

September 25, 2011 - Sloth vs. Hunger for What is Right

When people get married there is this strange process that they have to go through. Each person comes into the marriage with their own baggage so to speak. And by baggage, I mean, literal baggage. She comes in with her furniture and he comes in with his furniture. You've got his plates and her plates; his cups and her cups. She's got her wall art and he's got his. So when you get married you start out with this mishmash of stuff: his stuff and her stuff and whatever you received as wedding gifts which could be who knows what depending on what kind of friends and relatives you have.

When you get married, you have all this stuff that's kind of put together and you gradually kind of try and find agreeable styles and fashions that kind of fit both of you and your home kind of takes on that kind of a feel to it. Somehow, gradually and kind of magically and mysteriously, certain things start to vanish over time. Typically, and I can say this, because most of my kind of pre-marriage stuff is either gone or boxed up or somewhere else, so I can say this, that typically speaking it's usually the guy's stuff that goes first and maybe goes most. I don't know if that's because guy's stuff is more offensive to begin with or because the girls just care more about this sort of thing going in. It's probably not a bad idea because from what I've seen, girls tend to have better tastes in these sorts of things. So, generally speaking, that's kind of what happens.

In our house that's what happened too. Before we got married I had all my stuff and probably the most notorious thing that I had was the collection of Big Gulp cups that had been accumulated over a decade of time and so, lots invested in this collection. In my bachelor house - I had a big house and I was the only one there so - I had a room that was totally dedicated to just displaying all these cups all over the place. In my married house, there was no room for such a room. So, the first thing that happened, within a month of us getting married, is those were gone. That was kind of what happened in our house. A lot of my stuff has kind of gone away and I'm okay with most of that.

However, there was this one item in particular that came in with my wife, that I had a particularly difficult time assimilating into our married home. It looked like this (couch potato chair). She was actually kind of fond of this thing. It seemed like no matter where I was, I would turn around and this thing was kind of looking at me and it kind of gave me the creeps and kind of weirded me out a little bit. Now, eventually she sent it to Value Village of her own free will ... after years of harassment about it. Eventually it went away. I was looking this week, for a picture of that and I couldn't find one and I eventually found one on E-bay. I don't know if you can see this, I sent it to my wife and said "See, I found a picture of this." And her comment was "You owe me 30 bucks." So apparently there's still a little bit of unresolved issue going on there.

You might wonder why I'm bringing all that out. It's because the 'couch potato' is the poster child for "Sloth". When we talk about sloth and we think about sloth, we usually picture two

guys like this. They're sitting on a couch, they're not doing anything, they're a little bit like a slob, I guess. They've got the plates sitting around. They're people who sit around and don't do anything all day. I did a little research into the term and back in the 1970's there was this group in Southern California who kind of humorously prided themselves on opposing the fads on exercise and healthy diet. They promoted this idea of just vegging out in front of the T.V. and eating junk food. And back then T.V. used to be called the "Boob Tube", so these guys dubbed themselves the Boob Tubers. Then one day in July 1976, a guy by the name of Tom Iasceno decided "If we are the Boob Tubers, what kind of tubers would we be?" And he said "Well, the kind of tuber we would be would be a potato, (because a potato is a kind of vegetable known as a tuber). So that's how the phrase "couch potato" was phrased and born and if you can believe it, copywrited. The couch potato.

Perhaps when you think of a sloth you don't think of a couch potato but instead you think of the animal that bears this vice's name "The Sloth". I looked into the Sloth and the Sloth is one of the slowest most lethargic animals in the world. I looked at one list that had the Sloth listed as the 6th slowest animal in the world. The Sloth was clocked at an average speed of a whopping 160 meters per hour. That means that it would take 6 ½ hours for a Sloth to go one kilometer. If we had a Sloth here today, and I wish we had a Sloth here today, but they are surprisingly difficult to come by. But, if we had a Sloth here today and we put it over by the double doors that go into the Prayer Room and we set it down there, and we instructed it to walk from that door, across the front here, over to the doors to the multi-purpose room, it would take that Sloth approximately 12 minutes to cross this room. They are very, very slow animals. A Sloth has very little muscle mass. You can see it's got those large claws that it wraps around the tree so it doesn't even have to use its muscles to hang it just hooks its claws on. Barely chews its food. Its stomach is like an internal compost heap. It's half deaf and half blind and spends most of its day sleeping in the tree tops. Once a week, it will climb down from the tree to go to the bathroom and then it will go back up top of the tree to have a nap. That is kind of the life of a Sloth. On that list of the 6th slowest things, the only things that were slower in the world than a Sloth were slugs and snails which might be why when the Bible uses terms like 'sloth' and 'sluggard', we picture these creatures that move at a snail's pace.

With all those kind of images in mind, we come to our list of the seven deadly sins and on that list of seven things, where would you put sloth, as far as where it would rank? Now, as you ponder that question, let me just clarify: Yes of course all sins are bad and they are equally wrong and all sin separates us from God so we're not judging one to be worse than the other. Some sins just seem to be a little more dangerous or more destructive or more apt to do some collateral damage, so out of the seven deadly sins, where exactly would you put sloth in that list? The earliest version of The Seven Deadliest Sin's List comes in about the fourth century and it was tweaked and adjusted over the next 200 years. But the final list contains these seven things. This is the order which they have been in and which we'll continue to cover them in our series here. So those are the seven things on the list. (Pride, Envy, Sloth, Greed, Lust, Wrath & Gluttony)

Now, just take a minute. How would you rank and order those things? I don't know about you, my list kind of goes something, more or less, something like this. How does your list look? Now what I found interesting is that the person who originally made up this list, was a man named Evagrius of Pontus. He started out with eight items actually, and he listed them in what he considered to be escalating ranks of severity. This is what his list looks like, starting with the least severe in his opinion. Starts with gluttony, then lust, greed, envy, wrath, sloth and pride. Now, I don't know about you, but sloth was not at the top of my list. How many of you had sloth in the top two? No one. Now many of you had sloth in the bottom two or three? That's what I expected. Most of us would, generally speaking, send sloth down to the bottom of the list. Because, yes it's wrong and it's not good, but is it really that bad? Evagrius put sloth and pride at the top of his list because he said "all other sins are kind of rooted in one of these two things." So, we have to ask, really, is sloth that bad? I mean, okay it's not good to be super lazy but, top of the deadly sin's list? Really? Is that where it belongs? Well, simply, there's more to sloth than simple laziness. There is something more to it and that something is what makes it so enticing but also so dangerous. You see, sloth is about something much more and something much greater than just being lazy. There's much more to it than simply being a couch potato. When it comes to sloth, it is not a tuber.

Sloth's motto is 'Hakuna Matata'. And as the song says, "it means no worries for the rest of your days. It's our problem free philosophy." Sloth beacons us like Timone And Pumba called to Simba. "Don't be stressed about things. Don't fret. Don't worry, in fact, forget everything else and enjoy yourself." Which is a rather appealing offer. It was appealing to Simba and it's appealing to us as well. However, while Simba was off 'hakuna matataing' back in the pride lands things were not going so well. The once lush fertile lands and fields had begun to dry up. The herds had moved on and the hyenas had moved in. Why? Because the rightful king was being slothful and neglecting his duties. You see, although sloth may sometimes lead to and look like laziness, it is at its very core, indifference and apathy. It's giving our attention to and putting our energy into lesser things to such an extent, that the more important things get neglected.

Cook writes in his book of sloth, he says "Drug users, TiVo addicts, obsessive video gamers, may be poisoned by sloth but so are most workaholics. Sloth is not restfulness. Sloth is escapism of the deadly sort. Sloth saps our time and emotions through a favorite sports team, a new set of shoes, or obsession over our appearance--while leaving scant energy for our marriage or our kids or duties. In fact, sloth can be best expressed not by a lazy attitude but in zeal over petty matters."

Sloth is a lot more dangerous and a lot more difficult to spot than we had originally thought. Being lazy and not doing anything is easy to identify both in ourselves and in other people and it seems to be relatively harmless thing. But sloth can be found in busyness and activity. It can be found in anything that keeps me from doing what really needs to be done. It can be hidden in work and in play and in leisure, in hobbies, in sports, in past times, in study, in just about anything.

Jesus often challenged the Pharisees on their slothful religious activities. In Matthew 23:23-24 He says:

“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees. You hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

Jesus gives this dramatic picture of focusing in on such a very, very tiny thing but letting a very big and important thing go by. The story of the good Samaritan, which you may be familiar with, is in many ways a warning against slothfulness. In this story, a man is robbed and beaten and left to die on a road. A priest comes by and he sees the man but he keeps going. Then a Levite comes by and he sees the man and he keeps going as well. The priest and Levite both walk by because their devotion to other things kept them from doing what was most important in God's eyes.

If sloth is being indifferent and apathetic to and neglecting the things that are most important, then our next Beatitude is the exact opposite of all that. In Matthew 5, verse 6, Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.”

Jesus says “Happiness comes from craving the most important things.” You notice, He doesn't say “Blessed are those who are well fed. Blessed are those who dine because they have been told to do so. Blessed are those who eat at regularly scheduled times. Blessed are those who feel a little peckish, now and then.” Jesus' invitation is for those who hunger and thirst for what is right. Those whose stomachs are growling. Those whose throats are parched. Those who are famished for what is right. Jesus calls His followers to be passionate about seeing the things that are right a most important to God and seeing them come to pass.

Quinton read a story for us just a few minutes ago about a great banquet. The story that Jesus tells is prompted by a question from someone in the crowd that day who was probably trying to butter Jesus up a little bit. So the man says “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast of the Kingdom of God.” And in response, Jesus tells the story of lots of people who should have jumped at the chance to attend the great banquet but are too pre-occupied with other things. In the end, the Master says “Go out and find those who are really hungry and let them be filled by my feast.” Do you know what I find most shocking about that parable? It's not the fact that some of the people he invited passed up the invitation. It's not even the things that they passed up the invitation for. I'm not surprised by some of that. And it's not even the Master's reaction when the guests decline the invitation. The thing that shocks me about that parable is the things that the people pass up the banquet for are not terrible, they're not awful, they're not evil things. One guy says “I bought some land and I need to go and check it out.” Someone else says “I bought some livestock and I need to go and tend to them.” Third person says “I

just got married and we need a little time to ourselves.” And that’s one of the most lethal things about sloth. It can sneak into anything. It doesn’t have to be an overtly bad thing. It can be an okay thing, it can even be a good thing. Before we realize that we are distracted from what’s most important and our life is filled up with other things.

Sometimes when we get home in the evening we usually set about trying to make supper and whatnot. Our kids, especially when we get home later in the evening, for whatever reason, our kids often come to us and try to impress on us that they are going to totally expire on the spot if we don’t give them a snack, immediately. Usually we challenge them to wait a little bit but on those days where we’re kind of running behind or we know that supper is going to take a little extra long to prepare, we go ahead and let them have a snack. We try to give them a healthy snack, instead of cookies, which is what they always ask for. But we try to give them good things like carrot sticks, or cheese sticks, or fish crackers, or something relatively healthy. But even when we give them ‘good’ snacks, if they get enough of those good snacks before supper time, when the meal comes out, they’re really not that interested in eating it. You see, sloth persuades us to fill up on snacks. But Jesus invites us to the feast. Sloth hands out a bag of Cheetos and says “Sure there may be other stuff out there to eat but it’s really not worth the effort. Forget about it and just enjoy these things. Jesus opens the door to the banquet hall and says “If you crave the good stuff, you will be filled.”

And all of that begs the question “What is it that we are supposed to hunger for?” I suppose there could be a lot of answers to that but here is the most consistent message that I see Jesus giving. Starting with the verse we already read, as Jesus talks to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, He says:

You’re doing what you’re not supposed to do. Here is what you should be doing. “You have neglected the important matters of the Law, Justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

In Matthew 11, John the Baptist sends some of his friends to Jesus. John is in jail and so he sends his friends to Jesus and says: “Ask Jesus if He is really the Messiah? I need to know if He’s the one or if we should wait for someone else.” And this is Jesus’ reply. He says:

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” He says “If you want to give John a sign that I am the Messiah, tell him that you see Me doing the things that are important to God.”

Matthew 25, Jesus paints this picture of the end times. All of the people are gathered and they are divided into two sides and to one side God says “Well done, good and faithful servants. Come into the rest that’s prepared for you.” And on the other side He says: “I never knew you. Go out and away from here.”

Both sides are confused by “How did I get on this side?” And so, Jesus gives basically the

same answer to both sides. To those who are on the good and faithful servant side He says this: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Justice, mercy, faithfulness, caring for those who are in need, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the clothes less, caring for the sick, spending time with the isolated and lonely, sharing the ‘good news’ with others.”

As I look at that list, I no longer scoff at the notion that I might be a little slothful at times. If these are the things that Jesus said are of greatest importance, how often does something, anything, a whole lot of things, preoccupy my life, leaving me no time and no energy, attention or hunger for these things? That doesn’t mean that you can no longer, ever, follow your favorite sports team or watch T.V., use face book, sleep in one morning, (if you don’t have kids), stay up late watching a movie, take a day off or a vacation, do scrap-booking or crafts, or eat cheetos or chocolate or ice cream. Doesn’t mean that those things are off limits, we just need to remember what really counts. What’s really important. What really satisfies. Just don’t forget you stand on the front lines. The battle is on. On one side there is sloth and on the other side, there is a hunger for the life made right. Which will you choose?

I haven’t had my watch on. Well I have had my watch on but I haven’t been paying attention to it. But, my sense is that’s shorter than a normal message would tend to be. And the reason for that is, because all week, I struggled and I tried to add more in and I tried to flower it up, and in the end I kept coming back to the idea: The point is so simple. Anything else distracts from it. We have the two sides. One gives us distractions and tries to fill us with lesser things and keeps us away from the things that are most important, and the other side--God offers us the best. Offers us the promise of being filled. And I look at my life and I weigh which of those two sides I go to the most or the easiest, or the most habitually. And the point seems so clear to me.