

### ***The Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth***

In the name of him in whose accomplished work we find rest, dear friends in Christ: this evening we come to the penultimate item on our list of Seven Deadly Sins, the sin of sloth. It is, like several of the others we've already considered, a sin of excess. At least that's one way to look at it; by which I mean there's nothing wrong with resting and relaxing – especially after a hard day's work. The Lord tells us that he himself rested on the seventh day after having worked for six creating the universe and everything in it. He commanded his people Israel to follow his example in this same pattern of work and rest. And each day, even, he divides into roughly equal periods of light and darkness precisely so that we will have time and opportunity to rest. So the Lord is not opposed to resting. He wants his people to do it. The person who tends toward sloth, however, is ever trying to alter the divinely ordained six to one ratio so that he increases rest and decreases work, with the ultimate goal of eliminating the latter altogether. So, one way to think about sloth is as excess of rest. The other way you could look at it, and probably the way we usually do, is as a shortage of work. But what I always find amazing is to what great lengths and how much effort some people will go in order to avoid having to do any work. When you see a case like that you think, "What's wrong with you? Can't you see that it would be easier just to get in and do what needs to be done?"

But that's an aside. The readings we have before us this evening tell us a few things about the Lord's perspective on the sin of sloth or laziness. From the Proverbs, for example, we told that the sluggard (that is, a person who practices sloth) is someone who is more or less stuck on Newton's first law of motion. That's the law of inertia that says "Objects at rest tend to remain at rest unless acted upon by another force." For most people, the force that moves them from a state of rest is some sort of self motivation or even self interest that tells them they need to take advantage of the opportunities they have to maintain or even to improve their present situation and status. The trouble with the sluggard is that he never gets started. That internal voice that tells him to get busy for his own good isn't loud or forceful enough to overcome the gravitational pull of the bed or sofa he finds so comfortable and from which he'd rather not be disturbed. This is why Solomon tells him to consider the ant. It doesn't need to be driven like a slave. It knows what it has to do to survive and it does it. Even tiny insects are smart enough to understand the basic principle of life that says: pay first, play later. The sluggard has it backward. He wants to play first ... and, well, he wants to keep on playing. It's sort of like the way Congress spends money – just keep on spending without any thought that one day the bills must come due.

And so we see with the sin of sloth a number of typical behaviors. There's a reluctance to get started on anything, or to follow through on projects begun and later found to be more difficult than first imagined. There's procrastination – always putting off for tomorrow what can and should be started today. There's apathy – the "who cares?" attitude that stifles growth and paralyzes action, along with the "aw, that's good enough" attitude that achieves shoddy results and leaves jobs only partially done. And then there are the inevitable self-justifying excuses. Again, from the Proverbs we read that the sluggard says, "There's a lion out there." The point is that he always has a reason for not working. He's got excuses, and it doesn't really matter how irrational, exaggerated, or just plain foolish they are. All they have to do is sound good to him. It's like guy in the parable Jesus tells who hid his talent in the ground. When asked to report on his work for the master, he's got an excuse for his lack of performance. "I knew you were a tough guy to please and so I was afraid. That's why I hid my talent in the ground." In the

master's reply to his slothful servant, Jesus stresses just how ridiculous the excuse is. "How stupid can you be? If you knew that I was a hard guy to please, that should have motivated you all the more to do something productive with what I gave you." Though he's not given the opportunity to make a second excuse, we can well imagine what it might be: "Well, you see, my Lord, the problem is that I didn't have as much to work with as the other guys. It wasn't enough to make a proper investment. You know what they say, 'it takes money to make money'." Of course, that excuse would have been shot down too. The Lord is looking for a return on his investment. Obviously if he gives less, he won't be expecting as much. The question is: did you put to work what I gave you? And that's the sluggard's problem: he doesn't want to work.

And here it's revealed what the sin of sloth is really all about: it's a violation of the seventh commandment. When all is said and done, the slothful person is a thief. He's robbing God by failing to develop and utilize the talents and opportunities the Lord has given him. "I've given you so much" says the Lord, "I gave it all to you with the expectation that I would get a return on my investment – that you will get busy and make something of yourself – that you would serve me by your efforts to improve yourself and help others." You know, in the field of business, money not earned that could have been is counted as lost revenue. The Lord thinks the same way. What we could have gained and whatever goals we might have achieved by using our time and God-given talents that we don't due to our laziness and lack of motivation, the Lord counts as stolen from him.

And he isn't the only one being robbed by our laziness. In the epistle reading, St. Paul admonishes us not to grow weary of doing good for our fellow man. The priority is on those who share our faith – our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in want or who need a helping hand; but all people are included in the expectation. If we can help someone and don't due to our sloth or apathy, we've robbed them of the aid, comfort, and assistance that the Lord might have given them through us.

Now, my guess is that in a community largely comprised of hard-working Iowa farmers who are deeply indoctrinated in the American work ethic, few of you expected to discover yourself guilty of the sin of sloth. We're more likely to think, "Yeah, I know a few deadbeats; but I'm sure not one of them." Hopefully you see now that that's not true. The fact is that we all are guilty of sloth. Why, even someone who's a full-fledged workaholic can be guilty of it by throwing himself one hundred percent into his job, and neglecting his obligations to his family, to his neighbors, and to his church family.

And it's even worse than that because usually when we think of laziness, it's with respect to physical work and manual labor; but it can apply to other areas of life as well. There is for example intellectual laziness – the failure to exercise and develop the mind. Teaching over at the Lutheran school as I do, there's nothing I find quite so frustrating as a kid who has tons of potential to learn; but who simply refuses to do it because "it's too hard" or "it's too much work". At the same time, I wonder how many adults haven't cracked a book of any kind since leaving high school. And no, I don't exempt myself. There're plenty of times I think to myself, I really should be studying this or researching that as I prepare a sermon or a lesson – and then I think, "Naw. Why bother? Nobody'll know the difference." That's wrong of course. There is Someone who knows the difference. And I rob Him and I rob you whenever I succumb to the temptation.

And then there is what's even worse, and that is spiritual sloth. It's the neglect of God's Word, the failure to spend time in meditation and prayer, and the avoidance of our gathering together for worship. It's skipping Bible study and other opportunities to grow in Christian faith,

knowledge, and life because – well, because I'm satisfied right where I am, because I don't want to expend the time and effort to grow and develop my potential, and because it's just too slow and difficult a thing to do. So doing we waste the talents God has given us, robbing him – and ourselves of the heavenly treasures he wants us to have. We become like the lazy person Solomon spoke of: we put our hands into the dish of God's grace and are too weary to lift them to our mouths to feed ourselves. Now, that's lazy. And foolish; because by it we don't just rob from ourselves, we may end up murdering our immortal souls through spiritual starvation.

Small wonder then, that sloth is included on the list of deadly sins. It's a lot more common and dangerous than we're likely to think. And hopefully this evening I've given you cause to appreciate just how serious it is – and how deeply we are infected by it. Let us then repent of it. And receiving again Christ's sure Word of forgiveness and being empowered and inspired by his Holy Spirit, let us resolve to stop robbing God, our neighbors, and ourselves through the sin of sloth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***