

Matthew 25:31–46 (NIV)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Revelation 3:14–22 (NIV)

¹⁴ “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Love can be quite demanding. The doing of love can seem a lot like work.

Are you ready to do what love demands?

Sloth. What an odd-sounding word. I think of that strange South-American creature that was given the name “sloth” by Spanish missionaries because the animal moved at half-speed. So, it isn’t surprising that when most of us refer to someone as a sloth, we mean lazy, inactive, a couch potato, master of the remote control, hammock hanger, guru of the afternoon nap, and so on. It seems such a trivial thing to be on the list of Capital Vices, aka Deadly Sins. Sure, Paul says that all who are able should work. We acknowledge that we are children of the Protestant work ethic . . . but still, could

laziness really be one of seven deadly vices? The answer is no: laziness is not one of the glittering vices, because laziness is not what we mean by “sloth.”

So what do Christians really mean by “sloth”? The old word for it was *acedia*, which means “lack of caring.” Monks, for example, found that there was a “noonday demon” which slowly pulled them away from their spiritual work. Hunger, boredom, and other distractions would sap the monks’ discipline until finally they found themselves asking “What is the use of this holy effort anyway?” In my own life, I think it is like the problem of “to-do” lists taking over my brain in the middle of listening to a sermon. In a way, it is plain old apathy and indifference. It is finding ourselves simply not caring enough to put the work into loving God and loving others. Rebecca DeYoung, uses the example of marriage to help us understand sloth:

Imagine a typical husband and wife. In general, they have a relationship of genuine love and friendship. One evening, they quarrel at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the night. They find it much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than to do the work of apologizing, forgiving, and reconciling. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires giving up their anger, their desire to have their own way, their insistence on seeing the world only from his or her own perspective. Saying “I’m sorry” takes effort, but it is not simply the physical work of walking across the house and saying the words that each resists. It might be that this is another wearying version of the same fight they’ve been fighting for years, and it doesn’t feel like they are getting any nearer to resolving it. What’s the point of going through the motions of apologizing one more time? Do they want the relationship? Yes, they do — neither would renege on their commitment to each other. But do they want to do what it takes to be in that relationship — do they want to honor its claims on them? Do they want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Well, maybe tomorrow. For now at least, each spouse wants the night off to wallow in his or her own selfish loneliness. This is true especially when love takes effort, or feels like a formality or an empty ritual.¹

I’ve been part of a failing marriage. After awhile I wasn’t even mad anymore; I just didn’t care. Thus: *acedia* = lack of caring = sloth. Whether it is loving God or anyone else, love is going to take some work. Sometimes more, sometimes less. But it takes effort. And an unwillingness to put in that effort, to do the work, is what we mean by sloth. As DeYoung puts it, sloth is “resistance to the demands of love.”

This is, in part, the secret to understanding Jesus’ letter to the Laodiceans in Revelation 3. It is no surprise to us that Jesus would prefer the Laodiceans be hot for God, on fire and totally committed, trusting God in all things, and working to build for his kingdom. Surely, the creator of all things, the God of love, ought to be the focus of such passion and desire.

But preferring the Laodiceans be cold? Why would Jesus prefer people not know him at all, or even hate him, to simple indifference? In the gospel of John, when it comes to the question of Jesus there is no middle-ground, no “we’ll see,” no fence straddling . . . no room for indifference. One believes or one does not. One path leads to the light, the other remains in the darkness. One way leads to life, the other to death. And it is Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In John’s gospel and in Jesus’ message to the Laodiceans, the term “lukewarm Christian” is an oxymoron, it makes no sense. How could someone have genuinely been born from above (John 3), have given their life over to Jesus Christ, and yet be indifferent about the whole thing. At least Jesus knows where he stands with a person

¹ DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (p. 85). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

who is either hot or cold. A Christian who doesn't care enough to act is hardly even a Christian; they've traded away their faithfulness for slothfulness. Willimon writes:

There are those who think that tornadoes destroying towns, the suffering of little children, the wars in the world, and college religion courses taught by atheist professors are the chief threats to faith. I would nominate the less spectacular gradual attrition and erosion. The morning after a midnight visionary encounter with God is the great spiritual challenge. Among my parishioners, it is one thing to have a dramatic, life-changing conversion experience. It is quite another thing to keep it going over the long haul. Sloth eats away at the soul, extinguishes faithful fire, and thus takes its toll, wearing down the soul by slow degrees. . . .

In my pastoral experience, what people sometimes call doubt is more often, more properly called Sloth. Faith requires active response, engagement with God, a willingness to be formed and transformed by God's work in us. The Reformers were concerned not to make "faith" into a new form of "works righteousness," in which we attempt to save ourselves by ourselves. But today I wonder if the greater spiritual danger is that gradual dissipation of faith that comes from a simple unwillingness to take the trouble to believe. Dante wisely places Sloth in the middle of his Purgatory, halfway up the mountain, or halfway down, depending on how you read it. It is in the middle of the day, the middle of life, that dangerous middle point when we have been on our way, and are halfway there, but not nearly there yet, sometime between noon and three, the same hours that Jesus hung on the cross, the same time of the afternoon when middle-aged King David awoke from his nap and spied the lovely Bathsheba at bath, that Sloth gets to us (2 Samuel 11-12). Sloth is that sin that is midway between all the things that drag us down in human life and all our attempts to pull ourselves out, that demon that jumps us at noon.²

I know that some who come to church are like I once was – present but apathetic, not allowing God into any part of their life beside Sunday morning. A little worship here and there suits them just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it, not just peek though the crack, wanting us to throw aside all our indifference and complacency, our sloth. In Revelation, immediately after the warning to the lukewarm Laodiceans, we are transported with John the Revelator to the throne room of God. It is a breathtaking change. . . from the sloth of the Laodiceans to the throne of God, the elders, the four living creatures . . . Holy, Holy, Holy . . . and in the face of all the majesty our imaginations can conjure up, we fall on our knees.

Just do it

In the same vein, our passage from Matthew is one of the most challenging of all Jesus' parables. Simply put, all peoples are divided into two groups – those who provide for people in need, and those who don't. It is door #1 or door #2. A or B. One door leads to God's kingdom. The other is the entrance to oblivion. There is nothing comforting and consoling in this parable. It is a challenge laid down before all those who call themselves disciples of Jesus.

From the time of Moses and Pharaoh, God has expected his people to care for the neediest among them. The Israelites were not to pick their fields clean so that the "the poor and the alien" could gather the remnants of the harvest (Leviticus 19:9). The Israelites were to love their neighbor (Lev. 19:18). God told them that he is the one "who executes justice for the widow and orphan and who loves the strangers. You shall also love the stranger . . ." (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

Jesus could not have drawn a more stark contrast for us. Do we provide for "the least of these" or do we not? Close to home and far away? This love for neighbor, this sacrificial

² Willimon, William H. (2013-02-01). *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins* (p. 80). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

love grounded in action, is every bit as much a part of becoming Christlike as Bible study, prayer, or any of the other spiritual disciplines. Genuine love for others demands that we do something, that we respond, that we care.

An empowered heart

Sadly, this is often nearly impossible for us. Blessedly, we are not alone in this, and we have more than one another. We have been given the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of God. Jesus not only gives his disciples a mandate, he gives them the power to accomplish it. As Jesus had promised them on the eve of his crucifixion, the Spirit, the Comforter and Advocate, would come to Jesus' disciples weeks later at Pentecost. The Spirit would be God's empowering presence in their lives and work. And the world would be forever changed.

God's Holy Spirit dwells in all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who reshapes our hearts and minds. It is the Spirit who convicts us when we turn inward to the exclusion of others. It is the Spirit who works with us to foster an ever-growing desire in our hearts to proclaim Christ and to serve others. It is the Spirit who will help us overcome the sloth into which we can sink.

The UMC Book of Discipline states that "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world. . . . This mission is our grace-filled response to the Reign of God in the world announced by Jesus." The Reign of God is one of justice and mercy. And so we go out, a Bible in one hand and a hammer in the other – ready to respond to the demands of love.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Begin by discussing what you think Christians mean by "sloth." How is it something different from mere laziness? Could a person be incredibly busy but still trapped in the vice of sloth?
2. Hot? Cold? Lukewarm? . . . If the letter to the Laodiceans doesn't get you thinking, then not much will. In which of these three categories would you place yourself? In which category would your friends place you? Your family? Co-workers? If your faith were hot, how would anyone know?
3. We are all comfortable with the idea that there are expectations of us at work or at home, but many of us get really uncomfortable with the idea that God has expectations of us as well. Do you agree? If so, why do you think some people don't want to hear about God's expectations of us? What are God's expectations of us? In Matthew's Gospel, immediately after the parable of the talents, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this parable, the blessed are those who feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed, care for the sick, etc. In our busy lives, how much time do we make for doing the work of Jesus' disciples? How can bold giving of ourselves become a holy virtue for us?
4. At the end of today's parable, Jesus says that the unfaithful slave is tossed "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." These are Matthew's favorite metaphors for the fate of the wicked and stand in sharp contrast to the blessings given the first two slaves. If talk of God's expectations makes Christians uncomfortable, Jesus talking about condemnation and judgment really gets us squirming. Somehow, it can seem more Old Testament than New! Yet, the entirety of chapters 23-25 of Matthew is commonly referred to as Jesus' "judgment discourse." Why do Jesus words about judgment make so many of us uncomfortable? Why do you think that Jesus finishes this parable with words of judgment? How could we think of judgment as something loving that encourages us? What *does* encourage you to be a true disciple? To meet the demands of love?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 5:43-48 Learning to love our enemies has to take some effort and a whole lot of God!</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 25:14-30 We say we love God, but are we ready to do what love demands, using all that God has entrusted to us?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 10:25-37 Again, what does God require of us? What does love demand?</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 If this is what love is, then apathy and indifference could never be the path to such love.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Peter 1:3-7 Do we truly “make every effort”? Note that verse 5 culminates in love.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

