

We are finishing up our sermon series titled *Why the Seven Deadly Sins Are So Deadly*. Today we are going to talk about sloth. When you think about sloth, what comes to your mind?

(Pause to hear responses)

Most of the time when we think about sloth, we automatically think about laziness or about procrastination. My sermon title would lean toward this understanding of the term. But in doing the research for this sin, I have come to understand it in a different way.

Initially, sloth wasn't understood as laziness nor procrastination. Initially it was understood as spiritual apathy. It was simply not being willing to do, spiritually, that which helps us place God first. Then it became understood as discontentment, or an unwillingness to accept ones present circumstance.

I think my favorite definition of sloth is the earliest definition of spiritual apathy.

*As a pastor, I am now convinced that this sin of sloth, or an unwillingness to build the practices in our life that connect us with God, is one of the most dangerous things facing us today.* While Laziness may be a problem, to be sure, sloth will eat away at our soul. Sloth is the absence of zeal for the Lord. It can mean being very busy with many things or being very busy with no things yet it certainly is neglectful of the one thing - the only thing - the makes a difference in our lives. Sloth can mean doing much work or doing no work but certainly it means not making Kingdom work a priority for our lives. Above all else, sloth is the refusal of God's joy in our lives.

The Rev. Brad Monroe tells a story of how dangerous sloth can be to a congregation. He says, "I hesitate to tell this story but I think it illustrates well what Christian writers mean by sloth. In a previous congregation, I got along famously with the vast majority of the congregation (say 98% of the people). But as it is with virtually all pastors in every church, there was a small percentage with whom I did not see eye to eye. It was a strange disconnect with which I struggled from my first day there to the last day there.

The small number of folks with whom I never connected were all "country folks"; that is, they had lived in that community for decades and

their families had lived there for generations. They were comfortable living a certain way. One day the rest of Texas discovered what a delightful place it was and the town started to change. "City folks" from Houston, Dallas and San Antonio started moving in. The population increased. The schools had to adjust. The traffic got busier. New businesses were competing with the old shops. Even the grand old parade, had to change; in the mid-1980's the first blacks were finally allowed into the community children's. You can imagine how all this change played in small town Texas: some folks adapted easily, some folks adapted uneasily, some folks didn't adapt.

It is scary - and I mean flying out of y'er boots fearful - to have all those changes in such a short time. But fortunately for the country folks, they were the patriarchs and matriarchs of all the churches in town because they had been there the longest. I say it was fortunate for the country folks because the one place they could keep things from changing was in *their* church. And they did a good job of keeping the change to a minimum. We were singing from the same hymnal that was purchased in the 1950's, reading from the same Bible translation purchased in the 1950's, using the same order of worship as was used in the 1950's. Can you imagine reciting the Apostle's Creed for 3,000 weeks in a row? We were caught in a time warp: we were a church of Eisenhower's America.

Now as I said, most of the people welcomed me warmly, we got along great and did some neat ministry and mission together. But those two percent and I never did connect. I remember when I first started preaching there. I was new to preaching every week and sometimes I would say just about nothing. I would finish up my sermon and think to myself, "I cannot believe you inflicted that upon these good people. It was vague, passionless and didn't really say all that much about God. Ugh!" But the two percenters would love it.

It took me a while to figure out the pattern, but every time I called the congregation to a living faith, a passionate walk with Christ, a seeking after God's justice for others, they hated it. But every time I preached something vague, and devoid of all passion, they loved it. You see, I think that whenever I preached about living faith, about a passionate walk with Christ, about seeking after God's justice for others, what the two percenters heard was, "Even your church - even your faith - might have to change." *And it scared them to death.*

I had been at the church about six years when a non-denominational pastor asked me to describe my church. I started to give him the institutionally correct answer, complete with statistics about size, age demographics and a program list, but he stopped me. He said, "No, that's not what I meant. I want you to tell me about your church," by which I knew he meant the church's heart, the church's soul.

What I said was this, "I think that for too many people, and some more than others, they are living out their faith in fear. I get the sense that they fear they're not doing their faith the right way, or they fear what they might have to give up, or they fear their faith doesn't really matter." Then my friend asked me a question I will never forget; he said, "In your deepest heart, what do you want for your people?" And this is how I answered: "*I want them to live their faith out of a place of joy rather than fear.*"

Pause

I love that story. That is what I want for us. I want you to live your faith, out of a place of joy, rather than fear. I want you to understand that God's love comes to you, to me, to us. And we can really experience that love, by giving ourselves to God, with our whole heart. What I want for you is to know the joy of living your faith, sold out for Jesus Christ.

My former grandfather-in-law was a truly wonderful character named Maurice. Maurice literally would give a stranger the shirt off his back: one of the nicest, kindest, most good hearted people you will ever meet.

What made him a character, though, was that whenever you asked him how he was doing, he would say, "I couldn't be better." It didn't matter what he was doing or what had happened to him, he'd say the same thing, "I couldn't be better." I once thought I had found the occasion in which he couldn't say that. He had been on top of his barn fixing the roof after a hail storm and fell off, breaking his hip. When I saw him in the hospital and asked him how he was doing, he said, "I couldn't be better." I told him, "Now I know you're lying." He said, "Nope. Doc tells me it was a clean break so I won't need surgery and I've been meaning to catch up on my paperwork, so now I'll have some time to do that. I couldn't be better."

"I couldn't be better." Through thick, through thin; in the lush forest or the barren desert; whether strong and confident or weak, helpless and lying in a hospital bed; he could not be better, for he knew that his life was lived in the grace of Jesus Christ. All that Maurice was, all that Maurice

did, was a song of joy to our Lord. When that kind of joy is the light that shines from our hearts, there is no evil that can overcome us. There is no apathy toward the great possibilities of God. There is no profound weariness of soul. There is no neglect of duty nor refusal of joy.

When the light of God's love shines in our hearts, there is no sloth, for then we know that we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works. May God help us live a life of faith.

Amen