

## **A Study of Sloth (Acedia)**

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*“[Acedia] is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.”<sup>i</sup>*

### **What is Acedia (sloth)?**

The words sloth, laziness, apathy, despair, or depression are all part of *acedia* but not the whole thing. The truth is that no English word covers the whole realm of *acedia*. The word literally means “no care”, but it’s specifically no care about spiritual goods. One Lutheran pastor calls it “boredom with all things holy.”<sup>ii</sup>

### **Why is *acedia* called “the noonday demon”?**

Psalm 91:6 refers to the “the destruction that wastes at noonday.” The early monks took to calling *acedia* this *noonday demon* of Psalm 91. A monk’s only meal would come at 3pm. The weariness of his spiritual burdens would set in about 10am and last until 3pm. The hunger and heat of the day would cause them to become disgusted with everything and everyone and long for greener pastures. This would lead to one of two reactions – a desire to do nothing at all or a desire to escape and get busy with other things.

### **What are the two ways *acedia* is usually manifested?**

As the monks learned right away, *acedia* was never only laziness. It can also manifest itself in busyness. When we become bored and apathetic to God’s holy things, we will either become lethargic, lazy, and slothful OR we will avoid the sorrow with a busybody, hectic life of triviality.

Some of us will readily identify with *acedia* because we have times of deep despair where nothing seems to matter and we have no desire or energy to do anything. And yet some of us would probably think, “This sin of sloth definitely isn’t me! I’m constantly busy!” Yet either way we may be trapped in the sin of *acedia*. Busyness is often nothing more than a mask for a life without care or meaning.

“The busyness of our lives is a dead giveaway that the solid and lasting things of the kingdom of God have lost their luster among us.... Our hectic lives are examples of the narcotic effect of *acedia* among us, the ‘spiritual morphine’ that Norris wrote about. All this activity is a way of coping with pain.”<sup>iii</sup>

Consider this question: Why are we so busy? Why? Is it possible that we’re hiding from anything that is too real? It is possible that we’re busy as a way of not spending too much time on anything particular at all?

### **What isn’t *acedia*?**

For non-Christians, this so-called “sin” is really just a sin against time or a sin against ourselves and our potential. But Christians realize that the real concern has nothing to do with time or ourselves. The real concern of *acedia* is God. *Acedia* is a rejection of God’s love in Christ and a refusal to live the new life that God has given us in Christ. In short, it’s not a waste-of-time problem but a spiritual problem.

***Acedia* is refusing to do the “work” God has given us to do. DeYoung explains using the example of marriages and friendships:**

“An analogy will help us get a handle on what Aquinas is talking about. Imagine a typical husband and wife. In general, they have a relationship of genuine love and friendship. One evening, they quarrel at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the night. They find it much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than to do the work of apologizing, forgiving, and reconciling. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires giving up their anger, their desire to have their own way, their insistence on seeing the world only from his or her own perspective. Saying “I’m sorry” takes effort...

Why do marriages and friendships make good pictures of what goes wrong in the vice of sloth? 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 a relationship to exist and grow and flourish...It will require us to restructure our priorities. It may compromise our plans. It will demand sacrifice. It will alter the pattern of our thoughts and desires and may transform our vision of the world....

The slothful person, in this sense, is one who resists the effort of doing day after day after day whatever it takes to keep the bonds of love strong and living and healthy, whether he or she feels particularly inspired about doing it or not.”

**Why is *acedia* even worse than straight-out rebellion against God?**

One who rebels against God is closer to God than one who is caught in the depths of *acedia*. Whereas rebellion will at least take a side, sloth refuses to play the game at all. It refuses to take any side at all but just sits on the sideline bored!<sup>iv</sup>

Revelation 3:16, “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”

**Where does *acedia* hide its ugly face in today’s American culture?**

One place that *acedia* is hiding today is under the banner of “tolerance”. Tolerance is certainly not all bad, but it often hides a complete apathy for the truth. It’s much easier to claim tolerance for everything than to do the hard work of talking to each other and discussing which ideas are right and which are wrong. Sadly, the tolerance of our culture today is often nothing more than a convenient way of saying, “I don’t care.”

**How is *acedia* of old related to depression of today?**

You may have noticed that *acedia* seems to bear some similarities to what is called *depression* today. It’s true that there is some overlap. However, remember that *acedia* is specifically a sin whereas depression is certainly not always in that category. The primary difference is that *acedia* is specifically a spiritual problem.

**What are some factors contributing toward *acedia* in the church and culture today?**

Interestingly, some of the same factors that lead to depression are the same that lead toward *acedia*. For instance, the hectic pace of life; the technological chaos; alienation of people from one another; breakdown of the traditional family; loneliness; failure of belief systems, etc.<sup>v</sup>

In the Church especially, it manifests itself as kind of spiritual attention-deficit-disorder (ADD). We go through all the motions of worship and church life without finding Christ there. We don't consider the words of our prayers, our hymns, and our Creeds. At home we don't pass down the faith to our children but expect them to somehow discover it all on their own.

### **What are the opposite virtues of *acedia*?**

The vice of *acedia* disappears in the presence of Jesus Christ. Christians must regain an appreciation of God's holy things. When we're together on a Sunday morning around His Word and Sacrament, the living Jesus is there with us. Present! How can we be slothful when our living Lord comes to teach us and feed us? In the same way, our prayers every day are a conversation with the living God of heaven and earth.

The opposite virtues of *acedia* are endurance, long-suffering, perseverance, and patience.

### **What is an answer to sloth?**

We will not answer sloth all by ourselves. Through Baptism, Jesus has made us new and every day He gives us Holy Spirit to kill *acedia* and live a life of patience and joy. In the Gospels, Jesus regularly took time away for prayer and meditation. At the same time, He didn't run away from His calling but persevered in teaching, preaching, healing, and going to the cross.

Some things you might consider as a Christian living in Jesus Christ:

1. Make personal and family devotions the number one priority of your day. You're not too busy. We simply convince ourselves that we are too busy. There are many, many resources available. If you can't find the right one for you, please talk to me and I'll be glad to help.
2. Cut down your schedule to make more time for rest, meditation, and enjoyment of the higher things in life.
3. Don't be a *gyrovague*!<sup>vi</sup> A *gyrovague* was a monk who would always wander around from monastery to monastery, never staying long enough to bear any of the burden. The word literally means "wander in circles". It's not hard to be a *gyrovague* in our culture, always wandering around in circles looking for the new church, the new marriage, the new job, etc. A Christian, however, "stays put" where he or she is and serves the people that God has called us to serve. This is perseverance and patience. God will provide.

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<sup>i</sup> Sayers, Dorothy. "The Other Six Deadly Sins", October 1941.

<sup>ii</sup> Senkbeil, Harold. "Engaging Our Culture Faithfully." *Concordia Journal* 40.4 (Fall 2014):305.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305. Senkbeil quotes from Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>iv</sup> Kreeft, Peter. *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion*. Ignatius Press, 1992, p. 155.

<sup>v</sup> Okholm, Dennis. *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*. Brazos, 2014. p. 142.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.