Seven Deadly Sins: Sloth

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0:00] And you may have a seat. Welcome to all of you, especially those of you who are not normally here worshiping with us in Brooklyn in the morning.

This is a bit of an unusual Sunday. It's a very exciting Sunday. We're not having an evening worship gathering, so some of you have come from our Columbia Heights parish. You're here with us this morning, so glad that you're here.
We'll also not be celebrating the Eucharist this morning. The service will be ending early. We'll be transitioning directly into a members' meeting. Throughout the year, every now and then, it's very important that our church gather and that we have family time, family meeting time.
And there's a lot of great things happening, some good updates to give you, so very excited. We'll transition directly into that, and it's pretty appropriate. The worship doesn't end when the service ends.
The worship continues, and the family meetings that we have are a huge part of the worshiping life of our church. So glad that we get to do that. But right now, we're going to open God's Word together, and we're going to continue a series this morning that we started a few weeks ago when Lent started.
[1:12] And we're looking at the seven deadly sins together. The seven deadly sins. And when you say the word sin, the idea of sin sounds a bit antiquated these days.

Outside of church, other than pop culture, movies like Seven, and things like that, you don't really hear this discussed very much on a normal day-to-day basis. These days, most people believe in the inherent goodness of human nature.
That we're inherently good, that we're born as blank slates. And that we're born with unlimited potential. And that we're born with a tendency to self-actualize.
If we can simply remove enough barriers, that that will happen naturally. That's the common, I think, perception of human nature. Now, if that's true, if we are just blank slates with unlimited potential to self-actualize, to realize and fulfill our true potential, then it should be just as easy to live a good life as a bad life.
It should be just as easy to choose virtue over vice. If I'm a blank slate, I should be able to make either choice with the same degree of effort.
[2:27] And yet, my life tells me on a day-to-day basis that that is simply not true. For me, it is profoundly easier to lie than it is to tell the hard truth, the embarrassing truth.

You know, for me, it's a lot easier to hold on to anger than it is to actually show mercy and forgive. For me, it's a whole lot easier to covet or be envious of someone.
Than it is to be thankful and content with my life and who God has made me to be. These things come way more naturally, which should tell us what?
That we're not blank slates. That there is something in us that pulls us away from all that is good, true, and beautiful.
Something that pulls us away from God. And that inner pull away from God, that's what the Bible calls sin. And fortunately, back around the 4th century, some monks who were living in the desert, endeavoring to live lives of virtue and faithfulness, began to look inward to try to understand and to categorize this pull.
[3:43] What are the ways that sin manifests in our lives? And how can we combat these tendencies within us? Because here's the thing about sin.

The less aware you are of sin in your life, the more it will control you. The less aware you are, the less in tune you are with the sin in your life, the more it will control you.

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So this series is all about understanding our tendencies towards sin. Believing that the more we understand them, the more we can then begin to take steps to overcome them in and through Jesus Christ.
So that's the point. So this morning we're looking at, I think, one of the most overlooked sins in the list. And this is the sin of sloth.
And because it is so overlooked, I think it has the potential, based on what we said a moment ago, to be very, very, very dangerous. So we're going to look at a case study, as we've done every week. We're going to look at Luke chapter 10, verses 38 to 42, a case study of a woman named Martha.
[4:49] We're going to see four things. We're going to move through these things rather quickly. We're going to see what it looks like, where it comes from, why it matters, and then how to begin to take steps to overcome it.

This is sloth. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that we have the freedom, the ability to gather here.
And that we know that we could be here in a high school auditorium. We could be in a church. We could be in the middle of a field or sitting under a tree, as many churches have done over the centuries.
And that wherever we are, you are with us. You're Emmanuel. And that you speak to your people. Words of truth spoken in love. And that's what we need this morning.
Your words of truth spoken in love. Just as your word brought order to chaos millennia ago, we now pray that you would bring order to the chaos of our lives through your holy word.
[5:45] And it's in your son Jesus' name that we pray. Amen. So let's look at sloth together. Sloth is often misunderstood. As misunderstood as it is overlooked.

A lot of people confuse sloth with laziness. But that's oversimplifying. It's not quite the same thing. Other people confuse sloth with depression.
A lot of times they get grouped together. Sloth and depression. Now while there is a relationship between sloth and depression, we need to be very careful and very clear to say that there is also such a thing as clinical depression.
That is caused physiologically. That requires treatment. In many cases, medical intervention. And that is not a sin. That's not what we're talking about. There is also a kind of depression, a spiritual depression, that we see in places like Psalm 42, which we just read.
That is more closely connected to sloth. But again, when we say sloth, we're talking about something slightly different. Let's look at this case study together in Luke's Gospel.
[6:52] If you look at Luke chapter 10, all of Luke 10 is about the way of Jesus. What is the way of Jesus? What does it mean to follow him? What does it look like? What does it not look like, both to insiders and outsiders?

And then we get down to the end here. And we have this amazing story about Martha and Mary and Jesus. And this sort of crystallizes themes that we've seen throughout the entire chapter.
Martha and her sister live together. Martha's probably the older sister. It says that it's her house. She's the hostess. And Jesus comes into town and Martha invites him to come and stay with her. This is common. You come into a town. You're a traveler. There were no hotels. You relied on the hospitality of people who live there. So Martha says, you can come and stay with us. So Jesus comes to their home. And sometime later, we don't know how long, Jesus begins to teach.
And the word implies that he is formally teaching. He's leading them in a kind of Bible study. And I just want to, this isn't the point of the sermon, but we have to make this point. This is very amazing because in this culture, typically, only men would be the ones to sit at the feet of a teacher like Jesus.
[8:03] It would only be the men. And even then, it would most likely only be future rabbis. Rabbis in training would be the ones to sit at the feet of a teacher like Jesus.

And yet, Jesus is teaching these women in their home, which confers enormous dignity and respect and recognizes these women as Jesus' disciples right alongside the men.
This is an amazing thing that we see here. Very countercultural. And we have two responses to this. Mary, it says, sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. Fully attentive.
But, verse 40, Martha was distracted with much serving. And then Martha gets angry and she says, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?

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Tell her to help me. So she's essentially accusing Mary of what? Well, sloth as we typically think of it. I'm doing all the hard work.
[9:02] Mary's being a lazy sloth. Just sitting on her butt. Tell her to get up and tell her to help me. She's accusing Mary of being lazy. And she says, Mary's being lazy.

She's not doing anything. And then Jesus gently and lovingly rebukes not Mary, but Martha. He says, Martha, Martha. Very tender, by the way. Repeating her name. It's very loving.
Very tender. He's not being harsh with her. Martha, you're anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her.
Now, I don't know about you, but this story upsets a lot of people. You know, a lot of people get really frustrated at this because they say, you know, well, somebody has to do the cleaning and the cooking and the, you know, you have people over and the house doesn't just clean itself.
The food doesn't just cook itself. Somebody's got to do that. Doesn't the Bible say that hospitality is important? What are we supposed to do? Just let them sit on a pile of dirty laundry? Give them saltines? Somebody's got to worry about that kind of stuff.
[10:08] Right? Now, I think we have a lot of people in here who might resonate with that. But it seems, as we look closely, it seems that there's more going on here than we might first see.

There are clues that show us that there's a real issue here that Jesus zeroes in on. Because Martha's not just doing what is essential to show hospitality. The text actually says that she's distracted with much serving, which implies that she's not just setting out some hummus and dip. She's going above and beyond. She's doing way too much. And the text zeroes in on the fact that she's overdoing it and going way beyond what's necessary.
And this unnecessary busyness is distracting her from the thing that matters most, which is Jesus' teaching. And so this is the key thing that we need to understand about sloth.
Sloth most often manifests as unnecessary busyness. Unnecessary busyness that distracts us from the things that matter most, that it compromises and confuses our priorities.
[11:24] Now, this should make us wake up and pay close attention. If we're saying that sloth often manifests as busyness, we live in a culture that sees busyness as a virtue.

I mean, in the culture of DC, at least the circles that I travel in, being busy is a badge of honor. When you go and get a job interview and they ask, well, can you share one or two of your weaknesses?
99% of people in this room would say what? Well, I tend to work too hard. I tend to overdo it. I can be really busy. Probably 90% of the time when people ask how we're doing, how was your weekend?
How was your past week? How have things been going? Almost always, I say, been really busy lately. Been crazy busy lately. It's a really busy season right now. Had a pretty busy weekend.
I say it all the time. But it's a way of saying I'm important. I matter. People need me. There are things only I can do. I'm valued.
[12:23] I'm competent, right? That's what it translates into. It's a badge of honor. But this is saying that it's a sin. That much of the busyness in our lives is a sin and not just a sin, a deadly sin.

A sin that is particularly destructive to our faith and to our soul. So we need to sit up and pay attention here. So that's what sloth looks like. It most often looks like unnecessary, distracting busyness.
So second question, where does it come from? What causes that? Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. Martha, Martha, you were anxious and troubled about many things.
And if you look at this, it seems that Martha has a lot on her mind. There's a lot weighing heavily on her heart. And it very well may be that Martha is using busyness to distract herself.
It's a way of avoiding having to deal with things that she would rather not face. When you sit down and you attend to the teaching of Jesus, you're not going to receive abstract ideas and principles for living.
[13:27] Jesus has a tendency to go straight into your heart. And that can sometimes be terrifying. And it very well may be that Martha doesn't want anybody fiddling around with her heart. Martha would much rather concern herself with the dishes in the kitchen than actually have to be exposed in that way.

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So she's distracting herself and she is using busyness as a way to avoid things that she doesn't want to maybe have to face. Frederick Buechner says this, sloth is not to be confused with laziness. A slothful man may be a very busy man. He is a man who goes through the motions, who flies on automatic pilot. He knows something's wrong with him, but not wrong enough to do anything about. He is letting things run their course. He is getting through his life. I don't know if that strikes home with anybody. The idea of putting your life on autopilot and just letting life run its course certainly hits home with me.
See, the core of sloth, the core issue is not busyness itself, nor is it laziness itself.
[14:38] It's avoidance. The core of sloth is avoidance. It's escape. It's disengagement. It's a refusal to fully inhabit our lives.

It's a way of getting through life where we've just put the autopilot button on and we've disengaged and life is happening to us. We're not actually living into our lives fully.
And sometimes this can manifest in very specific ways. There can be specific things that we're avoiding, that we don't want to have to deal with. Maybe that's going on with Martha.
Maybe there's certain issues on her mind. We see this example of this in the 1 Samuel 2 passage that we read a little while ago. This is about Eli.
And Eli is a good man and he serves at the temple, or he serves the Lord rather. And it says that Eli has these two sons and these sons are priests, but they are wicked.
[15:39] And they're corrupt. And the things that they're doing are profaning and blaspheming the Lord. They have a racket going where they're forcibly getting meat from people who are there to bring sacrifices.

And this has been going on for, it seems like, a very long time. And Eli's not doing it. His sons are doing it. But then look what it says in the next chapter. Chapter 3, verse 13.
God says, And I declare to Eli that I'm about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew because his sons were blaspheming God and he did not restrain them.
Eli is conflict avoidant. Right? His sons are doing this again and again and again. And everybody knows they're corrupt.
They're mistreating people. They're abusing their power. And you can imagine how many times people have come to Eli and said, You've got to do something about this. Your sons, they're horrible. They're, they're, they're, they're, and the word is spread all over them.
[16:38] Eli, won't you do something about this? And Eli just keeps putting it off. I'll talk to him tomorrow. I got, uh, things are really busy today. I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'll talk to him next week. I'm kind of tired. And they just, they, they're going through some hard things.

I'll talk to him next week. And you know how that goes when you just put it off and put it off and put it off and put it off. And God finally calls him to account. And says, you had your chance. You never said a word. You never confronted this.
So now I'm going to step in and bring judgment against your house. Right? So this is a form of sloth. It's a lack of courage. It's Eli avoiding conflict. I know some of us resonate with this.
So that's one way that we can be slothful. But there's another way of being slothful where it's just simply a way, a posture with which we live life. Avoidance just becomes our M.O.
So Richard John Newhouse defined contemporary sloth as this. He says, here's contemporary sloth. Evenings without number, obliterated by television.
[17:36] Evenings neither of entertainment nor of education, but a narcotic defense against time and duty. That gets me when I hear it.

You're not really being entertained. You're not really engaging. You're not really being educated. It's just a narcotic defense against time and duty. Just zoning out. Imagine if he had been writing in the era of smartphones.
Imagine what he would have said if he was looking at an iPhone rather than a television set. I can fill up my work day with all kinds of tasks.
I mean like that, I can fill up my day with all kinds of little tasks that I can get done. And I can get through eight, nine, ten hours of just tasks. And then I can come home and I can crash with a cocktail, some show on Netflix that I don't even really like.
Maybe watch three or four episodes of it. I don't even really like it. I don't even really follow the plot. And I can literally be sitting between an amazing book of poetry on the side table on my right and my amazing wife, who I haven't talked to all day on my left, and engaging in either direction would

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be spiritually and emotionally and intellectually enriching.
[18:55] And yet what do I do? Do I hear, hear, hear? No. I'm flipping half-heartedly through my news feed on my iPhone. Right?

So you can be busy or you can be lazy or you can be busy some of the day and lazy the rest of the day. And it all amounts to the same thing. It's a slothful disengagement.
It's an unwillingness to fully inhabit ourselves and our lives and to engage the things that matter right around us. That's what sloth looks like. So our third question is, if sloth can look like laziness or busyness, and if it comes from this inner tendency or desire or temptation to avoid, disengage, why does this matter so much?
And maybe some people are thinking, well, who cares? Yeah, that sounds like me, but who cares? Life's challenging. Well, sloth is the thing that most often leads to spiritual apathy.
Sloth leads to spiritual apathy. Spiritual apathy is what? I just don't really care about God, God's kingdom, what God's doing in the world, God's word, God's people, God's agenda, God's priorities.
[20:15] I just don't care. Worshipping God. I just don't care. And I hear this so often from people, you know, I just don't care. This, it just doesn't figure prominently in my life.

I just, I have other things that I care about more. I just can't, I don't feel it. I don't feel it. That's spiritual apathy. And the thing that we need to understand about our faith is that faith is very much like muscle.
The more you use your faith, the more you challenge it, the more you exercise it, the more it grows, it gets stronger. But if we don't use our faith, if we don't exercise it, it atrophies.
And it's never neutral. You're either getting stronger in your faith or it's atrophied over time and it's getting weaker and weaker and weaker.
And if you feel spiritual apathy, I just don't care about this. This doesn't matter to me. It's just not a priority. That is an indication that you have atrophied.
[21:14] Spiritual apathy is a direct result of spiritual atrophy. Atrophy. Your faith is weakened. It's shrinking. It's being starved slowly.

See, the ancient spiritual disciplines, things like prayer and fasting and contemplative reading of Scripture, these are the things that are meant to strengthen our faith.
These disciplines that have been passed from one century of believers to the next, these are the things that God's people come back to again and again and again to strengthen that muscle. But the thing that they all have in common is that they're difficult.
And they take time. And they take discipline. And frankly, sometimes they're tedious. And they're not always immediately rewarding. It's a lot like working out. And so because of this, because of the nature of these spiritual disciplines, many people, most people have not tried them and found them wanting.
They've just not ever really tried them because they're just too difficult. And it's impossible to live a busy life and to adequately give time and energy to spiritual disciplines like this.
[22:25] They can't. You have to choose. Busyness makes these things impossible. You cannot sit down and contemplatively engage, prayerfully engage and reflect on God's Word if you're also doing a million other things and you're not even really present for any one of them.

You just can't do it. See, sloth is the thing in us. Sloth is the thing that wants the benefit and the payoff without the effort. That's what sloth is.
So sloth wants the mystical experience. Sloth wants the spiritual high. Sloth wants the radical transformation and the deep sense of God's presence.
But we want those things on demand. Like Netflix. I'm focusing on this and this and I've got to get this done and now I want a spiritual high right now. And I've got ten minutes for a spiritual high.
We want a button that we can push. And it just doesn't work that way. I mean, unfortunately, a lot of churches recognize that this is how people operate and so they try to create that experience on Sunday.
[23:27] We get these people for an hour. Let's make sure the music and the lights and the message and the entire experience soup to nuts. Let's, you know, the emotionalism. Let's make sure it's all there so that we can create this spiritual high that fits into their busy schedule.

Because they've got to get to soccer practice. So let's make this happen. And there are a lot of books that do the same thing. Spiritual transformation, radical, powerful, face-to-face encounter with God is just around the corner with these simple steps.

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Sadly, all these things do. Is enable sloth. So over time, we're having these emotional experiences. But underneath, our faith continues to atrophy.
Right? And over time, over time it gets weaker and weaker. And this is really a vicious cycle. You know, we exercise our faith less and less because of sloth.
Which results in our faith beginning to atrophy. Which then leads to more spiritual apathy. Which then leads to more sloth. Which leads to us doing less to exercise our faith.
[24:36] And it just goes around and around and around. Right? So the greatest threat, here's really the point. The greatest threat to your faith is probably not going to come from another religion making a better argument.

You know, or from the new atheists. The greatest threat to your faith is probably not Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. The greatest threat to your faith is probably busyness.
It's busyness. It's going through your life from one thing to the next. On and on and on and on and on. Never really inhabiting or fully engaging any of it.
And then over time, your faith erodes. And it gets weaker and weaker and weaker and weaker. Until one day you just kind of look around and you say, I don't care about any of this anymore.
And it just crumbles apart. So then what's the answer? Right? If sloth manifests in the ways that we're talking about, if it's this innate thing in us that wants to avoid and disengage and escape, if this is probably one of the biggest threats to our faith overall, then how do we overcome it?
[25:53] Well, Jesus says to Martha, one thing is necessary. And of course, Jesus is referring to himself. And this is great for a preacher. Because sometimes sermon applications are kind of a stretch.

Or they require some nuance. Or they require some massaging of the text. They require a little contextualization. It's just not one of those times. It's pretty straightforward.
Right? So I'm going to tell you something right now that you need to remember. There's one thing. I'm going to tell you something that if you leave this church and you never come back and you move to another part of the world, if there's only one thing that you ever remember from being here, this is the thing.
There is only one thing in your life that is necessary. And it's Jesus Christ. Your relationship with God is the single most important thing there is.
It is more important than your spouse. It is more important than your kids. It's more important than your job. It's more important than your financial security. Your relationship with God is the single most important thing there is.
[27:05] And this is the remedy for sloth. Because sloth is precisely the thing that confuses our priorities. It convinces us that secondary things are primary things.

And primary things are secondary things. It leads us to spend vast amounts of time and energy majoring in the minors. Only one thing is necessary.
There's only one thing that matters. And if you don't get that thing right, nothing else matters. I don't care if it's A-pluses across the board.
On this one issue, everything in your existence hinges. I think the way to overcome sloth is to have the kind of community where we continually remind one another to have this clarity in our priorities. Simply put, if you're living your life in any way that detracts from your ability to focus on, contemplate, reflect, and enact the teachings of Jesus, then you need to make changes to the way you're living your life.
[28:18] You know, Eugene Peterson has an interesting insight where he says that often sloth is caused by laziness. Or I'm sorry, the busyness in our lives is caused by laziness. But it's the particular kind of laziness where we let other people determine our priorities.

We don't actually carve out and decide how we're going to invest our time. We let other people around us do it for us. And we simply go along with their expectations. Only one thing is necessary. I don't care who you have to disappoint. Only one thing is necessary. By the way, this is why God instituted the Sabbath. You know what sloth means?
That we never really work and we never really rest. You ever feel that way? You're kind of all, you're at work, but you're kind of working, but you're also checking social media and feeds and news and kind of, you know, drinking coffee and talking to people and going for walks.
And you're kind of getting stuff done, but not really. And then you kind of come home, but you don't ever really disengage. You're just kind of still on your, checking your email and you're still kind of

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responding just one quick thing and just kind of get this.
[29:22] I forgot to get this. And it's just sort of your life just becomes this blur where you're never really doing either. And so Jesus teaches about the Sabbath. He says this isn't meant to be an overly burdensome regulation.

This is a blessing. God created the Sabbath and instituted it to bless human beings so that there's a clear demarcation. So that when you're working, you're working. And when you're resting, you're resting.
Right? Jesus himself said this was meant to be a blessing. And we need regular times to stop and to notice what God is doing when we're not doing anything. That's what the Sabbath is all about.
And you see in Jesus, Jesus lived his life with one singular purpose. I mean, whether Jesus was being tempted in the desert or flattered by the multitudes, when all the rest of his disciples had fallen asleep in the garden or abandoned him altogether, Jesus remained focused on one thing, and that was the will of his Father.
So from the manger to the workshop to the cross to the grave to the throne, Jesus never wavered in his focus on his Father's will. And because of his courage, because of his full, unwavering focus on his Father's plan, no matter what it cost him, we now have the grace and the spiritual power we need to overcome sloth, to inhabit our own lives, to devote ourselves to the only thing that truly matters, Jesus Christ.
[30:52] Let's pray. Our Father, an unhurried life. Whether we are working full-time jobs that expect too much, or raising young children, or dealing with the chaos that comes from all of the transition that is so common to the city, whether we're laboring under unrealistic expectations, either from without or from within, Lord, whatever it is that drives our busyness, may we be an unhurried people.

May you give us the wisdom and the courage to live unhurried lives in the midst of a very, very, very hurried city. Lord, we pray and we have this vision that we might be known as people who work hard and who do good work, and yet who do it without being rushed and hurried, that we never lose our sense of what matters most, Lord.
We pray that you would put that ever before our eyes, that as often as we need a gentle rebuke, like Martha did, that you would use this community to do just that. We pray that busyness would no longer be a badge of honor, but that it would be a confession of sin.
And we pray that that would lead us more deeply into your presence and grace. In your Son's name, amen.

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