

Spiritual Apathy (Akedra): Giving Up on the Love of God

The pattern of sin we are going to discuss today is very different from the other patterns of sin we have discussed in previous weeks.

Other sins treat something bad as a good thing and run after it.

- When I suffer from pride, I have a false picture of myself (which is bad) but I think this false picture is good and I put all my energy into making it seem good, putting other people down so I can put myself up.
- When I suffer from vainglory, I have a false picture of myself (which is bad) but I think this false picture is good, so I draw attention to myself so that other people will also see my false picture of myself and will also think it is good.
- When other people do not think of me as being as good as I (falsely) think I am and do not give me the honor I (falsely) think I deserve, I lash back at them. (Anger)

In each case, these are all sins that involve action (I put myself up, I draw attention to myself, I lash out at others). The reason they are a problem is that my action is misguided (I am running after something I think is good, but it is really bad).

But are all sins defined in terms of things we do?

What about sins that are problem because of things we *don't* do?

- Let's say you are washing the dishes after dinner. You need help, so you ask me, "Can you help me?"
 - I answer, "No, I can't be bothered with washing dishes! I have much more important things to do!"
 - Here I sin by what I do; I am proud and angry and I speak wrongly to you.
 - But what if I don't answer you at all? If I act like I didn't hear what you said and don't move to help you, isn't that also wrong?
 - Here I sin by what I don't do.
 - There was a debt of love which I owed you; I should have responded to you and helped you, but I didn't. I didn't do anything when I should have done something and that was wrong.
 - In fact, not doing anything at all was just as big a sin as doing the wrong thing. Both not acting and acting wrongly trampled on love and rejected love's claim on us.

Because our culture is focused on action, we are very quick to look at outward actions and pass judgment on outward actions.

- We often don't take the time to look beyond outward actions to see what was going on in the person's heart before they acted (the motives and intentions coming out of their inner life).
- We also commonly overlook sins where wrong motives led me not to act.
 - We don't see these because we are not looking for them.
 - What we are looking for is outward actions to praise or blame.

- When my sin lies in the fact I don't act, there is no outward action to give me away.
- No one will see that my heart was wrong and this led me to refuse love's claims, so I did nothing for anyone else. (Even when love urged me to respond to them and help them, I refused.)

Sins that we do not see because we are not looking for them are very dangerous. Because they have a subtle character and seem invisible to us, they can gain a great deal of influence over us without our even realizing it.

The early church believed that not acting because one refused to do what love asked of us was the deadliest and most dangerous of sins. They called this sin *akedia* ("indifference," "spiritual apathy").

When we discuss *akedia*, we are discussing the mystery of why people fall out of love.

Spiritual apathy can be thought of as progressing through five stages (of which the last two are the most spiritually dangerous):

- (1) I find that responding to love's claim on me by praying or reading Scripture (the debt of love I owed to God) or helping someone with a legitimate need (the debt of love I owe to my neighbor) increasingly seems too hard for me.
 - 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.

- (2) The less we feel moved by love, the more intense our feelings of discouragement and unhappiness become. Often at this point, we feel very restless and take a negative view of the present conditions of our life, i.e.
 - a. the place one lives (it is a very unsuitable place to live; I find it tedious living here; not much ever happens for me here; time passes too slowly; I hate it here);
 - b. the people here (or the people in my life) (I can't trust them; they haven't shown me much love or offered me much encouragement; being around them makes me feel bitter, jealous or envious, so increasingly I just don't want to be around them);
 - i. Ps. 18:8: "Friend and neighbor you have taken away; my one companion is darkness."

- (3) At this point, sorrow becomes so oppressive that we feel we can't bear to keep going with any of the good things we had been doing. Even to take them up (trying to pray or read the Bible or look after someone in need) seems hopeless and too hard for us; we have no love for it and no joy in it and find no comfort from it.

(4) At this point, we cannot perceive God's goodness toward us and become unhappy with God and doubt the love of God for us, because he does not seem to want what we want.

- a. Here something subtle but important happens: We move from looking to God for our good to looking to ourselves for our good and our satisfaction.
 - i. The driving force in the soul is now not the love of God, but the love of oneself without reference to God (with increasing indifference to God).
 - ii. One is now inclined
 1. not to turn outward (to God and neighbor) but to turn in upon oneself to pursue one's own personal gratification
 2. to choose acts that serve purely selfish interests in preference to acts that come from a desire for God
 3. to do things more carelessly and heedlessly unless they are connected with one's main source of personal gratification.
 - a. Cf. the wise and foolish virgins in Mt. 25:1-13.
 - iii. One does not take the time to care about God's will for him/her, so not only does not do what God asks of him/her, but does not even want to know (find out) what God asks of him/her.
 - iv. One finds it too hard to give up specific sins, so looks away from this or readjusts his/her position in regard to these.
 - v. One may even begin to ridicule or make fun of others who are more concerned to grow in the love of God. Here one becomes a vehicle for negative influences, affecting others for the worse.

(5) We believe that what we really need is to drive out our sorrow and unhappiness with pleasure by diverting ourselves. (At this point, we often think, "If God really cared for us, this is what he would want for us to.") If something seems too hard, we run away from it, rather than engage it.

- a. "I need to move on from what I've been doing. I can find success, acceptance and happiness more easily in another place/doing something else."
- b. Thinking this, one leaves off what one has been doing and loses himself/herself in some distraction or diversion (other people, other activities, etc.) that seems like it might be more satisfying.
- c. This distraction or diversion starts taking up more of one's time, one's energy and one's inner life. (The focus shifts away from God, one's spouse, etc. onto this new thing.)
 - i. Despite the increasing energy one puts into distraction, one still has periods of feeling miserable but can never understand why he/she feels miserable.
 - ii. Eventually, this distraction/diversion wears one out, draining off enough of one's energy that other parts of one's life fall apart and one collapses (sometimes wanting to do nothing at all; sometimes breaking with and discontinuing large parts of one's past life).

Diversions and distractions can be of different types.

- An extra-marital affair is one of the most common diversions.

- We often assume that an extra-marital affair is about lust, but often the initial driving force behind the affair is actually *akedia*, i.e. the specific kind of spiritual apathy we have been discussing.
- Drinking to relax and forget can be another escape.

Why Is Apathy and Escapism a Sin?

What makes spiritual apathy a sin is that we end up

- looking away from truly good things (God and what he gives) and think these are evils we can't bear
- giving ourselves over to lesser things, hoping to find our good and our happiness in them rather than in God
 - This makes the lesser things we are fixated on false substitutes for God (idols of the heart).
 - The more energy we pour into diversion and distraction, the more energy we have to put into hiding who we really are (our false self) and what we are really doing (being unfaithful by rejecting love's claims on us) from other people and from ourselves.

The pressures of spiritual apathy often hit hardest those who lead the church by prayer, teaching and example.

- Anyone who wishes to assume a position of leadership in the church must be able to recognize spiritual apathy as an especially dangerous temptation and to come to terms with it, before it comes to terms with us.
- The goal of the Christian life (which pastors were called to remind us of) is this:
 - Together we must look to Jesus, even in the hard times of difficulty, pain, dryness and emptiness, believing (because of Jesus' own promise) that he *will* be sufficient for us.
 - Because Jesus is sufficient, we *will* find our satisfaction in him (even if all things are hard for us and presently seem against us).
 - It is important to see that certain definite promises are made by Jesus to us when we face hard things and suffer.
 - Having to face hard things is not a sign of God's disfavor or his lack of love for us.

- The nail marks Jesus had in his hands were not a sign of God's rejection but of God's victory.
- When Jesus spoke from the Cross the words, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), this was not because he had failed and it was all over, but because he had seen God's victory achieved in spite of others' sin and anger and in spite of some things he himself had lost.
 - "Father...I have glorified you on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do" (Jn. 17:4).
 - Sometimes to do what God asks, we have to spend not out of what we have, but out of what we are and this hurts.
 - In responding to God, it is not so much what was done, but the way it was done that matters.
 - A single prayer offered out of love for God in sickness and weakness is worth more than many prayers spoken quickly and formally when things seem good.

Some Scriptures for Meditation (Lectio Divina):

Mal. 1:13 (NLT): “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 (CEV): “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 (NCV):

“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 (NIV): “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?”

Jer. 32:17 (NIV): “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 (NIV): “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 (NCV): “This command I give you today is not too hard for you. It is not beyond what you can do.”

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

1 Cor. 13:10 (Worldwide English): “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 (Worldwide English): "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 (NCV): "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.'"