

STUDY ON SELF-PITY

By Cindy Nichols

This is a teaching about what self-pity really is, how to recognize it, why it is there, what the results of it can be, and how we can become released from its vicious cycle.

What is self-pity?

Webster's Dictionary defines self-pity as having pity for one's self. So how does Webster define pity?

- Pity: A feeling for the suffering of others; sympathy, compassion, commiseration, condolence; implies tender or sometimes slightly contemptuous sorrow

Definitions of other words that Webster uses to describe pity:

- Sympathy: Strictly implies a power to enter into another's emotional experience of any sort
- Compassion: Pity coupled with an urgent desire to aid or help
- Commiseration: Pity expressed outwardly in tears, words, or action, etc.
- Condolence: Grieving with another who has suffered loss, or an expression of such grief

So what is self-pity then? Self-pity is the process of turning an emotion that is meant to bring emotional intimacy with others inward; thereby blocking our ability to emotionally connect with God and others. Self-pity is driven by a desire for emotional intimacy.

Why do we feel self-pity?

There can be several reasons why we may feel self-pity. A few of them are as follows:

- It is an attempt to seek emotional intimacy with others by evoking their feelings of compassion
- It is the result of disappointment over unmet expectation resulting in a feeling of sorrow or loss ('if only')
- It is the result of having experienced rejection
- It is the result of a fear of others or a circumstance
- It is the result of a feeling that a situation or circumstance is a punishment from God for a sin
- It is a means of punishing one's self out of shame or guilt (example: I'm so stupid, ugly, etc.; I'll never be...)

Self-pity creates a vicious cycle. We desire to connect with others so we tell our sad story in an effort to connect emotionally. We may gain the sympathy of others but since our focus is on self it prevents us from connecting emotionally with others; thus blocking the intimacy we were seeking. So we tell our story again in an effort to connect emotionally... and the desire for intimacy becomes like an addiction that is never satisfied and the cycle continues. It's hard to connect with someone whose focus is inward.

How do we recognize self-pity?

One way to recognize self-pity in ourselves is to closely examine our thoughts and words. When we do so, we are looking for these signs of self-pity:

- Repeatedly telling or thinking about how someone wounded you
- Asking "why did this happen to me?"
- Having feelings of unfairness

- Making statements such as “I didn’t deserve...”
- Global statements such as “I will never succeed... I always fail...”
- Having first person focused thoughts “I, me, my”

Another sign of having self-pity is looking at some situation dealing with another person and feeling sorry for yourself. An example might be looking at how another person’s misfortune will impact you rather than having (or showing) compassion for them. Like the wife who doesn’t think about the impact on the husband’s emotions when he loses his job but is embarrassed for anyone else to know her husband has ‘failed’. Or the parent of a wayward child who is ashamed because they have failed as a parent, rather than seeing their child’s behavior as an attempt to deal with their own pain.

Self-pity begins in our thought life. So remember, what we think and talk about usually becomes the things we believe and it eventually creates authority in our lives (refer to Chapter 1 of Living in the Freedom of the Spirit).

Biblical Examples of Self-pity:

- In Genesis 20, Abraham says Sara is his sister because he fears for his own safety (this falls under the heading of being let down by God)
- In Exodus 3:1 through 4:16, Moses tells God to choose someone else to lead the people out of Egypt
- In Judges 6:12 to 7:15, Gideon tells God he is the weakest of his clan

What are the results of self-pity?

Harboring self-pity can cause us to stay stuck in unforgiveness. It does this by preventing true forgiveness of others because we continue to nurse and rehearse the wound, thereby repeatedly wounding ourselves. It can even create a false sense of a ‘right to unforgiveness’. When this happens, you begin to think to yourself (whether you are conscious of it or not) “Look how this person has done this awful thing to me. I have the *right* to feel sorry for myself and to *not* forgive them.”

Self-pity can also bring us into a sense of hopelessness. This is a belief that something that is greatly desired is unobtainable. Self-pity does this by diminishing our view of what God says about us, and our view of God and His character. It can create beliefs that God has let us down or will let us down (*distrust* in God), or that God is punishing us for some sin (because we are not forgiving ourselves). Hopeless people have a lack of assurance that God values what they offer Him, and that God will not respond in any way to their overtures. When asked, “If you were to ask God for something, do you really think He would hear you and answer you?” they respond, “I wish I could believe it, but to be honest I don’t feel that God is really interested in me (or my problems).” There is a feeling of a lack of power or ability to effect the situation.

In contrast, hope is the confident expectation of something good. Having hope means to have trust and reliance. It is desire with expectation of obtaining what is desired or belief that it is obtainable. It is made up of three basic elements:

- Confidence
- Expectancy
- Security

Because hope is confident, secure, and expectant it creates in a person an inner attitude of openness toward God, towards other people and towards life. This is extremely important

because we receive what we expect and we receive only what we are open to. When we do not have hope we are pessimistic, expecting the worst, therefore putting up protective barriers against life, against people, and against God. Then we wonder why we never seem to receive anything.

Hope is the other side of faith. Faith means that I commit myself in trust to another. Hope means I expect that what I have offered, faith, a committed trust in another, will be responded to, thereby making me open to receive that response.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1)

The person who suffers from self-pity is often a person with a great deal of compassion; their focus is just off. When they are able to take their focus off of themselves they become tremendously effective in ministry because of their ability to truly relate to another person's pain.

Broken relationships and relationship problems

Many times attempts at personal relationships are unproductive because we are afraid to commit ourselves in trust to another person or because we have no confidence that what we have offered the other person is of value and will be appreciated and responded to. Either we do not reach the other person, or we do not allow him to reach us. People with an inferiority complex often have a problem with relationships because they feel that once a person gets close enough to see what or how they really are, the other person will reject them, lose interest in them, or that they just don't deserve good things; therefore they are unwilling or unable to be transparent with the other person.

Self-Centeredness

Self-pity creates self-centeredness because the focus is entirely on you and your problems. This self-centeredness also contributes to relationship problems.

Blocking or ignoring other people's emotions

Because your focus is on self you cannot or will not deal with other people's emotions. This is another contributing factor in relationship problems.

Blaming others

Self-pity leads us to blame others for our problems and not accept or acknowledge our own responsibility for problems. When we feel others are solely to blame for our problems it takes away our responsibility, and ability, to have any power to impact the problem; therefore keeping us stuck in our problems. This also does not help in relationships.

Creates bitter root judgments from comparison and envy

Self-pity encourages you to look at other people's circumstances and view them as better than your own; which often leads to comparison, envy, and resentment. This is sometimes the only time your focus is on others, yet it is still primarily about you, but it is definitely not healthy.

A curse we bring on ourselves

We bring a curse upon ourselves with our negative thoughts and bitter root judgments.

Prevents praise

Praise is an outward expression of trust, hope, faith and thankfulness; qualities which are severely hindered by self-pity.

A stronghold of the enemy

Ultimately, self-pity is a tremendous stronghold for the enemy because it separates us from God by creating doubt in God's goodness and sovereignty. It also separates us from others with self-centeredness, comparison, envy, and pride (a false mask we hide behind). It is an especially effective stronghold because many times it is not a readily apparent sin and is extremely difficult for the person stuck in self-pity to admit; again an issue of pride.

Suggestions for further study

Psalms 42:5, 62:5, 119:74, 130:7, 147:11; Proverbs 13:12; Isaiah 40:31; Romans 5:4; Hebrews 6:19, 11:1; 1 John 3:3

Redemption

Self-pity is an emotion that isolates you and keeps you stuck in pain. It is a tool of the enemy that works to keep you stuck in unforgiveness and distrust in God. Self-pity begins in our thought life therefore taking every thought captive is key to release from and staying out of self-pity. Self-pity can sometimes hide behind a false pride, making yourself better than the person who wounded you in an effort to justify your unforgiveness. You may need to confess and repent of the pride as well. You will just have to pray and ask God to reveal what applies to you. Just remember sorrow for self rarely brings about change.

In order to get release from self-pity, there are several steps we must take:

- Confess/admit the sin of self-pity. Confess how you may have misjudged God's character by doubting His sovereignty (control over circumstances), goodness and kindness (feelings of being punished). Confess your hopelessness, disappointment, fear, anger, etc.
- Forgive others who have wounded you. Ask God to forgive you for misjudging His character, for doubting Him. You may need to forgive yourself for the sin for which you are punishing yourself. Remember that not forgiving yourself is a form of putting yourself above God.
- Relinquish the right to not forgive someone for wounding you. Relinquish the right to self-pity, or holding on to your pain
- Ask for the grace/ability to hope and praise God. It is also important to praise God for the attribute of His character that you misjudged. For example: His sovereignty, goodness, His desire for relationship with us (intimacy), His love for us. Find Scriptures that demonstrate that attribute in His dealings with other people
- Taking every thought captive is the key to freeing yourself from self-pity. I can't stress this enough. What are you thinking about internally? When your mind wanders what topic does it go to? Does it go to wounds of the past, or God – either in praise or acknowledging His power in a situation? What external data are you putting into your mind (books, TV, conversations)? Remember that our thoughts lead to our behavior and create authority.
- Give thanks! Thank God for all things because He is using every circumstance to perfect your faith and increase your relationship with Him. (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Actively work to help others in either action or prayer. (Psalms 37:3).

The last two actions take the focus off of us thereby beginning the process of opening us to intimacy with others.