

Sermon – June 17-18, 2000  
Rich Nathan  
The Seven Deadly Sins for Today Series  
Phil. 3:12-14

## Overcoming the Spiritual Blahs

I have been doing a series on the Seven Deadly Sins and if you were here the last week or two you might have noticed I was gone. My wife and I in July are celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary and so we just took our first extended vacation alone since we have had kids, where I didn't have to work, in the last 20 years. We splurged and went to Rome. We got to see all the sites and ate great Italian food. I would remind you that according to my definition of gluttony, really enjoying great food is NOT gluttony!

But I have been doing a series on the Seven Deadly Sins, a list that comes out of the early church. We are in the home stretch of this series. Today I want to talk with you about the sin of sloth. In almost all of the talks I have had to begin with what a particular sin is not. When we talked about pride I said that it is not the sin of pride to be proud of your kids or proud of your church. It is not gluttony to thoroughly enjoy a great meal or spend lots of time preparing a good meal.

Likewise, with sloth, I need to tell you what sloth is not. Sloth is often confused with idleness. But it is not necessarily a bad thing to be idle. There is nothing particularly wrong or sinful about lying in the sun on the beach why after all did God create beaches? They're not particularly great places for farming or building homes. Beaches exist for our enjoyment. There is nothing wrong with taking a vacation or a walk in the park for no other reason other than it is a nice day and you just want to enjoy the park. It is not sloth when you linger in a restaurant with a dear friend or a lover, or you linger with your spouse because you enjoy this other person's company and you enjoy their conversation. The sin of sloth is not curling up on the sofa on a rainy day with a good book or a video.

A poet once asked:  
"What is this life  
If full of care  
We have no time  
To stand and stare."

It is not sloth to just take some time to stand and stare, to daydream, to allow yourself the freedom to NOT produce all the time. Sloth is not the same thing as rest. It is not recreation. It is not refueling. In fact, the Bible commands rest to us. To hyperactive, hyper-productive 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans it probably would be a really good idea if we did some extended study on the issue of God's command for us to have a Sabbath. Sloth is not taking a break. In fact, Psalm 127:2 says: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to stay up late toiling for food to eat, for the Lord gives his beloved sleep." So we aren't talking about vacations, rest, sightseeing, camping, hiking, taking a Saturday afternoon not to garden or to

do chores that will produce, but to just lie in a hammock with a big glass of iced tea and a novel.

What is sloth? What was the early church talking about when they said that sloth was one of the fundamental sins that produced all other sins? The Greek word for sloth is the word “akedia.” It means not caring, “a” which means not; and “kidos” which means care. By sloth what the ancient church was talking about what we might call today “apathy” or “indifference” or a lack of passion, a lack of feeling or caring about what is right.

By sloth we are talking about a state of spiritual dullness where you just don’t care about sin in your life or God or prayer or witnessing or worship or pursuing Christian virtues like reconciling with someone who is difficult, or peacemaking, or pursuing patience or purity. The basic theme of sloth is “I just really don’t care.” We are talking about a case of spiritual blahs.

It is the adult or teenager who is not particularly interested in God or spiritual things or righteousness. They are just dull. It is a state of spiritual inertia. It is being a spiritual Homer Simpson. Sitting on the sofa with your mouth hanging open, flipping through the channels on the TV over and over again.

By sloth we are talking about never giving back more than you take. Never serving except when you absolutely have to and there is no other alternative. It is “Yeah, yeah, I have heard that before, but I am not that motivated to change.”

It is the condemnation that Jesus made to the church at Laodecia, where he said, “I would that you were cold or hot; but because you are lukewarm I will spew you out of my mouth.” By sloth we are talking about lukewarmness. You just don’t have any particularly strong feelings one way or another about God, prayer, life, or marriage. Everything just seems like it takes too much energy.

I need to point out at the front end of a talk like that this that it is a myth that if you are a hard worker, if you are successful in business, if you are a hard-charging professional, if you spend 75 hours a week on the job that you clearly are not guilty of sloth. The truth is that many of us who work long hours at our jobs can be exceedingly slothful. Because work may be for you the path of least resistance. It is really not that tough for you. You don’t have to deal with the messiness of your family, your kids, or your wife’s depression, or the messiness of getting involved in personal relationships, if you are a single person. Or dealing with your own personal problems. The slothful person always pursues the path of least resistance. Not what is right, what is sacrificial, or what costs, but rather what is easy.

Dorothy Sayers, the great Christian writer and dear friend of CS Lewis, once said that sloth is the sin that believes in nothing; cares for nothing; seeks to know nothing; interferes with nothing; finds purpose in nothing; lives for nothing; and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.

Do you have the picture? Spiritual blah, indifference, lukewarmness, unmotivated, you don’t care very much about anything at all. The kind of thing where occasionally you ask yourself:

what's it going to take for me to really make a difference, but you don't think of it for very long.

And sloth, frankly, has been the theme of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We celebrate folks who are laid back. "I really like him. He is so laid back, man." Think of our slogans:

"Go with the flow..."

"Live and let live, that's my philosophy." Talk about the philosophy of the slothful.

"It's not my business. I am not going to get involved."

"Hang loose."

"If it feels good, do it."

"Don't make waves."

Brothers and sisters, it is not very hard to find the sin of sloth infecting almost everyone we meet and in almost every occupation.

Today is Father's Day and truly there is so much of the sin of sloth in parenting today. It is hard work, you parents know it, it is hard work to try to raise a responsible, well-disciplined, productive child who gives back to others, to the society, to church, who gives back more than they take. It is hard work. There are so many forces working against you. The great lie is that it is easy to be a good parent. The lie is that it shouldn't take so much effort to get your kids to stop fighting or to help with chores or just to have a decent attitude.

The slothful parent, of course, rather than engage in the hard work of drawing lines and following through on threats of punishment and making their kids unhappy, pushing and prodding – the slothful parent basically buys their kids off. And that is what parents have been doing for the last 40 years. They are buying their kids off. Well, we live in a rising economy, so why not make the kids happy and buy them the stuff. It will pacify them for a little while. Buy them another CD. Get them some new clothes. Buy them another computer game. Cater to their demands.

I remember just after my own parents' divorce how my parents competed to buy me off and to buy my affection. I remember I was 13-14 years old and I knew they were engaged in this game and I thought it was a great game. I sure wasn't going to complain. I remember just after my parents' divorce, my mom went out and bought me a TV for my bedroom. That was a big deal back then for a kid to have their own TV in their room. My father wasn't going to be trumped by that and he came over with a mini-bike. And so I milked the system for all its worth.

Well, that is slothful parenting, to buy your kids off. And I know that many of you who are custodial parents in divorces are at your wit's end because you deal with a slothful occasional father or mother in the person of your ex-spouse. The common story is to have an ex-spouse who just won't discipline the kids when they are with them. They let your kids run wild. They totally violate your standards and let them watch anything on TV or videos. The other parent just wants to be the good guy. And you always have to play the heavy, the disciplinarian. You always have to clean up the mess of a terrible attitude. Pushing kids to practice their piano, to read, to help around the house without being paid – being a good parent is hard work. Being a good parent is not for the slothful.

And by the way, I need to balance my remarks and say that harsh discipline can also be a sign of sloth. It is slothful to say "no" to your children without explaining why you are saying "no." It is slothful to send your kids to bed early just so you can be left alone, so you can watch TV. It is slothful to scream at your child or to lose control, rather than to have a thoughtful conversation, which really provides discipline.

You see sloth in our educational system today as many teachers in schools have simply given up attempting to raise the bar high and to teach kids who seem unmotivated. I remember when my son was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Like good parents we went to Parent/Teacher Day and my son's English teacher in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, stood up in front of a room full of parents and said to us, "You know, my goal is just to get the kids to read something. [This is 11<sup>th</sup> grade now.]" She said, "I would prefer that they didn't read Babysitter Club books [books designed for 4-5<sup>th</sup> graders], I would prefer they didn't read that, but if that will get them to read, then that's OK with me. And I would like to have them turn in a 1/2 page book report on what they are reading."

Talk about sloth. It is slothful when school districts decide to artificially inflate grades to essentially pacify kids and tax-paying parents. There are school districts around Central Ohio where 25-30% of the graduating classes have GPAs above a 3.6. Now, that is just plain sloth on the part of teachers. 1/3 of all the kids are judged to be excellent? What is this? Lake Woe-Begone where all the kids are above average?

And you see sloth in the design of modern textbooks, which will take every key word and define it in the margins and every concept is highlighted and every page has 2-3 photos and graphics.

You see sloth in many of our marriages. Sloth is at the root of many marital failures. Not all, but many marriages go sour just because of the pure laziness and indifference and lack of desire, care and effort on the part of one or both parties. Where people just stop caring enough to really work out their differences. Often, in retrospect, people will say: That marriage wasn't so terrible. It wasn't so horrible. Our problems weren't so monumental. We are not talking about being married to a crack addict or a hardcore gambler or abuser. We are talking about really solvable problems. But the truth is that neither of us took the time nor made the effort to solve our problems. So many marriages collapse out of sheer sloth.

It is reminiscent of TS Elliott's poem "The Hollow Man" where he says:

"This is the way  
The world will end  
Not with a bang  
But a whimper."

That's how lots of marriages end – not with a bang. Not "We are just wildly fighting all the time," but "We just stopped caring."

And you see sloth in so much of the service industry today. Go into a store and look for someone who really cares about their job. Someone who has learned the product line. I

went to purchase perfume for my wife not too long ago and they had four different kinds of perfume – cologne, parfume, perfume, etc. I asked the salesclerk, “What’s the difference?” And it was obvious that she had never taken the time to even try to learn what she was selling. And her manager was too slothful to train her. It is true that if you go into a bookstore today or a coffee shop.

I think we see sloth in many of our discipleship programs in churches. The promises that we offer people in our conferencing. “You can have your life changed in three days, two days or just an evening and a morning...for a \$100.00.” The old Christian idea was that Christian growth was incredibly difficult. Progress was painfully slow and you grew only after lots of effort, suffering and trial being the chief catalyst.

The new idea of Christian growth is that it is pretty easy. That with a few tricks, reduce things to a few spiritual principles, a seminar, a tape, you mail in something to a radio show and you are going to grow. And you will grow quickly, easily, dynamically. You don’t have to fast, repent a hundred times of the same sin. You don’t have to serve in obscurity for a long period of time without any recognition. You don’t have to be bruised or battered by constant criticism of others. Spiritual growth is easy.

It is a sign of sloth. We really take Jesus’ words where he says that the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and few there are to find it. But the way is broad and easy that leads to destruction and we turn them on their heads and say, “You know, it is not that hard to live the Christian life. It is pretty easy. It is pretty easy to grow, you just need this booklet.

We live in a culture, in sum, that hates everything that takes effort. Even in the church we pursue spiritually high experiences over and over again far more than we do service. And for many of us it is just plain difficult to get motivated to want to be different. Well, today, I am going to talk about the sin of sloth in a talk I’ve titled: **“Overcoming the Spiritual Blahs”** Philippians 3:12-14. Let’s pray.

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

This is one of the great texts if you are dealing with a case of spiritual blahs. If you just can’t get yourself motivated to care. If God, prayer, church, service, sacrifice and pursuing Christian virtues and caring about your sin – if it is all just sort of “I’m not that interested” Philippians 3:12-14 is such a wonderful antidote. And unfortunately it has been the subject of so much confusion and wrong-headed explanation that I have to point out what many people have understood this passage to say.

And the wrong conclusions that people draw regarding what this passage was never designed to teach. Many people when they read the words “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. I don’t consider myself yet to have taken hold of it” say that Paul was really saying is

“Brothers and Sisters, I don’t yet consider that I have taken hold of salvation yet. I certainly couldn’t claim at this point in my life that I know that I am saved. I am still trying; I am still striving; I am still hoping that somehow I will be saved. I hope. But far be it from me to claim that salvation for myself.”

There are lots of Christians in lots of churches today that will say that even if you trusted in Christ as your substitute you can never really know what will ultimately happen to you. And look here, Paul didn’t even know where he stood. Many people in an attempt at humility will say that about their own spiritual state: I don’t really know if I am going to heaven or not. I certainly hope I will. One can never be sure of the future.”

In fact, some people will actually tell you that it is a good thing to be insecure. They say that if people get too secure that is what causes them to live slothfully. It is good to never be sure of God’s eternal view of you. It is good, they say, to be uncertain about where you are going to end up. Some folks say that the only way to get people motivated, to shake off the spiritual blahs, is to preach to them a message that makes them feel insecure. That makes them wonder where they stand with God.

I think this whole business of Paul being insecure or teaching insecurity is not only inconsistent with what the great apostle taught in other passages, but even as psychological matter, as pragmatic motivational device, I think it is muddle-headed and false that people perform better when they are insecure and unsure of the future than when they are secure and convinced about the future. See, I think that insecurity is not only inconsistent with lots of Bible passages, but it is wrong practically and psychologically. Is it the case that you can motivate people toward better performance and toward shaking off spiritual blahs by getting them to feel really insecure? Or do people go for it and perform better when they are confident?

Think about it. In an employment situation in the workplace, do employees perform better in an atmosphere where they are waiting for the ax to drop, where the boss always communicates that you could be fired at a moment; where there is always a sense that heads are going to roll; where there are rumors around the office of impending layoffs. In that kind of insecure, walking on eggshells environment, do employees perform better? What do people do when they fear they could lose their jobs at any particular time? What do they do?

Most people become anxious. They get depressed. Some enterprising people begin to explore their options. They send out their resumes. There is a natural human search for security. You want to go somewhere where you are appreciated.

On the other hand, I have seen people who literally perform back flips for an employer that shows confidence in them. They will do everything and anything because they feel that this particular employer really believes and trusts in them. He or she has resided so much trust in me; they have been so good to me, I have to rise to the occasion and give them 110%.

Or put it in the family situation. What is the effect of an insecure foundation on a child? Do children perform better when they are unsure of a parent’s love or acceptance? Do children say, “Oh, because I never know what I am going to get from daddy, whether I am

going to be loved or get the back of his hand, this will cause me to perform better.” Daddy is always angry. Mom has a hair-trigger temper. We always walk around the house on eggshells. Does this produce healthy human beings?

I am convinced that insecurity is never the foundation of healthy performance or causing people to ultimately long-term day in and day out care, shake off slothfulness, pursue the things they ought to. People absolutely need to be rock solidly rooted in God's eternal unchanging faithful acceptance and love. His perseverance towards us; his extraordinary prodigal, extravagant grace. And if you aren't regularly washed over by extravagant grace, you are not going to be motivated.

So Paul is not saying in v. 12 – and I needed to deal with that erroneous interpretation at some length, but he is not saying that I am uncertain about where I am at with God. I am uncertain about his eternal love for me. I am uncertain about my salvation. What is he talking about in v. 12 where he says, “I haven't already obtained all of this?” All of what?

Well, I think he is talking about what he was talking about in vv. 10 and 11 where he says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing his suffering. Becoming like him in his death.” He is saying, “I am certain about where I am going. I am certain about God's love. I am sure that his love will never fail me. I am convinced of his mercy toward me. But right now I haven't yet arrived at the maturity or the depth of Christian experience, the goal for which God took hold of my life.”

See, God has a goal in mind. When he reached out from eternity and grabbed hold of your life to save you, he had a goal in mind. And the goal is so much more than just getting you to pray a prayer of commitment or to begin to embark on the Christian life. The goal is v. 10 – to know him: “That I might know him.” There's a goal, that you would know Christ deeply and intimately and romantically.

This motivates me, friends. I don't need to be motivated out of insecurity about whether God loves me, but because God loves me. I desire to know that love more intimately. I desire to know Christ in a way that will sustain me when I am old and all the different props and trappings are taken away from my life. When I get reduced and when I am perhaps alone, lonely and afraid, I want to know Christ well enough to sustain me at that time. I want Christ's assurance right now regarding things I am afraid of – personal problems and family issues that I don't know how to deal with.

“That I might know him and the power of his resurrection,” there is a goal. To know Christ's power, power to heal, power to save, power to deliver well enough so that we wouldn't drop over dead in our tracks if we prayed for someone and they actually got healed. It wouldn't be like, “O my goodness. What happened here?” Paul's desire was to know Christ's love intimately; to know his power; to share in his sufferings, so that in the course of our trials we see that God is bringing us along to maturity.

And so Paul as he talks about full blown Christian maturity, knowing Christ intimately, knowing the power of his resurrection, accurately interpreting our trials and difficulties and pains in this world – Paul looks at the full stature of Jesus and he says, “I am not there yet.” Even the great apostle Paul as he looks up at Jesus says, “I am still on the way. I don't love

yet the way he loved. I don't serve in humility the way he served. I don't pray the way he prayed." Even the great apostle Paul, who was going hard after Christ said: 'That goal is ahead of me. I am not there yet. I am certain of God's love for me. I am certain that he has forgiven my sins. I know that heaven awaits me. I know that God's love never fails. What remains for me, however, is this process of growing into maturity and reaching the goal for which I have been saved, which is to progressively look more and more like Jesus Christ.

Now what I love so much about the apostle Paul and the Bible, let me just speak personally to you, is how practical it is. The Bible just doesn't say, "Well, you know, God had a goal in saving you and that is to bring you to Christian maturity, to get you to know Jesus intimately, to see his power at work in your life, to get you to interpret trials the right way." What I love about the Bible is that the Bible gives us a methodology. It says, "here's how you look like Jesus. Here's how you can shake off the sin of sloth or the sin of lust." The Bible doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves like so many of the self help books.

Well, here's your problem, let me give you a lengthy description of it. And then virtually no real help in changing.

Philippians 3 the apostle Paul is saying: I want you to examine the pattern of my life because I have discovered the methodology. Here is the way to continually be motivated in the things of God. And in fact, here is a methodology to get motivated in almost any area of your life. He is saying he has inculcated in his life certain kinds of habits, a certain approach to life, which gets him towards the goal for which Christ took hold of his life.

And here is the methodology for shaking off the spiritual blahs and moving into a kind of a Christian life where you really do pursue the goal that God has for you. The first thing that Paul says is that you have to concentrate on a certain goal. V. 13: "I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do..."

One thing. If you want to become mature as a Christian, then you have to concentrate on Christian maturity as a goal. If you want to become intimate with Jesus, you say: I would like to really hear his voice and be able to become more responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in my life...then intimacy has to be your one thing. One thing: I want to become intimate with Jesus. If you want to be used by God to heal the sick, then you must concentrate on that as a goal. One thing: I want to see his power at work through me.

Paul says: 'There is one thing that I am after.

You know, you can't get somewhere if you don't know where you are going and you don't focus on something as a goal. People whose lives are characterized by sloth are people who if they were really honest would say that they have no particular goals. You don't care about where you are going and any road will take you there. And generally, you will pursue the easiest road. You don't need to worry about methodology. It is all just the same to you. And what we observe in people who are floundering and drifting is there are no goals. There is no "this one thing is what I am after."

Think about it. If you want a great marriage, then you must make that a goal. You are not only content with getting married or being married, you say: I want to have a great marriage.



Do any of you have that as a goal in your lives? I want to have a great marriage. I have never seen someone who had a great marriage that didn't set that as a goal. People don't just drift into great marriages. Well, we will just live together and see what happens. Take it as it comes, one day at a time.

People who have great marriages say: We want to go beyond being business partners. We have in both of our minds a picture, a vision, of what marriage ought to be that we ought to regularly serve each other. That I should go out of my way to be an encouragement to my wife or my husband. That our marriage should regularly resolve our conflicts. That we ought to really enjoy being in one another's company. That we ought to be best friends. That we should enjoy being on vacation together. That we should pray for one another regularly.

You never get to having a great marriage without having a goal for that.

Or maybe you have a goal for getting out of debt. That's a legitimate goal. People whose finances are totally out of control, if they are really honest they would say: I am not concentrated regularly on a goal of dealing with my financial problems. I mean it is more than: I make money and I spend money. Do you have any financial goals in mind? Are you putting money aside to buy a house? Are you saving for your kids' college or for retirement? Do you give regularly? I have never seen anyone do well financially who didn't have some financial goals in mind.

I have never seen a student do well in school without the goal of excellence. I have never seen anyone be a great parent who did not have as a fundamental part of the way they think of their life the goal of being a great parent.

See, the goal you have in your mind controls the secret choices you make in your heart. There is this business of goal-centeredness is linked to another thing, which is the secret choices of our hearts. When Paul says: One thing I do, you could translate that: One thing I choose. Paul says my choices are driven by my goals.

The process of shaking off spiritual sloth and pursuing God and pursuing the things of God and Christian virtues and self-sacrifice and reconciliation in relationships and all of that – its driven by a hundred secret choices that you make every single day. You say: I want to know Jesus intimately. Maybe that is your goal. I want to really know his voice. I want to hear him. I want to feel his love. I want to not just watch other people who seem to be intimate with Jesus; I want to personally be intimate with God.

Well, God breaks that down for you. He says: OK. Well, here's a series of a hundred little secret choices that you need to make. Will you turn the radio off in the car right now so that you can just talk to me and listen to me? Secret choice – not a big thing, but its driven by the goal of intimacy with Christ. Will you take a ½ hour in the morning just to seek me, to spend time in my presence, to unburden your soul, to listen for my voice? If you turn the TV on, what will you watch?

See, there are a hundred little choices that we make that move our hearts one direction or the other. Friends, if you are going to overcome sloth in your life, you are going to have to put a very high value on your secret choices.

Will I hold my tongue right now, or do I have to just blurt out what I am thinking?

Will I respond in anger or not?

Will I spend money on this object or not?

And the second thing is that mature people understand the need for personal exertion. Look at the words that Paul uses as he talks about reaching the goal of intimacy with Christ and knowing the power of his resurrection. He says in v. 13: I press on. He says in v. 14: I am straining toward that which is ahead. I press on.

That word “press” is a word taken from hunting. Paul is picturing himself as someone who is out in the woods pursuing game. He is going after it. He doesn’t expect a deer to lie down in front of him. He doesn’t expect a pheasant to fly into his oven. He is going to hunt it down.

That is what people who are great parents or great husbands, wives, or servants of Christ look like. They are hunting down this goal. They are straining. They are exerting themselves. It is the exact opposite of sloth. You never see someone become really good any anything without personal exertion.

Excellence in any area of your life, friend, never is the result of following the path of least resistance. You get older automatically, but you don’t look more like Jesus automatically. You look more like Jesus by exercising your choice, your will, by exertion, by leaning into it. God gives you the power. God is at work in your life. You are crying out: God, do in me what only you can do. You have repented a hundred times. But we work it out. We strain. WE put in the effort. We obey. This is not salvation by works. We are saved by trusting in Christ alone.

But we grow by serious exertion. You put yourself out on the line. You say: You know, I am going to buy a couple of tickets for the Men’s Luncheon at Summer Harvest and I am going to invite several people until I get two guys to come with me.

I am going to put myself out on the line and invite some parents who live on my block who are the parents of my kids’ friends to Family Night.

You don’t grow without exertion. Without making the choice to put the newspaper down in the morning and pick up the Bible. To go to some of the discipleship classes that we offer here. To take a morning or evening and say: OK, I am going to get an overview of the New Testament or Old Testament. I call this the Word of God, so I need to learn it like my life depends on it.

We have a goal in mind and we strain, we press toward the goal. The third thing that Paul says in his methodology for shaking off the spiritual blahs is that if you really want to go after Christ, you have to let go of your past. Paul says in v. 13: “One thing I do, forgetting what is behind...” He is picturing himself as a runner and he is saying: For me to run this

race successfully, I cannot keep turning my head back and looking where I have come from. I can't keep focusing on where I've been.

I don't know how many of you saw the old movie "Chariots of Fire" or if you did see it, you remember the scene where the one Jewish runner, Abraham, is caught at the tape and passed because at the last moment he turns his head back to see where the other runners are.

If you want to move forward in Christ, if you want to grow in intimacy with him, if you want to see the power of his resurrection in your life, if you want to interpret your sufferings and trials in a biblical way, then you cannot keep focusing backward on your past. What is Paul talking about when he says you can't keep focusing back on the past?

Well, certainly forgetting what lies behind has to at least include letting go of past sins. There is one thing I have seen in my own life and in the life of the slothful. That is a despairing of God's mercy. It is a view that says: Well, I have blown it too many times. I have failed too often. I have gone too far. The slothful always despair of the mercy of God. There is always a sell-out: I might as well throw in the towel and give up and completely collapse.

Oh yeah, theoretically you say: Christ died for your sins and God loves you. But you always add a "but," your sins, your situation, your past. How can God show mercy for *this*? This particular failure? This divorce? This abortion? How can God show mercy toward this?

The Christian who moves ahead is the Christian who lets go of the past. The past things we have done. The past things that have been done to us. We give people to God.

Sometimes I think folks stay in a place of spiritual indifference because they fear that they can't really succeed. I wonder if for some of you who have been frozen for a really long time – you have heard lots of messages, but you really haven't acted on almost any of them, you never come forward in response to a call. Even in secret you just don't respond to the voice of God – I wonder, do you believe that you could get well in Christ? Do you really want to be different? You who have been stuck for a very long time, could it be that you just don't want the pressure of growing, of declaring yourself. Of saying: I am going to be sold out for Christ.

Maybe you are afraid you are going to fall on your face. Maybe you fear the pressure of trying to succeed. For some of you, you have to repent of your fear of failure. Your fear of declaring openly that you are going to be a Christian.

For some of you, you have to repent of your sense of: Well, I tried this before and it didn't work. I love the old Puritan Jonathan Edwards' statement where he set out as a goal. He said: I am never going to slacken in my fight against sin no matter how unsuccessful I might be.

I like that. I am never going to just roll over in my fight against sin no matter how many times I fail. No matter how many times I fall off the horse, I am going to get back on.

May I challenge you, those of you who haven't gone after Christ, that you say: Lord, I am going to give you another shot at my heart, at my life, at this particular point of my failure. I am not going to continue to be stubborn.

And when Paul was forgetting about what lies behind, I think he is also talking about forgetting about our achievements, about the good things we have done. We can look back not only on bad things that hinder our progress, but also some of our good things, our past achievements – the way you served Christ in another church, the fact that you used to be a leader, maybe you were a pastor or some kind of paid Christian worker. There is a reason why Jesus said in Matthew 6 to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Because the truth is that when we start focusing on the things we used to do, it almost always creates spiritual pride in us and spiritual sloth in us. The moment you start focusing on your past good deeds – the fact that you gave money; the fact that you were involved in some sacrificial action; the fact that you really tried to reconcile a relationship; it almost never is a source of encouragement for you to move forward in Christ. It is either going to create sloth and self-pity where you say: Look at all I tried to do and it hardly produced any good at all. What's the point? Nobody else has paid this big price.

Or the other side of it – you will be tempted toward self-satisfaction. I am doing really well. I have done enough. Let someone else sacrifice. Let someone else serve. I did that Bible study. I read those passages in the past. I did care for that other person's child. I have done children's ministry. Now I have done enough. Let someone else do it.

Listen, if you really want to shake off spiritual sloth and become a vigorous Christian, then you need not only forget your past bad deeds, but in general, you need to let go of your past good deeds. If you are still focusing a lot on what you have done, you don't keep moving forward in Christ.

It is OK now and then to take a sideways glance at some of the good things that are going on in your life and say: Lord, thanks. I take encouragement from this. I see a little bit of progress. But you can't get absorbed in that. You can't get focused on what you are doing because it will almost always produce great inertia either through self-pity or self-satisfaction.

So we need to focus on the goal. We need to exert ourselves. We need to forget the past.

And finally, we need to understand that the Christian life is a high calling. I prefer a different translation to v. 14 where the NIV says: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward." I like the translation that reads: "I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God." You can say the "heavenward call of God" the "high call of God."

Those who are generally vigorous in their Christian lives understand that the Christian life is a high calling. Let me put it in more normal English. In Matthew 5:47 Jesus says to people: "What do you do more than all these other people?" The high call means that you understand as a Christian that you are to do more, you are to be more, you are to be different than all the rest of the folks living in America. Jesus says in Matthew 5:47: What do you do more than all the rest of these folks?

And he goes through a series of examples regarding what he means by more. Everybody loves people who love them. It is no big deal to be nice to someone who is nice to you. The high call of the Christian life is you are willing to allow God to help you to love someone who has not been nice to you. Are you committed to love people who misunderstand you regularly? Are you committed to love people who talk about you and who have a bad attitude?

The high call of the Christian is to love your enemies. To love the person who is inconvenient, annoying ex-spouses, someone who is not doing well. Do you do that? Jesus says: What do you do more than these others?

Jesus talks about lust. He says: Lots and lots of married people don't physically cheat on each other. Don't pat yourself on the back and say: I am doing pretty well because I am not physically cheating on my spouse. What about your heart? Do you regularly lust in your heart? The high call has nothing to do with your behavior. It has to do with your heart.

Jesus says: The whole world goes one mile out of their way. Christians, if you are aiming at the high call, do you go two miles? Do you go the next mile over and above? In other words, do you settle for a standard of mediocrity, good enough, or do you go the next mile?

I know I could throw something together for children's ministry. I know I could do that. But I am not going to. I am going to go over and above that. I am going to go the whole next mile and put in time.

I know I could throw something together for kinship. But I am not going to. I want to give this group fresh bread, so I am going to pray over what I am doing.

O, other people could serve. You have done your part. But how about going above and beyond – the second mile?

The Bible describes the end of the Christian life as not only making it into heaven. But the end of the pursuit of the high call is being able to receive that applause of God. Now I can't even imagine, my mind reels at the thought that one day my Lord Jesus Christ might rise from the throne when one of you gets to meet him and claps and says: Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You didn't allow spiritual inertia and sloth to just hold you back, but you went for it. You let go of your past sins. You set your mind on following me. You made hundreds of little choices to incline your heart toward me. I have always loved you. But I want you to know now that you have done really well.

Let's pray.

Sermon – June 17-18, 2000  
Rich Nathan  
The Seven Deadly Sins for Today Series  
Phil. 3:12-14

## Overcoming the “Spiritual Blahs”

- I. Sloth Defined
- II. Sloth Described
- III. Sloth Defeated
  - A. Secured by God's Love
  - B. Seized by God's Purpose
- IV. Sloth Methodically Dismantled
  - A. Concentrate of “One Thing”
  - B. Exert Yourself
  - C. Forget the Past
  - D. Aim at the “High Call”