

# Are You A Victim Of Self-Pity?

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Most of the unhappy people in the world, and all the sinners, are victims, not of injustice and persecution from others, but of their own self-pity. Are you among them?

## ARE YOU A VICTIM OF SELF-PITY?

Perhaps nobody, on reading the above title, will feel inclined to answer the question with a yes. It is our experience, in dealing with many thousands of troubled souls, that people resent the accusation that they are victims of self-pity almost as much as being called liars or hypocrites. At least there is usually a quick reaction of self-defense against the charge.

Whoever you are, or whatever be your first reaction to the above title, don't toss this pamphlet aside as if it could not possibly offer anything that you need. Self-pity is like a hidden cancer; it may have crept up on you without your being aware of it. You can become aware of it, and do something about it, only if you look boldly and humbly at the many ways in which it can manifest itself in human character.

In order to help you examine yourself carefully for signs of self-pity, we propose to do four things:

- 1) to explain what self-pity is not;
- 2) to define in general what it is;
- 3) to show how self-pity can wreck all the important relationships in a person's life;
- 4) to offer remedies for self-pity.

### 1. What Self-Pity Is Not.

In speaking of self-pity as a bad trait of character, one must not give the impression that there is anything wrong with pity itself. Pity is a great virtue, but it is that virtue by which one has compassion on the sorrows and sufferings of others. Rightly acquired and cultivated, the virtue of pity leads to the works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving homes to orphans, et cetera. From this it is clear that self-pity is a contradiction; it turns something that by its nature is meant to concern itself with the sufferings of others inward upon oneself alone.

It is not self-pity to possess a realistic knowledge of the fact that this world is, as Catholics call it in the 'Hail, Holy Queen,' a 'vale of tears', an exile, a place of trial, where there are bound to be sufferings, some coming mysteriously from the hand of God, and some having to be chosen freely as the price of loyalty to God's laws. Anybody can say like Job, without succumbing to self-pity, that 'man, born of woman, is filled with many miseries,' (Job 14:1) so long as he can also say like Job, 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth and I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see my God.' (Job 19:25) Self-pity sees only the miseries of self, nothing of the hope that takes the sting from them.

Nor is it self-pity to grieve spontaneously and deeply at times when one suffers some great loss or especially difficult trial. One who has lost all power of inclination to weep in the face of tragedy,

involving oneself or others, is no longer a complete human being. A good son or daughter who weeps at the death of a beloved mother or father is not to be accused of self-pity. However, there are individuals who do not permit time and submission to God's will to heal their griefs, but instead permit them to become a habit of self-pity.

Finally, it should be clear that this study deals with the kind of self-pity that is curable, not with that which is associated with psychotic states or diseased conditions of the mind called melancholia. The horrible depressions, worries, fears and self-accusations that the mentally distressed suffer need special professional treatment. However, it can also be said that failure to deal sternly with self-pity in oneself in its early stages often contributes to later mental breakdowns.

## 2. What Self-Pity Is.

Self-pity is a complex thing, not easy to define in a few simple words. A picture of it, as it is seen in the lives of many people, can best be given through a description of its three principal features. After presenting each feature, we shall add a number of questions through which an individual can learn for himself whether he is inclined toward self-pity, or already its victim.

A. Self-pity is marked by the habit of concentrating one's inner thoughts and attention on one's own troubles, or on one particular cause for sorrow.

This means that the general direction of a person's innermost thoughts is toward the circumstances in his life that make for sadness. Some people see only gloom in everything within them and around them. Others succumb to self-pity because of one particular happening in their lives, and they refuse to think of scarcely anything but that. Thus, a person who has lost a beloved relative or friend by death can make the memory of that loss and the sorrow connected with it the focal point of all his thinking, and refuse to snap out of the sadness such thinking always causes. Thus a person whose marriage has failed can refuse to permit anything but the thought of his (or her) misery and loneliness to dominate his mind, until this leads, as will be shown below, to terrible sins in an effort to escape sadness.

Ask yourself these questions, and answer them sincerely, if you want to know whether this first feature of self-pity is to be found in you:

When I am alone, do I find myself thinking, most of the time, of my miseries, my ill-health, my unhappiness in marriage, my lack of success in business, my inability to have what most prosperous people have?

Do I permit myself to think that I have been neglected and forgotten by God, or cruelly and unjustly treated by Him?

Do I sum up my whole life by saying it has been nothing but a burden, and sometimes by saying, 'I wish I had never been born?'

Am I accustomed to look only at the hardships of my state in life, and to consider them too heavy to be borne? As a wife and mother, am I among those who consider bearing children and rearing children just an endless and unrelieved bore? As a husband and father, have I got into the habit of considering the task of supporting and raising a family so grinding that I'm constantly wishing I were a free man again?

Am I constantly comparing my lot in life with that of others, and then concluding that I'm worse off than practically everybody else?

B. Self-pity is marked by habitual failure and even refusal to think of, a) the things for which one should be grateful, b) the compensations and rewards that God has promised to those who suffer with resignation and cheerfulness.

Since most of the time of the victim of self-pity is spent in thinking of his aches and pains, his miseries and his sorrows, he naturally cannot bring himself to think of the reasons he has for gratitude and joy. Self-pity is really a powerful weapon of the devil; he encourages it wherever he can because he knows that its victims will gradually lose all sense of gratitude to God, of penance for their sins, of hope for a reward in heaven, of appreciation for the good things God has given them on earth together with the pain He has allowed them to suffer.

It is remarkable to notice what trivial things can sometimes blind the victims of self-pity to all the motives they have for gratitude and even joy. All human sufferings are trivial, of course, in relation to the joys of heaven. But sometimes you will find a fabulously rich man wallowing in self-pity because he cannot crash certain circles of society, or because somebody has been given an important office that he wanted. And sometimes people in middle-class circumstances, with much to be thankful for, make themselves wretched because they cannot step up to a higher social and economic level that some of their relatives have attained. They have so narrowed down their outlook that they can see nothing but some small thing that they want and do not have.

Ask yourself these questions about this second feature of self-pity:

Have I practically given up all thought of a heaven, where there will be no sorrows, and limited my outlook to the possible joys I can attain in this world, especially to those I do not possess?

Do I ever thank God for my life as a free, immortal human being, endowed with many wonderful faculties and powers, and a glorious destiny in heaven?

If someone reminds me of the things I should be grateful for, do I brush him off with such words as, 'All that is worthless, because I suffer so much from what I don't have?'

Do I ever think of relating my sufferings to my sins, and thank God for having forgiven me, and for permitting me to make some atonement for my sins?

Do I never meditate on the passion and death of Christ with the realization that, for my sins, He suffered a thousand times as much as He asks me to suffer?

Do I ever pray for the virtue of gratitude, and for the grace to overcome my tendency to self-pity?

C. Self-pity is marked by bitter resentment against others, who are held responsible for the sufferings one must endure.

There is no self-pity without some resentment against God. Those who become its victims have lost all sight of the goodness, the mercy, the providence of God, and of His promises of a reward for every cross. Something of the attitude of the unrepentant thief who died on a cross beside our Lord is theirs; they may not express it in the thief's words, but their self-pity is a way of saying like the thief, 'Take me down from my cross, and then I will believe in you.'

This resentment, against God usually overflows into bitterness against one's fellow man. The victim of self-pity has a keen sense of justice, but a very narrow sense of justice, namely, as it should be practiced toward himself by others. More than that, you would think, to hear him talk, that he was the only one who was ever treated so unfairly and unjustly in the history of the world. 'Why,' he

says, ‘should I have to suffer all these things? What did I do to deserve such ill-treatment?’ (The answer you are expected to assume is ‘nothing.’) ‘Why can’t I get a little justice in this world?’

In its extreme form, this becomes the persecution complex called paranoia, a mental disease that makes those afflicted with it imagine all sorts of plots and conspiracies against their happiness.

The victim of self-pity is not necessarily mentally diseased; he does suffer, like everybody else in the world, slights, un-kindnesses, mistreatment, injustices, perhaps, from others. But he has never grown up enough to see in these things a part of the pattern of every human life, an opportunity for charity and forgiveness, an occasion for doing penance for his own sins, a source of merit and increased happiness in heaven. Nothing but his own concept of perfect justice will rescue him from self-pity, and that he will never receive.

As a result, the victim of self-pity makes a very unpleasant companion. His conversation, like his thoughts, centers around how much he is abused, how unjustly he is treated, how great is his ‘suffering’. No one remains his friend who does not constantly sympathize with him and feed his self-pity. That is why he has few friends.

Ask yourself these questions about this feature of self-pity:

Is the word ‘injustice,’ meaning the injustice of others toward me, frequently on my lips?

Do I resent the fact that, while God seems to favor others with wealth, with popularity, with positions of prominence and power, He left me, who deserve more than these others, poor, forgotten, unrecognized?

Do I resent the fact that God, society and those around me seem to have conspired to make the course of my life an unhappy one?

Do I resentfully blame God and other human beings because I’m single and cannot find a good mate for marriage?

Do I resentfully blame God and my husband or wife because I’m married, and have found marriage to be no bed of roses?

Do I constantly complain and grumble about my sufferings, nag at those around me for not treating me more justly, repeatedly run down and criticize those whom I think to be more favored than I am?

Do I pout and bear grudges and refuse to speak to my family or friends for days, because I feel that they should suffer for their injustices to me?

Answer these questions boldly, and only then say whether you are inclined to self-pity or not.

### 3. How Self-Pity Wrecks One’s Life.

There is no important relationship in human life that is not in some way upset and ruined through self-pity. Consider how it affects the two most important relationships, namely, relationship to God, and relationship to one’s family.

1) Self-pity ruins one’s relationship to God. The reason is simple; it is because self-pity inevitably leads to sin, and sin makes one who was destined to be a friend of God His enemy.

Make no mistake about it: there is a great degree of self-pity behind every mortal sin that is ever committed by a human being. All three features of self-pity described above are present there: a) a concentration of the mind on the terrible suffering that will be involved in keeping a serious law of

God; b) failure to think of all the good things God has given and promised, that can be enjoyed without sin; c) resentment against God and His Church for having made a certain law, and sometimes against God's priests for preaching God's law.

The sinner may not say so in words ; indeed, he may say the very opposite in words, but the fact is that he so resents a law of God that he is willing to crucify Jesus Christ the Son of God by breaking that law.

Here are examples of how self-pity leads to sin.

The man and woman who have entered an invalid marriage, one that is the beginning of a life of habitual sin, first filled their hearts with self-pity before they took their fatal step. 'We have a right,' they said, 'to this happiness. God, with all His power and authority, has no right to deny us this. If we don't live with each other as if married, life will be too lonely, miserable, intolerable.' And the longer they live in their bad marriage, the more they pity themselves at the thought of giving up their sins. They pity themselves, not Jesus Christ, hanging, bleeding, suffering, dying on a cross for just such sin, and dying in vain for them when they are not given up by the sinner.

So it is with every serious sin – contraception, abortion, fornication, hatred, stealing, et cetera. First, there is the build-up of self-pity, which blinds the mind to the rights and laws of the Creator, to the promised joys of heaven, to the pleading love of Jesus Christ on the cross; then follows the sin or the habit of sin. Maybe it's because sinners pity themselves so much on earth that it is said they will, if hardened in sin till death, curse themselves forever in hell.

2). Self-pity ruins one's relationship to one's family. In every unhappy home, there will be at least one person who is a victim of self-pity. It may be the wife, who, when she learns by experience the full meaning of what she contracted for when she got married, decides that it is too much, it is unjust, and in self-pity refuses to accept God's will for a good wife. It may be the husband, who, when the emotional love of courtship and early marriage has cooled off, starts pitying himself to the extent that he seeks escape from his duties as a husband and father.

Sometimes, too, one partner to a marriage falls into self-pity because the other partner turned out to be less than perfect, or guilty of great neglect of duty and even of many sins. Such a one forgets the words uttered in the marriage ceremony, 'I take you, for better, for worse.' These words were meant to ward off self-pity. They were like saying: 'If things turn out worse than I expected in this marriage, indeed, if they turn out as bad as they can possibly be, I'll accept it all for the love of God, and I'll still save my soul, and try to save my partner's soul.'

However, homes continue to be wrecked:

Because a husband pities himself for having to bother with children and to spend evenings with his wife, and takes to the tavern and late hours with the 'boys', and coming home half drunk.

Because a wife pities herself for not being married to a richer or more successful man and makes things miserable for her husband because he does not rise to the heights of success.

Because both husband and wife pity themselves for the awful burden they must carry in bearing and rearing children, or for the terrible sacrifice involved in practicing continence at various times when this is the only way of avoiding sin. It is not the children nor the continence that wrecks marriages; it is the self-pity into which the married let themselves fall in conjunction with these things.

4. Remedies for Self-Pity.

We offer these remedies for self-pity, without which this spiritual disease can never be cured.

The first is humble and cheerful submission to God's will. This means being able to say to oneself: 'God is my Maker. He made me for Himself, which means for perfect happiness. He has a right to command me, and to do with me what He will. He could make my life a thousand times more difficult than it is, in view of the fact that He has heaven waiting for me at the end. I want His will, not my own will, no matter how much it may hurt or how much it may cost me at times. I shall never complain of anything that is God's will for me.'

The second is confident dependence on God's helping grace. This means being able to say: 'Jesus Christ warned me that I would have to bear crosses in following Him, but He also promised me divine and miraculous help to carry them cheerfully if only I would pray for it. In every temptation to pity myself because of the crosses that come my way, I'll turn more eagerly to prayer, to the Mass, to the sacraments, through which I know I'll receive the grace to do God's will and carry the crosses that He sends.'

The third is personal devotion to the passion and death of Jesus Christ and His Immaculate Mother as the Mother of Sorrows. All the sufferings of ordinary human beings, even those of martyrs who are tortured for their love of God, are small in comparison with those of Christ and His Mother. This is because no ordinary mortal man has the capacity for suffering that Christ had, nor even that which was given to His Mother.

The one thing to be remembered in order to escape self-pity is that the sufferings of Christ and His sinless Mother were willingly accepted for every human being in the world. How little are one's own in comparison! How can anyone wish to add to those sufferings by committing the least sin out of self-pity?

(Thanks to Saint Louis Province, Redemptorist Fathers.)

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