

ASK FATHER MIKE: DO WE NEED CONFESSION?

by:

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Dear Father Mike,

I want to go to confession, but I don't really feel bad for my sins. What do I do? Can I be forgiven?

That's a really common experience. After all, if we think about it, one of the main reasons (if not the only reason!) why we sin is because there is something pleasing about it. Even when Eve saw the fruit, it was "good, pleasing...and desirable to the eyes." It seems that the only reason we choose to do anything is because we are convinced that it will make us happy. And sometimes it does. Sometimes sin makes us happy.

With some sins, the happiness fades really quickly: the moment is past and we physically, psychologically or emotionally feel the hurt or emptiness. But other times it may take quite a while until the unhappiness really begins to set in. Sometimes, we may not ever get to the point of realizing (in that deep, sensed, way) what we've lost until after we've turned our life around and returned to Christ. I've spoken with many people who didn't realize how their sins were emptying their life of love, joy, and other good things until long after they were reconciled with God. I've known this in my own life as well.

So if you don't feel bad for your sins, I wouldn't let that keep you from being reconciled with God. There is an enormous difference between regret and repentance. Regret is simply rooted in emotion. I "feel" bad. This can be a good first step, but it cannot be the only step. And it is not even a necessary step. While there is something very healthy about "feeling bad" for "doing bad" (it shows that your soul is a bit more sensitive to the reality of sin), it alone is not a return to God. That's what repentance is.

In fact, this is what "repentance" means: it simply means "turning." Repentance is the choice to return to God. You do not need to regret what you've done (believe me, that will come with time), but you do need to make the decision that you will no longer continue on in this particular sin. Regret has never saved anyone. I've known people who have felt very bad for their sins who refused to give them up; who have even refused to *try* to give them up. Where does that leave them in the end? Still miserable. And still out of relationship with God. And I have also known people who could not muster up one single tear for very serious sins, but who chose to begin taking the steps back to God's heart who are now great signs of hope to those who know them.

Sometimes someone will ask: “But won’t I be acting hypocritically if I say I’m sorry in confession but don’t really “feel” sorry?” Nope. There is nothing hypocritical about that at all. The main thing we bring to confession is an intention to turn to God and away from sin. If you can bring that, you’re golden. Besides, which is a greater sign of true sorrow: someone who weeps and weeps but won’t try to change, or someone who, sober, and dry-eyed, pledges to do their best to avoid giving offense in the future?

We all need God’s help to do any of this. If you are thinking about confession, realize that this is God’s invitation to come home and into a better life. Even if you don’t “feel better,” believe me, you will “be better”.