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Hardworking Sloths: Disguising Spiritual Laziness

The lazy culprit behind our busyness.
CAROLYN ARENDS / POSTED JUNE 13, 2011



Image: iStock

looked.

I found myself thinking about that lethargic critter the other day while listening to a recorded Eugene Peterson lecture and arguing with my MP3 player.

Peterson: *Pastors are highly susceptible to the sin of sloth.*

Me: *What are you talking about? Pastors are some of the most overworked people alive.*

Peterson: *Sloth is most often evidenced in busyness ... in frantic running around, trying to be everything to everyone, and then having no time to listen or pray, no time to become the person who is doing these things.*

Score one for Peterson.

I'm not a pastor. But I am busy, like almost everyone I know. When Peterson declares that "the pastor's primary responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God," I can readily apply that job description to my roles as wife, mother, musician, and author. The mandate can be stated even more succinctly regarding my

My family used to play "Where's Waldo?" with a three-toed sloth at the zoo; eventually we'd find him suspended like a hammock from a tree branch above us. I used to think he got a bad rap as nature's laziest creature. After all, I don't have the strength to hold myself upside down on a set of monkey bars for 10 seconds. Then a zoo volunteer explained that sloths have curved claws that allow them to dig into branches and hang without effort. Our sloth, it turns out, really was as unmotivated as he

task as a human: *Pay attention to God*. If I don't, I'm guilty of spiritual sloth, no matter how hard I'm working. In truth, there is an inverse relationship between how overwhelmed I am *doing* things and how much energy I can give to *being* attentive.

But did I mention I'm *really* busy?

Part of the problem is that spiritual receptivity requires unglamorous practices like prayer, time in Scripture, and attentiveness to what God is doing in the people around me. Telling me, "Prayer promotes spiritual growth!" has as much wow-factor as announcing, "Reducing calories leads to weight loss!" I want something *new*—a development that will lead to breakthrough. Peterson observes that spiritual disciplines have "not been tried and discarded because [they] didn't work, but tried and found difficult (and more than a little tedious) and so shelved in favor of something or other that could be fit into a busy [person's] schedule."

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Scheduling is no small matter. Attending takes time without offering quantifiable results. It requires stillness in a culture that rewards industriousness. It's inefficient in a world that considers getting things done next to godliness. A pastor who refuses to be slothful in the areas of silence and reflection stands a good chance of getting fired.

Our emphasis on external productivity over internal fidelity goes back a long way. Consider the case of King Saul, reported in 1 Samuel 13.

Early in his kingship, Saul and the prophet Samuel had an understanding: Samuel would lead the people spiritually, and Saul would lead militarily. However, holed up with his troops facing a brigade of Philistines, Saul faced a dilemma. Samuel failed to show up on time to offer the sacrifice that Saul and his men relied on to keep them in God's favor. As typically happens when things go off schedule, disorganization set in. The longer Saul waited, the more restless his men became; he was losing them.

Saul did what any good manager would do. He took action. He offered the sacrifice himself.

If I were conducting Saul's job evaluation, I'd give him a bonus. He took initiative and solved the problem, saving time and boosting morale in the process. But Samuel didn't see it that way. He told Saul he had failed to keep God's command, and thus would be deposed by an incoming king—a "man after God's own heart" better suited for the job.

God is not looking for leaders who take matters into their own hands. He values faithfulness over efficiency. It's no good to organize the whole world yet be oblivious to the God who created it and holds it together. Yes, we have practical commitments we need to take seriously. But part of being responsible is being response-able: centering our lives in such a way that we can respond to the world around us with the mind of Christ. Such response-ability is impossible if our obligations crowd out any opportunity to get to know him better.

It makes sense that the sloth is the official mascot of spiritual lethargy. I've begun to see my incessant busyness as the set of claws that keep me holding on for dear life, dug in, hanging upside down, not getting anywhere. With God's help, I want to let go, trusting him to show me how to live right side up. My job is to pay attention.

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