

# When All Things Are WEARISOME

Understanding the **sloth** of our busy lives

“There are people with the most extraordinary ability to transform everything into a business operation, whose whole life is a business operation, who fall in love and are married, hear a joke, and admire a work of art with the same businesslike zeal with which they work at the office”  
—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 1843

In this third installment in our series on the seven deadly vices and the seven Christian virtues, we consider the vice of sloth and the virtue of faith. For the most part, we are treating vices and virtues as the enduring moral character traits that enable or prevent individuals from becoming followers of Christ. Vices and virtues, however, can also characterize communities and cultures.

Each of the seven deadly vices has had its own high points in history, those times when the particular vice is obvious to all who look back upon that particular historical culture or its leaders. When the vice of pride looks to the past, it swells with nostalgia as it considers 1938 Nazi Germany or the Roman Empire a century before

its fall. Greed has certainly had its heyday among the decadent nobility in eighteenth-century Europe or in the company of the late twentieth-century dictators who plagued Africa.

But when the vice of sloth lounges in leisure and lazily leafs through the photo album of its vacations over the centuries, which cultures would be pictured? Would we find any photos of twenty-first century United States in its scrapbook?

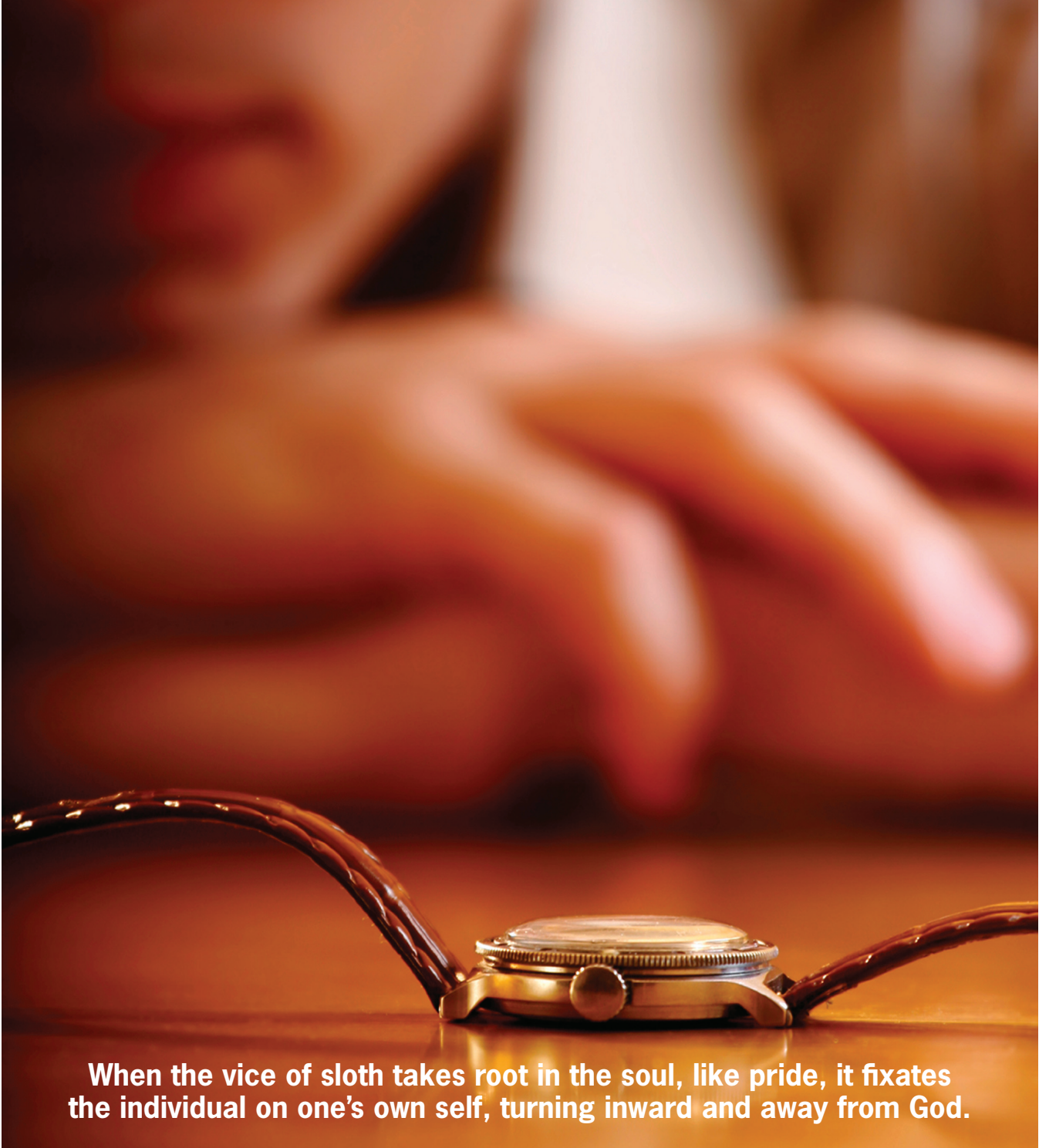
In a culture that publicly denounces the couch potatoes among us, and exports our national symbol of achievement and performance, Nike, across the globe, we might be surprised to find ourselves recounted in sloth’s memoirs. We Americans can hold our heads high for keeping our citizens the busiest among the world’s populations. By most statistics, Americans work more hours per week at their jobs than the citizens of any other nation around the world. And when we add in all that we accomplish during the hours we spend shopping, getting our kids to their after-school activities, checking online for the latest news and email updates—well, we should all squeeze in a trip to the nearest Starbucks, order a round of extra-shot venti Frappuccinos, and take just a quick break, secure in the

knowledge that at least *this* vice has not gotten the best of us.

Before we congratulate ourselves on our industrious avoidance of sloth, we should clarify what we mean by the vice. In the first article in our series, we described a vice as a disposition to act in inferior and abhorrent ways, cultivated over time through habit. As a vice, sloth (*acedia*) is an engrained character trait that shapes our desires in a particular way.

*Acedia* has been on and off the list of cardinal vices over the centuries. Originally one of the “eight bad thoughts” of a monk brought on by the distinct vulnerabilities of the ascetic life, sloth was replaced by “sadness” on the list of seven commissioned by Pope Gregory I. However, the church officially placed it back on the list of cardinal vices in the seventeenth century, and since then more have become aware of how accurately *acedia* describes a particular temptation that afflicts those seeking to live a faithful life.

Many mistakenly assume *acedia* means either laziness or melancholy. Now if sloth were mere laziness, the obvious cure would entail staying active, and keeping oneself moving and occupied with the tasks of life



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so that the vice has nowhere to creep into our filled schedules. The problem with those monks and desert fathers, we might think, was that they didn't have enough to do! It is this mistaken assumption that can drive our frantic and frenetic twenty-first-century American lifestyles, where we work fifty- to sixty-hour weeks, run endless errands, hit the gym on our lunch breaks, or demand that our employees take no more than two weeks of vacation a year. Ironically, such efforts to avoid sloth can actually cultivate it even more.

If sloth were mere melancholy, then the obvious cure would entail some self-esteem exercises, or diverting those dark feelings with the comforts of mindless entertainment. Again, we might assume that the problem with those thirteenth-century theologians was that they spent their days in dark libraries with little sun and no fun. That's why we twenty-first-century Americans think we have it made, given that we probably publish more self-help books than any other nation on earth and offer our citizens an endless array of cable television channels

and online diversions to perk us up.

Sloth, therefore, is neither mere laziness nor melancholy. It can be said that those who are clinically depressed are indeed more vulnerable to acedia, but the vice itself doesn't afflict all who are depressed or, for that matter, suffering grief.

Fourth-century Egyptian desert father Evagrius Ponticus describes acedia as the noonday demon because it often afflicted his fellow monks

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during the middle of the day when one's morning energy and anticipation wane: "First, [acedia] makes the sun appear sluggish and immobile, as if the day had fifty hours. Then he causes the monk continuously to look at the windows and forces him to step out of his cell and to gaze at the sun to see how far it still is from the ninth hour, and to look around, here and there, whether any of his brethren is near. Moreover, the demon sends him hatred against the place, against life itself, and against the work of his hands, and makes him think he has lost the love among his brethren and that there is none to comfort him.... He stirs the monk also to long for different places in which he can find easily what is necessary for his life and can carry on a much less toilsome and more expedient profession."

Though the context of this description is that of a monastic desert father, the description speaks to many of us. Indeed, acedia is a depressed-like state than can afflict us during the middle of the day, the middle of the week, the middle of life—where task becomes tedium, vocation becomes vacuous, ritual becomes rut, and where we can no longer experience the vitality of life or the goodness of love.

Acedia afflicts one with the mundane wherein the everydayness of our lives bears down upon our once impassioned souls as if to remind us, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?... All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, 8-9).

Certainly, sloth does entail an aversion to activity. But we should be clear why activity is

so unattractive to someone suffering this vice. Thomas Aquinas writes, "[Acedia] is a profound withdrawal into self. Action is no longer perceived as a gift to oneself, as the response to a prior love that calls us, enables our action, and makes it possible."

When the vice of sloth takes root in the soul, like pride, it fixates the individual on one's own self, turning inward and away from God. Whereas pride wrongly considers the self its own salvation and source of triumph, sloth burdens the person with one's own emptiness, leaving him or her with the sheer banality of everyday life. As Kathleen Norris writes in her recent book, *Acedia and Me*, once acedia takes hold, "even if she knows what is spiritually good for her, she is tempted to deny that her inner beauty and spiritual strength are at her disposal, as gifts from God."

At its root, sloth is a profound inability to receive life, goodness, and God as gifts and to respond with

meaningful activity shaped by gratitude.

The corresponding virtue to counter sloth is neither industriousness or self-esteem, but faith. Faith, of course, is such a holistic description of the Christian life that we cannot hope to treat it with any sufficiency here, but we can consider it in light of how it relates to sloth.

As moral character traits, sloth and faith lie on the opposite end of the spectrum from pride and wisdom. Sloth and faith are neither the perversion nor ennobling of our striving after goodness, as are pride and wisdom; rather, they are the perversion and ennobling of our *receptivity* to goodness. Unlike pride and wisdom, which both originate in activity, sloth and faith originate in passivity.

In the first article in this series we described a moral virtue as a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit. Faith, however, is a theological virtue; that is, it has its explicit origins in a divine gift and not human nature as, say, wisdom or justice might. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (2:8-9).

The reformer Martin Luther, who had reservations about using virtues to describe the Christian's relationship to God, reminds us faith is a divine gift that has to be given *continuously*. Thus to some extent faith is never the result of habit.

While faith never loses its essential character as a divine gift, once it is given by God to the receptive heart, it functions as a virtue because the person

## For further reading

*Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, by Kathleen Norris. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008.

*Confessions*, by Augustine. Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

*Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe*, chapter 1, "Faith," by Don Frisk. Chicago: Covenant Press, 1981.

*Dynamics of Faith*, by Paul Tillich. New York: Harper-Collins, 2001.

*Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther*, by Martin Luther. Edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne. New York: Random House, 2002.

*For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality*. Edited by Timothy George and Alister McGrath. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, by Marva J. Dawn. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.

*Sloth*, by Wendy Wasserstein. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. (Note: this book is written as a satirical guide to becoming slothful.)

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is disposed to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways. Consider Luther's reflection: "[With the reception of faith] the Holy Spirit now comes and fills a man's heart and makes him to be a different kind of man who loves God and enjoys doing what God wills.... A new man is created who now understands, feels, and thinks differently than before. Now his understanding, insight, emotions, and heart are all alive—all these with the desire to do everything that pleases God."

It is here, in the essential receptivity and gratitude of faith that we discover why faith and not work is the opposite of the vice of sloth. Sloth is precisely a kind of spiritual despair that results from the incapacity to receive the good gift of divine grace; faith, in its receptivity to God's activity, enables a life pleasing to God as a response. American-style industriousness is precisely not the solution to sloth, because the problem is not originally one of not doing enough, but of not knowing how to receive enough with gratitude.

Like all the virtues, however, cultivating a receptive heart is no easy task. There is much in our individual lives that discourages it, ranging from our fears resulting from past sufferings and abuse to our addictions to work and consumption that we struggle to overcome.

This, then, is the lesson that the virtue of faith and the vice of sloth teach us: that the cultivation of our moral character results not from heroic achievement, but rather, from our dependence upon divine grace. To the extent that we resist the most basic disposition of gratitude, Luther would say, we become overcome with the empty weight of our own selves. Sloth and faith remind us that the goal of moral formation in the Christian life is not to make moral heroes, but to form Christian disciples and saints. ■