



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

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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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.

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.