

## **Overcoming Scrupulosity**

### **Regina Boyd**

Hi, I'm Regina Boyd, licensed therapist. And today we're going to talk about scrupulosity. Let's start with a prayer.

### **Opening Prayer**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Come Holy Spirit. We ask that you guide us, enliven our hearts. Be a light unto our feet and to our path. Show us, Lord how you see us.*

*Help us to see ourselves in that radiant light, beheld by you. Mother Mary, we ask for your intercession as we pray. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. and blessed is the fruit of the thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

### **Scripture Reflection**

I want to start with a scripture reflection. So, we are going to read from Mark chapter 3 verses 1 through 4 ***"Again He entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched Him to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And He said to the man had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent."***

When I think about this situation, Jesus, on the Sabbath, he has a man in pain and in need of healing and the Pharisee are watching him very closely. They're at this place where, they were so caught up with the practice of the law, so caught up with focusing in and having such a narrow focus on how to practice their religion, they were losing sight of the bigger picture of their faith. And I think Jesus' question in that moment is so powerful. "Is it lawful to do good or to harm someone on the Sabbath?"

And I think that sometimes we find ourselves in that same place as the Pharisees. That we can get wrapped up in those small, minuscule details. We really get lost in the details and we lose sight of the larger vision and picture that God has for us that He wants our good and that He loves us, regardless of how strictly we're practicing the law. Regardless of how strictly we're practicing the law. Yes, I will say that again.

## **What is Scrupulosity?**

And so, what is scrupulosity exactly? When we talk about scrupulosity, it's an excessive worry or concern about committing a sin in a particular way when the sin is not there. So, there's a lot of worry and doubt around whether or not a certain practice was done well, for example, I had someone recently share with me about their own experience going to confession, to the sacrament of reconciliation and trying to decide if they should repeat their penance. Did I pray that Our Father well enough? Do I need to say it again? My mind wandered away. And does that really count? But at the end of the day, we have to remember what we're called to do in those moments. And so, scrupulosity can have us get lost in the minutiae of religious practices where we wonder did I do this action well enough for it to count? For it to be pleasing to the Lord? For me to be increasing in holiness and pursuing God's heart in a better and more improved way?

And then in addition to that, sometimes in a very extreme way, scrupulosity can manifest with symptoms very similar to OCD. It can become OCD. A category of OCD, if you will, can be scrupulosity, depending on the severity of how these things come up. And so, it's just obsessing over those practices, over the little, tiny practices. We lose sight of the big picture and then it's very hard to find solace and calm, even from attending the sacrament.

So, in a sense, someone could be doing everything “right.” Going to daily mass, and I'm going to put right in quotation marks because what does that meaning exactly, doing everything right? So, giving the appearance of doing everything right. Going to daily mass, going to reconciliation on a regular basis, praying a rosary daily. They could be doing all of these wonderful things and not receiving peace or solace from them. Still having constant worry about falling into sin or committing sins when sin isn't really there.

And so that's what we're talking about today when we talk about scrupulosity. And what I hope is that at the end of our time together, that there can be a clear conviction and knowledge of the extravagant love of God and what He has for you, knowing that it's unconditional. That there is nothing that we can do in this world, for good or for bad that could ever separate us from the love of God, that could take us away or make us seem smaller in His eyes because we were created by Him and He wants us to be in eternity with Him.

## **How is this a problem?**

So how does this become a problem? Well, there's lots of reasons of why scrupulosity becomes a situation that people experience from time to time. And it's usually a combination of factors of environmental factors, psychological factors and maybe even sometimes the way somebody was raised by their parents. So attachment styles can play a role in scrupulous tendencies. Not all the time but we'll touch briefly on it.

So, what do I mean when I say attachment styles? Our attachment styles, and this is important because it relates to how we might view our relationship with God. An attachment style is something we receive from our caregivers growing up. So, when we were infants, how quickly did our caregivers respond when we were crying, how quickly did they respond and respond correctly when we were in need of something, whether it's a bottle, whether it's changing of a

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diaper, whether it was too cold, and we just needed extra socks on our feet. So how attentive were our caregivers in those moments? Or how unattentive?

And what an infant learns throughout that process from their caregivers is whether or not they can trust that their needs will be met, that their needs will be provided for or not. And these different situations, depending on how caregivers relate with their children in those young early stages, those young early years, ages one to three, then that can influence how they create attachments in their other relationships with other people.

So those can be anxious attachments. Those can be avoidant attachments. And they can be ambivalent attachments, attachments where we are not really, we're kind of anxious and avoidant at the same time. And so sometimes, when people have certain attachment styles, there's also secure attachment styles, by the way, which the majority of people fall into that category.

But sometimes these attachment styles are also how we relate to God in our relationship with Him. So if you were, you or I or somebody who had an anxious attachment style, we had caregivers who were not very attentive, not quick to respond and so somebody who develops an anxious attachment style becomes a people pleaser in a sense. They get really nervous when that significant other doesn't answer the phone call right away or when friends are not able to come and join plans for that weekend. They become very anxious, and wonder did I do something wrong? Do they not love me anymore? Do they not care about me? And so that can also be projected onto the relationship with God. Are there things that I have to make sure I'm doing really well and really effectively to keep God's love, to earn His love, to make Him essentially stay around in my life and want to be pleased by me?

And so, these are all things to pay attention to. There's lots of information online to think about and find out what your attachment style might be and reflecting on how that could play out with your relationship with God as well. And we really want to pay attention to this. Why? Because it can detract us, it can take away from who our Father really is. The truth and the reality of who He is.

So, we have a father who came to us in the incarnation. He loved us so much. Not only did He create us but He loved us so much if that wasn't enough, and then not only did He come to Earth and live life and know what it was like to have feelings and worries and doubts, He gave His life. As if that wasn't enough, He showed us that "I am here, I give all of myself to you. I hold nothing back." And there's nothing we have to do in any of that to have earned that. We did not earn the incarnation and we did not earn Jesus giving His life on the cross for us.

And so we have to tap into, that is the source of our healing of scrupulosity is tapping into the truth and the reality of who our father is and that extravagant love that He has shown us time and time again.

## **Practical Ways on how to Work on This**

So what are some practical ways that we can work on this and learn to view ourselves as God views us? One rule that I read about on a really interesting website. It's called The Integrated Catholic Life and they have a lot of wonderful information and resources on there about scrupulosity and OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder, by the way. And one of the things they mention in there is saying when in doubt, don't.

Meaning if there is a question in your mind about whether or not some action you did was done well enough or if it was a sin, if there's a question around it, if it's not a very clear yes or no answer, then we just decline giving that anymore time. Or if you're doubt of should I do this, should I not, should I repeat that prayer again, should I not? When there's a lot of questions around it, when I doubt, don't. It doesn't apply, it's probably not some big moral teaching or issue of dogma. It's again, tapping into that minutiae and that can be a good rule of thumb in general, just as you're moving forward of how to combat this a little bit and wrestle through that scrupulosity.

Another thing is reflecting and meditating on gentleness, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. How can I be more gentle to myself? In those moments when it's tough and when I'm worried about whether or not I'm doing something well and asking for the grace to have more gentleness towards myself.

There's a big difference between thoughts and actual sin. And this is something I've spoken about with many people before is I am not my thoughts, my thoughts do not define me and there's a big gap between a thought in someone's head and a actual behavior or action taken from that. Let alone was that a thought, I don't want to make things too complicated, but was that even a thought that was voluntarily, that I consented to? So that's a whole other issue but reminding yourself that you're not your thoughts and thoughts do not equate sin.

And then another great principle is to use moderation. I think a big temptation when we are living with scrupulosity is to go to those extremes and so for example, somebody might want to live a more ascetic life. Am I fasting enough, am I praying enough? Am I in adoration in enough hours of the day? And so the only answer for someone with scrupulosity is we need to be doing more of all of these good and wonderful things that our church gives us.

And so a good practice to bring that back into balance is moderation. Moderation is a way to say that this is me living my life in a balanced way and trusting, trusting that God still loves me and that I'm growing in holiness, that I've been granted the grace to grow in holiness, regardless of if I spend five minutes in adoration, 30 minutes, 1 hour or 10 hours. And then some other practical things too.

## Getting Help

If your scrupulosity is on the more severe end, whether your symptoms are presenting as OCD symptoms, then I suggest going to therapy. Usually, therapy and some type of combination of medication, spiritual direction is also really helpful to do that alongside therapy so that you can have guidance along those spiritual issues and situations that you have questions about of what is truly a sin, and what's not, and being able to speak about that with a spiritual director, and helping you practice some positive spiritual practices.

## Important Scriptures

And so I want to leave you with a few scriptures, a few things to reflect on because there is so much goodness in our faith and in scripture that we can draw from to continue to trust in God's goodness as we wrestle with scrupulosity. The first is one of my favorite scripture verses from I John 4:18 where it says, *"Perfect love casts out all fear."*

Allowing God's perfect love to transform our hearts and to rest in that peace and beauty and goodness that when his perfect love is with us, there should be no room for fear. There can't be any room for fear because we know his extravagant love is real and it's true.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori has also written about scrupulosity. He has some great information out there as well. And like I mentioned before, The Integrated Catholic Life can be a great resource. And then I want to leave you with an examination of conscience.

## 10 Commandments for the Scrupulous

So, the 10 Commandments for the Scrupulous. This is credited to Father Thomas Santa and Father Don Miller of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. So I'm going to read through these 10 commandments that they created for the person who would consider themselves scrupulous.

- One, without exception, you shall not confess your sins, you have already confessed.
- Two, you shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.
- Three, you shall not repeat your penance or any of the words of your penance after confession for any reason.
- Four, you shall not worry about breaking your pre-communion fast unless you put food and drink in your mouth and swallow as a meal.
- Five, you shall not worry about powerful and vivid thoughts, desires and imaginings involving sex and religion unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God.
- Six, You shall not worry about powerful and intense feelings, including sexual feelings or emotional outbursts unless you deliberately generate them to offend God.
- Seven, you shall obey your confessor when he tells you never to repeat a general confession of sins already confessed to him or another confessor.

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- Eight, when you doubt your obligation to do or not do something, you will see your doubt as proof that there is no obligation.
- Nine, when you are doubtful, you shall assume that the act of commission or omission you're in doubt about is not sinful and you shall proceed without the dread of sin.
- And Ten, when you are doubtful, you shall assume that the act of commission or omission you're in doubt about is not sinful and you shall proceed without the dread of sin.

Oh, those two are repeating. So those 10 commandments I think are repeated. So, feel free to look those up online. And see if they're resonating with you and something that would be helpful to you but I thought they were really helpful just for a lot of people that I've met along the way.

### Closing Prayer

So let's close in prayer. *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Father God, we recognize your presence here with us in this moment. Surround us with your love and your truth. Help us to experience your love in a new way. Bring us consolation, lightness of heart, cast out all fears and anxieties. Help us to see you and be assured of you and your presence and help us to see ourselves as you see us, Lord. As we pray the prayer that you taught us, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.*

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

God bless you.