



Are Attachments Keeping You from God?

The importance of detachment

If asked to name the greatest quality of a holy person, qualities such as prayerful, virtuous, devout or sacramental might come to mind. It should go without saying, but every one of these qualities should be present in the life of every Christian, not just those seeking holiness. The one quality that stands out, defines holiness and distinguishes a holy person from all other Christians is detachment.

Holiness is seeking union with God. Union with God means being attached only to Him. One cannot fully reach God if they are attached to anything else in life. The attachment will hold the Christian back like a pet on a leash being held back by its master.

Prayer, virtue and sacraments are like super high-octane gas put into a sports car's gas tank. When the accelerator is floored, the car takes off like a bullet and hums along the road, speeding towards its destination. Attachment is the brake. It slows the car down and can stop it cold. If the brake is applied to the floor before hitting the gas, the car isn't going to move forward regardless of how far down the pedal goes to the metal. Without detachment, the spiritual life can't move forward towards God.

God alone

"God only, God everywhere, God always." These words, spoken by Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, are a favorite little prayer of mine. I used them in the refrain of a song I wrote for meditation and focus on God. The refrain simply goes:

Trust in God... God only, God everywhere, God always.

Love God..... God only, God everywhere, God always.

Live for God... God only, God everywhere, God always.

Joy in God..... God only, God everywhere, God always.

It's human nature to seek joy. The joy of Heaven is a profound theme throughout Scripture and is usually why one turns to God in the first place. One might find themselves praying, "God, give me peace and joy here on earth and eternal joy in Heaven."

What do you think of when it comes to the joys of Heaven? Is your focus on no more pain and suffering? Are you looking forward to endless chocolate or getting a hole-in-one every time you hit a golf ball? Many things might come to mind.

My wife was a Faith Formation teacher for small children. She would sometimes get the question, "Will my pet be in Heaven?" Her answer was always "In Heaven, God will give you whatever you need to be happy. If you need your pet to be there, your pet will be there." The answer is completely true. In Heaven, God will give us everything we need for abundant joy.

What is often forgotten is the only thing we will need for abundant joy in Heaven is God Himself. He will be sufficient for all the joy we could ever imagine. "You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever" (Psalm 16:11). Also, "You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence" (Acts 2:28).

Abundant joy shouldn't have to wait until our next life in the Kingdom of Heaven. Eternal life begins the moment we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. We may not be in His physical presence now, but His spiritual presence should



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be enough to bring joy and peace in this life. Maybe, just maybe, abundant joy is missed because the wrong things are considered as joy. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). Maybe it is in seeking joy from things in this life that joy is actually lost.

The order of things

God's plan for each of us includes loving ourself and taking care of ourself. Achieving personal well-being means giving attention to three dimensions of life: physical, mental and spiritual. Each dimension has its own basic needs and the soul must seek ways to fill those needs. Physical needs include food, drink, shelter and sleep. Mental health is quite complex, encompassing all aspects of emotion and intellect. In simple terms, needs for mental health include peace, joy, love and understanding. Spiritual needs include self-worth, fulfillment and having a meaning or purpose to life.

As the soul seeks to meet basic needs, some things are considered to be more appealing in the order of satisfying needs. For example, certain foods taste better and certain music is more uplifting. The soul inclines itself to things that are more pleasing and satisfying. Those things become preferences or favorites. When inclination towards something turns into desire, it becomes very difficult to let go and an attachment forms.

Meatball subs

Every so often, I eat at a certain fast-food restaurant. Each time I go in I look over the entire menu and then still order the meatball sub. I can't seem to help myself. I walk in thinking it would be nice to try something different this time. The steak and cheese sub looks good. But the moment I get to the register the words "meatball sub" come out of my mouth, as though my mouth had a mind of its own. Anything on the menu would satisfy my hunger. Even tofu, if they served it, would satisfy my hunger. The issue is tofu wouldn't satisfy my taste buds and I have to make them happy.

I admit, I'm attached to the meatball sub. I'm not exactly sure how it happened. I tried it one time and thought it was very delicious. On my next visit the meatball sub popped into my mind. I remembered how tasty it was the last time` so ordered it again...and the next time...and the next time. The meatball sub now seems to have some kind of control over me. Any time I enter that particular restaurant I end up eating a meatball sub. I don't know if I have the willpower to order anything else.

The nature of attachment

Attachments can develop from any dimension of life. Food, drink and personal belongings are obvious sources of attachment. People and pets are common attachments as well. Some not-so-obvious attachments include pleasure, entertainment, sports, political parties, religious beliefs, church and even prayer itself. Probably the most difficult attachment to recognize and overcome is the attachment to memories, both good and bad. They're in the past, but can't seem to be shaken off.

Attachments begin as inclinations, then become desires. Each time one gives in to an attachment a small amount of willpower is lost. The attachment gains more and more control until the attachment becomes the master. This may sound like obsession or addiction, which are attachments in the extreme form. However, all attachments wield power over the will even without addiction. It's why I can't seem to order the steak and cheese sub. The meatball sub compels me to order it.

You may be wondering why the emphasis here on meatball subs. Certainly, it isn't sinful to enjoy a meatball sub now and then. It also wouldn't be a sin to enjoy a glass of wine to relax before bedtime. Attachments aren't



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inherently sinful of themselves. The problem with attachments, even trivial attachments such as a meatball sub, is surrendering the will over to desire. When actions and emotions are controlled by the desire of an attachment, the attachment becomes disordered.

Disordered attachments

Disordered attachments offend God, block spiritual progress and lead to sin. They can also damage physical and mental well-being. Disordered attachments of a physical nature can become habits which later turn into obsession or addiction. Any uncontrolled attachment has the potential to become disordered and offend God. There are three primary ways disordered attachments offend God.

“God looked upon all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God has a specific and good purpose for everything He created. Disordered attachments satisfy a self-serving purpose instead of God’s purpose. Enjoying a meatball sub for the purpose of satisfying hunger isn’t a sin. Stopping in at the restaurant when it isn’t mealtime, just to satisfy a meatball sub craving, would be disordered.

“Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters” (Proverbs 23:20). Throughout the Bible God warns against excess of anything. It’s called the sin of gluttony. Disordered attachments focus on pleasure and want as much of something as they can get. There is never enough. Gorging myself on an extra-large meatball sub simply because I enjoy it, when the medium sub contains enough calories for my dietary needs, would be disordered.

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Every pleasure that presents itself to the senses, if not purely for the glory of God, is misdirected. Everything in life that pleases us should lead us back to God. Disordered attachments are enjoyed for their own sake, not for God’s sake. Beware idolatry in all its subtle forms. Choosing anything over God, for example skipping Mass or giving up prayer time for a self-serving reason, would be disordered.

Losing control

A slow drip can fill up a bathtub and overflow, ruining the floor and everything around the tub. Attachments begin as unnoticeable drips. Leaks to self-control must be stopped early, because any attachment can potentially turn into a flood and carry us away. The greater the flood, the harder it is to swim against the current. I would have had a much easier time trying to order the steak and cheese sub had I tried it on my third visit instead of waiting until my tenth visit.

The following are indications, warning signs if you will, an attachment is taking control. Or maybe it already has.

Strong antecedent emotion. Inability to control emotions is the most obvious indicator of an attachment taking control. When one can’t obtain the thing they desire, or loses it, the attachment evokes strong emotions such as anger or despair. Disappointment and sadness are God-given emotions to help us cope. Anger and despair are evil spin-off emotions that destroy mental and spiritual well-being. Anger and despair are sins, as they miss the mark of how Jesus would respond. If joy in life rests only in God, nothing should be able to take away joy.

If the restaurant removed meatball subs from the menu, I would naturally be disappointed. If I became angry and began admonishing the manager, that would be disordered.

If one’s favorite team loses, it’s natural to be disappointed. If losing the big game results in a temper tantrum and having the rest of the day ruined, that’s disordered. The disordered attachment to sports is very common. I remember many years ago a product called “The TV brick”. It was made out of foam. Some genius marketer made



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a lot of money by giving sports enthusiasts something to throw at their TV that wouldn't break it whenever their team lost a heartbreaker.

Loss of rational judgement. Lack of reason and common sense can be an indicator of an attachment taking control. Irrational judgement says "don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up." God gave us a mind to think, assess and decide. When one is so convicted in their heart of something they reject all other facts, that's disordered. It buries the truth and leads to harmful decisions.

Consider the person who staunchly supports a particular political party or candidate. The candidate is supported regardless of their position on issues or possible lack of moral values. Any negative information about the candidate is simply disregarded as fake news. One candidate ran a platform of "Jesus and guns!" It's hard to imagine Jesus with a gun. Yet, the vote is cast.

Consider the person who holds fast to a false religious belief. They find a couple Bible verses they can interpret or twist to mean exactly what they want. Any Scripture not supporting their belief is ignored or white-washed. The scripture they like is read literally, but of other verses they say "Jesus didn't really mean it that way." How do they know? Were they there when Jesus said it?

Inability to focus. Misdirected priorities and inappropriate use of time are indicators of an attachment taking control. God rested on the seventh day and expects us to rest and relax as well. It isn't a sin to relax and have a favorite pastime. When a favorite activity takes precedence over more important things in life, that's disordered. All kinds of problems can arise from failing to focus and spend time on what's important in the present.

Recently, I was in a restaurant and observed a man and woman at the table next to me. The man had his head buried into his phone and the two hardly seemed to speak or enjoy each other's company the entire meal. When the meal was over, the couple walked out the door. The man continued to have his eyes glued to the phone. If it wasn't work, it was a lost opportunity to build or maintain a good relationship. If it was work, either the man or the man's boss might have a disordered attachment to work.

Idolatry. Idol worship doesn't necessarily mean bowing down before a bronze statue. Idolatry is excessive adoration or devotion for something. God gives us love so we can love others and others can love us. Love is one thing, adoration and devotion are reserved only for God. When love for someone is elevated to adoration or devotion, that's disordered. It's also idolatry. It can be very difficult to recognize when love turns into idolatry, that is until the loved one is gone.

Holidays are never the same. Birthdays and anniversaries are empty and jarring reminders of how our life was changed forever. Grief is a natural part of the healing process. A disordered attachment to a loved one goes beyond grief; becoming destructive and sinful. It's good to recognize and mitigate a disordered attachment for someone before they die, or any of the following can happen.

Getting angry at God isn't an uncommon response to losing a loved one. Anger comes from a disordered attachment. In the first place, it indicates a selfish love focused on what one lost rather than the joy of what the loved one gained in Heaven. Anger says, "They belong to me God, and you took them from me." The second problem with anger at God is it indicates idolatry. There is undue adoration and worship for the loved one and the dire need for them in one's life, making them an idol.

The inability to function after losing a loved one is also not uncommon. Depression and alcoholism can drain the life out a person, destroying a functioning life. These are signs, albeit too late, of a disordered attachment. Love



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that is rightly ordered will experience grief even for years, yet rest in God's love, mercy and comfort to see it through.

This next example is both uncommon and the most spiritually destructive of all. I remember one time I was praying over a woman and became spiritually uneasy, not knowing why. As we continued to talk, she mentioned how her husband had died but he was still with her. I said "In your heart?" She answered, "No. He's in the kitchen. He is with me and we talk all the time like he never left." We had a whole different discussion after that, as well as a prayer for deliverance.

Misdirected spirituality. It might be difficult to believe something spiritual can become a disordered attachment. Keep in mind the example of the Pharisees. True worship results in the glorification of God. When the act of worship becomes more important than God, that's disordered. God must be worshiped in spirit and truth (John 4:24), not self-righteousness.

Consider a man who goes to his room prays every morning. One day his wife steps in to let him know their son is sick at school and she is going to pick him up. The man begins to yell at her "You know I pray every morning! Get out!" The man has a disordered attachment to his prayer. His self-righteousness and lack of love just denied him from receiving any blessings from his prayer.

Claiming there must be one way to receive the Holy Eucharist (standing or kneeling, tongue or hand) is a disordered attachment to ritual. It's judgmental and presumptuous. For how can one know another's heart or claim Jesus is displeased by the manner He is received, rather than by the love one has in their heart for Him in the Eucharist.

The following, however, is my favorite example of a disordered spiritual attachment. It shows how subtle attachments can be and how even the Eucharist can become a disordered attachment.

Saint Teresa of Avila considered the Eucharist to be the support of her life and source of intense graces. Nothing wrong there, it should be. Saint John of the Cross would frequently take communion to her at the grates. Teresa became accustomed to receiving a large piece of the host. She once mentioned that receiving a large host pleased her and she preferred it. One Palm Sunday, Saint John brought her a small host and she became disappointed. As she walked back to her room Jesus appeared to her and showed her the error of her way in revering the size of the host she received. When the reception of a sacrament in any form removes our sight from Jesus, who is the source of the sacrament, it is a sign of disordered attachment.

Attachment and sin

The Church teaches "every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory" (Catechism, 1472). In the Kingdom of Heaven, there will be no attachments except to God. For the benefit of the soul, it's better to break attachments and sin in this life rather than the next.

Receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly can become discouraging when one recognizes they are confessing certain sins over and over and over. Sins of the world and sins of the flesh are rooted in attachments to something. The devil doesn't always have to lead us into temptation so much as lead us to our attachment and let the attachment do the rest. Deliver us Lord not only from every evil, but also from every attachment.

If lying is a persistent sin, maybe the real root of the problem is an attachment to pride and not admitting mistakes. In this case, praying for strength over lying is not going help because lying isn't the real problem. Prayer for humility



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might help. This exemplifies the importance of a thorough examination of conscience as opposed to simply walking into a confessional and firing away with what comes to mind. With all the possible attachments in life, it also proves the importance of regular (monthly if possible) reconciliation to weed out attachments one at a time and in order of spiritual importance. There is always something else hiding in the weeds.

The need for detachment

“These people worship me with their mouths, and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13). This reflects a common theme in the Old Testament concerning the insincerity of worship by God’s people. Jesus later quotes this passage in Matthew 15:8-9, applying it to the Pharisees and showing its enduring relevance.

The verse is still relevant today. God isn’t pleased simply because one prays, goes to Mass and receives Sacraments. God wants our heart and our heart can’t belong to God if it is attached to anything else. The presence of sin is an indication one hasn’t mastered their attachments and fully given their heart yet to God.

“From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). Paul isn’t devaluing marriage or calling us to neglect marital responsibilities. This verse is all about detachment. It warns against adoration and worship of spouse and over-emphasis of emotions. It underscores the transient nature of earthly relationships and emotions, because “the time is short”. It reminds us, “The world is passing away, along with its desires” (1 John 2:17).

Saint John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church, has been referred to as the “Doctor of Detachment”. The *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, written by Saint John around 1578, is a treatise on the soul’s journey to reach ultimate union with God. John writes, “habits of voluntary imperfections, which are never completely conquered, prevent not only the attainment of Divine union, but also progress in perfection”, “the soul that has attachment to anything, however much virtue it possess, will not attain to the liberty of Divine union” and “not only do they make no progress, but because of this attachment they fall back, lose that which they have gained, and retrace that part of the road along which they have travelled at the cost of so much time and labor; for it is well known that, on this road, not to go forward is to turn back, and not to be gaining is to be losing”.

Avoiding and breaking attachments

The following is based on the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

First, have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in everything and conform to His life. Meditate on the life of Christ that the life of Christ may dwell in one’s heart and soul.

Every pleasure that presents itself to the senses, if not purely for the glory of God, must be renounced and rejected for the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus had no pleasure other than to do the will of the Father. Jesus even called the Father His food (John 4:32). This is not to say we are unable to enjoy life or treat ourself from time to time. God made life to enjoy so we would praise and honor His goodness.

There must be restrictions. If enjoyment and pleasure are habitual and detract from God, it must be abandoned. If there presents itself the pleasure of listening to words not to the glory of God, do not listen. If there presents itself the pleasure of looking at things that do not lead to God, do not look. If there presents itself the pleasure of speaking or writing ill of others, do not speak or write.



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Prefer not the easiest, but the most difficult. Prefer not the most pleasurable, but the least. Prefer not that which is restful, but wearisome. Prefer not the greatest, but the least. Prefer not the loftiest, but the lowest.

Let the soul always think humbly of itself. Put the good of others ahead of the good of one's self. Consider not the hurt others cause the soul, but only the joy the soul can bring to others.

Strive to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty with respect to all that is in the world for the sake of Jesus. Consider gain as nothing.

When the mind dwells on anything, dwell on nothing but God.

To have pleasure in everything, desire pleasure in nothing. To possess everything, possess nothing. To be everything, be nothing.

Herein lies the purpose and benefit of fasting and abstinence. To consciously and purposely deny oneself of something the soul desires can greatly help in controlling it. It can be the very means of completely detaching from it. Herein also lies the benefit of dedicated daily prayer time and making it happen even when one is busy, tired or not feeling like prayer. Prayer isn't really as easy as we'd like to think.

Holy detachment

Detachment is not for the sake of itself, it is for God. Detachment doesn't mean giving everything up, but having everything ordered rightly. Detachment is an attitude of "holy indifference" towards everything, being able to take it or leave it because the only thing we can't leave is God. Detachment breaks the chains and releases the brakes to allow prayer, virtue and sacraments to speed the soul towards God.

If there was one word to describe a holy person, it would be "unflappable". Nothing affects the soul because the soul covets nothing. The soul doesn't become elated by what it has and it doesn't become deflated by what it loses. It doesn't get angry at others, because the soul isn't even attached to itself. The soul is unflappable because its only true joy is God's spiritual presence in this life and His physical presence in the next life.

Meditation: What disordered attachments are most keeping me from union with God?
What must I do to break these attachments?
How can I better utilize the Sacrament of Reconciliation to break attachments?
How can I use fasting and abstinence better in my spiritual life?