our

own. We don't have to fight constantly to justify our existence because our existence has already been justified by Christ.

2. **Stay put** – The slothful person thinks, “If only I had a better worship services or a better small group, or wife or husband. I’m tired of putting up with such shoddy, substandard, flawed, screwed-up, imperfect human beings who continually disappoint me, fail to inspire me, and fail to meet my needs. I just don’t want to hang with these people anymore. I need to move on to the next person, the next relationship, the next small group, the next spouse, the next family, etc. Then my life could really take off.” This is why sloth has been categorized as a failure to love.

Traditionally, the only way to battle relational sloth is to work through the wall of love rather than bailing out, running away or trying to find a short cut. 1

Corinthians 13 give us three active verbs for love – love is a battle, love requires effort, love must rise above our natural laziness:

- Verse 7 says “love bears all things” which literally means to roof over or as we might say, “love doesn’t cave in.” It supports. It has staying power.
- Verse 7 goes on to say “love endures all things” or literally translated “love stays under” or love perseveres. It was the word used to describe a soldier who stays in the battle when the fighting grows intense. It’s a great word for the staying power of Christian community. Let’s say someone strikes you as angry or troubled or depressed. They’re not the kind of upbeat, positive, wholesome model of perfection that you prefer in your social circle. Or let’s say there is conflict with another person – someone hurts you. Or let’s say there are people who don’t share your cultural heritage. The slothful person will just ignore or avoid the angry people, the conflict or the cultural differences. After all, it requires so much work to love and love should be easy so he cries out “Run away! Run away!” Perhaps if the battle gets really intense, he’ll look for new friends or a whole new church community. But the loving person stays in the battle. He or she engages the unpleasant, angry person. He or she moves towards the person who is different. He or she enters into the conflict and says, “I’m going to fight for this relationship. I’m going to fight for our community. Not to get my way or to prove that I’m right and you’re wrong. I’m going to fight to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2).
- Verse 8 says “love never ends” or love never gets driven off its course. It was used when a ship got blown off course and shipwrecked (Acts 27:26).⁴ The slothful person just doesn’t have a sense of mission in life. She enters Christian community because she thinks it will improve her social network or, at long last, she’s finally found like-minded friends to share a caramel macchiato with. She doesn’t understand that love is a battle, love is a struggle, love requires work and that real love breaks through cliques and barriers and even cultural differences. The mission is expressed in Galatians 3:23 and Ephesians 2:11-22. This requires work.

This requires effort. If you just want to hang around friends who look like you and think like you and you find agreeable on every issue – you don't need Jesus for that. If you just want to have community based on friendliness and cordiality and cultural and socioeconomic homogeneity, you don't need Jesus for that. That's just sloth disguised as fellowship. Real love breaks across boundaries of age and gender and culture

I love what Denis Haack says about this kind of diligent love: “It is tempting to withdraw from church and meet with like-minded friends at home ...perhaps, and ‘being our own church.’ I’m not sympathetic towards that sort of thing, because it is too easy. Being in church forces me to love people I find unlovable and would never invite into my home.”

3. Encourage one another (see Hebrews 10:24-25). I am fighting a battle; you are fighting a battle. I am fighting a battle every day of my life. My mind and heart tend to drift away (Hebrews 3:1). That's why a key strategy for staying close is encouragement. “Encourage one another daily” Hebrews 3:14 urges us. That's one of the main reasons why we emphasize small groups at TVC. That's one of the main reasons why we're gearing up for a significant men's ministry here at TVC. Men, we need to encourage one another. (Story of being on the road, tempted, lonely, weary, losing focus – called a prayer hot line in order to share struggle).

¹ Dorothy Sayers writes, “One of the favorite tricks of (sloth) is to (hide) itself under a whiffling activity of body. We think that if we are busily rushing about and doing things, we cannot be suffering from sloth. And besides, violent activity seems to offer an escape from the horrors of sloth”

² The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, “Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is wretched for it lacks passion ... The thoughts of (our) hearts are too paltry to be sinful. Their lusts are sluggish, their passions sleepy. They do their duty. This is the reason my soul turns to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. I feel those who speak there are at least human beings; they hate, they love ... they curse ... they sin.” Sloth is the sin that is so dead that it doesn't even rise to the level of sin.

³ This is the part of the analysis of the downward spiral of sloth from a 4th century follower of Jesus named Evagrius of Pontus.

⁴ The same word was also used for falling stars (Mark 13:25) or of chains falling off a prisoner's hands (Acts 12:7).