

Can I go to confession if I don't feel sorry?

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Q: I think that I want to go to confession, but I worry that I don't feel sorry enough. I don't want to lie and say "I am sorry for all my sins" if I don't feel sorry. Do I have to stay away from reconciliation until I feel badly?

A: This is a very good question. I may have addressed it in a previous column years ago, but it would be good to revisit it and add a few points.

It is noble of you to acknowledge that you do not want to say something that you don't mean, especially to God! At the same time, we recognize that there is a difference between "regret" and "repentance." It is good to have both, but we need at least one of these. Regret can help with repentance, but regret on its own does not actually "do" anything.

We can think of it like this: Both Peter and Judas felt regret over their individual denials and betrayals of Jesus. They both wept over their sin. But only Peter repented of his sin. Only Peter chose to let go of his sin and turn back to Jesus. Judas, on the other hand, clung to his sin in his sorrow and pride.

It takes humility to repent. Regret takes no humility. In fact, if one were to indulge in sorrow for their sin (and not simultaneously repent), it could easily be a massive and tragic work of pride. I know that this might seem counterintuitive, but there is no automatic humility associated with regret. One could easily feel sorry because they expected more out of themselves or because their sins were found out or for a dozen other reasons that have nothing to do with a willingness to acknowledge the truth. We know this in our own spiritual lives: Self-reliance often leads to self-condemnation.

This could have easily been the case with Judas. No one knows for sure, but knowing our own hearts, it isn't difficult to imagine that his regret and subsequent suicide was driven by pride and the stubborn refusal to allow God to love him in his weakness and failure.

Regret is an emotion. Sorrow is an emotion. On its own, emotion is neither good nor bad. It cannot be promised, and it cannot be demanded. For example, while love often involves emotion, love is not an emotion. Love is a choice. Love is an action. Love is a decision. That is why couples can promise to love each other for the rest of their lives. They are not promising, "I will feel this way until the day I die." They are promising to choose the good of the other through to the end.

Similarly, regret or "feeling sorry" cannot be promised or demanded. It can often not even be willed by oneself. I can't make myself feel sorry. But I can (and must) repent of my sins in order to receive God's mercy. This means that I have to choose to change. I have to choose to accept God's mercy.

One might ask, "How can one not feel sorry for committing sins when one has damaged one's relationship to God? And what is the motivation for changing if not sorrow or regret?"

"Sorrow" for sin can truly involve the emotion of sorrow, but it must involve the action of repentance. There are times when one's soul has been so numbed by sin that we become indifferent to how it might hurt God or others. We are not all so noble or holy as to always truly care how our actions affect others. There are times when we might repent of sin simply to save our skin. We know about the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, and this might be the only immediate reason a person turns from sin.

Yes, this reveals our capacity for selfishness. But it also reveals God's love. He is willing to forgive us even when we are mere "mercenaries," even when we only come to him to avoid hell, not because we love him. This is remarkable to realize: His love for us. This is the only reason why we can hope for forgiveness — God's unstoppable mercy

Of course, we are meant to get to the point where we do love God for his own sake and repent of sin because it offends him. But in the meantime, God is humble and accepts us back even when we are only coming back to avoid hell.

