

Scruples

Gilbert Kilpack



PENDLE HILL PUBLICATIONS
WALLINGFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Gilbert Kilpack was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. He took his undergraduate work at the University of Oregon and received his M.A. degree at Oberlin College in The Philosophy of Christianity. For five years he was executive secretary of the Stony Run Friends Meeting in Baltimore. He joined the Pendle Hill staff in 1948 and was appointed Director of Studies in 1954.

He also lectures on Christian Literature of the 17th Century, Classic Devotional Literature of all Ages, Russian Literary Religious Classics, and Spiritual Themes in the Modern Novel.

Among his writings are the Pendle Hill pamphlets, *Ninth Hour* and *Our Hearts Are Restless*. He gave the William Penn Lecture for 1946, *The City of God and The City of Man*.

“A scrupulous man teases God, irritates his neighbor, torments himself and oppresses his director.” It was thus Frederick Faber began his classic essay on scruples. That was over a century ago, but not much has changed in the human situation to permit a softer word on the subject. There are spiritual fashions and they do change. The weight of what we are pleased to call historic situations thrusts new problems upon us and that which plagued our grandparents as a venial sin hardly touches us, but rather something else — something very old with a new name. The seven deadly sins remain. Scruples is not among the honored seven; it deserves to stand at the head of a list of its own. We might call them the “seven subtle sins” or “the little sins which are greatly unexpected.”

As the traveler expects and prepares for heat, cold and hunger, so there are big temptations in life we expect and prepare for. What the traveler doesn’t anticipate is the grit in his shoe. It is not the thunderstorm which stops the traveler, it is the little hole in his stocking which leaves him on the side of the road nursing a blister. This illustration falls short because scruples are not only unexpected but they do not even appear harmful when they are seen. Faber speaks of them as “sins under the pretext of good . . . little centers of spiritual death spotting the soul, a kind of moral erysipelas.” We are thinking then, not of a sin which rampages in the local night club, but rather of a respectable one, a well dressed hitch-hiker who with sorrowful gaze accosts each one of us as we set out on our spiritual journey.

Have you not at one time worked laboriously and hopefully with a committee which was appointed with a very real concern to engage in an important task, only to see all action made impossible by one or a few persons whose consciences were whetted to a razor-sharp edge; they were sensitive, that could not be denied, but it was a sensitivity

only to threats and problems. Have you not some time known promising young men whose lives you have seen brought to a standstill because wherever they looked they saw nothing but compromise. Have you not yourself once had a God-given leading which is now only a dim memory, all because you feared you could not carry it through as expertly as you thought you should. And perhaps I who write this am greatly hampered in coming to the truth because I fear that I will not be so precise in what I write as I fear that I should.

I am speaking then of those scruples which come in the wake of spiritual effort. There are people who claim to be thoroughly secular and they suffer from scruples too, but I am here speaking to those of us who, knowing that we are called to be brothers of Christ and share in his freedom, are puzzled and grieved that so little comes of it. We stand in the doorway to the kingdom, but a stone in our shoe keeps us always limping, always about to move on in.

Theologically, a scruple is defined as "a vain fear of sin where there is no reason or reasonable ground for suspecting sin," and I would add, a vain fear of compromise, a vain fear of failure, a vain fear of the judgment of others where there is no good reason to be concerned. Our subject is complicated by the fact that we sometimes speak of good scruples. If a man tells me that he has a scruple against taking life, I cannot but accept it as commendable. If however that same man makes one principle, say "reverence for life," his exclusive spring of action in such a way that no other fact or principle can enter in, he is on the road to losing even his one principle. I can well imagine this one-principled man coming to the point where he fears to take a step lest he crush an insect. "Reverence for life" may be a good principle but no one principle will do to inform the conscience.

When Hamlet says that “conscience doth make cowards of us all” he is speaking of an ill-informed conscience, or of a finical conscience issuing in an irresolute will. A scruple as I use it here shall not refer to a “bad” conscience so much as to an imperfect or unbalanced conscience, or a strong conscience unsupported by an equally strong faith and vision. The opposite of a scrupulous man is not an unscrupulous man but a man of faith.

We can push our illustration further of the man who lives by “reverence for life.” This dictum must be balanced by the acceptance of man’s place and responsibility above nature as well as his participation in nature. The book of Genesis makes it abundantly clear that a part of man’s state of knowledgeable suffering is his proprietorship over nature. But there are those who out of a scrupulous reverence for the realm of nature refuse the responsibility over it, and as a result themselves fall back under the dominion of nature. Indeed it is not an uncommon urge to return to nature as a refuge because our scrupulous self cannot bear the weight of reverence for all nature. Such a principle as “reverence for life” cannot be realized without supernatural aid and sanction.

This may be seen more clearly if we pass from the dictum of Schweitzer to an even more profound one from Dostoevsky: “We are all responsible to all, through all and for everything.” Take this to heart, just as it stands, unrelated to all other truth and you will soon be plunged into despair or into a quivering mass of impotent sensitivity. Then place this teaching in its great setting, the great divine-human household where God is seen to enter into and share all joy and all sorrow. You will then witness the banishment of all fear, all qualms and hesitations.

The history of the Christian church offers numberless examples of persons and congregations with whom the

scruple might almost be called a cornerstone of their piety. The saintly John Woolman is a good example; the word “scruple” dots the pages of his *Journal* and in using it he means that he has a stop in his mind against taking some course of action. With Woolman it is not so much the voice of conscience informed by tradition as it is his whole sensitive being, open in the midst of new situations, to new spiritual leading, which stops his going on in habitual and accepted ways. He expresses scruples against acting as secretary for the writing of wills where the transfer of slaves was involved, against paying a war tax, against small pox inoculation, against jugglers and sleight of hand performers, against drinking out of silver vessels, against using the mail system because the horses and the post boys were overworked, against wearing dyed clothing and many more. The following is a fair example of Woolman’s description of a scruple:

I soon after went to bed, and my mind was under a deep exercise before the Lord, whose helping hand was manifested to me as I slept that night, and his love strengthened my heart. In the morning I went with two Friends on board the vessel again, and after a short time spent therein, I went with Samuel Emlen to the house of the owner, to whom, in the hearing of Samuel only, I opened my exercise in relation to a scruple I felt with regard to passage in the cabin, in substance as follows:

That on the outside of that part of the ship where the cabin was I observed sundry sorts of carved work and imagery; that in the cabin I observed some superfluity of workmanship of several sorts; and that according to the ways of men’s reckoning, the sum of money to be paid for a passage in that apartment has some relation to

the expense of furnishing it to please the minds of such as give way to conformity to this world; and that in this, as in other cases, the moneys received from the passengers are calculated to defray the cost of these superfluities, as well as other expenses of their passage. I therefore felt a scruple with regard to paying my money to be applied to such purposes. (See the Whittier edition of *The Journal of John Woolman*, page 239.)

There is ample evidence from John Woolman to see that scruples, at their best, are negations. They are the inward “No! this I cannot do!” And much can be said in support of the negative act in the modern world. We only need to remember how we felt during the war when we heard of heroic German citizens who said “No!” to Hitler — a negation, a scruple, but from our standpoint an act of compelling power. Still, the great creative acts of human history go far beyond the domain of the scruple. The negation in Woolman is balanced by an infinite tenderness for people, which carried him on many arduous journeys. And, as Whittier says, “His singular conscientious scruples, his close self-questionings, are prompted by a tender concern for universal well-being; an earnest desire that no act or omission of his own should add to the evil and misery under which the creation groans.”

We can observe the perilous nature of the good scruple as it is exemplified in the life of Gandhi whose shrewd common sense and humor saved him from the vise grip of the negative. With Tolstoy there is the same problem. I have the feeling that he was in some ways a greater man in his early days when he was a tippler than in his later days when he was a scrupler. Certainly his scruples were a crushing blow to his genius power of creative writing. But here too the tragedy is not in the negation but that he remained in a state of unbalance.

Scrupulosity is a deficiency disease. It attacks where there is a lack of grace; and to live without grace is to live by self direction, even though it be a very “spiritual” life. A man sets up for himself a meticulous rule of life or perhaps an undefined, moral goal. That is his first mistake — the setting up of his own rules and his own goal, for even though they be the words of the Scriptures they are not his unless God give them to him. God doesn’t go around handing out abstract principles to abstract people. God may make his rain to fall upon the just and the unjust, but he is also the great discriminator. With his great commands, he offers personal understanding and individual strength to act. If our man who makes up his own rules fails in those rules the full burden falls upon him alone and he must either chastise himself or begin the never ending monologue of self justification. He cannot pray with the Psalmist. *Against me alone have I sinned, oh me.* God has forgiven him, even in advance of his sins, but self cannot really forgive self, it doesn’t know how, it has no ground to stand on. Self may excuse self, but the forgiveness of the Lord is not only a release from the burden of guilt but the renewal of integrity.

No one can beat a scrupulous man at harsh self judgment, but on the other side of the picture there is the curious fact that no one has such a positively unerring scent for tracking down those areas of conduct where laxity might be legally permitted. It is a laxity which holds scrupulously to the Ten Commandments but gives up all thought of bearing the cross. Scrupulosity, consuming as much time and energy as it does, there is understandably — “legitimately,” that is! — no time left for the inspired acts of human creativity. This enormous laxity which comes as the result of scrupulosity can only be seen from the vantage point of the “love and do as you please” motivated Christian conscience.

If laxity comes as a result of scrupulosity, it happens just as frequently that as soon as we settle into easy ways, scruples descend upon us as do fleas on a weak dog. And is this so surprising? If we go to church regularly and hear the Gospel read, if we hear the heartbreaking story and the totalitarian commands and yet continue to live, a soft though wearisome, life, we shall have to try to “make it up” somehow. As long as the Gospel nudges our conscience and we resist, we must make it up with a punctilious performance of numerous rituals, duties and offices. Thus an ancient writer speaks of scruples as a very common punishment for soft and delicate living.

How many times have we heard it said, and not infrequently in meetings for worship, that “it is the little things in life that count.” Well, and how about the big things such as loving one’s enemies. Jesus did not say to the rich young man: “My dear fellow, it is the little things in life that count,” nor did he say it to the Pharisees who were experts on little things. With Jesus it is not the little things that count but the things of low degree, the despised and the rejected. He holds up children as examples, not because they are little but because they are innocent and unassuming.

I may seem to be throwing our problem all out of focus. Perhaps you have heard genius defined as an immense capacity for taking pains, and what is this but a passionate attention to details. There is a great difference. The scrupulous man makes himself the slave of details, he is at the mercy of minutiae. The strength of the genius lies in his command over details, his power to subject them to his vision and will. Toscanini, as an example, is famous for his furious attention to the minutiae of symphonic interpretation; he stands lordly above all, imposing his exact vision on all below him. The pain he feels when the oboe is a fraction late in entering is not an officiously legal scruple;

in his mind he has already heard the total sound, the complete symphony and the small imperfection is a blow at the total incarnation. His is a righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees.

One of the great writers on this subject, F. Augustine Baker, says, "The spiritual cause of scrupulosity is tepidity; for though it seems to be a humor full of solicitude, haste and eagerness, yet the true ground of it is an unwillingness and loathness to give God more than we must needs." Have not we known people who were filled with nervous energy, active in many affairs and with a seeming zest for life, but on drawing near to them we found that they were doing little more than running in circles and burning up energy. They love nothing outside themselves, that is their tragedy; and all their nervous activity is but a camouflage behind which they dwell, tepid and irresolute toward life and people.

To those who are bound hand and foot by scruples it is tempting to say: "Go find some great cause and give yourself to it and you will forget your fears." It isn't that simple. A new cause or a new ideal is but the occasion for new scruples. In fact, I can think of no more proficient way to nourish this affliction than to take a great moral stand all out of proportion to our willingness to accept God's grace to live it out. Let us suppose that I take the absolute pacifist position, and I hold to it because the arguments seem entirely reasonable to me; it is hardly an act of faith and not simply a response to God's command to me; no, I have decided that it is a good way to get good ends. Now what is to save me from having to justify my life before those of my neighbors who have taken a far different stand.

I see my friends going off to battle and I try to figure out a way whereby I can suffer at home as much as they do abroad. But how can I know when I have suffered enough to justify myself in their eyes? And so my scrupulosity has driven me into the position not of giving myself up to the

great universal human hurt, but of doling myself out, inflicting my own pain, measuring my own hurt in order to be justified. And the more meticulous I get in my legal maze the more I am separated from people. The scrupulous man is a bookkeeper, a spiritual bookkeeper, and he must balance his books to the last scruple. And yet there is something else within me that I had not counted on, a canny instinct for self-preservation which recognizes that the whole attempt at legal self-justification is futile and so I throw the whole matter up and head for the nearest recruiting office. Or, my despair drives me to my knees.

There is no person more distressing to live with than the one who must every moment be justifying his existence, for though he seem profoundly humble, he is in fact profoundly proud, for his thoughts are always busy with himself. He can do nothing freely and spontaneously; everything must be dissected, explained and justified. As fear is at the root of such a life, so complete love which casts out fear is the only cure. Perfect love is not a scrupulous love, for love and scrupulosity are opposites; perfect love takes no thought of self, for it knows that all belongs to God. It was for the scrupulous man that St. Augustine wrote, "Love, and do what thou wilt; whether thou hold thy peace, of love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, of love cry out; whether thou correct, of love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare; let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good."

One of the heaviest charges against scrupulosity remains to be mentioned: it attacks groups as well as individuals; it sweeps through the church, carrying off the innocent as well as the guilty. I can think of no more unhappy example than the Society of Friends in America at the midway point of the last century. A scrupulosity of speech, dress, and manners became their distinguishing mark. Having withdrawn from the government of the

country, they suffered from a punctilious compulsion to keep clean and clear the demarcation line between themselves and the world. The reading of the Queries, in themselves a noble device for self-examination, led all too often to autopsy and justification rather than renewal. The Minute books of the time reveal a fearful self-centeredness, a meticulous care for self-cleansing and that freedom which blossoms in spontaneity and imagination seems to have been smothered in the cradle. On that very day of history when the world was giving birth to great musicians, artists and writers, the Society of Friends was engaged in bookkeeping behind closed doors. Dostoevsky had written his first novel, *Poor Folk*, and was gone to a prison camp in Siberia; but the Quakers could have known nothing of that, they bore a scruple which exiled even Shakespeare. Beethoven had finished his work and died in 1827 but Friends had a scruple against owning pianos. This is not said in condemnation; from the other side of these Friends an admirable picture could be drawn. They do however, illustrate the fact that all attempts at self-purification of the church by means of an outward code must inevitably breed scrupulosity. Even the Communists have trouble on this score; the ardent party member never knows when he has been scrupulous enough and must always live in fear.

When we turn to the Gospel with this problem in mind, it is no particular text which satisfies us so much as the general temper of the life of our Lord. I am thinking not only of Jesus' compassion but more exactly of his spirit of freedom. I am often puzzled that out of all the Christians in the world there are so few who strike me as being clearly Christlike. I know many who through their faith in Christ have been saved from grievous sins, and some few who have great compassion, but not many, if any, who seem to have Christ's air of freedom. We do the right things, but without

authority. With most of us scruples limit our freedom, which in turn puts a stiff bridle on our compassion.

What were the scruples of Jesus? I am unable to point to one. I see only a man who walked through this world with a heavenly inspired carelessness. Not one speck of fear. Suffering and anguish, but no hint of anxiety. And I am not surprised that he showed no anxiety about what he would wear or what he would eat, but I am amazed that he had no anxiety for the Kingdom, that he had no scruples about endangering his mission by mixing with the wrong people, no fear of being misunderstood, no delicate care to please everybody.

Beside Christ, the Scribes and the Pharisees are like men trying to walk a chalk line through the wrong end of binoculars. They take mincing, cautious steps to keep on the line, and still they totter and sway while Jesus walks through open country, overleaping boundary lines, breathing deeply the fresh air of God's freedom. He has no scruple against beginning his ministry at a wedding feast and ending it on a criminal's cross. He is never seen waiting for perfect people and perfect situations to accomplish his work, and thus Christianity becomes the religion of impossible situations. Jesus accepts everything and every person as not only the necessary but also the God-given point of operation. The kingdom is born in the midst of the despised and the rejected — moments, places and people — mangers, Nazareth, Judas and a cross. No scruples.

But with us it is different. If the situation is not right, if there is no money, if the people aren't important, if there is no time . . . the cause is hopeless.

It is important to remember that when Jesus overrode the minutiae of the Jewish law and tradition, he was not acting out of ignorance. But in the presence of human need his thought of the law fades into the distance. His hand stretches forth with compassion to heal and there is no

scrupulous debate, "Is it the Sabbath? Shall I heal or shall I wait for a better time?" He sees the need, he feels the divine compulsion, and the deed is accomplished.

He is hungry and he picks grain. No worrisome deliberation, "Shall I obey the law or shall I not, shall I mortify the flesh or shall I eat." He simply does, without question, that which proceeds naturally from his God-loving nature. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it. And there are always those standing by who are consumed with jealousy, envious of his freedom. "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." They do not here accuse him directly but only suggest guilt by association. And he does not explain or rationalize; with one stroke he brings the issue into focus — the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath and the time to do good is when there is a need for good. No more running to look at the calendar. "Stretch out your hand," and the man stretched out his hand and it was restored. It was directly after this (Matt. 12:1-14) they took counsel — appointed a committee, that is — how to destroy him.

The best interests committee put the old eagle eye on him and they noticed that some of his disciples ate with unwashed hands. (Mark 7:1-23) Trap him, show him up for what he is, a completely lawless anarchist, or else force him to spell out a code of his own that we can argue with. We know where we stood with John the Baptist, he had a code, but this man seems to live out of the wild blue sky. Where is his authority? Jesus meets these charges head on: his words shake the foundations of the scrupulous life. "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandments of God, in order to keep your tradition. . . . Hear all of you and understand: there is nothing outside of a man which by going into him can defile him."

Jesus was not saying that there was no good reason in the old dietary laws. I think he was saying that there are

some things worse than ptomaine poisoning, and scrupulosity is one of them. I once had an old man with the sight of death in his eyes make a confession to me. He had been a farmer and had for years scrupulously refused to merchandise his milk on the Sabbath. After he had retired and gone to the city he was one Sunday given the urgent commission to go out and buy some fresh milk for a sick grandchild. He had considerable difficulty, and in his search his whole life of scrupulosity rose up and struck him. He confessed this to me, but the fact that he couldn't bring himself to believe that God had forgiven him indicated that his essential problem remained — God was more a scrupulous old farmer than a loving father out seeking milk for his children.

Jesus' cry of woe to the Scribes and the Pharisees is not a manifesto against law and order. It is a curse upon a meticulousness which goes hand in hand with a neglect of the all important. He was not against washing the cup but opposed to the careful outward scrubbing which neglects the dirt inside. (Matt. 23:26) He is not against Sabbath observance but for spontaneous, absolute charity at all times. And we must not soften the curse which Jesus hurls at those who heap heavy loads of tradition on others who are unable to bear the weight or understand the meaning of the burden. I have met people who look with horror at this episode in the life of Jesus. But they have mostly been people who are trying to walk through the world so gently that they hardly touch the earth and the grand principle of their life is not to hurt anybody. This is as far from the immediate aim of Jesus as can be. He saw that to be free is also to be free from the fear of hurting. All great creative acts run the risk of misunderstanding and hurt. Those of us who avoid genuine human encounter for fear of hurt shall, like the man with the one coin, have our own taken from us — that is, we shall be forced to stand on the sidelines

and see others hurt because of our lack. There is a much neglected text (Luke 16:16): “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the Kingdom of God is preached, and everyone enters violently.”

Faithless ones hope to enter the Kingdom by their own endeavor and their own calculations. Some day it will be clear to us — we have all been calculators in this generation. Our business, our families, and our churches are run by calculation and they turn out boring and tragic. And why should we have faith where so much is in our own power. We do not move from faith to action. We reason from our own calculations about possible results to action. We can calculate how not to hurt people, but we cannot calculate how to do great good. With Jesus it was entirely different, in him not one speck of calculation, only great obedience to the inward leading, the word of the Father. Jesus was surrounded by calculators and it took the crucifixion to knock the calculations and the scruples out of them, but until we experience the cross we are stuffed with human contrivance.

When Jesus was at Bethany a woman came to him in the house of Simon and poured expensive ointment on his head. When the disciples saw this their scruples all rose up and their calculating machine began to grind. “Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor.” (Matt. 26:6-13) Jesus thought only of the woman’s need to give and his reaction was as spontaneous as her act. It was immediately after this that Judas began the most fearful calculation in history: “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?”

In contrast to Jesus’ harshness with the Pharisees is his gentle pity for those who hardly know that they are swallowed up in their little scruples. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.” (Luke 10:41) It would be wrong to interpret this

story simply as a decision for spirituality as against materiality. There are many anxious, scrupulous Marys whose spirituality is largely housekeeping — the perpetual airing of old blankets and chasing after specks of dust. To the scrupulous Marys Jesus says, “And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life?” (Luke 12:25)

There is no more tragicomic picture in all literature than the one Jesus gives of the man who tries to remove a speck of dust from his brother’s eye when he has a log in his own eye; (Matt. 7:3-5) and this is another of his stories which can work two ways. Why do you worry about the specks in your own eye, first pull out the log and then see if the sawdust will not work itself out. “Your eye is the lamp of your body . . . but when it is not sound, your whole body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness.” (Luke 11:34-36)

The charge has been made many times of Jesus that he commanded, “Be ye therefore perfect” and thereby introduced into history an unbroken apostolic succession of frustrated, scrupulous, self-cleansing miniature Christians. And it is true that this saying has caused a great deal of trouble, but mainly to those who have taken it to heart without also taking the whole life of Jesus to heart. He acted as though he never gave a thought to the perfection of himself. In the wilderness and in the garden of Gethsemane his struggle seems not to have been directly with self. His life and teachings agree in pointing to a perfection which is come into only by self-forgetfulness, the finding of self by the losing of self. It is thus a perfection which is wrought only by love, a love which is the exorcism of that life of moral bookkeeping with its long hours of addition, subtraction, division, double entry, discount and obscure deficits . . . always, always trying to make it come out right and it never will, except by falsifying or borrowing heavily on the future. Augustine Baker describes this

unhappy way as “torturing the will, by plucking it in violently contrary ways almost at the same time.” And such is the scrupulous life — to live without that love which casts out all fear. Not to accept the present with love, this is to be afraid. Fear is to go into the future without love.

The perfection of the Christian life is not unlike the particular beauty of an early Gothic cathedral. Technologically we can far exceed these old buildings with ours which are sleek and accurate, “perfect,” as only modern instruments of precision can make them. But the old builders seemed to know the beauty of the “imperfect,” they knew that the perfection of the individual and of history is quite another thing from a mathematical perfection. Thus the irregularities and unevenness of architecture of the old cathedrals which were built over the course of centuries, with many minds and hands involved, contribute, not detract to their greatness. Even the ugly gargoyles on these old churches, symbolize ever-present temptation which is necessary to our perfection and is in no way a disfigurement of it. The true Christian life is rough-hewn and full of irregularities and perfection is not in spite of this but *through* this. God was not only revealed in Christ but God was hid in Christ. The world was not ready for this kind of perfection and it still does not accept it; and it seems almost harder for the churches to accept it than for the world to accept it.

The Calvaires Bretons are magnificent old sandstone carvings which have stood four centuries in the Breton countryside. They represent the life and passion of Jesus and the story of the disciples. Though the proportions in many of the figures are truncated and sometimes grotesque, they are perfect. They stun, they overwhelm, they absolutely convince with their communication of reverence, pity, adoration, suffering and the majesty of divine-human life. The beatings of storms and time on these carvings and the moss which grows on them in great patches in no way

detract from their beauty. And so it is with life. Imperfect time, sickness and deprivation can only enhance the heart of love.

But look at the modern popular paintings of Jesus! Scrupulously perfect. He is the combined work of the technician and the romantic. The stumbling block remains.

There are people who, when they catch a sight of how far they are from the grand goal of perfection get the moral fidgets or the spiritual jitters and they become super-careful about details as some sort of atonement for their failure or their imperfection. We ought not suffer in this way, for we are the inheritors of history, the history of the saints by grace who are most disarming at this point; they accept quite freely and openly their shortcomings, great and small — the small often being the hardest to accept. The saints are not resigned to their distance from the goal, but they accept it as the present condition of fact and would rather joke about it than fret about it.

There is a love of perfection which at first glance seems to be made of nothing but meticulous care. I think of Georges Rouault, the great French painter and profound Christian. He has kept many of his paintings by him for ten or twenty years; to his eyes they are unfinished. The critics declare them masterpieces and the dealers stand by ready to pay him thousands for them, but he is dissatisfied and in the end burns many of them. Here is what appears to be an overwhelming scrupulosity, but is in fact a genius' patience with and reverence for insignificant bits of paint and obedience to the vision. Never any fear — that is what makes the difference.

Now I must confess that if I employ an architect or a builder I want a man who has a scrupulous care for details, but if his care is only fear of the builders' code or anxiety for his own reputation, I will look elsewhere. Be it a Rouault or a local carpenter, what we honor is the meticulousness

which is simply love and fidelity to the vision. All of this is hard to put together with the fact which I believe to be true — that there are many things in life which are worth doing which are not worth doing scrupulously well. But I believe that those who live by faith do put them together.

The early Christian church did not escape the scourge of scruples. St. Paul had in his life time shaken every known scruple by the hand and earned every right to be their bitterest opponent, and he was. Whether it be the subject of food offered to idols or segregation in the church, Paul comes out with blazing passion on the side of freedom. And we can appreciate Paul's judgments, particularly when we realize that he continued all his life to wrestle with scruples. In the first Letter to the Corinthians, he airs his feelings about such niceties of life as women's hair-do. He knows and says he is on shaky ground but the thirteenth chapter is only two pages ahead, and there he climbs onto bedrock. Paul, more than anyone in the early church, realized that a scruple is a negative and that we do not reason from negatives to come to the way of life. We do not start with the suspicion that some food has been offered to idols and is unclean. We start with the faith that "the earth and all its contents belong to the Lord." We do not start with the fear that some people will not understand if we eat in mixed company. We start with the fact that all men are of one blood and have one Father. From such positive convictions we move forward in freedom and without fear. This is St. Paul. He made one discovery: God has given Himself to man and man can give himself prodigally in return.

Why have I written so long on so small a subject — a mere scruple? Because I find myself so near to the Kingdom and yet so far from it, and I know what that separation consists of. I notice that my friends have some of the same troubles that hinder me. They too stand in the entrance

way, anxious about many small things. I see the church which I love, the church which was born of Christ's passion, now obsessed with the scruples of the world. The church which spends its day washing its hands and getting to the proper table. The church which has been willing to settle for bookkeeping. Christ suffers yet, with and for his church.

"A scrupulous man," says Faber, "measures nothing by God's will, but everything by his own." I think that about fits us. For even when we want the Kingdom, we want it in our own way, at our own hour, and we want to make our own defense of it.

Are we not to know whether what we are doing is certainly pleasing to God? Bonaventura answers this, saying, "To know that we have charity is not necessary to salvation; it is the having of it which is so." Our attention is not to be given over to the judgment of any of our works; our attention is to be given to God and to Christ.

I gladly give the last word here to Augustine, who said, "Let not the imperfect fear, only let them progress."

Bibliography

F. Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom*

Frederick Faber, *Spiritual Conferences Growth in Holiness*

Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis*

The writings of Fenelon and St. Francois de Sales will also be found helpful on this subject.