For Personal Reflection

?

1. How do I experience sorrow?
2. What kinds of situations, circumstances or experiences result in my feeling sorrow?
3. Am I a compassionate person? Am I moved by the situations or plights of others? How do I express that compassion?
4. Am I truly sorry for my sins and imperfections? Does my sorrow over my sins and faults motivate me to try to do better with God's help?
5. Do I experience the dark side of sorrow? Do I find myself getting down or negative?
6. What kinds of things tempt me to experience unhealthy sorrow?
7. What can I do to resist the negative effects of sorrow?

Further Reading

Introduction to the Devout Life. St. Francis de Sales. Part IV, Chapter 12.

Treatise on the Love of God. St. Francis de Sales. Book V, Chapter 4; Book XI, Chapter 21; Book I, Chapter 5; Book II, Chapter 20.

Spiritual Conferences. St. Francis de Sales. Chapter II, p. 19; Chapter VIII, p. 136; Chapter VI, p. 76.

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Compassion And Contrition

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Blessed are the Sorrowful

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins this discourse with the well-known Beatitudes, one of which is: "Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation."

Blessed—happy—are the sorrowful? Isn't this a contradiction in terms?

Not if we understand the proper meaning of sorrow as Francis de Sales did. "Sorrow is an affection that makes us share in the suffering and sorrow of the ones we love. Sorrow makes others' experiences of good and evil our own." (Treatise on the Love of God: Book V, Chapter 4)

"Sorrow is an affection that makes us share in the suffering of others as well as owning our own suffering ."

"Sorrow" of this kind is the basis for empathy, sympathy and compassion. It is the result of being affected and impacted by the plights of others. It is a manifestation of our willingness to be moved by the struggles, setbacks and calamities of those whom we encounter. De Sales wrote: Piety is a virtuous sorrow which comes into our hearts in order to make us desire to deliver our neighbor from the evil that he or she endures." (Treatise, Book I, Chapter 5)

Jesus' challenge is obvious: to the extent that we are moved by the plight of others and try to be a source of consolation and support we, too, are more likely to find consolation when we, ourselves, experience sorrow and setback in our own lives.

This "sorrow" of which Jesus speaks is also an expression of contrition for our own sinfulness. Francis de Sales remarked: "Perfect penitence has two effects: sorrow that separates us from sin, and love, which reconciles and reunites us with God." (Treatise, Book II, Chapter 20)

"Perfect penitence has two effects. First, it produces a sorrow that separates us from sin. Second, it opens us to a love that reconciles us and reunites us with God ."

There is an interesting "flip side" to this sorrow. Francis observed: "The throne of God's mercy is our sorrow; therefore, the greater our sorrow the greater should be our confidence..."(Conferences II: page 19) As profound as our sorrow for our own sin may be, this sorrow should indeed be ultimately overshadowed by our confidence in God's long-suffering and abundant patience with us and forgiveness of us. Put another way, this sorrow, at its best, should be an expression of profound humility: "Humility allows us to see the real good that God has planted in us." (Conferences VI: p. 76) Sorrow for sin should lead us to reaffirm our God–given dignity and to redouble our efforts in giving witness to our God-given goodness by our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions.

However, we need to be cautious. Like many things in life, our sorrow needs to be balanced. "Healthy" sorrow can quickly become something unhealthy and debilitating. Francis de Sales offered this advice in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "Sorrow can be either good or evil according to the ways in which it affects us. True enough, it can produce more bad effects than good ones. It has two good effects: compassion and repentance; whereas it has six evil ones: anxiety, sloth, wrath, jealousy, envy and impatience." (Part IV, Chapter 12)

"Healthy sadness in an expression of our sorrow for sin or evil."

We know that we have a tendency to avoid sorrow at any—and all—costs. Francis de Sales reminds us that sorrow is helpful—even necessary— if we are to be truly happy in this life. Healthy sorrow allows us to display compassion for sufferings of others and to experience repentance for our sins and imperfections. Still, we need to experience—to practice—sorrow in ways that does not inhibit or retard our growth as sons and daughters of the living God.

Remember, it's "blessed are the sorrowful"...*not* the miserable.