

A person is walking on a sand dune at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The person is silhouetted against the bright sky. The dunes are dark and rolling. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Spiritual Practices for the Spiritually Stuck

Five Patristic Remedies for Spiritual Inertia

A Via Devotio Resource by Rev. Dr. Tadd Kruithoff

Introduction: When the Soul Feels Stuck

Every Christian—whether a beginner or seasoned disciple—will eventually experience spiritual inertia. Spiritual inertia are those periods of spiritual dryness, numbness, or interior resistance. You might feel unable to pray. You might feel restless yet unmotivated. You might find yourself avoiding Scripture, drifting through worship, or simply going through motions without desire.

The early church had a name for this: *acedia*. *Acedia* is a state of heaviness, distraction, and inner resistance. It is what the Desert Fathers called the noonday demon. Far from being surprised by this experience, the early Christian teachers took it normative but serious and offered clear, time-tested remedies. The wisdom is ancient, but the insight is strikingly relevant for anyone who feels stuck spiritually. This guide summarizes five spiritual practices, recommended by the patristic fathers for becoming unstuck. They are simple movements of the heart that gently reopen you to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

How to Use This Guide

Move slowly. Choose one practice at a time and allow it to season your days. Each page introduces a patristic principle, a concrete practice, and a brief "why it works." You will also find short lists and prompts that make each step simple and doable. Return to these pages whenever you find your desire dimming, your attention scattering, or your prayer life hollowing into routine.

A Pastoral Word of Hope

Feeling stuck does not mean you have failed, nor that God has withdrawn. In the patristic imagination, resistance is often the threshold of growth. What appears as absence is frequently an invitation into deeper trust, steadier rhythms, and a humbler reliance on grace. The goal is not intensity but availability—making room for the Spirit in the ordinary.



What the Early Christians Taught About Spiritual Inertia

Acedia: The Ancient Word for “Stuck”

Evagrius Ponticus described acedia as a force that “makes the soul sluggish” and “turns its attention from holy work.” It is not laziness but spiritual paralysis that keeps us from attending to God. Cassian described it as restlessness, boredom, dissatisfaction, and a desire to escape. The symptoms are familiar and remain strikingly recognizable even in modern discipleship.

- Avoiding prayer or Scripture
- Feeling numb or indifferent
- Constant distraction or agitation
- A desire to change everything rather than stay present
- Inner resistance to practices we know bring life

Yet the early church also taught this encouraging truth: being stuck spiritually is not a sign that God has withdrawn. It is a sign that God is inviting you deeper. Growth happens precisely at the point where resistance appears. The Fathers and Mothers did not coddle the soul in inertia, nor did they shame it; they prescribed manageable, grace-centered remedies that could be practiced by anyone, anywhere.

Reframing Resistance

Rather than chasing emotional spikes or imagining a different life, the patristic way invites fidelity in place, honesty in prayer, and mercy toward our limits. These pages draw from the Desert Fathers, Cassian, Evagrius, Basil, Chrysostom, and the early Christian tradition, translating that wisdom into simple practices you can enter today to help you get unstuck.



Practice One: Stability of Place & Practice



“Stay in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

Evagrius, Praktikos page 12

Feeling stuck spiritually always tempts us to flee—change routines, ministries, locations, jobs, relationships, even churches. The Fathers insisted that stability is medicine. Stability of place and practice trains the heart to receive grace in ordinary moments rather than from novelty or sudden shifts. In a culture obsessed with optimization, the ancient invitation when spiritually stuck is to stay put long enough to become teachable again.

The Practice

Choose one simple spiritual rhythm and hold it steady for 7–14 days. Do not change the time. Do not relocate the practice. Do not escalate or complicate it. Hold it gently. Let stability realign your inner world to the presence of God. You might choose:

- Morning Scripture reading
- A fixed time of silent prayer
- Midday breath prayer
- Evening Examen

Why It Works

Feeling stuck spiritually tends to awaken desires for emotional highs or novelty. Stability gradually disenchants the soul’s craving for stimulation and re-educates desire to recognize grace right where you are. By resisting the urge to tweak, move, or upgrade, you bear quiet witness to God’s constancy. Over time the heart softens, attention steadies, and prayer becomes simpler and truer.

Practice Two: Short, Honest Prayer



“Do not strive for many words, but pray with a simple heart.”

Evagrius, Chapters on Prayer page 67

When you feel spiritually stuck, long or intense prayer can feel almost impossible. The early Christian remedy was not to force effort but to reduce prayer to one sincere sentence. Honest brevity pierces numbness better than eloquent performances. These short prayers become like breaths for the soul, returning you to God throughout the day without pressure.

The Practice

Choose a short prayer you actually mean, then repeat it slowly at three points during your day—morning, midday, and evening. No performance. No pressure. Just honesty.

- “Lord, give me the desire for desire.”
- “Jesus, awaken my heart.”
- “Holy Spirit, meet me in my resistance.”

Why It Works

Acedia numbs desire. Honest prayer awakens desire by inviting God into your present reality—not your ideal spiritual state. Like the publican’s simple cry, short prayers are an act of trust that God meets us in truth. Over days and weeks, these small petitions kindle warmth, attention, and availability to grace.





Practice Three: Tiny-Acts of Obedience



“The small deed done is greater than the great deed imagined.”

Basil the Great

Acedia makes spiritual life overly internal, trapping us in analysis and delay. The Fathers countered it with small acts of concrete love. External action reawakens the heart and interrupts the cycle of passivity. By blessing someone in a simple, specific way, we learn again that grace flows from God through our bodies into the world.

The Practice

Choose one small act of goodness today. Keep it small. Keep it simple. Keep it doable. Let the goal be faithfulness, not impact metrics. Trust that hidden acts are seen by the Father who sees in secret.

- Encourage someone
- Return a phone call
- Donate an item
- Assist someone quietly
- Do one avoided household task

Why It Works

Love in action disrupts the self-enclosed loop of apathy. It returns the heart to the concrete reality of God’s presence and aligns our interior life with outward mercy. Over time these tiny-acts accumulate, forming habits of responsiveness that make larger obediences feel natural rather than heroic.



Practice Four: Gentle Self-Examen



“The enemy’s power is strengthened by secrecy.”

John Cassian, *Institutes* page 7

The Fathers observed that once stuck, acedia thrives when our interior life remains unexamined. Once brought into the light, it loses power. The examen is a tender practice of attention—not a harsh audit. Its purpose is to notice God’s nearness and our responses so that tomorrow can be freer than today.

The Practice: Two Questions Each Evening

1. Where did I sense God’s nearness or invitation today?
2. Where did I resist, avoid, or shut down?

Do not analyze. Do not judge. Simply observe with God. If you wish, share insights occasionally with a pastor, spiritual director, or trusted friend. Naming movements of the heart restores clarity and frees us from drifting.

Why It Works

Attention itself is a spiritual practice. By gently reviewing the day with God, we exchange rumination for discernment. Over time, patterns emerge—moments of consolation to be received with gratitude and desolations to be met with compassion and wiser choices tomorrow.





Practice Five: Contrary-Motion Practice



Remedies are chosen to counter the distortion directly.

Evagrius & Cassian

The patristics viewed spiritual growth therapeutically: identify the pattern of distortion and apply a remedy that moves the soul in the opposite direction—not by force but by grace. Contrary motion is not self-punishment; it is a gentle reorientation that leverages small, precise practices to realign desire toward God.

The Practice

- Scattered? Practice fixed-hour prayer.
- Numb? Pray a short passage of Scripture slowly.
- Restless? Sit in silence for three minutes.
- Avoidant? Do one avoided task.
- Self-focused? Perform an act of hidden service.

Why It Works

Contrary motion breaks the inertia of acedia by introducing a counter-trend that is simple enough to attempt and concrete enough to complete. Each small act weakens avoidance pathways and strengthens trust. Over time the soul discovers that grace is stronger than resistance, and desire begins to move again toward God.



An Invitation to Spiritual Direction

Spiritual inertia is not overcome by willpower. It is softened and healed through attention, grace, and wise companionship. One of the most effective supports for seasons of dryness or confusion is the ancient practice of spiritual direction. A companion who listens with you for the movements of the Spirit can help you disentangle resistance from invitation and craft rhythms that fit your real life.

You Don't Have to Navigate This Alone

A spiritual director holds space with you to: notice God's movements, discern desires and resistances, build sustainable rhythms, clarify next steps, and deepen intimacy with God. If you sense that God is inviting you into a season of renewal, I would love to walk with you.

Start a Conversation

Learn more or schedule an initial conversation at:
<https://viadevotio.org/spiritualdirection>.

