

I. Introduction¹

A. **Video: MJW on hammock.** (I found a way to get my prep time down to an hour!) Let me assure you, I paid top dollar for this sermon, so it should be good.

B. Today's deadly sin – the cardinal vice that we focus on this morning – is sloth. As I noted in my email this week:

B.1. This is the sin most likely to be laughed at. “Sloth? A Deadly Sin? Are you kidding me? We leave murder, rape, racism, genocide and lying off the list to make room for taking a nap in front of the TV on Sunday afternoon? Whose brilliant idea was that?”

B.2. And this is the sin many of you feel immune to. “No one who knows me would accuse me of sloth. I charge through life. I start early and end late. I work hard and play hard. I seldom use all my vacation time. This sermon is not for me.”²

C. I am aware of what I'm up against here. So let me simply open by saying:

C.1. It's likely that much of what you think about sloth is wrong or woefully incomplete.

¹ Quotes: 1) "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mat 26:41); 2) It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. Dorothy Sayers; 3) “I don't think pride is the deadliest of the deadly sins ... I think sloth is.” Karl Barth; 4) Sloth is in a conspiracy with Envy to keep us from thinking. Sloth persuades us that stupidity is not our sin, but our misfortune; while Envy at the same time persuades us that intelligence is despicable – a dusty, highbrow and commercially useless thing. Dorothy Sayers; 5) The demon of acedia—also called the noonday demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [or lunchtime], to look this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle. —Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), *The Praktikos*

C.2. Aldous Huxley called sloth the primary affliction of our age.

C.3. One of the characteristic of those who struggle with sloth is that they do not think they have a problem with sloth.

D. One woman told my wife, “After the first week I thought my biggest problem was pride. Then after the second week I thought, no, my biggest problem is anger. Then after envy...” I share that because I think a bunch of you are going to be walking out of here thinking, Sloth. Huh. I didn’t see that coming. But clearly this is my biggest problem.”

II. Let me start by making three general observations about this particular vice.

A. First: **Sloth is a big, bad sin.**

A.1. Sloth – the sin as it was understood by those who argued that it was one of the Seven Deadly Sins or Seven Cardinal Vices – is a real problem.

A.2. It’s big, common. Once you get it you start to see it everywhere. One 12th century French theologian³ needed twenty-seven chapters to explain sloth and identify the way it creeps into our life.

A.3. And it’s bad, it’s deadly. In fact some prominent Christians leaders – people like Evagrius Ponticus (the late 3rd / early 4th century Desert Father who drafted The Eight Evil Thoughts, the first list of deadly sins) and Karl Barth **(IMAGE)** (one of the most prominent theologians of the 20th century - perhaps the last theologian to make the cover of *Time* magazine) believe this is the granddaddy of them all - the worst sin.



2 Some zip codes are prone to certain vices. Most would say sloth is not a problem on the North Shore. Most of the people I know are pressing pretty hard. They were weaned on the Protestant Work ethic, start their days quite early and end late. Of the nearly 200 countries in the world, US workers rank 9th for total number of hours at work per year. Sloth as it has been generally understood is not an American value. Indeed, most of our political rhetoric suggests a distaste for those not willing to do their fair share.

3 William Peraldus

B. Second: **The word *sloth* is a placeholder.**

B.1. Theologians have never been able to agree on what word to use to refer to this particular sin. Evagrius's list of Eight Evil Thoughts – Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, Wrath, Sadness, Sloth, Vainglory and pride – included two aimed in this direction: Sadness and Sloth.

B.2. A couple hundred years later Gregory the Great modified the list in a handful of ways in an effort to get it down to seven. Vainglory, envy, sadness, avarice, wrath, lust and gluttony. He dropped sloth, folding it under sadness.⁴

B.3. Not quite one thousand years later, Thomas Aquinas, who included a discussion of The Seven Deadly Sins in his magnum opus *Summa Theologiae*, dropped *sadness* and put *sloth* back in.

B.4. The translators of the King James Version of the Bible went with the word sluggard.

B.5. More recently, Kathleen Norris, a 21st century author whose book *Acedia and Me* is the most robust exploration of the topic in a long, long time, opts for the Greek term *acedia*. She doesn't think any of the other words gets the job done. *Acedia* means "to not care." The Greek word *kedie* means "to care." You add the alpha prefix and it negates what follows. A theist believes in God, an a-theist does not. *Kedia* means "to care" a-*cedia* means "to not care."

B.6. So, sloth is a big deal, a devastating sin. The word sloth does not capture the essence of the problem. It does not communicate what the ancients were talking about when they put Sloth on the list.

C. Third: Current discussions about this sin are confusing because people are talking about three distinct issues. Or maybe it's best to say: **There are three different levels of sloth.**

III. Let's look at the three types, or levels, of sloth.

A. I suppose if we are talking about different uses of the word we should say there are four and start with the South and Central American mammal that spends most of his life hanging upside down in a tree. These are remarkable animals.

⁴ This was not the only change he made. For a history of the development of the list, see Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 25ff.

- A.1. They spend their day hanging upside down in a tree, a feat that, thanks to God's design, takes no energy. They only move when necessary – and never very fast. Their top speed is 6.5 feet per minute. They eat leaves, but only what is nearby. They do not build shelter. They cannot be trained. (They do not fetch, although they do very well at “stay.”). They sleep 10 – 15 hours per day.
- A.2. I realize that some of you think I'm describing your 14 year old son. (Let's see: eats whatever is close; can't be trained; sleeps all the time. Yeah, that sounds like him.) No, not unless they look like the picture.
- A.3. We are not interested in the tree sloth today, though their characteristics do capture what I'm going to describe as Level One Sloth.

B. **Level One Sloth: Physical Laziness**

- B.1. This is classic complacency and lethargy. This is avoiding work so you can take a nap. This is parking your backside on the couch with the remote in hand and channel surfing for the rest of the night.
- B.2. You've heard the saying, “Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.” Those who embrace Level One Sloth say the opposite, “Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.”
- B.3. Proverbs 26 – a section written to fools and sloths – describes them this way. (This is from Eugene Peterson's Message paraphrase).
 - B.3.a) **Loafers say, “It's dangerous out there! Tigers are prowling the streets!” and then pull the covers back over their heads. Just as a door turns on its hinges, so a lazybones turns back over in bed. A shiftless sluggard puts his fork in the pie, but is too lazy to lift it to his mouth.**
- B.4. Perhaps the passage most associated with the slothful – most likely to be quoted to 14 year olds – is Proverbs 6.
 - B.4.a) **Take a lesson from the ants, you lazy fellow. Learn from their ways and be wise! For though they have no king to make them work, yet they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter. But you—all you do is sleep. When will you wake up? “Let me sleep a little longer!” Sure, just a little more! And as you sleep, poverty creeps upon you like a robber and destroys you; want attacks you in full armor.**
- B.5. Let me pause for a second here and defend 14 year olds – or 12 – 15 year olds. I'm not aiming my comments at them at all.

B.5.a) I entered high school barely 5 feet tall and weighing less than 100 pounds and four years later was 6 feet tall and weighed 140. And I was exhausted the entire four years. I barely remember my freshman and sophomore years in school. This is not geared at them. The question is, does it apply to you?

B.6. **And I suppose the even more basic question is: is laziness a sin?** Is Level One Sloth a big deal? There is some debate.

B.6.a) Those who say yes argue that:

(B.6.a.1) Paul thought so. In 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul writes to the church there to say those who think it's spiritual to sit around and wait for Christ to return need to be told that if they do not work they do not eat.

(B.6.a.2) And some early church leaders thought so. They set diligence as the virtue juxtaposed to sloth.

B.6.b) And I think we would all acknowledge that we are better off with constructive things to do.

(B.6.b.1) In Men's Fraternity this fall we've been thinking about work - about calling and vocation and how all of this factors into our effort to thrive. When it comes to work there are three ways we can get it wrong:

(B.6.b.1.a) Dualism: thinking that only spiritual work matters to God. Buying into the sacred - secular divide, the Sunday - Monday gap. The truth is, all work is sacred. It all matters to Him.

(B.6.b.1.b) Workaholism: Making work an idol, being defined by what we do, seeking our worth in what we do.

(B.6.b.1.c) Sloth: not doing enough.

(B.6.b.2) And one of the things we've acknowledged is that we tend to do better when we work too much rather than work too little. Men without constructive things to do get in trouble pretty quickly.

B.6.c) We could add other voices to this. The idea that being lazy is a bad idea – a sin – is not just supported by Christians, others say the same thing.⁵ Henry Ford wrote, “Work is our sanity, our self-respect, our salvation. Through work and work alone may health, wealth and happiness be secured.”

B.7. Those who push back on this – who think that the noise the early church made against laziness – is a bit misdirected.

B.7.a) In a famous essay, Evagrius labeled sloth “The Noon Day Demon” and talked about how hard it was for the monks working in the Scriptoriums, to stay awake. There they were copying the Bible to stay awake after lunch. I’m thinking: it’s hot, it’s boring and I just ate. I’m falling asleep just thinking about it.



B.7.b) I’m not inclined to lose much sleep over naps – no pun intended.

B.8. So, is Level One Sloth even a problem? Well, it clearly depends on what we’re talking about. A ten minute nap after lunch does not make my radar as sin. Is laziness a sin? Yes, I think it is. Is laziness a Deadly Sin? No. I would not say that. More importantly, neither would those drafting the list. Those who argued that sloth was one of the Seven Deadly Sins did not view it as a physical vice. (There are both spiritual and physical vices. Pride and envy are spiritual. Lust and gluttony are physical.) Sloth is spiritual. At most, classic laziness is seen as a symptom of the problem not the problem itself.

C. **Level Two Sloth: Despair**

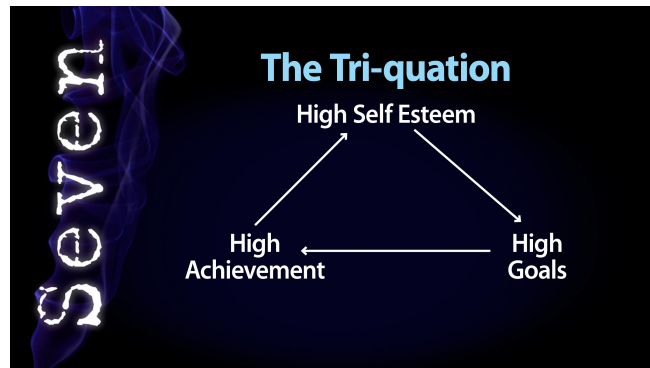
C.1. You might remember that Evagrius had sadness on the list. When you read about what the ancients meant by that it’s clear that some of those suffering from sadness were depressed. And no one today wants to label clinical depression as sin.

⁵ Sociologists note that the belief that all work matters to God and that we should be industrious is part of what fueled the Protestant Work Ethic.

C.2. This is a complicated topic. We have learned a lot about the various causes of depression. Clearly, some (many) clinical depressions have physical (chemical, hormonal) causes. Let's set those aside. I've shared a bit about my grandfather in the past. He struggled with mental health issues throughout his adult life. He was, for all intents and purposes, unemployable. I in no way want to suggest that mental health issues are sin. Nor do I know of anyone who does.

C.3. But there is a despair – a sadness, to use the term – that grows out of lack of hope. There is an attitude that grows out of lack of faith that manifests itself in quitting. In giving up. We can talk ourselves into despair. And that can look like laziness.

C.4. From time to time I've shared this little triquation with you: High Self-esteem leads to high goals leads to high achievement which leads to high self-esteem. And conversely, low self-esteem



leads to low goals which leads to low achievement which leads to low self-esteem. It's hard to know which comes first, but we've watched people fall into the death spiral where a few failures sets them back so far that they get paralyzed and problems start to compound. (When it comes to our children we think, "They need a few wins here. A few wins would make a huge difference.")

C.5. We could spend a lot of time here if we had it. Let me be clear: I am not calling low self-esteem a sin. I'm more nervous by high self-esteem than low because high self-esteem and pride often go hand in hand. My point is: we can give up the hope we are called to and can lead to a failure to act when we should. And that is sloth and that is sin.

C.6. We are called to hope. Not in ourselves but in God and his plan. I just did a wedding, and like many weddings, it included a reading from I Corinthians 13:6.

C.6.a) Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.... ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.

C.7. As Christ followers we are called to hope. And that hope calls us to act. To stay in the game. To not give up.⁶ The opposite of hope is despair. Despair can lead to laziness. The sin is not the laziness, it's the despair. The laziness is a symptom of a sinful attitude towards life. That's what is meant by Level Two Sloth.

C.8. Now let's be honest for a minute – it's easy to fall into despair. It's easy to be overwhelmed. I fight this from time to time. It's easy to look around, see the size of the problems – the amount of pain and poverty and hurt – and think, “I can't make a difference. So I'm not going to try.” Or, “I can't fix this big problem so I'm going to stay safely inside my safe world and stop trying to do good.”

C.9. A few years into my first assignment (as a college pastor) I ran right into Level Two Sloth.

⁶ We are sometimes called to long, ongoing battles from which we should not grow discouraged or give up. William Wilberforce was tempted to give up on his quest for reformation of society. There were many times to throw in the towel. He faced: 1) loss of popularity; 2) death threats; 3) illness. And the fight for the freedom of slaves took 34 years, ending only 3 days before his death. Would you have preserved? What have you bailed on? What do you think is too much work?

C.9.a) It wasn't a physical thing. I'd had one of those a couple years earlier. I'd gotten really sick and briefly gone to the hospital. They couldn't figure it out. They thought I had some tropical illness even though I hadn't been in the tropics. But a couple older men from the church came to visit and said, "This is not a surprise. You've been trying to do too much, moving too fast. There is no S on your chest and you don't wear a cape. You're going to need to learn to pace yourself." And so I learned to dial it back a bit.

C.9.b) This wasn't physical exhaustion. And it wasn't doubt. I know what that looks like. I have some good friends – including some good friends in ministry – who occasionally struggle with doubt. Get paralyzed by it. I have my own set of unanswered questions. And it took me quite a while to step over the line. But since doing so doubt has never been a particular problem for me.

C.9.c) So, this wasn't exhaustion and it wasn't doubt, but it was something. I just didn't see the point. I didn't care. I was a college pastor at the time and I got very frustrated with the stupid things students were doing. I thought, "if you want to make a mess of your life, have at it." I was mad at people who took without giving back. I was tired of being the one who was trying to make things happen. The church I was on staff at always had a fair number of homeless people around. I was tired of hearing their stories.

C.9.d) I just really didn't care. And I remember sitting in the senior pastor's office of the church and venting. I remember thinking that I probably should be more guarded in what I was sharing because these were not the kind of things to share with your boss. But, I didn't care.

C.9.e) And I asked, "Why are we doing this? Why are we trying so hard? What does it matter?"

C.10. And he didn't call it sloth, although he could have – it was classic, level two sloth – but he looked at me and wisely and helpfully said, "I know what you're feeling. From time to time I struggle with those thoughts myself. You need to meditate on Paul's advice to the Galatians – chapter 6:9. 'Do not grow weary of doing good.'"

C.11. Don't give in. He didn't use the word sloth, but what I was struggling with was classic level two acedia. I didn't care.⁷

C.12. Not caring is a sin. Not caring is a sin.

C.13. The work we are called to as Christ followers is ongoing. It is hard. We will be tempted to quit. Quitting in that fight is sin.

C.14. But the specific vice that made the list is slightly different than that. It resides one level lower.

C.15. Laziness is a symptom of despair – level one sloth is built on level two. Level two is built on level three. This is the essence of the Deadly Sin.

C.16. The root of the problem is laziness in our love of God.

D. **Level Three Sloth: Laziness in our Love of God**

D.1. The problem is a spiritually cold heart. And the reason the heart is cold is because we have failed to attend to the things love requires. We have failed to make our relationship with God our first priority. We have failed to do the things that would keep us dialed in spiritually.

D.2. And here is a big point – while our failure to attend to God can be caused by sheer laziness, it is often the result of excessive busyness. Being busy is a classic symptom of sloth.

D.3. Being busy is a classic symptom of sloth!

D.4. It's far easier to fill our day with stuff than it is to live thoughtfully and fully engaged with God.⁸

⁷Acedia is a condition of listlessness and discontent that robbed them of energy, joy and passion, a malaise that left people apathetic about the fate of their soul and that of anyone else. Acedia, pronounced uh-SEE-dee-uh, means “the absence of care.” At its worst it includes an inability to care or a decision not to care that you don't care. This blight may apply to every area of life. But, more often, it settles on matters of faith. Acedia can manifest itself as boredom and restlessness, inertia or even workaholism. It may be behind a reluctance to commit to a particular person or place because of a nagging sense that something better might come along. Acedia can be seen in a lack of attention to prayer or an overall dissatisfaction with life. It was the Desert Fathers greatest fear. It asks the question: is it really worth it? Thomas Aquinas calls it “sorrow in regard to spiritual good.” The medieval called it “the noon day devil.” Sloth is lethargy for spiritual things. I can't muster any energy, interest or enthusiasm for the things of the spirit. It is boredom, depression and inactivity at the spiritual level of life. “Acedia is the most negative thing I can imagine. It disconnects you from yourself, from other people, from God.” Kathleen Norris

D.5. But at one level it doesn't matter what keeps you from God – watching Seinfeld reruns, golfing or working 80 hours a week – if we are not attending to the careful development of our soul we are guilty of the sin of sloth.

D.6. The sin is not taking a nap it's failing to keep our love for God vibrant. And that can happen because we are too lazy to start our day reading and praying – 10 + 10. Or that can happen because we are too busy to start our day reading and praying.

D.7. In both the sermons on pride and anger I showed testimonies of people from Christ Church sharing their struggles with a particular sin. (Be glad you didn't get that call from me. “This is Mike, would you be willing to talk about your struggles with pride, anger, lust). We filmed a video on Sloth as well, and I went after a woman I knew was exceptionally busy. I told her what I was after and she agreed to share. At first pass I thought, doesn't work. I so appreciate the kinds of things she's been filling her day with! But on reflection it hints at how subtle this sin now is and how easy it can be to fall into it. **(RUN VIDEO)**

E. In her book, *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca DeYoung, a professor at Calvin College, suggests that we compare our relationship with God with a marriage. She then quotes Kathleen Norris – who wrote *Acedia and Me*, the big work on sloth – she quotes Norris in saying, “married love is eternal, but it's also daily, about as daily and unromantic as housekeeping.”

E.1. And she says: Being married changes things. Married love makes demands. You rearrange your life in order to attend to those demands. Love has requirements.

E.2. In a similar way, being in a relationship with God makes demands. Being a follower of Christ carries requirements. You rearrange your life to attend to those requirements. To fail to do so is sin. It doesn't matter if you fail to do these things because you are too busy or for some other reason, the name for this – the failure to make God first is called sloth. The failure to care enough about God to do what love requires is sloth.⁹

⁸ “One of the favorite tricks of this Sin to dissemble itself under cover of a whiffling activity of body. We think that if we are busily rushing about and doing things, we cannot be suffering from Sloth.” Dorothy Sayers, *The Other Six Deadly Sins*, Address to the ??? 1941.

⁹ Kathleen Norris's treatment of acedia makes it clear that it has many symptoms: boredom, tolerance (intellectual sloth), a general malaise. She argues that acedia disconnects us from whatever connections we have made – from

IV. So what does love require?

A. Well, look, we talk about this all the time. On the one hand, we are all unique and our relationship with God – and the path to greater love of God and greater transformation by the Spirit of God – is unique. But on the other hand, there are a handful of things that are expected.

B. We talk about these in terms of Worship, Connect, Grow, Serve and Share

B.1. For two thousand years Christ's followers have meet together on the first day of the week for worship, prayer, instruction and the sacraments. God set one day in seven aside to be unique. We are told not to neglect gathering together.

B.2. We need to be in community with others. We need a smaller circle of friends with whom we are doing life together. There are all of these "one anothers" in The Book. We are to love one another, pray for one another, serve one another, confess our sins to one another. You cannot do the Christian life along. Being too busy to be in intentional relationship with others is sloth.

B.3. We need daily habits that focus us on God. We talk about 10 + 10. Ten minutes a day of reading your Bible and prayer. If you do that your life will change. There will be seasons where it's fun and there will be seasons where it's just hard work. To fail to cultivate daily spiritual habits is sloth.

B.4. Serving is expected. There are many, many, many opportunities for this: at home, at work, in the neighborhood, here at church, outside the walls of the church. We serve.

B.5. We share – we share our faith, our finances, our life.

V. If you've been around here for very long you know that I get very nervous whenever we talk about requirements.

your life, spouse, vocation, church, friends. All of the sudden, the grass is greener somewhere else. You don't feel appreciated. It's time to move on. I'm restless and bored. Everyone annoys me here. Acedia also mocks your work. It suggests that it doesn't matter. You are a fraud. What you have been working for – your family, your career, whatever it is, your sense is, "You were a fool to ever believe this. Dan Boone – who also writes on sloth – makes a related observation. He writes: Slowly, something begins to happen to us as we keep filling the God-shaped hole with stuff. We grow tired, cynical, weary, numb. All thee momentary diversions are thrills no longer excite. An emptiness settles in and it won't go away. Despair follows. We no longer care. We no longer feel responsible. We no longer want to try. Boone, p. 59

- A. Our default assumption is that we earn God's favor. That's not true.
 - B. We are saved by grace through faith. We do not contribute to our salvation. A new born baby that is adopted into a family does not do any work in arranging that adoption. It's all done by others. Becoming a child of God is a gift we receive.
 - C. Becoming more like Christ – being transformed – is something also engineered by God. But here we are involved. We do not earn our way forward, but effort is expected. Effort to keep our love for God front and center.
- VI. At one level or another, sloth is a challenge we all combat.
- A. Laziness
 - B. Despair
 - C. Or a failure to pursue God as we should.
 - D. It may be because we'd rather watch TV, or take a nap. It may be because we cram so much into 24 hours that we allow no time for God. At one level it doesn't matter. It's a Deadly Sin.
 - E. We need to attend to the things that love demands.
 - F. We need to press on towards the goal for the prize of the higher calling of God in Christ Jesus.
- VII. Announcements
- A. Struggling with Sloth? I told you that some of you who were sure you got this week off would be in for a surprise.
 - B. An answer comes from Paul. READ Romans 12:9-13