
SIMPLE, SLOTH AND PRESUMPTION

RELIGIOUS indifference is well personified in the characters Simple, Sloth and Presumption.

Bunyan, in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, laments the listless and apathetic nature of many of his spiritual children, who seem to have quit the way to the Celestial City. The spiritual indifference and lethargy pictured in his three drowsy travelers no doubt inspired him to say that many in his flock were “a little out of the way, fast asleep, and with chains upon their heels.”

With these characters, Bunyan addresses those who sit in the pew week after week under the preaching of the gospel yet remain dispassionate and unmoved. Either they rest securely in their religious profession, full of confidence that in the end everything will be well with them, or they become self-assured that they still have time to mend their ways and repent before they go to judgment. Anyone who tries to warn them of their peril is usually politely told to mind their own business even as they mind theirs.

To Christian’s warning, Simple responds, “I see no danger.” He is not named “Simple” because of weakness of intellect or smallness of mind—he suffers no mental deficiency. Solomon instructs us that Simple’s ignorance and simplicity of mind are willful moral choices:

To know wisdom and instruction;
to perceive the words of understanding;
to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;
to give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:2–5, 7).

Simple has as his partner in chains one

named Sloth. Sloth has also made a moral choice, but his is for a life of spiritual laziness. The fetters of his own indolence have thrown a mantle of drowsiness over his heart and conscience. How often do we find ourselves saying, in unison with the sluggard, “Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep” (Proverbs 6:10)? What does it mean to us to “watch and pray,” or to “wrestle against principalities and powers,” or to “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind”? Have we any sense of warfare in our lives? Do we not know that our enemy never sleeps and sloth never overtakes him? Let us rouse and shake ourselves for the sake of our own soul’s safety and comfort for “now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Romans 13:11).

Presumption, like the others, hears Christian’s warning of impending judgment yet rejects with vehemence any kind of assistance or caution from another: “Every tub must stand on its own bottom.” A presumptuous attitude says it’s every man for himself—God will accept me just as I am on my own merits. Presumptuous sins are of the deepest dye because King David says that they lead to the “great transgression” (Psalm 19:13). David’s sincere prayer was that he would be kept from sins of presumption, the seeds of which are in all of us. How often have we gone to the Cross to confess and repent of our sins, only to return to commit the same shameful transgression at first light? The presumption is in our thinking that God’s grace abounds, that Christ’s blood atones, that pardon awaits while we even yet look for the next opportunity to indulge.

The next time readers encounter Simple, Sloth and Presumption is in *Christiana*, book two of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The chains of simplicity, laziness and presumption, which once fettered their heels, are now twisted about their necks.
