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AVOID

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“Avoid negative sources, people, places, and habits.” (Dalai Lama)

I frequently pass a poster that lists as the first of its A-Z principles for living the above quote attributed to the Dalai Lama. All of us know these kind of situations and people who draw us, and often quite willingly, into cynical, dark, and ultimately unhappy places. In *Kelly's Heroes*, one of my favorite World War II films from the 1970's, the character of Sergeant Oddball (played by Donald Sutherland) said to another person that they were — “always with the negative waves.” We know what it can be like to be overwhelmed and exhausted by “negative waves.”

Within the New Testament, St. Paul also encourages his listeners to avoid various things and persons. Though he uses different Greek words for “avoid,” the literal meaning is often stronger than simply not going near something or someone, but rather actually implies “turning” away or aside when a choice needs to be made:

I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; **avoid** them (Romans 16:17).

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. **Avoid** the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (1 Timothy 6:20).

Remind them of this, and charge them before the Lord to **avoid** disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers (2 Timothy 2:14).

Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness (2 Timothy 2:16).

[There are those who] hold the form of religion but denying the power of it. **Avoid** such people (2 Timothy 3:5).

[Remind others] to speak evil of no one, to **avoid** quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men (Titus 3:2).

But **avoid** stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile (Titus 3:9).

Entering into the summer we now measure our time not just in weeks of the months, but in “Sundays after Pentecost” — Sunday June 30 being the First Sunday after Pentecost. To live in the time of Pentecost, the time of the Holy

Spirit is consciously to be reminded of the prayer that the priest offers at each liturgy of the year that God would not “take away the Holy Spirit from us, but renew Him in us.” We come to each liturgy anticipating and longing for the “renewal” of the Spirit.

In the Orthodox Church we believe that nothing happens magically, but through God’s presence, His grace, His Spirit. God always allows us freely to choose life in service and love to Him — “nothing virtuous can be forced,” said one of the saints. The obvious challenge behind this cooperative effort between ourselves and God comes down to daily and frequent choices. Do we want to be involved with, to hear and see, to participate, to cooperate with people and experiences that will or will not lead to a renewal of the Spirit?

Sometimes I think we feel it’s possible to have it both ways: we may allow ourselves to be enticed by imagery in music, books, magazines, the internet, and movies that leave us desensitized to appropriate relationships, yet feel that these images really are harmless. We may still be surprised when they implant within us certain visual memories that return at embarrassing moments and are difficult to escape. We may use profanity or sacrilegious language as the means of releasing anger or for establishing or strengthening our identity within a group that we admire, only eventually to feel uncomfortable with that image we have created.

The conclusion of the Scriptures and our Orthodox spiritual tradition is that it is impossible to have it both ways: There are influences, images, and persons that are not helpful or healthy to us. There are things we will have to avoid — to say, “No more. No way.” The renewal of the Spirit that we hopefully desire to experience at the liturgy and throughout our life will be impossible without this radical decision to take seriously the daily choices around us.

Finally, as Blaise Pascal wrote it comes down to what a person wants to look for, search for, and wishes to see:

Openly appearing to those who look for Him with all their heart, while
hiding from those who run from Him with all their heart, God governs
human
knowledge of His presence. He gives signs that are visible to those
who search
for Him, and yet invisible to those who are indifferent to Him.
To those who wish to see, God gives sufficient light;
to those who do not wish to see, He gives sufficient darkness.