Seven Deadly Sins: 2. Sloth

I thought that ‘taking a duvet day’ was the polite equivalent of ‘throwing a sickie,’ pretending to be ill so that you can have a day off work. But apparently some companies have a policy of allowing workers a certain number of unscheduled days off to support their mental health. ‘Duvet days’ are said to help with stress and anxiety, giving people time to think and to recharge their batteries. The idea is that, by giving employees a chance to sleep, recover and take of their personal wellbeing, this reduces the likelihood of reduced productivity through burnout further down the road. So, how do you feel about the idea? Are you thinking, ‘That’s what weekends are supposed to be for,’ or do you think that people should be allowed to take the occasional day off if they are too tired to come into work?

Christians have tended to emphasise the importance of ‘redeeming the time,’ and making sure that every day is spent constructively: ‘The devil finds work for idle hands.’ Although the principle of sabbath rest is enshrined in scripture, historically non-conformists tended to ensure that Sundays were filled with worthwhile, spiritual activities, so that in practice they could be as busy as any other day. Was that a good or a bad thing? How important is ’down time’? Can you enjoy leisure with a clear conscience, or are you a bit too driven to be able to do that? How do you achieve a good work-life balance? Is sloth a deadly sin for you? If so, how does it manifest itself in your life?

There aren’t many references to being lazy in the New Testament, but one is found in Romans 12:11, though you need to read the ESV to spot it: ‘Do not be slothful in zeal.’ Dunn suggests the translation, ‘not negligent in eagerness,’ and suggests that the slothful person doesn’t get stuck in because of weariness, fear, bashfulness, reserve or culpable nonchalance. According to Cranfield, it is an ‘attitude which seeks to get by with as little work and inconvenience as possible, which shrinks from dust and heat and resents the necessity for any exertion and a burden and imposition.’ Moo talks about losing steam in our lifelong responsibility to reverence God. Should ‘sloth’ be named and condemned as sinful, or can it be a manifestation or some other, underlying issue?

It’s always easy to point the finger at others and think, ‘That’s true of them!’ But what about you? Is this a danger in your life? Is it an issue you have encountered in the past? If so, how did you handle it? How did others support you through it (or maybe they didn’t…)? Does the rest of Romans 12:11 provide a possible solution to this problem? If so, how could implementing Paul’s words here make a difference?

When we think of sloth as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, we tend to think of wasting time on account of laziness, but Thomas Aquinas talked about acedia, which is a specific term with a slightly different meaning. Aquinas was referring to apathy, a sense of spiritual listlessness or indifference towards God. Monks would frequently struggle with acedia around midday, just before the main meal, when they were tired and hungry and inclined to be irritable and fed up. John Cassian talks about ‘a tedium or perturbation of the heart [which] besieges the unhappy mind, it begets aversion from the place, boredom with one’s cell, and scorn and contempt for one’s brethren.’ Many of us will recognise the kind of ‘spiritual boredom’ which makes us disinclined to pray, read the Bible or go to church: it all seems too much effort for little or no reward. And that’s the problem – that is precisely how the sin of acedia attacks and undermines our relationship with God when we yield to it. Acedia distracts us from God, and diverts our attention elsewhere, pushing God out of our minds, our hearts and our routine. Avoiding God can manifest itself in hyper-activity as much as in indolence: if you are too busy to pray, you are too busy… Can you relate to any of this?

John Cassian was a monk who spoke of only finding relief from acedia when he left his cell and went to see one of the other brothers. When he spoke to another monk, Abba Moses about it, Moses replied, ‘So far from freeing yourself from it, you have surrendered to it completely and become its slave. You must realize that it will attack all the more severely because you have deserted your post, unless from now on you strive to subdue it through patience, prayer and manual labour.’ In other words, there are times when you just have to grit your teeth and stick at your spiritual disciplines, not because you find them rewarding, but because you are doing them out of love for God. In any relationship there can be times when we don’t feel very loving, but then we should resolve to continue to speak and act in loving ways. Sometimes our behaviour can express our feelings, but there are also times when our feelings need reinforcing by our behaviour.

Chloe Lynch talks about the priority of ‘friendship with God overflowing in friendship-love for others.’ How does (or could, or should) this priority affect your daily or weekly routine? Why not use Lent this year as an opportunity to restart a particular spiritual discipline, and ask God to rekindle your relationship with him through this? Is there someone you could ask to walk with you through this period, who can extend to friendship of Christ towards you, and to help you strengthen your friendship with him?

‘Deliver me, O God, from a slothful mind, from all lukewarmness, and all dejection of spirit. I know these cannot but deaden my love to thee; mercifully free my heart from them, and give me a lively, zealous, active, and cheerful spirit; that I may vigorously perform whatever thou commandest, thankfully suffer whatever thou choosest for me, and be ever ardent to obey in all things thy holy love.

(John Wesley, from *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*).