

# Defined by my past? - Bulldog Catholic

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**Q: How much weight should I give to my past? I mean, I've been told that I need to forget the past and move forward, but it seems like there ought to be something more to it.**

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A: This is a great question. When it comes to the past, many of us are tempted to fall into one of two traps. We either choose to ignore the past or we choose to live in the past. Yet both of these choices will prevent us from accomplishing one of the principle ends in life: becoming wise.

The pursuit of wisdom is an essential part of being human. Let me restate that more accurately: becoming wise is one of the goals of a life well lived. More important than pleasure, more lasting than fitness, and more possible than wealth...wisdom is enduring, available to all, and proper to the human person.

Historically however, wisdom has been far more than technical "know how". Wisdom has been seen as the result of acquiring two things: Truth and Experience.

We ignore the past when we don't stop to evaluate and appreciate what we have experienced. When we fail to recognize the way our decisions have impacted our lives and the lives of those around us, and when we fail to acknowledge the ways other people's decisions have impacted our lives, we are short-circuiting one of the essential ingredients for becoming wise.

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To ignore one's past can be absolutely devastating to a good life. We can see this in our own experience (or in the experience of the people around us). We all know the person who consistently dates one jerk after another. Rather than learning from their past, they not only continue to date jerks, but the same kind of jerk! To these people I like to reference the quote: "Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes that reason is you are foolish and make bad decisions." That might be harsh (of course it is merely meant as a lighthearted way of pointing out our tendency to make unwise choices), but it is also often true of those who refuse to acknowledge the past.

If wisdom comes as a result of combining Truth with Experience, then in order to become wise, one must look at one's past and assess it. This is one of the incredible benefits from the practice of regularly examining one's conscience. Even more than an "examination of conscience", I would recommend something called a "consciousness examen". I know that it sounds like the exact same thing, but they are significantly different. With a consciousness examen, a person will, at least once a day, stop and review their day. Beginning by asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, the individual goes over their day looking for times when God was present. Essentially, one is looking for the ways God had spoken to them through the day or had blessed them during that day. After acknowledging God's presence and action, the person thanks God. Then, one reviews their day again while being attentive to all of the times when God was trying to speak to them or invite them to act, but the person said no to God's invitation. After looking at and assessing these times, the person repents of them (we ask God to forgive us and resolve to turn to Him more in the future).

It is this process, repeated on a regular basis, that will help a person grow in wisdom. The individual avoids the first pitfall of tending to ignore the past by looking at the past, assessing the past, learning from the past, and repenting where we need to repent. If one does this, they will certainly become wise. Rather than simply "going through the motions" and drifting through life, they will begin to move through life with intentionality and purpose. Their choices (both good and bad) will have the ability to become the necessary fuel for wisdom and will help them chart a course for the future.

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They will avoid the incredibly silly trap of saying things like, “Don’t regret anything from your past...it has what made you into the person you are today”. That saying is absurd for a number of reasons. The first reason is that it assumes that you have learned from the bad and good choices and are actually a better person today! But all of us know that this is not necessarily the case. Just because a person has a lot of experience does not mean that they are automatically good or wise. Often, our experiences can contribute to our becoming more evil and more foolish. It is only when we look at our past, assess our past, learn from our past, and make corrections (AKA “repent”) that we have the potential to become better and wiser.

The other trap many people fall into is to live in the past. I am not just talking about someone stuck in the “glory days” (although that is a real thing). I am also referencing those people who repeatedly beat themselves up over decisions long gone. There are those who, even after learning from the past and repenting where they needed to repent, choose to continue to define themselves by their failures (or by their successes). It is impossible to become wise when one chooses not to learn from the past and leave it alone. This is because wisdom has to be practical. And practical wisdom is the ability to apply what one has learned to the current situation (the present) in order to move forward in the best way possible. This cannot happen if a person is stuck in the past.

Last thing. There are people who just can’t seem to break free from the past. I have one piece of advice for them: laugh. Laugh at yourself. So many of us are stuck in the past because we take ourselves so seriously. Because of this, every time we remember something bad we have done in the past, we are crippled by it. It is possible that the only cure for this person is laughter. I am not saying that they should laugh at the errors or sins. I am not saying that they should laugh at how another has hurt them. What I am encouraging is something more personal: laugh at yourself. The Christian is the one who does not need to take themselves so seriously. We take God seriously. We take good seriously. We take other people seriously. We need to take sin seriously. But we do not need to take our “drama” so seriously. If you can take yourself less seriously, you will be free to learn from the past, but not live in the past.