

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM[®] Text, Chapter 17, Section IV.1–9

The Two Pictures

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
~~strickethrough blue text~~ = Not in Urtext, in FIP edition
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Overview of the Section

This section presents imagery that creates a mental image of the relationship between the special relationship and the ego's entire thought system, imagery that is remarkably detailed. The image is then contrasted with an equally detailed image of the holy instant. The section deserves careful study, allowing one's mind to form a clear image of the pictures that it draws, and the meaning of each detail.

Due to the length of the section we will be covering it in two parts. This first part, which presents the picture of the special relationship and the ego, unfortunately ends on a rather negative note. I encourage you, if you find this part somewhat depressing, to read through the remainder of the section, which presents a picture of the holy instant as the antidote to the special relationship.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹God established His relationship with you **to make you happy**, and nothing **you** do that does **not** share His purpose **can** be real. ²The purpose **God** ascribed to anything **is** its only function. ³Because of **His** reason for creating **His** relationship with you, the function of relationships became forever "to make happy." ⁴*And nothing else.* ⁵To fulfill this function you relate to your creations as **God to His**. ⁶For nothing God created is **apart** from happiness, and nothing God created but would **extend** happiness as its Creator did. ⁷Whatever does not fulfill this function [~~Whatever fulfills this function *not*.~~] **cannot be real.**

• Study Question •

1. *The last sentence says, "Whatever does not fulfill this function [the function of extending happiness through creating in Heaven] cannot be real." Are you real?*
 - A. *No, since you are not creating in Heaven right now.*
 - B. *No, you are an ego.*
 - C. *Yes, you are real even though the person you think you are is not.*
 - D. *Yes, you are creating in Heaven now though you are not aware of it.*
 - E. *A and B*
 - F. *C and D*

The Workbook declares that, "God's will for me is perfect happiness" (W-pI.101.Title). From God's perspective, our relationship with Him has only that one purpose: to make us happy (1:1). The purpose of *that* relationship sets the mold for *all* relationships (1:2); thus, "the function of relationships became forever 'to make happy.' (1:3). In other words, every relationship we have with anyone in this world is *supposed to make us happy!* How many relationships actually fulfill that function all the time? Or even a majority of the time? If the relationships we form do *not* make us happy, Jesus says, they are not real (1:1).

In order for relationships to produce happiness, we need to relate to one another as God relates to us (1:5). He wills us perfect happiness, so we must will perfect happiness for all those with whom we are in relationship. Our only goal becomes to extend happiness (1:6)! And if that isn't how our relationships work, they "*cannot be real*" (1:7).

We've seen that the ego's purpose in relationships is to take vengeance on the past, to use the relationship partner as a scapegoat for the sins of our "shadow figures." To the extent that this purpose pollutes our relationships, they are not real. Real relationships have no purpose but the function of making happy. This may sound a bit Pollyanna-ish, but in your heart of hearts, when you engage in a relationship, isn't this what you really want? To find and increase your happiness? This paragraph reassures me that my instinctual desire to give and receive happiness *is the real purpose of relationships*.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹In this world it is impossible to create. ²Yet it *is* possible to make happy. ³I [We] have said repeatedly¹ that the Holy Spirit would not **deprive** you of your special relationships, but would **transform** them. ⁴And [by that,] all that is meant ~~by that~~ is that He will **restore** to them the function **given** them by God. ⁵The function **you** have given them is clearly **not** to make happy. ⁶But the holy relationship **shares** God's purpose, rather than aiming to make a **substitute** for it. ⁷Every special relationship **you** have made **is** a substitute for God's Will, and

¹ For example, T-15.V.5.

glorifies yours instead of His **because of the illusion** [*delusion*] **that they are different.**

• **Study Question** •

2. *The Holy Spirit changes our special relationships into mirrors of heavenly relationships. According to this paragraph, what is the purpose of your relationship with the teller at the bank?*



Our creations are spiritual, not material. They cannot be part of this world, which the Course declares to be illusion. Therefore, creation is impossible in this world (2:1). In heaven, where our creations exist, we *do* relate to them as God relates to His creations. That can be reflected in our relationships in this world by giving them the function of making happy (2:2).

The Course has told us that the intention of the Holy Spirit isn't to *take away* our special relationships, but to *transform* them (2:3). What does it mean to transform our relationships? Simply to "restore to them the function *given* them by God" (2:4), which is to make happy.

What if we engaged in every relationship, great or small, with one intent: to give happiness and to receive it? What if we realized that all the Holy Spirit desires to do in our relationships is to teach us to give and receive happiness?

If we examine our existing relationships, we will surely notice that we have *not* always given them the function of happiness (2:5). So often, rather than trying to "make happy," we've attempted to "make guilty"! We've substituted our purpose for God's (2:6–7). We're convinced that God's Will isn't what *we* want, so we push His purpose aside and replace it with our own (2:7).

Paragraph 3

3. ¹You have **made very real** relationships even in this world, ²**Yet** which you do not recognize, [**simply**] ~~them~~ because you have raised their **substitutes** to such predominance that, when truth calls to you, as it does constantly, **you answer with a substitute**. ³Every special relationship you have made has, as its fundamental purpose, the aim of occupying your mind so completely that **you will not hear** the call of truth.

• **Study Question** •

3. *Some of our relationships have a dual nature composed of a special relationship and a real relationship. How do these two aspects relate to each other?*
- A. *The special relationship, being of the ego, is more hidden, while the real relationship is easier to see.*
 - B. *The special relationship is more on the surface. It obscures and substitutes for the underlying real relationship.*
 - C. *The special relationship and the real relationship regularly change places in our awareness, occupying our minds roughly half the time each.*

We have “very real relationships even in this world” (3:1) We do? Jesus inundates us with dark truths about our special relationships, and now he asserts that, nonetheless, we do have some very real relationships. The problem, he says, is that we don’t recognize them when we have them! When we are drawn toward a real relationship with someone, our egos rise up and substitute a special relationship (3:2). What *could* have been a *real* relationship is smothered by specialness. True relationship is calling to us, but we don’t hear it because our mind is totally occupied with the specialness that seems so attractive (3:3).

Paragraph 4

4. ¹In a sense, the special relationship was the **ego’s** answer to the creation of the Holy Spirit, Who was God’s Answer to the separation. ²For although the ego did not understand **what** had been created, it **was** aware of threat. ³The whole defense system the ego evolved to **protect** the separation from the Holy Spirit was in response to the gift with which God blessed it, and **by** His blessing enabled it to be **healed**. ⁴This blessing holds **within itself** the truth about everything. ⁵And the truth is that the Holy Spirit **is** in close relationship with you, because in Him is your relationship with God restored to you. ⁶The relationship with Him has never been broken, because the Holy Spirit has not been separate from anyone **since** the separation. ⁷And through Him have all your holy relationships been carefully preserved, to serve God’s purpose **for** you.

• Study Question •

4. *So you meet someone of the opposite sex at a coffee shop and feel like he/she is the missing ingredient in your happiness. According to this paragraph, why are you really drawn to this special relationship?*
- A. *You want the untold blessing the Holy Spirit placed in your relationship with this person.*
 - B. *Your ego wants to use this relationship to protect the separation against the nameless threat of the Holy Spirit.*
 - C. *This relationship symbolizes to you the close relationship with the Holy Spirit that lies in you.*
 - D. *The ego is trying to get revenge on the shadow figures from your past.*

God's Answer to the separation was the creation of the Holy Spirit, the Voice within us that constantly speaks of and draws us toward the truth. It is that inner Voice that is calling us into real relationships. The *special* relationship is the ego's answer to that inner call to truth (4:1). The ego does not understand the Holy Spirit, and cannot, but it "was aware of threat" (4:2). It instinctively knew that that inner call for truth, if listened to, would bring an end to separation. Of course real relationship would end separation! So the ego evolved a defense system to protect itself from that threat (4:3). This inner gift of the Holy Spirit contains "the truth about everything" (4:4)!

The truth *is* that we *are* "in close relationship" with the Holy Spirit, and "in Him is your relationship with God restored to you" (4:5). Perhaps you feel as though you have no relationship at all with the Holy Spirit, or a very spotty and sporadic one, but that isn't true. As the poet (Tennyson) said, "Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet." "The Holy Spirit has not been separate *from anyone* since the separation" (4:6, my emphasis). "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21, KJV).

The final sentence (4:7) is remarkable! It says that, through the Holy Spirit and His presence within each and every one of us, all of our holy relationships have been "carefully preserved." This implies that we *already have* a holy relationship with everyone, but it has been kept in mothballs, as it were, waiting for us to take it out of storage and "put it on." It exists; we do have "very real" relationships in this world, relationships that are constantly calling to us, but they have been drowned out by the ego's shouts of specialness.

Paragraph 5

5. ¹The ego is always alert [*is hyperalert*] to threat, and the part of your mind into which the ego was accepted is **very** anxious to preserve its reason, **as it sees it**. ²It does **not** realize that it is totally insane. ³And **you** must realize **just what this means** if **you** would be restored to sanity. ⁴The insane **protect** their thought systems, **but they do so** [*do it*] **insanely**. ⁵And **all** their defenses are **as**

insane as what they are supposed to protect. ⁶The separation has **nothing** in it, **no part, no** “reason,” and **no** attribute that is **not** insane. ⁷And its “protection” is part of it, as insane as the whole. ⁸The special relationship, which is its chief defense, **must** therefore be insane.

• **Study Question** •

5. *According to this paragraph, if you want to be restored to sanity, what specifically do you have to realize?*
- A. *That the ego is alert to threat.*
 - B. *That the special relationship is the ego's chief defense.*
 - C. *That the part of your mind that functions in this world is totally insane.*

We don't realize how vigilant the ego is—“hyperalert to threat” (5:1). If we are not paying attention, the ego will react instantaneously when the call of spirit arises and will smother it.

Our egos don't realize that they are “totally insane” (5:2). I don't know if you have ever spoken with a severely mentally ill person, but it is unnerving. To me their illogic is so clear, but they seem incapable of reason. It is very important that we realize how insane our egos are, and how blind they are to their insanity. We need to take this into account if we want to regain our sanity. The ego's thought system is 100% insane, with not a bit of sanity in it, and so are the ways it seeks to protect it (5:4–7).

And the point is this: The special relationship is the “chief defense” of the ego². Since the ego's protection is part of the separation, which is wholly insane, the special relationship “*must* therefore be insane” (5:8). Jesus, I think, is trying to pry us loose from our attachment to special relationships, which *appear* to be desirable, because they are a major force in drowning out the Voice for God within us. I doubt anyone would disagree that romantic relationships, and even family relationships, are powerful distractions that often pull us down into raw ego feelings. If we are to fully awaken, we need to be willing to let them go. I believe this was the truth behind the disturbing sayings about relationships that are attributed to Jesus in the gospels, such as:

“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”” (Matthew 10:35, 37; 12:50 NRSV)

² "The special love relationship is the ego's chief weapon for keeping you from Heaven" (T-16.V.2:3).

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:29 NRSV)

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:51–53

NRSV)

In his book, *Jesus’ Plan for the New World*, Richard Rohr comments on Jesus’ attitude about family relationships as follows:

To challenge family was really shocking to a culture based on the kinship system. In fact, a pivotal point in Matthew’s Gospel, the symbolic middle of the Gospel, is the scene where Jesus creates a new definition of family.

Jesus switches sides. He’s on the inside of a house teaching his disciples when his mother shows up. Mary is standing outside with “his brothers” and the word is sent to Jesus inside that his mother and brothers want to see him. And he says, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand towards his disciples he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:47b-50; see also Mark 3:31-35).

Jesus has in a moment turned upside down the whole bloodline family system, even at the risk of slighting his mother! That’s utterly shocking and unacceptable to his culture. Jesus says it’s not blood that makes family; it’s trust, union and commitment. He has redefined family in a kinship-based culture (which is often the shape of religious cultures). From that point, after Matthew 12, everything turns to those outside—who are, of course, invited “inside” (where Mary and Jesus’ “brothers” surely are).

The scene is presented as a scandalous passage so you can’t miss the point: How could he dare to consider his own mother an outsider? Well, he is willing for you to think that so you will redefine what family is. Jesus opposes conventional wisdom so much that he has redefined the family in terms of the universal family of love. Looking back two thousand years later, how many wars have been justified by kinship? Jesus broke that addiction to false patriotism, loyalty and nationality.

The Course's teaching on relinquishing special relationships is, to me, saying the same thing. They are of the ego. *My mother, my father, my family, my spouse.* These relationships inherently separate us from the rest of the world and, as such, they must be relinquished. Jesus' understanding of family is *much* broader than blood or marriage. It includes the world. Spiritual awakening often meets with incomprehension from those closest to us, especially when we seem to love others equally with those who believe they have a special relationship with us. It isn't easy to go through. Jesus had to do it himself: "For not even his brothers believed in him." (John 7:5 NRSV)

Paragraph 6

6. ¹You have but little difficulty now in realizing that the thought system the special relationship protects is but a system of delusions. ²You recognize, at least in general terms, that the ego is insane. ³Yet the special relationship still seems to you somehow **to be "different."** ⁴Yet we have looked at it far closer than we have at many other **aspects** of the ego's thought system that you have been more willing to let go. ⁵While this **one** remains, you will not **let** the others go. ⁶**For this one is not different.** ⁷**Retain** this one, and you **have** retained the whole.

• Study Question •

6. *Paragraph 6 mentions two aspects of the ego's system: its thought system, and a specific manifestation of that system, the special relationship. What is the relationship between them (more than one of the following answers may be correct)?*
- A. *It is easier to see the lack of validity in the special relationship than in the rest of the ego's thought system.*
 - B. *The special relationship is a protection for the ego's thought system.*
 - C. *By retaining the special relationship you have retained the whole ego system.*
 - D. *The two are not really different from each other.*

As I said above, even if we have begun to realize the insanity of the ego, "the special relationship still seems to you somehow *to be different*" (6:1–3). This, despite the fact that Jesus has spent a good deal of time peeling back the layers of deception and willful blindness that mask the ego's ugliness in special relationships (6:4). Special relationships are the keystone of the ego's thought system; as long as we hold onto them, we *will not* let go of the rest of its thought system. Putting it simply: To cling to a special relationship is to cling to the ego, to keep it alive (6:5–7). You may think you are beginning to transcend your ego, but if you are still holding on to a special relationship, you are wrong!

Perhaps you think that different kinds of love are possible. Perhaps you think there is a kind of love for this, a kind for that; a way of loving one, another way of loving still another. Love is one. It has no separate parts and no degrees; no kinds nor levels, no divergencies and no distinctions. It is like itself, unchanged throughout. It never alters with a person or a circumstance. It is the Heart of God, and also of His Son (W-pI.127.1:1-7).

Paragraph 7

7. ¹It is essential to realize that **all** defenses *do* what they would **defend**³.
²The underlying basis for their effectiveness is that they **offer** what they defend.
³What they defend is placed **in** them for safe-keeping, and as **they** operate **they bring it to you**. ⁴Every defense operates **by giving gifts**, and the gift is **always** a miniature of the thought system the defense protects, set in a golden frame. ⁵The frame is very elaborate, all set with jewels, and deeply carved and polished. ⁶Its purpose is to be of value *in itself*, and to divert **your** attention from what it encloses. ⁷But the frame **without** the picture you **cannot** have. ⁸Defenses operate **to make you think you can**.

• Study Question •

7. *What does this first sentence not mean?*
- A. *Defenses bring to you precisely what they claim to protect you from.*
 - B. *The special relationship brings to you the ego's thought system.*
 - C. *Defenses give you gifts, and the gifts are miniature versions of the thing they are defending, the thing they are trying to preserve.*
 - D. *Defenses do what they would protect, not what they would protect you from.*

The first sentence (7:1) has often been misunderstood. People think it says, "All defenses do what they defend against." That would seem to imply that if I am defending myself against someone's greed, for example, I am being greedy. But it does not say that. There is no "against" in the sentence. It says that defenses *do* the thing they are defending. Therefore, if we are defending our ego, we are *doing* the ego, *being* the ego, *feeding* the ego. And, since special relationships are the ego's chief defense mechanism, they are doing the ego. The second sentence makes it very clear: "The underlying basis for their effectiveness is that they *offer* what they defend" (7:2). Special relationships harbor the ego, and as we relate from and with specialness, the relationships "bring it [the ego] to you" (7:3).

3 The ego's defenses "do" the ego (not what they defend *against*). The defense in question is the special relationship, which is an "attractive form" of the ego. "...they *offer* what they defend" (7:2).

The next sentence introduces the analogy of a miniature portrait, set in a golden frame. This image will run through the rest of the section, in elaborate detail. The portrait is “a miniature of the thought system the defense protects” (7:4), that is, the thought system of the ego. Every defense, Jesus says, “operates *by giving gifts*, and the gift is *always*” such a miniature of the thought system being protected. The key, however, is the golden frame that surrounds the portrait. It dazzles the eyes—”very elaborate, all set with jewels, and deeply carved and polished” (7:5). The next sentence is key to understanding this section: the frame’s “purpose is to be of value *in itself*, and to divert *your* attention from what it encloses” (7:6). He is talking about the ego thought system (the portrait) and the special relationship (the frame) with a striking analogy that really pictures the point he is making (pun intended)!

You can’t have the frame without the picture (7:7), the relationship without the ego—but, “Defenses operate *to make you think you can*” (7:8). That’s why we *think* we can hold on to special relationships while transcending the ego and becoming spiritual. It can’t be done.

Paragraph 8

8. ¹The special relationship has the most imposing and deceptive frame of all the defenses the ego uses. ²Its thought system is offered here, surrounded by a frame so heavy and so elaborate that the picture is almost obliterated by its imposing structure. ³Into the frame are woven all sorts of fanciful and fragmented illusions of love, set with dreams of sacrifice and self-aggrandizement, and interlaced with gilded threads of self-destruction. ⁴The glitter of blood shines like rubies, and the tears are faceted like diamonds and gleam in the dim light in which the offering is made.

• Study Question •

8. *What is the frame and what is the picture (you will need to read paragraph 7 very carefully)?*
- A. *The frame is the special love relationship and the picture is the special hate relationship.*
 - B. *The frame is the pleasures, the gifts, that special relationships supposedly give, and the picture is the ego's thought system, the reward that special relationships actually give.*
 - C. *The frame is the defense and the picture is what it would defend you against.*

Now, Jesus goes into more detail about the frame and what makes it *seem* attractive. But first, notice that the first sentence (8:1) implies that the special relationship is not the only defense of the ego, and that all of them operate in similar fashion, with a “frame” that seems attractive, enclosing a polluted core, the ego thought system, or some aspect of

it. But because the special relationship is “the ego's chief weapon for keeping you from Heaven” (T-16.V.2:3), its frame is “the most imposing and deceptive frame of all.” The frame overwhelms the picture it contains. Try to visualize this: a thick, golden frame, with ornate baroque decorations reminiscent of the almost obscene extravagance of the Palace of Versailles, that is so dazzling you can barely make out the picture it contains. This frame is “so elaborate that the picture is almost obliterated by its imposing structure” (8:2). The whole is displayed in “dim light,” so that the frame glitters while the picture is obscured in shadows.

The frame represents the relationship. It shines with all our “fanciful and fragmented illusions of love.” Into the frame are set “dreams of sacrifice and self-aggrandizement...interlaced with gilded threads of self-destruction” (8:3). Think of all the romantic novels that are written, the sappy, sentimental romantic movies, the tales of heroic sacrifice for love. Think of “Romeo and Juliet.” Think of the popularity of soap operas.

What the Course is portraying here is no exaggeration! Our society's picture of what constitutes a special love relationship is full of this kind of crap—and I use the word advisedly.

There are jewels in the frame: but what seem like rubies are drops of blood, and what glitter like diamonds turn out to be tears (8:4). Do our special relationships bring us to tears at times? Oh yes! And do they ever cause us to bleed, at least in our hearts if not literally? Yes, they do. We are seduced by the glamor of the frame, and left bleeding and crying by the bitter reality of the clash of egos. Leona Lewis rose to stardom in 2007 singing about “Bleeding Love,” which tells the story of a woman who has been so “hurt by love” (What an absurd idea, that real love could hurt!) that she shuts down, but so misses the rush of “love” (the frame) that she has opened herself to another man, a man whom her friends all warn her will hurt her again, but she ignores their warnings and keeps “bleeding love.”

Paragraph 9

9. ¹**Look at the picture.** ²Do **not** let the frame distract you. ³This gift is given you for your damnation, and if you **take** it you **will** believe that you ~~are~~ [are] damned. ⁴**You cannot have the frame without the picture.** ⁵What you **value** is the **frame**, for **there** you see no conflict. ⁶Yet the frame is only the wrapping for the **gift** of conflict. ⁷**The frame is not the gift.** ⁸Be not deceived by the most superficial **aspects** of this thought system, for these aspects enclose the whole, complete ~~in every~~ [with every] aspect. ⁹Death lies in this glittering gift. ¹⁰Let not your gaze dwell on the hypnotic gleaming of the frame. ¹¹**Look at the picture**, and realize that **death** is offered you.

• Study Question •

9. *Paragraph 9 stresses that the real gift of the special love relationship is the picture, not the frame, and that we must therefore look at the picture, not the frame. What would this mean in our everyday life?*
- A. *It would mean looking at our relationships with enemies, rather than our relationships with friends.*
 - B. *It would mean looking at the ways that others have attacked us in the past, rather than looking at the love they gave us.*
 - C. *It would mean looking at the real gift of the special relationship, the thought system of death, rather than looking at the relationship's supposed pay-offs.*
 - D. *It would mean looking at the inner reality of the other person, rather than at their body.*

Jesus appeals to us to, “*Look at the picture. Do not let the frame distract you*” (9:1–2). Look at the awful insanity of the ego’s thought system that underlies special relationships, and do not be distracted by the dreams of sacrifice or the gilded threads of self-destruction. Stop “bleeding love” in response to abuse.

The ego is offering you what looks like a gift, but it “is given you for your damnation.” The ego wants you dead, wants you in hell, and if you take the “gift” “you will believe that you are damned” (9:3). If you allow yourself to be drawn to a special relationship to complete yourself, to make you happy, to meet your needs, to let you feel good about yourself...whatever the attraction in it is that appeals to you in particular...if you succumb to the temptation, you will suffer the consequences. “*You cannot have the frame without the picture*” (9:4).

Imagine being offered a gift, a framed picture with an utterly gorgeous frame. It looks so great! But “the frame is not the gift” (9:7)! You resolve to look more closely, past “the most superficial *aspects*” of the frame, to see what it contains. As you look at the picture it contains you realize that it is a picture of you—dead (9:9)! That is what the ego’s “gift” really is!

“Let not your gaze dwell on the hypnotic gleaming of the frame. *Look at the picture, and realize that death is offered you*” (9:10–11).

That may seem like a terrible place to end this commentary. It isn’t the end of the section, however. I encourage you to read the rest of Section IV, which goes on to discuss a second picture and frame, which portrays the holy instant. It more than offsets the negative tone of this first half. We will study and comment on that part in the next commentary.

Answer Key

1. F
2. To make happy.
3. B
4. B
5. C
6. B,C,D
7. A
8. B
9. C