

ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

SANTA BARBARA, CA

JANUARY 22, 2012

PROVERBS 6: 6-11; II THESSALONIANS 3: 6-13

BEWARE OF THE SEVEN

III. "SLOTH"

DR. BRETT A. BECKER

Our Scripture readings today, in effect, compare and contrast *two* animals: the sloth, and the ant (which is *really* an *insect*). "Go to the ant, you lazybones," advises the passage from Proverbs. The *writer* of Proverbs, *traditionally* believed to be King Solomon himself, sees the *ant* as the *epitome* of *industry*! And *anyone* of us who *ever* had an *ant farm* as a kid can *attest* that, indeed, *ants* are little bundles of *efficiency* and *organization*.

Notes Solomon, "without having *any chief* or *officer* or *ruler*, [the ant] prepares its *food* in *summer*, and *gathers* its *sustenance* in *harvest*! *Consider* its *ways*," counsels the *wise king*, "and *be wise*" yourself.

Contrast this *tiny industrial wonder* with the *sloth*! These tree-dwelling mammals of Central and South America move at a *maximum* speed – maximum – of (hands) 6½ feet *per minute* (pause) – that's *slow*! In *fact*, *infant* sloths *cling* to their parents, but *they* are so lazy that they sometimes *lose their grip* and *fall to the ground*. *That* wouldn't be so *bad* – kids will be kids, after all – *except* that the *adult* sloths are so lazy that *they* will often *refuse* to come *down* out of their *tree* to *rescue* the baby sloths, *allowing* them to *die* there on the ground! It's true! I *read* it on the Internet!

Sloths only come down out of their trees *about once a week* to *relieve* themselves; they have only about a *quarter* as much *muscle tissue* as *other animals* of *similar weight*; and they *sometimes* will remain *hanging* from *tree branches* *even after* they have *died*! To put it in a nutshell, *sloths* move *only when necessary* and, even then, *very slowly*.

You can *understand*, therefore, why “sloth” is *characterized* as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Once upon a time, there was a high school *teacher*, attempting to *instruct* her class on the *difference* between *ignorance* and *apathy*. “Who can tell me the *difference*?” she asked. No one responded. She *noticed* James, slumped in his *chair* at the back of the room. “James Newton,” she called out, “what is the *difference* between *ignorance* and *apathy*?” James *raised his head slightly*, looked around the room, then *back* at the teacher and said, “I don’t *know* and *I don’t care*.”

Of *course* the boy *was right*!

Sloth can be *defined* as a *spiritual* or *emotional apathy*, a *neglect* of the *directives* God has *given* to us. The *word* “sloth” comes from a Greek word meaning, “I don’t care,” and it can *also* indicate a “wasting away” due to *lack of use*. The *idea* is that through *inactivity* one *invites sin* into one’s *heart* and *life*. Let me *say that again*: through *inactivity* – lack of *service*, lack of *study*, lack of *good deeds*, lack of *discipline* – one invites *sin* into one’s *heart* and *life*. “Idleness,” goes the *old saying*, “is...the *devil’s...workshop*.” And Isaac Watts, the famous hymn-writer, wrote, “For Satan *finds* some *mischief still* for *idle hands* to *do*.”

In our epistle reading for the morning, Paul says to the Thessalonian Christians, “For we hear that *some* of you are *living* in *idleness*, mere *busybodies*, *not* doing *any* work.”¹ Now the word “busybodies” can *also* mean “gossips” – *those* persons who spend their time *nitpicking* at what *other* people are *doing* or *not* doing, rather than “busying themselves” with productive, uplifting *labor*. And oh, *don’t* we know how *easy* it is to “fall into” a *pattern* of *criticizing* others *rather* than honestly *confronting* ourselves with our *own* shortcomings and sins! Benjamin Franklin said, “Search *yourself* for your *vices*; others, *for* their *virtues*.” And Jesus said, “Why do you seek to take the *speck* out of your *brother’s* eye when there is a *log* in your *own*? First, remove the *log* from your *own* eye; then, you will see *clearly enough* to remove the *speck* from your brother’s eye.”²

One of those “logs” in our *collective* “eye” as North Americans *might* be our “voracious hunger” for entertainment, leisure, and “escape” from *work*. We have forgotten the lesson from the Hebrew people in Genesis that *work* can be a *virtue*, and the *creation* story that *even* the Lord *worked* for *six* days in *creating* the world and *only* rested on the Sabbath. We don’t want to be Puritanistic, so we *eschew* the Protestant work ethic and we *placard* stickers on our car *bumpers* that say, “A *bad* day at *golf* is *better* than a *good* day at *work!*” and *such* like that.

And *yet*, “work” is *redeemed* when we see it as an *opportunity* to develop and express our God-given *talents* and *aptitudes* for the good of *others* and for the *good* of our *society*. *Work* becomes “vocation” when we *allow* God to “shape” it to “fit” his desires for us. “Work” becomes *enjoyable* and *exciting* when we *understand* it as God’s chance

¹ II Thess. 3: 11, NRSV; italics mine.

² See Matt. 7: 3-5.

to “*work on us,*” *developing* in us qualities of *character* that are *not as likely* to come out of *mere play* and which will *never derive* from *pure “idleness.”* The Preacher of Ecclesiastes says, “In the *morning, sow your seed,* and *at evening do not* let your *hands be idle...*for you should *never underestimate* the work of God, who *makes everything.*”³

So we are to work *together* with God! It is to be a “partnership,” us “working” at *our work,* and God working *on us!* In the book of Ephesians, Paul says, “For *we are God’s workmanship,* created in Christ Jesus *for good works,* which God prepared *beforehand to be our way of life.*”⁴

And *thus* we can *understand* why Proverbs asks, “How *long* will you *lie there,* O lazybones? *When* will you *rise* from your *sleep?*”⁵ It *reminds* me of the woman who came to talk to her *pastor* after church one Sunday. “I’m *so sorry,* pastor,” she said, as she entered his office, “but perhaps you *noticed* my husband Walter get up and leave during your sermon this morning.”

“Yes!” replied the pastor, “Now that you *mention* it, I’ve noticed him get up and *leave* during the *sermon* for the *past three weeks!* Perhaps what I’m saying is too *challenging* for him, or too *demanding,* or too *troubling.*”

“No, pastor, I’m *afraid* to tell you, it’s *just the opposite,*” replied the woman. You see, Walter’s been *sleepwalking a lot* lately...”

³ See Eccl. 6a, 5b.

⁴ Eph. 2: 10.

⁵ Prov. 6: 9, NRSV; italics mine.

“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little *folding of the hands to rest*,” says our reading from Proverbs, “and *poverty* will come upon you *like a robber*, and *want*, like an *armed warrior*.”⁶

One of the times where it may be difficult *not* to fall asleep – *besides* during the sermon – is during our *devotional time* with God. For *many* of us are *so distracted* during the *day* that we don’t give *any* time to *prayer*, and if we *give* God *any time at all*, it is *usually* at the *last moment* before we go to *bed* at night – and *by then* we are *so sleepy* that we cannot keep our *eyes open* or our *minds alert* to God’s guidance. We have allowed *everything* to *come before* our *appointment* with God!

Now I would *daresay* that *if* we, by *fortune* or *fame*, had an *appointment* to see the President of the United States *or* the Queen of Great Britain, we would do *all we could* – come Hell *or* high water – *not* to be *tardy* or *late* or *falling asleep* when we *got* there. We would *probably* be there *ahead of time* and *deeply concerned* about *how* we were *dressed* and *what we would say* to so *distinguished* a person! At least, I would *hope* we would. And *yet*, we are *continually remiss* in our *appointments* with God! We *know* in our *hearts* that God is *calling* us, but we are *guilty* of *slothfulness* in our *relationship* with the Almighty.

It is *no wonder*, then, when we feel *deep spiritual want* and a *depressing poverty* of the *soul*! We have *run around* and *gained all the trinkets offered* by our *materialistic culture*, but we have “shipwrecked our minds and hearts” on the *island* of *spiritual laziness*! Like that *captain* of the Italian *cruise liner* Costa Concordia, we have “*run our ship aground*” on a *reef* and have *failed* to take *any responsibility* for our *actions*! We must “own up” to

⁶ Prov. 6: 10; NRSV (italics mine).

our duty to keep *at least* a *daily* “appointment” with God. *If* an adult *sloth* – one of God’s *creatures* – can leave *his* or her *infant sloth* to *die* on the *ground* after *falling* there, then *we shouldn’t* be *surprised* when we *allow ourselves* to *die* “spiritually” when we have the *power and the calling* to *acknowledge* God’s *grace* and *provision* in our *own lives*! “The *Lord* is *my shepherd*, I shall *not* want,” says Psalm 23. “Therefore, sisters *and* brothers,” says our reading from II Thessalonians, “do *not* be *weary* in *doing* what is *right*.”⁷

Sloth, in *any form* – in the *ordinary courtesies* of *everyday living*, which we are *expected* to *extend* to *others*; in our *conversation*, which is to be *sprinkled* with *gratitude* and *goodwill*, *not* with *grudges* and *gossip*; and in our *spiritual lives*, which should be characterized by *honesty* and *industry* – *sloth*, in *any* of these *areas*, is **deadly**. It can *only* be counteracted by *Christ-in-us*, for whom *sloth* was an “enemy” to be *overcome*. For Jesus looked out on the white fields of summer and he *said* to his *disciples*, “The *harvest* is *plentiful*, but the *workers* are *few*; therefore, *ask* the Lord of the harvest to *send out workers* into his *harvest field*.”⁸

We are those “workers,” and Jesus is “requesting” *us*. (Hands) The sloth. The ant. (Hand down). “Consider the ant. Consider *its ways*, *and* be *wise*.”

Amen.

⁷ II Thess. 3: 13; NRSV (italics mine).

⁸ Luke 10: 2.