



Counseling Idleness

2020 ACBC National Conference – Keith Christensen

- I. Examining Idleness Biblically
 - II. Idleness and Other Sins
 - III. Some Texts for Counseling Idleness
 - IV. Some Practical Suggestions for Counseling Idleness
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I. Examining Idleness Biblically – Is it really that bad?

a. Scripture strongly condemns idleness

i. 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 10, 11, 14

ii. 1 Timothy 5:8

iii. Proverbs 18:9; 26:12 with 26:16

b. An idle person's life is *necessarily* full of sin

i. James 4:17

ii. Galatians 6:10



c. Idleness is a breeding ground for other sins – Ephesians 5:13-16

i. Idleness and common “root” sins

1. Pride – Proverbs 12:16

2. Covetousness, greed (Prov. 21:26, 13:4, 21:25), which is idolatry (Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:5)

ii. Idleness and other specific sins / struggles

1. Depression and discontentment – Proverbs 13:12, 19 with 13:4; 20:4, 21:26

2. Fear and Anxiety – Matthew 6:34, James 4:13-17, Matthew 25:24-26, Proverbs 21:26, 21:25, 22:13, 26:13,

3. Gossip and other relational problems – 1 Timothy 5:13

4. Sexual Immorality – see 2 Samuel 11:1ff



II. Some Texts for Counseling Idleness – (In addition to those cited above!)

- a. Genesis 1-3 – Biblical Foundations for Understanding Work
- b. Ecclesiastes – Learning to Enjoy Work in a Fallen World (2:18-25, 3:9-15, 22, 4:4-9, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10, 10:18, 11:4-6, 12:13-14)
- c. Proverbs: The Sluggard - 6:6-11, 10:4-5, 10:26, 12:11, 12:24, 12:27, 13:4, 14:23, 15:19, 18:9, 19:15, 19:24, 20:4, 20:13, 21:25-26, 22:13, 24:30-34, 26:13-16, 28:19-20
- d. 1-2 Thessalonians – A Failure to Love; Admonish the Idle - 1 Thess. 4:9-12, 5:14, 2 Thess. 3:6-15
- e. Colossians 3:22-24 – Put On Whole-hearted, Fervent Work for Christ
- f. Titus – The Gospel Changes Lazy People – 1:12, 2:11-14, 3:1, 8, 14, 2:5, 7



III. Some Practical Suggestions for Counseling Idleness

- a. Teach them to respond to idleness in repentance toward God (cultivating godly sorrow) and faith in Christ for forgiving and transforming grace (gospel-centeredness). Teach them to walk in daily repentance even for sins of omission (James 4:17, Gal. 6:10).
- b. Teach them to repent toward (seek forgiveness from) those they've sinned against by their laziness (Luke 17:3).
- c. Choose one of the following, depending on the specifics of the case:
 - i. Schedule: Require them to write out an hourly schedule of how they will use their time each day. Set up accountability for them (perhaps as often as daily) to see how they're doing.
 - ii. To-do lists: Require them to make a list of their daily responsibilities before God. Each evening, make a to-do list for the next day, putting it in order of what *needs* to get done first. Set up accountability for them (perhaps as often as daily) to see how they're doing.
- d. Ask them to make a list of the things that they typically do instead of being busy with work (their "busybody" list). Set up appropriate boundaries to "make no provision" for idleness (Rom. 13:14). Practice "radical amputation" (Mt. 5:29-30) as needed.
- e. Instruct them in God's purposes for work (Genesis 1-3) and the Christian ideal for work (Colossians 3). Show the ways that idleness falls short of these (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, 1-2 Thessalonians, Titus, etc.)
 - i. Give homework that sends them to some of these Scriptures for study and prayer.
 - ii. Choose pertinent verses from these sections for them to memorize, pray through, and meditate on throughout each day.



- f. Get them on the path of growing in grace and knowledge of our Lord, generally speaking.
 - i. Establish a plan for daily prayer and time in the Word.
 - ii. Require weekly church attendance, and encourage (require?) participation in a Bible study/small group and/or one-on-one discipleship.
 - iii. Give them short readings that set their eyes on the glory of God, not only material focused on their specific issues (Ex: weekly moving through the short chapters of *Attributes of God* by AW Pink, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* by John Piper, *Knowing Christ* by Mark Jones, etc.)
- g. Require them to do at least one loving thing for another person each day (above and beyond the “normal” responsibilities of each day).
 - i. Require them to become involved in at least 1 ministry at their church through which they can serve the body regularly.
- h. Examine what heart idols may be at play.
 - i. Have them answer heart-probing questions like these about the times they choose idleness: What was I wanting most in that situation? What outcome did I most want to avoid? Whose opinion mattered most to me at that time?¹ What was I thinking I “needed” or “deserved”? What rationalizations or anxieties led to my decision to be idle or procrastinate? What lies and/or desires were driving those rationalizations or anxieties? How did I use my time instead of devoting it to my work?
- i. Deal with any other issues that are associated with the idleness (responding to trials biblically, sins that have taken root in the soil of idleness, other sources of fear, worry, or depression, etc.).
- j. Those who feel fatigued, tired, and weak all the time (or become so uncommonly easily) should visit their doctor to discover and address any potential physical problems that may be contributing factors.

¹ These first three questions taken from the booklet *Procrastination: First Steps to Change* by Walter Henegar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), pg. 18.

² Kidner, Derek. (1964). *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, Vol. 17, p. 39-40). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. A few of the other statements in this



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Ecclesiastes: Learning to Enjoy Work in a Fallen World

- I. Ecclesiastes: Work “Under the Sun” (in a fallen world)
- a. Hating work. It brings despair, sorrow, and vexation. 2:18-23
 - i. See the effects of the Fall on man’s work: difficulty, fruitlessness, and seeming futility because of death.
 - ii. The preacher clearly does not share God’s purposes for work (see above) in this paragraph: he is concerned with his own legacy (i.e. glory) and benefit, not the glory of God and benefit of others.
 - iii. Compare 4:4-8.
 1. Man’s work will be “vanity and an unhappy business” (v8) when he works for exalting self (v4, “envy of his neighbor”) and only for benefitting self (v8, “For whom am I toiling?”).
 2. If a man responds to the toil and vanity of work by choosing laziness, he is a fool and will destroy himself (v5; cf. 10:18).
 - b. Enjoying work. This is the gift of God 2:24-25, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10 (compare also 5:12 with 2:23)
 - i. Receive work as a gift from God to be enjoyed for its own sake. Ask God for the gift of enjoying work!
 - ii. Seek to put away self-centered motives for work and work for the glory of God (12:13) and the benefit of others (3:12, 4:8-9).
 - iii. Work in light of eternity (3:9-15, 12:14). Don’t only consider how your work matters in this life “under the sun.”
 1. Compare 1 Corinthians 15:58 – because of the resurrection of Christ, nothing we do for the Lord will ultimately be in vain!



Proverbs: A Portrait of the Sluggard

- I. The Sluggard's Relation to God
 - a. Sluggardliness is a righteousness issue (15:19, 21:25-26)
 - b. His living contrary to wisdom shows he does not fear God (1:7; 6:6)
- II. The Sluggard's Relation to His Neighbor
 - a. He lives contrary to love of neighbor (Proverbs 18:9 (cf. 28:24), 10:26, 10:5 (cf. 10:1)).
 - b. He does not give thought for others (Prov. 21:25-26, 22:13, 26:13)
- III. The Sluggard's Ruin
 - a. His sluggardliness won't lead anywhere good (6:10-11, 10:4, 12:24, 13:4, 14:23, 15:19, 20:4, 20:13, 21:25, 24:30-34, 28:19)
 - b. But he isn't able to see it coming (6:10-11, 19:15, 24:30-34)
- IV. The Heart of the Sluggard (cognition, affection, volition)
 - a. The Sluggard's Thinking (cognition)
 - i. He lacks sense (12:11, 20:4, 24:30 (cf. 6:32)) and wisdom (6:6)
 - ii. His rationalizations take away his rationality; they create and/or strengthen his anxieties; he deceives others and/or himself (22:13, 26:13; 14:23, 20:4)
 - iii. Yet he is conceited, wise in his own eyes, worse than a deluded fool (26:16, 12, 5)
 - b. The Sluggard's Desires (affection)
 - i. His problem is rooted in his desires, cravings, loves (13:4, 20:13, 21:25-26).
 - ii. His desires go unfulfilled (13:4), making him distraught or "heart sick" (13:12).



iii. His desires multiply, making him abound in covetousness, greed, discontentment, and sorrow (Prov. 21:25-26, 13:4).

c. The Sluggard's Choices/Commitments (volition)

- i. He won't start things (6:9-10, 20:4).
- ii. He won't finish things (12:27; 19:24; 26:15).
- iii. He talks but will not toil (14:23).
- iv. He won't work without oversight (6:7-9).
- v. He is committed above all to ease (sleep / his bed / rest) (6:9-10, 20:13, 26:14).
- vi. He devotes himself to worthless pursuits (12:11, 28:19).
- vii. His way is the culmination of thousands of small choices (6:10-11, 24:30-34).

“When we ask [the sluggard] (6:9, 10) ‘How long ...?’ ‘When ...?’, we are being too definite for him. He doesn't know. All he knows is his delicious drowsiness; all he asks is a little respite: ‘a little ... a little ... a little ...’. He does not commit himself to a refusal, but deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away...

“‘Then I beheld, and considered well: I saw, and received instruction’ (24:32). The wise man will learn while there is time. He knows that the sluggard is no freak, but, as often as not, an ordinary man who has made too many excuses, too many refusals and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible, and as pleasant, as falling asleep.”²

V. A Model Non-Sluggard – the Proverbs 31 Woman (31:10-31)

- a. “She eats not the bread of idleness” (31:27).

² Kidner, Derek. (1964). *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, Vol. 17, p. 39-40). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. A few of the other statements in this outline were influenced by Kidner's portrait of the Sluggard in the introduction of this commentary.



Directions Against Idleness and Sloth

Richard Baxter, *The Christian Directory*

Slightly abridged with updated language, Keith Christensen

Direction #1: The first help against sloth is to be well acquainted with the greatness of the sin. For no wonder it be committed by them that think it small. I shall tell you what it is:

1. God himself reckons it with heinous sins (Ez. 16:49, Proverbs 18:9, 21:25, 2 Thess. 3:6-15).
2. Idleness is a temporary destruction of all the faculties of mind and body which should be exercised. It is contrary to nature: for nature made our faculties for use: You bury yourself alive...Is it not pity and shame to see one voluntarily dead, that makes himself useless by his sloth?
3. Idleness and sloth are consumers of all the mercies of God...Does God daily feed, cloth, and keep you, and protect and support you, and teach and warn you, and all for nothing? Is idleness that for which he hired you? Will you accuse your Maker of so great imprudence, and your Redeemer of more, as if he created and redeemed you to do nothing, or that which is as bad or worse than nothing? He calls to you, "Why stand you idle?" (Matt. 20:3, 6) And it is a terrible sentences that such shall receive: "Thou wicked and slothful servant; cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness" (Matt. 25:26, 30).
4. Idleness is robbing God, who is the Lord of us and all our faculties, and all our service is his due.
5. It is a robbing yourselves of all the good to soul or body, which by your labor and industry you may have received.
6. It is a robbing of the community, and of all those to whom your labors, or the fruit of them, was due. You are burdens to the community, like drones in the hive.
7. Slothfulness is a great consumer of time... O what abundance of their lives do idle persons lose! When time is gone, they will better understand the greatness of their sin and loss, who now make light of it.
8. Idleness is not a single sin, but a continued course of sinning: an idle person is sinning all the while he is idle... and the continuance shows that it is not effectually repented of.
9. Idleness is a destroyer of grace, gifts, and natural abilities; they will rust for lack of use.
10. Idleness and sloth is a fruit of pleasing the flesh, and so comes from the most pernicious vice. It is but to please the flesh that one is drunk, and another gluttonous, and another a fornicator, and another covetous: and your idleness and sloth is but pleasing the same



flesh in another way, which is forbidden as well as those. “And if you live according to the flesh, you will die” (Rom. 8:13).

11. It strengthens the flesh against the Spirit by indulging the flesh in its ease and sloth.
12. Idleness is the mother and nurse of many heinous sins... They that do not what they should, will be doing what they should not. (Baxter mentions lust, fornication, foolish sports, vanity, debauchery, riot [and all the mischief which follows it], idle talk, meddling in other people’s business, foolish and trivial speech, gossip, gluttony, drunkenness, gambling, rebellions, mutinies, and all other lusts of the flesh.)
13. Idleness is the season of temptation; it is Satan’s seedtime. It is then that he has opportunity to tempt men to malice, revenge, and all other villainy that is committed.
14. Idleness is a disorderly walking, out of the way in which God has appointed us to eat our bread and receive his blessings.
15. Idleness usually brings poverty.
16. Idleness is a murderer of the body. Gluttony and idleness kill most of the world before their time; no two sins more constantly bring this curse along with them.
17. Idleness makes you the shame of the creation. Don’t you see how all the world is in action? The sun, the waters, the ground, the cattle labor. All things that are most excellent are most active; all things that are most inactive are most vile, and dead, and worthless. The Scripture sends the slothful even to the ant to learn to labor (Prov. 6:6). Shall the ant, the bee, and every creature be witnesses against you to condemn your sloth?
18. Lastly, idleness disables you from doing good to others.

Direction #2: Those persons must be extraordinarily watchful against this sin of idleness whose constitutions [i.e. body, mind, temperament], unhappy educations [i.e. upbringings], condition of life [e.g. those who don’t need to work to live], or company [family, friends, coworkers] do most strongly tempt them to it. It is a sin that some have but little temptation to in comparison of others: and some have need of a great deal of care and resolution to escape it. (Baxter later adds to this list of those who should be especially watchful against idleness those who are not required to do much at their jobs).

Direction #3: Settle yourselves in a lawful calling, which will keep you under a necessity of ordinary and orderly employment... A man that is out of a stated course of labor cannot avoid idleness so well as he that has his ordinary time and course of business to keep him still at work. It is dangerous to live life out of a calling.

Direction #4: Take heed of excess of meat, and drink, and sleep: for these drown the senses, and dull the spirits, and load you with a burden of flesh or humors, and greatly indispose the body to all diligent, useful labors. A full belly and drowsy brain are unfit for work.



Direction #5: A manlike resolution is an effectual course against sloth. Resolve and it will be done. Give not way to a slothful disposition. Be up and doing: you can do it if you will but resolve. To this end, be never without God's quickening motives on your minds. Think what a sin and shame it is to waste your time; to live like the dead; to bury a rational soul in flesh; to be a slave to so base a thing as sloth; to neglect all God's work while he supports and maintains you, and looks on; to live in sloth, with such miserable souls, so near to judgment and eternity. Such thoughts well set home will make you stir, when a drowsy soul makes an idle body.

Direction #6: Take pleasure in your work, and then you will not be slothful in it. Your very horse will go heavily where he goes unwillingly, and will go freely when he goes there where he would be. Either your work is good or bad: if it be bad, avoid it; if it be good, why should not you take pleasure in it? It should be pleasant to do your work.

Direction #7: To this end be sure to do all your work as that which God requires of you, and that which he has promised to reward; and believe his acceptance of your lowliest labors which are done in obedience to his will. Is it not a delightful thing to serve so great and good a master, and to do that which God accepts and promises to reward? This interest of God in your lowest, and hardest, and most servile labor, does make it honorable, and should make it sweet.

Direction #8: Suffer not your fancies to run after fleshly, vain delights. For these will make you weary of your callings. No wonder if foolish youths be idle, whose minds are set upon their sports; nor is it wonder that fleshly gentlemen live idly, who glut themselves with corrupting pleasures. The idleness of such sensualists is more inexcusable than other men's, because it is not the labor itself that they are against, but only such labor as is honest and profitable. For they can bestow more labor in play, or dancing, or running, or hunting, or any vanity, than their work required. And it is the folly and sickness of their minds [i.e. their hearts] that is the cause, and not any disability in their bodies; the most busy in evil are most slothful to good.

Direction #9: Mortify [put to death] the flesh, and keep it in obedient dependence in the soul, and you will not be captivated by sloth. For idleness is but one way of flesh-pleasing: he that is a lusting slave to his flesh will please it in the way that it most desires! One man in fornication, and another in ambition, and another in ease; but he that has overcome and mortified the flesh, has mastered this with the rest of its lusts.

Direction #10: Remember still that time is short, and death makes haste, and judgment will be just, and that all must be judged according to what they have done in the body; and that your souls are precious, and heaven is glorious, and hell is terrible; and work is various and great, and hindrances are many; and that it is not idleness, but labor, that is comfortable in the reviews of time; and this will powerfully expel your sloth.

Direction #11: Lastly, watch against the slothfulness of those that are under your charges as well as against your own... Sloth in itself is so great a nourisher of vice, and deadly an enemy to all that is good; and idleness is such a course and swarm of sin, that all your understandings, resolution, and authority should be used to cure it in yourselves and others.