

The Sluggard Syndrome

By David Feddes

A lazy bum was out on the sidewalk begging for money when a woman stopped and glared at him. She asked, "Have you ever been offered work?"

"Only once," replied the man. "Apart from that, I've been shown nothing but kindness."

That's the kind of person who has the sluggard syndrome. He considers work a form of torture. To him, a job offer is a form of verbal abuse. He celebrates Lazy Day, not Labor Day.

The word *sluggard* isn't an everyday word, but many English translations of the Bible use the word in various passages. A sluggard is not a slugger. A slugger may be a home run hitter who slugs a baseball and knocks it out of the park, or a slugger may be a boxer who slugs his opponents and knocks them out of their senses. But we're not talking about a slugger; we're talking about a *sluggard*: S-L-U-G-G-A-R-D. Dictionaries define a sluggard as "a habitually lazy and inactive person." A sluggard takes a sluggish approach to life. A sluggard is a lazybones.

In Proverbs 26, the Bible describes several symptoms of the sluggard syndrome. According to Proverbs 26:13, "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets.'" He can't possibly go to work today. What if there's a lion out there? What if something terrible happens to him on the way to work? The sluggard uses any excuse, no matter how ridiculous, to avoid working.

Proverbs 26:14 says, "As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed." Mr. Lazybones is so fond of sleeping that it's like he's permanently attached to his mattress. It's a big job for him just to turn over in bed.

Proverbs 26:15 says, "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his own mouth." Even the most basic task is too much for him. He's too lazy to feed himself. He thinks he's being overworked if he has to lift his own sandwich from his plate to his mouth!

Proverbs 26:16 says, "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly." The sluggard thinks he's a genius! He figures work is for those who are too stupid to get out of it. In the sluggard's own humble opinion, he's smarter than seven brilliant university scholars. After all, he knows how to live without working, and those professors don't.

Okay, so maybe nobody is quite that lazy. These biblical proverbs are making fun of the sluggard. They're exaggerating the way political cartoonists in the newspaper draw a caricature that exaggerates each feature. Probably no sluggard is quite this bad (though some people come mighty close). But the Bible is showing us in a funny and memorable way four basic symptoms of a person who's infected with the sluggard syndrome: (1) he's an expert at making excuses; (2) he'd much rather relax than work; (3) he thinks that even the most basic task is too much; and (4) he measures his intelligence by how little work he can get away with.

Below the Surface

The sluggard syndrome is a mindset, an approach to life that treats laziness almost like a virtue. The fact that it's a mindset, an inner attitude, a way of approaching

life, means that you can't determine whether a person is a sluggard simply by asking whether or not that person has a paying job. You need to look below the surface.

Take people who are unemployed. Some are lazy freeloaders who don't want to work, but many unemployed people aren't that way at all. If you're out of work, you may be hoping to find a job as soon as possible. And when you already feel terrible about not having a job, the last thing you need is for someone else to label you as lazy. Many unemployed people aren't looking for a handout; they're looking for a hand up. So we need to avoid snap judgments. The fact that a person is unemployed is by no means proof that he or she has the sluggard syndrome.

Likewise, the fact that people have a paying job is no proof that they don't have the sluggard syndrome. What about people who pick up their paycheck each week but don't carry their share of the load, who have good jobs but do poor work? The head of a New York business firm put a message on the company's notice board:

Some time between starting and quitting time, without infringing on lunch periods, coffee breaks, rest periods, story-telling, ticket-selling, holiday planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's television programs, we ask that each employee try to find some time for a work break. This may seem radical, but it might aid steady employment and assure regular paychecks.

There are men and women who punch the time clock every day, but between punching in and punching out, they do as little as they can possibly get away with. So it's clear that the sluggard syndrome can't be measured simply by whether or not you have a paying job. Some people who don't have jobs are willing to work, while some who do have jobs are lazy.

Not only that, but you can actually have a paying job *and* work very hard at your job and still not be free from the sluggard syndrome. A man goes at his work with gusto. He's ambitious; he's energetic; he drives himself hard. He takes pride in his work, and he does it well. You look at the man, and the word "lazy" is about the last thing that comes to mind. But watch him when he gets home from his job. He slumps into his cushioned chair and pops open a beer. If his wife asks him to do even the smallest thing, he mumbles and grumbles and groans and moans. If his kids want him to play a game or read a book with them, the task is too overwhelming. He doesn't feel like studying the Bible or giving spiritual leadership to his family. He never volunteers a minute of his time to community service or to working in his church.

When this guy is on the job, he may be the hardest worker around, but in every other part of his life, he's as much a sluggard as the lazybones described in Proverbs 26. Okay, so he doesn't talk about a lion in the street to get out of work. But he's got plenty of creative excuses for doing as little as possible for his family and community. He may not quite be hinged to his bed, but once he gets home, he does seem rather attached to his La-z-boy recliner. He may have enough energy to lift the food from the plate to his mouth, but that's about it. Ask him to get something for himself from the cupboard or help clear the table after dinner, and he acts like the stress will cause him a heart attack. He may not claim to be smarter than seven scholars, but he does think he's quite clever for avoiding any task around home that isn't directly related to his career.

I hope it's clear that when we think about the sluggard syndrome, we can't just focus on people who prefer welfare checks to paychecks. They may be the most blatant

sluggards, but they certainly aren't the only ones. People who have jobs but do them with minimal effort are also sluggards. And even people who are workaholics when it comes to their career may be sluggards when it comes to other important aspects of their lives.

Threefold Failure

The Bible says a great deal about what will happen if the sluggard syndrome remains unchecked. The final result can be summed up in one word: *failure*. The failure is threefold: you fail yourself, you fail other people, and you fail God.

Let's look first at how you fail yourself when you're lazy. If you can get away with laziness, you may think you're smarter than seven geniuses, but it's more likely that you don't have the intelligence of an insect. The Bible says in Proverbs 6,

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. (6:6-11)

A sluggard doesn't even have the brains of a bug! The ant is at least smart enough to look to the future, while the sluggard thinks only of what is easiest right now; he doesn't see that laziness now means failure in the future. If you're too lazy even to look for a job, you're going to be stuck in a lifetime of poverty, stumbling from one crisis to another. If you have a job but don't really work at it, you'll probably end up getting fired and find yourself without a paycheck.

The bulletin board in a Detroit business office posted this notice:

The management regrets that it has come to their attention that workers dying on the job are failing to fall down. This practice must stop, as it becomes impossible to distinguish between death and the natural movement of the staff. Any employee found dead in an upright position will be dropped from the payroll.

Ouch! The sluggard syndrome can stop your paycheck and block your cash flow.

And the workplace isn't the only place we fail ourselves by being lazy. We've already seen that the sluggard syndrome can infect more than just our job performance. If you're too lazy to put any effort into your marriage, don't be shocked if you wake up one day to find yourself alone or else moping along in a marriage with no excitement or romance. If you don't put time and effort into rearing your children, you may regret it when they don't amount to anything but trouble. And if you don't put any effort at all into studying your Bible or working for God, your spiritual life can end up in ruins. When you approach any part of life or any important relationship with a lazy attitude, you're cheating yourself.

Does this mean that any time we fail, we must have been lazy? No, hard work doesn't always guarantee success. Many things in life are beyond our control. Still, even though hard work doesn't guarantee success, laziness usually brings failure.

When you're lazy, you fail not only yourself, but you also fail others. Proverbs says, "As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him" (10:26). Many things in life are irritating. A mouthful of sour vinegar can really make your mouth pucker up. Smoke and soot can sting your eyes and make them

water. But is there anything more irritating than when you count on someone who turns out to be lazy and unreliable? "As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him."

Ask anyone in business about the frustrations of having employees who don't get the work done the way they should. Ask anyone who's married to a sluggard how frustrating it can be to find out you married a parasite instead of a partner. Ask a child how much it hurts to have parents who won't spend time and effort on their kids. Laziness is not just irritating to others; it's downright harmful. Proverbs 18:19 says, "One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys." In other words, a sluggard isn't much better than a vandal. His laziness is destructive, both to himself and to other people.

But perhaps the sluggard's most serious failure is that he fails God. Every person has a purpose in God's plan. Each of us has God-given opportunities to honor the Lord, and we ought to make the most of them. Any time we do less than our best, we fail the God who made us and gave us those opportunities. Christians, especially, should avoid the sluggard syndrome. We carry the name of Christ, and if we're lazy, it doesn't reflect well on the one we claim as our master. Jesus calls you to be a servant, not a sponge.

At the time the apostle Paul was writing his epistles of the New Testament, some church people in the Greek city of Thessalonica decided to stop working. They said that Jesus might return any moment and then their work wouldn't matter anyway.

Meanwhile, as they sat around waiting for Jesus to come back, they paid their bills by depending on other people's generosity. In a letter to the Thessalonians, Paul set them straight. He told them they were foolish to set a date for Jesus' coming, and he told his readers that laziness is a serious sin—so serious that they should distance themselves from sluggards until those people came to their senses. Paul wrote,

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us... "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right (2 Thessalonians 3:6,10-13).

Renewed Energy

If we want to avoid failing ourselves and others and God, we've got to get rid of the sluggard syndrome. And to do that we need renewed energy. At the root of the sluggard syndrome is a lack of energy, a deep apathy, a lack of motivation, a lack of purpose. How can your energy be renewed? Through a renewed relationship with God and a renewed view of work.

A vibrant relationship to God changes attitudes and builds energy. Once you know God through Jesus Christ, you've got a new joy and vitality. You know that God is at work in you and that you've got a special place in his plan. How can you lack energy when you're energized by God himself? How can you feel no sense of purpose when you know that God created you with a definite purpose in mind? How can you be satisfied failing yourself, failing others, and failing God, when you know that Jesus gave up his life to overcome your failures?

The Bible says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). When you realize that you're God's workmanship, you'll want to produce the highest quality workmanship. When you discover that God prepared good works in advance for you to do, you'll want excellence to characterize everything you do.

A renewed relationship to God produces a renewed view of work. So if you find yourself being dragged down by the sluggard syndrome in any dimension of your life, take another look at your relationship with God. If you aren't already committed to Christ, if you've never really said, "I give all of my life to you, Lord," then now is the time to do it. Turn your life over to Jesus. Find out what a difference Jesus can make in your life and in your work when you start living and working for him.

And if you're already a Christian but you've grown soft and lazy like a slug, it's time rediscover who you are in Christ. You are his workmanship. Realize that you owe it to him and to others and to yourself to make the most of your work. Even if your duties aren't a thrill a minute, it's important to God, and it should be important to you. A renewed relationship to the Lord and a renewed view of work will give you renewed energy.

More Than a Job

And remember: God is talking about more than just your *job*; he's talking about your *work*. Your work is more than your paid employment. It's more than your career. Your work involves every part of your life. You need to see *everything* you do in the light of God's plan. So if you're paid to do a job, by all means do it just as well as you possibly can, but at the same time be sure that you're not being lazy about the other unpaid work God has given you to do.

Your job is just one part of your total work, and it may not even be the most important part. Take the apostle Paul: he earned his money making tents—that was his "job"—but his "work" was much bigger than that. His main focus was on telling people about Jesus and starting new churches. Paul's greatest impact was not in the tents he made but in the many people he led to Christ. Or look at Jesus himself: Jesus may have worked as a carpenter, but that's not the most important thing he ever did. No doubt when Paul worked on making a tent, he tried his best to produce a quality product. No doubt when Jesus was making something from wood, he did an excellent job. But the jobs of tentmaking and woodworking were only a part—and not the most important part—of their overall work.

Some people who don't have a job at all, nevertheless, have very important work. In many families, one parent chooses to stay at home when the children are young while the other continues to hold a job. Sometimes it's the man who stays home, but more often it's the woman. Sometimes a woman will say, "I don't work. I'm just a housewife." There is no such thing as "just a housewife." How can you say you don't work? You work, alright. You just don't get paid for it. It's hard to imagine any work more important or more challenging than the shaping of a child's life. So let's get rid of the notion that the only work worth doing is the work we get paid to do.

And by the way, if you've retired from your job, don't think for a moment that you now have the right to retire from your work. There's more to life after 65 than a golf

course. Some of your richest opportunities to serve God and others come when the daily demands of a job no longer prevent you from pursuing other possibilities.

Encouragement for the Jobless

What if you're unemployed right now and looking for work? Well, even then, don't think you're useless or that there's not work for you to do. In *Today's Christian Woman* magazine, Annie Oeth told how her husband Ed lost his job due to cutbacks in the company he worked for. Ed felt devastated. It was a serious financial concern, of course, but it was also a crushing blow to his dignity. Ed and Annie wondered how a loving God could let something so awful happen to them. Some days were okay as Ed looked for a new job, but on other days, says his wife Annie, Ed "stayed in bed past noon, let his face stubble grow, and watched television all afternoon and into the night." The pain and discouragement of being unemployed could have driven Ed into the sluggard syndrome.

But as time went by, said Annie, something happened:

For the first time in our marriage, my husband and I had plenty of time to spend together. We started taking walks, and stayed up late to talk. Our oldest boy became his father's shadow, following him and imitating him whenever possible. My husband was able to watch his boys grow up day-by-day, something he had missed when he was traveling and earning a large salary.

Annie goes on to tell how they played games together as a family, and how her husband "was able to spend precious time with his father, who was dying of cancer." At the same time, they also learned to feel a deep compassion for the unemployed and homeless that they hadn't felt before.

When Ed finally got a good new position ten months later, he not only had a fresh excitement and appreciation for his job, but he also had a renewed involvement in all the other important work and relationships that God had given him. In losing his job, he had discovered his work. At first, the experience of unemployment had made Ed feel useless, but God ultimately used that experience to make Ed more useful than ever.

So whatever your situation is right now, don't give in to the sluggard syndrome. God has work for you to do. The Bible says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23-24).

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