

Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth

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Ecclesiastes 6

One of my favorite movies is the 2006 film *Stranger than Fiction*. *Stranger than Fiction* tells the story of Harold Crick. Harold is an IRS agent and he lives a predictable, regulated life that is about as exciting as the tax returns that come across his desk every day. But then one morning Harold wakes up, and while he is brushing his teeth, he hears a voice. It's a voice that is describing everything he's doing. The voice is narrating his life. It's like he's a character in a book and he can hear the author's voice writing the story of his life. Sometimes the author's voice just describes what Harold is doing in that moment. But other times the author's voice says things like "*Little did he know that this small, seemingly innocuous decision would set in motion a chain of events that would lead to Harold's death.*" Well, this gets Harold's attention. He wants to figure out what's going on so he goes to visit an expert on authors and stories, a local English teacher. 'What do I do?' He asks the teacher. 'Well, the first thing you have to do is figure out what kind of story you are in,' says the teacher. 'Are you in a comedy or a tragedy?' 'How can I tell?' asks Harold. 'Easy: a comedy ends in a marriage, a tragedy ends in death. At the end of a tragedy everybody dies, at the end of a comedy, you get hitched.'" So Harold Crick tries to figure out whether he is living in a comedy or a tragedy. He gets out a notebook, and starts a kind of ledger. He writes comedy on one side, tragedy on the other, and he enters events on either side of the ledger to see if he can discern his life's direction. It's an interesting premise because Harold's question is a question all human beings wrestle with. We may not be entering the events of our life into a notebook, but all human beings are trying to figure out what life is at its core. Is my life a comedy, or is it a tragedy?

Which side of the comedy/tragedy ledger does the teacher of Ecclesiastes land on in chapter 6? It's pretty clear isn't it? This chapter has a tragic view of human existence. So tragic, in fact, that you may be surprised to find this level of pessimism in the Bible! But that's Ecclesiastes. For the most part, Ecclesiastes is a dark book. In fact, if Ecclesiastes were not in the context of the rest of the Bible, I'm not sure we would consider it a book of faith; it would be more like a book of resigned obedience. That doesn't mean it's not inspired by the Holy Spirit. This book has a holy purpose: Ecclesiastes is in the Bible to confront easy answers and false cheerfulness. It's a book that stomps on phony piety. Ecclesiastes is a spiritual rototiller; it uproots our glib, Sunday school answers. Ecclesiastes is prosperity preacher's worst nightmare.

And nowhere is Ecclesiastes darker than chapter 6. The teacher suggests that a stillborn baby has an enviable life. "The baby comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness is its name shrouded." It's better off because we all end up in the darkness at the end, and at least that baby didn't have 80 years of toil and worry to endure. "It has more rest than does that man." Then the Teacher of Ecclesiastes goes on to enumerate a number of ways in which life is meaningless chasing after the wind. People's appetites are never satisfied. They keep feeding their desire for food and things and it's never enough. Wisdom is overrated. People spend all this time in school, but in the end, do they have any advantage over fools. The powerful will always win. And in the end, we all lie down in the darkness of death. Life is a tragedy. This pessimism has a root. The teacher of Ecclesiastes seems to have an 'under the sun' view of the

world. He has no idea about the resurrection; this under the sun world is all there is. We toil away under the sun, we try to find a little joy, and then we die. Chapter 3:19 puts it plainly: *“Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so does the other.”* Life is a tragedy.

Why am I sharing these depressing words with you this morning? Because I want you to understand sloth. And that dejected, hopeless, cynical spirit that pervades Ecclesiastes 6 is the heart of sloth. If you want to know the spiritual heart of sloth, read Ecclesiastes 6. Maybe that surprises you. Most people associate sloth with laziness. When people think of sloth they think of a couch potato: someone who sits around all day and sponges off of others, someone who doesn't use their talents, someone who doesn't contribute to society. And that's not totally wrong. Most of the time, sloth shows itself in the world through lethargy, but not always. In fact, sometimes sloth can show itself through manic busyness. Like all the deadly sins, sloth is a problem in your heart. As we said last week, all the 7 deadly sins are disordered loves. So sloth is love gone wrong, and more specifically, a slothful person has lost their love for their own life. A slothful person is a person who has lost their zeal for existence. A slothful person is someone who has lost their ability to care. The fire has gone out in their heart. Their passions have grown dim. Life has become a pointless tragedy. Maybe this sounds a little like clinical depression. It is not. Clinical depression is a disease of the body. It involves brain chemistry gone wrong. Sloth is an affliction of the Spirit.

There's an old Jewish legend about an encounter between a Rabbi and Satan which illustrates the heart of sloth. A rabbi was coming to the synagogue one morning when all of a sudden his shadow broke free from his body and ran up the synagogue steps ahead of him. The shadow was transformed into a mighty and powerful prince with flowing robes and dark eyes. The rabbi knew it was Satan, the great angel who was thrown out of heaven for rebellion against God. Satan tries to tempt the rabbi but the rabbi resists. At the end of the encounter the rabbi wants to ask Satan a question: "Tell me," he said, "What do you miss most now that God has thrown you out of heaven? Do you miss anything?" Satan paused a moment and then he said, *"I miss the sound of trumpets in the morning."* That's sloth. When sloth has clogged up the arteries of your soul, there are no trumpets in the morning. When you are in the grip of sloth, you wake up and instead of hearing trumpets, all you hear is the demand of your appetites and groan of your obligations. Do you get a sense of the Spiritual feeling I'm talking about? I think most of us know this feeling.

This deadness of spirit that is at the heart of sloth bears dark fruit in people's lives, and the most common of these fruit is a desire to escape. Slothful people don't want to be where they are. They want to get away. Sometimes sloth's escape looks like the typical couch potato laziness. Nothing really matters, so I'm going to sit here on the couch and binge on Netflix because it distracts me from the real burdens of my life. That form of sloth appears in the parable of the talents. Remember the third servant in that parable? Instead of going out and using his talent he buried it, stayed home and watched cable. Do you remember why he did that? In Luke 19:21 the servant says to the master, *"I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in. You reap what you did not sow."* The third servant has an Ecclesiastes 6 view of the world. He hears no trumpets in the morning. Life is tragedy.

Sloth also escapes through manic activity. A man's family is falling apart. His kids are rebelling, they hardly talk to them anymore, his wife has become distant and he kind of knows it's because of his own failures. He has been gone too much and when he was home, he neglected the craft of family love in favor of his own thing. This man's feelings about his family

are flat and dead. But instead of doing the work of healing - talking to his wife and apologizing to his kids - what does he do? He works. He works long hours. He puts in 80 hour weeks just to avoid coming home. He doesn't want to stop working because if he stopped, he would feel the dull ache of his dead spirit. So whether it's through activity or laziness, Sloth always wants to escape. It's restless. Sloth doesn't want to bloom where it's planted. It doesn't want to do the work right in front of it. It doesn't want to love the people beside it. Sloth thinks it should be in a better place, with better people, doing better things.

How do we push against this deadly sin? Let me conclude with three things. These things are in order of depth, with the deepest being the last. First, to combat sloth practice *Stabilitas Loci*. Way back in the fourth century AD the desert Fathers were already wrestling with sloth and they suggested that you resisted sloth by practicing *Stabilitas Loci*. That's Latin, and roughly translated it means, stability of place. Here's what the monk Evagrius wrote 1600 years ago to colleagues who were struggling with the drudgery of monastic life: "*You must not abandon your cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather you must remain inside and practice perseverance. Fleeing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly and evasive.*" In other words, practice the craft of love right where you are. Even if it seems pointless. Practice the craft of love in the place where you are with the people right beside you. That desire for a better place with better people is often the devil's way of keeping you from really practicing the work of love. That doesn't mean you are never called to leave or change...see Abraham and Moses and Paul...but love, by its very nature, is a work of stability and attention.

Second, look to the cross. Because the cross pierces sloth's cold heart. That's the word from the preacher of Hebrews to us. Bob read Hebrews 12:1-3 earlier in the service as our call to confession: "*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.*" Now that could be taken as a simple call to persevere: "keep running your race! Jesus persevered and so should you." But if that's all you hear, you are missing the gospel of the passage. It's not just that Jesus is an example of perseverance; it's that he has persevered *for* you. He is the perfecter of your faith. It is finished. He has done it. He's the great High Priest who has entered into the heavenly sanctuary by the offering of his own blood, the blood shed on the cross for us. Jesus tore the veil between heaven and earth in two, and he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. *So, after Jesus, you can't just look at your life as something 'under the sun.'* Jesus blew an eternal hole in the under the sun world. By His cross, Jesus punched a hole in the fabric of time. As Hebrews 9 puts it, Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary by the offering of his blood, and he took us with him. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Our name is on his lips, our lives are in his hands. We are not under the sun people. Death and darkness is not our end. We are children of the light.

Which brings me to the third thing. Life is not a tragedy. This book tells us that life is not a tragedy. Remember the definition I gave at the beginning of this sermon? In a tragedy everyone dies, in a comedy there's a wedding. Ecclesiastes 6 seems to think it all ends in death. But how does this book end? With a wedding! With the great wedding supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19 where all of us weary people gather around his table and feast with him forever! Winston Churchill died in 1965. He received a hero's funeral at St Paul's cathedral and, in typical Churchillian fashion, he planned his own funeral. At the end of the funeral he wanted a trumpeter

to play taps from the dome of the cathedral. Taps is what the trumpeter plays at night as the flag is taken down. After Taps, Churchill wanted a moment of silence, and after that moment of silence he wanted a second trumpeter to play a Reveille. A Reveille is the military bugle call played to announce the coming of a new morning, to celebrate the arrival of a new day. He wanted a morning trumpet. Why? Because of 1 Corinthians 15 I suppose. "The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable. My prayer for you is that, even when it's hard, you will always love your life as much as Jesus loves your life. Which is a lot. He gave his life for it after all. And I pray that you will hear His trumpets every morning.

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