

In the Mix Conference 2015
Spiritual Apathy (Akedia): Giving Up on the Love of God

Definition

Needs to be differentiated from laziness, apathy, ennui, boredom. Also known as the deadly sin of sloth. The medievals called it “the noon day devil”.

The demon of akedia – also called the noonday demon – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the window, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look this way and now that to see if perhaps one of the brethren appears from his cell. Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.

(Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), *The Praktikos*)

Author Kathleen Norris in her book “Acedia and Me” asserts that dictionary definitions such as torpor and sloth fail to do justice to this temptation; she believes a more accurate description is a state of spiritual restlessness, of not living in the present and seeing the future as overwhelming.

Thomas Aquinas calls it “sorrow in regard to spiritual good”. I can’t muster any energy for spiritual good. You know, it’s a hot day at noon and you just had your lunch and all you want to do is yawn and take a nap. I can’t muster any energy, interest or enthusiasm for the things of the spirit. It is boredom, depression and inactivity at the spiritual level of life.

Karl Barth said, "I don't think pride is the deadliest of the deadly sins ... I think sloth is." All the other deadly sins will have us race toward the sin, collapse and come back to God. Whereas sloth is just that I'm bored, indifferent and could care less. And I tend, therefore, just to rest there in the "dead centre".

- (a) I feel discouraged and just can't concentrate.
- (b) I no longer have any love for what I am doing; I find no satisfaction in it.
- (c) I feel that I can't keep doing (or trying to do) what I am doing. I am weary of it. It all seems unbearably tedious.
- (d) I feel I have achieved nothing and am achieving nothing; I am just wasting my time.

We believe that what we really need is to drive out our sorrow and unhappiness with pleasure by diverting ourselves. Diversions and distractions can be of different types:

- (a) An extra-marital affair is one of the most common diversions.
- (b) Drinking to relax and forget can be another escape.
- (c) Pornography. Thomas Aquinas has something perceptive to say about this: *"Since no one can be a long time in the company with what is painful and unpleasant, it follows that something arises from sorrow in two ways: first, that the person shuns whatever causes sorrow, and second, that they pass to other things that give them pleasure. Thus those who find no joy in spiritual pleasures have recourse to the pleasures of the body."* (Summa II II, 35.4).

"People find nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then they face their nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of their soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair." (Blaise Pascal, Pensees, 622).

In the NT Apocrypha "The Shepherd of Hermas" there is a fascinating discussion of akedia in his third vision (3.11.2-3). There the church in Rome is compared to an old seated woman who is doing nothing. Like an old man, the Christians in Rome have lost their power, their virility, as a result of doubt and spiritual infirmity, so that, softened by the matters of this life, they no longer cast their cares on the Lord, but have given themselves up to akedia. So they no longer have anything good to look forward to except sleep; they have lost all hope for rejuvenation. Their spirit is broken; they have been made old by their sorrows; they do not renew their youth any more. This is followed by two other visions which see the woman regain her youth from joy at the reception of her inheritance, so that she is full of joy, because she thinks of nothing but the good news of her inheritance and is made strong for doing good in the future. What I find most fascinating is the recognition that those who are spiritually despondent may actually surrender and give themselves over to akedia; they embrace it by yielding to it, going along with it, accepting it.

Luther mentions akedia in two places that I have thus far discovered. The first is in his exposition of the Large Catechism (LC 3, 99) and the second is in the introduction to his

commentary on Psalm 117 (LW 14, 7-8). He also refers to the sense of boredom with holy things that characterizes it in his second Preface to the Large Catechism (LC 5, 16, 20). In fact, that whole Preface from 1530 is written to counteract spiritual ennui and its consequent laziness by the practice of meditation and prayer. Luther also advocated music as an antidote. Not simply the great hymns of the faith, though certainly these. Good music in general. Also the disciplines of daily prayer and exercise. This is where a few simple disciplines come in handy - when you just don't "feel like doing it" but you do anyway.

An amazingly perceptive treatment of this topic has been undertaken by August Vilmar in his "Theologische Moral", vol 1, 268-73. He includes it in his discussion on the lust of the flesh (1 John 2:16) as one of the "sins of indolence /sloth" (Trägheitssünden). Their spectrum spreads from physical idleness/laziness (2 Thess. 3:1-12; 1 Tim 5:13; Tit 1:12) to mental/emotional indolence (Gk okneeria) (Matt 25:26; Rom 12:11; cf. LXX Prov. 6:6, 9; 20:4; 21:25; 26:13, 14, 15,16) to spiritual boredom with God's word and the things of God (nothos in Heb. 5:11; 6:12), which, he claims, is part and parcel of akedia. He makes five perceptive observations:

- a) Akedia often is the result of force feeding young people before they are ready to receive what is taught so that they mouth the words of the Bible and the church, play at piety, and confuse it with sentimentality. But it has little or nothing to do with what is real for them. It is alien to their experience.
- b) He connects with the premature exposure of teenagers to all life's experiences before they reach adulthood with the result that nothing is new for them to experience and they have nothing new to enjoy as they become adults. They become burnt out cynics.
- c) He associates it, in some cases, with compulsive masturbation (would he now add pornography?)
- d) He holds that it comes from the disdainful rejection of what is and has been received from the past as well as the lust for what is new, as if the old were no good and the new was always better.
- e) It leads at its worst to spiritual apathy and a sharp distaste for holy things.

Modern literature references:

- Chekhov and Samuel Becket's plays often have themes of akedia (e.g. Waiting for Godot)
- Aldous Huxley wrote an important essay on Akedia called Accidie. A non-Christian, he examines "the noon day demons" original delineation by the Desert Fathers, and concludes that it is one of the main diseases of the modern age.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ though is one who shatters all the illusions we have about ourselves, namely that we are basically good people, that we can save ourselves, that we deserve to be respected for our 'fine' qualities and to have our selfish behaviour tolerated. The truth about ourselves is something that we routinely shy away from and thus the

essence of sin as expressed in sloth is to turn our back on God because we know He will expose the very things we are trying to hide.

Biblical References

This term does not occur in the NT but its Christian use seems to originate in the LXX.

Bible verses:

- Isaiah 61:3 “a spirit of despair”
- Psalm 119:28 (My soul melts away for sorrow)
- Psalm 61:2 (“I call to you when my heart is faint”)
- Psalm 143:4 (“...my spirit faints within me”)

In all these passages it translates the Hebrew verb ‘ataph’ which describes a sense of physical, emotional and spiritual faintness that comes from the loss of energy and vitality, a sense of dispiritedness, deadness, and deep discouragement, a pervasive sense of hopeless sorrow and utter desolation.

N.B. Akeidia must be distinguished from the psychological condition of depression. Although it is often diagnosed as depression, perhaps in some cases depression is a symptom of akeidia. One way to distinguish the two may be the extent to which anti-depressant drugs help or don’t.

The Antidote

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”

Nobody is ever given an experience of God without being sent. God has loved you into being. Understanding this helps us to just relax and say to him, “Okay, God, send me.” Cardinal Newman said, “We have all been made for some quite definite purpose.” Let that line sink into your heart ... it is a very simple but very powerful idea. We are to be a conduit of his love in some definite way ... that’s your mission. And finding it gives you this zeal that overcomes sloth. So, here is some practical advice: Work hard at discerning your mission. The idea of mission reminds us of the deep truth that the more we take our focus off ourselves and concentrate in love on others, the more we truly find ourselves, find fulfilment in the mission God has for us.

One way we can both be fed and can enact this love is by following Luther’s ‘threefold rule’ (also called Luther’s ‘triad’):

1. Oratio – prayer
2. Meditatio – meditation
3. Tentatio – trials, suffering

This three-fold ‘rule’ for living as a Christian comes from the monastic world; it refers directly to the monastic life of prayer, contemplation, the liturgy of the hours, as well as monastic community life. Luther’s vision for theological education and formation – of all

Christians – was an externalising of the best of this monastic model into the church’s life in the world.

1. Oratio

When the tentacles of Akeia encroach, Luther suggests that we turn to the Lord’s Prayer. St. Gregory of Nyssa calls it “a way to remember that the life in which we ought to be interested is daily life. ... Our Lord tells us to pray for today, and so he prevents us from tormenting ourselves about tomorrow.” Ask the Lord, “What do you want me to do? And then say, “Send me.” Ask, and then be ready to get the answer. Go to worship and especially to the Lord’s Supper as often as possible with this question in mind. Trust me, he’ll send someone or some sign.

In the *Rule of St Benedict*, he offers this advice: “...every time you begin a good work, you must pray to God to bring it to perfection.” Beginning is something we must do every day, many times a day.

Secondly, read the Bible as you consider the question: “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

Thirdly, don’t wait for God to give you an answer out of the blue, but practice what the Church calls the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, and chances are you will find out what it is. What are they?

Corporal

- Providing food for the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Sheltering the homeless and dispossessed
- Visiting the imprisoned (including those imprisoned by poverty or war or some other social injustice)
- Caring for the sick and the dying
- Providing clothing for the poor
- Helping to bury those who have died

Spiritual

- Praying for others (especially the less fortunate, those who are hurting or sad or in need in any way)
- Instructing the unaware, which is a big part of what the social justice team does – providing awareness of the social issues and problems around the world that we may not know about
- Providing care for the doubtful and comfort to the suffering
- Bearing patiently with those who are causing trouble and correcting their wrongs
- Forgiving those who sin against us

2. Meditatio

The word meditation has a range of meanings including to reflect on, to study and to practice. Christian meditation is a more passive spiritual practice than prayer, in that it is characterised more by reflecting and listening. In meditation we are not so much acting as opening ourselves to be acted upon. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and work within us – teaching, cleansing, comforting, rebuking.

Some Scriptures for Meditation (Lectio Divina):

Mal. 1:13: “‘You say, ‘It’s too hard to serve the Lord,’ and you turn up your nose at my commands,’ says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. ‘Think of it! Animals that are stolen and crippled and sick are being presented as offerings! Should I accept from you such offerings as these?’ says the Lord.”

Jn. 6:59-61: “Jesus was teaching in a Jewish place of worship in Capernaum when he said these things. Many of Jesus’ disciples heard him and said, ‘This is too hard for anyone to understand.’ Jesus knew that his disciples were grumbling. So he asked, ‘Does this bother you?’”

Ps. 73:15-17:

“God, if I had decided to talk like this,
I would have let your people down.
I tried to understand all this,
but it was too hard for me to see
until I went to the Temple of God.
Then I understood what will happen to them.”

Jer. 32:27: “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?”

Jer. 32:17: “Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.”

Gen. 18:14: “Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.”

Dt. 30:11: “This command I give you today is not too hard for you. It is not beyond what you can do.”

1 Jn. 5:3: “Loving God means obeying his commands. And God’s commands are not too hard for us.”

1 Cor. 13:10: “No testing has come to you that other people do not have. But God will not fail you. He will not allow the testing to be too hard for you. No. When the testing comes, God will make a way out for you, so that you can go through the testing.

Mt. 17:20: "Jesus said to them, 'Because you do not believe enough, I tell you the truth. If your strength to believe were as much as a little mustard seed, you could say to this hill, 'Go, move over to that place!' And it would move. Nothing is too hard for you to do."

Zech. 8:6-7: "This is what the Lord All-Powerful says, 'Those who are left alive then may think it is too difficult to happen, but it is not too difficult for me,' says the Lord All-Powerful. This is what the Lord All-Powerful says, 'I will save my people from countries in the east and west."

3. Tentatio

Christians who takes up service to Christ and His church can expect tough going. They can also be certain their chief problems will not be social or administrative. Whether it be the ancient temptation of Akeidia or something else, the devil, world and flesh will always seek to take away our hope and joy in Christ.

Ironically, it is the very trials that we face that can reinvigorate us for the things of God. Not that they can feed our hunger and thirst for righteousness, but that they make us aware again of our hunger and thirst. They jolt us out of Akeidia.

Luther says that one of the great things tentatio did for him was teach him how to see the comical and ridiculous side of his own failings and struggles. Luther learned to laugh at himself, and to join God in laughing at the devil, whose plans to derail the faith serve only to bring them closer to God's love.

Building on Luther's exposition of Anfechtungen (spiritual attack), Dr. John Kleinig directs the attention of twenty-first century Christians (and their pastors) to the wonderful way that God in His grace is able to use even the temptations and assaults of Satan to preserve and protect His saints.

When Satan attacks us, we experience the righteousness and truth of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the intellect; we experience the sweetness and loveliness of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the emotions; we experience the power and strength of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with the body. Temptation is therefore the touchstone that God uses to assess our spirituality. Temptation reveals what is otherwise hidden from us. Just as a pawnbroker uses a touchstone to test the presence and purity of gold in a coin or a piece of jewellery, temptation also tests the authenticity of our faith and proves our spiritual health.

So it is that after a period of spiritual assault one can look back to see how God used even this evil to drive the consolation of His gracious Word deeper into heart and mind. Yet in the midst of akedia's onslaught, pastors should not be left to their own devices. Because they frequently live isolated and lonely lives, pastors are especially vulnerable to spiritual attack.

“He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone,” Bonhoeffer wrote. That’s why pastors themselves need pastoral care.

This leads to one final and important point to note: The importance of a father confessor and/or spiritual director. Spiritual direction is the practice of being with people as they attempt to deepen their relationship with the divine, or to learn and grow in their own personal spirituality. The person seeking direction shares stories of his or her encounters of the divine, or how he or she is experiencing spiritual issues.