A Series on Wisdom

Well, this evening we are beginning a four-part sermon series on the book of Proverbs. We do this every summer in July where we jump into the wisdom literature to look at the wisdom of God. Next week we'll talk about friendship. The following week we'll talk about stewardship and then we'll talk about God's wisdom on how he can help us discern his plan for our life. And today we are going to visit a character that comes up throughout all of the Proverbs which is this character of the sluggard or the person that is slothful. We're going to ask the question, what does God's wisdom have to say to us about how to guide us into a life that is full where we steward the gift that God has given us.

Now before we jump in there, in the past we did whole sermons on what the idea of wisdom is, whole messages that described how God's wisdom is revealed in the scriptures and how it guides us. I do encourage you to go back and listen to those sermons from last year because they are beautiful and brilliant. They weren't done by me. One of them was but the other one wasn't and they give you a beautiful description of what wisdom is.

Defining Wisdom

But I want to give you a working definition for us as we approach this passage and then as we approach the passages for us. What is wisdom most deeply? Wisdom is the spirit of God guiding us in our lives into what is good and true and beautiful that glorifies his name in a world that is very complex. Now it's one thing in our lives to know what is good and true and beautiful, even to desire in our lives what is good and true and beautiful. But it's another thing altogether to know how to actualize that, how to actually navigate with the goodness of God through a world that is anything but oftentimes true and good and beautiful and often very complex. So when we speak about the wisdom of God, as I mentioned it in this message and in the messages to come, this is what we mean. It's the spirit of God guiding us into the fullness of life.

The Sluggard and the Flatness of Heart

This evening again, we're going to look at what that wisdom looks like, how it shows up as we speak about this idea of being a sluggard or being slothful. And its opposite of being someone that's filled with life. Now, I want to name something very carefully here at the beginning, which is if you hear the word sloth or if you hear the word sluggard, your mind probably goes like my mind to think of somebody that is extremely lazy or you think about excessive laziness. So, the old image of somebody that won't get off the couch and just watch his TV all day or the life that's lived with an endless scroll where people don't do anything else or that person that won't go and get a job.

I personally love this quote by Mark Twain who said this, "Never put off until tomorrow what may be done the day after tomorrow just as well." And with this image of sloth and this image of the sluggard, we often picture them, those people, those lazy people, or maybe even sometimes ourselves as we look in the mirror with a certain sense of judgment. Oh, those lazy people over

there, they need to just get off the couch and go and work. And there is something to that. There is something to work ethic and to responding. Maybe we even write off the premise of this message. You're sitting there and you say, "Well, I'm not lazy. I don't really need to listen to this." But in the scriptures, as we'll discover, and in the wisdom of the church, there's a much deeper understanding of what sloth actually is. It does relate to self-discipline and into work ethic. But more deeply, sloth emerges from a state of our hearts. And the way that it's most deeply described is that sloth is a sorrow or a heaviness towards the good. Sloth, put another way, is a flatness of heart towards the good. And so, it's not just about whether you're working or not working or whether you're lazy or not lazy, but it's where our lives, it's whether our lives are moving towards the good and the true and the beautiful which is again the goal of wisdom to where God is taking all of us.

Once we understand sloth in this way we realize that sloth isn't just a problem for those lazy people over there or us maybe in a season, but it's a condition that touches every one of us because you can be slothful when you're lazy and not doing anything and idle, but ironically you can also be slothful when you're busy when your calendar is full. And so today, we're going to look quickly at three faces of sloth in the book of Proverbs.

Our goal in doing this is not just to help us identify the ways in which we maybe get it wrong in our lives or patterns that maybe are not healthy for us, but to actually look at it in how God is encouraging us to re-embrace the fullness of life that he has given to us. Because he's given all of us something very precious to steward and that is our lives, our bodies, our souls, our lives. Each of us have a set amount of years, weeks, and months that we walk on this earth. And God wants us to use those well and to steward them well. And he invites us, as Jesus said, to know the fullness of life that is present within him. The opposite of what sloth is. Not a flatness of the heart, but a fullness of the heart.

So, as we look at these faces of sloth, the goal is not to sort of beat ourselves down, but to give us a matrix to maybe analyze our own lives and to see how God may be calling us out of that into a fuller life together with him.

Let me pray for us and then we'll move into the scriptures. Lord, we know your word is like a double-edged sword dividing soul from spirit, bone from marrow, laying bare to us, laying bare to you the intentions of our heart and our soul. We ask now that you would reveal to us what we have in our own hearts, that you would place within us your life and your joy. Guide us by your scriptures, lead us by your wisdom, bless us by your Holy Spirit. We pray in your name. Amen. Amen.

Face 1: The Lion in the Road

So, we're going to jump around a little bit, but if you want to go to Proverbs chapter 26, we'll start there. Let's look at how the Proverbs points out and diagnoses for us this sorrow for the good or this flatness of the heart with three pictures of sloth. And we'll move through these very quickly and then get to how God calls us out of them. Proverbs 26:13 says this, "The sluggard

says, 'There is a lion in the road. There is a lion in the streets.'" That is to say, I'm not going to do anything or move from where I am because there are lions out there.

So, the sluggard, the one that is slothful, is somebody that is so hyper-focused on obstacles, they look for obstacles and obstacles become something that stop them from ever getting off the couch or ever engaging in life or ever stepping into that new thing that God might want for them. Now, to be fair here, in many cases in our lives, there actually are lions. In many cases of our lives, there actually are obstacles. And so, we don't want to just brush this off easy and say, "Oh, you're just making excuses so you can stay on the couch." There actually are challenges that many of us deal with in our lives.

I was reading an article recently about the challenges that young adults face today. For example, in this generation, it faced housing costs that are way out of proportion with earnings compared to 1980 for previous generations, challenging job prospects, the spectre of what AI might do to their careers, delayed marriage, student debt, loneliness. These are not imagined lions. These are not somebody who's sitting on the couch and just making up lions and obstacles for themselves. These are real. Lions are real. This is true for many other types of people. People that deal with chronic pain, people that deal with family challenges, people that deal with chronic depression. These are real obstacles and real lions and so we don't want to just quickly brush them away and say just get up go. These are real reasons that push many of us to sort of engage this idea of sloth and being a sluggard or to put it in more modern terms to sort of just quietly give up and opt out.

What the scriptures say is that the mistake is not in seeing the lions because lions are real, but it's in letting them become wholly sovereign in your life to where they are all that you can see in front of you. Where the obstacle or the challenge, real or imaginary or exaggerated, clouds out the vision that God has given you for the good and the beautiful and the true. And all you can see in front of you is the lion or the obstacle that is in front of you. And when that happens regularly and over time, our hearts begin to go more and more flat for the good that God has for our lives.

So I want to ask a diagnostic question to all of us. What is the good? What is the beautiful? What is the true in your life that perhaps you are avoiding because the fear of the obstacle in front of you has kept you from pursuing it, from stepping forward into what God has for you. Sometimes the face of sloth looks like you're never starting something. This could be spiritual, could be something right in front of you because you fear the lions. You make up lions. You say, "There's too many lions on the road, so I'm just not going to go there. Just going to stay where I am."

Face 2: Motion Without Progress

So sometimes the face of sloth looks like we're not moving. Sometimes it looks like we're moving, but we're not actually going anywhere. So if you look in the next verse, chapter 26:14, as a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns in his bed. So this is a face of sloth where there is motion but there's no progress. Where the door is moving but it's not actually going

anywhere. Where a sluggard is moving around in their bed but they're not actually doing anything meaningful. So there's motion in their life but they're not actually doing anything. And ironically the sloth isn't actually resting either because they're moving around in their bed. So they're moving but they're not doing anything. They're moving but they're not resting.
In our lives this is the irony of where sloth can show up in a busy life. That's a life that's filled with novelty and doing things and scrolling and constant travel and working and filling your schedule with all sorts of things. And you might have the fullest calendar compared to all of your friends, but nothing is really driving forward with real purpose. And so, you're doing a lot of motion, but you're not actually moving anywhere.

If I can give you an image from one of my favorite niches. Hopefully, it's not too niche. If any of you have ever driven a boat, do you know what cavitation is? Raise your hand. Okay, we're in Colorado. We're not on the East Coast. I'm from the East Coast. So, if you ever have an outboard engine and you hit the gas, it pushes the boat forward. But if you turn the boat too fast or if you lift the engine out of the water a little bit too much, there are air bubbles that come in. It's a principle of fluid dynamics. I was a chemical engineer. It's fun to have these things. So, the bubbles enter into the area where the propeller is turning and it's called cavitation. The propeller starts to spin faster and faster and faster and faster and the engine gets louder and louder and louder, but it doesn't have any propulsion because there's no water to actually grab.

This is what sloth and sluggardness can look like actually when you're busy. It's a life that's filled with cavitation, where the engine in your heart and your life is loud and you're moving and the propeller's spinning, but there's so many air bubbles. There's so many things that don't have real substance. There's so many things that don't drive us forward or that we can grab a hold of with our souls that we find that we're not actually moving forward. And when we live a life like that for a long time, if you've ever had an engine cavitating, you know it can actually blow up the engine. If you live a life like that for a long time, again, your heart begins to go flat. You begin to stop having an actual desire for what is good and true and beautiful because you find your life is a life of cavitation. So a good diagnostic question for us if this is our kind of sloth is not am I moving but where am I going, am I actually going anywhere. So that's the second face of sloth

Face 3: The Overgrown Vineyard

The Third face of sloth, last one, is the vineyard that has grown over. For here I invite you to go to Proverbs 24; it's the verses that we heard read here up front. We'll start in verse 30. I passed by a field of a sluggard. It was overgrown with thorns. The ground was covered with nettles and its stone wall was broken down. And then I saw a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. And poverty will come upon you like a robber.

This is the idea of creeping sloth. The idea that nobody wakes up in the morning and says, you know, I'm just going to neglect my friendships or I'm just going to neglect my marriage or my job or I'm just going to sort of give up on everything. Nobody woke up in the morning and said, "I'm just going to let my vineyard go to ruin." But over time, a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands, a little bit of neglect, a lack of responding to the demands of the needs around me, and behold, it comes upon you like a robber. It creeps into your life.

The Proverbs is speaking about a vineyard here, but also the deeper truth that anything good, anything of value, anything worth loving, any of the gifts that God has given us, his demands that he has for our life have demands. A good marriage has demands. Raising children with love has demands. A good career has demands. A vibrant prayer life, creating art, doing anything good and true and beautiful that glorifies God as we follow him often has demands. So sloth often shows up not so much as open rebellion but a quiet resistance to the demands that love have upon us. So a good diagnostic question again for us is: are there things that we're sort of folding our hands on? We're sort of just letting drift or grow. We're not paying attention to these things that God has given us that have true and deep value, but we're just sort of, you know, just letting them go because we don't feel like engaging.

A Portrait of the Numb Heart

These are the faces of what sloth looks like. The lion, the door on its hinges, the vineyard. They're different pictures of the same disease, a heart that has gone flat. And I just want to recap all of these with this brilliant quote. It's from Dorothy Sayers. She was an Anglican novelist and a Christian essayist. And she captured it better than almost anyone. She said this, "Sloth is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for."

Now, that's not laziness. That's not just sitting on the couch. That's a portrait of a heart that has gone numb and a soul that has lost its capacity to delight in the goodness of God. Now, if that's what sloth ultimately is, then the answer for us as we leave here today cannot be just go and try harder, get out of bed earlier, just, you know, muster up the energy to punch the lion in the face. That can't be the answer because that's not the diagnosis of why we fall into sloth. We can't manufacture delight. We can't reinflate a deflated soul or a deflated heart.

The Gospel and the Restoration of Joy

And this is why the gospel is such good news for us. Jesus didn't come merely just to forgive us our sins, to guide us on the path of wisdom, but he came to restore our hearts. He came to make that which was dead alive. He came to restore our capacity for joy by restoring unto us the life that he created us for. He came to teach us to love what is truly good again in our lives. The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which dwells within us. This is why Jesus came to meet us and to know us.

As I was reflecting on that Sayers quote, it's sort of like a scalpel that goes in and cuts. It struck me that her description of sloth also describes in reverse the life that Christ gives us in the scriptures. If sloth is a person that believes in nothing, then Christ comes to give us something true, something real, something noble, something good to believe in and to know. If sloth cares for nothing, Christ comes to teach us what ultimate true and deep care looks like. If sloth knows nothing, Christ comes and says, "Be renewed. Be restored and transformed by the renewing of your minds." If sloth withdraws from the world, Christ says, "Go out into the world and make

disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Bear their burdens. Bring my joy to them."

If sloth enjoys nothing, Christ restores wonder in our hearts. If sloth loves nothing, Christ pours that love into our hearts. If sloth hates nothing, Christ teaches us to hate what is evil and what performs what he made that is good. If sloth lives for nothing, Christ gave us a kingdom to live for. And if sloth will die for nothing, Christ came to die for us, to forgive us of our sins, and to redeem us into this new life. This is the wisdom of God. This is the wisdom that not merely makes us more productive citizens, but it's the wisdom that makes us fully alive and gives us hearts that delight in the good and the true and the beautiful in what ultimately and most deeply glorifies God in being remade after his image, the image of his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Practical Steps for Fullness of Life

To end here, I just want to give you three practical steps so this isn't just all theory that help us to say: how do we live out of sloth and into this fullness of life? And I just want to cite here that I'm ripping these completely from Thomas Aquinas and his work on acedia, which is another word for sloth, and diligence. So how do we live outside of this? How do we embrace a life that is full?

First, do the good thing before you feel like it. Do the good thing before you feel like it. I didn't have room to put this in, but the Proverbs talk about the ant. He says, "Behold the ant. Look at the ant. You sluggard." The ant just goes out and works. Do the good thing before you feel like it. Don't wait for the feelings to come back before you act. Feelings follow action more often than they lead to it. That is to say, our feelings catch up with our actions faster often than our actions are motivated by our feelings. So the encouragement here is to get up, to make the call, to start the work, to open the scriptures, to engage in prayer. The heart often warms up after the body shows up. This is the wisdom that God gives us in the scriptures.

Secondly, keep good company. Acedia thrives in isolation and it thrives in confirmation bias. So this is the part where we gather every week that you're not just here for yourself. Your presence here is medicine for someone else whose heart has gone flat. And if you spend your time by yourself or if you spend your time with other people who have just sort of given up and gone flat in your life, you will feel encouraged to go flat in your life as well. You'll find that to be normative in your own life. And so the wisdom of church history and in the scriptures say surround yourself by those who are embracing the good things of God.

Last thing: contemplate the goodness of God until the desire for him returns. Look at Christ. Sit with his beauty. Sit with a beauty that's been revealed through all the scriptures. Embrace the joy that while we were sinners and far off from him, while we were dealing with all the issues that we have, including being sloths and sluggards spiritually, Christ sent himself to call us out of that into a new life with him. Embrace that truth. Find joy in it. Let your heart be slowly retrained by what is actually true and good.

The Apostle Paul says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent and praiseworthy think about such things." This is the wisdom that God has for our lives. This is what Proverbs is offering us and driving us towards this night. A life that is full, a heart that is not flat, but filled up by the love of God so that we can fully embrace the fullness that God has for us. So that we steward our lives well for his glory and actually for our own joy as we walk together with him. So I pray that we're a people, a church that follows God into his truth.

Closing Prayer

Let me pray for us.
Lord, bless us as we leave here today and seek your path for our lives. May your wisdom that is given by your Holy Spirit and offered by your word guide us as we leave here today. Open up our hearts, Lord, again and show us the ways in which we have fallen away from a fullness of joy for you. Where our hearts and our souls have fallen flat. Lord, help us to cooperate with your spirit to draw us into the fullness of life.

I pray especially, Lord, for those in this room that are dealing with real obstacles and real lions, maybe for a long period of time, things that have just held them down and kept them from knowing the joy of life that is in together with you. Would you bless them by your spirit? Would you visit them specially this evening to let them know that you've called them and drawn them into the fullness of life. Bless us all, Lord, as we walk with you and be with us this evening. In your great and holy name we pray. Amen.