

The Sin of Slothfulness

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

The same fleshly Power that draweth one man to whoredom and drunkenness, and covetousness, doth draw another to sloth and idleness. It is but several ways of Pleasing the same flesh, and obeying the same sensuality. And because that Idleness and Sloth is so great and common a sin, & yet made so light of by the most, I shall briefly tell you the mischiefs of it, and the Reasons that should make you hate it.

1. Slothfulness doth contradict the very end of our creation and preservation, and the frame of our nature; and so provoketh God to cut us off and cast us as useless into the fire. Who dare so wrong the wisdom of God, as to say or think that he made us to do nothing! If a man make an house, it is to dwell in; if he make a watch, it is to tell him the hour of the day, and everything is for its proper use: And is man-made to be idle? what man, that is the noblest inferior creature, and an active creature, fitted for work, and the highest work! shall he be idle? Justly may God then hew him down as a dead and withered tree, and suffer him no more to cumber his ground.

2. Slothfulness is a sin that loseth the precious gifts of God. Our faculties and our members are his gifts and talents, which he hath committed to us to use for his service; so are our goods and all that we have: and shall we hide them in a napkin, or idly neglect to use them? O what abundance of excellent mercies lie useless and idle, because you are idle that should use them? Every hour that you lose in idleness, what noble faculties, and large provisions are all laid by? As much as in you lieth, you make the whole creation to be, and work in vain. Why should the Sun shine an hour or minute for you in vain? Why should the Earth bear you an hour in vain? why should the springs and rivers run for you an hour in vain? why should the air refresh you an hour in vain? why should your pulse beat one stroke in vain? or your lungs once breathe a breath in vain? shall all be at work for you to further your work, and will you think that idleness is no sin?

3. Moreover, Laziness and sloth is a sin that loseth you much precious time. All the time is lost that you are idle in. Yea when you are at work, if you do it slothfully, you are losing much of your time. A diligent person will go further, and do more in an hour than the lazy flesh-pleaser will do in two. When the slothful is praying, or reading, and working in his calling, he is but losing half his time, which diligence would redeem. And is our time so short and precious, and yet is idleness an excusable sin? what, loiter so near night! so near eternity, when we have but a little time to work! O work while it is day, for the night is coming when none can work. Were it but for this, that sloth doth steal so much of our time, I must think it no better than a heinous Thievery.

4. And by this means we rob ourselves. We might be getting some good all the time that we are idle; or doubly advantage ourselves, if sloth did not keep us company in our work. The slothful is brother to him that is a great waster, Pro. 18. 9. slothfulness is self-murdering; men die while they lie still and wish. It's a sin that famisheth soul and body, Prov. 21. 25. The desire of the slothful killeth him, because his hands refuse to labour. It's the common cause of beggary and want: and what comfort can you have under such afflictions which you bring upon your selves? If you want food or raiment, if your wives and children are in want, how can you think that God should take care of you and afford you relief, when you bring this on your selves by pleasing your flesh which is his enemy? If a Soldier gets hurt by trucking with the enemy, he may rather look that his General should hang him than relieve him. And how should good men be moved to compassionate you? If God do impoverish you, and you come to want by innocence or a righteous cause, they must needs be ready to relieve you: But if Sloth, or Pride, or Gluttony, or Drunkenness bring you to it, till you repent, I see not how they should relieve you, at least any further than to keep you alive. For if you are set to please your flesh by idleness, must I join with you to please it by such supplies as shall cherish you in your sin? No, one flesh-pleaser is enough for one man! If you will please it either by Idleness or by Luxury your selves, expect not that others should please it by your relief, and make provision for your sins. If I may not make provision for my own flesh to satisfy its lusts, neither must I do it for another.

But that's not the worst, slothfulness is the common cause of men's damnation; when they see a temptation and danger before them, slothfulness hindereth them from resisting it

When Heaven is offered them, slothfulness makes them sit still and lose it. They must Run, and Strive, and Fight, and Conquer, and these are not works for a slothful person; especially when they must be continued to the death. So that it's manifest, that most men in the world are undone soul and body, by the sin of sloth.

5. And by this you rob others as well as your selves: You owe the world the fruit of your labours: You rob the souls of men to whom you should do good. You rob the Church that should be bettered by you: You rob the Commonwealth of which you are a member, and should have benefit by you. You owe your labours to Church and Commonwealth and the souls of men, and will you not pay so great a debt? You deserve no room in the Church or Commonwealth, but to be cut off as an unprofitable member, if you bring no advantage to them. They say the Bees will not suffer a drone in the Hive. Nay, if you be hired servants, you plainly rob your Masters if you are slothful, as much as if you stole their money or goods. If you buy an hundred sheep of a man, and he let you have but fourscore, doth he not rob or cheat you? And if a man buy a years or a day's labour of you, and you let him have but half a year's labour, or half a day's labour, because of your sloth, do you not defraud or rob him of the other half? So that the idle are thieves to themselves, to the Church and the souls of men, to the Commonwealth and those that they are related to; even to their wives and children, for whom they should provide due maintenance by their labour.

6. And you are injurious to the honest poor, in that you disable your selves from relieving them: when God commandeth you to work with your hands, not only for your selves, but that you may have to give to them that need, Eph. 4. 28. What if all men should do as you do, how would the poor be maintained, and the Church and Commonwealth served?

7. Yea worst of all, you are guilty of robbing God himself. It is him that you owe your labours to, and the improvement of all the talents which he lendeth you: And idleness is unfaithfulness to the God of Heaven that setteth you on work: Even in working for men, you must do it ultimately for God, Col. 3. 22, 23. [Not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God: and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord you shall receive the reward of the inheritance, for ye

serve the Lord: But he that doth wrong, shall receive for the wrong which he hath done.] If it be an offence to wrong man, what is it to wrong God? and if you may not be slothful in the work of a man, what a crime is it to be slothful in the work of the God of Heaven? The greater your Master is, the more heinous it is to be lazy in his service. Remember the curse on them that do the work of the Lord deceitfully, Jer. 48. 10. All work that you have to do, is the work of the Lord.

8. And consider, That the Idle forfeit the protection and provision of God; even their daily bread. For must he support and feed you to do nothing? His own rule is that if any man will not work neither should he eat, 2 Thes. 3. 10. And if he may not eat, we may not relieve him.

9. And if idleness had not been a heinous sin, the Apostle would never have commanded us to avoid the company of such, as if they were unfit to converse with Christians, 2 Thes. 3.

10. Consider what abundance of work we have to do, and of how great importance! O what a deal has we to do for our poor souls, and for many about us, besides all our bodily employment in the world! Methinks, every man that knows why he is a man, and what it is, in an inch of time to work for everlasting, should never find an hour for idleness in his life, but still cry out, How short and swift is time, and how great and long is the work! A man that had all the Town on fire about his ears, or a man that were fighting for his life, or a man that were in a leaking vessel ready to sink under him, might better be lazy, than a man that is at work for an endless life.

11. Moreover, Idleness is a base kind of vice: It is the imitation of a block or a stone that lieth still, when that which hath life will be in action.

12. And it is usually a continual sin, or at least makes up a great part of the lives of many that are addicted to it: A drunkard will not always be drunk; and a liar will not always be lying; But a slothful person will be most commonly slothful.

And, to conclude, lay all this together, and think what a reckoning a slothful person is like to have, that by his sin is always running behind-hand, and will have the neglected time, and means, and mercies of almost all his life to answer for.

And now you see the greatness of this sin abhor it, and awake from it. You have much to do, and souls to save; and the ease of your flesh and fleshly minds is one thing that must be denied, before it can be accomplished. The slothful is still craving, yet a little slumber, and yet a little ease: and he is still upon delays, even when he is convinced of his danger and his duty: when he knows that he must turn or die, yet he is delaying and putting off till another time: And so the vineyard and garden of the sluggard, are grown over with nettles and weeds: And he hath scarce a duty to do but there is a thorny hedge or a Lion in the way. Deny this ease, and be up and doing.

And there are three sorts of persons that have especial need of this advice. The first is those that by the phlegmatic distemper of their bodies, are more prone to heaviness and slothfulness than others. The more such are disposed to it, the more should they watch against it, and resist it.

The second sort are Beggars, and other idle wandering persons, that make a Trade of Idleness, and worse: such also as Ballad-singers, Stage-players, Jugglers, Cheaters, and most Ale-sellers that spend their time in tippling and talking with their guests; and other idle persons, that will spend whole hours together in tattling and talking idly, and of other men's matters. All these live in a course of flesh-pleasing, and of heinous sin: and must better learn to deny the flesh, before they can be the true Disciples of Christ. This is not the life that God called you into his vineyard for, no nor that he sent you into the world for, to waste your short and precious days in potting, and piping, and prating, and other ways of idleness; Nor should such be suffered in a Commonwealth.

The third sort, are too many Lords, Knights, and Gentlemen, that think because they have enough to maintain them, that it is lawful to live an idle life. Or if they do anything that's profitable to the Commonwealth, it is rather as a recreation, than as a Calling: Now and then an hour in the midst of their pleasures and idleness is the most. It is a miserable life that this

sort of persons live: even in the sins of Sodom (which cry for the vengeance of Sodom) Pride, Fullness of bread, and Idleness. As if these persons that have most wages should do God the least work: and they that have most of his stock in their hands should make the least use of it; or those that are obliged to God by the greatest mercies, should do least in manifesting their thankfulness or fidelity! what incongruities are these? Who should be so busy and laborious, as those that have the greatest account to make, and those that are to be exemplary to the rest? Truly Gentlemen, I must deal plainly with you, that Idleness and the expression of it among the most of you, in hunting, and hawking, and bowling, and complementing, and visitations, and vain discoursing, and excess of drinking, and tedious meals, is become the common shame of your order; and must be corrected before your honour or consciences can be recovered: And I am so far from any partiality in this censure of you, that I must tell you, if I knew one of my own profession that were guilty but of the tenth part of some of your Idleness, I would do my best to rid the Church of him, and have him cast out among the sensual. And you may do well sometime to ask your selves, whence it comes to pass that Negligent idle Ministers must be sequestered and turned out of all, and Idle Magistrates let alone? One reason is because Gentlemen can better cheap compel a Minister to painfulness than themselves, and punish Ministers for negligence than themselves. And another reason is, because all faithful Ministers themselves in love to the Church are the seekers of this severity: but Magistrates are few of them so self-denying & forward to seek for such severity against the idle and negligent of their own order. But doth not your calling require diligence as well as ours? It is a brutish, ungrateful conceit of any man to think that he may live idly, because he is rich. The richest men in the world are bound to as diligent labour as the poorest, though not in the same kind. And yet I can perceive that most of the poor are even of the same mind; and when they labour hardest, they are idle in Gods account, because they would live idly if they could. It is no thanks to them that they labour; for it is necessity that doth constrain them. I can hear them say, that they would not work, at least but little, if they had but money enough. God will judge these as idle persons, because he takes the will for the deed. You must labour in obedience to God, and work as his servants, and that with cheerfulness and delight, and deny that self and flesh that would have ease, if ever you would have the heavenly reward.