



The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

SESSION 4—SLOTH AND CARING

| *Sloth is sadness in the face of spiritual good.*

Defining Sloth

How did sloth get listed as a vice, and then even as a “deadly” sin? Sloth, to most of us, means laziness, like lingering too long in a warm bath, dozing on a summer day, or leaving work for others to complete. Such sloth may irritate others, but it hardly seems a mortal sin. We find only a few lines in the book of Proverbs critical of the sluggard, plus one postscript to a letter by an apostle. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13 the writer scolds the idle and bids them get to work.

Our common definition of sloth falls short of describing the vice early Christians believed to be deadly. Most Christian writers who have dealt with sloth have identified it with what the apostle Paul called “worldly grief.” In 2 Corinthians 7:10 he writes, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” As Christian theologians have studied what Paul means by “worldly grief” they have connected the word *acedia* (= sloth) with what Thomas Aquinas called *tristitia*, “sadness in the face of spiritual good.”¹

The word “sloth” is not in most people’s daily vocabulary. Yet each of us knows people who embody it and suffer it in their soul. Perhaps we do too! A more practical definition of sloth today may be spiritual indifference, apathy, boredom, and—very important!—not caring. God offers good things and experiences, but the vice of sloth keeps its victims from enjoying them or from being roused to creative activity for the good of one’s self or others.



In the Gospels and other New Testament writings about Jesus we see that everything about him shows how far he was from the vice of sloth, indifference. His entering the human scene and showing love to lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and outsiders in general becomes the model for all who call themselves by his name.

What the Bible and Church Say about Sloth

If “sloth,” meaning only “laziness,” appears so seldom in the Bible, “sloth” as “sadness” in the face of spiritual good can be found in many scriptural texts. We Christians can actively sin against spiritual goods in many deadly ways that are anything but lazy. We can fight against God and the good. We can be defiant and resist God’s gifts. We can rustle up arguments against the divine good or wrestle with God. The ones who are engaged with “sadness in the face of spiritual good” may be very active in their “slothfulness.”

The description of sloth as spiritual sadness appeared first among monks in early Christian history. They headed to the desert, where there was no company and few distractions. They wished to be open to the voice and presence of God. They wanted to meditate and be visited by angels. Yet the monks reported being visited by “the noonday devil” to which they gave the name *acedia* (= sloth). Since many of them fasted, around noon

CLINICAL DEPRESSION IS NOT SLOTH

It is important to distinguish between the various forms of clinical depression and the numbing depression that stuns and benumbs the Christian who is sad in the face of spiritual good. While perhaps appearing like *acedia*, clinical depression has physical sources that do not merit the category of “deadly sin.” Medication and deep, probing counseling, plus advice for the victim to change the scene or the patterns of life, are aids.

they would experience a sluggishness and what we now understand to be a normal reaction of lack of interest due more to chemical imbalances in their bodies given the lack of food than to a spiritual sin. Yet this feeling of emotional withdrawal does describe the sin of sloth.

Sloth became a deadly sin or, as many scholars would have it, a “capital” sin, because it was at the top of a column of sins: that is, many other sins flowed from it. Sloth was not merely a single act or temporary emotion. Gregory claimed that sloth had six daughters: “malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, [and] wandering of the mind after unlawful things.” Thomas Aquinas noted that “we do many things on account of sorrow, either that we may avoid it, or through being exasperated into doing something under pressure thereof.” Are we then agreed: sloth is “fittingly reckoned a capital sin.”²

Physicians look for symptoms that prompt diagnoses and potential cures. Confessors watch for signals of spiritual shortcomings that suggest that something deeper is going on, something that keeps one from responding to a good God or to opportunities in God’s good creation. Normally, sloth breeds self-centeredness that goes so far that the sinner gets bored with that “self” and loses all interest—including interest in worship, prayer, community activities, and voluntary works of love. Little can be done about these unless one gets to the root cause, the deadly point of attack: spiritual sloth.

For the Christian who has fallen into the sin of sloth and wishes to overcome it, there are some ways to picture alternatives and pursue them. We will discuss these after looking at the corresponding virtue to the vice of sloth, which is caring.

The Virtue of Caring

If not caring or not being able to care for God, for others, for one’s self, is the sin of sloth, then being able to care and caring signals life and health. Being indifferent or bored or spiritually sluggish is “deadly,” because the one who does not care cannot accept the gifts God offers and cannot be moved to care for others. They may not *feel* that they are sinning or falling into vice, but they will find that many other vices can block out any chance for them to act the part of Jesus Christ’s disciples or being good citizens or genuine neighbors, working for the common good. They are incapable of exemplifying the virtue of caring, which corresponds to sloth defined as laziness. The awake, alert, and ready-to-go persons are or can be virtuous if their ability to care gets gracefully renewed or quickened, and they act.

What the Bible and Church Say about Care and Caring

In the Christian church, no diagnosis or cure will progress unless it deals with the central figure of the faith, Jesus Christ. All the Gospel records show that his fundamental approach to others was one of caring. The one story in which Jesus in effect turns his back on a woman who appealed for healing (Mark 7:24–30; Matt. 15:21–28) is still shocking, because it seems so out of character. He healed her, so we find that caring for her needs in the end turned out to be fundamental in the story.

In the Gospels and other New Testament writings about Jesus we see that everything about him shows how far he was from the vice of sloth, indifference. As one who was equal with God, as Paul wrote in Philippians 2:5–11, Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” and took on human form, even the form of a slave, whose dying was the ultimate act of showing care. His entering the human scene and showing love to lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and outsiders in general becomes the model for all who call themselves by his name.

If Jesus, who was “without sin,” according to the Scriptures, had been guilty of sloth, not caring, he would not have wept over the city of Jerusalem. He cared, even when its inhabitants did not. Had he been indifferent, he could have found ways to avoid being on the track to

WHY I CHOSE SLOTH

Author's note. I had first crack at choosing a favorite deadly sin about which to write. Usually favorite sins are those that do not tempt us. I can preach denunciations of, for example, gambling. The tables at Las Vegas are not alluring. That leaves plenty of other sins that do and should trouble me, but I do not like to talk about them. So I chose sloth, of all things, but sloth as described on these pages. I can be lazy, sluggish, and all the rest. But that is not sloth as understood in the church's history. Here it means "sadness in the face of spiritual good," and while I can become sad, disappointed, set back, beaten down, like everyone else, I have not experienced profound and sustained sadness.

So why pick this sin? One good reason: many years ago I read the sour British novelist Evelyn Waugh writing on sloth as the deadly sin, the "refusal of joy"

as *the* characteristic sin in Western culture today. We are busy, active, besieged by stimuli—tweets and Twitters and all the rest—but few observers of our culture would note that we are characterized by joyfulness. I've been on a mini-crusade to give publicity to Waugh's definition of sloth, because I see it in the church. I see people leaving the sanctuary with grim faces and clenched fists, or in the sanctuary singing apathetically and dozing off. On the other hand, whenever I find Christians caring for others, being care-full in dealings, being attentive to the surprising Gospel stories, I know that sloth is not ruling them—and does not have to rule widely in church and culture as it does. So: defy despair, lean forward rather than slouch down when the praise of God is offered, and one more deadly sin won't be so deadly.

—Martin Marty

being killed, but he cared too much for everyone, even one of two thieves on a cross next to him, to be apathetic. He accepted the real criminal, hanging near him, as someone who mattered completely. Where he could have showed apathy he showed empathy.

He never turned his back on anyone, nor will we if the virtue of caring replaces the indifference that is a deadly sin. The virtue of caring is not simply the result of human striving through regimens and exercises. They can all help, but the virtues that conquer deadly sins are responses to spiritual gifts.

Moving from Sloth to Diligence

Of course there is no blueprint, no one-size-fits-all formula for stepping out of our slothful habits and becoming more diligently virtuous. What follows are some suggestions you may wish to consider.

Look into the Faces of Others

The counsel of good friends, those who are caring and who are not indifferent, can help. They advise the sinner to look at the neighbor in a different way. The awareness of the face of the other is crucial as a step to overcoming indifference. This does not simply mean being alert to the physical features of a face, but recognizing a presence beneath the physical features.

We hear of bored young people who could not be stirred to study or care much about the world but were totally transformed as they left the luxury of a campus to serve a place such as Haiti, where a catastrophe has occurred, where the poor have been sequestered, forgotten. There the serving students are stirred to empathy. And such empathy is a major counter to the sin of "sadness in the face of spiritual good." Here it is the face not only of the spiritual good but of the Giver of that good. Do all mission trips or experiences like this succeed in such transformation? Of course not. But it is hard to picture being roused from indifference without some such personal experiences.

Create Meaningful Conversations

Conversation can serve well in the task of enhancing care, including care for the other. When we argue with one another, one wins and one loses. But attentive conversation is guided not by the answer but by the question. Picture using these exercises in diagnosing and dealing with the seven chosen vices and virtues in order to stimulate imagination and thus awaken someone out of sadness and spiritual torpor. One participant raises a question: is "sloth" one of the deadly sins? The other comes back with "how do you define a deadly sin?" Immediately the two draw on their reservoir of learning and experience to answer the question.

FIGHTING SLOTH

You cannot counter and defeat sloth slothfully. That is, if sloth is a sin marked by joylessness, the sinner cannot fight back through grim, sour, self-defeating confession of that sin. Did you ever notice that in the Gospels repenting is a joyful act, joining Jesus at the table with sinners whom he has forgiven? The best way to experience this is to engage in acts that demonstrate care for others and are based in care for God.

Such conversation goes on when a counselor deals with someone afflicted with or prone to *acedia*.

Maintain a Variety of Friends

A third way to move out of the depth of sloth toward the virtue of diligence is by having a variety of friends with a variety of personalities and interests. Often succumbing to a deadly sin is comparable to being confined in illness. *Acedia* victims or perpetrators almost universally experience isolation and loneliness. They do not care about themselves or others and so others do not notice them. The presence of a company of people provides interactions and models for someone who is to experience the grace that helps them care and be cared for.

Pay Attention to Art

A fourth remedy can be found in art. Where “sadness in the face of spiritual good” is the symptom of a soul from which the spirits of truth, beauty, and goodness

have disappeared, through the ages wise counselors have resorted to and relied on the arts. Art does not always work and will not always solve everything, but experiments with one of the arts, music, are as old as the Hebrew Scripture accounts. In 1 Samuel 16:14–23 one reads of King Saul, whose depression and torment had come from the Lord. (Such a source of depression and anxiety occurs frequently in theological literature.) “And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul . . . [future King] David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him” (vv. 14, 23). Murals or tapestries on palace walls and stained-glass windows in churches provide visual imagery that depict options to *acedia*. Art therapy is used widely.

Conclusion

Spiritual sadness or grief, not being roused to affirm God’s presence or to experience joy, is more than an emotion: it is a sin. In fact, it is rightly a “deadly” sin, from which other sins flow. People can practice the virtue of caring and showing care, thanks to the grace of God and the gifts that come when one turns afresh to God.

About the Writer

Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago.

Endnote

1. Question 35, “Sloth,” in *Summa Theologica*. The term appears, with some slight paraphrases, on several occasions in Article I-IV. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3035.htm>.
2. Ibid.