98 Desperation or To Despair (*Desperacio uel Desperare*)

According to Augustine,[[1]](#endnote-1) a sin with despair is certain death. For according to Ambrose,[[2]](#endnote-2) man sins more in despairing than in perpetrating sin. Wherefore, Jerome says,[[3]](#endnote-3) Judas offended God more when he despaired and hung himself than when he sold Christ. Therefore, it is said in Prov. 24[:10], do not “lose hope in the day of distress.”

And this sin is accustomed to come from various causes. Sometimes from faintheartedness of the penitent because he does not think he can perform the stated penance. Sometimes from the enormity of the fault which he thinks unforgiveable. Third, from the difficulty of avoiding sin which he has out of habit which binds as if another nature, according to the Philosopher.[[4]](#endnote-4) Which is figured in 1 Kings 23[:26]: “David despaired of being able to escape from the face of Saul,” because Saul with his men “encompassed David and his men round about.” Thus, the devil and his suggestions go about the sinner so that he seems not to be able to escape him through penance, Job 7[:16]: “I have done with hope, I shall now live no longer.”

Hardly may I accept the gift of grace, but we are not so, but according to that, Hold back, I will surrender; fight, I will help; overcome, I will crown, and Prov. 3[:25]: “Be not afraid of sudden fear, nor of the power of the wicked falling upon you.” Because the Lord is with you as a powerful helper. For God is more inclined to have mercy than we to recover our senses. Certainly, one offends in greatness, but he is placated in littleness, Wis. 6[:7]: “To him that is little, mercy is granted.” Sometimes despair comes from malice, as hiding oneself and evading grace. Just as it is evident in Cain, Gen. 4[:12], who said, “My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon.” And thus, to despair is to sin against the Holy Spirit. Wherefore, Bernard said, *Super Cantica*,[[5]](#endnote-5) you lie, namely, Cain, for just as a spark is to the middle of the sea, so the malice of men is to the mercy of the redeemer.

¶ Therefore, when despair is opposed to divine mercy,[[6]](#endnote-6) it is presumption, in truth, of divine justice. It is worse to despise the mercy of God than his justice. How much more it is proper to God to have mercy and spare than to punish.

1. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 50.5 (PL 36:588): Peccatum cum desperatione, certa mors. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ambrose, cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 20.1 (PL 38:138): Dicat anima quae peccavit, ne plus pereat desperando, quam se perdidit delinquendo. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jerome, cf. Peter Comestor, *Historia evangelica* 162 (PL 198:1625): Dicit Hieronymus super CVIII psal. quia magis offendit Judas Deum, quando se suspendit, quam in hoc quod cum prodidit. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Aristotle, *Categories* 8, 8b27-9a12 (Barnes 1:14): One sort of quality let us call 'habit' or 'disposition'. Habit differs from disposition in being more lasting and more firmly established. The various kinds of knowledge and of virtue are habits, for knowledge, even when acquired only in a moderate degree, is, it is agreed, abiding in its character and difficult to displace, unless some great mental upheaval takes place, through disease or any such cause. The virtues, also, such as justice, self-restraint, and so on, are not easily dislodged or dismissed, so as to give place to vice.

By a disposition, on the other hand, we mean a condition that is easily changed and quickly gives place to its opposite. Thus, heat, cold, disease, health, and so on are dispositions. For a man is disposed in one way or another with reference to these, but quickly changes, becoming cold instead of warm, ill instead of well. So it is with all other dispositions also, unless through lapse of time a disposition has itself become inveterate and almost impossible to dislodge: in which case we should perhaps go so far as to call it a habit.

It is evident that men incline to call those conditions habits which are of a more or less permanent type and difficult to displace; for those who are not retentive of knowledge, but volatile, are not said to have such and such a 'habit' as regards knowledge, yet they are disposed, we may say, either better or worse, towards knowledge. Thus habit differs from disposition in this, that while the latter in ephemeral, the former is permanent and difficult to alter.

Habits are at the same time dispositions, but dispositions are not necessarily habits. For those who have some specific habit may be said also, in virtue of that habit, to be thus or thus disposed; but those who are disposed in some specific way have not in all cases the corresponding habit. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Bernard, *Meditationes piissimae de cognitions humanae conditionis* 2.5 (PL 184:488): Sicut enim in coelo stella coruscans velociter currit, et repente deficit; et sicut scintilla ignis subito exstinguitur, et in cinerem redigitur.

Cf. Hrothsuita, *Abraham* scene 7, (PL 137:1024): Qui enim peccantibus Deum misereri velle desperat, irremediabiliter peccat, quia sicut scintilla silicis pelagus nequit inflammare, ita nostrorum acerbitas peccaminum divinae dulcedinem benignitatis non valet immutare. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg, *Compendium Theologicae Veritatis* 3.29 (8:146a): In ipso remittente duo sunt scilicet misericordia et justitia Contra primum est desperatio contra secundum præsumptio In eo cui remittitur duo sunt scilicet dolor de commisso et propositum de non committendo Contra primum est obstinatio contra secundum finalis impœnitentia Præterea dispositio remittendi in eo cui remittitur duplex est scilicet cognitio veri et amor boni Contra primum est impugnatio veritatis agnitæ contra secundum invidentia fraternæ gratiæ De finali impoenitentia nota quod sicut dicit continuationem peccati usque in finem sic in omni peccato in quo quis scienter decedit et finalis impoemitentia prout autem est una species peccati in Spiritum sanctum secundum quod hie sumitur sic dicitur propositum non poenitendi [↑](#endnote-ref-6)