

Scrupulosity: When Doubts Devour



by MICHAEL R. EMMET

Having scruples is a good thing. It means you have a well-functioning conscience that is pricked when you face a moral or ethical dilemma. It guides you to do what is right. But if you struggle with scrupulosity, it is *not* a good thing. The word describes someone whose conscience is overwhelmed by such pricks or “stabs.” The person experiences an ongoing and intense concern for his or her own moral purity in both thought and deed.

To help you understand the struggle more specifically, I’ll begin with a few personal snapshots. Brandon gave up playing the piano because when he plays well, he is overwhelmed by the fear that he is stirring up ungodly pride. Alicia, who grew up in a strong Christian household and professed faith at a young age, is plagued daily by the persistent thought that perhaps she is not saved after all. She seems immune to the encouragements of family and friends who point out the fruit of the Spirit in her life. “Yes, but you can’t know my heart,” she insists. Serena ruminates for hours about the answers she gave to others’ questions throughout the day. She wonders, “Was I truthful? Was I completely accurate?” Karl resists holding his young daughter on his lap or hugging her because it triggers the thought, “What if I’m a pedophile and I’m being sexually gratified by this?” He is horrified by the thought. Despite having no objective, physical evidence of sexual arousal, his anxiety about it has grown, to the point that he now avoids

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close physical contact with his daughter. Graham has become a virtual recluse because every time he ventures out of the house, he feels compelled to share the gospel with every person he meets—bank tellers, restaurant servers, supermarket cashiers—anyone and everyone. The persistent thought “Share the good news!” is ruining his life and his marriage. He feels obligated by passages like Romans 10:14 and Matthew 28:19.¹ He asks, “How do I know for sure I’m not the one God wants to bring the good news to that person?”

Have you worked with anyone who struggles in these ways? Many Christians are paralyzed by obsessive doubts and worries about their spiritual and moral lives. These doubts and worries rob them of peace, purpose, and joy. They feel isolated and alone, finding that many people, even brothers and sisters in Christ, misunderstand their struggle. This further reinforces their sense of separation from God. Historically, this problem has been known by the name *scrupulosity*,² but more recently in the psychological literature it is labeled *religious obsessive-compulsive disorder*.

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In my role as a biblical counselor, I often find it challenging to address scrupulosity. Relatively few resources exist to guide those who want to provide wise pastoral care. In light of these realities, this article will provide a hope-filled, biblical perspective and practical help for this struggle.

Defining and Describing Scrupulosity

Here is how I define the experience of scrupulosity:

Intrusive (spontaneous, unbidden, unwanted) and obsessive

¹ Romans 10:14: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

² The term is actually derived from the Latin *scrupulum*, a sharp stone, implying a stabbing pain on the conscience. From “The History of OCD” found at <https://www.ocduk.org/ocd/history-of-ocd/>

(persistent, recurring) thoughts and doubts about moral-spiritual issues, which produce distressing levels of anxiety and the quest to rid oneself of that anxiety, usually by one or more of the following: performing compulsive behaviors, engaging in mental rituals, or by avoiding triggering situations.

Some have called it “the doubting disease.”³ Others have viewed scrupulosity as “fearing sin where there is none.”⁴ Often you see excessive concerns and

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fears over committing a sin, distinguishing right from wrong, how to make decisions, and having assurance of salvation. The anxiety that results from these concerns may lead to excessive confession of sin and/or apologizing, repeatedly seeking reassurance from loved ones, prolonged and excessive rumination, ritualistic praying, or avoidance of certain situations that may provoke the intrusive thoughts (including reading Scripture or attending church). This is not merely a tender conscience. The over-scrupulous person’s “moral thermostat” is clearly malfunctioning.⁵

The experience of scrupulosity is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Christianity. It has also been described in other religious settings, including Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities. Psychiatrists and psychologists view the experience as a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) given the similar pattern of struggle, its severity, and its responsiveness to the kind of interventions used to treat obsessions and

³ Joseph Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease: Help for Scrupulosity and Religious Compulsions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995).

⁴ Jonathan S. Abramowitz and Ryan J. Jacoby, “Scrupulosity: A Cognitive-Behavioral Analysis and Implications for Treatment,” *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 3 (2014): 140. Available at <http://jonabram.web.unc.edu/files/2014/05/Scrupulosity-model-2014.pdf>

⁵ See Gary L. Nebeker and Norman L. Thiesen, “Consciences That Condemn: When Moral Thermostats Go on the Blink,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19:1 (2000): 26-32.

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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