



Pilgrimage:

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PENITENCE & SELF-PITY

Husband A gets home after working late, hoping to have a little time to play with the kids before bedtime. He finds that his wife has not fed them yet, so he has to rush around with her to get that done. Then it is time for their bath and bed. He does not get time to play with them. After they are in bed, he complains to his wife about his disappointment. Wife does not seem to respond with any remorse. Husband gets angry. Argument ensues. In the course of this, husband finds out that she was running late because a client of his kept her on the phone for almost an hour as she was trying to prepare supper. Now he begins to see that it was not entirely her fault. Indeed, since it was his client, some of the responsibility is his, and she might be justly resentful of him. He begins to suspect that it was really his selfishness which provoked the argument, and not his wife's incompetence.

When he recognizes that the argument was needless, and that he started it, he becomes depressed and mopey. "How could I be so stupid?" he says to her. "How could you marry such an unreasonable man? How could you possibly love someone like me?" While he says (over and over) that he is sorry for what he has done, he cannot let the matter rest. He goes around, perhaps for several days, feeling unlovable, a failure as a husband. This, of course, makes him difficult to live with, especially to his wife. No one likes to live with a grump-toad.

Yet all the while, husband A is feeling penitent. He recognizes his sin as sin, and, in his way, he is attempting to take responsibility for it. In fact, he overemphasizes his responsibility for it. He expects to do not just better, but to be perfect. His depression is the result of this expectation. He simply should not do what he has done. He should know better. He should be able to resist such temptations to selfishness. He ought to be nice to his wife, understanding, forbearing, giving her the benefit of the doubt. This is his expectation of himself.

When he fails, he fails to satisfy his own standards for himself: he fails himself. This means that until he forgives himself, he will be consumed with self-judgment, self-hatred. He is unacceptable to himself, because he does this to his wife. In short, he beats himself emotionally because he is not perfect. He is unable to accept the truth of his sinfulness. He thinks he should at least be able to be 'nice to his wife. His remorse ends up making things more difficult for her -- so he gets more depressed still. His mopiness feeds on itself.

In this mood, he is also liable to use the "preemptive grouch." He assumes that his wife is angry with him, since he is still angry with himself. He wishes she would instead forgive him. Since she has not (as he assumes) he will be defensive, which comes out in his being grouchy towards her. His grouch appears to her unprovoked, but not to him. To him, it is justified by her (purported and unjustified) lack of forgiveness.

Similarly, he may well get defensive should his wife try to talk about the issue at all. He assumes that since he expects perfection, her query (which may be an honest attempt to clear things out, forgive, and get on with a more pleasant relationship) manifests the same expectation. Since he cannot produce perfection, he gets defensive about his failing. His anger at himself is directed toward her.

In all this, Husband A feels wretched. Since the wretchedness is the result of his sin, he assumes he is being a good Christian: Christians are supposed to feel sorry for their sins. Not only is he feeling sorry, he is allowing that sorrow to rule his life. That it doesn't feel very nice is only to be expected: sin is unpleasant.

Here we leave Husband A for the moment, and turn to Husband B. He also is provoked when he cannot have the play time with his kids. But when he realizes that he is in the wrong, rather than becoming angry with himself (and taking it out on his wife), he takes a deep breath, and admits his fault -- first to himself, and then out loud to his wife. He humbles himself in this, for in all likelihood his wife has contributed something to the spat -- by her defensiveness (since she knows that she **ought** to have dinner on the table on time). But seeing his fault, he is willing to own up to it.

Having apologized, he must still show that he is really sorry. This means making it up to his wife however he can. This usually means listening to her vent her resentment at his sin. It may take her a while to express her anger and hurt, and this may seem to him like rubbing salt into his wounds, after he has already confessed his fault. Yet it is only to be expected; no one is perfect. Penitence requires of him that he listen patiently, and accept her judgment. Only thus can he show that he really is sorry, and not shamming.

If there is something concrete he can do to make things better, he is ready to do it. He is also looking for ways to be nice to her, and so

show his repentance. His feelings may or may not support this action: he may be tired of the whole thing and want to go off by himself. But if he is serious about making it up, he must show it.

For her part, his wife cannot long resist such penitence. While she may find it necessary to make clear how his actions have hurt her, and how destructive they have been, and how quick to take offence he is, she will in the end forgive him and accept his apology. Their relationship is not only reestablished, but strengthened by the practice of forgiveness, a divine action.

[At this point, it may be well to note that both husbands are fictitious -- but Husband B is a bit more fictitious than Husband A! Also, just as husbands are as provoking as wives (some would say more so), wives can be just as provoked as husbands. That I have used husbands for the example does not mean that wives are off the hook -- or the unmarried.]

The two husbands show us the difference between true penitence and self-pity. We are all too apt to mistake the latter for the former. Being sorry for our sins is not being sorry for ourselves, but being sorry that our sins are offensive to our beloved Saviour (and, in this case, to our beloved wife).

When confronted with our responsibility for sin, especially sins against someone we love and would not dream of hurting intentionally, we are apt to feel sorry for ourselves. We think how stupid, weak, fallible, wretched we are, how unlovable. This implies that we think we are responsible for making ourselves perfect and lovable. In short, it is our pride which speaks here. The supposition that we **can** make ourselves perfect or lovable is ridiculous, and we would never assert it consciously. Yet that is the basis for the self-pity.

The great danger of self-pity is that it misplaces the foundation of our religion. So long as we pretend that we ought to make ourselves perfect (we may cling to the pretense even if we consistently fail) we reject the grace which God offers us to bring us to heaven. Even if we admit that we cannot make ourselves perfect, if we pity ourselves for our failures, we claim that we should be making ourselves perfect rather than God. We put ourselves in God's place; we pretend to be divine. We may well fail to recognize this since we are making ourselves wretched, but it is true nevertheless. Self-pity can set us apart from God just as surely as it sets us apart from those we most desire to love.

Self-pity refuses forgiveness, preferring the illusion of the power to be perfect to the reality of needing forgiveness. We would rather feel sorry for ourselves -- for that at least gives us some control over our lives -- than to admit that we need something we cannot produce for ourselves. Forgiveness can come only from the one we have offended; nothing we can do can coerce or manipulate it. It is ours only as a gift. When engulfed in self-pity, we claim we are unworthy of forgive-

ness -- and thus refuse it, whether from God or from the one we have offended. We forget that Christ died to save **sinner**s. (I Timothy 1:15) We prevent any real reconciliation with the other, since that can come only by forgiveness.

The self-centeredness (and thus the pride) shows in the way we continue to treat the other. We are more concerned with being miserable ourselves than with making up the hurt the other has suffered. If we think of that at all it is only to make ourselves feel worse: to amplify the crime and thus our unworthiness. The more we moan and groan, the more we assert our concerns against the one we have offended. We demand that we are the center of things: it is **our** sin that matters, even more than their hurt or forgiveness. Yet our sorrow is not for the other person but for ourselves.

True penitence, on the other hand, is not self-centered. Its first concern is for the one who has been hurt. What can I do to make it up? How does she feel after what I have done? How can I help her to feel better? Instead of moaning over the failing, true penitence puts itself in the place of the offended. Identifying with the offended we can be sorry for the sin rather than for ourselves. Sorrow leads to empathy with the victim of the sin.

Practically, this is one of two things we can do against self-pity: to try to think not of how miserable we are, but of what we can do for the other person. This is a way to become less preoccupied with self, to let go of that passion. To go and say something nice is a start. Perhaps we could do the dishes, or clean the bathroom, or help out in some way that we usually do not. Flowers are the husband's old standby. But the gift is offered not as a bribe, but as a token of repentance, of sorrow for sin.

The other weapon against self-pity is to remember the Cross. Christ died in the love which He has for us; He does not indulge in self-pity. This is the objective side of our religion. His sacrifice makes no sense if we can make ourselves holy without Him. Rather, it shows that He does not expect us to be righteous but penitent. He wants us to love Him, and thereby to accept His gift. We should not expect more of ourselves than He does. We should aspire to think of ourselves exactly as he does: as His adopted and often erring, but nevertheless beloved, children.

Self-pity is dangerous not only because it is a vice pretending to be a virtue. It is dangerous to a Christian because it leads us to refuse the love of God, styling ourselves as unworthy of it. Not only do we underestimate the love of God for sinners; we actually refuse to accept it. So we should not indulge in self-pity, but beg God's grace to break its power and give us instead true penitence.