

Meekness toward Ourselves

by Francis de Sales

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9. Meekness toward Ourselves

One of the best exercises in meekness we can perform is when the subject is in ourselves. We must not fret over our own imperfections. Although reason requires that we must be displeased and sorry whenever we commit a fault we must refrain from bitter, gloomy, spiteful, and emotional displeasure. Many people are greatly at fault in this way. When overcome by anger they become angry at being angry, disturbed at being disturbed and vexed at being vexed. By such means they keep their hearts drenched and steeped in passion. It may seem that the second fit of anger does away with the first but actually it serves to open the way for fresh anger on the first occasion that arises. Moreover, these fits of anger, vexation, and bitterness against ourselves tend to pride and they spring from no other source than self-love, which is disturbed and upset at seeing that it is imperfect.

We must be sorry for our faults, but in a calm, settled, firm way. When a judge is guided in his decisions by reason and proceeds calmly, he punishes criminals much more justly than when he acts in violence and passion. If he passes judgment hastily and passionately, he does not punish the crimes because of what they really are but because of what they seem to him. So also we correct ourselves much better by calm, steady

repentance than by that which is harsh, turbulent, and passionate. Violent repentance does not proceed according to the character of our faults but according to our inclinations. For example, a man much concerned with chastity will be very bitterly disturbed at the least fault he commits against that virtue, while he will only laugh at an act of gross detraction he has committed. On the other hand, a man who hates detraction torments himself because of some slight whisper against another while he takes no account of a gross sin against chastity. So also for other sins. All this springs from this source, that such men form their consciences not by reason but by passion.

Believe me, Philothea, a father's gentle, loving rebuke has far greater power to correct a child than rage and passion. So too when we have committed some fault, if we rebuke our heart by a calm, mild remonstrance, with more compassion for it than passion against it and encourage it to make amendment, then repentance conceived in this way will sink far deeper and penetrate more effectually than fretful, angry, stormy repentance.

For my own part, if I had made a firm resolution not to yield to the sin of vanity, for example, and yet had seriously fallen into it, I would not reprove my heart after this manner: "Aren't you wretched and abominable, you who have made so many resolutions and yet let yourself be carried away by vanity? You should die for shame. Never again lift up your eyes to heaven, blind, insolent traitor that you are, a rebel against your God!" I would correct it in a reasonable, compassionate way: "Alas, my poor heart, here we are, fallen into the pit we were so firmly resolved to avoid! Well, we must get up again and leave it forever. We must call on God's mercy and hope that it will help us to be steadier in the days to come. Let us start out again on

the way of humility. Let us be of good heart and from this day be more on guard. God will help us; we will do better.” On the basis of such correction I would build a firm, solid resolution never again to fall into that fault using the proper means of avoiding it under the advice of my director.

However, if anyone finds that his heart is not sufficiently moved by this mild manner of correction, he may use a sharp, severe reproach and rebuke so as to excite it to deeper sorrow. This must be on condition that after he has curbed and chided his heart in this rough way he closes all his grief and anger with sweet, consoling confidence in God in imitation of that illustrious penitent who saw his afflicted soul and raised it up in this way: “Why are you sad, O my soul, and why do you disquiet me? Hope in God, for I will give praise to him, the salvation of my countenance and my God.”

Lift up your heart again whenever it fails, but do so meekly by humbling yourself before God through knowledge of your own misery and do not be surprised if you fall. It is no wonder that infirmity should be infirm, weakness weak, or misery wretched. Nevertheless, detest with all your powers the offense God has received from you and with great courage and confidence in his mercy return to the path of virtue you had forsaken.

Confer C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 98; “Two Ways with the Self,” *God in the Dock*, p. 193; and *Letters to An American Lady*, 21 May 1955.