



As we complete our series of messages on the *Seven Deadly Sins* this morning I want to let you know where we are going for the next month or so. Beginning next week I will offer a brief series of messages with the theme *Voices of Faith*. That theme will take us to these topics – *Voices of Faith, Under Persecution; Voices of Faith, In the Marketplace; Voices of Faith, In the Political Arena; and Voices of Faith, In the Family*. That may expand as we go, depending on how I feel led.

Today we come to the deadly sin of *sloth*. Ironically, I meant to do this one earlier but just couldn't get motivated. The subtitle to this message is, *eh, maybe later*.

Our Scripture text for this morning is Luke 10:38-42, which is the story of Mary and Martha. Those two personalities demonstrate, I think, the delicate balance between work and rest, and knowing when it's time to work and when it's time to rest.

Luke 10:38-42 –

38 *As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.*

40 *But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

41 *"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

As we consider the topic of the last deadly sin, that of sloth, I will sum up this topic with three words – *Work, Responsibility, and Sabbath*.

1. *Work*.

If you have young children, or grandchildren, you are probably aware of the movie *Zootopia*. I have not seen the movie, but I did see a preview a few weeks ago when Tanya and I were at a theater to see a different movie. *Zootopia* is an animated movie, with an all-animal cast, and in one scene two of the main characters go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. All of the animals working at the DMV were sloths, and with apologies to anyone who works in a government office, it was, I thought, rather funny

casting (you can see it at this link – <https://youtu.be/bY73vFGhSVk>). I have to confess, I could actually feel myself getting tense as the sloths moved so incredibly slow. I wanted to shout *speed up! Please!*

So here is the question I have about the deadly sin of sloth – is sloth really a problem for many people? I know we sometimes question the health of the work ethic in this country but the pace and busyness that consumes so many lives today is not at all healthy. For many people, it's not a question about the need to get moving and get busy as much as it is the need to slow down and stop more often than they do, if they ever do. I'm not sure I need to tell anyone this morning that they need to get motivated and step it up; I believe the message I need to share, to many, is to slow down.

Work is a gift of God, I believe. It is not a punishment, although we sometimes act as though it is. Work is a gift of God that allows us to use the gifts and abilities he has given to us, it allows us to be useful, and it can bring meaning to our lives.

But we also have a complicated relationship with our work, especially in a couple of areas. Somewhere along the way, for many people, work became the primary means of self-fulfillment. Having a good career can be a wonderful blessing, but so often these days, it seems, career becomes so consuming that it becomes almost an idol, as it becomes the object to which we devote our highest loyalty and affection. In the past, it seems to me, that it was more likely that people found their sense of self-fulfillment in areas of life such as family and faith. Increasingly, it seems that people turn to their work to bring them a sense of worth, fulfillment, purpose, and meaning. If you love your work and career, I say good for you, but I would also caution that it can be very problematic when we tie our identities, sense of worth, and sense of fulfillment to our work. Many of us have taken note that retirement can be difficult for some people, as they struggle to fill the void that is left after leaving their work. For some, they must re-establish their sense of identity after retiring, and find it difficult to reconnect with life apart from work.

Work also becomes, for some people, a way to avoid what might be going on in their lives; that is, work becomes a tool of avoidance. If you keep moving, if you keep busy, you have a reason not to stop and talk with someone you need to talk to, and if you keep busy you might keep your mind active enough to even avoid thinking about some of the matters that need your careful thought.

It is this avoidance that leads some to become workaholics. *Workaholic* is a word that has a modern origin, first coined by Dr. Wayne Oates back in the 70s. Interestingly, being a workaholic doesn't have anything to do with work. Being a workaholic, I think, is primarily about avoidance. A workaholic can't slow down because if they do, it might be necessary to talk about an issue they don't *want* to talk about it, and so work becomes a very convenient method of avoidance. And our culture is happy to help with this avoidance, because we sanctify workaholism into a virtue. We provide various rewards for those who put in long workweeks, get to work early and stay late, and take work home on the weekends.

2. *Responsibility.*

My father was only nine years old when his father passed away, and it became necessary for him to help support his family. My dad was a hard worker, and because of his circumstances, it was ingrained in him from an early age to work, and to work hard. He was a steelworker – putting in long hours at the mill – and had a number of small business pursuits on the side, as a farmer, a gunsmith, a sign painter, doing tractor work, and other work as well. It was a very rare occasion for me to witness my father either sitting down or being still. Consequently, he worked very hard to instill in my siblings and I a strong work ethic. All of us had regular chores to do, and one of the first for me was shoveling the ashes out of our coal furnace. Did anyone here grow up with a coal furnace? If so, you know what it was like to be covered from head to foot in coal ash. I knew, on Saturday mornings, I was not free to do anything or go anywhere until I went down into our cellar and shoveled out that coal ashes. And I didn't like it, but it was good for me. My parent's insistence that I have regular responsibilities around our home was good for me, as they helped to teach me about responsibility.

It is important that we learn to fulfill the responsibilities that we have in life, but how we do so can vary from one person to another, as we are all different in our personalities. This is why the story of Mary and Martha is so interesting, because people react to the story according to their personality type. The Marthas of the world read or hear this story and think *she's right! It's the people like us that do all the work and if it weren't for us nothing would ever get done!* And they have a point. The Marys of the world read or hear this story and think *people need to slow down. Be more like me. Be laid back. That working all the time wears a body out!*

Mary and Martha make an interesting contrast, because neither of them are wrong. But take note of something interesting – Martha complains about Mary, but Mary does not complain about Martha. Martha goes to Jesus and says, *Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!* Martha frames that question in an interesting way – *Lord, don't you care?* It wasn't a question as much as it was an accusation – *Lord, you don't care that I have to do all the work! Mary's sitting around when she should be helping me!*

Part of what we can understand from this passage is that not everyone approaches work in the same way, and that's all right. Some people have a very driven, type A personality, and some are not. Martha was a type A personality. Maybe a type A++. She is the one who criticized Jesus when their brother Lazarus died (John 11:17-21 – *17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died).* Only a strong personality would have the boldness to approach Jesus in such a way.

Martha was not wrong because she worked hard. I would never fault Martha for being a type A personality. I am married to a type A personality, so I understand them very well. I am not a type A personality. Some day I'll get around to figuring out what type I am, but not today. We need those driving types of personalities in the world or a lot of things would be left undone. But in this story, Martha failed to realize that there is a time to work, but part of the understanding of responsibility is to know when not to work.

We have a bit more information about Martha, but we don't know as much about Mary's. Perhaps Mary needed to be a bit more motivated. Perhaps Mary was willing to let Martha do the greater share of the work. But whatever the case may be, Mary understood that at that moment, work was not the most important.

We have to work, but we are not just created for work. We are created by God with a spirit, a soul, and they must be tended, and that is a different kind of work. It is a responsibility, and sometimes that responsibility supersedes work. That being said, our final word is –

3. Sabbath.

Exodus 20:9-10 says that for **9** *Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.*

Jesus and his disciples worked hard, but they knew there was a time to rest, and at times he even led them away from the overwhelming need that surrounded them, in order to find a quiet place to bring them refreshment and renewal (**30** *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."* **32** *So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. 33 But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

So he began teaching them many things). I think that if Jesus saw the need for rest, we can give ourselves a break and rest some as well. I don't believe in the idea that *it's better to burn out than to rust away*. I worry about burnout in the church. As important as our work is, we need to make sure we are getting adequate rest and spiritual renewal.

One of the most meaningful moments of my sabbatical last year came on the last day, when I went to the Abby of Gethsemani near Bardstown. If you have never traveled to that beautiful place I encourage you to do so. I found it really moving to sit in the back of the sanctuary there and to listen to the prayers and the songs of the monks. And the weather that day was beautiful, and I walked up to the top of a hill across from the Abby, where there was a cross, and on that hill you could look around and see for miles at the surrounding countryside. I told myself that day that I would return there with some regularity but have yet to return, but I go there often in my mind.

We are blessed by God to be given the opportunity to have meaningful work, but we are spiritual beings, with souls that must be nourished. We must never forget to have times of Sabbath rest. So rest today, and don't feel badly about it!