

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 17, Section VI

Setting the Goal

Legend:

- blue text** = Material from ACIM 3rd edition (FIP)
bold blue text = words emphasized in all caps in Urtext
red text = alternate or omitted material from the Urtext
light blue text = editorial comments
~~strike through blue text~~ = Not in Urtext, in FIP edition
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Overview of the Section

Jesus here presents a very simple and practical way to bring peace into our relationships, even when they are difficult.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹The practical application of the Holy Spirit's purpose is extremely simple, but it **is** unequivocal. ²In fact, in **order** to be simple it *must* be unequivocal. ³The simple is merely what is **easily understood**, and for this it is apparent that **it must be clear**. ⁴The setting of the Holy Spirit's goal is **general**. ⁵Now He will work **with you to make it specific**, for application *is* specific. ⁶There are certain **very** specific guidelines He provides for **any** situation, but remember that you do not yet realize their universal application. ⁷Therefore, it is essential at this point to use them in each situation separately, until you can more safely look **beyond** each situation, in an understanding far broader than you now possess.

• Study Question •

1. *Paragraph 1* introduces this section by saying that the Holy Spirit's goal, which has been set in a general fashion, will now be made specific so as to be applicable. Why, according to sentences 6 and 7, should you not take the Holy Spirit's guidelines and apply them to all situations as a whole and at once?
- A. *Because they do not apply to all situations.*
 - B. *Because that would imply future situations, rather than on now.*
 - C. *Because you do not really realize that they apply to all situations.*
 - D. *Because you need do nothing.*
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The section begins by speaking about “the Holy Spirit’s purpose,” that is, His purpose for our special relationship (1:1). Carrying out that purpose is both *simple* and *unequivocal*. That is, the instructions are extremely clear, with no room for misunderstanding. If I tell someone, “Please take this dish into the kitchen,” it may not be clear exactly where I want the dish—the sink? the oven? the refrigerator? If I say, instead, “Please take this dish and place it in the top rack of the dishwasher,” the instruction is both simple and unequivocal. You know for sure I don’t want the dish in the refrigerator. So Jesus is starting out here by underscoring the fact that the instructions he is going to give us will be very clear and easily understood (1:2–3). We are not going to find any wiggle room here.

The goal of the Holy Spirit for our relationships is *general* (1:4), but now, He intends to work with us to apply that general goal in specific ways to each of our relationships (1:5).

The Course, in this paragraph, points out that the instructions the Holy Spirit gives are adapted or tailored to our limited level of understanding. He says that there are guidelines for relationships that are universally applicable (1:6), but that, due to our truncated understanding, we are incapable, as yet, of using them so broadly. We need to consider each situation separately, and apply his instructions to *this specific situation*. Eventually, we will be able to “safely look *beyond* each situation,” but that will require “an understanding far broader than you now possess” (1:7).

The instructions follow.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹In any situation in which **you** are uncertain, the **first** thing to consider, very simply, is “What do I want to come of this? ²What is it *for*?” ³The clarification of the goal belongs at the **beginning**, for it is this which will determine the outcome. ⁴In the ego’s procedure this is reversed. ⁵The **situation** becomes the determiner of the outcome, **which can be anything**. ⁶The reason for this disorganized approach is evident. ⁷The ego does not know what it **wants** to come of the situation. ⁸It **is** aware of what it does **not** want, but only that. ⁹It has no **positive** goal at all.

• Study Question •

2. *Please describe, in light of this paragraph, what the Holy Spirit's "very specific guidelines" are that were mentioned in the first paragraph?*

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Note, first of all, that the instructions he is about to give apply to “any situation in which *you* are uncertain” (2:1), a description that certainly applies to most of the situations in our lives. These instructions, as he says, are very simple; so simple, in fact, that we may be tempted to think, “Duh! What’s so profound about that?” The amazing thing is, we seldom put the consideration of, “What do I want to come of this? What is it

for?" *first*, as he advises us to do (2:1–2). We barge into things and plow ahead without being clear about where we want to end up. As he says, we need to ask ourselves these questions "at the *beginning*," making it "the *first* thing to consider" (2:3). Setting the goal at the outset "will determine the outcome" (1:3).

But, following our egos, we do the reverse (2:4). We stumble through each situation and allow the situation to determine the outcome (2:5). Let's say, for instance, that there is a particular issue that we need to discuss with one individual. We are at a meeting at church or at work where there are a large number of people. We decide we can talk to this person over lunch. But several other people come up and indicate they would like to join us for lunch. If we have not clearly set the goal (to discuss this private matter) we may just go along with what's happening. We go to lunch with a group, we don't get the issue handled, and we end up feeling frustrated. The situation has determined the outcome. But if we have set the goal at the beginning, when the other people come up and ask to join us, we may politely decline, saying, "I need to talk privately with" the other person. Setting the goal clearly determines the outcome.

The reason for the confusion, says Jesus, is that "the ego does not know what it *wants* to come of the situation" (2:7). The ego knows what it does *not* want (doubtless referring to real joining, inner peace, etc.), but it "has no *positive* goal at all" (2:8–9). Its attitude is pretty much, "Anything but true communication and joining."

Paragraph 3

3. ¹Without a clear-cut, positive goal, set at the outset, the situation just seems to happen, and makes no sense until it has **already happened**. ²Then you look **back** at it, and try to piece together what it **must** have meant. ³**And you will be wrong**. ⁴Not only is your judgment **in the past**, but you have no idea what should happen [Ur: *should have happened*]. ⁵No goal was set with which to bring the means **in line**. ⁶And now the only judgment **left** to make is whether or not the ego **likes** it; is it acceptable, or does it call for vengeance? ⁷The absence of a criterion for outcome, **set in advance**, makes understanding doubtful and evaluation impossible.

• Study Question •

3. Which of the following is not one of the outcomes that will occur if you don't set a goal at the outset. (there may be more than one correct answer)?
- A. The situation will make no sense while in progress.
 - B. You will try to make sense of it afterward, and will be wrong.
 - C. You will not have a very full or excited downline for Amway, and you definitely won't get that new house.
 - D. You will judge the situation afterwards by whether the ego likes it or whether it calls for vengeance.
 - E. You will be in the flow of the spirit, because setting goals is forcing things; it is "efforting."

Sentences 3:1–2 sound very familiar, don't they? So many things make no sense until they have already happened, when I look back and "try to piece together what it *must* have meant"! You've probably had that experience many, many times, as I have.

Note first that Jesus is pointing out the *reason why* we have that experience so much: We have not set a clear-cut, positive goal (that is, something we *want* as opposed to a negative goal, something we *do not* want) at the outset (3:1). I believe that the kind of goal he is talking about here is a general, spiritual goal, not one of some specific form. For instance, we may enter a conversation with the goal of peace and mutual support. The specific *form* that may take is nothing we need to consider; we can leave that in the Spirit's hands.

When we wait until something is over to figure out what it was about, *we will be wrong* (3:3). We are trying to rely on our memory of the past (even though it might be *very recent* past), which is always imperfect. Not only that, but we can't be sure that what *did* happen is what *should have* happened if we'd set the goal ahead of time (3:4). Without the goal to guide things, the whole situation may have, and probably did, gotten off track (3:5). So as the ego looks backward, it tries to gauge the proper reaction: is the result something I (the ego) like? Or is it an attack that calls for some kind of retaliation (3:6). What kind of criteria are these: Good for the ego or bad for the ego? The whole thing will be evaluated from the perspective of whether or not it serves our ego needs. Failure to set a goal, with a positive outcome that we desire, makes it unlikely we will truly understand the situation, and truly impossible for us to exercise sound judgment (3:7).

Let me call your attention to how often, even in this paragraph, Jesus contrasts setting a goal "at the outset" and "in advance" with the way we typically wait "until it has already happened," "look back," judging what is now "in the past." It's very much a matter of proper timing.

Paragraph 4

4. ¹The value of deciding in advance what you **want** to happen is simply that you will perceive the situation as a means to *make* it happen. ²You will therefore make every effort to **overlook** what interferes with the accomplishment of your objective, and concentrate on everything that helps you meet it. ³It is quite noticeable that **this** approach has brought you closer to the Holy Spirit's **sorting out** of truth and falsity. ⁴The true [Ur: "true"] becomes what can be used to **meet** the goal. ⁵The false [Ur: "false"] becomes the useless **from this point of view**. ⁶The situation now **has** meaning, but only because the goal has **made** it meaningful.

• Study Question •

4. *Which of the following is not one of the outcomes of deciding on the goal in advance (again, there may be more than one correct answer)?*
- A. *You will see the situations as a means to achieving the goal you set.*
 - B. *You will become fabulously wealthy because you put a picture of your goal on your refrigerator.*
 - C. *You will overlook what interferes with your goal (i.e. your mistakes and your brother's mistakes).*
 - D. *You will come closer to the Holy Spirit's sorting out of true and false--the true being what helps you meet the goal; the false being what doesn't.*
 - E. *You will concentrate on what helps you meet the goal (i.e. the "good efforts" you and your brother have made).*
 - F. *The situation will not become meaningful.*

Once again, what is recommended is “deciding in advance what you *want* to happen” (4:1). I think, as I read this, that I want to take this as a spiritual practice for the next week or more: Every time I am about to enter into some situation, like a conversation with someone, a meal shared with someone, a phone call, an email message, to stop for a moment to do exactly this: decide in advance what I want to happen. Imagine what a difference this could make in your life!

The value of doing so, Jesus says, is that as you move into the situation you will look upon it “as a means to *make* it happen.” If I have decided that I want this phone call I am about to make to be a means of bringing peace or joy into someone’s life, or strengthening my relationship with the person I am calling, as I engage in the call, I will spontaneously say things, and respond to things, in a manner so as to bring about the intended goal! I will equally spontaneously *overlook* anything that interferes with the desired goal (4:2). It’s a very simple concept, isn’t it? Yet oh, so difficult to implement and follow! Without the goal of peace, if the other person says something insulting or

antagonistic, I am very likely to get defensive and to respond in kind. But if the predetermined goal is peace, my response will be very different.

This, in fact, is a giant step toward the ultimate goal of the Holy Spirit, which is sorting out truth from falsity in our minds (4:3; cf. T-9.I.4:2). Assuming we've set a goal consistent with the Holy Spirit, then "true" will mean what fosters the goal, while "false" means anything that *fails* to further the goal. And the situation itself "now *has* meaning" "because the goal has *made* it meaningful" (4:6). Suddenly, the mundane activities of life will be seen to be serving a holy purpose. Suddenly we realize the truth of the statement that every encounter is a holy encounter (T-8.III.4:1), that all things are lessons God would have me learn (W-pI.193.Title).

Paragraph 5

5. ¹The goal of truth has further practical advantages. ²If the situation is used for truth and sanity, its outcome **must** be peace. ³And this is quite **apart** from what the outcome *is*. ⁴If peace is the **condition** of truth and sanity, and **cannot** be **without** them, where peace is they **must** be. ⁵Truth comes of itself. ⁶If you experience **peace**, it is because the truth **has** come to you and you **will** see the outcome truly, for deception cannot prevail against you. ⁷You will **recognize** the outcome *because* you are at peace. ⁸Here again you see the **opposite** of the ego's way of looking, for the **ego** believes the situation **brings** the experience. ⁹The Holy Spirit knows that the situation **is** as the goal determines it, and is experienced **according** to the goal.

• Study Question •

5. *Let's say that before you enter a business meeting you decide that the goal of that situation is truth or holiness. Then let's say that the meeting ends with lots of upset feelings, and even with a business partnership splitting up. What will be the outcome for you?*
- A. *Peace and truth.*
 - B. *It is impossible to know, for that would be forecasting the future, rather than staying in the present.*
 - C. *Whatever it was, it would be the perfect lesson for you at this place along the path.*
 - D. *That depends on the particular details of the situation, which aren't really given here.*

Setting a holy goal in advance has "practical advantages" (5:1). *Whatever the external outcome*, the *inner* outcome will always be peace (5:2-3). Clearly, setting the goal does not mean deciding what external outcome we want; it has to do with peace, with truth, with holiness, with wholeness. So for instance, I'm going in for a job interview, and certainly, externally, I want the job. But if I set the goal of peace ahead of time, and

decide that what I want above all is to be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing, the best place for me as an expression of God, then whether or not I get the job will not affect my peace.

To the ego, the outcome of the situation determines my experience of it (5:8). To the Holy Spirit, *I decide in advance* what my experience will be, and that is what I experience *regardless of the outcome* (5:9). I will interpret the external outcome in a way consistent with my goal of truth and sanity (5:6). Here is a very profound statement that succinctly summarizes all of this: “You will *recognize* the outcome *because* you are at peace” (5:7). I set a goal of peace; I choose peace. And if I am at peace, truth must follow (5:5–6).

Paragraph 6

6. ¹The goal of truth **requires faith**. ²Faith is implicit in the acceptance of the Holy Spirit's purpose, **and this faith is all-inclusive**. ³Where the goal of truth is set, there faith **must** be. ⁴The Holy Spirit sees the situation **as a whole**. ⁵The goal establishes the fact that **everyone** involved in it **will** play his part in its accomplishment. ⁶**This is inevitable**. ⁷No one will fail in anything. ⁸This **seems** to ask for faith **beyond** you, and beyond what you can **give**. ⁹Yet this is so **only** from the viewpoint of the ego, for the ego believes in “solving” conflict [Ur: **conflicts**] through **fragmentation**, and does **not** perceive the situation as a whole. ¹⁰Therefore, it seeks to split off **segments** of the situation and deal with them **separately**, for it has faith in separation and **not** in wholeness.

• Study Question •

6. *Let's say you are a marriage counsellor and you are entering a situation with a couple that is very likely to end in an ugly divorce. What does having faith in the goal mean here?*
- A. *It means having faith in the goal, but not necessarily having faith in the couple to follow the goal.*
 - B. *It does not mean having faith in the couple, because they could so obviously choose to go against the goal.*
 - C. *It means picking the one member of the couple that seems most willing and trying to solve that person's life.*
 - D. *It means realizing that both people (and you, too) will play your part in this situation perfectly--eventually, even if not right now.*

Yet again Jesus tells us his path “requires faith” (6:1; cf. T-17.V.6:1-4). You are heading into a situation and *deciding in advance* that when it is over you will be at peace. A lot could “go wrong” on the way. The person you are interacting with might not have the goal of peace like you do. So it *does* ask for faith. In fact, it includes faith “that

everyone involved in it will play his part in its accomplishment” (6:5). Jesus goes so far as to say, “*This is inevitable*. No one will fail in anything” (6:6–7).

How can this be? How can *my* setting a goal guarantee that *everyone* will play his part without fail? Jesus admits that this seems to ask for faith beyond our ability to give (6:8). But he emphasized the word “seems,” indicating that it *isn't* beyond us, that this faith is within our reach. Only the ego sees it as impossible (6:9). The ego believes I am separate from the others involved; the Holy Spirit knows that we are inextricably joined as one. So the ego believes that I must deal with “other people” as if they are separate. The Holy Spirit is asking us to have faith *in wholeness* (6:10).

Paragraph 7

7. ¹Confronted with any **aspect** of the situation that **seems** to be difficult, the ego will attempt to **take this aspect elsewhere**, and resolve it there. ²And it will **seem** to be successful, except that this attempt **conflicts with unity**, and **must** obscure the goal of truth. ³And peace will not be experienced **except** in fantasy. ⁴Truth has **not** come because faith has been **denied**, being **withheld** from where it rightfully belonged. ⁵Thus do you **lose** the understanding of the situation the goal of truth would bring. ⁶For fantasy solutions bring but the **illusion** of experience, and the illusion of peace is **not** the condition in which truth can enter.

• Study Question •

7. *Suppose you are part of a newly born holy relationship that is encountering an initial period of difficulty and confusion due to the sudden change of goal. What would it mean to take difficult aspects of this newborn holy relationship elsewhere and solve them there?*
- A. *It would mean going into couples therapy to solve some particularly difficult aspect of the relationship.*
 - B. *It would mean the two of you moving to a new city.*
 - C. *It would mean trying to meet the needs that aren't getting met in the relationship by going to some other relationship where they can be more easily met.*
 - D. *It would mean going to someone else who will commiserate with you and make you feel vindicated regarding all those ways in which your partner mistreats you.*

If I approach any situation from the perspective of my ego, and I encounter some “*aspect* of the situation that *seems* to be difficult” (an “*aspect*” can be some circumstance such as an unexpected expense, or it might be some *person*), my ego will try to cut that aspect off from the whole and to deal with it separately, much like a cowboy cutting a steer out of the herd (7:1). Often this seems to succeed. Superficially, it handles the

difficult person or circumstance, but because “this attempt *conflicts with unity*,” ultimately it “must obscure the goal of truth” (7:2). This action of taking the aspect elsewhere can manifest in a number of ways. Perhaps I take the problem person aside and try to deal with them one on one. Perhaps I may look elsewhere, like the situation mentioned earlier in which I react to a difficulty *within* a relationship by trying to have my needs met *outside* the relationship. Or, maybe, instead of confronting the person with whom I have the problem, I complain about them behind their back. All of these seem to me to be ego responses using fragmentation to respond to some difficulty.

In any of those false solutions, any peace I seem to experience will be illusory, a fantasy of peace (7:3). Instead of having faith that everyone involved, including the “difficult aspect,” will do their part—and I think that means they *are* doing their part even when they are being difficult!—I am denying them faith. Thus, Jesus says, I “lose the understanding of the situation the goal of truth would bring” (7:5).

When difficult situations arise in our holy relationship, rather than trying to “solve” the conflict, we need to remember the shared goal that brought us together in the first place. We need to fall back on our faith that, if we hold to the goal, the outcome *will* be peace.

• **Supplemental Study Question** •

8. *This section advocated setting the goal at the beginning of each situation and having faith in that goal's accomplishment. It also spoke of the positive benefits of doing this, and of the negative results of not doing it. See if you can answer these questions in about one paragraph: What is the goal that you are setting? What is not the kind of goal that you are setting? Consider two things in your answer: First, the discussion of goals from the previous section (you may want to search for the word "goal" in this section and the previous one and see how it is used); second, the kind of goals that are normally set in conventional society.*

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Answer Key

1. C
2. Asking yourself at the outset of the situation, "What do I want to come of this? What is it for?"
3. C,E
4. B,F
5. A
6. D
7. C,D
8. The goal you set is the goal of truth, of holiness, of God, of salvation, of sanity. The goal you do not set is the goal of specific form outcomes, the goal to be rich, to have things go your way, to get a house, etc.