

Sloth: Who Cares?

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

As we refuse to be involved with hurting people or with God, our refusing eventually becomes habitual. It is a joyful thing to find true rest from having gotten what our hearts desire. But there is also a sad, tired rest of sloth that comes when desire dies.

The tradition of the capital vices, or seven deadly sins, grew out of the mundane life of medieval monasteries where monks lived together in close quarters. Pride, envy, anger, sloth [*acedia*], avarice, gluttony, and lust came to be seen as deadly because through trial and error, the monks learned that these sins could not only kill your soul but they would certainly kill the monastery. Deadly sins destroy community and relationships. Thus, one of the primary reasons they still bear looking at today is that in small congregations where members take seriously living near and loving one another, these sins can kill close-knit community. Here I will look at one of the most deadly of sins—sloth.

You may remember the dead-pan comedian Pat Paulsen (1927-1997) who ran bogus campaigns for the presidency of the United States over three decades. In one of his televised campaign appearances in the 1960s he called for “a great, national groundswell of apathy” that would allow this nation to fall softly backwards into “peace, prosperity, and goodwill.” As he came to the big climax of his speech, he said, “I don’t really care whether any of you do this or not.”¹ Apathy is a symptom of sloth.

In his wonderful, whimsical article in *The New York Times Book Review* titled “Sloth: Nearer, My Couch, to Thee,” the novelist Thomas Pynchon observes how overlooked the vice of sloth is today: we have no symposia on sloth, no sloth task forces, and no government hearings on sloth, so we easily conclude that sloth is no big deal.²

The Church, however, has known for a long, long time that sloth is serious business: it is a deadly sin that separates us from God. Our modern world

has totally secularized and reduced its meaning, however, to casual laziness; we think sloth is a personal flaw — on the order of sitting around in lukewarm bathwater rather than getting our work done. But the vice is more serious than that. It is also easy to get sloth confused with what we call depression today. They are not the same thing; the first is a sin to be resisted and the second is a medical malady to be treated. Yet, there is most likely a great deal of overlap between sloth and depression. On the outside they look a lot like one another.

The Greek name for the vice of sloth is *acedia*, which means “not caring.” In Dante’s famous *Divine Comedy*, the vice is a perversion and twisting of God’s gift of love. If greed is loving things too much and gluttony is loving food and drink too much, and pride is loving self too much — sloth is deficient love.³

The fourth-century Christians in the deserts of Egypt referred to this vice as the “noonday demon.” Around midday when the sun was hot, their cells were stifling, and their stomachs were rumbling even though it was still two hours before meal time, the work of prayer and repeating the Psalms became really difficult and their minds turned to other things. That is when the vice made its tempting entrance into their lives. John Cassian captures the moment:

Finally one gazes anxiously here and there, and sighs that no brother of any description is to be seen approaching: one is for ever in and out of one’s cell, gazing at the sun as though it were tarrying to its setting: one’s mind is in an irrational confusion, like the earth befogged in a mist, one is slothful and vacant in every spiritual activity, and no remedy it seems can be found for this state of siege than a visit from some brother, or the solace of sleep. Finally our malady suggests that in common courtesy one should salute the brethren, and visit the sick, near and far. It dictates such offices of duty and piety as to seek out this relative or that, and make haste to visit them; or there is that religious and devout lady, destitute of any support from her family, whom it is a pious act to visit now and then and supply in holy wise with necessary comforts, neglected and despised as she is by her own relations: far better to bestow one’s pious labour upon these than sit without benefit or profit in one’s cell....⁴

As I read this, all of a sudden I begin to understand the vice. John Cassian is talking about me! Instead of doing the hard and often tedious work of prayer, I am always ready to visit someone, have a conversation, stand around and talk. And not one of those things is bad. But there are times when I must do the hard work of prayer. Prayer takes discipline, commitment, and patience. It is not easy. And I would rather talk to someone on the phone or do email. The Church calls it sloth!

Sloth is the refusal to get involved because we do not care enough to be involved. It is faintheartedness in matters which are important, but difficult.

The temptation of sloth is always to take shortcuts. The passive technologies of television and Internet that replace real relationship just

pave its way. It is a student sitting in class with a vacant stare, wanting the teacher to spoon feed the lesson, but not willing to do the hard work of reading, going to the library, and doing research to get to know the material and its sources personally. This is sloth.

Or it is a member coming to me and saying, "My marriage is falling apart and I don't know what to do. I want to save my marriage." I respond, "Every day I want you to do three things with your spouse as if you were really in love. Here they are. Do these things whether you feel it or not." And the response is, "I don't know if I can work that hard." This too is sloth.

Congregations are full of members who are seeking spiritual shortcuts. They want to come to worship and be inspired and feel good. They want sweet experiences and easy answers and are not interested in doing the hard work of thinking, confessing their sin, coming to Bible study, and having their lives challenged by the gospel. This, again, is sloth.

In my pastoral experience, I have had a lot of folks tell me of their spiritual doubts. They do not know if God exists, or they do not feel God's presence, and on and on. But often the issue is not their doubt, it is their sloth. The living of the Christian life, the life of faith, is not so much about holding certain beliefs as it is actively responding to God and being willing to be formed and transformed by God's work in us. It is about daily prayer and daily Scripture reading and every day forgiving someone and being forgiven. Being a Christian is being involved with God and it is being involved with people. That means work. And it takes time.

Noting that Mary Magdalene was the only disciple who remained at the tomb on Easter morning and who saw the resurrected Jesus, Gregory the Great explained that "she persevered in seeking, and so it happened that she found him."⁵ Maybe we do not know God because we do not persevere.

Sloth is the preeminent sin of omission; its deadly defect is in what we don't do. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke

10:29-37), the Priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side." Perhaps they passed by on the other side because of fear, but I think they passed by because they did not want to get involved with beaten traveler. They suspected that to tend to the man who was bleeding in the ditch would require quite a bit of time, effort, and care to take him to a place of recovery. Out of a laziness of the spirit they passed by on the other side.

Sloth is the refusal to get involved because we do not care enough to be involved. It is faintheartedness in matters which are important, but difficult. The temptation of sloth is always to take shortcuts.

Over time as we refuse to become involved with hurting people or with God, our refusing eventually becomes habitual. It is a joyful thing to find true rest from having gotten what our hearts desire. But there is also a sad, tired rest that comes when desire dies. That is what happens with sloth. Our desires die. Our refusal to be involved and engaged and participate in God, in people, and in this world becomes so habit forming that we die inside.

But sloth is also a deadly sin because God calls us – and, in the economy of God, the people in this world need us – to be involved. Without the life-giving, suffering-servanthood involvement of God’s people, this good creation begins to die: children die of hunger and sickness and famine, innocent civilians die in war, and people’s desire for all that is just and true and beautiful dies.

Toward the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Albus Dumbledore, the Hogwarts School headmaster, warns Harry that the time is rapidly coming when people will have to choose between doing what is right and doing what is easy.⁶ Sloth is the easy way.

Jesus Christ calls us to follow him. It is the right way.

May it be so with us. Amen.

NOTES

1 Will Willimon tells this story in *Sinning like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 76-77.

2 Thomas Pynchon, “The Deadly Sins/Sloth: Nearer My Couch to Thee,” *The New York Times Book Review* (June 6, 1993), www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-sloth.html (accessed August 13, 2013). Older churchgoers will notice the deep irony of Pynchon’s subtitle, which is a take-off on Sarah Flower Adams’s famous hymn “Nearer, My God, to Thee” (1841). Adams prays to come nearer to God “e’en though it be a cross that raiseth me,” but no sentiment could be further from the spiritual apathy that characterizes sloth.

3 Precisely as the Pilgrim [the character Dante] reaches the ledge of sloth in Purgatory, his strength quickly fades. Virgil, his guide, takes advantage of this delay to explain the relationship of the seven capital vices to love. See Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Book 2, Canto 17, lines 91-139.

4 This famous passage from Cassian’s *Institutes* 10.2.3 is translated by Helen Waddell in *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998 [University of Michigan Press, 1957]), 164-165.

5 Gregory the Great, Homily 25 “Mary Stood outside the Sepulcher,” in *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, translated by David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 187-199, here citing 188.

6 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York, Scholastic, Inc., 2000), 724.



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