

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
July 18, 2021

## **Faith Is Hard Work**

Ecclesiastes 10:15-20

If you look around our facilities and grounds, you may have noticed that our Buildings and Grounds Committee certainly hasn't been idle this summer. Trees have been trimmed and removed. Landscaping has been refreshed. Oil tanks have been painted. And the big project that most of you spotted last Sunday—the parking lot got a new seal coat and new striping. Some of these projects have been contracted out to specialists. Others have been taken care of by individuals here in our congregation with the skill, time, and willingness to help us care for and enhance what God has entrusted to us. Having a well-maintained church building doesn't just happen. It takes hard work and effort.

Contrast this with the scene painted in one of the verses in today's text from Ecclesiastes. "Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks" (v. 18). In this case, it sounds like the Buildings and Grounds Committee has gone on summer vacation. Actually, this proverb seems to have more of a residential setting. The homeowner has been neglecting essential maintenance and repairs. The roof is leaking. The toilet won't flush properly. Door knobs are loose. Light bulbs need to be replaced. Drafty windows need some caulking. The air conditioning keeps breaking down. The homeowner prefers sitting on the couch watching reruns of *Home Improvement* without ever doing any of their own.

During one of the commercial breaks, maybe this person should pick up their Bible, currently being used as a resting place for the remote control, and open it to the book of Ecclesiastes. That's where we find plenty of insight about how to live wisely rather than foolishly. Today's Scripture is just one segment of an entire chapter that gathers up a variety of individual sayings, all pivoting around the theme of cause and effect. If you follow this course of action, or inaction, this is how things will likely turn out. Choosing foolishly will lead to problems and potential disaster. Choosing wisely will make for a much better outcome. So in those behavior choices that face us each day, use good judgment.

In particular, beware the dangers of idleness. I realize that lots of people have commented on that subject. Some of the advice has a more negative bearing, like, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." Or, "Shun idleness. It is a rust that attaches itself to the most brilliant metals" (Voltaire). Or, "Idleness is sweet, and its consequences are cruel" (John Quincy Adams). But idleness can also be interpreted in positive statements. For instance, "Idleness is not doing nothing. Idleness is being free to do anything" (Floyd Dell). Or, "What fools call wasting time is most often the best investment" (Nassim Taleb).

Recall last Sunday's sermon when I focused on the theme of sabbath. Rest is a gift of God who wills our wholeness and well-being. When we honor God through our observance of the Lord's Day, and practice disciplined rhythms of rest in our daily lives, we acknowledge that ceasing from work is part of our relationship with God. In that respect, there's a place for "idleness" in the Christian life. In other words, a positive kind of idleness that helps renew and refresh, that creates space and time for creativity and imagination.

Earlier this week, I talked to someone who was trying to pay attention to how her children are spending their summer. She had decided to lean toward more free time, or maybe we could even say idleness. She was concerned about the way that the lives of many children, including her own, can get overscheduled. Their lives are so structured, organized and booked with activities, programs, and events. There's little time left for rest and recreation, for the freedom and creativity of play. Here was a mom who was learning the value of "down time".

In his book *The Busy Trap*, Tim Kreider says, "The space and quiet that idleness provides is a necessary condition for standing back from life and seeing it whole, for making unexpected connections and waiting for the wild summer lightning strikes of inspiration—it is, paradoxically, necessary to getting any work done."<sup>1</sup> So from a Christian perspective, there's a sense in which we need to be idle. In order to practice holiness and bring glory to God, we need to clock out from lives devoted purely to productivity, efficiency, and achievement.

But that's different from the kind of idleness warned against in today's text, and in various other places in the Scriptures. I mean idleness that involves wasting time, resources, and opportunities that could be utilized to seek after God's righteousness and to embody it in our lives, individually and together. This is the kind of idleness that can make us spiritually unproductive, can provide the occasion for temptation to sin, and can contribute to procrastination.

Throughout the history of the church, Christian communities and Christian thinkers have stayed alert to the dangers of idleness, and have cultivated spiritual practices and habits that counter its threats. For instance, in the sixth century, a guide for monks called the Rule of St. Benedict, stated, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers must be busy with manual labor at specified times, and also with divine reading at specified hours, for they are really monks when they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the Apostles did."<sup>2</sup> In this case, a daily rhythm of manual labor, coupled with reflection upon Scripture, was prescribed as a way of being vigilant and maintaining attentiveness to God.

In the Middle Ages, a painting by Hieronymus Bosch shows a man dozing in his chair in the middle of the day. There's a pillow under his head and a little dog curled up at his feet. Standing next to him is a nun, offering him a prayer book and some rosary beads. But the man is not able or not willing to wake from his slumber. As one preacher has put it, "He'd rather snooze than hear from God."<sup>3</sup> Now we all need to snooze from time to time. A little nap never hurt anyone. But the impression conveyed by this piece of art may be warning us against being overtaken by spiritual slumber. Richard Baxter, a Puritan church leader, once noted, "Idleness is a sin we can sleepily ease into. It is not a sin that we can sleepily ease out of. If we take laziness lightly, we will never repent of it with our whole heart."<sup>4</sup>

Today's text is a reminder that without vigilance, we can grow slack in the life of faith. We can slip into spiritual slumber and become unfruitful. When I say fruitful, I'm not talking primarily about constantly checking things off a to-do list for the Lord, or racking up accomplishments in the life of the church, or populating your calendar with non-stop spiritual disciplines. It's certainly possible to overdo it in the direction of busyness, including religious activities. In fact, as one person has observed, "The workaholic may be as guilty as the couch potato ... because their constant activity keeps them from attending to the most important things and people in life."<sup>5</sup> So both busyness and idleness can take their toll on a lively personal relationship with Jesus, and on deep and lasting involvement with the community of Christ's people, the church. Especially during a time like this, when

the pandemic has challenged and disrupted many of our programs and activities as a congregation, it's easier to become distant and disengaged from the fellowship of faith. Spiritual idleness can start to set in.

Businessman Max DePree was a trusted voice on the subject of leadership. When he was once asked about the most difficult thing that he personally had to work on, he said, "It's the interception of entropy." Entropy is a term from physics that has to do with the availability of energy. It's essentially the idea that everything that is left to itself has a tendency to deteriorate. One preacher has noted, "Entropy. It's not only one of the great enemies of the universe; it's one of the great enemies of the human spirit. A person becomes apathetic or complacent or settles for the path of least resistance in some area of life. Dreams die and hopes fade. A terrible thing happens: a person learns they can live with mediocrity."<sup>6</sup>

Maybe that's part of the situation depicted in today's verse from Ecclesiastes. The homeowner has grown comfortably complacent inhabiting a mediocre dwelling. So the roof has a leak, the air conditioner is making funny sounds, the gutters are coming loose, and the foundation is showing some cracks. These things may need to be addressed, but not now. Repairs can wait.

A few years ago, Debby and I had some repairs done to the floor of our front porch. But it took some time to get to that point. Over time, there was a lot of deterioration on both ends of the porch, which were more exposed to the elements, especially rain. About a decade ago, I went the DIY route and fixed one end. But a few years later, the weather had taken its toll again. So time passed, and we postponed replacing the whole floor, especially for budget reasons. That is until the day when I stepped on one of the boards and my foot went all the way through the floor. That was a pretty good indication that it was time to do something. So we went ahead with the project.

Idleness often takes the form of procrastination. Rather than moving into action, it's frequently easier to postpone or put off what needs to be done. "I'll take care of that tomorrow." "That project can wait for another time." "We'll get around to it at some point." But tomorrow, or another time, or some point, never comes, and we end up doing nothing. From a spiritual standpoint, in relation to our sinfulness, Puritan Charles Bridges captures it this way: "While we study the awful catalog of sins of commission, let us not forget that the sins of omission are equally guilty. We learn to do evil by doing nothing. We satisfy ourselves and irreligious habits with the delusion that we have done no harm. But is it really no harm to have trifled away all opportunities of doing good?"<sup>7</sup>

A life of following Jesus involves not only avoiding evil but also doing good. And this requires effort. Faith is hard work. So beware of complacency in your spiritual life. Stay on your guard against idleness. Or think of it this way. If you conceive of your relationship with Christ and his church as a dwelling, what kind of shape is your home in? Where are the creaks and leaks? Where are the strange sounds that need investigating? What's broken and needs immediate attention? What's deteriorating from neglect and will only get worse? Are there cracks in the foundation itself? How much deferred maintenance is there in your discipleship? Where do you need to come alive from your complacency and get busy with renovation and repairs?

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Amy Julia Becker, "Worth Reading: On Faith, Disability, and Busyness." Christianity Today website. July 15, 2012. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2012/july/worth-reading-on-faith-disability-and-busyness.html> (July 14, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Elesha Coffman, "Monks Making Money." Christianity Today website. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/april/monks-making-money.html> (July 14, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Wilkerson, in his sermon, "Sloth? Seriously?" Preaching Today website.

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2017/february/sloth-seriously.html> (July 14, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Keith Christensen, "Counseling Idleness." Association of Certified Biblical Counselors website. March 10, 2021. <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/conference-messages/counseling-idleness/> (July 14, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Wilkerson, summarizing an observation by Peter Kreeft, in "Sloth? Seriously?"

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, in his sermon, "Intercepting Entropy." Preaching Today website.

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?query=ortberg%20entropy> (July 15, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Christensen, "Counseling Idleness."