

Sermon 163: Romans 12:11: Sloth

OUTLINE

The ant
The garden
The cartoons

INTRODUCTION

One of the seven deadly sins is sloth/laziness, or as the Latin has it, *acedia*. Why is it called a cardinal or deadly sin? We see that in the parable of the talents the wicked servant buries his talent in the ground and does not serve the Lord because he is lazy, and results in him being cast into the outer darkness, Matt. 25:26, 'You wicked and slothful servant!' It is this word slothful that is found in the verse we are considering this morning in Romans 12:11, 'Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.' Paul is in the midst of a list of our Christian duties, v10 had two one another commandments which related to how we ought to treat one another like family, v12 has three exhortations all aimed at how we serve God generally. Our focus this morning is something we all need to consider, the first part of v11, 'do not be slothful in zeal.'

None of us gets this right, we play at our work and work at our play. We have the proper view of rest and work on its head. We do not rest to work, we work to rest. We do not treasure our various activities for God, the six days of our labour as our primary goal, we live for the weekend. The word slothful means lazy, and the word zeal can mean one of two things, usually it includes both, and that is diligence and eagerness. So we could translate it, 'don't be lazy in diligence.' Paul is most likely speaking generally about our activity. It is not specified as to whether Paul is talking about our vocations, our work in the church, looking after our gardens or family devotions. It is likely that Paul is calling for a general diligence and eagerness in all that we do. Many of us are diligent at our hobbies and interests, but Paul is calling for a blanket diligence. A good summation of his point would be in the 6th resolution of Jonathan Edwards. As a young man he made 70 resolutions that he would read over every week to remind himself of his duties, here is number 6, 'Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.' My goal in this message is to counteract that natural inner sloth that we might be consecrated as living sacrifices to God, diligent in all we do, and eager in all we do. Spurgeon said, 'idle men tempt the devil to tempt them.' So then let's get to business. We will be looking at three word pictures from proverbs, the ant, the garden and the cartoons.

The ant

The sluggard is the biblical picture for the person given to sloth. And the most instructive portion of scripture on this topic is in fact the book of proverbs. So then we will be considering the three main portions on sluggards and other single verses. Let me remind us that the book of proverbs was written for children to get a proper picture of adult life. The picture language of proverbs is aimed at gripping the imagination and drawing us into godly wisdom and life lessons. Let's begin with Prov. 6:6-11, 'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.'

The opening words to go to the ant are words intended to humble our pride. We are confronted with the indignity of sloth. As human beings we have been made in God's image and given a created mandate to subdue the earth, yet we are not busy with our callings, we are distracted. Being in His image we are to be industrious, creative and active as He is. We are the crown of God's creation but we have forgotten our place as workers in the God's world, we seek to holiday and play, so Solomon tells us to inspect one of God's lowly but respectable creatures, the ant. Prov. 30:24-25, 'Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer.' In one year ants can move an estimated 50 tons of soil in one square mile.

Solomon calls upon us to consider her ways in order to learn wisdom. Jonathan Edwards in his work 'Images of Divine Things' investigates nature in just this way to show how there is a deep agreement between what God has put in His creation and what He has revealed in His Bible. Just as a young plant is pliable and can be trained to grow in various patterns, so an old one is fixed and will snap and not yield. This speaks to us of our teachability throughout life. Here Solomon directs us to the ant, in particular her independent work ethic, v7, 'Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.' This is an affront to the passivity of sloth. The ant knows its job and sets out to do it, that endless chain of activity as the ants work and work. They do not need someone breathing over their shoulder, or a slavedriver with a whip promising punishment for negligence. They don't need a cheer leader on the side lines building up their self-esteem or a coach to give them pep talks. Paul calls the first century slaves to serve their masters with a similar inner drivenness, Col. 3:22-24, 'Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.' God-pleasing not man-pleasing, this is what drives consistency.

The second lesson from the ant is her forethought and preparation, v8, 'she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.' This is to contrast with the shortsightedness of sloth. The great folly of laziness is that it denies future gratification by insisting on resting now. This is the great paradox of sloth, listen to Prov. 13:4, 'The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.' The whole goal of laziness is to avoid work for pleasure, yet the great irony is that in aiming directly at pleasure and rest you are left empty and craving. This life lesson from the ant reminds us how the universe God made works, we labour for reward. This is the lesson of delayed gratification. 'I want it all and I want it now,' in the words of Queen are the demands of the sloth. This verse points out the work and labour involved in preparing the food and harvesting the ingredients for the food. There are several layers of tasks that need performing before the basic requirement of food is available. The ant is well supplied, but the sloth will go hungry.

Children this idea of preparing yourself for the future is vital for you to understand. Ask any of the adults that are in this room if they regret not playing more computer games, or not spending more time on facebook, or not sleeping in more. No each one will tell you they regret not applying themselves better at school and preparing themselves for life. I certainly do! Anything I write needs editing, I stuffed around when it came to learning languages at school and my study of the biblical languages is poorer for it. Let me tell you that every action is an investment in your future characters. Every action is an investment in your future you. What you are today you will be more of tomorrow. Are you diligent or lazy, planning or plodding? You always have to live with tomorrow in mind. To dig into a novel, to watch another movie, to sleep away your mornings, they might give you a level of

pleasure, but it is the deceptive pleasure of the sloth. You are not investing in your future and your laziness will come back to bite you. Prepare for the future, listen to the ant. V9 is a rebuke in the form of questions, 'How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?' You have been reminded of your dignity, your Lord, and the need to work to eat, how long until you stir yourself?

V10 is a key verse because it seems to be the response to the parental goading of v9. 'A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest.' This is the excuse that the sloth gives. 'I am just going to rest for a little while before I get started. I am just going to sleep a little longer.' But this is just part of the self-deception of sloth, it becomes death by inches. Matthew Henry puts it this way, 'the more a slothful temper is indulged the more it prevails.' It will never be just a little more sleep and rest, it will be more and more. It will be harder to take a hold of yourself later than now, you will be more deeply entrenched later than now. Carpe Diem, seize the day, there is no time like the present, because putting off is putting yourself deeper in the mire of your laziness. Learn the lesson that you will not die if you do not rest and take it easy every time your sinful heart suggests the possibility to you.

V11 tells the story of what happens to the lazy child or adult, 'and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.' Money comes by work, and work by employers, but who wants to hire a lazy person, Prov. 10:26, 'Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.'

The garden

Prov. 24:31-34, 'I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.' We have learned some lessons from the ants, now we get to learn from observing the natural consequences of sloth by looking at a garden. Solomon tells the story of passing a sluggard's field. It is a vineyard. And you will see a parallel description of the sluggard as a person lacking sense. This does not mean a person of lower intelligence, nor a person who is not aware of the facts, but a person who has not acted in light of the facts. The field was surrounded by a stone wall intended to keep animals out, this wall is broken down and so any rogue fruit that might have appeared would be pilfered. The ground where the pathways would have been were untrodden and overgrown with nettles, and the vines themselves were all thorns. Solomon said he looked and received instruction, what is the instruction to be received from this picture? Sloth=no fruit; sloth=weed invasion; sloth=no strategies to secure future fruit, the field might as well be given to another for all the good it is doing for the sluggard. This is in fact what happens in the parable of the talents, the servant with one who is lazy has it taken off him and given to the one with ten.

Let us ponder this garden and receive instruction. Firstly, the fact that the field is overgrown with weeds. This field represents the various areas of our lives and a lack of effort and maintenance will yield the weed effect. To do nothing is to allow weeds to prosper. Firstly, thorns are used in the scripture to indicate pain and difficulty, Prov. 15:19, 'The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.' To be lazy is to create troubles for yourself and make a rod for your own back. Secondly, weeds are the negative version of fruit. They are the alien invasive species that destroys and has no purpose but to be burned. The lesson here is that when we fail to be

diligent weeds creep in, and they will inevitably creep in. Part of the curse is the inevitability of weeds, it is something we will always have to wage war against, and when we stop fighting we get overrun. Think of the various areas of your life as this garden. Think of your walk with the Lord, is it a fruitful vine or overrun with weeds? Are you diligently rooting out sins and keeping the walls well preserved to keep enemies out, or do you neglect your walk with God, failing to read your bible, pray, go to church and fellowship with the saints? Your family is a garden, are you negligent in family devotions and prayer for your family, have you allowed the walls to be broken down through lack of vigilance and predators have come into your garden harassing your children and tempting even you? We can apply this picture to each area of our lives.

And what about the lessons we learn from the fruit of the vineyard. Sloth=no fruit. Vineyards have many responsibilities that include keeping the walls in good order, and weeding, but there is the pruning, the guiding of the vine, fertilizing the soil, harvesting, and the many other jobs that need doing. The yield and blessing of fruit has to be nurtured through every part of the process. Diligence is crucial. Applying ourselves to the means of grace, working hard in dependence upon the Spirit, this is how fruit develops in the Christian life. God is the author of spiritual growth but He has chosen to give it to us in response to our partnering efforts with Him.

This is not something that we can be lackadaisical about, sloth is not called a deadly sin for nothing, a lack of diligence can be deadly, Prov. 5:22-23, 'The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.'

The cartoons

Proverbs 26:13-16, 'The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.' Here we have four hyperbolic caricatures of the sluggard. The exaggeration in the pictures is meant to amplify those things unique to the sluggard.

Firstly, the sluggard is a person who is full of excuses. They say that necessity is the mother of invention because needing something forces you to find a way. But I think this is closer to the truth, laziness is the mother of invention. Why get up to change the channel on your TV when you can press a button on a remote from your chair without getting up. Why walk all the way over to the light switch when you can time your lights to turn on, or to sense you when you walk in the door, or turn them on from an app, or by a clap or voice command. These shortcuts that indulge our ease are money makers. The lazy person is a genius when it comes to accommodating their ease, and this verse points out that we are master logicians who have an arsenal of excuses for why we should be doing what we ought to be doing. This proverb puts it rather comically, 'There is a lion in the road.' But the nub of this verse is to point out that when you ask the sloth why they are doing their duty, they have very good reasons for why they shouldn't be doing it. In this instance self-preservation against violent death. The lazy person has to become very familiar with lying in order to keep their lifestyle. Whether this is a front of lies or whether they believe their own lies is not explored, it is probably a bit of both.

The question is this, is there ever a reason to not obey God? And added to that, don't we have every reason to obey God? These are the questions that cut through false excuses. If

we are to obeying God, then come death we should do it. And more than that, if we stopped to consider God's love, God's majesty and worth, the richness of our salvation, the value of a human soul in sharing the gospel; we would not hesitate to do what is right, we would feel compelled. The trick is to turn away our minds and preoccupation from ourselves to God.

The second picture is one of the motion of a sluggard. Now a sloth moves on average 38 meters a day, and when crawling 30cm a minute. Think of this verse as a nature program focusing on the exciting life moments of a sluggard, did you see the exciting moment when he turned in his bed from one side to the other. The idea of a door on its hinges seems to be conveying one of two points, firstly, it could be the fact that the sloth does not get out of bed just as a door is fixed to its hinges, the bed being its natural habitat. Or it could be that groaning of a door on its hinges. The bed and sleeping are no doubt the emphasis. We sleep to be refreshed to go and work, sleep is not an end in itself. This picture of inertia could be expanded slightly to include our modern picture of a person who never leaves the house but just sits at home watching TV all day, this would be the equivalent. This verse is intended to be a satire and a mockery of the poverty of such a life.

The third picture is a laughable one. The sluggard is so lazy that he plops his hand into the bowl with great effort to get some food, but because he is so lazy he cannot even raise it to his face to feed himself. This might be a familiar picture to those who have been very sick or you have seen someone who is infirmed in this position, but this is the picture of a healthy person doing this. I think it is intended to be a miniature of what the sloths overall life looks like. Think of their fields as their bowl, because of their neglect they will not eat. Once again the bite of dark humour is being used to drive the point home.

The fourth proverb speaks about how the sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer wisely. The intent of this saying is obvious, it is calling the sluggard stupid even though they think they are clever. The insinuation is clear, if you are living like a sluggard you are the most foolish of all. You may think you have great excuses, but you are not clever. I can imagine what this might sound like today. 'Those poor fools who have to go to work every day, let the government pay for you to live, live on the dole.' 'I am not a slave to the MAN I am my own boss.' And so on and so on.

If your opinion does not agree with God's word it is folly. You are made for work, it is a joy, it is dignifying, and it is the means by which you are a channel of God's common grace to others in this world. Leisure, opting out, luxurious ease, sponging, there are many flavours of sloth. But in Christ we are recalled from our sinful laziness and put into God's employment. We were sinners who were intent on denying the work God called us to, we prioritised ourselves and our pleasures above God's will. But then God sent His Son to serve, to work for us. He died for the guilt of our selfishness and sin and offers to save us to bring us back to what we are made for. To be image bearers who put on display the good of work. So when Paul says, 'Do not be slothful in zeal,' he is speaking out of this program of restoration is God is saving us into.

