

## The Spiritual Sluggard

How many of us would admit to being lazy? We generally feel insulted at the idea – and point to how hard working we are in our jobs, at home or places of learning. We point to how tired we are at the end of the day, and console ourselves – we are hard-working people.

But do you know that it is possible to be hard-working in some areas and lazy in others? Just look at the man who labours 10 hours at his workplace, but can never wash dishes! Or the student who can take his body to its limit in the gym, but cannot spend two hours in his books. It's clear that laziness is an attitude that we apply to particular situations, not an overall condition.

Sadly, laziness in the area of our spiritual lives is epidemic. There is probably no area we so allow our slothfulness a free reign than in our walk with God.

Again, you might find yourself extremely busy in church ministry and yet still be a lazy Christian. You might be given to exhausting service for God and be a spiritual sluggard. Just like the man who can spend hours on his hobby, but is lazy with his children, so we can be in church five times a week, but still be slothful in our walk with God.

Spiritual slothfulness is laziness in our personal relationship with God. It is laziness with prayer and Bible study. It is slothfulness with meditation and application of the Word. Many deceive themselves into thinking they are labourers for God, when in fact they simply keep themselves busy in His work, but are refusing to labour where it counts – in personal communion with God. They will not put the effort in where it is most important – speaking to God in prayer, and listening to God in the Word.

See, Scripture is very clear that the child of God is to put a wholehearted effort into seeking God. In contrast to our lazy, instant coffee, fast-food world, the Bible speaks of spending much time, effort and diligence in our personal walk with God. Consider just a few verses:

- **Jeremiah 29:13:** *"And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart."*
- **Psalms 119:2:** *"Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart."*
- **Deuteronomy 4:29:** *"But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul."*
- **Deuteronomy 6:5:** *"And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."*

Jesus said this was essentially the most important command of them all. The thrust of our lives should be to enjoy God with all of our being. Your whole heart should speak of a diligent pursuit, an undivided, single-minded search for God. We see Joshua being commanded to meditate on the Bible, day and night. Psalm 1 echoes this idea of thinking about the Bible constantly. In fact, the Psalms are a cry for personal communion with God.

- **Psalm 42:1-2:** *"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?"*
- **Psalm 63:1:** *"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."*

In the New Testament, Christ teaches in **Matthew 5:6**, *"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."* Christ continually teaches persistence and earnestness in prayer through His parables. His life teaches us He sought God with His whole heart, rising a great while before day to pray, often withdrawing to pray, and being so saturated with the Word that He could surprise learned men at the age of 12.

**Hebrews 5:7** tells us of the way He prayed: *"Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared."* James tells us that it is the fervent or boiling hot prayer of the righteous that avails much. And Hebrews sums it up:

*But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.*

**Hebrews 11:6**

A diligent seeking for God. What is the opposite of diligence? Laziness. These verses we have seen stand in stark contrast to the slack, easy Christianity we profess today. A two-minute prayer to end the day, reading a 100-word devotional written by someone else in the morning, maybe a sermon on Sunday, and the occasional chapter here and there about sums it up.

Often, we want our experience of God to be like a drive-through order, with the knowledge of God delivered in five minutes. The earnestness, the effort, the sacrifice, the time, the pain, yes, even the frustration we endure in other areas of our lives are strangely absent when it comes to seeking God. If we cannot find God in five minutes, we dispose of the idea. If seeking God doesn't bring immediate results, we give up.

Also, many today are like this because they are confused about grace. Grace is God's power and enablement through the Holy Spirit. Anything of spiritual worth is only achieved through Him. We can do nothing without Him. However, some have become confused at the idea of depending on the Holy Spirit, and have taken it to mean that you can be passive.

Many cannot understand God's part and man's responsibility. They say, 'Just let go and let God.' But that is not how it works. Yes, it's 100% God, but the verses we have just read command you to put in a 100% effort. I think of it this way – the Holy Spirit gives 100% of the power to the heart that gives 100%.

A saying says God gives strength in proportion to the strain. As a pastor I know put it: think and act as if it all depends on God, and work as if it all depended on you. Seeking God is obviously a

vain effort if He refuses to be found. But since He invites us to seek Him, we must do so with confidence. Not only that, but we must do so as He commanded us to – with diligence.

In order to seek God with diligence, we must repent of our spiritual laziness. Then we can put it off, renew our minds with correct thinking about this theme, and put on diligence in our walk with God. To start, we must identify the signs of spiritual slothfulness in us. So let us go to the textbook of identifying laziness – Proverbs – and there tick off the marks of the sluggard.

## **1. The spiritual sluggard chooses ease, entertainment and rest over the pursuit of God**

The motto of the spiritual sluggard is found in **Proverbs 6:10**: *"Yet a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep."* Their attitude is 'Just a few more minutes, then I'll get up and pray. Just a little bit more – then I'll have my quiet time.' But those small surrenders deceive the spiritual sluggard, and their smallness makes them feel they are committing no great sin.

Of course, soon it is time to get up, and there is no time to meet with God. The sluggard says, 'Tonight, or tomorrow, I'll do it.' The truth is, the spiritual sluggard is like the glutton who must have a bit more even when they are stuffed; they crave rest even when their body has had enough. Proverbs even captures it with its usual humour: *"As the door turneth upon his hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed"* (**Proverbs 26:14**).

Yes, the spiritual sluggard can rise at 5am if the plane leaves early. They can study till 2am if there's an exam the next day, but they just can't seem to wake up, even after enough sleep, to read their Bible on an average day. They must slouch in front of the TV at night to make up for a hard day, or scroll their phone in every break to take their mind off a hard day, but oh, they can never open the Bible.

God created us to need sleep. But the spiritual sluggard exploits this natural need into a lust, which overpowers any diligence in seeking God. A casual reading of church history will show that all greatly used people of God, following our Lord's example, rose early to seek God. E.M Bounds said, "A desire for God that cannot break the chains of sleep is a weak thing and will do little good for God." The spiritual sluggard will choose ease, entertainment and rest over seeking God.

## **2. The spiritual sluggard can seldom start, and never finish, their pursuit of God**

**Proverbs 15:19** says, *"The way of the slothful man is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain."* The spiritual sloth cannot start reading their Bible, or praying, because their way is always blocked. Blocked by what? Their own disorganized lifestyle. Oh, the desk is too cluttered. Oh, I want to go through the Bible systematically, but I'm too far behind. Oh, I need to take notes, but I can't find my book.

See, to them, getting started is a major effort. It's too cold to pray now in the morning. Their day is too cluttered with appointments to make one with God. Oh, it's too late now in the evening. There's always a hedge of thorns in their way. But in actual fact – that's just the way they like it.

The student loves the fact that they can't find their textbooks – it gives them a supposed excuse not to study. They enjoy their chaos, because it saves them the effort of disciplining themselves. But if they do start in their seeking of God, they can never finish. **Proverbs 12:27** says, *"The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting"* – he hunts, but he's too lazy to cook the meat.

In fact, it gets even worse. **Proverbs 19:24** says, *"A slothful man hideth his hand in his bosom, and will not so much as bring it to his mouth again."* This man is so pathetic that even if he gets so far as to have cooked the food – he is too lazy to feed himself, to take the spoon to the dish and up to his mouth.

The spiritual sluggard can start praying, but falls asleep, or their mind wanders because it's too much effort. They start reading through a book in the Bible, but their notebook is filled with the first few chapters, then they get tired and never finish. They do not have what the Bible calls endurance, so they cannot bring forth fruit that will remain.

### **3. The spiritual sluggard is selectively diligent and excuses their laziness**

We've mentioned this. A sluggard is not someone who is weak, though that is one of their excuses. The lazy person does not require more sleep than others; it is not that they cannot work by some physical impediment. They are selective as to where they want to be diligent. When they refuse work, they make excuses.

The same person who works overtime at work reads their Bible once a week. The same man who trains for three marathons a year can barely make ten minutes of prayer a week. The same woman who spends hours on social media platforms puts her Bible down after five minutes. See, we are selectively diligent. The thing that we are interested in, or the thing which we believe will bring us reward – that is where we put effort in.

So the spiritual sluggard simply rebels against effort, work and diligence when it comes to their walk with God. The sluggard always has excuses, of course: *"The slothful man saith, there is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets"* (**Proverbs 22:13**). 'I can't go to work – I might be killed,' says the sluggard. 'I can't read my Bible because I'm too tired. I can't pray because I'm busy,' etc.

Even when it comes to church: 'Oh, I couldn't make it because I was really tired.' God asks us in **Malachi 1:8**, *"Offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person?"* Would your earthly boss accept such an excuse: 'Oh, I was tired, so I didn't come to work. Oh, it's been a rough week, so we decided to stay at home for some family time.' Would you try that on a Monday morning?

But ultimately, the sluggard is not going to be convinced. See, **Proverbs 26:16** tells us *"The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason."* His laziness is not a weakness, it's rebellion to God's order. It's rebellion to God's established pattern of work.

In the spiritual realm, people make excuses to cover up their rebellion, but ultimately, they are rejecting their responsibility to seek God with their whole heart. Their wholehearted pursuit of other things in their life shows that they are not incapable of seeking something with their whole heart, it shows they are selectively diligent.

#### **4. The spiritual sluggard wants shortcuts to spiritual growth**

The spiritual sluggard is like many today. They think work is part of the curse. It's not. God instituted work before Adam fell. What is part of the curse is our sinful nature of hating effort and seeking to find the easiest path through life.

The sluggard is convinced there must always be an easier way – a shortcut. They are sure that this whole thing of hard work to bring reward is really only something that the uninformed masses stick to. They're sure they can find a way around it. They can do a tenth of the work, and get ten times the profit. They apply this to their spiritual life too.

They are sure there is a path to an intimate knowledge of God, apart from hours on their knees. They are sure there is a way to be wise, apart from hours of diligent Bible study. So they scheme and dream of ways of conducting their spiritual life that will steer them clear of the daily toil of repentance and faith before God. But **Proverbs 13:4** tells us *"The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing."*

See, there is no shortcut with God. God cannot be manipulated into your spiritual scheme. He lays down the conditions, the creature either obeys the Creator to his benefit, or disobeys to his harm. But the spiritual sluggard will simply not submit. They will continue in their rebellion to this principle, and turn to schemes.

Two hours of Sunday School duty, a good relationship with the pastor, a good Christian book for the bedside table and a Christian podcast or two – and they feel they have booked the system. They are growing in Bible knowledge, others think of them to be a fine Christian, and it all seems great. But in their soul, they know there is a leanness. There is a poverty of a true experience of God that cannot be counterfeited.

#### **5. The spiritual sluggard will not work for what they cannot immediately enjoy**

Sluggards only enjoy what brings them a reward in front of their eyes. For this reason, they cannot take to prayer and Bible study, which is often still and calm, and more like a sowing process than a reaping. *"The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing,"* says **Proverbs 20:4**. As they cannot see the point of sowing

something that they will only eat of in a few months' time, so the spiritual sluggard cannot see the point of Bible study for spiritual growth that will benefit them for eternity.

Like Esau who despised his birthright, the sluggard will treat time with God as worthless, and give it up for a bowl of soup. Because they reject God's order, they treat their time with God as nothing. Not seeing the benefits, and they skip it without much thought. They inwardly esteem it of little value, though they will never say as much. But the fact that they apply themselves to other areas proves what is important to them: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," (Matthew 6:21).*

Those are the five characteristics of the spiritual sluggard. If that's you or me, I trust the consequences promised to the sluggard will sober us up. For the Bible says that:

### **1. Firstly, the spiritual sluggard will endlessly desire but have no satisfaction.**

We saw this in **Proverbs 13:4**. There will be a hunger for a real taste of God, but a continual frustration. God's real blessing and real spiritual growth will always be out of reach for the sluggard who desires, but will not follow up on that desire. There will be a leanness in their soul.

### **2. Secondly, the spiritual sluggard will be mastered.**

**Proverbs 12:24** says, *"The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute."* The spiritual sluggard will find himself conquered by his own lusts, ruled by his temper, and a slave to his body. He will be like a leaf blown to and fro by adverse circumstances, and as his roots in the Word are shallow, he will never truly bring forth fruit.

### **3. Thirdly, the spiritual sluggard will end up with spiritual poverty.**

The warnings are repetitive:

**Proverbs 6:9-11** says, *"How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man."*

**Proverbs 20:13** says, *"Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty; open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread."*

**Proverbs 24:30-34** says, *"I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction. Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man."*

Spiritual poverty can appear in many ways. The weeds of sin and disobedience may grow unrestrained in our life. Wisdom and the fruit of the Spirit will be choked and sadly

lacking. We will be ill-equipped to face all that the world, the devil and our own flesh will throw at us.

This spiritual poverty will also be seen in a life with little impact for the kingdom of God. That in turn will show up as an empty-handed appearance at the judgement seat of Christ – nothing to show for the years and resources God gave us – stripped of all but His grace, saved but only as by fire.

Consider what's at stake by being lazy in your pursuit of God. Solomon chose his words carefully when describing how poverty will come upon the sluggard. He said it will be like one who is on a journey. Spiritual poverty will only seem to be slowly edging upon you, like a gradual, hardly noticeable thing, for quite a while. But then, Solomon says, it will be upon you like an armed thief. Like an attack. It will catch up with you suddenly, violently and tragically.

Your laziness in seeking God will catch up with you all at once. Right now, it seems insignificant – just a little relaxation, just another missed quiet time – but one day, the robber is upon you. We might think that a missed prayer or Bible study can hardly be of significance eternally, but they are the little surrenders that add up to a giant loss in eternity. Don't let the smallness of the surrender make it seem any less like rebellion. Consider what's at stake.

Sluggards are in rebellion. They are rebelling against God's order in life – work hard for reward. We need to repent of this and submit to the fact that a hard-working search for God is commanded, and expected, for real spiritual growth. So, if you want the diligence and discipline to seek God wholeheartedly, the primary thing is to truly repent of spiritual slothfulness, and see it as the evil thing it is.

We must renew our minds with these truths about what laziness is, how we are practicing it in not seeking God, and how God has commanded us to seek Him with our whole hearts. You need to be fully convinced that the pursuit of God should be where you are willing to put the hardest effort in, not the spare change, the leftover time, the remaining strength.

Then, we need to put on orderliness and discipline in our lives, so that our pursuit of God can thrive. Don't expect to diligently seek God within an environment that is messy, cluttered, unorganized and chaotic. Listen to Solomon's wisdom here, and notice the four *"if"* statements, followed by the result:

*My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.*

#### **Proverbs 2:1-5**

Consider the words that suggest a diligent, hard-working effort: *receive, hide, incline, apply, cry, lift up your voice, seek, search*. If you do this, Solomon says, then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. A simple condition, a wonderful result.

God said to Abraham, *"I am thy exceeding great reward"* (**Genesis 15:1**). God is the greatest treasure of all. Do you believe it? And will you repent of spiritual laziness and direct your whole heart, soul and mind to seeking God diligently?