



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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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).

Resistance to the Demands of Love

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 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.