A Radically Accepting & Mindful Faith



by Jessica A. Parks, MSW, LCSW

"God, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference."

This well-loved prayer is known as the Serenity Prayer. In it, one seeks the ability to radically accept what cannot be changed, and wisdom and courage to then change what can be.

The word "acceptance" can mean different things to different people. To some, accepting means tolerating. To others, it means agreeing. For the purpose of this discussion, to accept means to acknowledge your current experience, fully and without judgement. For example, recognizing and allowing the feeling of sadness when a loved one dies, rather than attempting to change that emotion or "cheer yourself up." During times of uncertainty, like the current COVID-19 pandemic, acceptance can look like acknowledging that this is an incredibly challenging time, allowing grief over lost plans and milestones, and then shifting focus to prayer, time with family, or other bits of beauty present in the chaos. In spiritual terms, it can mean allowing yourself to experience whatever is happening in each moment, knowing that God is also present there.



Acceptance paves a positive path

This kind of acceptance can be empowering. For instance, accepting that your experience of hurt can empower you to then communicate to the person whose words hurt you. Accepting that you are experiencing anxiety about an upcoming job interview can empower you to spend additional time preparing. Acceptance paves the path to change and growth.

Acceptance frees your energy

Radical acceptance is also freeing. Attempting to change the emotion or thought you are experiencing

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often results in significant energy and time lost to a mental tug-of-war. This internal battle with your emotions and thoughts shifts your focus away from God's presence, away from your values, away from the things that matter to you. When you acknowledge and accept thoughts and emotions, just as they are, then you are able to shift your energy and focus instead to how you would like to respond. You are free to move forward rather than to wrestle in place.



Mindfulness shifts our focus

In accepting our current experience fully, we allow our emotions to inform us. Our minds and bodies were created by God to signal to us when we need rest, when we are longing for connection, when we are unsure or afraid. By noticing and accepting these signals, we can take steps to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). We acknowledge and experience our emotions, accepting them as they are, so that we can then seek God's guidance of how to step forward free from feeling stuck in a tug-of-war with our emotions. We are allowing God to speak to us through our current experience rather than trying to rid ourselves of that experience. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:10, we can be "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when [we are] weak, then [we are] strong."

In our busy, distracted, fearful world, God calls us to radically acknowledge our current experience, gently and consistently returning our attention to his presence. If we acknowledge and accept our experiences, then we can make choices; in choosing, we can step boldly forward to run the race ahead, consistently adjusting our course through the Holy Spirit's guidance. In John 16:33, God promises this: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." We will have trouble- pain, grief, fear, uncertainty, exhaustion, loneliness, hurt. In focusing our energy on avoiding and escaping trouble, we increase our suffering. In accepting our experience of trouble, we are then able to take heart, as God encourages us to do. May we all boldly accept each moment, just as it is, so that we can then step forward into each next moment with freedom. ■



Jessica Parks is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and sees clients in our Lombard, Orland Park, & Plainfield, IL locations.

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