



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
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Study Guides for

Acedia

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the vice of *acedia* and its remedies in the Christian tradition. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Resistance to the Demands of Love 2

At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship with God because of the transforming demands of his love. God wants to kick down the whole door to our hearts and flood us with his life; we want to keep the door partway shut so that a few lingering treasures remain untouched, hidden in the shadows.

Depression and *Acedia* 4

Everyone faces *acedia* in their lives; some also face clinical depression, and it seems that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another. Depression, with the disruption it causes and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life.

Staying Put to Get Somewhere 6

We may believe the "grass is greener" in another marriage or church or vocation or place, but often it is the same hue. What is worse, when we are always seeking something new and better we remain the same. Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run (which is precisely what the ancients associated with *acedia* – a cowardly running away).

Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life 8

The primary remedy for *acedia* is being faithful in the demands of daily life that God's love calls us to face. When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can rekindle the fire of God's love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.

Acedia in the Modern Age 10

Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* is an engaging modern narrative of *acedia*. This saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback is enlightening not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage this vice causes, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Resistance to the Demands of Love (*Acedia*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Capital Vices: *Acedia*'s 'Deadly' Cronies (*Acedia*, pp. 82-87)
- 📖 A Wearied Explorer (*Acedia*, pp. 58-61)

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Resistance to the Demands of Love

At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to God due to the transforming demands of his love. God wants to kick down the whole door to our hearts and flood us with his life; we want to keep the door partway shut so that a few lingering treasures remain untouched, hidden in the shadows.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:22-32

Meditation†

Acedia is not a household word, unless your “house” happens to be a monastery or a department of medieval literature. ... In the mid-twentieth century Aldous Huxley called *acedia* the primary affliction of his age, and its baleful influence still sours our relationships to society, politics, and our families. But how can this be, you may ask, when *acedia* is such an obscure term? Well, as any reader of fairy tales can tell you, it’s the devil you don’t know that causes the most serious trouble.

Kathleen Norris

Reflection

“For the fourth-century Desert Christians and medieval theologians,” Rebecca DeYoung notes, “*acedia*...had a central place in the moral life, and even rivaled pride as the vice with the deepest roots and most destructive power!” It was a difficult vice to understand; they had no words for it in their language, so they simply made up some—*acedia* or *accide*—based on its original Greek name, *a-kedia*, “a lack of care.” By this, they did not mean the vice involved “simple ‘carelessness,’ but an intentional stance of ‘I could care less’—as in, ‘I am not invested in this, so do not expect me to make an effort. Just let me stay where I am comfortable, would you?’ The person with the vice of sloth, or *acedia*, is not passively suffering depression or torpor, but is actively refusing to care, to be moved.” Today we use the misleading term “sloth” for this vice, but more about that in a moment.

Thomas Aquinas’s account of *acedia*—as an aversion to the divine good in us—points us toward the heart of the problem. By “the divine good in us,” DeYoung explains, Aquinas “refers to the Holy Spirit’s work in our hearts, the divine life of God that informs our lives as his children.” This loving relationship with God is what we were created for and it should be our greatest joy. So, how could we possibly become averse to it?

Aquinas traces our surprising, negative response to God’s love—he goes so far as saying we can feel “dislike, horror, and detestation” toward it!—to the opposition that the Apostle Paul described between flesh and spirit, or the “old self” and “new self.” God’s love has a ‘now and not yet’ character; it is both gift and life-transforming work. “When we suffer from *acedia*, we object to not being able to stay the way we are,” DeYoung explains. “Something must die in order for the new self to be born, and it might be an old self to which we are very attached.”

“Because it is about love—accepting God’s love for us and the cost of loving him back—*acedia* earns its place among the seven capital vices, or deadly sins,” DeYoung observes. “In their reluctance to die to the old self, those with *acedia* choose slow spiritual suffocation to



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the birth pains of new life. They cannot fully accept the only thing that would ultimately bring them joy. They refuse the thing they most desire, and they turn away from the only thing that can bring them life.”

How common is *acedia*? It has two (apparently opposing) symptoms: despairing laziness and desperate busyness. If we cannot get away from a relationship we are resisting, we may lose hope, sink into listlessness, and stop doing what it requires. This explains why a modern name for the vice is “sloth.” But if we think we can escape from the relationship, any distraction will do. We may immerse ourselves in doing lots of other things—even religious activities—to fill up our time and avoid doing what the relationship requires.

Do either of these symptoms sound familiar? “*Acedia* can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity,” DeYoung concludes. “Somewhere in between the two is a holy Sabbath rest for the heart that has given itself utterly to God, a heart which can say with joy, ‘Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’”

Study Questions

1. “God does not jump in and create a new self in us overnight. The project of transforming our nature requires a lifetime, and a lifetime of cooperation on our part,” Rebecca DeYoung notes. What aspects of the transformation seem burdensome to you? How do you cope with the discouragement?
2. How do marriage and human friendships provide good human analogues of what goes wrong in *acedia*?
3. Discuss how Hieronymus Bosch captures *acedia*’s symptoms in *A Tabletop with the Seven Deadly Sins and Last Four Things*.

Departing Hymn: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (verses 1 and 3)

Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I’m fixed upon it,
mount of thy redeeming love.

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I’m constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above.

Robert Robinson (1758), alt.

Tune: NETTLETON

† Kathleen Norris, “Got Acedia? Who Cares?” *Washington Post* (September 16, 2008).



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Focus Article:

📖 In Pursuit of Sophia:
On Pilgrimage with
Depression and *Acedia*
(*Acedia*, pp. 26-35)

Suggested Article:

📖 Diagnosing *Acedia* and Its
Spiritual Neighbors
(*Acedia*, pp. 88-93)

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Depression and Acedia

Everyone faces *acedia* in their lives. Some people also face clinical depression, and it seems that depression and *acedia* tend to occasion one another. Depression, with the disruption it causes life and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life.

Prayer

O God, you are the source of every good and perfect gift. We thank you for this time set aside for us to study together, to honor and praise you, and to rest in your presence.

We pray that we will be present to one another and to you as you are present with us. When our hearts are overflowing with joy, the others here amplify our songs and prayers and reflections; when our hearts are too heavy, they sing and pray and reflect for us. Thank you for bringing us together in this place and drawing us into your life and light.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we pray.
Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 91:1-2, 5-6, 13-14

Reflection

The confident praise "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust" (Psalm 91:2) is hardly a Pollyannaish bromide. The psalmist recognizes the dangers of war, mishap, and disease that plague people day and night, but still trusts in God's protection. These hopeful words specifically fortified fourth-century desert Christians to resist the mental onslaught of "the demon at noon" (v. 6b, Septuagint), which they identified as *acedia*. They continue to inspire psychiatrist Andrew Michael, who has explored both the differences and possible interactions between clinical depression – or, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) – and the vice of *acedia* in order to help his patients find healing.

MDD is presumed to be a brain condition that can be alleviated with medications. It is diagnosed when a person has five or more of these symptoms over a two-week period: depressed mood, diminished pleasure in activities, increase or decrease in appetite and weight, insomnia or desire to sleep to avoid the day, either restlessness or slowed behavior, loss of energy, inability to concentrate or make decisions, and recurrent thoughts of suicide. Michel is glad that people who experience these symptoms, when viewed through the "clinical lens of psychiatry," are not judged or condemned. "Psychiatry has the capacity to separate the person from the disorder and within this opening suffering persons sometimes find the room to breathe and live."

However, some who receive the best psychotropic treatments for MDD do not flourish; something else seems to be plaguing them. Michel wonders if in some cases their body's disposition toward depression makes them extremely predisposed to the vice of *acedia*. "I was initially concerned that such a notion might turn into a project in moralizing," he admits. "Yet, to my delight, as I have explored the richness of *acedia*, I have paradoxically discovered that...rather than heaping judgment on a person, the recognition of *acedia* offers an invitation to abundant living. *Acedia*, as one doorway into the moral life, restores the possibility that a person might choose what is beautiful and good."



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Noting that “*acedia* is a disdain for that life inside of one that would participate with God,” Michel pinpoints the vice as “a failure to celebrate the image of God in one’s human nature.” This suggests to him that two movements are required of those who suffer from this troubling condition. With support from a spiritual guide, one must:

- ▶ *love God enough to simply receive God’s imprint in one’s life.* “The invitation of God in the moral life is not to a stringent striving but to a gentle day-by-day decisiveness in being God’s friend in a new way of living,” Michel writes. “To oppose *acedia* is not to be busied with work, as we might assume, but rather to find rest for our souls” (cf. Matthew 11:28-30). Often the person “may even need to borrow on the conviction of a guide in the spiritual life to come to know how deeply she is loved over a long period and to notice how she bears the imprint of God’s goodness and beauty.”
- ▶ *let go of any attachment to sameness and safety.* This movement is more difficult and may cause anxiety, but “this is what it means to be loved, for God is interested in directing us to be what we are most meant to be.” The person might start with small steps of embracing a concern for others, developing an interest in the world, and so on, that reflects God’s specific call on their life. Michel points out, “God can take whatever small gesture is possible and multiply it in abundance.”

The diagnosis “of *acedia* is an invitation to take seriously the moral life” that “will involve ongoing participation in suffering, to the end of character transformation,” Michel concludes. This will require effort (though not inordinate effort) and progress may be slow. But in the movement toward “becoming friends with God in restful, joyful activity rather than falling into either stagnation or frenzied work” we are assured of God’s provision, often through spiritual friends who encourage and guide us.

Study Questions

1. Clinical depression (MDD) and the vice of *acedia* are often confused. What symptoms are common to these conditions? How might clinical depression predispose a person to *acedia*?
2. Describe the key differences between what Andrew Michel calls the “psychiatric discourse around MDD” and the “moral discourse around *acedia*.” In his view, can one discourse replace the other, or do we need them both? Do you agree?
3. What steps does Michel commend for responding to *acedia*? Why does taking these steps often require the help of a spiritual guide or friend?
4. Consider how Michel characterizes “the moral life.” What aspects of the moral life make it difficult for persons who suffer from depression and *acedia*? What aspects make it possible for them?

Departing Hymn: “I Lift My Prayer to Thee” (verses 1, 2, and 5)



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Focus Article:

📖 Staying Put to Get Somewhere
(*Acedia*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 *Acedia* in the Workplace
(*Acedia*, pp. 77-81)

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Staying Put to Get Somewhere

We may believe the “grass is greener” in another marriage or church or vocation or place, but often it is the same hue. What is worse, we remain the same. Conversion and growth happen when we remain, not when we run (which is precisely what the ancients associated with *acedia*—a cowardly running away).

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 106:1-8, 24-25, 43-45, 48

Meditation†

Once when Anthony was living in the desert his soul was troubled by *acedia* and irritation. He said to God, “Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?” After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Anthony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, “Do this and you will be cured.” When he heard it he was very glad and recovered his confidence. He did what the angel had done, and found the salvation he was seeking.

Reflection

“The vice of *acedia* is paradoxical,” Dennis Ockholm admits. We call it “sloth” since it is “a weariness of the soul, indifference, a listlessness, an inability to concentrate on the task at hand.” But *acedia*’s resistance to the demands of love can mask itself in what Solomon Schimmel calls “fervid but misdirected activity.”

Psalm 106 diagnoses both symptoms of *acedia*—despairing laziness and desperate busyness—in the recalcitrant children of Israel. First, they angered God by their grumbling and foot-dragging across the wilderness; then, instead of welcoming the land of rest with God (cf. Deuteronomy 12:8-12; Joshua 1:13), they “despised the pleasant land” (Psalm 106:24) and turned again to restless wandering.

In the sixth century Benedict of Nursia even created a name for the wandering monks who would not be satisfied in any community, embrace the demands of mutual love there, and just be at rest: he called them *gyrovagues*, from Latin for “circle” and Greek for “wander.” As contemporary *gyrovagues* we wander unsatisfied from one marriage, job, place, or church to another.

Certainly there are times, places, and continuing relationships of abuse that we should flee. But too often our wanderlust is not caused by any external evil of that sort, but by our own internal distractions. In the latter case, Ockholm suggests, the best remedy today (as it was in Benedict’s day) is to practice stability of place. Thus, he explores the wisdom in the monastic advice to “stay in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

- ▶ *Stability is more than staying in one place.* It requires paying close attention to and offering ourselves to the people who share that place—a family, workplace, church, or community—with us. “Stability is premised on the conviction that God places us in *particular* constellations of people so that we can speak to and



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hear from each other what is needed for our mutual growth into Christlikeness," Ockholm explains.

- ▶ *Stability resists diversions.* Often our goals and actions are flighty when we have no inner spiritual direction. "We do not act from within ourselves but accept as our life a life which is actually fed in from outside," Anthony Bloom notes; "we are used to things happening which compel us to do other things." Chasing the latest fads, bowing to every request, and following the crowd will "distract us from our full participation in the context and community into which God has placed us," Ockholm warns. These behaviors "leave us untethered, uncentered, disoriented, and confused."
- ▶ *The practice of stability slowly transforms us.* We cultivate the virtue that the ancients called *hypomone*, which Ockholm describes as a "patient endurance motivated by a charitable disposition." We also increase in love for God and others, and develop the courage required to not flee the difficulties of a place. As other people come to know us better, we come to know and love ourselves—enough to grow when we need to. "It is only when we persevere in relationships that we can be known in such a way that we are confronted with the reality of our real selves and challenged to change."
"If we believe that by divine providence we have been placed in a community for the nurturing of our souls, then not to persevere but to flee that 'cell' in a fit of restless *acedia* is also to flee God," Ockholm concludes. "And that is the problem with *acedia*: it is opposed to love, the queen of the virtues, which is life-altering friendship with God and those who are in communion with God."

Study Questions

1. What features of contemporary culture distract us from forming close and loving relationships with God and others, and thereby tempt us to be *gyrovagues*?
2. The Christian tradition warns us that a common symptom of *acedia* is desperate busyness with "pious" activities. According to Dennis Ockholm, how is this pattern apparent in pastors and religious leaders today? Consider how you are tempted to pious busyness in your own life.
3. What is the Christian practice of "stability of place"? How, according to Ockholm, is it a remedy to *acedia*?
4. Stressed by a demanding job he thought God wanted him to do, Alvin Ung writes: "My desire to quit was so overwhelming that all I could do was to go to work, one day at a time, and pray for help. Unwittingly I was cultivating a rhythm of work and prayer. By not quitting, I was becoming a Christian mystic in the marketplace." Discuss how Ung's actions were a modern instance of practicing "stability of place."

Departing Hymn: 'I Lift My Prayer to Thee' (verses 1, 3, and 5)

† Apothegm 7.1 in *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, translated by Benedicta Ward (Penguin Classics, 2003), 60.



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Focus Article:

📖 Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life
(*Acedia*, pp. 36-44)

Suggested Article:

📖 Sloth: Who Cares?
(*Acedia*, pp. 73-76)

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Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life

The primary remedy for *acedia* is being faithful in the demands of daily life that God's love calls us to face. When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can enkindle the fire of God's love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:23-24

Meditation†

The beginning of the attack of *acedia* comes as an invitation to divert one's attention from the prayer, work, or charity at hand and to pay attention to something else, which might be entirely innocent or even useful in itself. ... [Soon] you find yourself distracted and spiritually dissipated. And if you're anything like me, it's difficult to get a day back on track once this happens. This is why *acedia* has to be discerned quickly through a practice of vigilant guard of the heart, so that it may be cut off at its seemingly innocent beginning.

Brother Charles, OFM Cap.

Reflection

The early stream of Christian spiritual guidance – from Evagrius (c. 345-399) and his pupil John Cassian (c. 360-435) down to Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543) – recommends *stabilitas*, or “sticking to your post,” as the best remedy for *acedia*. “Being faithful in our regular times of prayer, study, office tasks, cleaning the house, changing diapers, and other works that we may be called to do each day can seem dry and discouraging,” Amy Freeman admits. “Yet...the discipline of reforming our outer activity can be a means, with God's grace, to inner transformation.”

Freeman unpacks the ancient guidance that lies behind this motto often used to describe Benedictine spirituality: *ora et labora*, “pray and work.”

- ▶ *Be faithful in the ordinary, daily work that God's love calls us to do.*

Freeman notes that both Cassian and Benedict urge their monks to do manual labor – things like “harvesting crops, caring for guests, performing various crafts, and doing whatever was needed to keep the monastery in good order.” Due to the close relationship between body and soul, such work addresses both symptoms of *acedia*: lazing around and welcoming needless distractions. “Physically working our bodies can help us break out of an idle spirit; furthermore, focusing our bodies in a coordinated effort can help us work out our psychological distractions,” she explains.

Furthermore, “faithfulness requires us to give good attention to the work at hand since we do it all for the glory of God.” To do our work *attentively*, we must avoid becoming overly busy, even with good things like healthy exercise, worthy tasks, Bible study, and ministry. “When we are consumed by a spirit of productivity, we become too focused on our own affairs and overemphasize their importance. We may even lose track of the ultimate purpose of all



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that we do, which is 'to know [God], to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven.'"

- ▶ *Be faithful in worship.* Though it is often called "sloth," *acedia* is actually a refusal to rest—not in the sense of resisting inactivity, but resisting an immersive enjoyment in our proper activity, which is worship. "With various stratagems, *acedia* tries to cloud our thinking about regular Sunday worship," warns Freeman. It leads us to think we are too busy, or worship is too boring, or other activities are more important.

Ideally, "The joy of resting in God can spread through the week as we spend some time each day in prayer, even if our state of life allows only brief moments for it...[in] what Walter Hilton in the fourteenth century called the 'mixed' life. In this vocation, a person 'learns to make time in the whirl of everyday practical affairs for a true spiritual inwardness.' This time can be likened to a mini-Sabbath each day in which our souls are refreshed."

- ▶ *Put work and worship together.* "Monks learn habits of praying during the ordinary works of daily life. St. Francis de Sales [1567-1622] invites all believers to join them, advising laypersons that 'when your ordinary work or business is not specially engrossing'—perhaps such as washing the dishes or doing yard work—"let your heart be fixed more on God than on it," Freeman writes. "When our work demands our full mental attention, St. Francis de Sales suggests we occasionally pause from work to mentally place ourselves beneath the cross or to think on the Lord in some other way."

She concludes, "Whether or not we are able to pray (aloud or to ourselves) during our practical affairs, spiritual directors like Walter Hilton emphasize offering all of our work as a gift to the Lord in prayer. We do this by remembering that our part is only to do faithfully and as best we can the specific work God has given to us. We entrust the rest to him."

Study Questions

1. How can "sticking to your post" (in the sense of faithfully and prayerfully doing the daily tasks that God's love calls you to face) address each symptom of *acedia*: lazing around and welcoming needless distractions?
2. What is the "spirit of productivity," according to Amy Freeman? How does it tempt us away from prayerful work?
3. What does Walter Hilton mean by the "mixed" life? Consider the flow of your daily work. Discuss practical ways that you can integrate prayer and worship into your tasks.
4. Why, according to Kyle Childress, is the vice of *acedia* (or sloth) rightly called a "deadly sin"? Discuss its deadly consequences for the individual caught in its distorted habits, and then for other persons and the creation.

Departing Hymn: "I Lift My Prayer to Thee" (verses 1, 4, and 5)

† Brother Charles, OFM Cap., "Acedia on the Web," *A Minor Friar* blog (September 2, 2009), friarminor.blogspot.com/2009/09/acedia-on-web.html. Used by permission.



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 An Unconditional Surrender: Evelyn Waugh on *Acedia* (*Acedia*, pp. 45-55)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Intimate Separation (*Acedia*, pp. 56-57)

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Acedia in the Modern Age

Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, an engaging saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback during World War II, is enlightening not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage the vice causes, but also for its remedy in virtue.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:1-8

Meditation†

Acedia is a soul-sickness, a loss of any connection with spiritual things. Practices mean nothing. Boredom is too weak a word. Perhaps aversion or repulsion regarding the spiritual dimensions of life and living better describe the effects of *acedia*. ... The chief benefit of facing *acedia* can be to purify my motivation. It can cause me for the first time to start doing spiritual exercises for the right reasons rather than for subtle self-gain.

Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B.

Reflection

At the heart of *acedia*, or sloth, is a mystery: "The malice of Sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty...but in the refusal of joy," Evelyn Waugh notes. "Man is made for joy in the love of God, a love which he expresses in service. If he deliberately turns away from that joy, he is denying the purpose of his existence."

It is difficult to imagine how a person could reject joy, could be "fully aware of the proper means of his salvation" yet refuse "to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust." This is why rich narratives that depict how the vice of *acedia* functions are particularly helpful.

Guy Crouchback, the protagonist in Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, is a poignant, humorous illustration of how one might fall into both the lethargic, inactive form of *acedia* and its frenetic, distractive counterpart. Guy's deep-rooted apathy began as instinctual recoil from the pain of divorce and financial failure. He goes through the motions of his Catholic faith, but his distorted gestures towards effort are poisoned by *acedia* and actually prevent true healing. In the sacrament of Penance he is indolent and unengaged, preferring to confess in a second language so "There was no risk of going deeper.... Into that wasteland where his soul languished he need not, could not enter."

World War II shakes Guy out of "eight years of shame and loneliness" with a chance to fight in what he thinks is a just war. He joins the army to find a path back to purposeful action in the world that requires no compromise of his personal honor. Guy's newfound passion for justice, patriotism, and loyalty are significant goods, but for him they are secondary goods that serve to distract him for a few years from his underlying attitude of despair. Guy has found bustling activity to replace his lethargic sloth, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love. Now trapped in a distractive form of *acedia*, he is still at odds with his true identity and *telos* to love and serve God.

Guy's hope in earthly justice is damaged irrevocably when England forms an alliance of convenience with Stalin's Russia. Guy's foray into



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the world through just war has been as unsuccessful and disheartening as his foray into marriage. With the distraction of army life gone, he reverts to his old apathy until a letter from his father forces Guy to reflect on the state of his soul: "his father had tried to tell him.... [t]hat emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity.... Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*."

Finally recognizing his *acedia*, Guy responds with a simple prayer to God: "Show me what to do and help me to do it." Guy abandons his presumptuous refusal to participate when God does not work in ways he accepts; he acknowledges with humility that "Even he must have his function in the divine plan." In his new openness to vocation, Guy has found the only true solution to *acedia*: to actively pursue the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to love and serve God.

Our actions ultimately matter because we are astonishingly permitted by God to join in his work and become instruments of his will. The vice of *acedia* would defame and distort this terrible gift. But as Guy finally learns, it is possible through love and obedience to embrace that ultimate *telos* we all share: to serve God in joy through our individual vocations.

Study Questions

1. How does Guy Crouchback manifest both the inert and energetic forms of *acedia*? What can we learn from his story about the causes, expressions, and consequences of *acedia*?
2. In the Christian tradition, the proposed remedy to *acedia* is a renewed commitment to and obedience in the daily tasks God calls us to do. How does this fight against *acedia*? How does Guy Crouchback provide an example of this remedy?
3. What can Matthew 20:1-8 teach us about vocation and *acedia*? How does this passage reshape Guy's view of his vocation?
4. Consider the apparent relational *acedia* between the man and woman in Edward Hopper's *Room in New York*. Do you see parallels with Waugh's depiction of Guy Crouchback?

Departing Hymn: "Take My Life and Let It Be" (verses 1 and 6)

Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise,
let them flow in endless praise.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1874)

Tune: HENDON

† Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B., *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 107 and 99.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Resistance to the Demands of Love

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To articulate the essential nature of *acedia* as resistance to the demands of God's love.
2. To identify the two (apparently opposing) symptoms of *acedia*.
3. To explore the human analogue of *acedia* in marriage and friendships.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" locate the familiar tune NETTLETON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) is the desert Christian who wrote the first systematic account of "the eight thoughts" (later, the capital vices or deadly sins). We glimpse both the laziness and restlessness of *acedia* in his image of a vexed monk who is supposed to be reading and praying in his cell.

"The eye of the person afflicted with *acedia* stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. The door creaks and he jumps up; he hears a sound, and he leans out the window and does not leave it until he gets stiff from sitting there.

"When he reads, the one afflicted with *acedia* yawns a lot and readily drifts off to sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for awhile; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep, but not a very deep sleep, for hunger then rouses his soul and has him show concern for his needs." [*On the Eight Thoughts*, 6.14-15, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, translated by Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 84]

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to draw members ever closer to God and to one another with love.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:22-32 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study explores the central features of the vice of *acedia* and its manifestation through two opposing symptoms, despairing laziness and distracting busyness. Two later studies, “Staying Put to Get Somewhere” and “Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life,” survey the spiritual practices that remedy this destructive vice. If time allows, study Hieronymus Bosch’s famous visual depiction of the vice. To members who want to know more about the central role of *acedia* in the Christian tradition, recommend the resources reviewed in John Spano’s *The Capital Vices: ACEDIA’S ‘Deadly’ Cronies*.

Study Questions

1. “We like the comforting thought of being saved by love, of being God’s own, but not the discomfort of transformation and the work of discipline – even the death of the old sinful nature – that God’s love requires of us,” Rebecca DeYoung notes. Read Ephesians 4:22-32 again and invite members to list the ways that being clothed with the “new self” requires us to change. We must resist deluding “lusts” (v. 22), deception of others (v. 25), nursing our anger (even righteous indignation) (v. 26), and “making room for the devil” (v. 27). We must quit stealing; we must become responsible for ourselves and not be lazy, but rather give generously to others (v. 28). We must quit gossiping, but rather speak encouragement (v. 29). And not only must we change our behavior, but allow God to change our hearts so that we become “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (v. 32).

Divide members into groups of three or four to share with one another which of these (or other) aspects of transformation have been difficult for them. Urge the members to encourage, advise, and pray for each other. Discuss how your congregation can help members overcome the discouragement that they experience when their growth in Christlikeness becomes burdensome.

2. DeYoung writes, “For all its joys, any intense friendship or marriage has aspects that can seem burdensome. There is not only an investment of time, but an investment of self that is required for the relationship to exist and, further, to flourish. Even more difficult than the physical accommodations are the accommodations of identity: from the perspective of individual ‘freedom,’ to be in this relationship will change me and cost me; it will require me to restructure my priorities; it may compromise my plans; it will demand sacrifice; it will alter the pattern of my thoughts and desires and transform my vision of the world. It is not ‘my life’ anymore – it is ‘ours.’ Thus it can seem as though stagnating and staying the same might be easier and safer, even if ultimately unhappier, than risking openness to love’s transforming power and answering its claims on us.”

Consider the strategies by which a disgruntled spouse or friend might avoid a demanding relationship. They might become depressed, ignore phone calls and emails, sleep the weekend away, and so on. This would exhibit the first symptom of despairing laziness. The second symptom, distracting busyness, might manifest through becoming immersed in a hobby, staying overtime at work, or even taking on extra religious activities.

3. Heidi Hornik notes that *acedia* is represented in Bosch’s painting by “a man lounging around: he is sitting in a large chair before a fire with a pillow propped behind his head. His dog is sleeping at his feet. Behind him a nun holds a prayer book and offers a rosary to him, suggesting that he should pray.” These features suggest the first symptom of *acedia*: despairing laziness. The second symptom, distracting busyness, is suggested in a more indirect way: “the man holds a complex instrument; these may be associated with the sextant and vase filled with rolled documents (perhaps these are maps?) displayed on the shelf. Beside the man is a folio of documents secured with ribbon and leather cover. Taken together, the instruments of navigation and papers may indicate that the sitter is a sort of explorer who has been distracted from his religious duties by wandering thoughts and is now wearied.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Depression and *Acedia*

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To articulate the differences between clinical depression and *acedia*.
2. To outline the steps that someone who suffers from both conditions might take to respond to *acedia*.
3. To discuss the relationship between the discourse of psychiatry and the discourse of spiritual guidance more generally.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"She came to me not as a pilgrim in the desert but as a patient in the clinic. I was not her spiritual director but rather her psychiatrist," Andrew Michel begins in the case study he constructed from his experiences for this study of *acedia* and depression. "She was an undergraduate student whose studies had been interrupted by a suicide attempt late in the course of a semester. Life's cruel forces had knocked her down, and she lacked the inner resources to remain steady in the face of hardship. She did not see herself as being on a spiritual or moral quest, but simply wanted to feel good, or when that failed, to escape the pain she felt. ...

"Sophia's hopes for a life worth living would surface on her good days only to be drowned out by ensuing waves of despair on bad days, which remained numerous. On these dark days, she lacked the motivation to rise from slumber and seemed to be afflicted by some force which burdened her with the slow, torpid torture of ennui, like a great yawn that persisted through the day and threatened to carry her into the abyss of despair.

"What was this force that left Sophia stranded on the edge of the abyss?"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 91:1-2, 5-6, 13-14 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Because the vice of *acedia* and the medical condition of clinical depression, or Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), can have similar symptoms, some people believe that the modern psychiatric diagnosis depression should replace the ancient spiritual diagnosis of *acedia*. Other people strongly disagree; they think that this would be a case of psychiatry overstepping its bounds and wrongly treating a spiritual disease with pharmaceuticals. Psychiatrist Andrew Michel charts a middle course: he carefully distinguishes the two conditions. Some of his patients suffer from both depression and *acedia*, but his responses to these disorders are quite different.

As you discuss this study in your group, be sensitive to members' experiences of depression in their own life, or among family members and friends. They may have strong feelings – pro or con – regarding professional psychology and psychiatry in general.

Study Questions

1. Recall that the twin symptoms of *acedia* are despairing laziness and desperate busyness. Discuss which of the nine symptoms of clinical depression listed in the study guide are similar to one of *acedia's* symptoms.

Describing how clinical depression might predispose a person to *acedia*, Andrew Michel writes, "The experience of depression, with the disruption it causes life and its general effect on overall temperament, allows a foothold for *acedia* to thoroughly ensnare one's life." For instance, in his constructed case he describes Sophia as "assaulted by a mental condition [clinical depression] that would make it hard to muster the resolve and energy to care about these internal goods in herself [of God's friendship]."

The interaction goes the other direction too: the vice of *acedia* can make it difficult to experience the healing from depression. Michel writes, "Sophia also appears to be in a moral battle against *acedia*, which would oppose any fruit-bearing of these internal goods."

2. Michel says "the [psychiatric] discourse around MDD invites a passive sufferer of a presumed brain condition to find her condition resolved by external forces (medical prowess). The psychiatric narrative... demands less effort on the part of the suffering person." By contrast, "the discourse around *acedia* is an invitation to take seriously the moral life. ... [It] invites the pilgrim into a journey toward healing via taking up with a moral life. The moral life will involve ongoing participation in suffering, to the end of character transformation. It is a seemingly slower process and involves more effort (though importantly, not inordinate effort) on the part of the person, who is seen as one agent (alongside many others) at work in her life." He summarizes: "One is a secular discourse; the other has roots in a spiritual tradition. One is utilitarian, focused around finding pleasure and alleviating pain; the other is teleological, focused on reaching one's true end, which will entail both joy and sorrow."

Michel sees value in each discourse, or way of understanding ourselves. "For psychiatry to find its proper place in the order of aids to human flourishing, it will have to be held there by internal and external pressures that are rightly ordered," he believes. "The problem is not so much with psychiatry itself but with efforts from within and without to make it a primary arbiter over the human condition without input from other perspectives. Psychiatry, when misused, may eclipse the felt need of giving attention to the moral life."

3. Michel describes two steps in response to *acedia*: (1) love God enough to receive God's imprint in one's life, and (2) be open to the growth that loving God entails. A spiritual guide may be required for each step. In the first step, a person "may even need to borrow on the conviction of a guide in the spiritual life to come to know how deeply she is loved over a long period and to notice how she bears the imprint of God's goodness and beauty." In both steps "she will likely require guides and spiritual friends to help her on her way, to uncover and embrace the divine nature at work in her." Invite members to share specific ways that spiritual friends have helped them embrace God's love and the change it requires.
4. Following Thomas Aquinas, Michel characterizes the moral life as being united with God in the bond of friendship. The gift of friendship is offered by God, and our "effort" is receiving and welcoming the relationship. Michel notes, "The invitation of God in the moral life is not to a stringent striving but to a gentle day-by-day decisiveness in being God's friend in a new way of living." But, these steps into divine friendship will be difficult for a person who suffers from depression because it requires "suspend[ing] the negative thoughts she has of herself, letting go of the image she has maintained of herself as inherently bad."

Friendship with God is possible for us because God's Spirit actively draws us to God, often through the mediation of spiritual friends who encourage and guide us. God will graciously honor the steps we take in the moral life; God will "take whatever small gesture is possible and multiply it in abundance" as we develop habits of response to his love.

Departing Hymn

"I Lift My Prayer to Thee" is on pp. 67-69 of *Acedia*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Staying Put to Get Somewhere

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the vice of *acedia* leads to desperate busyness, even in “pious” activities.
2. To consider how our culture tempts us to desperate busyness.
3. To explore why the Christian tradition commends stability of place as a remedy to the busyness of *acedia*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) depicts the restlessness of *acedia* in this vignette of a monk who is resentful of the community in which he lives.

...the same malady [*acedia*] suggests that he should dutifully pay his respects to the brothers and visit the sick, whether at a slight distance or *further away*. It also prescribes certain pious and religious tasks: Those relatives male and female should be looked after, and he should hasten to bring his greetings to them more often; it would be a great and pious work to make frequent visits to that religious woman who is vowed to God and who, in particular, is totally deprived of her relatives' support, and a very holy thing to bring whatever might be necessary to one who was abandoned and disdained by her own relatives. On such things it behooves him to expend his pious efforts rather than to remain, barren and having made no progress, in his cell.

Perhaps you can identify with this monk in whom the vice of *acedia* disguises itself as virtuous activism. In this study we will review the primary remedy for such distracting busyness that Cassian and other desert Christians commend.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members discernment and peace about their work in God's kingdom.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 106:1-8, 24-25, 43-45, and 48 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the next, “Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life,” survey the remedies to the vice of *acedia* in the Christian tradition. An earlier study, “Resistance to the Demands of Love,” introduces the central

features this of destructive vice and its manifestation through two opposing symptoms, despairing laziness and distracting busyness.

Dennis Ockholm commends the practice of stability of place as a remedy of *acedia*. If members would like to learn more about and develop this practice, encourage them to read Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, 163 pp., \$14.99), which is reviewed by Jonathan Sands-Wise in *Diagnosing ACEDIA and Its Spiritual Neighbors* (in *Acedia*, pp. 88-93).

Study Questions

1. "We are captives of a technologically-enabled, consumer-driven, efficiency-minded, instant-results-oriented culture," Dennis Ockholm complains. We have so many "distracting and numbing" options in many areas of life. (He briefly summarizes "a study of Chicago area communities that evolved from few choices and deep community life in the 1950s to a plethora of choices and a paucity of community life in the 1980s.") Invite members to discuss how their own relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, fellow church members, and others have changed over the years. How have these changes been influenced by such things as expanding choices in popular culture, increased mobility, the prevalence of information technologies, more demands in the workplace (working harder to be more productive, changing jobs to advance or maintain a career, etc.), or growing polarization of political, social, and theological views. Can they think of other cultural factors that might encourage the restlessness of *acedia*?
2. Ockholm reviews a study of pastors in 2010 which found "that while 65% of the pastors surveyed said they worked fifty or more hours a week, 52% indicated that they spent only one to six hours in prayer each week and 5% reported they spent no time at all in prayer. As one researcher put it, 'These people tend to be driven by a sense of a duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7.' ... The toll that *acedia's* commitment to tasks takes on a pastor's prayer life is devastating, not only for the pastor, but also for the congregation."

Give members a few minutes of silence to list the temptations to pious busyness in their lives. How can these good activities get in the way of a deepening friendship with God?

3. "'Stability of place' is much like a marriage vow," Ockholm says. It is the commitment and ongoing practice of staying put in a relationship, congregation, workplace, or community. It's not a naïve commitment to an abusive situation. Rather, "Stability is premised on the conviction that God places us in *particular* constellations of people so that we can speak to and hear from each other what is needed for our mutual growth into Christlikeness."

Recall that the vice of *acedia* is resistance to the demands of God's love. Persons with *acedia* do not really care enough for that relationship: they want the benefits of friendship with God and others, but without the commitment and work and willingness to change that these relationships require. The practice of stability is acting like we love God and others more than we really do, because we want to grow in our love for God and others. This practice of staying put and paying closer attention to others gradually counteracts *acedia* in several ways. We begin to notice and resist the distractions that threaten to divert us from the relationship. As we come to know and be known by God and others, we trust them more to correct us and help us grow in Christlikeness. Finally, we develop perseverance in the relationship, zeal (love) for God and others, and courage to not run away from problems.

4. "Each time I stepped through the glass doors of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, I had the uncanny feeling that I was stepping into a monk's cell," Alvin Ung writes. "I began to see that everyone I worked with, including my ornery boss, was made in the image of God. I forged allies. I found friends. Angels appeared. Three angels, a Malay man, an Australian woman, and a Chinese man, embedded themselves in my team and together we achieved things beyond belief. ... All these lessons – of spirituality, resilience, friendship, and teamwork – would never have emerged if I had not remained. (There is a time for us to move on. I did quit that job later on. As a principle, a good time to move on is when we are free from the desperate urge to run away.)"

Departing Hymn

'I Lift My Prayer to Thee' is on pp. 67-69 of *Acedia*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how “sticking to your post” (in the sense of faithfully and prayerfully doing the daily tasks that God’s love calls you to do) can remedy the vice of *acedia*.
2. To discuss practical ways of integrating prayer and worship into the rhythm of daily life.
3. To consider how the vice of *acedia* has “deadly” consequences for the individual who has the vice and for other people and the creation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) tells this memorable story about a desert Christian who lived alone in a remote cell.

Abba Paul, one of the most upright of the fathers,...was free of care by reason of his date palms and little garden, had enough provisions and a quantity of food, and could not do any work to support himself because his dwelling was separated from towns and from habitable land by a seven days’ journey through the desert.... He used to collect palm fronds and always exact a day’s labor from himself just as if this were his means of support. And when his cave was filled with a whole year’s work, he would burn up what he had so carefully toiled over each year.... He did it just for the sake of purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving out *acedia*. [John Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.24, translated by Boniface Ramsey (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2000), 233.]

Amy Freeman writes, “For the same reasons that Abba Paul found collecting his soon-to-be-burnt palm leaves to be curative [of the vice of *acedia*], Cassian and Benedict recommend manual labor for their monks.” In this study, Freeman explores why being faithful in the daily tasks that God’s love calls us to face is a primary remedy for *acedia*.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members discern and welcome the daily tasks that God’s love is calling them to face.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:23-24 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the previous one, “Staying Put to Get Somewhere,” survey the remedies to the vice of *acedia* in the Christian tradition. An earlier study, “Resistance to the Demands of Love,” introduces the central features of this destructive vice and its manifestation through two opposing symptoms, despairing laziness and distracting busyness.

Study Questions

1. In response to *acedia*'s first symptom of “sleep, inactivity, and surrender,” Amy Freeman suggests that “physically working our bodies can help us break out of an idle spirit.” In response to the second symptom of “instability, fecklessness, and agitated activity for activity’s sake,” she says “focusing our bodies in a coordinated effort can help us work out our psychological distractions. Have you noticed these twin benefits of manual work in your experience? After chopping vegetables for cooking, for instance, I seem to be less tempted by a spirit of apathy and less distracted when I need to sit down to do assigned reading.”
It is important to remember that “sticking to your post” is more than doing things that give you a sense of purpose and focus your mind. It involves coming to see those daily tasks as contributing to the life that God has called you to live. You become attentive to the tasks and offer them in gratitude to God. Freeman explains: “In one of his letters Hilton instructs a layman to fulfill his responsibilities and do good works, and then afterwards to ‘lift up your heart to God, and pray that in his goodness God will accept your works that you do to his pleasure.’ The man is to offer them humbly, realizing that they are nothing on their own, but they can be offered to God because of God’s mercy. When done with this sort of humility, all of the ordinary works of daily life can be as little sticks that enkindle the fire of love in our soul and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of *acedia*.”
2. When we “spiritualize” work, we forget “that we, through God’s mercy, only participate in a small way in his saving work,” Freeman writes. “When we are consumed by a spirit of productivity, we become too focused on our own affairs and overemphasize their importance. We may even lose track of the ultimate purpose of all that we do, which is ‘to know [God], to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven.’” Invite members to discuss how they are tempted to spiritualize their work.
3. In a “mixed” life a person sets aside brief moments for prayer. This is not easy, Freeman admits, because “we may become discouraged when faced with distractions or dryness in our prayer. Some of the external distractions, such as ringing cell phones, we can shut off. Other distractions, especially mental distractions, are beyond our control. In this case we should either address the distraction in prayer or calmly collect our thoughts as much as possible and carry on, resisting any kind of discouragement.” In addition to the suggestions by Francis de Sales in the study guide, Freeman commends praying before and after each task that we do, or offering what Father Thomas Dubay calls “life-triggering prayer” in which “all sorts of diverse happenings can... ignite a short sentiment directed to God.”
4. The vice of *acedia* is spiritually deadly to the individual, Kyle Childress writes, because “Over time as we refuse to become involved with hurting people or with God, our refusing eventually becomes habitual. It is a joyful thing to find true rest from having gotten what our hearts desire. But there is also a sad, tired rest that comes when desire dies. That is what happens with sloth. Our desires die. Our refusal to be involved and engaged and participate in God, in people, and in this world becomes so habit forming that we die inside.”
The vice also has deadly consequences for others, “because God calls us – and, in the economy of God, the people in this world need us – to be involved. Without the life-giving, suffering-servanthood involvement of God’s people, this good creation begins to die: children die of hunger and sickness and famine, innocent civilians die in war, and people’s desire for all that is just and true and beautiful dies.”

Departing Hymn

“I Lift My Prayer to Thee” is on pp. 67-69 of *Acedia*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Acedia in the Modern Age

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see how *acedia*, in its lazy and distractive forms, refuses to love and serve God in joy.
2. To discuss how being open to and pursuing our particular vocations is a remedy to *acedia*.
3. To consider how literature can clarify the causes, manifestations and consequences of *acedia*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Take My Life and Let It Be" locate the familiar tune HENDON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Reading from the Trilogy

Guy Crouchback is at his father's funeral when he acknowledges and responds to his *acedia*.

"For many years now the [spiritual] direction... 'Put yourself in the presence of God,' had for Guy come to mean a mere act of respect, like the signing of the Visitors' Book at an Embassy or Government House. He reported for duty saying to God: 'I don't ask anything from you. I am here if you want me. I don't suppose I can be any use, but if there is anything I can do, let me know,' and left it at that.

"'I don't ask anything from you'; that was the deadly core of his apathy; his father had tried to tell him, was now telling him. That emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity in [his army unit] the Halberdiers. Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*.

"In the recess of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came. They also served who only stood and waited. He saw himself as one of the labourers in the parable who sat in the market-place waiting to be hired and were not called into the vineyard until late in the day. They had their reward on an equality with the men who had toiled since dawn. One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created. Even he must have his function in the divine plan. He did not expect a heroic destiny. Quantitative judgments did not apply. All that mattered was to recognize the chance when it offered. Perhaps his father was at that moment clearing the way for him. 'Show me what to do and help me to do it,' he prayed." (Evelyn Waugh, *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994], 540)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to increase your sensitivity to his direction in your life and give you strength to overcome *acedia*.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 20:1-8 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Though the features of *acedia* are mysterious, they can be illuminated by rich narratives like Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*. Members may need a brief summary of the plot, but they will quickly recognize the causes, manifestations, consequences, and potential remedies of *acedia* in the protagonist in these novels, Guy Crouchback.

Study Questions

1. Form two groups—one to recap from the article how Guy Crouchback exhibits a lazy form of *acedia*, the other to review how he exhibits a distractive form. Guide the first group to block quotes about Guy's isolation (p. 46) and habits of confession (p. 47), and the second to the summary and quotes about Guy's identity and self-conception in the army (p. 49). Ask them to report on what they learn about the causes, expressions, and consequences of *acedia*.
2. *Acedia* is a resistance to the demands of God's love. If the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to love and serve God are not clear to us, *acedia* would prevent us from ever finding them out. Thus, seeking to love God through the opportunities and responsibilities in our family, community, work-place, and congregation is a sure way to fight against *acedia's* damage. Like Guy Crouchback, we may not always know exactly what God is calling us to do, and we may not have a vocation to religious life or marriage, but we can become more sensitive to God's call through obedience to God's presence.
Guy's prayer, "Show me what to do and help me to do it," is a simple expression of how our wills intersect with God's. This humble and obedient posture prepares Guy to recognize the opportunities God puts in his path to become an instrument of his suffering love and self-giving mercy for the world.
3. Review Matthew 20:1-8 and the quotation in "Reading from the Trilogy" above. Discuss the diligence of the landowner who seeks workers for his vineyard throughout the day, and brainstorm the possible motivations of the laborers. Why were some "standing idle in the marketplace" later in the day? Did they slothfully resist earlier calls to work? Or were they neglected through no fault of their own? Why might the landowner pay the latecomers for a full day of work? This parable draws our attention more to the generosity of the landowner than the merit of even the best laborers.
Guy relates to those laborers called to work late in the day. He realizes that he is at least partly culpable for this late work: he spent eight years in a slothful stupor after his divorce and several more years seeking distraction in military life while neglecting his own soul. When Guy finally becomes sensitive to opportunities to do God's work, however, he pursues them despite the sacrifices and humiliations they require. Humbly open to God's will for his life, he is able to become an instrument of a love and mercy which far exceed his own. He recognizes that no matter how late his work comes, it will be accepted by God.
4. In Edward Hopper's *Room in New York* (on the cover), the building's column and window partly frame the couple, both putting them on display and isolating them from the viewer. The artist uses bright, warm colors (reds and yellows) for the room interior, which makes it pop forward from the cooler, blue building frame; as a result, the image seem almost unbalanced. The man and the woman are seated facing each other, but they turn toward their individual activities: he leans forward, seemingly completely absorbed by his newspaper; she looks away from him towards the piano. Is she playing a note on the piano? Does he not notice? The figures faces are blurred, "allowing them to serve as types rather than specific individuals," Heidi Hornik notes. Consider how the figures might express a human analogue of *acedia* by resisting the demands of one another's love. The man seems distracted from the woman, while the woman seems slothfully inactive—attentive neither to her music nor her companion.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.