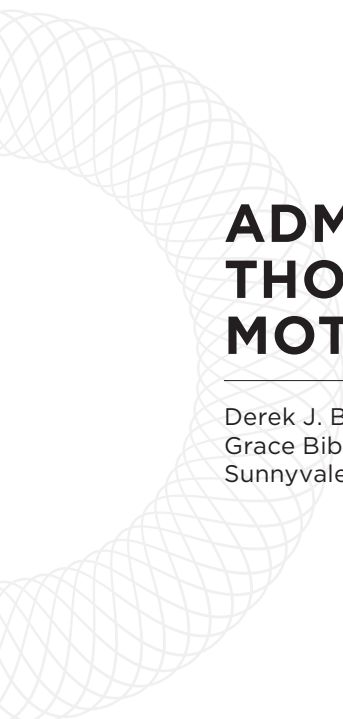




ADMONISH THE IDLE: THOUGHTS ON HOW TO MOTIVATE LAZY MEN

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As we sat down to lunch, it became apparent that this brother whom I had recently met was depressed, full of anxiety, and generally discouraged about his circumstances. He didn't have a plan for life after college, nor did he have a job. He was now in graduate school, but he wasn't sure why. He was still living off his parents and most of his time was spent in his dorm room doing who knows what.

It is difficult to see a man who is given over to listlessness and laziness. Something in us recognizes that his unwillingness to work, plan, and forge ahead in life is contrary to God's design. Most would agree: the sluggard's sleepy-eyed approach to life is discouraging to those who have opportunity to observe it. By contrast, men who have a zest for life and a zeal to make significant contributions to their family, church, and society not only possess a genuine attractiveness, but they also motivate people around them to make the most of their own time on earth.

I admit there have been seasons of sloth in my own life. Many times I have neglected important responsibilities to watch television, or surfed the Internet while resisting schoolwork, or even procrastinated in the face of difficult projects. Yet, I must also confess that, when I succumb to the lull of passivity and indolence, I am afterward never satisfied. The sweet promise of pleasure that laziness offers always turns to gravel in my mouth.

WHY SHOULD WE SEEK TO MOTIVATE LAZY MEN?

When it comes to our labor in the church and among Christian brothers, we should desire their unwavering pursuit of diligence for at least three reasons. First, a pattern of diligence and a strong work ethic fulfills a significant part of their calling as Christian men. Man was created in the image of God and recreated in the image of Christ to work, and work a lot. A man's unwillingness to work is a rebellion against the Lord and a rebellion against a fundamental facet of his personhood.

Second, a solid example of masculine industriousness provides encouragement to other brothers to set their hand to the plow and do something with their lives. I am daily motivated to pursue godly productivity by other men in our church, by my pastors, and by my heroes in the faith. Their model of single-minded persistence and productivity is inspiring, to say the least.

Finally, we should lovingly admonish our brothers because we are convinced that the path of obedience is the path of true satisfaction. We know and they know (if they have truly tasted it) that only a life of Spirit-empowered labor for the glory of God is truly fulfilling—if only they could get off the couch. The rest of this article aims to help them do just that.

NINE WAYS TO MOTIVATE LAZY MEN

Give Them a Compelling Vision of What They Could Be

It may be tempting to approach a lazy brother with the exclusive use of exhortation: “Get up! Do something! Be a man!” There is a place for this kind of appeal; the sluggard will typically need patient yet prodding words to wake him from his slumber. I will talk more about this form of motivation below, but at this point it is vital to remember our speech must involve more than in-your-face locker room talk. Men need a compelling vision of what they could be.

Scripture does not merely give us negative admonitions and rebukes; nearly every time Solomon offers a cautionary description of the lazy, foolish man, he precedes or follows such warnings with counter examples of the diligent, wise man. Our pattern should be similar.

Rather than only telling our lethargic friend he will suffer loss if he follows his current path, we should also make the effort to place before him a picture of what he could be if he would turn from his folly and pursue a life of gospel-motivated diligence. Jesus Christ is in the business of taking wandering, listless, lethargic boys and transforming them into decisive, purposeful, active men. So help your brother see that he could be, by God's grace, a Christ-like husband, a courageous father, a productive employee, a fruitful church member, a respected neighbor, and an influential leader. You will be amazed at how a positive vision of godly masculinity will motivate a man to find his way out of an idle existence.¹

¹ A couple of recent books for providing you many useful ideas for helping men see what they could be are Matt Perman, *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get things Done* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) and Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

Remove Their Objections

As we deliver this vision of what our brother could be, we must be ready to dismantle his objections. If he knows the Lord Jesus, he possesses the spiritual resources necessary for a life of gospel fruitfulness. He must grasp this essential truth if he is going to make headway out of the mire of his purposelessness.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that one's past, personality, or present circumstances are irrelevant—we must exercise compassion with our brothers in Christ and seek to really understand why they are having so much trouble getting out of bed in the morning. But in order to combat the discouragement that assuredly pervades their life, we must bring men to a place where they are convinced there are no permanent barriers between where they are now and where God would have them be in the future. They can find forgiveness in Christ for their past sins. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Exod 34:6–7). Their Savior has given to all Christians everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3–4).

By removing your brother's objections you are not being unkind; you are giving him hope that halts the way laziness feeds discouragement, and vice versa. Eliminate all objections, and you have done much to stop his vicious cycle of apathy and despair.

Help Them Understand Work is Essential to Being Human

Although they may claim to know what Scripture teaches on the issue of vocation, you cannot take the depth of their knowledge for granted. They must see afresh how pervasive the theme of work is in Scripture, and how sloth is a sinful rejection of a fundamental component of their humanity. To be made in the image of God means, first and foremost, that we are to exercise dominion over the earth for the sake of human flourishing (Gen 1:26–31). Man was designed for the purpose of work (Gen 2:15). Thus, the refusal to work is a sure sign of foolishness (Prov 12:11) that impoverishes a person physically and spiritually (Prov 6:9–11; 10:4). Indeed, the one who is lazy is closely related to one who destroys (Prov 18:9) and is in need of a stern rebuke (2 Thess 3:6–11; Titus 1:13).

If it is true, then, that work is fundamental to human personhood, refusal to work will naturally lead to problems in other areas of life. Thus, you must make a direct connection between a person's anxiety, depression, and lack of fulfillment with their refusal to work. Help your brother consider that their spiritual condition may in large part be due to their unwillingness to do what God created them to do. While it may be difficult to determine whether one's laziness caused the depression or the reverse, we must acknowledge that to remain in a state of perpetual lethargy will most assuredly lead to more depression.²

Show Them From Scripture What Happens to a Lazy Person

Not only must we offer positive encouragement, we must also help our brothers see what their future holds if they continue in their current path: spiritual and physical poverty (Prov 10:4–5; 12:11; 19:15), unshakable feelings of purposelessness (Prov 15:19), despondency, depression, and a life devoid of real accomplishment awaits them (Prov 10:26; 13:4; 20:4; 21:25–26).³ Find a way to help your brother

² I recognize that uncovering the root causes of one's depression can be a complex and difficult process. Nevertheless, I believe it is unwise to allow a person who is struggling with depression to remain in a perpetual state of sloth, for they cannot expect much deliverance from their depression so long as they are refusing to work. Applying oneself to one's responsibilities can often serve as the first step out of depression. See Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 143–44.

³ Bruce Waltke insightfully observes that Proverbs 13:4 (“The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul

taste the bitterness of these fruits before they are in full harvest in his own life. In the same way you painted a picture of wonderful possibilities, cast for them a vision of dreadful consequences, praying that the Spirit might make their sloth morally reprehensible and utterly unattractive.

Explain to Them How the Curse Has Affected Their Manhood

While we seek to show our brothers that work is essential to their humanity and that laziness leads only to loss, it will also be necessary to help them see that the path of diligence will often be the path of most resistance. The conflict they experience is a direct result of the fall of humankind into sin. Explain to them that after the fall, God cursed an aspect of creation that is central to their masculine calling (see Gen 3:17–19). Temptation to passivity and laziness is now compounded by the fact that work is difficult, occasionally fruitless, and will not often yield satisfaction until a man has expended significant effort. A right understanding of the curse is essential for helping men cultivate a life of diligence, for they must know that they are fighting an uphill battle lest they become discouraged.

Ask Them About Pornography

In his first epistle, Peter exhorts his readers to abstain from fleshly lusts because they “wage war against the soul” (1 Pet 2:11). Peter’s use of the word “soul” (Gr. *psychē*) in his admonishment is instructive, because it tells us that the apostle intends to ground our motivation for abstinence from lust in the well-being of our *whole* inner-person. An addiction to pornography doesn’t merely wreak havoc on the mind; it devastates the affections and the will. Lust robs men of ambition, discourages initiative, perverts inclinations, sabotages desire for godly productivity, promotes passivity, dampens passion for adventure, hinders taste for spiritual truth, and weakens the ability to concentrate. It could be that the brother you are seeking to encourage in a path of diligence is caught in a slough of lust. Ask him about pornography.⁴

Address the Assurance of their Salvation

We cannot confine our admonishments to only address temporal troubles. Scripture indicates there are eternal issues to be considered in relation to one’s tendency toward sloth. In Jesus’ parable of the talents, for example, we learn that an unproductive life is evidence that one may not know the Lord. The man who hid his one talent because he perceived his master as a hard, unfair man received a damning rebuke for his laziness and a promise of eternal punishment (Matt 25:24–26).

We must communicate straightforwardly to our lazy brother that he should not expect an abiding sense of assurance of his salvation so long as he remains in his current condition. While salvation does

of the diligent is richly supplied” [ESV]) includes all human appetites in its chastisement of the lazy man: the sluggard is unable to acquire or accomplish *anything* of significance! “By contrast, the sluggard’s appetite is not fattened but *craves* . . . and he has not (*wā’ayin*). The unqualified *wā’ayin* refers to everything his human drives and appetites aspire to, such as eating (Job 33:20; Mic 7:1), drinking (2 Sam 23:15), and the opposite sex (Ps 45:11[12]; Jer. 2:24). The antithesis implies that every appetite of the diligent person is abundantly satisfied, including his hunger for God (see Pss 42:1[2]; 63:1[2]). The proverb assumes that everything needful in life is richly available under God’s good hand (Ps 128:1–3), but it is non-existent for the sluggard (Ps 128:1).” Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 554–55.

⁴ For some excellent help in the area of sexual purity and finding victory over pornography addiction, see Heath Lambert *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity by the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013) and Tim Challies, *Sexual Detox: A Guide for Guys Who Are Sick of Porn* (Adelphi, MD: Cruciform Press, 2010).

not come by our works of obedience, assurance of our salvation certainly does. A professing Christian who resides in a perpetual state of idleness cannot have assurance that the energizing, fruit-producing, work-compelling Spirit resides in him.⁵

Be Firm

While it is vital that we warm our brother's affections by providing a compelling vision of what is possible in his life, it is equally essential that we apply an appropriate amount of forthright admonishment to wake him from his slumber. Paul says, "admonish the idle" (1 Thess 5:14). The book of Proverbs makes it clear that rebuke is the way of wisdom. Irresolute, timid, inconsequential suggestions rarely—if ever—make their way deep into the heart of the lazy man. He is right in his own eyes (Prov 26:16) and therefore desperately needs strong, straightforward, unflinching, eye-to-eye rebuke for wasting the life God has given him. Be firm.

Be Patient

In the same verse where Paul instructs the Thessalonians to admonish the idle, he reminds us to be patient. The apostle recognized a tendency in all of us to grow exasperated with our brothers and throw up our hands in resignation as their progress sputters and stalls. Our frustration, however, will only prove deadly to their growth and is probably rooted in our own self-righteousness. It is likely that change will be gradual, so we must resolve to make consistent effort to persevere through seemingly fruitless seasons. "Let us not grow weary of doing good," the apostle reminds us, "for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Gal 6:9). Be patient.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Even though I have offered several strategies to spur on a lazy brother to love and good deeds, I do not mean to imply that such a list is exhaustive. The labor required to understand your friend and pinpoint the root cause of his troubles is complicated and demanding. Below the surface of an indolent life lurk deeper issues of the heart, and only a man of understanding is able to draw them out (Prov 20:5). So, I have not attempted to address all the issues related to the topic of laziness; rather, I have offered a few basic principles to help guide you in your efforts to counsel your brother to get off the couch and fulfill the calling God has for him.

⁵ While you will not be able to say definitively that the professing brother in this case is an unbeliever due to his laziness (for only God can see the heart), you can safely question his assurance of salvation based on his unwillingness to diligently steward the Lord's resources. For an excellent discussion of perseverance, assurance, and the role of warnings in Scripture, see Thomas R. Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal" *SBJT* 2.1 (Spring 1998), 32–62. Schreiner has also expanded on these ideas in a book co-authored with Ardel B. Caneday. See Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).