

Sloth and Diligence
1 Kings 19:1 – 13; Matthew 25:14 – 30
Sunday, March 31, 2019

This past week we moved into our new house. And as wonderful as that is, it has been absolutely exhausting. The past few weeks, we have been working hard to finish things up and get packed and ready. And the last few *days* before the move were especially taxing. We were working until 1:00 AM Sunday night, 3:00 AM Monday night, moving all day Tuesday and working until almost 1:00 AM that night. In the midst of all that, I had papers due for my two doctoral classes from January. But I just did not have the time or energy to put into those, so I had to get extensions on them. The boys were supposed to have an 8:00 AM Saturday baseball practice, but we were so tired that we completely slept through that. Then one day I'm driving my car, and I look down at the stickers in the corner of the windshield and notice that the inspection on my car was due in January. But I thought, "That's the *least* of my concerns. I *really* don't have the time or energy to put into *that*. I'll take care of that later."

When I got up on Wednesday morning to start working on this sermon, I thought to myself, "A sermon is the *last* thing that I want to do right now." So with all of this exhaustion and having to put things off or miss things altogether, I found it really ironic that the topic of this week's sermon is *sloth*.

For those of you who aren't familiar with it (because *sloth* is a word that we don't use very much anymore unless we're talking about the *animal*), the sin of sloth is often associated with *laziness*. So I guess the animal comes by its name honestly. Sloths are very lazy, slow-moving animals that don't do any more than they absolutely have to. So we have come to understand *laziness* as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. But that is not actually how it first started out.

When we first started this series several weeks ago, I told you how this list of Seven Deadly Sins (and the corresponding list of Seven Heavenly Virtues) has been around for over 1,500 years. It originated with this group of monks in the 3rd or 4th century referred to as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. They sold all their possessions, gave the money to the poor, shunned civilization, and went to live in the desert outside of Egypt, where they spent the rest of their lives in solitude and prayer, copying and memorizing scripture, reflecting and writing on what it means to follow Jesus Christ. They came up with this list of seven conditions or temptations that are the root of all these other sins in our lives.

But one of the things that happened to some of these monks after spending years in the desert, away from civilization, was that they stopped caring. They stopped caring about the *world*, about other people, because they had withdrawn from it all. So what does it *matter* what happens to the world; we're not a part of it. And they stopped caring about their day-to-day tasks in the monastic community. They developed this feeling of, "What's the point of *any* of this?" They began neglecting their duties and obligations to God, to each other, and to themselves. They became despondent; they gave up.

The word that they used to describe this condition was the Latin word *acedia*. It literally means, "without care." These monks didn't think of it as *laziness* but as a state of depression that caused spiritual detachment. I mentioned last week how Dante (the 14th century poet who popularized the Seven Deadly Sins in his epic poem *Inferno*) had a *ranking* of these seven sins from the worst (pride) to the "least bad" (lust). For Dante, sloth was right in the middle. Because these Seven Deadly Sins are characterized by excessive love – either excessive love for *yourself* (pride, greed, gluttony) or excessive love for *someone else* (envy, lust). Sloth is the only one

characterized by an *absence* or *insufficiency* of love. It is to *stop* loving – God, your neighbor, and yourself. To be *detached* from them.

Elijah was a prophet who had been very *zealous* for the Lord. He has just had 450 prophets of the Canaanite god Baal killed. Queen Jezebel happened to be a fan of Baal, so she was very angry with Elijah and wanted to kill *him*. Elijah runs away from her, out into the wilderness, where he says, “I have done everything you asked me to do, God, and look where it has gotten me! They’re just going to *kill* me.” It says that he sat down under a solitary tree and asked to die. He says, “It’s *enough*, Lord. Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Elijah has given up. He has disconnected. He is despondent. He has stopped caring.

This is where we see the sin of sloth. It’s not just *depression* – depression is not a *sin*. People who are experiencing depression, it’s not that they don’t *want* to care. If they could *change* it, they *would*. It’s not that they’re just *lazy* or *choosing* to shirk their responsibilities. Depression is a situation where you *can’t help it*. Sloth is a *willful decision* to stop caring, to give up, to neglect your duties and responsibilities. It’s the *choice* to detach and stop loving.

Jesus tells this parable about a man who was going on a long trip. He gave three of his servants money and told them to keep doing business for him while he was gone. The one servant took the five coins that were given to him and made five *more*. The second servant took the two coins that were given to him and made two *more*. The third servant took the one coin that was given to him, and he went and buried it in the ground to keep it safe. When the man comes back, the first two servants are rewarded. But the third one, when he explains what he did, the man responds by calling him, “wicked and lazy.” That word *lazy* is the Greek word *oknere*, which means

“slothful.” That servant made a willful choice to neglect his duties and responsibilities and to do nothing with what was given to him.

There are several different ways to interpret this parable, but one way holds that God has given us gifts and abilities that we are called to *use* in such a way that we multiply the good thing that God has given. When we *do* that, we share in the joy of our master. But when we *fail* to do that – when we make a willful decision to *not* utilize the gifts and abilities that God has given us, to neglect the duties and responsibilities that God calls us to – we do *not* get to share in the joy of our master. In fact we are *distanced* from our master.

In that third servant, we see the sin of sloth. But in the first two, we see the virtue of *diligence*. If *sloth* comes from a Latin word that means, “without care,” *diligence* comes from a Latin word that means, “care and attentiveness.” It has to do with expressing love through attentiveness. When we are diligent about our work, we are making a choice to utilize the gifts and abilities that God has given us in ways that are careful and thoughtful and attentive; in ways that show we *care*.

I knew that this past week was going to be very busy and exhausting. I knew that at some point I was going to have to work on a sermon but that I probably wasn’t going to *want* to. So a week ago Thursday, before I left the office for the day, I read through the scripture readings and commentaries, I printed off everything I knew I was going to need for it, and I outlined the whole sermon. Normally, I don’t have that kind of work done until the end of the day on Tuesday. But I knew I had to be *diligent* if I wanted to get this done and not be up at night working.

Diligence seeks to make the most of the time and abilities that you have.

Now, there is one distinction that we need to make here. We live in a culture that values hard work and productivity and *doing*. A person's value and worth is often measured by what they *do* and how much they *produce*. And within this culture, inactivity and rest are often viewed as *lazy*. Sloth is a willful choice to disengage and do nothing. *But so is sabbath*. God calls us to take one day a week to rest from our labors and do nothing so that we can be reminded that we are not defined by our productivity; that we are not what we *do*.

There are all these stories about Jesus resting. He's in a boat with his disciples when a storm pops up, and they're all scared that they're going to die, but Jesus is asleep. They wake him up and say, "*Don't you care* that we're perishing?" They're questioning whether he *cares*, whether he has *detached* from them. Or he goes off by himself to pray, but the disciples come and find him and say, "Jesus, what are you doing? All these people are looking for you because they need to be healed. *Don't you care?*" But Jesus isn't demonstrating a *lack* of care when he goes off to rest and pray. He's demonstrating *self-care* because he's just *finished* doing a lot of work, and he knows there's a lot of work *ahead*.

Sabbath is not laziness or inattentiveness or lack of care. It is rest for the purpose of *renewing* and *restoring* us for the work ahead. It is self-care, attentiveness to the wellbeing of our bodies and minds and spirits, *so that* we can be diligent about using the gifts that God has given us to do what God calls us to do.

Let's go back to Elijah real quick. When we left Elijah, he was out in the wilderness, sitting under a tree, wanting to die. He had given up and fallen asleep. Suddenly, an angel appears to him and says, "Get up and eat." He looks, and there is bread and water there next to him. So he

eats and falls back asleep. The angel wakes him up a second time and says, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He gets up and eats, and it says that on the strength of that food, he walks forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, where God appears to him and sends him *back* to the world that he had given up on and left, to do the work that God calls him to do. God turns his sloth into sabbath; his resignation into rest and renewal.

There are times when life can feel overwhelming and it can all seem like too much. In those times we need to *stop* and *take a break* and *rest* before we can keep going. And God not only *allows* us to do that, God *commands* us to do that. Sabbath is a *diligent rest*. It’s not about giving up. It’s about resting so that we do not give up. It’s not about not caring. We need sabbath *because* we care and we need to be renewed so that we can go on showing our care for God, for our neighbors, and for ourselves. Sabbath is not *lack* of care. It is *self-care*.

A lot of times we don’t feel like we *can* do that. We feel like, “I have so much going on, there is so much to *do*, that I can’t afford to take a break and rest.” There’s a saying from Christian mysticism: *Everything matters and nothing matters*. *Everything matters* because every aspect of life deserves our attention and love and best effort. The things of this world and this life are *important*, there is an *urgency* here, and we are called to be *engaged* with them. But at the same time, *nothing matters*. The things of this world and this life are temporary, and we are called to be mindful of the bigger picture of existence – not to get so bogged down by the details and drama that we think this is *all* that matters.

Everything matters. And nothing matters. We don’t have to pick one of those. They can both be true at the same time. It’s a paradox that we are called to hold in tension. Because *in* that tension is where we find the diligent rest of sabbath that allows us to be renewed and restored so

that we can be engaged with the world and use the gifts that God has given us in ways that show attentiveness and care. Everything matters. And nothing matters.