Self-Pity

By Scott Schuleit

Please, dear reader, consider taking a brief test, a simple cursory examination into one facet of our culture by listening to the loud overspill from the various casual conversations people have, say in a restaurant, in a store, or wherever, listening closely for complaints and gripes, tales of woe and other manifestations signaling the sin of self-pity. You may become aware of this particular sin by simply listening to your conversations with friends and family, or by paying attention to that running interior commentary we all have. Participating in a test of this sort could prove to be alarming.

Our culture, in general, is saturated within the syrup of self-pity. America is probably the most affluent nation on the planet, perhaps the wealthiest in history, and what is our response to this circumstance, this gracious act of God’s providence? Is it gratitude? No, rather it’s a cry for more and then more on top of that and we want it—no, expect it—immediately. The credit system, to some degree, feeds off of this insane mentality. Not only are we among the richest, but we could also be regarded as among the most discontented, the most thankless, whiny people on the planet. Self-pity, this glorification of ingratitude, has become so deeply ingrained within the American mindset that it’s become a blind spot. We’re so close to the problem of self-pity and used to engaging in expressions of it that not only is it difficult to see, but when it is seen, we downplay it, and even at times regard it as something funny rather than being seen as something sinful.

With regards to the non-Christian, to some extent, their discontentment (from out of which, self-pity emerges as a glaring symptom) is, in a sense, though still a sin, understandable, because it reveals their recognition that something is missing in their life. If they were content, it would be expressive of a person who is very self-righteous indeed and more difficult to reach than the individual who knows something is wrong about their state. Before presenting Christ as Savior—as the Great Physician, the patient must be made aware of the terminal diagnosis of their sinful condition. Having said that, I think it would be true to say that not only do we see, in general, non-Christians engrossed within self-pity, but it would seem sharply apparent that many Christians have a similar problem.

Self-pity is, perhaps, the most common kind of sin within the diverse canon of sins we commit. Like all other sins, this sin does not exist in isolation from others, but is connected to, in greater and lesser ways, depending on the particular sin, to many, if not every other sin emerging from out of the dark matrix of the human heart. With regard to self-pity, (or any other sin) pride is at the root. One might think that the sad soul, assaulted by various afflictions, is actually, in some inexplicable way, simply being
sorrowful, or merely recounting various difficulties, or perhaps even being, in some way, humble. These are illusions regarding those engulfed within self-pity for it is, in part, like pride, an attempt to center attention towards oneself. You could say that I’m somewhat of an expert on this subject by way of extensive involvement, and the writing of this essay, could be construed as among my deliberate attempts to move beyond it. In the past, I’ve made some incredibly compelling appeals to others and God regarding the various difficulties of my situation. I’ve even managed, at times, to convince myself of the pitiable plight I was in. Poor Scott. Here we have a man saved from the wrath of God, from the just sentence of eternal perdition, chosen by the sole grace of God to become an heir of salvation before the pillars of the world were put into place, adopted into God’s family and uniquely gifted in ways to serve our Lord, complaining about circumstances, of which, he knows very well have not only been ordained by God, but have been done so, in part, for his benefit as well as the benefit of the church for the ultimate, overarching purpose of bringing glory to God. Thinking about one’s situation in this manner, helps to put things into perspective, and also provides, in part, a base—the magnifying glass of a context, heightening the hideousness and irrationality behind the sin of self-pity, or any other sin for that matter.

An even greater and more convicting context from which to view our sin, involves one coming to a greater awareness regarding the holiness of God, the majestic holiness inherent within the character of the One we are sinning against, the apprehension of which, will naturally engender a greater understanding regarding the intensely vile nature of our sin.

Taking a deeper look at self-pity, what exactly is it? How are we to define it? It could, at least, partly, be defined as this: the excessive, self-indulgent expression from an individual regarding what is, or considered to be, sorrowful circumstances. Now let’s try to formulate a definition from a more Christian perspective: the excessive, pernicious, and profoundly arrogant attempt to redirect, through the use of a legitimate or perceived sorrow, the attention of others (including oneself) either away from the Creator or away from some aspect of creation, and onto oneself to the worship and glory of oneself. Perhaps that sounds extreme. I don’t think it is. To a greater or lesser degree, I believe this could be construed, whether the individual is aware of it or not, as the ultimate motivation behind the sin of self-pity as well as any other sin. On the surface all sorts of things are going on, but this is the putrid core, the essential desire of one engulfed within the sinful, narcissistic posture of self-pity.

Other sins, in association with self-pity, can (as previously mentioned) emerge as well, including jealousy, envy, and wrath. For example, let’s say a man, who is dominated by self-pity, becomes ferociously jealous of another man due primarily to his perception that this man has stolen his girlfriend. Not only does he become jealous of this rascal who has his girl, but he also becomes extremely angry, (this often accompanies jealousy) and begins plotting his revenge. You’ll notice that several sins are involved here, including his feeling sorry for himself (self-pity) for he’s without his girl, along with jealousy (and perhaps envy) towards the man who is now the recipient of his ex-girlfriends affections, which leads to the unrighteous kind of anger, motivating him to
avenge himself on this fellow for either a real or imagined insult, and of course, the whole situation is underscored by pride, for he feels that he deserves better, that he’s in the right to take the situation into his own hands, rather than realizing that he really doesn’t have any rights whatsoever and that he is, despite the fact that he’s an unregenerate individual, currently receiving many gifts, packaged in various forms, through common grace from the Lord.

Like any sin, self-pity is extremely addictive. It feels all nice and cozy and warm to extensively dwell on one’s various hurts and pains, thinking to oneself about how rudely she treated me—no, actually, how rudely everyone treats me, even God doesn’t care about me and so on and so on thinks the one immersed in self-pity. This short example of the possible inner-dialogue of an individual trapped in self-pity is, perhaps, an extreme case, but not as uncommon as one might think. The more one indulges in self-pity, the more warped ones sense of reality becomes. Self-pity, like any other sin, fosters illusions regarding reality. The fog thickens the deeper one delves—in a sinful manner—into oneself. An individual ensconced within self-pity sees almost everything, if not everything, only in so far as it affects them, greatly distorting objectivity in the process.

Besides being horribly subjective in their outlook, people with this problem are also, often, excessively emotional. They work to achieve comfort and stability by folding into themselves rather than (assuming they are Christians) abiding in Christ, and therefore have no sturdy ground to set foot upon for every aspect of creation is limited and mutable and circumstances can be most unpredictable. This posture fills them with anxiety, propelling them to strive desperately and often obsessively, to control their lives, of which, is an impossible task. Sin always tries, to some degree, to do this. It is one among the many dark strands woven within the fabric of every single sin.

In further exploration of this, I’ve also noticed that some people with a turbulent inner life will attempt to achieve stability through the manufacture and maintenance of a precisely controlled exterior life. The opposite situation is often seen as well, where someone within a situation involving great external turbulence, will strive to fashion and maintain an extremely structured interior life. Some strive for both a precisely regimented interior and exterior life. These three methods that people often utilize to maintain stability are not inherently evil, but emerge as being a mixture that is either predominantly good or predominantly evil, depending upon the motivations.

Also, the soul imprisoned within self-pity, is usually hypersensitive, perceiving insults where none were rendered, assuming the worst intentions from everybody around them, expecting others to treat them precisely, exactly the way they expect to be treated. The ice is fragile around these people, crackling underfoot.

The more one gives in to the sin of self-pity, as with any other sin, the more deeply embedded the problem will become, and in time, more difficult to see as something abnormal, therefore, let us realistically and rigorously analyze the motivations of our hearts to see if we have allowed ourselves to become infested with this particular sin, or
any other sin, that it might be uncovered and properly dealt with before it renders even more damage upon us, and by way of implication, upon those within our sphere of influence.

This article is provided as a ministry of Third Millennium Ministries. If you have a question about this article, please email our Theological Editor. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our RPM Forum.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, subscriptions are free. To subscribe to RPM, please select this link.