

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Revelation 3:14-22, Luke 12:35-40
“Sloth: Sin Of The Spectator”

March 16, 2014
(2nd Sunday In Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

REVELATION 3:14-22, LUKE 12:35-40 "SLOTH: SIN OF THE SPECTATOR"

50 m. S.E. of Philadelphia, 3 Roads Converge, Lycus Valley

1) v.14a Introductory "Angelic" Formula.

7 Letters/ 7 Parts, Major Commercial, Opulent City

14 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

Referenced In Col. 1:7, 4:12-16, Epaphras Founder?
See Acts 19, Famous Banking, Textiles, Medical School

2) v.14b Characterization of the Lord (3 Christological Titles: Amen, Witness, Beginning).

- a 'The word of *the Amen*,
- b the faithful and true *Witness* (martyr),
- c the *Beginning* (origin, principle) of God's creation.

II Cor. 1:9, 20; Is. 65:16, "God of the Amen," Certain
1:5, 3:7, I Tim. 6:14
22:13, Col. 1:15, 18, 4:16; Rom. 8:29
What Jesus Is For God, They Are Not For Him!

3-4) vv.15-18 Praise Formula, "I Know," Only Censure Given, No Praise.

//Sardis (No Praise)

- 15 a "I know your works:
- b you are neither cold nor hot.
- c Would that you were cold or hot!
- 16 c' So, because you are lukewarm,
- b' and neither cold nor hot,
- a' I will spew you out of my mouth!

(6 miles to Hierapolis hot lime/sulphur springs, lukewarm at Laodicea)
No useful water in Laodicea, not effective
Tepid, Half-Hearted, Comfortable, Blase
Flowed over cliff opposite Laodicea, sulphur was nauseating
Cold and hot water are both useful
Emeo = emetic, Warning from Christ!

2 DIFFERING ASSESSMENTS:

17 For you say, 'I am rich (1), I have prospered (2), and I need nothing (3)';
not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable,
poor (a), blind (b), naked [c].

(3 Lies) Church's Opinion = Self-Sufficient (1)
Christ's Opinion = 5 Lacks, Miserable (2)

Local Sarcasm: Christ Mocks Them Sharply! "We take care of ourselves."
Tacitus, *Annals* 14.27.1 (refused Roman aid after 60AD/100AD earthquakes)

5) v.18-19 Call to Repentance (3 items from the local culture used).

Shop With Jesus, Is. 55:1b-2

- 18 a' Therefore I counsel you to buy gold from me refined by fire,
that you may be rich,
- c' and white garments to clothe you
and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen,
- b' and salve to anoint your eyes,
that you may see.

Pure Faith For Spiritual Poverty
(1) Famous Banking Industry, I Pt. 1:6-7
Holy Character For Nakedness: 3:4, 4:4, 19:7-8
(2) Famous Textiles: Glossy Black Wool
Clear Vision For Spiritual Blindness, Phrygian Powder
(3) City Known For Eye Treatments, Famous Medical School

19 Those whom I love (*philo* = affection) I reprove and chasten;
so *be zealous* and repent.

Gift of Divine Correction = God's Stern Love
Christ Can Be Tough! Their Witness Is Weak
Prov. 3:12, Heb. 12:5-1, Rom. 12:11, *Zeal* As Antidote To Sloth
Ephesus lacked *love*, Laodicea lacked *zeal/passion*, i.e. Guilty Of Sloth/Acedia

7) v.20-21 Two Promised Rewards.

Turn From Church To Individual Believer, Christ Outside!

- 20 Behold, I stand at the door and KNOCK;
if any one hears my voice and opens the door,
a I will come to him, and eat with him, and he with me.

(Knock) Restored Fellowship (1)
(Call) From Inside
(Communion) Song Sol. 5:2 [LXX], Jn. 14:23
No Forced Entry, Leisurely Evening Meal, Lk. 24:13-43

- 21 b He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne,
as I myself have conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Stay In Relationship, Shared Rule (2)
Suffering Cross/New Life/Ascension

Lk. 22:28-30, Mt. 26:64, Rev. 20:5, 22:1-3, Eternal Fellowship

6) v.22 Call to Hear What the Spirit Says.

Last Letter Is Full Of Emotion

22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Pay Attention/Make Room For Spirit's Voice

1) Luke 12:35-36 Exhortation To Readiness: Master Comes.

- 35 "Let your loins be (already) girded and your lamps (continually) burning,
- 36 and be like men who are waiting for their **MASTER** to come home from the marriage feast,
so that they may open to him at once when he comes and KNOCKS.

2 Images Of Readiness

2) v.37 Blessing On Servants Who Are Awake At The 2nd/3rd Shifts.

- 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes;
truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them.

2') vv.38-39 Blessing On Servants Who Are Awake.

- 38 If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants!
- 39 But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming,
he would not have left his house to be broken into.

1') v.40 Exhortation To Constant Readiness: Son of Man Comes Unexpectedly.

- 40 You must also be ready; for the **SON OF MAN** is coming at an unexpected hour.

A BEGINNING ANALYSIS OF THE DEADLY SIN OF *SLOTH* (Latin. *acedia*)

CATEGORY	SLOTH
Bodily Location	Back, Rump
Synonyms	Spiritual Apathy, Indolence, Laziness, Boredom, Negligence, Ennui
Brief Definition	Disinclination to spiritual labor, waste of time, cowardice, irresponsibility
Differs from....	Clinical depression, which requires medical treatment/counseling, though the person with depression may also have the sin of sloth as a factor.
Is a deadly sin because....	At some point it is a choice to neglect God and the good God offers.
Violates	Mark 12:30, “to love God with heart, soul, mind, <i>and strength</i> .”
T.V. Mnemonic: Gilligan’s Island	Gilligan, also Homer Simpson of <i>The Simpsons</i>
*Corruption Of Something Good *Life as....	The need for and gift of rest and leisure, a weekly Sabbath Life as the inaction of the passive self.
Healing Virtue Blessed are... *Disciplines	Diligence, Hope, Hunger for right, To love God with the whole self Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... Service, Use your gifts, Physical activity, exercise, Goal setting
Desire for...	Something less
*Contemporary Stereotype	The U.S. Couch Potato, the disconnected Christian who says, “I tried that.”
Impairs a....	Skill in production, a contribution to larger welfare and the common good
Biblical example	Sluggard v. the ant, Prov. 6:6, 9; 10:26, 13:4
Violates Commandments	No. 4: Work 6 days, Keep sabbath on the 7th
Effect on others	Resentment, Work shifted, You are seen as an energy drain
Key verses	Rom. 12:11, Prov. 13:4, Colossians 3:23, 2 Thess. 3:10, Phil. 4:13
*You become... *Loss	Essentially useless Of Capacity, especially for compassion and charity
*Hell is...	Motion of any sort, any call to duty or action.
*Leads to...	Entitlement, Shifting of Work, Mooching, Constant Complaining
*Household items	Chair, Couch, Bed, TV + Remote
*Theme song	Otis Redding: “Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay”
Emerges as a layer of the 8 stages(Erickson)	7) Adulthood, 8) Maturity (Melancholy)
Focuses On...	Purpose, Legacy
*Institutional, Cultural Forms	Excess Television, Immersion In Video Games/ The Digital World, Loss of physical education in schools, Some forms of indolent retirement, Intergenerational welfare bondage
*Personal Evidence	Excessive sleep, no diligence, joyless, channel surfing, no goal setting, restlessness, boredom, isolation
*Excuse	“I’m bored, tired, and don’t care any more.” “Let someone else do it!”
Secular Form	Abuse of Welfare, A “Whatever” attitude, Being a <i>slacker!</i>

SLOTH: SIN OF THE SPECTATOR

“Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.”

A wake up call from Jesus!

R E V E L A T I O N 3 : 1 9

During the late 1960's at the height of the cultural revolution a couple was traveling round California. One day they noticed a pleasant-looking young man sitting by a bridge near the hotel. Curiosity eventually overcame them, so they went and asked why he sat in the same spot all day, every day.

“I happen to believe in reincarnation,” he replied. “I’ve lived many lives before and will have many after this one; I’ve just decided to sit this one out.”¹

Sitting life out: that’s the deadly sin of sloth, and it’s not only a threat for those who believe the erroneous idea of reincarnation. Many Christians, who should know they have only one life to live and one death to die, are still passive. They sit in the stands and critique the efforts of others rather than suit up for the conflicts on the field, thus our title: *Sloth: Sin Of The Spectator*. The words of Hebrews 9:27 have not pierced their hearts, “And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment...” Sloth has forgotten what life’s about, that it has a straight line trajectory from birth to death; it’s short, unrepeatable, and every day counts.

Sloth is fourth in the classic Roman Catholic listing of the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, anger, *sloth*).² Think of Gilligan, or more recently Homer Simpson!

¹ Brian Cavanaugh, *More Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 54.

² On sloth, see Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 191-216; Ed Young, *7 Fatal Distractions* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 73-98; William H. Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2005) Jeff Cook, *Seven: the Deadly Sins And The Beatitudes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 67-82; 79-96; Rebecca Konyonkyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 79-98. See the appendix (p. 16) for Evagrius’ early reflections on sloth.

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The Middle English is *slowthe* from which get the word *slow*.³ Sloth is life in slow motion, all the zest leached out by neglect of the good things of God, the chief of which is himself, the second of which is other people. “First love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength,” said Jesus, and in that power “love the neighbor as the self.” A love that moves the heart is the antidote to sloth.⁴ When I find someone caught in the downward spiral of sloth, I listen till I find something they love, and if it’s not destructive, that’s where we begin. I want to know, What is it about what they love that gives them energy and motivation? And from there we build.

For the desert monks of the fourth century who first devised the categories of the eight- and then the seven deadly sins with one for each day- the Greek word for sloth was *acedia*, the literal meaning of which is *no care*, what we term *apathy*- a loss of spiritual passion.⁵ It was known as the *devil of the noonday sun* because that was the time- when the desert sun was high and the body tired- that this demon and distorted passion most afflicted the monks in their zeal for God. W.G. Burns captured it when he said, "A Christian never falls asleep in the fire, or in the deep waters; but she is likely to grow drowsy in the sunshine."⁶ What the summer sun does to motivation when baking on the beach, sloth does for the spirit of a believer; it slowly steals motivation for doing much of anything except not moving. It’s a dose of Novocain injected into the will to render it numb to God. Sloth takes the passion of love for God and others and cools it a degree at a time till hypothermia sets in. Sloth is feeling tired and falling asleep in a snow drift. No pain, but just as dead.

A middle-aged man once went to his physician complaining of many ailments. The patient said that he wanted the doctor to be frank about what was wrong. After the exam, the doctor said, "There isn't a thing wrong, except you're lazy."

"Okay, doc. Now give me the medical term for it, so I can tell my wife."⁷

³ *The American Heritage Dictionary* (New York, NY: Dell, 1975), 657.

⁴ Mark 12:30.

⁵ See Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (Atlanta, GA: Riverbend, 2008).

⁶ Albert Wells, editor, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 8.

⁷ Adapted from Jerry Newcombe, “Overcoming the Sin of Sloth,” www.christianpost.com/news/overcoming-the-sin-of-sloth-112284.

“Honey, the doctor says I have an advanced case of *acedia*.”

“Well, did he write you a prescription?”

“No. There’s no medicine as yet. He did say that lots of rest and good food in a clean home would be helpful.”

Sloth is clever, always reading to shift the burden of initiative to others.

In a column from years ago, Ralph Cannon reviews the signs of sloth in worship:

"A pew potato sits back and waits to be entertained. Though able-bodied, she complains the service includes too much standing up. He refuses to open his mouth or his mind- sometimes even his hymnal- when it's time to sing. During the anthem she plans a menu. When Scripture is read, he assumes there's no need to listen; after all, he's heard it all before. The offering is of no interest, since she's already sent an annual contribution. And when the sermon comes, possibilities are endless: a nap, daydreaming, anticipating ball games, placing mental wagers, wondering why so-and-so isn't in the usual seat...."⁸

Have you become a spiritual spectator instead of an animated participant? Then maybe sloth is an advanced disease of your soul. As one of the deadly seven, it’s serious; it’s terminal. To be bored and disconnected is pathological.

If it is the glue of love that binds us to God, then sloth is a slow acting solvent that dissolves the sticking power of love till we are set adrift.⁹ If you are bored with God, if there’s no appetite for the things of God and the spiritual disciplines that keep us alert to God, and if it’s been a long time since your slumbering heart was stabbed awake with joy and wonder, then you are both a victim and participant in the subtle sin of sloth. George Steiner saw the connection and wrote, "Men (and women) are accomplices to what leaves them indifferent."¹⁰ Just as an anorexic is an accomplice in the process that’s wasting them away, those who do not resist the creeping numbness of sloth conspire against themselves till they wither away to a hollow shell of a person: bloodless, stuffed with straw, unmoved by either the great pains or pleasures of the world around them. Ecstasy to them is a foreign language. As B.B.

⁸ Edited from *The Advocate*, "Cannonoids," Feb. 24, 1994, 3.

⁹ Peter Kreeft, *Back To Virtue* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1992), 153.

¹⁰ Wells, *Quotations*, 10.

King sang in his great blues song, "The Thrill Is Gone."

Sloth is not one of the warm sins like lust or gluttony, not an excess of an otherwise good desire but a cooling and finally cold sin that leaves us listless and indifferent, idle and bored. It's spiritual entropy. Sloth is a sin of omission, not so much something done as something left undone, and therefore cloaked in stealth. Sloth is a distrust of spiritual passion. It is allergic to the stirrings of God in the soul that motivate and enliven the will to action. I once had a woman tell me she changed churches because a woman she otherwise admired prayed with a bit too much passion, as if God was really her Father and listening attentively. Such zeal embarrassed her, and after all, being *comfortable* in church is the highest priority, isn't it? Those who seek only comfort are slothful.

Elie Wiesel is a Nobel winner and Holocaust survivor. In his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, he tells of Michael, a young Jew who- having survived the Holocaust- traveled at great risk behind the iron curtain to his Hungarian hometown. Though his memory burned with images of the soldiers and police who brutalized him and those he loved, Michael returned to satisfy his curiosity, not for revenge.

In a strange way he understood the brutality of the executioners and prison guards. What he did not understand was the man who lived across from the synagogue, the man who peered through his window day after day as thousands of Jews were herded into the death trains, reflecting, as Wiesel wrote, "no pity, no pleasure, no shock, not even anger or interest. Impassive, cold, impersonal."

There is a bond, thought Michael, between the executioner and the victim, even though the bond is negative. "They belong to the same universe. But not so the spectator. The spectator is entirely beyond us, seeing without being seen, present but unnoticed." He concludes, "To be indifferent- for whatever reason- is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray, and you are a man; torture your neighbor, you're still a man. Evil is human, weakness is human; indifference is not."¹¹ Sloth is deadly because it shrinks our humanity till we just don't care.

Martin Neimoller was a German pastor during the war years. Each time I run across his now-famous words I'm jolted awake by how deadly sloth really is:

"In Germany the Nazis came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I

¹¹ William White, *Fatal Attraction* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1992), 41-42.

didn't speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I was a Protestant so I did not speak up. Then they came for me. By that time there was no one left to speak up for anyone."¹²

To be a spectator in a time of crisis is the rotten fruit of sloth. Not wanting to be bothered: this is what sets up dry-rot in the soul. The slothful are skilled in the defense of inertia. They plead busyness. Churches and pulpits are full of nice folk: mannerly, hardly enough energy for any great sin of commission, neither cold nor hot but lukewarm.

One of the fundamental lessons of the Bible and the best of Christian thinking is that sin is not original or creative. It's parasitic; it feeds on and distorts the good; it does not create anything. There's no life in it. Think about it; each of the seven deadly sins is a distortion of a good desire or holy passion. Behind every vice is a virtue twisted out of recognition:

- *Behind the vice of pride is the virtue of appropriate self-love and regard.
- *Behind envy is the legitimate need to be recognized and valued.
- *Behind anger the capacity for energetic and just action.
- *Behind greed is the satisfaction of faithful ownership, enjoyment, and stewardship.
- *Behind lust is the good desire for sexual completion within marriage.
- *Behind gluttony is the need for daily bread.
- *And behind sloth is the God-given promise of rest and restoration- the sabbath, about which our United Methodist Church has a much-neglected doctrinal statement. It is lodged in our *Confession of Faith* and titled *The Lord's Day*:

“We believe the Lord's Day is divinely ordained for private and public worship, for *rest* from unnecessary work, and should be devoted to spiritual improvement, Christian fellowship and service. It is commemorative of our Lord's resurrection and is an emblem of our *eternal rest*. It is essential to the permanence and growth of the Christian

¹² Wells, *Quotations*, 9.

Church, and important to the welfare of the civil community.”¹³

As a correction to possible misunderstanding, remember that idleness is not necessarily slothful. It can be highly creative, as when daydreaming delivers an insight. A certain amount of mental freedom is required for any creative endeavor, and every act of true creativity is a partnership with the Creator. Time to muse, time to reflect, time to linger and ponder and savor and appreciate and meditate: all these are among our highest capacities. Neither is leisure to be confused with sloth, and the Sabbath rest of which the Bible speaks is certainly not sloth, but in fact its opposite. It is the faithful rhythm of work and rest God ordained for our good, but sloth tries to turn everyday into a lazy day and so loses the energy generated by the tension between the two beat rhythm of work and rest.

Oddly enough, Type-A’s like me are prone to sloth of an advanced variety. Sloth may rebound from over-activity, from burning the candle at both ends, then chopping up the candle to make more ends. The deadly sin of sloth may be the sin we most easily fall back into when we have indulged ourselves in the sins of over-activity, when we give ourselves to mindless entertainments and the taking up of tasks God never appointed for us. The slothful cannot enjoy the rest of God because they’re bored. Eugene Peterson writes:

"It was a favorite theme of C.S. Lewis that only lazy people work hard. By lazily abdicating the essential work of deciding and directing, establishing values and setting goals, other people do it for us; then we find ourselves frantically, at the last minute, trying to satisfy a half dozen different demands on our time, none of which is essential to our vocation, to stave off the disaster of disappointing someone."¹⁴

So if this is a definition of sloth- as I believe it is- then I know it all too well.

It is possible then, for sloth to hide behind much activity. The remedy for sloth is to vigorously engage the will with the work and worship God has given us to do, say No to duties that are not ours, and to with delight embrace the rest God gives us to enjoy. This is the triple antidote for the poison of sloth. Fighting sloth is about

¹³ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, 74.

¹⁴ *The Contemplative Pastor* (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 28.

making good decisions with God and embracing the good things God gives.

Sloth- as experts analyze it- takes at least four forms, the first of which is *mental*.¹⁵ If someone else is doing your reading or thinking for you, if you read the funnies and the sports page but never the editorials, if you rarely read the Scriptures but rely instead on predigested sermons, TV religion, and Christian radio, then sloth is corroding your mind. If you thrive on second-hand opinions, if your thoughts change with every wind of fashion, if your vocabulary is shrinking rather than expanding, and if you speak in constant cliches, if you never read a book through to the end, then yours is *mental* form of *sloth* which is epidemic in our day. And since we are commanded in Scripture to love God with all our intelligence, to let our brains turn to TV-intoxicated-mush is a great sin and makes believers who have never learned to *think Christianly* into patsies for intellectual and spiritual manipulation.

The second sub-type is *moral sloth*. This is a failure of nerve to act in a moral crisis. Edmund Burke famously wrote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (and women) to do nothing." Moral sloth prepares the way for great evils to invade without resistance. Moral sloth is AIDS of the soul, the loss of immunity that precedes the onset of opportunistic infection. It is the sloth of which Wiesel told and Neimoller spoke.

The third is *physical sloth*. A sign of physical sloth is an unused YMCA membership; another is the loss of energy because you are not resisting the natural decline of the body. Several years ago a study at Duke revealed that three vigorous periods of aerobic exercise a week has a similar mood-lifting effect to an anti-depressant medication. I often recommend Bible study *and* exercise, worship *and* physical activity. An over-used easy chair is an instrument of sloth.

The fourth is *spiritual sloth*, the loss of appetite for God. When the source of all joys, and the one *from whom all blessings flow*- becomes just too much trouble, we ought to feel a chill of terror. It is the healthy soul that sings with the Psalmist, "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God."¹⁶ For the physician taking a history, loss of appetite is a symptom. Same with the soul. We were made by and for God, so to lose a hunger for the ground of our own being is

¹⁵ Adapted from Maxie Dunnam & Kimberly Weisman, *The Workbook on the 7 Deadly Sins* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1997), 113.

¹⁶ 45:1.

spiritual illness. Sloth is not a sin to wink at. It is perhaps the most modern of the seven because our secular world finds little satisfaction in and even less fascination with God. Beneath our hectic hurriedness and much work, our many entertainments and little satisfaction, we are slothful. Our hearts are numbed to true joy.

As I reviewed the developmental literature, I find two groups especially vulnerable to sloth. First late teenagers, and then- by extension- young adults who are taking longer and longer these days to earn the markers of adulthood. Three hours a day of video games is sloth which makes you an expert at nothing. Endless hours wearing headphones is sloth which locks you up in a community of one. Not having a plan for the next phase of your life is sloth. Not working is sloth. Having a *Whatever* attitude is sloth. Not staying physically active is sloth. Smoking weed is sloth mixed with crime, and if your parents allow it in their house, they're guilty too. Thinking good things will come without effort is sloth. Not using a calender, mission statement and to-do list is sloth. Not keeping your promises or carrying your weight is sloth. Letting mom and dad pay your bills is sloth on both your parts: theirs because they want your regard rather than your respect, and yours because you enjoy coasting. Never asking a girl out on a real date where you pay and act the gentleman is sloth. And sloth, unless resisted, will keep from becoming a man. I occasionally see this among young women, but among young men it is epidemic. The recent economy has made it harder, but too many young men are stuck here.

But there is another group at the far end of the time line that are also prone to a recurrence of sloth, and that is the retired.¹⁷ One of the main tests of faith and character is what you do when you no longer have to work for a living. Yes, of course, take some time. Take a few trips. Catch up on the projects you postponed. Change your pace. Take up a hobby. But do not give into the mentality of sloth because it will whisper lies to you, lies like, "Do whatever you please," "Become a bum," "Leave life and service to others." No. Retirement is a time to be reinvented by the Lord for a new life so that you end strong. A time for your wisdom to enrich the world. Take a class. Get serious about Christian study. Become an expert on a local social problem. Run for political office. Don't coast. Pedal. Surrender to Jesus Christ and his will at a whole new level. Make the days between your retirement and

¹⁷ See Dr. Albert Mohler, "Redefining Retirement," www.christianpost.com/news/redefining-retirement-48525, who writes, "There is room in the Christian life for leisure, but not for a life devoted to leisure. As long as we have the strength and ability to serve, we are workers needed in Christ's Kingdom. Given the needs and priorities all around us, who would settle for life in Leisureville?"

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death the most spiritually fruitful of your life. Open yourself to a Spirit-guided adventure. Become the kind of old person young people want to be around because you bubble with the spirit of Jesus who- after all- was the most magnetic person who ever lived. Let it shine! Not that others are not susceptible to the deadly sin of sloth, only that teens, young adults, and the retired are especially prone because each is at a major life transition and tempted to shrink back from its demands on character.

It is significant that Jesus spoke of sloth both during his earthly ministry in Luke 12 and after his resurrection as the risen Lord in Revelation 3. He knew the fires of devotion and attention can burn low, and so addressed it more than once.

In his Parable of the Waiting Servants, Luke uses the imagery of *loins girded* and *lamps lit* to communicate this stance of vigilance and readiness. When you saw a man or woman in ancient Israel with their loins girded, it meant they'd taken their long outer garment and bound it up around the waist with a belt to free them for swift movement or work. The opposite of being unprepared is to always have your loins girded, to always be prepared to do the work of the Lord: to pray, to witness, to serve, to resist evil, to speak up for good. The only way I know to *be ready* is to *stay ready*, to live with Jesus standing in the next room about to walk in because he's never far away. To say to myself- when I'm foggy or gettin' sloppy, "The Lord is near," brings me back to focus. We always stand before him. He is always near at hand.

The second image is the burning lamp, which in that world let's you see at night. Cotton wicks had to be trimmed and extra oil on hand. It required forethought and planning. The promised blessing is that if we are found in this posture when he knocks, the risen Lord will honor us by serving us at his table. That is how highly Jesus thinks of those who keep the flame tended in a world of night. To be ready is to stay ready, as Luke said, "...for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour."

It is a dramatic question and not to be overused, but here it fits. Are you ready to meet your Maker and welcome the Master? When he knocks- either at your death, or at his sudden appearing, or for some call to join him in work today- will you answer with loins girded and lamp lit, or will you be fumbling around in the dark looking for a belt and a fresh wick? How humiliating to be found slothful.

There was a word my sixth grade teachers forbade us boys to use, not because it was lewd so much as overly graphic, and six grade boys love such words! It was the word *p-u-k-e*. *V-o-m-i-t* was nearly as bad, *upchuck* more delicate, *sick to your stomach* or *nauseous* still more refined. Only later in biology did we study the violent

contractions of the stomach known as *reversal peristalsis*. I would not make much of this had the author of Revelation not used it as a memorable image for Jesus' response to the slothful church of Laodicea, and here we learn that sloth is not just for individuals but infects whole groups, even those who claim to be disciples. Like individuals, churches have their own profile of communal vices and virtues. One of the great virtues of Main Street is a heart to serve- which is deep; one of our vices is a love of convenience and our lack of verbal witness. It's safe to talk about the church; it's highly risky to speak of your trust in Jesus Christ, and that is what people need to hear most of all, not an institutional endorsement but a personal, heartfelt witness about what he's done for you. Thus the test for this church will be a question, Will we serve when it's inconvenient, when it interrupts our play and social calendar, and will we take the risk to actually speak about Jesus to others?

Six miles upland from the rich city of Laodicea in Asia Minor were the hot mineral springs of Hierapolis. But once the six miles were transited, the hot waters were lukewarm; they were also full of sulfur and made anyone who drank nauseous.¹⁸ When Jesus came to sample the quality of the spiritual springs of the church in Laodicea, it made him nauseated, just like the tepid, sulphur water everyone knew about. I've never seen that image in stained glass- a queasy Jesus about to expel a church from his body!

The Lord prefers hot or cold to tepid. Fire pleases him; ice is a challenge, but not warm as spit. The ignited can be directed in their enthusiasm and zeal; those frozen in the ice of unbelief are at least candidates for the great thaw of God's love. But what can you do with the half-hearted who have just enough faith to inoculate them against the real article? Complacent, cruising along, thinking everything's OK because the bottom's not yet dropped out, holding a high opinion of their status, just like the Laodiceans, "I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing...."

"Not so," said the risen Lord in a blunt minority report, "you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Such are the blinding and debilitating effects of sloth on us all. Sloth blinds to our true condition.

There the Lord stands, sick to his stomach, yet even here is the offer of love and a chance to change, verse 18: "If you need gold for your poverty, I've got it, purified in the fires of persecution. If you need garments for your nakedness, I've got

¹⁸ Charles H. Giblin, S.J., *The Book Of Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 65.

them too, washed white in the blood of martyrs. If you need eye salve for your blind eyes, I've got plenty for those who wish to see sloth for what it is and repent." The Lord motivates his church with both the fear of judgment and the promise of reward. Question: Are we hearing what the Spirit says to the church today?

It doesn't take much to turn a church around and fill it with life, and it's not this or that style of music or a clever preacher. Only one thing works, but it's big and disruptive: that the church as a whole open the door from the inside and invite the Lord back in so we can follow him instead of just running a religious franchise. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," is his announcement.

The 19th century artist Holman Hunt painted the famous portrait of Christ standing with a lamp, knocking at the door. It hangs in a chapel at Oxford University; many of you have seen prints. It was while painting this work that Hunt was converted.¹⁹ "But Mr. Hunt," someone complained, "there's no knob on the door." "The latch," he replied, "is on the inside. The door is opened from within."

Which raises a question, How did Jesus ever get put outside his own church? Probably by neglect, by sloth, a preference for things more easily managed and less disruptive. I'll never forget a scene from the movie *Souder*. Two black men are strolling by a white clapboard country church. One says, "Do you think they'll ever let us in that place?"

"Naw," says his friend with a slap on the back, "I talked to the Lord just this mornin'. He said he's been trying to get in there for years." Both chuckle.

But the risen Jesus doesn't stop with a knock. He continues with an invitation, "... if any one hears my voice and opens the door (that's two actions, and for the slothful even one can be a challenge!), I will come to him, and eat with him, and he with me." This is the same meal imagery as in Luke 12, "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, *he will gird himself and have them sit at table*, and he will come and serve them." The promise of Jesus is a shared meal and a shared life. We eat and work and live together as his apprentices, his students and understudies, his friends and companions.²⁰

¹⁹ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 83.

²⁰ On the recovery of discipleship, see Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006).

Perhaps we need to leave an empty chair in every meeting as a reminder of who's our most important guest, and wherever the empty seat is, that's the head of the table. This is not the pastor's church, not the bishop's, not yours. The church belongs to him; Jesus owns all the stock. Church renewal is not pumped up emotions but a conscious Yes at the heart of a church to the Lord himself who promises to chasten those he loves and love those he chastens- which is all of us, and probably *me first* since leaders have higher accountability!²¹ So if your ears work, it's time to listen to what the Spirit whispers to the churches. Time to *arise from sloth*, time to rekindle the fires of devotion and obedience that have burned low, time to seek the Lord with zeal. "Those whom I love I reprove and chasten, *so be zealous and repent*," is the Lord's call in verse 19. Rouse yourself from your spiritual slumbers and run with all you energy to unlock the door and let him back into his church. Will we?

In Dante's work *Purgatory*, the reader is presented with the ultimate fate of the slothful, "The sinners on Mount Purgatory are freed from their sins by running swiftly up the mountain and proclaiming expressions of zeal (much like high school cheerleaders do today)."²² Jesus Christ is worth praising and cheering, worth knowing and following, and if you find yourself holding back for a deal that requires less exertion and perseverance, then sloth is an issue. Spiritual laziness is deadly.

There's no lack of information in today's church. We Methodists have the best educated pastors in history: 4 years of college, 3 of seminary, a 2 year residency, and on and on. More books and tapes and seminars than you can digest. The problem is not information; it's desire and discipline. We must turn and seek the Lord, even zealously, but inspiration is not something we can provide for ourselves. It's not the same as emotion. It's the breath of God's own mouth, the Holy Spirit blowing a steady fresh breeze across the church in answer to Jesus' prayer. And that, I believe, is the only cure for the sloth that has so deeply penetrated me, our church, and just about every Methodist preacher I know. We need a fresh touch from God to kindle, as Isaac Watts said, *a flame of sacred love on these cold hearts of ours*. God save us all from the stealthy creep of the deadly sin of sloth. God restore to us the blessing of a keen spiritual hunger, because it is a hunger Jesus both creates and promises to satisfy, "Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* after righteousness, for they shall

²¹ James 3:1.

²² Lisa Frank, "The Evolution of the Seven Deadly Sins: From God to the Simpsons," <http://as1020fall.pbworks.com/f/Lisa+Frank+-+Simpsons.pdf>.

be filled.”²³

If you have found this sermon annoying, beware; it could be sloth, the only cure for which is paying attention to the Jesus who’s wearing out his knuckles trying to get our attention. Can you hear it?

Appendix:

Evagrius Ponticus’ (4th century monk) original description of *acedia* or *sloth*:

“The demon of *acedia*, which is also called the noonday demon, is the most burdensome of all the demons. It besets the monk at about the fourth hour (10 am) of the morning, encircling his soul until about the eighth hour (2 pm).

- [1] First it makes the sun seem to slow down or stop moving, so that the day appears to be fifty hours long.
- [2] Then it makes the monk keep looking out of his window and forces him to go bounding out of his cell to examine the sun to see how much longer it is to 3 o’clock, and to look round in all directions in case any of the brethren is there.
- [3] Then it makes him hate the place and his way of life and his manual work. It makes him think that there is no charity left among the brethren; no one is going to come and visit him.
- [4] If anyone has upset the monk recently, the demon throws this in too to increase his hatred.
- [5] It makes him desire other places where he can easily find all that he needs and practice an easier, more convenient craft. After all, pleasing the Lord is not dependent on geography, the demon adds; God is to be worshipped everywhere.
- [6] It joins to this the remembrance of the monk’s family and his previous way of life, and suggests to him that he still has a long time to live, raising up before his eyes a vision of how burdensome the ascetic life is. So, it employs, as they say, every [possible] means to move the monk to abandon his cell and give up the race. No other demon follows on immediately after this one but after its struggle the soul is taken over by a peaceful condition and by unspeakable joy.”

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²³ Matthew 5:6.
