

2 Peter 1:3-7, **"His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love."**

The vice we're talking about today is sloth and at the most basic level, sloth is reluctance to exert ourselves, to work or make an effort; laziness. The nature of sloth is that most of us tend to think we work very hard and give great effort in our jobs or volunteering or in our marriages or relationships, and we can grow impatient very quickly with people we think aren't working as smart, fast, hard, or effectively as we perceive ourselves to be. The flip side of this is many of us tend to cringe at the idea of someone holding us accountable or holding our feet to the fire to make sure we're giving our all.

Over the last few weeks, Jill and I have been blessed to attend several Christian conferences and we've heard a lot of speakers and a lot of songs; most of the songs have been contemporary. One thing I've noticed, and you will too if you listen to a lot of newer Christian songs, is how many of them focus on two things: what Jesus did for us in dying on the cross, and worshipping Jesus. Don't get bent out of shape and email me about this – I'm not saying those things aren't true and appropriate to sing about, but they do reveal a pattern. We happily sing about how much Jesus did for us, how much he gave up, how much he sacrificed. But how many newer Christian songs do you know that encourage us to sing about how much we're doing for Jesus, how much we're giving up for Christ, how much we are willing to sacrifice for the Lord – in return for all Christ did and has done for us? As for all the songs about worshipping Jesus, here's a question for you, how frequently or how many times does Jesus invite people to worship him in the Gospels? I'll let you ponder that while I share a few verses with you.

**Mark 1:16-18**, "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw **Simon** and his brother **Andrew** casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, '**Follow me** and I will make you fish for people.' **And immediately they left their nets and followed him.**"

**Luke 5:27-28**, "After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named **Levi** sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, '**Follow Me.**' **And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.**"

**John 1:43**, "He found **Philip** And Jesus said to him, '**Follow Me.**'"

**Mark 10:21-22**, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, **‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’** When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

**Luke 9:59-60**, “And He said to another, **‘Follow Me.’** But he said, ‘Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.’ But He said to him, ‘Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, **go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.’”**

**Matthew 16:24-26**, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, **‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.** For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Do you notice a pattern here about what Jesus asks people to do? What do you think he wants more than singing or worship? The reason I shared all these examples with you is because I think there’s a trap that leads to spiritual sloth and the trap looks very respectable. Perhaps we praise Jesus for how much he did, sacrificed and gave; and we worship Christ as a member of the Trinity, **because it’s easier to say we praise and worship Christ than it is to actually do what he told people over and over again which was “Follow me!”** We want to enjoy the benefits of God’s love while avoiding the expectations that come with love. Even after the crucifixion and resurrection, the risen Christ says to Peter in **John 21:19**, “After this he said to him (Peter), **‘Follow me.’”** Even then Jesus didn’t say “Worship me.” He said, “Follow me.”

We can be grateful to Jesus, we can worship Christ, but we also **need to follow Christ; and to work at and develop our faith.** *2 Peter 1:5* states, **“You must make every effort to support your faith...”** We grow in our spiritual life and in fulfilling our life’s mission by well-directed **effort.** Grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning! If we’re slothful, if we resist the demands of love, if we have no intention to work at, develop, and mature our faith, we shouldn’t be surprised if it doesn’t! **When afflicted with sloth, we run away from God’s claims on us and the Lord’s calling for our lives.** This can take the form of both a lack of care or exertion, or a restless busyness that leaves us no time for God’s demands on our life. The passage from *2 Peter* is a good description of the effort that’s required on our part to develop our faith. *2 Peter* asserts that the basis for Christian growth and a godly life is our personal knowledge of and faith in Jesus. **Experiencing spiritual growth,** however, requires human effort in cooperation with the Spirit of God. One of the clear ways the validity of our faith is displayed is through the growth and development of our character as we grow in Christian virtue – as we grow in **goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love.**

Oswald Chambers wrote, “We have to do something. We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that **God will not do what we can do.** We cannot save or

sanctify ourselves – God does that. **But God will not give us good habits or character, and he will not force us to walk correctly before him.** We have to do all that ourselves. Beware of the tendency to ask the way when you know it perfectly well. Take the initiative. Be determined to act immediately in faith on what God says to you when he speaks. We have to get into the habit of carefully listening to God about everything, forming the habit of finding out what he says and heeding it. We have to take the initiative where we ARE, not where we have not yet been.”

It’s like the old saying by Charles Reade about developing character, “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character.” “No one is born either naturally or supernaturally with character, it must be developed. Nor are we born with habits – we have to form godly habits on the basis of the new life God has placed within us. **If the majesty, grace, and power of God are not being exhibited in us, God holds us responsible.**”

*2 Peter* warns us that it’s possible, because of sloth and resisting the demands of love, to know the Lord Jesus and yet be unfruitful and ineffective as a follower of Christ. God has given us everything needed for life and godliness, and it’s up to us to make every effort to grow in Christ-likeness. As we are trying to live out these virtues, which God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s power make possible, this scripture concludes by urging us, “Be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.” This is Peter’s way of saying, be sure to confirm your reservation in the eternal kingdom by growing in godliness.

I can’t believe Jill and I will celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this summer. My parents very generously sent us on a wonderful honeymoon trip to Hawaii. When we were returning, our last night on the way home was at a hotel at San Francisco’s airport. Our plane tickets, which had been booked months in advance, said our flight was at 11:00 a.m. so we figured we had plenty of time to sleep in and get ready. We were tired, so we slept later than usual the next morning. When we put the television on and were changing stations we saw a channel with flight information on it. We thought that was interesting, we’d never seen anything like that before, so we decided to check on our flight. For some strange reason, it wasn’t there. I got dressed, hopped a shuttle to the terminal and found out our flight left two hours earlier without us. We hadn’t done what we were supposed to do – we failed to pick up the phone to confirm our seats for the trip home.

*2 Peter* is urging us to confirm a far more important flight home than the one Jill and I missed. In our case, we were able to catch a later plane. We’re called to accept and confirm Jesus’ invitation to turn from a life disconnected to God and to love God, and our neighbors. The Lord has given us everything needed for a godly life, but **Peter’s words emphasize the importance of our making every effort to support our faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love.** How are you doing with that? Can people tell you’re growing in these virtues?

**If we're afflicted with the vice of sloth, we run away from God's claims on us and God's calling for our life.** God calls us to do things that are hard, but because something is hard doesn't mean we shouldn't do it. Think of the references I shared from the gospels – Jesus called people just like us to leave their families, their jobs, to sell their possessions and give the proceeds away. I don't imagine it was easy for Peter, Andrew, Philip, Matthew and all the others to do what Jesus was challenging them to do. So, we must ask ourselves, do we really trust God? Are we willing to put ourselves out there even when we don't feel like it? The vice of sloth involves sorrow and resignation over what the Holy Spirit is trying to do to make us new. Why in the world would we be unhappy about that process of transformation? Because the Holy Spirit doesn't just conjure our "new selves" out of thin air. The Spirit can't birth a new self unless the old one is put to death.

I can remember a time in my life more than 25 years ago when I was praying and writing in my journal early one morning asking God to help me with something that I wanted to be better at in my life and having this very convicting moment when I realized I was only asking God to help me with a part of my life that I knew needed improvement. The awakening I had was like hearing God say to me, "I don't want just part of your life, or to help you with the weaker parts of your life; think what I could do if you gave me all of you." And that became one of those moments when I surrendered myself to God anew and while I didn't break out singing, "All of Me, why not take all of me, can't you see, I'm no good without you..." That was the way I felt. If instead of giving God small pieces of ourselves, imagine what God could do in us and through us if we surrender to God wholeheartedly and completely even though we know accepting the call of God and responding to God's love begins a process of growth and change that never ends.

That process of growth and change as we follow Jesus can be a long, painful process of dying and rising. It takes daily effort and perseverance. The apostle Paul says, "You were taught to **put away your former way of life**, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (*Ephesians 4:22-24*) To "put away our former way of life" takes sacrifice, commitment, and change...over a lifetime. It's easier to stay stuck in our old, familiar ways. It takes effort to let the Holy Spirit ask something of us, create new hearts in us, and transform us out of the old mold into the image of Christ who calls us to **follow him** on the adventure of a lifetime.

Mother Teresa wrote in her book, *Heart of Joy*, "Let us be like a genuine and fruitful branch of the vine, which is Christ, accepting him in our lives the way he gives himself to us: as **Truth** which must be **Spoken**; as **Life** which must be **Lived**; as **Light** which must **Shine** out; as **Love** which must be **Loved**; as **a Way** which must be **Trodden**; as **Joy** which must be **Communicated**; as **Peace** which must be **Radiated**; as **Sacrifice** which must be **Offered** in our families, to our closest neighbors, and to those who live far away."

### **Prayer:**

O Lord God Almighty, who lives at once completely still and completely involved. Forgive me the slack-eyed nonresponse to something that should stir me to action, but barely elicits a yawn before the remote-control switches to something more entertaining and less demanding. Forgive me for the passive acceptance without thought of somebody else's ideas and for my systematic avoidance of having to think deeply about anything. Forgive me the complacency with which I refuse to take responsibility, preferring instead to complain and talk about what someone else ought to do. Forgive me for letting love die when it demands action to live. Forgive me for not caring enough to mourn its death. Forgive me for the dainty shallow mediocrity of my following of Jesus, content to float along on the stream of someone else's spiritual passion—or not.... Help me fall so deeply and passionately in love with you that I would do anything for the love of you. Help me to care about those things that you care about and to care as deeply as you do. Through Jesus Christ, the emblem of your passionate commitment to us and to the whole world. Amen.

**Blessing:** *2 Peter 3:18*, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and on the day of eternity."

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection:**

1. Sloth can be defined as a lack of caring, thus putting off or ignoring what God wants us to do. Share some experiences of sloth in your life. What can you do about them?
2. How can an overly busy life be a sign of slothfulness? Do you ever get this sense from your own busy life? How do you resist or counter excessive busyness—with its temptation to sloth—in your life?
3. In what areas of your life, or in what situations, are you most tempted to escape the demands of love? What acts of love do you find a daily burden? What are your favorite diversions or escape strategies?
4. Do you think you personally are prone more to sloth's restlessness or its false rest? Give examples. What forms of restless "busyness" are we involved in as Christians? To what forms of diversion-seeking does our culture tempt us? What sort of regular practices do you think could help us resist these slothful temptations—from inside and outside the church—together?
5. What rhythms and room in your schedule work to genuinely refresh you and your relationship to God and others?
6. *Galatians 6:7-10*, How might being "weary in doing good" be related to sloth? Have you felt that weariness? What advice does Paul give to overcome it?
7. Bonus for people of certain musical taste: listen to the R.E.M. song *It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine*. How does it paint a picture of sloth? Is this sort of 'feeling fine' the same thing as real peace?