

**“Good Grief”**  
**2 Corinthians 7:5-13**  
**February 14, 2010**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul says that there is a grief that leads to repentance, which then leads to life. And there is also a grief that leads only to regret and death. The main verse we are going to be looking at today, verse 10, contrasts these two types of grief. **“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”** It is possible for two things to look alike, but to be very different. This past week, I bit into an apple that looked very good on the outside. But as I bit into it, I discovered that it was rotten at the core. Similarly, this verse features two kinds of grief that may look the same on the outside, but be very different on the inside. As we continue our series on the gospel-centered life, we are looking today at repentance that brings life. The way into the joy and peace of God’s kingdom lies in the path of repentance. Such repentance is accompanied by godly grief.

The background of this passage is the letter Paul wrote that he refers to in verse 8. It was a letter of rebuke hand-delivered by Titus, and it brought grief to the Corinthians. He was rebuking them for turning against his apostolic leadership after they began following a false apostle. Though the rebuke was justified, Paul goes on to say that he regretted sending the letter after it left him. He wonders if he has spoken too harshly to them. But there was nothing he could do to recall it (such as after clicking on the send button of an e-mail). All he can do is to wait for Titus to report back on the results of the letter. He is hoping to see Titus in the city of Troas, but his friend didn’t show up there. So Paul left a fruitful ministry in Troas in order to try to meet Titus in Macedonia, the region just north of Corinth. He describes his time there in verse 5: **“this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.”** In other words, when he was with people, there were conflicts. When he would withdraw to be by himself, he was overcome with fears about the Corinthians and how they were doing. All in all, Paul was like a restless parent whose teenager is still not home two hours after curfew. When he finally connects with Titus and hears Titus’ glowing report of how they had humbly received his letter, Paul is overcome with joy. He says that he was glad to have rebuked them as he did. God intended that they should be sorrowful for their sin, so they might be led into repentance. Sorrow for sin is a good thing, and I want us to consider today three marks of this good grief. If we would be gospel-centered, we will need to learn this kind of sorrow.

**I. Godly Grief**

Good grief is godly grief. The word for grief is one that refers simply to pain in our hearts. It is that sense of sorrow we get when we experience some loss. It could be a financial loss. A week after buying a new car, you scrape it along the side of your garage and leave a long, ugly scratch. There is a sense of loss that leads to some inward pain. Or there is the more painful relational loss when a friendship is harmed in some significant way. One of the questions that arises in my mind as I read this passage is the question of whether true repentance is always preceded by some kind of sorrow. It's clear that godly sorrow leads to repentance, but can you have repentance that is not preceded by sorrow? I would like to say "Yes" to that question, because it would sure make things easier. Part of me would like for repentance to be more like solving a math problem—you work hard but finally arrive at the satisfying Eureka moment when everything falls into place and the problem is solved. Unfortunately, I can't think of a single biblical example of repentance that doesn't include sorrow. I read of people like King David and Simon Peter, whose repentance was preceded by great sorrow. And I read of those who repented when Peter preached to them on the Day of Pentecost. Prior to their repentance, we are told that **"they were cut to the heart"** (Acts 2:37).

The inevitability of sorrow as part of repentance is a message that is needed today. We can't come to God apart from repentance, and sorrow is part of repentance. I think there is a version of Christianity that is preached today that leaves us with the notion that Christianity is like a happiness pill. "Come to Christ and be happy" is the essence of the good news that is preached. While it is true that joy is a fruit of faith in Jesus, to preach Christ in such a way that there is no sorrowful repentance is to preach him differently than he is preached in the Scriptures.

Sorrow is an inevitable part of repentance, and repentance is an essential part of Christianity. But not all sorrow is alike. Paul talks in our passage about godly sorrow that leads to life, and worldly sorrow that leads to death. What is the difference? An important clue can be found in this adjective, "godly". Godly grief is God-centered grief, in contrast to self-centered grief. When our children get caught in some misbehavior and exhibit a sorrow for their sin, we might ask them, "Are you sorry that you did wrong, or that you got caught?" The two may look the same on the outside, but they are completely opposite on the inside. To be sorry only for the painful and unwelcome consequences of sin is a self-centered sorrow. We are sorry only because we have been negatively affected by our sin. The problem with this is that self has not been dethroned. Self is the central feature of this worldly sorrow, and self is also the central feature of our sin. This is the error of presenting Christianity as nothing more than the best way to be happy. It leaves unchallenged our central problem of self-centeredness. Our problem is that we want to be happy on our own terms, with our own control of our lives intact. God's role is simply to come along and help us achieve our goals for satisfaction in our lives. If we want lots of money,

God's job is to help us get there. If we want success, health, happiness, then God is here to serve our needs.

Esau is the best example of this worldly, self-centered sorrow I can think of. We read of him that he **“sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears”** (Heb. 12:16-17).

Contrast this with a God-centered sorrow, in which there is a recognition that our sin has been against God first of all. King David said it so well after his adultery with Bathsheba. **“Against you, you only, have I sinned”** (Psalm 51:4). Let me illustrate this with a discussion that came up in our small group this past Wednesday. We were talking about the person who engages in sin knowingly and willingly, telling himself that he can do so because God will forgive him. So let's suppose you have a Christian friend who is entering into divorce without biblical grounds for doing so. You go to your friend to challenge him or her to be faithful to the marriage for Christ's sake. Your friend replies to you, “I know that what I am about to do is sin, but I'm going to do it anyway, and I know that God will forgive me after my sin.” How would you answer your friend? Here's what I would say. “Though I can't see your heart, I'm not so sure God is going to forgive you. I know that God is able to forgive your sin, and he will forgive any sin that we bring to him with a humble and repentant heart. But I see no humility and sorrow in the action you are determined to take. I see a person who is sorry to be in a difficult marriage, but not one who is sorry for willfully disobeying God.” It is godly sorrow that leads to repentance and to life.

## **II. Personal Grief**

Good grief is not just godly grief, but personal grief. I mean two things by this. It is grief that is due to an offense against a person, and grief brought by a person. First, I notice that their grief was due to a personal offense against Paul. Their behavior had hurt Paul personally. Paul had invested a great deal in the people of this church, spending a year and a half with them when he originally planted the church. He had returned to Corinth later after hearing some disturbing news about some serious troubles in the church (2:1). A leader had arisen who turned the majority of the people against Paul. Paul was deeply troubled by this, not just because of the personal offense, but more importantly because they were abandoning apostolic teachings. He was like an agitated parent, who sees the self-destructive behavior of a child who is deeply loved. For months, this parent loses sleep over his deep concern for his wayward child. Any parent knows the great capacity a child has to bring pain into the heart of that parent. Paul was their father in the faith, and the Corinthians had brought pain into his life. Now it pains them to realize the degree to which that

had happened. They were appropriately hurt by their behavior that had offended Paul, and most significantly, had offended the Lord.

This is an important ingredient to our grief that leads to repentance. Repentance must include at least some sorrow that there has been a personal offense against God. Sin is more than the violation of a rule. It is the violation of a rule that is a personal offense against the Rule-Giver. It is a parent saying to a teenager, "I want you home by 10:00 tonight so you can get a good night's sleep before your ACT test tomorrow." But the child stays out late, does poorly on the test and misses the scholarship the parents were depending on to help pay for college. Now the father will have to take an extra job to pay the extra costs. That is what our sin has done to our heavenly Father. It is not the violation of an arbitrary rule, but the renunciation of God's right to rule our lives as a loving Father. And then, instead of asking us to suffer the consequences of our rebellion, he undertakes, at great cost to himself, to pay that penalty. Repentance comes when we begin to realize the personal side to our sin against God.

Their grief was also personal in the sense of being brought by a person, by Paul. He wrote a letter to them that was so harsh that he regretted sending it. Paul rebuked them, and the rebuke had struck home. Don't you wish sometimes that the sorrow that leads to repentance could be a little less personal? It would be much less painful if we could receive an e-mail from God each day that said, "Here's what I want you to work on today. You were too anxious yesterday, so try trusting me today and not being so anxious." But instead, it so often comes as we see how we have hurt others, and then they tell us about it. We then come to understand that we have been selfish and have not trusted God at all. It would be easier to get a calm e-mail from God than to have Wendy tell me that I've hurt her by my harshness. But it almost always comes through these more personal hurts, as in the case of Paul here.

### III. Life-Giving Grief

Though grief is always painful, the good kind of grief ends well. It leads to salvation and life, rather than death. Godly grief that leads to repentance gives life because it is temporary and without regret. In verse 8, Paul says that his letter grieved them, "**though only for a while.**" And then he says in verse 10 that "**godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.**" It is possible to live one's life with the kind of grief in which you beat yourself up all the time because of some sinful and foolish thing you have done. To live one's life in such regret is debilitating. It refocuses our attention on the past in a way that prevents us from living with joy and hope in the present. Many strategies are attempted to deal with such regret. Some people try simply to live in denial, convincing themselves that their actions were not that bad after all. "Everyone does it," they tell themselves. Others may try to

forget their regrettable behavior through some form of escape. But escape, whether it be in work or drink, is always destructive. Still others may try to deal with their regret by somehow making up for it with some new attempt at righteous living. But in the quiet moments, the regret returns.

There is only one strategy that works against regret, and that is godly grief that leads to repentance. Our grief must be enough that we give up trying to make up for it in some way ourselves, but in which we also see in Jesus the one who is able to cover our sin once and for all. Let me give two examples of this, the first of a man who had the kind of worldly sorrow that destroyed his life with regret, and the second of a man whose godly sorrow led to repentance.

Judas is the example of worldly sorrow that led to deadly regret. Some read the account of Judas' suicide and conclude that he repented and will be in heaven. Here's what the text says.

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself (Matt. 27:3-5).

Judas was remorseful, it says, but it was a worldly sorrow. There was no faith or hope in it, as evidenced by the fact that he took his life. Not all people who commit suicide go to hell, but the act itself is an act of unbelief. There is a sorrow for sin that kills rather than heals, and that was the case with Judas.

Contrast that with Peter. What was the difference between Peter and Judas? Their sin was not identical, but I don't see a big difference between Judas' betrayal of the Lord and Peter's triple denial of the Lord. But there was a big difference between their responses to their sins. Peter's sorrow was a godly sorrow because there was hope in it. He was so bold as to dare to believe that Jesus was so great that forgiveness was possible for even such a great sin as Peter's. He laid hold by faith of the God who is given the title in this passage of the God "**who comforts the downcast**" (v. 6).

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let's close by making two applications of this passage. First, ask God to give you godly sorrow for your sin. It is the only way to be done with regret because it takes us to Jesus. Second, take to Jesus any regret that has been afflicting you. Be so bold as to believe the truth that God announces here. He is the God of comfort who brings life to us through Jesus, and this life is characterized by the removal of regret, no matter how great the sin. Jesus takes such sin from us.