

# 7 Sloth

Uh, I don't do much really, I just read, and work here, and, uh, sleep and eat, and, uh, watch movies - Anti-Artist, *Slacker*

It's not that I'm lazy; it's that I just don't care - Peter Gibbons, *Office Space*

I'm not lazy, I just... Lisa, finish my sentence for me! - Bart Simpson, *Monty Can't Buy Me Love* episode of *The Simpsons*

I'm too lazy to hold a grudge - Sid the Sloth, *Ice Age*

People who throw kisses are mighty hopelessly lazy - Bob Hope

Sometimes he would accuse chestnuts of being lazy. A sort of general malaise that only the genius possess and the insane lament - Dr. Evil, *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*

Last week I helped my friend stay put. It's a lot easier than helping someone move - Mitch Hedberg, stand-up comic

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“Leave me where I am I’m only sleeping…” This line from the Beatles’ song *I’m Only Sleeping* describes the attitude of the slothful. Nothing seems to evoke passion. Nothing seems worth the effort. Dorothy Sayers describes sloth as “the sin which believes in nothing, cares for 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.”

Sometimes we just don’t want to deal. We retreat or procrastinate. Our problems may make us sleepy or send us to the movies. When we take on personal and professional projects, minimizing inconvenience and avoiding trouble is often a deciding factor. In relationships, avoiding confrontation becomes more important than communicating. Sometimes sloth comes from apathy, and sometimes it comes from fear and insecurity. Sometimes it’s just about comfort and convenience.

Sometimes negativity figures into sloth. Doubt, defeat, and disillusionment can be paralyzing. We may doubt our abilities, doubt that the outcome will be successful, or doubt that we are doing anything significant. With so little motivation, putting forth effort seems like a waste of time.

## **Avoidance**

In *Failure to Launch* 35-year-old Tripp still lives at home with his parents. After a traumatic event his life is stuck in neutral. His parents think it’s time for him to move on, but continue to enable him. What may have started as a supportive gesture on their part and real need on Tripp’s part has become a comfortable, unchallenging existence

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for Tripp. A guy still living in his parents house is a deal-breaker for most women, so he sees living there as a way to avoid any real emotional involvement. He fears another loss. Tripp is putting off independence as long as he can get by with it. Fearing he will never take the initiative to move out, his parents resort to drastic measures.

Committing to a course of action eliminates all the other possibilities. For many people closing off options can almost feel like a trap. What if a better choice presents itself later? What if what's next is not as enjoyable as what's now? What if this is the wrong decision? These thoughts can make us drag our feet. Eventually this sort of procrastination becomes a habit. "Someday" becomes our timeline for everything.

*Camp Nowhere* is a fake summer camp created by a resourceful group of kids who want to avoid the work and commitment involved in attending one of those very purposeful "improvement" camps their parents have selected. They blackmail a former drama teacher, Dennis Van Welker, to act as a fake counselor and cover for them to their parents and other adults. Dennis is a burned out hippie who can't seem to hold a challenging job, but he does remember why he got into teaching in the first place. He describes a purposeful decision with the goal to help and inspire kids. As problems arise in his life he runs away to avoid facing the consequences, leaving his dreams behind.

Some of the kids are being pushed to excel by ambitious parents, while others are dumped in camp because they are inconvenient. While they are unwilling to cooperate with their parents' ideas about personal improvement, left to their own devices the kids engage and begin developing their personal gifts and talents, along with the usual camp shenanigans. Dennis and the kids are pushed

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into taking responsibility, and Dennis rediscovers some of the passion he's lost along the way.

A few chapters after writing off all work as “meaningless” the writer of Ecclesiastes finds that embracing the joys of life is the way to go: “So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this! Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne! Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun. Whatever you do, do well” (Ecc. 9:7-8).

Neither Tripp nor Dennis is living the lives they expected. Their lives don't look like other people think they ought to look either. Nobody likes to feel like a disappointment. It may seem better that people think we don't care than to have them think we are incompetent. We can tell ourselves, and others, what a great job we would do if we actually cared. It can look like we don't care when we actually care too much.

### **Hopelessness**

Then there are those of us who actually don't care. Rather than “sloth,” 4th century writer Evagrius used the Latin word “acedia,” which literally means “absence of caring.” Acedia can lead to boredom, cynicism, and just plain exhaustion. Constant boredom or cynicism reflects a lack of hope. A life that consists of just going through the motions lacks hope.

M. Night Shyamalan addresses lack of hope and finding purpose in several of his movies. Cleveland Heep, in *Lady in the Water*, is in a holding pattern in his life. He's suffered loss that has him stuck in depression and unable to find hope for the future. Cleveland has simply settled for mediocrity and chosen the path of least resistance. A situation that

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demands heroic action leads him toward freedom and hope.

In this fantasy, Story, who is from another world, can only be returned through the cooperation of a number of people who fulfill particular roles. Cleveland takes responsibility for identifying these people and getting them involved in the task of rescuing Story. He brings a group of people into community and reveals the unique value and unexpected strengths in each one, including Cleveland himself. As he commits to meeting someone else's need Cleveland is able to let go of his debilitating grief.

"Acedia" is still used today as a medical term, defined as "A mental syndrome, the chief features of which are listlessness, carelessness, apathy, and melancholia." Thomas Aquinas spoke to a lack of hope when he explained that even though acedia might be "sorrow which is about a real evil, [it] is evil in its effect, if it so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good deeds." Though real evil affects our lives and the lives of those we love, if we begin to feel overwhelmed by these legitimately bad circumstances we may become so resigned that we give up.

Dante categorized sloth as "insufficient love," while he grouped lust, gluttony, and greed as "excessive love" and wrath, envy, and pride as "misdirected love." Sometimes this insufficient love reflects an unwillingness to place anyone or anything above our own comfort. In other cases it may reflect an insufficient love of self.

In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* three friends skip school to have a day of fun in Chicago. Ferris is optimistic and completely secure in his parents' love. He believes in himself and in his own ability to influence the world around him. Ferris' neurotic friend Cameron worries about everything. He believes that he is not a priority to his father. Cameron

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feels insecure, inadequate, and powerless. This makes it seem pointless to get out there and live life.

Cameron doesn't do anything unless Ferris pushes him. He doesn't want to commit himself or have to defend his decisions, so he lets others make decisions for him. In one scene he is so conflicted he gets in and out of the car several times, trying to decide whether or not to skip school with Ferris.

Cameron lets Ferris set the plan, then worries the whole time about the decisions. He lets Ferris decide. He lets his father decide. Cameron doesn't feel he actually has a say in what happens to him.

In one scene Cameron stands in an art gallery and experiences a crisis moment. As he stares at the Seurat painting "Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte" and focuses in on a figure in the center of the picture he realizes that she has no distinguishable features on her face. His sense of hopelessness and worthlessness comes crashing down on him as he confronts his own lack of personal identity. His father is important. Ferris is important. He's just Cameron.

Meanwhile Ferris joins a parade and sings from a float, making a dedication "To a young man who doesn't think he's seen anything good today — Cameron Frye, this one's for you." Cameron and Ferris are having the same day, but experiencing it differently. Ferris engages the people around him and delights in everything he experiences; Cameron can only see his own misery. Cameron can't let himself enjoy the day the way Ferris does. Ultimately Cameron Frye's day off is about seeing his state of paralysis, and working up the courage to break out of it.

Fear can paralyze. We may fear failure to the point that we expect to fail. We can learn to trust ourselves to be successful, to trust others to love us if we happen to fail, and

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to trust God to bless our efforts with success (his version, not ours).

Boredom is also a symptom of sloth and hopelessness. While some of us may just be bad at entertaining ourselves, many may be in genuine need of inspiration. In *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* Marvin the robot is supposed to be "Your plastic pal who's fun to be with!" Poor Marvin has a "brain the size of a planet," which makes mundane everyday life a bit boring for him. Marvin's role as a plastic pal leaves him with nothing challenging to do. He's bored and depressed because he has nothing to accomplish and nothing to discover. He is in a cycle in which hopelessness leads to cynicism and cynicism leads to boredom, which leads to depression, which leads to hopelessness. Marvin is trapped forever in a world with no flow.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." Csikszentmihalyi believes that flow happens when our skills match the circumstances we must face, and when we are acting with clear goals.

Some of us, like Marvin, possess underutilized skills, gifts, and talents. We may have boring jobs that do not challenge us. Feeling this way all the time is a strong indication that it's time to evaluate both attitude and occupational choices. However, we cannot expect to experience flow all the time. Sometimes life involves tedium. We are likely to experience less boredom if we approach boring tasks with good humor, imagination, and grace.



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### **Laziness**

Some of us just don't like to work. We want to have fun. We want our needs met with as little effort as possible. We absolutely are willing to settle for less. As the reputation for laziness grows it becomes something that defines who we are. Giving it up would mean redefining ourselves.

*Billy Madison* never wants to grow up, and until he faces the threat of losing everything he hasn't worked for he's content with irresponsibility as a lifestyle. Billy likes drinking, sex, parties, and lying around on his father's estate with his lazy friends. In order to prove to his father that he is worthy of the family business he must go back to school and pass every grade. As he moves through each grade in school he develops a greater sense of responsibility. The young friends he makes in each grade help him to gain greater compassion for other people. Billy never transforms into an overachiever, but he does develop a willingness to embrace adulthood and responsibility.

We all need a little silliness, but many of us seek entertainment as an end goal. We find outlets for this everywhere in our culture. Many of us would rather get our news from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. If we have to learn something we'd prefer edutainment over lecture. We watch *The Food Network* instead of actually cooking something. We carry around devices that allow us to listen to music and play games until life interrupts us. There is so much to care about that can be overwhelming.

Perhaps this trend toward constant entertainment is an attempt to escape. Most issues cannot be reduced to sound bites, or resolved in a few minutes worth of dialogue. Life is complicated and may require effort on our part to process and action on our part to solve. We may have to act on

things that we are still conflicted about and may not be able to resolve.

In the movie *The Big Lebowski* The Dude is identified as “the laziest man in Los Angeles County” while his opposite, the Big Lebowski, is successful, rich, industrious, and supremely unhappy. The Dude seems to be very satisfied with his unmaterialistic lifestyle yet seems to really need something to anchor his life, like his rug.

At the insistence of his friend Walter he becomes involved in a complicated intrigue involving his stolen rug, a case of mistaken identity, millions of dollars, and a woman’s life. As the plot thickens and the tension escalates The Dude’s focus remains, “I just want my rug back.” His rug seems to tie his life together as much as it “ties the room together.”

Walter and The Dude are both apathetic about the present and disinterested in the future. Throughout the movie both characters continuously refer to the past. The Dude is a former hippie protester, and Walter is a Vietnam vet. Each seems to have found his identity in a stereotype from the 70’s.

The Big Lebowski is materialistic and narrow minded. The materialism of his generation offers nothing to inspire the Dude, who has rejected materialism. The women in the movie represent the self-absorbed attitude of a generation that has concluded that nothing matters. This nihilistic attitude also bothers The Dude.

Since no generation has legitimate answers he clings to the 70’s when, as one of the Seattle Seven, he at least tried to make things better. Currently the bowling alley is the one place where the Dude feels purposeful. His unwillingness to sell out or compromise actually indicates a greater sense of purpose than his lifestyle would indicate.

The Dude seems to have figured out what he doesn’t

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believe. He rejects both nihilism and materialism. Lack of meaning and purpose has led The Dude to adopt an attitude similar to that of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who says “People leave this world no better off than when they came. All their hard work is for nothing - like working for the wind” (5:16b). Rather than working for the wind, “The Dude abides” on whatever fulfillment White Russians, a soak in the tub, and bowling can give him until he figures out what else matters.

### **Finding passion**

Sloth attaches itself to our spiritual DNA. It becomes an aspect of our personalities rather than just an occasional action, or in this case, inaction. “I know I’m lazy but someday I’ll deal with it...” or, “I have every reason to feel like this and I deserve to kick back for awhile...” Sloth may become so ingrained in how we see ourselves and how others see us that we embrace it as part of our identity.

In the movie *Office Space* Peter Gibbons dreams of “doing nothing.” He tells “the Bobs” (the efficiency experts) that his only motivation is to avoid having a parade of bosses telling him what he did wrong. “Where’s the motivation in that, Bob?” he asks. This movie shows how labor without passion can wound a soul.

Solomon said “Where there is no vision the people perish” (Prov. 29:18 KJV). Without vision and passion we tend to take the path of least resistance, seeking immediate gratification and comfort. The opposing cardinal virtue to sloth is diligence, or zeal. Zeal is the energetic response of the heart to God’s commands. Love, joy, and self-control seem to be necessary components to zeal; and hope is central.

There is joy in doing what we love. Self-control and discipline are what help us do it well. We may be able to

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fulfill our obligations without a true sense of purpose, but this sort of diligence is a prison without passion. In the movie *Chariots of Fire* Eric Liddell tells his sister that “when I run I feel God’s pleasure.” He took a gift, something he loved to do, something he had the natural ability to do, and developed it to the degree that he became an Olympic Champion. We each have been gifted with abilities and traits that are there both to give pleasure and service. We can do what we love, and inspire and help others experience God’s pleasure. Each of us needs to find God’s unique purpose for our lives, embrace that, and focus our energies outward.

### **Living purposefully**

We need to believe that what we do matters. Hope and trust come back into play here. Hope that what we do will have a positive impact on our own lives and on the lives of others makes the effort worthwhile. At its worst, sloth leads to spiritual withdrawal. We may use sarcasm, negativity, and passive-aggression to cope with pain and disappointment. Developing a habit of inaction can lead to actual loss of energy and creativity over time. Hope leads us to really engage.

In *August Rush* Evan dreams a big, audacious dream. He believes that an unlikely miracle will happen if he attains his dream. He can only work toward his purpose and trust that everything that is out of his control will fall into place. This movie is not just about a young boy’s talent, but about his hopefulness. Evan makes himself utterly vulnerable, experiences disappointment and betrayal, yet remains hopeful. Evan is a picture of the genuine, unpretentious, authentic people who Jesus was talking about when he said “blessed are the pure in heart” in his Sermon

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on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Paul wrote that “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (Rom. 8:28). The choices of all the characters are marked by the hand of God responding to Evan’s faith.

As individuals we are all gifted with talents and have unique interests that are meant to benefit others as well as ourselves. Additionally, all Christians are challenged with two important purposes. First, The Great Commandment is to love God with our whole hearts, minds, and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27). Second, The Great Commission is to tell others about His love and redemption (Matt. 28:19-20). When we focus on others rather than self there is no guarantee of personal comfort or convenience. There is, however, great potential for fulfillment and belonging. We must weigh whether opening ourselves up to the discomfort that is bound to come with hope and purpose is worth the satisfaction that accompanies it.

Goethe said “Hell begins the day God grants you the vision to see all you could have done, should have done, and would have done, but did not do.” Most of our regrets are about things we failed to do, not about things we tried to do but failed. When we embrace zeal over sloth we may find we can commit ourselves more fully.

### **Living enthusiastically**

In *Uncle Buck* a school principal tells Buck that his niece is a “silly-heart and a dreamer” who doesn’t “take her school career seriously.” He responds that he “doesn’t want to know a six-year-old is isn’t a silly-heart and a dreamer.” I personally prefer sixty-year-olds who haven’t forgotten how to be silly-

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hearts and dreamers as well. There is a difference between childishness and being childlike. Billy Madison is childish and has to learn to accept responsibility. August Rush's sense of wonder and willingness to believe in miracles embodies childlike faith.

The French have an expression, "joie de vivre," which means joy of life. It means a joy of everything, a comprehensive joy, a philosophy of life that involves the whole being. Both Ferris Bueller and August Rush demonstrate this.

Enthusiasm is not a discipline. We can't talk ourselves into it or work ourselves into it. What we can do is jump in and keep our eyes open. As we shift focus from ourselves to the purpose at hand we may eventually find our flow, or at least fleeting glimpses of it. We may just find that we can give our whole being and whole effort to what we are doing, and experience joy while we are doing it. This joy is not something we can manufacture, but rather something that God brings about when we let him disentangle the sloth that wraps itself around our souls.

According to the writer of Hebrews, "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see" (Heb. 11:1). Slothfulness obscures the vision. We may believe that God is really in control but we don't actually trust Him to lead us. We may believe that God has our best interests at heart but we can't take our focus off the problem or the pain. Without trust and hope as motivators change is too hard, too much work, too painful, too uncertain. The heart of the gospel is God's gift of real change. Just as the cross changes our status with God from guilty to forgiven, every aspect of our lives - spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, relational, and circumstantial is meant to undergo change that reconciles us to God, and gives us hope and joy.