

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 2 -

THE VICE OF SLOTH

"Almighty GOD, in whose hands are all the powers of man; who givest understanding, and takest it away; who, as it seemeth good unto Thee, enlightenest the thoughts of the simple, and darkenest the meditations of the wise, be present with me in my studies and inquiries.

Grant, O Lord, that I may not lavish away the life which Thou hast given me on useless trifles, nor waste it in vain searches after things which Thou hast hidden from me.

Enable me by Thy HOLY SPIRIT, so to shun sloth and negligence, that every day may discharge part of the task which Thou hast allotted me; and so further with Thy help that labour which, without Thy help, must be ineffectual, that I may obtain, in all my undertakings, such success as will promote Thy glory, and the salvation of my own soul, for the sake of JESUS CHRIST. Amen."

- A Prayer by Samuel Johnson, LL.D., November, 1752.

"Go TO THE ANT, thou sluggard; consider her ways" (Proverbs 6:6).

The wise servant of GOD will not fall to attend to an examination of this peril. Sloth, or accidia, has been defined as a raw, gloomy state of mind, inclining to melancholy. The Greek word from which the Italian word accidia comes, means that state of listlessness and indifference to good, that dull sadness which takes away any healthy interest in either mental or bodily activity.

In his Persanne's Tale, Chaucer calls it a "rotten sinne" and gives a list of vices springing from it - negligence, tardiness, slackness, coldness, sluggish undevotion. Dante, in his masterpiece The Divine Comedy, places it midway between the spiritual and fleshly sins - pride, envy, anger (vices of the spirit), avarice, gluttony, sensuality (vices, of the flesh) - a partaking of the evil of both.

The Word of GOD is replete with warning that the man of GOD should brace himself, gird up the loins of his mind, run the race patiently, and Paul speaks of receiving a ministry. But we are never exhausted as we possess the infinite resources. The danger, then, is real. It appertains to the ministry and the whole Christian life.

The Greek lexicon indicates that the adjective for "easy" means to "do things with ease." Then it came to mean to take things easy, to do wrong things, to play the rogue. A transition from ease to

evil is always our peril, as we make full proof of our stewardship of time. It is easy to recline.

Spiritual lassitude is a sin we have forgotten to tabulate nowadays, but the early Christians recognized it. Bishop Paget, writing of this sin of accidia, said:

"It may be called a weariness or distress of heart; it is akin to sadness; the homeless and solitary hermits, those who live in the desert, are especially assailed by it, and monks find it most troublesome about twelve o'clock: so that some of the aged have held it to be '**the destruction that wasteth at noonday**,' the dremonium meridianum of the Ninety-first Psalm. But the most striking part of all that Cassian has to say about accidia is the description in the second chapter of a monk who is suffering from a bad attack of the malady. When the poor fellow is beset by it, he says, it makes him detest the place where he is, and loathe his cell; and he has a poor and scornful opinion of his brethren, near and far, and thinks that they are neglectful and unspiritual. It makes him sluggish and inert for every task; he cannot sit still, nor give his mind to reading; he thinks despondently how little progress he has made where he is, how little good he gains or does - he, who might so well direct and help others and who, where he is, has nobody to teach and nobody to edify. He dwells much on the excellence of other and distant monasteries; he thinks how profitable and healthy life is there; how delightful the brethren are, and how spiritually they talk. On the contrary, where he is, all seems harsh and untoward; there is no refreshment for his soul to be got from his brethren, and none for his body from the thankless land."

In those good hours of the mind, those hours in which we strengthen ourselves to make high resolutions and to face grave dangers, we realise that we are masters of our own time. No one demands that we be at an office by a certain time, and the public and our people have no means of checking on our use of those precious hours. We are trusted to invest in the preparation of ourselves. If we are making progress in the economy of time we are learning to live. A Turkish proverb has it, "A busy man is troubled with but one devil; the idle man with a thousand." And a Spanish proverb, "Men are usually tempted by the devil, but the idle man positively tempts the devil." In a holy life there must be control of time. We must discipline the hours and bend them to GOD's purpose. The late Dr. James M. Gray, of The Moody Bible Institute, was wont to say, "Push your work." The slippered life does not befit the minister of JESUS CHRIST, who ought to be always on the alert, always about his Master's business, ready to put himself at the disposal of the HOLY SPIRIT. If the hours are frittered away by secondary interests and calls, we are succumbing to the vice of sloth. Laziness through religious fussing about with trifles is an idleness for which GOD will bring us into judgment.

Out of his ripe experience, the late Dr. J. H. Jowett counseled ministers to be as systematic and as businesslike as the business man. He said:

"Enter your study at an appointed hour, and let that hour be as early as the earliest of your business men goes to his office. I remember, in my earlier days, how I used to hear the factory operatives passing my house on the way to the mills, where work began at six o'clock . . . The sound of clogs fetched me out of bed and took me to my work . . . Shall the minister be behind them in his quest of the Bread of life? In off-setting sloth there must be a wise conservation of the hours."

Patient preparation means permanent power. Here is a preacher's workshop where he sharpens

and uses his tools. First of all, there is his use of and attitude toward the Bible. This is our textbook, above all others. It is not for us to spend hours with commentaries and a few minutes with a text. We should be men of one Book! Let the Word of GOD be central as the hub of the wheel, and then we shall place other works at the proper circumference and in their true perspective.

Reading plays a large part in our lives. If sloth besets us and we lose our appetite for the Bread which cometh from above, then our hungry people will not be fed. If we settle on our lees, we need not be surprised if they turn away, soured by our presentation of truth. Truth which we mediate will be as an idle tale unless we smart under it and are quickened by it. Robert Browning speaks of "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin." That is the peril, for we can make an outward show of respectability when we are indolent.

There is also the reading of other useful works. Dr. John A. Hutton, editor of *The British Weekly*, said, "Never read without taking notes. All other reading is self-indulgence and an occasion for sleep." If the newspaper is read standing, we are not likely to spend a disproportionate time with it.

In the furbishing of the mind and the quickening of the spirit a servant of GOD needs contact with the outstanding works accessible. We must work harder than any member of the congregation. By our reading and meditation we are preparing ourselves for sacred ministry. Let a rumour pass through a church that the pastor is a slacker, or sits at ease, or is not diligent, and he is finished!

A useful discipline of study in feeding our souls on the Word of GOD is to read a book at a sitting. A few have specialized in this kind of study with lasting profit, such as Dr. James M. Gray, Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, and Dr. W. Graham Scroggie. But it is open to all. To rise to the mastery of a book after repeated reading of it is to survey some large mountain range. There will be occasions when we return again and again to particular books in the Bible, and classic works of devotion will claim our interest. Dr. Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, writing to Lady Aidie, said that he had just finished Boswell's *Johnson* for the fiftieth time; and Charles Haddon Spurgeon was wont to say that he had read John Bunyan a hundred times. Dr. Alexander Whyte, of Edinburgh, said he read James Fraser of Brea, and could run Jowett and Spurgeon hard! Fraser was the Scottish Augustine in the seventeenth century. In his *Book of the Intricacies of My Heart and Life*, he says, "I was too lazy to roast what I took in hunting."

That is one of the snares of sloth. Reading a masterpiece of spiritual worth, we are exhilarated by it and delighted, but we do not get up for notebook or Bible to mark. And so we lose much of that which we have to enrich our ministry. Without roasting, and all the other operations and processes connected with roasting, you cannot eat so as to take your needed strength out of what you have hunted. "It must be added," said Canon Mozley, "that Cardinal Newman did the same. He drew up a summary and an analysis of any book he read." Sloth in the spiritual life is the last sin to be wholly overcome. "The sloth and unprofitableness of my life," wrote Cardinal Manning, "are only equaled by my vanity and self-complacency."

We need to read only the best books and to select the best for our library. Naturally, a minister will build up a library. Richard Baxter, of Puritan fame, had his books covering tables, chairs, and floor, as well as walls with shelves well laden. It is not the collection, but the selection

which is determinative. Books, however, were the one luxury which Baxter counted a necessity. He thought no money wasted in the purchase of them. No place more dear to him than his study! It was his workshop, his oratory, and (largely) his living-room, and he always left it with reluctance. We may not be able to do all we should like in garnering the wealth of literature, but it is possible with little to make every year a year of growth for the mind and heart. Even the company of one great writer or teacher will add cubits to our spiritual stature. The horizon widens, and preaching is enriched in proportion as we learn to group all knowledge around the Name which is above every name. Pity the minister who never reads anything and who has no passion for reading.

We may not be like the father of the late Sir William Robertson Nicoll, who, out of a stipend of about \$1,000 a year, accumulated a library of 17,000 volumes. Such a collection, it was said, could have been made only by depriving his family of the necessities for health and comfort. But the famous son never spoke a word of criticism of his father. Thus one of the largest private libraries in Scotland was built out of nothing, and a minister and writer who had enriched the whole Church of GOD was given to the world. We may not attain to the objective of Nicoll's father, but we should not be without some choice treasures of the mind and spirit.

"I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). The minister of the Gospel must be a man of knowledge, and if he has a good memory he is helped to face the demands of the hour. But even with a poor memory, he can toil to make good that deficiency. Discipline is possible for the culture of the spiritual life if we would **"save [ourselves], and them that hear [us]"** (1 Timothy 4:16). Thomas Shepard, Pilgrim Father and founder of Harvard University, worked hard early in the week at his sermons, and on Saturday he prepared himself. Hear his word:

"GOD will surely curse that minister who lumbers up and down the world all the week, and then thinks to prepare for his pulpit by a hurried hour or two on Saturday night. GOD knows, Saturday night were little enough time in which to weep and pray and to get his sinful soul into a fit frame for the approaching day."

The temptation to recline in prayer is a peril of the privileged. We deal in sublime things and stand in the holy place continually. When we have read and studied, worked and visited, we imagine we are ready for rest. We say that "labour is prayer," when the reverse is true, "prayer is labour." Because it is labour, an exercise, perhaps that is why we are prone to indolence in this respect. Haven't you discovered a reluctance and resistance to this spiritual duty? To pray aright and to pray enough is to face difficulties, especially our sloth. "Oh!" cried John Calvin, "what deep-seated malice against GOD is this, that I will do anything and everything, but to go to Him and remain with Him in secret prayer!" Our danger is that we are always "on the run," and neglect the culture of other souls in private. This discipline is needful in order to ward off sloth. Browning's Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister should be read.

I have heard of a minister who gave this judgment after a long ministry:

"I have not failed to study; I have not failed to write and meditate; but I have failed to pray . . . Now, why have I not prayed? Sometimes because I did not like it; at other times because I hardly dared; and yet at other times because I had something else to do. Let us be frank. It is a grand thing to get a praying minister . . . I have heard men talk about prayer who never prayed in their

lives. They thought they did; but when you have heard them, they made their own confession in a ruthless way."

In the days of His flesh, CHRIST "**offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears**" (Hebrews 5:7). It was a holy and costly business. We are not the men we might be because of this lack and the inertia which too readily besets us. Eternal vigilance must be fostered if we are to succeed. Sloth here is like the action of the termites, which destroy the life and strength of wood, causing it to crumble in dust when it is put under the pressure of use. Our prayers, even when we pray, are not at the flood. There may be much phrasing and little passion. Better to have a little less in other things and more experience in the school of prayer than to miss the power of the secret place. It is not found in the college curriculum.

Sloth in the spiritual life can overtake us when we imagine we are zealous. As Robert Murray McChesney found in Dundee, his times of solitude were often times of greatest temptation. With open Bible and prayer purposed, he found there was little communion. His plan of the spiritual life was carried through in the spirit of Jeremy Taylor's advice, "*If thou meanest to enlarge thy religion, do it rather by enlarging thine ordinary devotions than thy extraordinary.*" The daily regularity of devotion kept his soul refreshed by the stream of GOD. The wise man will remember the spirit of his Lord, the zeal of GOD's house consumed Him. "**He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem**" (Luke 9:51). "**My Father worketh hitherto, and I work**" (John 5:17). As the cases of barristers are won in the chambers, so we win our battles in private before we wrestle without.

Let us not deceive ourselves, imagining we shall never be tempted after one victory. In midlife sloth will appear again. Amid the pressure of labour we can lose the zest and thrill of aspiration. Charles Haddon Spurgeon knew something of this, for in one of his sermons he said:

"In this world, is it not a weary business to be a minister of CHRIST today? If I might have my choice I would sooner follow any avocation, so far as the comfort of it is concerned, than this of ministering to the sons of men, for we beat the air. This deaf generation will not hear us. What is this perverse generation the better for years and years of preaching? . . . The world is not worth preaching to."

In the spiritual pilgrimage of the years there is a loneliness, but thank GOD for the discipline of His service wherein we can grow. Napoleon said, "*I may lose battles, but no one will ever see me lose minutes, either by over-confidence or sloth.*" If we are not to flee the Christian ministry and resign, we should not ask for a life of ease, but hardship, for our symbol is not a cushion but a cross! We shall have to fight against this sort of thing all our lives, but CHRIST is our ally in the work and the fire can ever be kept burning on the altar; it need never go out.

WORK

Idleness is rust and death,
But, Work - hard, exhausting, rigorous labour,
Is GOD's good gift of life in action.

Save us then, Lord,

From this shameful disease of sloth,
From its living death.

Grant us the glory of Work,
Whose weariness is the crown of achievement,
Whose monotony is solid success,
Whose end is the end of a soldier,
flames on back and face to the foe.

Use us, Lord, in Thy work:
Use us remorselessly:
Grant us ever the guerdon of Work, of harder
and sterner Work.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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