

Fighting the ‘noon-day devil’ of acedia

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Q: I sometimes just wish that I could run away from the life that I am living. There is nothing terribly wrong with it, but I get this feeling that I should just leave this behind and try something new. Is this a sign that I should?

A: Thank you for writing with this great question. Before I offer something I hope is helpful, I want to note that you stated nothing is wrong with your current situation. I highlight that because there are some people who are certainly in the wrong situation. They may be living with someone who is not their spouse and their conscience is bothered by that. That is a good sign that things should change! A person might be in a situation where they are being victimized at home or at work. Those kinds of cases could involve a very different set of “next steps” that I will not be looking at here. Since you indicate that you are in a reasonable position, I will assume that those elements are not involved here.

What you are describing is one of the seven deadly sins. That may be alarming, but let me clarify what a deadly sin is. A deadly sin is not always, in and of itself, grave matter. The deadly sins can also be those sins that lead a person into areas of deeper and darker sin.

You might think of them as “gateway sins,” in the same sense as “gateway drugs”; on their own, they might not destroy one’s life, but they often lead to harder and harsher drug use.

The particular sin (or, more accurately, temptation) you described is called “acedia.” Most people know this temptation by another name, “sloth.” I prefer the first word, and I will say why in a moment.

In the early church, there were a number of men and women who went to live in the desert to seek the Lord in silence and solitude, penance and prayer. While these hermits were living and praying in the desert, they had the clarity to notice the various temptations that assailed them while they were pursuing Jesus with everything they had. From this experience, a list of “deadly sins” was compiled. The sins on this list are pride, wrath, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, and acedia.

Now, if you were living out in the desert, you might not be confronted with every one of these temptations. For example, a person might be of the temperament to battle with greed but not with lust. Another person might wrestle with pride but be free from wrath. But the one temptation that these hermits said assailed everyone was acedia.

When we translate “acedia” to the term “sloth,” a couple of things happen. First, we think we know what the word “sloth” means. Second, what we think “sloth” means is not, in fact, what it means here. Most people associate sloth/acedia with laziness, but true acedia is far more sneaky than simple avoidance of work. In fact, those who are tremendously busy can often suffer from acedia. There are workaholics who are guilty of acedia.

Acedia is not the avoidance of work; it is the avoidance of the work that I am called to do at this moment.

The desert fathers called acedia “the noon-day devil.” They called it this for a very simple reason: it struck at noon-day. Imagine you were living in a sparse hut out in the desert. From 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. the sun would seem like it was suspended in the sky, unmoving and inescapable. The freshness of morning has already passed, and the cool and calm of evening had not yet arrived. All one could do was sit in one’s hut and pray (or weave baskets or do whatever task to which the hermit had been committed). The profound feeling of discontent would begin beating on the door of the person’s mind, arguing that they ought to get up and do something else. It didn’t matter what: Sometimes it was the temptation to rejoin society and spread the Gospel or serve the poor, sometimes it was the temptation to visit another hermit for a spiritual conversation. Good things! Regardless of what the temptation was, it was the draw to “leave one’s hut” and do something else — anything else.

We have all been there. We have said “yes” to our state in life (married life, religious life, priesthood, or consecrated single life) and then we get to that moment when we want to just “leave our hut” and do anything other than what we are called to do at that moment. This is

not the time to flee! This is the time to enter into the moment and the mission even more deeply.

Is there a time to discern another way of life? Maybe (but not if we have made a permanent promise). But the time of temptation and desolation is not the time to make this move. The time to move is when we are moving towards, not when we are running away from, the call of God.