

GET WISDOM!

V. “Don’t be a Sluggard!”

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Proverbs 26:13-16

The sluggard is full of excuses, saying, "I can't go outside because there might be a lion on the road! Yes, I'm sure there's a lion out there!"
As a door turns back and forth on its hinges,
so the sluggard turns over in bed.
Some people are so lazy
that they won't lift a finger to feed themselves.
Sluggards consider themselves smarter
than seven wise counselors.

– NLT except using “sluggard” in place of “lazy” per NIV & others

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday afternoon, I turned on the TV to see if I could catch a Mariners baseball game. In looking for it, I came across an infomercial for the Magic Bullet– a kind of mini-blender. These infomercials are amazing in how easy they make things look. Here they were making chicken salad for a sandwich in less time than it took to toast the bread. Polly gets *very nervous* when I start watching one knowing my vulnerability when it comes to anything involving tools and equipment. Well I did escape without buying– but I do keep wondering if it can do all those things they showed as quickly and easily as it looked. At Polly’s urging I finally broke away, and since I couldn’t find the Mariners I watched Tiger Woods win another major golf tournament.

Isn’t a lot of our economy driven by making things easy for us? Certainly labor-saving devices are good. However, they can have the insidious effect of encouraging laziness in us. And that is not good. Because we are too lazy to walk a few blocks, we drive. Some of the hospitals I used to make calls at in Ohio, in order to relieve congestion on the elevators, had signs posted by their elevators saying, “If you are able, please walk up one or down two flights of stairs.” Yet, I rarely met anyone on the stairs. People would rather stand and wait three minutes for the elevator instead of taking 20 sec. to walk up a flight of stairs.

Laziness affects more than just our bodies. It has a great deal to do with our moral and spiritual condition. Psychiatrist, Dr. M. Scott Peck in his popular book, The Road Less Traveled, identifies laziness as:

- causing us to miss out on joy,
- a primary cause of psychological illness,
- a major cause of evil,
- and the reason that Americans are increasingly failing at human relations.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, we can all see the effects of laziness. Have you ever said, “I know I should pray more, study the Bible more, read more books to help me on my faith journey, but I just can’t seem to make myself do it?” Also, procrastination is rooted in laziness.

We don’t hear a lot about self-control in our day. Phrases like, “express yourself,” “be yourself,” and, “Don’t let anyone or anything restrict what *you* want,” are what we hear. And, if it’s too hard for you, we’ll find a way to make it easier.

But Christians of other eras have clearly understood the ramifications of laziness. In the Middle Ages, spiritual leaders put together a list of what were referred to as The Seven Deadly Sins: sloth, lust, anger, pride, envy, gluttony, greed. All sins of course are bad. But these they identified as the worst because they were at the root of so much that goes wrong with our human spirit. While the order in which they were listed varied some, often sloth or laziness is found in the lead-off position. In our day it wouldn’t be hard to find those who would argue that it isn’t even a sin— maybe a weakness. But certainly we don’t see laziness making a list of The Seven Deadly Sins.

Proverbs has a great deal to say about laziness. Our translations vary, but I rather like the word “sluggard” used by our NIV and several other translations. It has a bit more kick to it than “lazy.” “Sluggard” has a disgusting connotation, and I need that motivation.

PAIRED WITH WISDOM

Proverbs begins with,

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for attaining wisdom and discipline; (1:1-2a)*

Wisdom and discipline are paired. If we’re going to be wise, we need self-discipline. Knowing and understanding the best way to live is only part of it. Without self-control, we won’t be able to carry out what we know is right. How often do you learn something important from your reading or a sermon— some important Christian truth that you think, “I need to do that or make some changes?” How often do we actually get around to making those changes? How many good New Year’s resolutions fail to produce needed reform? There can be a huge gap between the knowing and the doing. Self-discipline is the bridge we need.

The followers of Jesus are referred to as disciples. It is no accident that the word is awfully close to discipline. To follow Jesus, to obey His teachings, requires discipline in our lives. Growing as a Christian doesn’t “just happen.” It involves intentional effort, choices, and some hard-fought battles over alternatives. The great missionary, E. Stanley Jones, offers this contrast between a life with discipline and undisciplined living:

The difference between a swamp and a river is that a river has banks, and a swamp has none— it spreads over everything.... Some people are rivers: they know where they want to go, and they confine themselves to the banks that lead to that goal. But some people are swamps: they spread over everything; their minds are so open they cannot hold a conviction.

Are you a river or swamp? Do you have spiritual goals and direction? Is there a plan of action in

your life toward becoming more like Jesus?

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick offers another image for discipline. He writes,

“No steam or gas drives anything until it is confined. No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined.”

Our Christian faith provides the framework, the structure for that focus, for disciplining everything for the cause of Christ. The study of Scripture, time spent in prayer, working with others in the community of faith, and reaching out in service and evangelism are all means of channeling our spiritual life into God’s purposes. Paul writes,

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor 9:24-27)

NO EXCUSES!

Let’s look in more detail at what our text is saying.

The lazy person is full of excuses, saying, “I can’t go outside because there might be a lion on the road! Yes, I’m sure there’s a lion out there!” (26:13)

Applied to our spiritual lives, what are the excuses you use to not be “out there” working for the Lord? Maybe you think, “I need to know more.” Well, what are you doing about that? There are lots of excellent books to help you learn what you need to know. Of course the Bible is always foundational. How seriously are you studying that, and are you trying to memorize a few key verses?

*As a door turns back and forth on its hinges,
so the lazy person turns over in bed. (26:14)*

Haven’t you struggled with getting up early enough to have a good devotional time with the Lord? If you aren’t already spending a solid half hour to an hour in the morning with the Lord, you really need to try it. It may mean missing a half hour or so of sleep, but God will honor that discipline of a consistent devotional life with fruit that will far out-weigh that missed rest. Why aren’t we more alive and growing in our spiritual lives? The short answer is laziness. Someone quipped, “It all boils down to mind over mattress.”

And then,

*Some people are so lazy
that they won’t lift a finger to feed themselves. (26:15)*

And, about not lifting a finger to feed themselves, apply that to spiritual food. We can’t just passively sit by, hoping others will supply all we need.

I referred to Dr. Peck earlier saying laziness is the main reason we fail at relationships. Consider how laziness prevents us from being truly loving. Love requires commitment and work— doing the things love would do even when we don’t feel like it. It takes effort to maintain good

communications. It takes self-denial to do for the other what you know love would want you to do. That is what Jesus teaches us. Yet, too many in our day have bought into the idea that love “just happens.” Either you’re in love or not.

From my experience, in most of the marriages I’ve seen fail, laziness has been a major contributor. They get sloppy in their living. They fail to put forth the effort to deal with character weaknesses. They don’t plan for growth in their relationship. They veg-out in front of the TV instead of having conversations. And, here’s the really sad part. When I suggest some basic changes that could be made to improve things, I sense the resistance. These are not hard things, but things like reading a book on marriage together and discussing it or watching a video series and using the discussion guide, scheduling quality time together, and working seriously on one or two character flaws that are contributing to their problems. If alcohol is involved, getting help for that addiction, etc. While usually the naked truth isn’t spoken, it goes something like this: “Yes, I would like to save our marriage— but what you are suggesting is more than I’m willing to do.” In other words, it is too hard. Change is difficult. And the sluggards are unwilling to put forth the effort.

Nurturing and disciplining our children takes effort. Many parents, through laziness, abdicate their responsibilities. They give up trying to get their children to do their chores, clean their rooms, and take responsibility. They let the TV babysit rather than working at creative time with their children.

Procrastination is an effective tool for the lazy. It is too much effort to do it now, so we put it off until tomorrow, and then again. Soon, it is too overwhelming and we just give up. There is discipline in being diligent, keeping up on things, not letting things slide. Note Prov. 24:30-34,

*I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest —
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.*

We spent a decade among the Amish. Their well-kept farms were always a delight to the eye. Everything was well-painted, fences in repair, lawns and gardens neat. Just looking at such a farm you knew they were well-disciplined people. The principles here apply not just to our property and work, but to our bodies and spiritual lives. “Tomorrow” and “later” are some of the devil’s favorite tools in squelching spiritual renewal in us.

A lady in the hospital was talking to the chaplain. Her physical problems were a lot due to her

life choices. She said, “Reverend, my trouble is I’ve been led around by my ‘gotta haves’ all my life.” Do you know about that— about being in bondage to your “gotta haves?” Self-discipline is essential in helping us say no to our “gotta haves.” Prov. 25:28 says it well,

*Like a city whose walls are broken down
is a man who lacks self-control.*

OVERCOMING SLOTH

Christianity is not a self-reform program— it is Spirit-empowered transformation. So, if you feel if you have a bit more of the sluggard in you than you’d like, it is a call to seek a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit into that area of our lives. Remember, self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). And Paul tells Timothy, 2 Tim 1:7,

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

The Spirit brings life and energy, countering the deadness of sloth. He restores the sense of adventure. A fear of failure can keep our lives frozen in slothfulness. That’s where Paul’s reminder to Timothy is helpful: Spirit-power energizes, love moves us outward, and self-discipline keeps us channeled in the right directions.

We, of course, must cooperate with what the Spirit is working to do in our lives. That means setting the alarm clock and rolling out of bed and planning actions to keep our bodies, minds, and spirits growing in ways honoring to our Creator and Lord. You can’t turn a car that isn’t moving.

Dr. Tony Compolo sums it up well when he writes:

“Sloth deadens, but the Spirit gives life. Sloth thrives on feelings of inferiority, but the Spirit gives us the assurance that we are the children of God. Sloth is self-centered, but the Spirit creates a burning desire to change the world. Sloth leaves us bored, and empty, but in the Spirit we find the fullness of God’s joy.”

CONCLUSION

Every age has its besetting sins. Certainly, for 21st century America, laziness is endemic. That directly feeds a lack of self-control. We tend to be a passive, undisciplined people in everything from our bodies to our souls. This defines a huge battleground for us.

Fortunately, as Luther reminds us, “the Spirit and the gifts are ours!” Prayerful examine your life this morning and let the Spirit direct you to just one or two areas where you know you need to get rid of laziness and overcome inertia to move forward. Ask for and receive the power of the Holy Spirit to help you. Then, “do whatever He tells you” (Jn. 2:5). I’d like to close by just reading those last few New Testament verses on self-control on your bulletin insert.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, (Titus 2:11-12)

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:13)

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. (1 Peter 4:7)

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8)