

(1.21) Contrition of the Heart

*Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline and abandon themselves to foolishness;*¹ hence they fail to grow in holiness. But if you practice spiritual contrition devotion comes naturally *because the Lord does not spurn a heart contrite and humbled.*²

Contrition reveals what is good whereas indulgence dulls our senses. How can anyone be completely satisfied in this life if he truly understands reality and the many dangers that confront his soul. Flippancy and carelessness in recognizing our faults make us insensitive to spiritual dangers that we dismiss with lightheartedness when we should be weeping. Recognizing *that the fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning one away from the snares of death,*³ is what brings real freedom and joy with a good conscience. Joyful is the person who can remain centered on contrition and understand its revelations. Happy is the person who disowns whatever may tarnish or encumber his conscience and makes every effort to cultivate good habits as they will overcome the bad ones.

If you leave others alone they will not interfere with your efforts; don't meddle with the affairs of others or concern yourself with the plans of your superiors unless your duties are involved. Keep track of your own imperfections and correct them before pointing to the flaws of friends. Do not grieve if you lack popularity but rather concern yourself that you do not live as well and carefully as a humble servant of God thereby giving virtuous example.

It is usually better not to have many worldly comforts but if we fail to have spiritual consolations it is usually our own doing for we fail to concentrate adequately on contrition of the heart, and are not fully detached of outward comforts.



Be aware that you are not so special as to deserve spiritual consolation and it is your imperfect life that brings on many sufferings. Have perfect contrition and the world becomes serious and even offensive in some ways. A good person often finds reasons for grief and tears, either personally or for a neighbor, since tribulations are so prevalent; the more contrite you are the more reasons reveal themselves for having greater sorrow. Contrition brings on sorrow due to our sins and vices which hinder our ability to spend more time contemplating things above.

If you were to spend more time realizing the inevitability of death rather than being absorbed in long life you would be more zealous in amending your wrongs. If you were to meditate on the pains of purgatory and hell you would more readily endure hardships and difficulties. There are those to whom the Lord will say: *Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*⁴ These considerations are often not taken to heart and so we remain slow to change, more

¹ Proverbs 1:7

² Psalm 51:19

³ Proverbs 14:27

⁴ Matthew 25:41

readily dwelling upon pleasantries that make us comfortable. Our lack of spiritual strength leads us to complain so quickly when we are under stress and hardship.

Pray with humility to the Lord of hosts that he grant you a spirit of contrition; be reminded of the Psalmist's prayer: *The LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD will receive my prayer.*⁵

This article is based on Book 1, Chapter 21 of Thomas of Kempis' writing, "Imitation of Christ." It is not a translation, and there are many of those, but a personal (layperson's) reflection on his writing; if any of it helps give credit to Thomas of Kempis; if any of it fails the responsibility is mine. (rfm)

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⁵ Psalm 6:9b-10