

# Lazy for God

The Rev. Dr. Peter  
G. James

1 Samuel 2:12-17

**Sermon Series:**  
**Seven Greatest**  
**Virtues and Vices:**  
**Sloth and Diligence**

*...how did  
sloth make it  
onto the 7  
deadly sins  
list?*

**T**he sloth is the world's slowest mammal. This creature inhabits the rain forests of Central and South America. The sharp claws of the sloth enable it to clamp on trees and live upside down. They do everything upside down; they eat, sleep and even give birth to their young hanging upside down.

The sloth is appropriately named, given that they sleep anywhere from 15-20 hours a day. Even while they are awake, they remain motionless. They are so sedentary that algae sometimes grow on their furry coats.

There is another type of sloth that inhabits the suburbs of Northern Virginia. You will often find this sloth stretched out on the sofa with a remote in hand. This little device makes it possible for him to change hundreds of channels on his TV with the press of a single button.

We've been preaching this summer on the 7 Deadly Sins. Thus far, we've examined the deadly sins of pride, lust and envy. They are, by all accounts, killer sins. But how did sloth make it onto the 7 deadly sins list? Sure, sloth can have deadly consequences for the

human soul, but would you have included it in the top seven? I wouldn't. I can think of far more lethal sins.

We commonly associate sloth with physical laziness. But when our Christian forebears included sloth in the deadly sin list, they had other things in mind than mere laziness. I'll say more about this a few moments from now.

Our Scripture lesson centers on a priest named Eli who serves the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Saul. Eli has two sons: Hophni and Phinehas. The writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel minces no words when it comes to Eli's sons. We read in verse 12 that "...they are scoundrels who had no regard for the Lord." There were specific regulations in the law regarding portions of the temple offering priests could consume for themselves. Eli's sons disregard these laws and help themselves to whatever suits them. We read in verse 17 that they treat these offerings with contempt. Later, in the same chapter, we're told they sleep with the women assigned to the tabernacle (2:22). Scoundrel is a fitting name for them.

In chapter 3, we're told that "Eli's sons were blaspheming

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God and he did not restrain them” (3:13). Eli was slothful about his parental duties. When he witnessed his sons behaving badly, he turned a blind eye.

Our story has obvious application for any among us who raise children or work with youth. When we see kids making bad choices, it’s our responsibility as parents and grandparents, teachers and coaches to exercise loving discipline. Some of us are so eager to establish friendships with children that we avoid the unpleasant task of disciplining them.

Our story also has a broader application. These 7 Deadly Sins, as I’ve said previously, were codified into present form by Pope Gregory in 590 AD. Gregory drew upon an earlier list of eight evil thoughts compiled by Egyptian monks back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most destructive sins, according to these desert fathers, was something called *acedia*. It’s a Latin term meaning “without care.” These 4<sup>th</sup> century monks regarded *acedia* as particularly deadly and ranked it up there with other killer sins such as pride and anger. *Acedia* is akin to mind-numbing apathy, suffocating gloom and restless boredom.

One of these 4<sup>th</sup> century monks, Evagrius Ponticus, labeled *acedia*, “The noonday demon.” Psalm 91 speaks about “the destruction that wastes at noonday” (91:6).

These Egyptian monks took refuge in the desert during a time when the church was stagnant and in decline. These monks sought refuge in the desert to focus exclusively on God. In the cool of the morning, these monks had great success at prayer and meditation. But when the noonday desert heat became oppressive and their fervor began to wane, these monks experienced a sluggishness of soul, which they called *acedia*.

If you have ever tried to love and serve God, you know what these desert fathers are talking about. Pride, lust and envy are killer sins, but, as these ancient monks remind us, spiritual apathy is just as dangerous.

Some of us may not know this word *acedia*, but we know the condition well. We have a vast palette of words to express the downcast mood of *acedia*, “a funk,” “the blues” and “the doldrums.” The boundaries between depression and *acedia* are notoriously fluid.

Kathleen Norris has written a book about this spiritual affliction called, appropriately enough, *Acedia and Me*. Norris chronicles in her book her lifelong struggle with *acedia*. She first became aware of it when, at age 15, she began asking herself, “Why bother?” Why bother with church and prayer? *Acedia* introduces these existential questions into our thinking. Why bother?

***“Why am I so willing to waste time, as if it were not a gift....”***

**- Kathleen Norris**

Norris wrote this book after the deaths of her father and husband. She describes *acedia* as a kind of spiritual morphine: “You know the pain is there, yet you cannot rouse yourself to give a damn.”

She raises a provocative question in her book: “Why am I so willing to waste time, as if it were not a gift, mindlessly consuming and discarding my precious mortal life?”

We appear on the outside to be anything but slothful. We are busy people. Look at the way we run around and busy ourselves with living. Our Christmas letters all begin the same way: “It’s been a busy year.”

As someone who spends nearly every weekend in town, I overhear people at my health club drone on about where the next weekend jaunt will take them or what exotic thing they will do. To a casual observer like me, they seem restless for the next trip and excursion. Norris speaks about *acedia* this way; as restless boredom “as we do more and care less.”

Our busyness has a way of masking *acedia*. It’s a cover for being lazy and slothful toward the things of God. It’s hard to admit, but lazy is what we are: lazy for God.

Any discussion of sloth in our day would be incomplete without reference to television. Americans love their television sets. According to the Neilson ratings, the average U.S. home now has more television sets

per household than people. Americans watch, on average, four and one-half hours of TV every day. If you live to 65, that means you will have invested nine years of your life watching television.

The notorious couch potato comes to mind with its attendant gifts of paralysis. We commit the other six sins in tandem to sloth as we express anger at the news, eat too much, envy the celebrated, become greedy for products advertisers shamelessly hawk over the airwaves, lust after provocative images and demonstrate pride that we’re not the biggest losers.

Stonehenge has mystified historians for centuries. Archeologists date these ancient ruins to anywhere from 3000 to 2000 BC. We have been speculating for millennia about the function of this massive stone structure. Did Stonehenge have astrological meaning? Was it an ancient healing place or a burial site?

What will future civilizations ask about us? One historian mused that when people uncover our ruins of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, they will ask why we watched so much television.

Don’t get me wrong, television can be wonderfully recreational. But imagine what we could do in terms of soul work if we had four more hours added to our day.

## *What is your nighttime devil?*

The desert fathers labeled *acedia* “the noonday demon.” I’m more susceptible to spiritual sloth at night. Call it “the nighttime devil.” Ben Franklin was fastidious about asking before bed, what good did I do today? He did this examination with a goal toward self-improvement, but I’m suggesting we ask it to deepen our relationship with God. What keeps you from this self-reflection? TV may be your drug of choice or another time waster. What is your nighttime devil?

Our focus this summer is not only these deadly sins but the lively virtues that counter-balance them. The antithesis of sloth is diligence. We counter-act sloth by becoming diligent for the things of God.

*Acedia* literally means “without care.” Sloth convinces us that the life of prayer and charity is pointless. Why pray? Why worship? What difference does it make? Maybe you have asked yourself these questions.

Evagrius Ponticus offers a remedy for *acedia*. He urges believers to practice stability by remaining where they are and practicing spiritual disciplines. Ponticus later influenced St. Benedict to make stability one of the four pillars of western monasticism. Some Christians jump from church to church in search of more vitality and energy. Scripture calls us to

remain and wait patiently for God, knowing that the Lord always has something more to give.

Prayer, Scripture meditation, worship and Christian community are spiritual disciplines designed to draw us closer to God. Dallas Willard writes in his book *The Great Omission*, “Grace is opposed to earning but not to effort.” While grace is opposed to earning merit with God, grace still requires effort. The fantasy that we can maintain a spiritual life without giving attention to spiritual disciplines demonstrates the depth of our captivity to *acedia*.

Center your life in daily prayer. Our Daily Devotionals are available to help in this regard. We stress the importance of weekly worship as a catalyst to renewed faith. We urge you to come to worship every Sunday, whether or not you feel like it. If I preached only on the days I felt like it, I would preach far less often. We talk a lot in this church about establishing spiritual friends, friends of the heart who can encourage you when you hit prolonged periods of sloth.

Kathleen Norris’s remedy for *acedia* is rather simple: “Go for a walk. Memorize Scripture. Sing Psalms. Seek community. Worship. Shovel manure. Dust a bookshelf. Wash dishes. Study. Read. Write. And be kind to one another.”