

Week 18

Three Kinds of Responses

Guide: Motives



Before returning to the life of Jesus, we will take one more week to lay further foundation for our upcoming reflections. We know we will be drawn more deeply into our relationship with Jesus and that this will call us to greater freedom in the choices we will make for living our lives.

This week we will spend our background time reflecting on a simple case study. We will consider an imaginary but very real situation, to reflect on three ways of responding to it.

We consider a case in which someone finds him or herself in a way of life or in a pattern of acting that he or she is not entirely proud of. It is important to note here that we are not talking about something really bad but something that has not been very responsive to God's movement in that person's life.

It might be an attachment to the way he or she looks, or simply the amount of creature comforts that he or she has become dependent on. It might be an attachment to a pattern of always using his or her gifts to manipulate others to get his or her own way, or simply being attached to the habit of mediocrity in family life or work—getting by with as little effort as is required of me.

Having one or more of these cases in our minds all week, we will consider three kinds of responses.

1. Wanting to free oneself from this attachment and really be more attentive to God's calls in one's life but *just never getting around to doing it*. This type of responder has only good intentions but never gets around to putting them into action.
2. Wanting to free oneself from this attachment but ending up rationalizing it to such a degree that one can work out a justification that makes it seem that *this way of being attached is actually what God wants*.
3. Responding to the attachment by neither trying to keep it nor trying to get rid of it. This is a desire to free oneself of the attachment in such a way that one becomes no longer attached to it. Rather, one becomes more responsive to and more attached to however God might be moving

one to act here and now. The desire becomes purer. *One wants only what will be of greater service to God.* Whatever would be of greater service becomes what motivates one's choices.

As we prepare to contemplate more of the life of Jesus, we beg for the grace this week, perhaps every morning when we rise, and each night, before we sleep. We ask for the gift to respond more and more freely, that all we choose might be for God's greater glory and the salvation of our souls.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

This week is a second very simple meditation to prepare us to continue contemplating the life of Jesus. It also helps us to be quite careful and humble in the responses we will make to God's invitation to free us more and more.

It is so important to remember that this is not about the choice to be a good person as opposed to a bad person. It is far subtler than that. We're assuming that we have great and growing desires to know, love, and serve Jesus, who has freed us from our sins.

This week is a reflection on ways of responding. As we enter more deeply into a life that is drawing us into the pattern of Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection, we are reflecting on how it is possible to avoid the freedom that is offered us. Then we are realizing that the only response we truly desire is to be free before everything in our lives.

To be human is to develop attachments to things, to habitual ways of being, to needs for security and identity. The purpose of this week is *not* to do an inventory of all the attachments in our lives. Our purpose here is to reflect on our response and to simply express our desire to be free.

Practically speaking, we can spend the whole week putting into words how we desire to respond. We can wake in the morning and go to bed at night saying the simple words, "My life is in your hands." The threefold prayer to Mary, Jesus, and God to beg for these graces of freedom can be very powerful this week.

As we encounter the attachments of our life this week, we can simply acknowledge the attachment and then ask not to be rid of it but to be *free* before it. Let's take a simple example. If I find that I'm embarrassed to admit that I'm too attached to my appearance, I can ask for the grace to desire only God's glory, and not mine. I might put into words how I long to use my appearance not to attract people to me for my own self-absorbed purposes but so that I might be better able to serve God, and save my soul, by not caring whether I look attractive or don't look attractive. My one desire will be to be *however* I can be to better serve God.

It might happen, that in the course of this week, we will struggle with this. We might discover a real resistance to being this free. We might find ourselves uncovering the *depth* of some of our attachments. We may discover a voice from inside saying, or perhaps shouting, "I don't

want to surrender so much. I don't *want* to be spiritually poor and I sure don't want to experience *material poverty*." It's at this time that there is great power in simply asking for the grace, with the voice in my heart that *does desire* to be more and more with and like Jesus and to continue to be invited by God into that union and imitation. We can say, "Lord, I want *only* what would make me truly free and truly happy."

Finally, we can express our gratitude to God, who is drawing us closer to Jesus. We know we aren't there yet, but we can feel the attraction growing within our hearts as we express our developing desires.

For the Journey: The Freedom Jesus Offers Us

It is very good for us to remember the purpose for our going through this retreat. We are at the halfway point, and we might have lost sight of just where these various considerations and prayers are leading us. Ignatius knows well the unfreedoms of the human condition. We have regrets, fears, resentments, ego needs, physical drives, and personal histories, all of which naturally pull us toward satisfying and protecting ourselves. Our personal wills fashion a lifestyle in which all the previously mentioned forces combine and play out in our choices of life.

The central aim of the retreat is to seek for the will of God and then desire to live God's will in our lives. Two difficulties arise in this area. We must face the strength and varying influences of our own wills and then extract ourselves from doing what we want and try to do what we hear God inviting us to do. Let me say this very simply: this doing of God's will is not easy!

Ignatius uses the natural attraction that we all have to possessions as an example of how difficult it is to let go, not just of material things themselves but also of our attraction and desires for it. The pulls on our lives of power, security, and independence are similar to the pull of gravity here on the earth. We learn to adjust to it so we don't jump from high places or expect to bounce when we fall. It all becomes quite natural to us, and we hardly ever refer to or reflect on its pulls on us.

Ignatius presents us in the Exercises with an invitation to live more aware of the gravitational pulls on our spirits and the choices that flow from within. The planet called Christ has different gravitational demands. They take getting used to and, as with the earthly forces when we are growing up, we can trip and fall trying to live these new laws of life.

We have been praying with the events of Christ's early life, and we will return to consider his public life, but Ignatius has us pause this week to ponder honestly how difficult it is to leave the natural laws of personal gravity and what it would cost to try to live more in keeping with the freedoms that Jesus offers. It is important to pray with the awareness of how of this earth we are. His call is gentle and patient but also insistent. We think we know what is good for us, and yet he offers us a second opinion as one who loves us more than we love ourselves, if we can imagine that.

This week we resist negativity about how of this earth's ways we are. We pray in hope that by his grace, little by little, we can be so attracted by Jesus and his ways that, though we can possess this or that, we become freed from anything possessing us.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Mary,

A week like this is humbling when I look at the patterns in my own life and see how they are designed for my honor and glory instead of God's. It's so easy to convince myself that what I am doing is God's will when I suspect deep down that it is for my benefit. I look at the way I distance myself from people. Mary, did you ever want to distance yourself from all of your critics or the people who wanted to judge you? I can feel myself doing that, and then I look at the three responses for this week. Often, like the first response, I'll tell myself, "Yes, I know it might not be a good thing to always pull away from people and relationships." I'll decide to change, to make myself more vulnerable and open—but somehow I never get around to it.

Or I might tell myself that there's nothing wrong with protecting myself from pain and that doing so helped me cope with a difficult childhood, so it's really OK if I simply pull back from connecting with people. After all, would God want me to expose myself to the pain that can happen if I really let people see who I am?

Mary, ask Jesus to help me. I want to do it all alone and I simply can't. Ask Jesus to help me see that if I ask for help from him, it's not a failure but an opening up of myself.

Jesus,

I need your help and I don't know where to start. I do so many things that protect me from harm and isolate me from other people. When I look at the photo of Mother Teresa this week, my first instinct is to dismiss her. "I can't be holy like that! Do I have to be like her?" But maybe that's not what you are inviting me into, Jesus. If I look at her life, she was so open to others, so vulnerable to their pain and suffering. Maybe she just reminds me that I keep myself from feeling others' pain as a way of not feeling my own.

Jesus, help me to interact with people in a less closed-off way. But maybe that's not it either. It's not about fixing me. Maybe it's not whether I protect myself but whether everything I do is for God's glory. I'm not sure what all of this means now. All I know is that I want to get to know you better and to free myself from the things in my life that keep me from living life the way you did. Jesus, please ask God for the grace to choose only what is for God's glory and the salvation of my soul. If that means that I should open myself up more to people, then give me the help I need to do that.

Loving God,

I turn to you and beg you for help that I might be able to choose only what is for your glory and the salvation of my soul. Help me to relate to people in a way that is not for my self-protection but for your glory. Accept my humble prayer and give me the guidance and wisdom I need to live this day only for you.

Help me to remember that I can get easily confused and sidetracked in examining my own motivations. God, sometimes too much scrutiny merely makes me self-absorbed. Help me to focus only on you, on how I can serve you and how I can live out my life in the way you desire for me.

Scripture Readings

Luke 18:18–30

Luke 9:57–62

Matthew 6:24–34

Philippians 3:7–16

Psalms 131