

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia  
on Sunday, March 19, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**PROVERBS 24:30 and ROMANS 12:11**

“I walked by the field of a certain lazy fellow and saw that it was overgrown with thorns, and covered with weeds, and its walls were broken down.”

“Never be lazy in your work but serve the Lord enthusiastically.”

**“LAZY BONES, SLEEPIN’ IN THE SUN”**

Lent, as you know, is that period in the Christian Year, extending for 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter morning. It has always been regarded as a special opportunity for self-examination, prayer and fasting in preparation for our celebration of the atoning death and triumphant resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

During the Middle Ages it was customary, during Lent, for sermons to be preached on “The Seven Deadly Sins,” the first of which they listed as SLOTH. Now “sloth” in the modern vernacular simply means “laziness,” and I’m sure we are surprised to find this sin at the very top of the list.

Laziness is a human frailty that we make jokes about. When I was a teenager, everybody used to sing a popular ditty which ran like this —

“Lazy bones, sleepin’ in the sun,  
How d’ya ever ‘spect to get your day’s work done,  
‘Spect to get your day’s work done,  
Sleepin’ in the noonday sun?”

We’re inclined to look on laziness as a characteristic of those “laid back” people who appear to have a more “relaxed” attitude toward work than “Type A” personalities who are on their way to becoming workaholics. Therefore, to list “sloth” as the first of Seven Deadly Sins may seem a little extreme.

And yet, those old preachers were on to something. Social scientists today tell us that laziness is a major cause of evil, a primary cause of psychological illness, and the main reason why Americans are failing increasingly at human relationships.

**1. Laziness in relationship to love.** Did you ever realize that laziness is the major cause for the failure of marriages? Love is not something that just happens. You have to work at it. Love becomes nonexistent and marriages collapse primarily because most people do not work hard enough to create love and build solid marital relationships.

Usually a couple whose marriage is in trouble know exactly what is needed to restore the relationship, but one or both of them are unwilling to put forth the effort. Let me cite a not uncommon illustration of what I mean. Here is a husband who is preoccupied with sports. In high school and college, he had been a fairly good athlete, and in the early years of their marriage his wife tried to share his interest in sports. She went to games with him; she read the sports pages of the newspaper in order to be informed enough to carry on conversations with her husband about how the players and teams were doing; but his interest in sports grew until it became a total preoccupation. Nothing else in life seemed to interest him. His interest in his wife diminished. His involvement in church declined, and there was room in his life for nothing else but sports.

One day his wife left him for another man. And of course, he came running to his pastor to see if there was something he could do to get her back. His pastor said, "Yes, there is something you can do and must do. You must change. You must cut back on the time and energy you spend on being a sports fanatic and make a commitment to your wife to give time and attention to things that would interest her. You simply must rearrange the priorities in your life and begin to give the Lord and your family the time and attention they deserve." And after listening to his pastor, do you know what that fellow said? He said, "I thought of all that; but to tell the truth, I don't feel it's worth the effort. I want her back, but not that much."

Now that may appear to be an extreme case, but I assure you it is not. All across this country, sports are moving from pastime to preoccupation. More and more people, especially men, are allowing the games of their favorite teams to become the most important events in their lives. Lazily they lounge in their stuffed chairs that seem riveted in front of their T.V. sets, absorbed in the exploits of their favorite stars. They pore over "Sports Illustrated" while the Word of God goes unread and unheeded.

As a player and as a spectator I have always enjoyed sports but let me tell you this -- it is time that we as Christians, recognize that spectator sports are nurturing a latent tendency to laziness in our lives and in the lives of our fellow church members. It is time that we all become painfully aware that precious time is being absorbed by a sports mania that threatens devotion to God and to family. How many precious hours that are desperately needed for building relationships between parents and children are being consumed in watching T.V. sports? How many New Year's Days are turned into a meaningless progression of bowl games?

And others, who are not sports addicts, still spend countless hours watching T.V. programs that are nothing but harmful drivel.

But when these lazy observers of other people's activities are told about this encroaching evil in their lives, they joke about it. They know that what they are doing is a wrongful waste of precious time. They recognize that their mates and children are being denied one of the most precious gifts that can be given. Nevertheless, they refuse to change. They know better, but they are too lazy to do anything about it.

I said a moment ago that love is something you've got to work at if it is going to grow and

develop. Love is something we do, as well as something we feel. The Bible commands us to love.

We are commanded to love God and our neighbor (Luke 10:27).  
Husbands are commanded to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25); and  
We are all commanded to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

There is no doubt about the fact that Jesus spoke of love as something that people should do; and if love is something we should do, then lazy people, who are unwilling to put forth the effort to love, are justifiably condemned by our Lord.

For some years now, I have been saying to people who come to me for marriage counseling — “Do you really want to be in love with your spouse?” Usually they look at me incredulously, as if to say — “How can I make myself love someone for whom I feel nothing? Surely when love is dead, nothing can be done about it.”

But I challenge them by saying this — “If you do what I tell you to do for an entire month, I can promise you that by the end of the month, you will be in love with your mate. Are you willing to give it a try?” My prescription for creating love is so simple that those to whom I give it don’t always take it seriously. Here’s what I tell them — “Do at least six things each day that you would do if you really were in love. First thing each morning make a list of six specific things you could and will do that day to express your love -- if you were in love.” I know that if people will really work at doing loving things, it will not be long before they experience the feelings that are often identified as being in love. Love is not those feelings. Love is what one wills to do to make the other person happy and fulfilled. But the very doing of those kind and thoughtful things generates the feelings which are associated with “being in love.” In our society, we believe that what a person feels influences what he does. But often we don’t realize that what a person does influences what he feels.

Pay a sincere compliment if you enjoy a meal. Your wife may be so surprised that she may think you’re having a mid-life crisis; but she’ll feel good inside, and so will you! Take the time to write notes and say nice, encouraging things to your partner.

I know one wife, married to the same man for many years, who, when she prepares his bag lunch, puts in a paper napkin, on which she will write with ballpoint pen -- “I love you,” and sign her name! Can you imagine how he must feel when he opens that bag?! Those three magic words must do more for him than a calorie-laden dessert! Pray God to give you the wisdom and sensitivity to do these loving, considerate acts, because, if you make the effort to express love, it will not be long before you feel love.

The story is told of a couple who came to a marriage counselor. At the end of the session, the wife said sadly, “I can’t remember the last time my husband said, ‘I love you.’”

“Is that true?” the counselor inquired.

With some anger in his voice the husband said, “The day I married her I said, ‘I love you.’”

and I told her that if I ever changed my mind, I'd let her know." That may sound funny, but let me tell you, its real—life implications are tragic. By not saying and doing our love, we let it die. Love must be expressed in words and deeds in order to be revitalized and grow.

**2. Laziness in relationship to the Christian nurture of the family.** Most of the problems related to rearing children in our modern world are caused by parental sloth. Children grow up to be undisciplined and insufferable because parents are too lazy to do the hard work associated with nurturing them properly in the ways of responsible living. For example, many parents have given up on trying to get their children to make their beds and straighten their rooms. Why? Because the kids just don't want to be bothered! Knowing that they can get their parents to do the work that they should do, some children deliberately try to drive their parents to the point of such exasperation that they'll say — "never mind, I'll do it myself." They test their parents to see how hard they are willing to try to get them to work. Usually, they find that their parents have so little perseverance that they choose the easy way out, which is to relieve their children of responsibility. Now such parents are downright lazy, because they are unwilling to keep at their responsibility until things are done right.

Everybody knows that the most important thing is not the straightening of rooms, but the disciplining of children to do what they are supposed to do, even when they don't feel like it. So, parents, shape up!

Sloth is responsible for parents allowing their children to go off to their rooms, shut their doors, and listen for hours on end to the latest recordings of "Prince" or "Black Sabbath" or other such classics! To ask what records are being purchased, to ask about the messages of the songs (some of which are utterly degrading), and to discuss the value of the music with their children, requires more time and effort than most parents are willing to expend. And so, a generation is left to the corrupting influence of a rock subculture, because so many parents are unwilling to address the hard task of training their teenagers.

Or take the matter of family worship. I don't know any Christian parents who wouldn't say that it is a splendid thing for parents and children to read the Bible and pray together in the home each day. What a wonderful way to train and nurture the whole family in the devotional life! Yet how few Christian homes engage in family worship each day! Why? Because parents are too lazy to make the effort. And when the teenagers assume a course of action that is destructive and rebellious and sinful, parents cry out -- "If only I had done what I was supposed to do as a Christian parent, this would not have happened!"

The same is true of seeing to it that our children are in Sunday School at 9:15 a.m. each Lord's Day morning; where committed and well-trained teachers are waiting to open up to them the treasures of the Scriptures. Why are the children absent? Because parents just won't get up in time to get them there.

It takes hard work to grow up into mature faith, and many Christians remain all their lives "babes in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1) because they are too lazy to take the time and make the effort to master the Scriptures, and to fellowship with God in prayer, and to minister to others through Christian service of one kind or another.

I am convinced that on Judgment Day, the sins of omission will loom larger by far than the sins of commission. Consequently, more sins will have resulted from sloth than from all the other sins put together. Now are you beginning to see why those old preachers put “sloth” at the top of their list of “deadly sins”?

So, the final question remains — “How can I get rid of sloth in my life?” And the answer is — by allowing the Holy Spirit to take complete control of my life. The same Lord Jesus Christ Who died 2000 years ago on the cross to atone for our sins, is alive and present with us now through the Holy Spirit. And all of us who believe in what Jesus did for us then, on Calvary, are able to invite the Holy Spirit to effect changes in our lives here and now.

The new life generated by the Holy Spirit displaces the deadness that seems to typify those who are subject to the soul—destroying influence of sloth. Laziness saps the vitality out of our whole being, as all of us who have wasted time know all too well.

Sloth does not create a sense of well-being. Rather it leaves us frustrated and groggy. However, when we open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit, He give us life. Just as new life was imparted to the corpse of Jesus, even so the Holy Spirit will give life to those who are deadened by sloth. When we truly repent of our sin and make that complete surrender to the will of God, then we provide a fertile soil for the fruit of the Spirit to take root and grow in our lives.

To be filled with the Spirit is to have our hearts broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus. To be alive in the Spirit is to view people through the eyes of Jesus. Consequently, whenever we see anyone suffering, we will feel what Christ feels for that person, and we will seek to alleviate that suffering. Whenever we see anyone hungry, we will view that person as Jesus does, and we will seek to feed that person. Being filled with the Spirit creates within us a hunger for justice and a craving for the salvation of the lost. With such an orientation to the world, it is impossible to maintain a slothful attitude.

Sloth deadens, but the Spirit gives life. 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 discover the fullness of God’s joy; and that, after all, is what we all crave for, isn’t it?

**Amen.**