

# Resistance to the Demands of Love

BY REBECCA KONYNDYK DEYOUNG

**At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to 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.**

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**P**icture a hairy long-toed sloth hanging from a branch, with a headset on, listening to “sloth motivational tapes”: “Relax, take your time, what’s the hurry? Life goes on whether you’re asleep or not.” That is how one of my favorite cartoons of sloth depicts this supposed vice. I say “supposed,” because on first glance, hardly anyone would think of sloth as one of the capital vices, or as they are popularly known, the seven deadly sins.

Why is this? It is mostly because, like the cartoonist, we typically think of sloth as laziness. Thus understood, should it rank with sins like envy and lust in its evil and destructive power? Since when was sitting on the couch watching reruns of *Friends* with a bag of Doritos a moral failure worthy of such severe condemnation?

There are several answers we might give. First, we could conclude that it does *not* in fact have a place; if putting it on the list of capital vices in the first place was not an outright mistake, keeping it there now is certainly outmoded. In this vein Evelyn Waugh writes,

The word “sloth” is seldom on modern lips. When used, it is a mildly facetious variant of “indolence,” and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the world’s most amiable of weaknesses. Most of the world’s troubles seem to come from people who are too

busy. If only politicians and scientists were lazier, how much happier we should all be. The lazy [person] is preserved from the commission of almost all the nastier crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Second, we could accept the same description of sloth and conclude that it *does* deserve a place on the list. There is both a sacred and a secular version of this answer.

As for the sacred, one might think sloth strikes at the heart of the great Christian virtue of diligence—that powerful sense of responsibility, dedication to hard work, and conscientious completion of one’s duties. What is hard work and dedication at its best, after all, but the ultimate expression of love and devotion?<sup>2</sup> Communities that value diligence in this way point to recurring warnings to the “sluggard” in Proverbs and Paul’s admonition to do useful work with one’s hands. Especially if our work is a divinely appointed vocation, as the Reformed tradition of Christianity likes to think of it, sitting around is not just useless, it is thumbing your nose at God’s call.<sup>3</sup>

Even outside religious circles, however, the virtue of diligence is glorified, and “slacking off” is frowned upon. In the stirring words of Henry Ford, “Work is our sanity, our self-respect, our salvation. Through work and work alone may health, wealth, and happiness be secured.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* put “diligence” at the top of their list of the five top virtues necessary for success in graduate school.<sup>5</sup> Diligence or “industry” now counts as a pragmatic virtue aimed at professional success. Thus, even if our careers replace our religion as a source of purpose, worth, and identity, laziness still carries significant weight. The upshot is, you had better get busy or you will be good for nothing.

But there is a third option, which I will explore in the next section. We might investigate whether our contemporary understanding of sloth has strayed from the original definition of sloth among those who developed the list of capital vices: the fourth-century Desert Christians and medieval theologians. For them, sloth—or *acedia*, as they called it—had a central place in the moral life, and even rivaled pride as the vice with the deepest roots and most destructive power!

To look ahead: we shall see that several features of their account often go missing today. What they meant by sloth does imply a *failure* of effort, but it is a certain *kind* of effort that our contemporary accounts miss. Furthermore, they thought of sloth as having an active side for which the person bears responsibility. Their favored name for the vice comes from the Greek compound “*a-kedia*,” which means “a lack of care.” This does not mean 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.



Thomas Aquinas's account of *acedia* in the thirteenth century stands at the crossroads between the ancient tradition of the Desert Christians and the modern conception of sloth in terms of a failure of effort in one's work, Christian or not. His definition, moreover, answers the question why *acedia* makes the traditional list of 'great' vices. It also needs some unpacking, for he begins with the cryptic idea that sloth is an aversion to the divine good in us.<sup>6</sup>

Let me start with a story. Take a typical situation between a husband and wife. In general, theirs is a relationship of love and friendship. But when they quarrel at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the evening, it is much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than it is to do the work of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires giving up their anger, their desire to have their own way, and their insistence on seeing the world only from each of their own perspectives. Saying "I am sorry" takes effort, but it is not *simply* the physical work of walking across the house and saying the words that each resists.

Do they want the relationship? Yes, they are in it and they are in deep. But do they want to do what it takes to be in relationship; do they want to honor its claims on them? Do they want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Maybe tomorrow. For now at least, each spouse wants the night off to wallow in his or her own selfish loneliness. Love takes effort.<sup>7</sup>

Why do marriage and human friendships make good pictures of what goes wrong in *acedia*? 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

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and safer, even if ultimately unhappier, than risking openness to love's transforming power and answering its claims on us.

Think of your relationship to God like that, and we are on our way to grasping Aquinas's definition of *acedia*. His definition has two parts—*acedia's* aversion, which is opposed to joy, and the divine good in us that is the object of that aversion. Let's start with the thing over which we feel sorrow, the good that *acedia* experiences not as a gift but as a thorn in her side. "The divine good in us" refers to the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, the divine life of God that informs our lives as his children. The Apostle Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20, NIV).<sup>8</sup> When God lives in us, our whole being is transformed: the old has gone, the new has come. We are "to be made new in the attitude of [our] minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:23-24, NIV). This grace, as Aquinas says, "is a beginning of glory in us."<sup>9</sup> God's love alive in us, the gift of the Holy Spirit, our new identity in Christ—this is the target of *acedia's* sorrow.

The key here is that our new identity in Christ is both "now" and "not yet," a promise and a present reality. Aquinas captures this when he describes the difference between the desiring aspect of love and its fulfillment aspect, which he calls delight or joy. When we love someone, we *long to be with them*. This longing is what Aquinas calls "desire." When we love someone and *are fully 'one' with them*, Aquinas calls this "joy" or "delight." Our idea of "enjoyment" (in the sense of deep, grateful pleasure, not casual entertainment) probably comes closest to what he is getting at here. Joy is the condition of a heart united with the object of its love, which is present and possessed—it is full and fulfilled, and desire is at rest.

While we do have joy over God's presence in our hearts, our joy is not yet complete. Why not? Because 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: it is called sanctification.<sup>10</sup> Being a Christian is like being married—a man and woman take their vows on their wedding day and thus are married, but *being* married, *living* out those vows and making them a living reality will take all of their efforts for the rest of their lives. Love has a 'now and not yet' character; it is both gift and life-transforming work. It is just this transformation by God's love in us that *acedia* resists; it resists the spiritual rest that comes with accepting his presence in our hearts.

This explains how *acedia* could be a really serious vice. After all, it resists our identity in Christ and chafes at his presence in our hearts. If that is not a description of a significant vice, it is hard to see what else could count. At the same time, this very explanation raises a hard question—how could we possibly feel aversion to God's presence in us? What could possibly make us *unhappy* about the greatest gift of love, a gift that is the secret to our own happiness, fulfillment, and perfection? Why would we ever resist this?

Aquinas goes so far as to describe *acedia* as “dislike, horror, and detestation,”<sup>11</sup> even though God is the greatest possible good that we can and do possess. How is this possible?

Aquinas answers by drawing on the Apostle Paul’s words in Galatians 5: *acedia*’s aversion is caused by the opposition of the spirit to the flesh.<sup>12</sup> It is tempting to draw the conclusion from his answer that *acedia* strikes us when the pursuit of our religious duties or spiritual good (things of “the spirit”) would take too much effort, sacrifice bodily comfort, or be physically difficult (thereby opposing the desire of “the flesh”). Is sloth laziness after all?

Aquinas emphatically denies that *acedia* is a vice focused on bodily goods like comfort and ease. Instead, we get to the heart of *acedia* by considering what the Apostle Paul usually means by contrasting the “flesh” and “spirit,” namely, the contrast between the old sinful nature and our new redeemed nature in Christ. The battle here is not between body and soul, between the physical and the spiritual, but between the “old self” and the “new self.” Spiritual battles take place on many fronts, but in the worst cases, *acedia* describes a heart loving and clinging to the wrong things, so that we are divided against ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

Essentially, then, *acedia* is resistance to the demands of God’s love. Why? Because a love relationship marks an identity change and a corresponding call to transformation. Think back to the marriage example with which we began. The claims of the other that require a thousand little deaths of our old individual selfish nature – this is the work that *acedia* objects to, not merely the bodily effort it may or may not involve. In fact, the person with *acedia* may pour significant bodily effort and emotional energy into the difficult task of constant distraction and denial of her condition, so the aversion cannot be directed toward effort itself. Yet in a sense, those with *acedia* do want the easy life, for they find detachment from the old selfish nature too painful and burdensome, and so they neglect acts of love that will maintain and deepen the relationship. *Acedia* wants the security of Christianity without the sacrifice and struggle to be made anew.

At its core, *acedia* is aversion to our relationship to 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

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shadows.<sup>14</sup> In one of her autobiographical novels, Anne Lamott recounts the words of a wise old woman at her church who told her, “the secret is that God loves us *exactly* the way we are *and* that he loves us too much to let us stay like this.”<sup>15</sup> When we suffer from *acedia*, we object to not being able to stay the way we are. 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.

Here we can finally sort out our initial thoughts on sloth. We are right to think of *acedia* as resistance to effort – but not only, or even primarily, in the sense of being physically lazy or lazy about our work. Rather, it is resistance to any effort to change demanded by our new identity as God’s beloved. 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. We are like that married couple, who want the dream of being unconditionally loved, without having to condition their own selfish desires in return. We are like Augustine praying for the gift of chastity, but not wanting it quite yet because he is not ready to give up the pleasure of his old lustful ways. Contemplating conversion, his old desires whisper, “Do you really think you can live without us forever and ever?” We are like Lot’s wife, who accepts her rescue, but cannot quite turn away from the only home and life and friends she has ever known. How many of us have felt like we need two angels to drag us out of Sodom, while we look back over our shoulders, pining for the good old days? We are like the people of Israel, poised to enter their homeland and promised rest in Canaan after years of restless wandering, but who judge upon closer inspection that the drearily familiar desert might not be so bad after all.

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. We are made for love. To resist it is to deny who we are. In their reluctance to die to the old self, those with *acedia* choose slow spiritual suffocation to 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.



As a result of its resistance to love’s demands, *acedia* can take two opposing forms: despairing resignation or desperate escapism. If we cannot escape from the relationship we are resisting, then we sink down into oppressive hopelessness and despair. It is the listlessness of this manifestation of *acedia* that fosters the popular image of the vice as laziness. But on the other hand, if we think we can escape from the relationship, we may pour all our energy into any form of flight that shows promise, no matter how desperate. It is all about distraction. We lose ourselves in what Dorothy

Sayers calls “a whiffling activity of body” – which could be endless work, or games, or sports.<sup>16</sup> Sad to say, this can even take ostensibly pious forms: we can spend our whole lives procrastinating about true discipleship, even if we faithfully engage in lots of religious activities.

Thus, *acedia* can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity. 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.”<sup>17</sup>

It is not those who take up their crosses who find them an unbearable weight, but those who resist the demands of love – the ones with *acedia* – whom Jesus commands, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30, NIV).<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1 Evelyn Waugh, *The Sunday Times* (London), 1962; reprinted in Ian Fleming, ed., *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Pleasantville, NY: Akadine Press, 2002 [1962]), 57.

2 The root of our word “diligence” is the Latin word *diligere*, which means “to love.” Sloth, even more than laziness, is apathy – comfortable indifference to and neglect of your duty and other human beings’ needs. If you will not work hard, you do not care enough. Sloth is really the lack of love that lies behind our laziness.

3 For the idea that sloth is opposed to basic benevolence, see Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205 ff. We may, however, also legitimately worry about glorifying work as a sacred ministry for which everything else can be sacrificed, including family, friendship, and Sabbath rest.

4 Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (1922), chapter 8, accessed July 21, 2013, [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7213](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7213).

5 Thomas H. Benton [pen name for William Pannacker], “The 5 Virtues of Successful Graduate Students,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:2 (September 5, 2003), C3, accessed July 21, 2013, [chronicle.com/article/The-5-Virtues-of-Successful/5060/](http://chronicle.com/article/The-5-Virtues-of-Successful/5060/).

6 See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 2. Cf. *De Malo*, Q 11, a 1, response.

7 Granted, it may be the case that their tiredness after a hard day of work makes them more prone to the initial argument, or more reluctant to attempt reconciliation, but in that way, *acedia* is no more carnal than gluttony, which may be more tempting when one is hungry, but is an affliction which persists both before and after hunger has been satiated.

8 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com) The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

9 *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 24, a 3, reply to objection 2.

10 We do not earn or merit salvation by our effort. But because salvation involves our deepening relationship with God, like a marriage or friendship it requires our active participation in and welcome of its life-transforming process. The New Testament expresses it this way: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and

godliness.... For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love." (2 Peter 1:3a, 5-7)

11 *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3.

12 Aquinas explains, "this divine good is saddening to us on account of the opposition of the spirit to the flesh, because as the Apostle says in Galatians 5:17, 'The flesh lusts against the spirit'; and...when love of the flesh is dominant in us we loathe spiritual good as if it were something contrary to ourselves" (*De Malo*, Q 11, a 2, my translation).

13 Thus, Augustine writes, "So also when the delight of eternity draws us upwards and the pleasure of temporal goods holds us down, the identical soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other. It is torn apart in a painful condition, as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of familiarity. Such was my sickness...." Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter 10, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1991]), 150. This is why Aquinas says that when we have *acedia* the divine good in us feels like "something contrary to ourselves."

14 This is the point of Paul's warning to the Colossian Christians: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..." (Colossians 3:1-2a).

15 Anne Lamont, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005 [1993]), 96, emphasis in original.

16 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins" (1941), in *Creed or Chaos? And Other Essays in Popular Theology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1949), 81.

17 Aquinas follows the earlier tradition in opposing *acedia* to the commandment to hallow the Sabbath day, which is a "moral precept commanding that the mind rest in God, to which the mind's sorrow over the divine good is contrary" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 2; see also *De Malo*, Q 11, a 3, reply to objection 2). "Rest" may be taken here to refer both to stopping 'activity' in order to engage in contemplation of God (the antidote to *acedia*'s frantic busyness) and to the joyful peace that characterizes that state of communion.

18 This article is adapted from my "Resistance to the Demands of Love," *The Calvin Spark* 51:1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Alumni Association, 2005) and is used by permission.

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