

You can find them anywhere. They look harmless but don't be deceived, they carry a disease that is as contagious as it is fatal. You need to know how to recognize this dangerous creature because this is no endangered species. They thrive in an affluent culture like ours and sometimes even slip into churches and spread their toxic lifestyle. I am talking about the deadly sluggard. The word sluggard is found only in the book of Proverbs. But we do use other words to convey the same affliction, words like "slacker" or "sloth."

If you want to see a real sluggard, you don't have to go to the zoo just peek behind the curtains of the average American home. See him? There he is, a *"middle-aged man sitting in front of a television set watching whatever sport happens to be on cable. He once had bright plans for the future and a strong desire to make his mark on the world but somewhere along the way all the fire went out. He settled for comfort. His dreams were sacrificed to a La-Z-Boy and flickering images on a screen. His life is a story of unrealized potential, unfilled longings, and unrelenting boredom. Boredom has been called 'the common cold of the soul,' It is the fruit of patterns of behavior that never get confronted and changed, abilities and gifts that never get cultivated and deployed. Weeks turn into months and months turn into years until one day he's looking back on a life of deep, satisfying relationships he never formed, honest conversations he never had, great bold prayers he never prayed, exhilarating risks he never took, and lives he never touched. He is a sluggard sitting in his recliner with a shriveled soul and forgotten dreams oblivious to a world of desperate need and a great God calling him to be a part of something bigger than himself.* (Adapted from Ortberg, *If You Want To Walk On Water...*, pp. 34-35). How did it happen?

Proverbs 26:13-16 paints a vivid picture of a sluggard. The writer offers four symptoms of those who are slouching their way to Gomorrah.

1. A sluggard never runs out of excuses. A sluggard even creates imaginary circumstances to excuse not doing what he is supposed to do...v. 13.

Jesus was not a big fan of excuses. Mt. 25:14-30 is a warning passage about the danger of slothfulness. Jesus is telling about His promised return. He says, "It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property." When the man returned, he called his servants in to give an account of their activities while he was away. The first two servants who had invested the master's resources wisely were commended. "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." The third servant, had nothing to offer but an excuse, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed,²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours." The parable ends on a surprising note. The Master says, "You wicked and slothful servant!... take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Sounds a little harsh doesn't it? "You wicked slothful servant." How was he slothful? After all, he took care of his master's assets. That's good stewardship isn't it? Why does Jesus call him lazy? Because the master expected his servants to use what he gave them to pursue profitable activities in his absence.

The third servant was more focused on preserving the resources he received than investing them. The Master expects a return on his investment. Everything the Master gives us - money, time, abilities, relationships and anything else that can be leveraged for the kingdom. The sluggard has a million reasons why he isn't interested in a life of intentional investment. **Do you frequently make excuses?**

2. A sluggard values comfort above all...v. 14. "How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest." The result of his indifference is predictable, "and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man." Pr. 6:9-11

The pursuit of comfort is killing us in America. "Underdeveloped societies suffer from one set of diseases: tuberculosis, malnutrition, pneumonia, parasites, typhoid, cholera, typhus, etc. Affluent America has virtually invented a whole new set of diseases: obesity, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, strokes, lung cancer, venereal disease, cirrhosis of the liver, drug addiction, alcoholism, divorce, battered children, suicide, murder. Take your choice. Labor-saving machines have turned out to be body-killing devices. Our affluence has allowed both mobility and isolation of the nuclear family, and as a result, our divorce courts, our prisons and our mental institutions are flooded. In saving ourselves we have nearly lost ourselves."
— John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*

If your highest goal is to save yourself, to simply preserve your life, to settle down and be comfortable, you're missing the point. We are to "seek first the kingdom of God" not our own self-indulgence. In 2014, Admiral William H. McRaven's gave the commencement speech for the graduating class from the University of Texas at Austin. He surprised everyone in attendance by explaining that the key to success was making your bed every day. Making your bed is what he calls a "keystone habit," something that kick starts a pattern of other good behavior. He advised the graduates, "If you want to change the world, start by making your bed. If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. Obviously, there is more to success than making your bed but an impactful life is the sum total of one good decision after another. **Did you make your bed this morning?**

3. A sluggard rarely finishes what he starts. v. 15 (This exact Proverb is repeated in 19:24). The sluggard loves to start new projects but fades before the finish line. He made his bed in the morning but crawled back in after lunch. He got off to a good start but faded before the finish line.

John Steven Akhwari from Tanzania competed in the Olympic marathon in Mexico City. Struggling to finish the race Akhwari fell to the ground, gashing his knee and also causing a dislocation. He also smashed his shoulder against the pavement. Most observers, seeing his injuries, assumed he would pull out and go to hospital. Instead, he received medical attention and returned to the track to continue his race. By the time he reached the stadium, he was limping and the bandage around his leg was flapping in the breeze. He was asked why he'd carried on, and his response has gone down in sporting history. "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race," he said. "They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."

There is no more important assignment in life than pursuing the calling God has created us to pursue. But the Christian life is not a sprint, it's a marathon. We have to keep running.

That's why the apostle Paul says, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are aperfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you." Philippians 3:12-15

4. A sluggard is the smartest person in the room. A sluggard does not listen to the counsel of others...v. 16. When King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king over Israel. He consulted his wise counselors who told him, "If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them and grant them their petition, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever." But he forsook the counsel of the elders which they had given him and consulted with the young men who grew up with him." They told him to be tough so he said, "Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." 1 Kings 12:11. The result was a divided kingdom which was never reunited.

Determine a plan of action. No man ever plans to fail, he simply fails to plan. Strangely enough, sluggards can be very busy. He does just enough to get things done, so he can get back to enjoying his comforts. The sluggard lives his routine in a fog, without a plan, sleepwalking between weekends. Frederick Buechner writes: "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. Like a man with a bad head cold, he has mostly lost his sense of taste and smell...people come and go, but through glazed eyes he hardly notices them. He is letting things run their course. He is getting through his life."

Slothfulness can be characterized by undisciplined activity, sideways energy, peripheral activity, motion without meaning. I can avoid being repurposed by immersing myself in all sorts of activities, none of which furthers God's purpose for my life. You could be the hardest working person here but if you are not pursuing your God-given purpose then you are what the Bible calls a sluggard. Sloth has nothing to do with pace, it has everything to do with purpose. Determine a course of action that will help you grow spiritually and make it a habit. What course of action will you take today that will lead to your sanctification? How will you cooperate with God so that your life will be repurposed? Regular worship attendance? Forming a group for mutual accountability? Training experiences? Choose one healthy practice and make it a habit.

D. A. Carson says, "People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated." (*For the Love of God*, vol. 2, p. 23)

Remember, there is no growth without resistance. God, in His great love for us, will not allow us to enjoy endless comfort in this life. The loss of comfort is the essence of trials. When we get too comfortable we begin to sabotage the sanctification process. When the comfort is taken away, we are jolted back to spiritual alertness. Through trials, God says, "I love you enough to remove the comforts you crave to make room for Me. I am your ultimate joy and comfort."

This past week I taught a class for seven pastors. One of them pastors a Chinese church in Houston. He told us about a man in his congregation who was going to go live in a dangerous part of the world with two young children. This pastor was concerned. He said this is not a safe place to take your wife and children. The man told him, "Pastor, let me explain to you my theology of safety. Safety is not our priority. We are well aware of the dangers. We are concerned with the security situation in that country but that is not our priority. Our priority is obedience. If safety is our priority, we will be forced to disobey the call of God on our lives. That, we will not do.

"So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, 'I am holy; you be holy.'" 1 Pe. 1:13-16 (The Message)