

Dealing with Regret
2 Corinthians 7:1-10
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Regrets, I've had a few; But then again, too few to mention. I did what I had to do. And saw it through without exemption. I planned each charted course; Each careful step along the byway, But more, much more than this, I did it my way.

Thanks to Rose for this sermon opener suggestion. Just be glad I didn't sing it to you! And thanks to Vicki Williams for this sermon topic. Vicki attended a high school reunion last fall and wrote about her experience catching up with an old boyfriend. "At the football game that Friday night, I talked to a guy I had dated briefly in high school and college, but had discarded somewhat callously for someone else. I regret that I treated him so harshly, because perhaps in the end, my life is less for it."

What in your life up to this moment do you regret? The dictionary defines regret as "to think with a sense of loss; or a sense of loss and longing for something gone." The etymology of the word means "to weep again." What actions, or words you did or said last month or last year or 30 years ago that causes you to weep again? I want to be clear that I am talking about the regret we feel over things we have said or done in the past. I am not talking about grief over the death of a loved one. We may regret that we did not say or do something to a loved one who is now gone. The focus here is on our action or inaction; our words or our silence.

There is an intensity factor that comes with regret. You may regret tailgating that slow driver last week when you discovered it was someone you knew. That type of regret is on the light end of the intensity scale. And you will find it easy to forget. On the other end is the traffic accident you caused due to negligent driving that resulted in someone being injured. That kind of regret can haunt you every day for the rest of your life. That kind of regret can rest heavy on your soul.

The Bible is not silent on the subject of regret. Corinth was a challenging place for a Christian church to grow. Paul loved this church and wrote to them often to encourage them to grow and mature in their Christian faith. He felt he could talk with the Corinthians openly and honestly which he often did. In this part of his letter he talks about two kinds of grief they feel over some of the disputes they were having. Godly grief is good grief. It is the kind that leads to repentance and salvation. Godly grief is the kind that brings no regrets.

Worldly grief on the other hand is not good grief. Worldly grief leads to regret. It is a guilt that kills life. Have you ever felt worldly grief, the kind that comes with guilt, the kind that twists a knot in your stomach every time you think about a past regret?

True story. Sarah was rich. She had inherited twenty million dollars. Plus she had an additional income of one thousand dollars a day. That's a lot of money any day, but it was immense in the late 1800s.

Sarah was well known. She was the belle of New Haven, Connecticut. No social event was complete without her presence. Sarah was powerful. Her name and money would open almost any door in America. Colleges wanted her donations. Politicians clamored for her support.

Sarah was rich. Well known. And miserable. Her only daughter had died at five weeks of age. Then her husband had passed away. She was left alone with her name, her money, her memories, ... and her guilt.

It was her guilt that caused her to move west. A passion for penance drove her to San Jose, California. Her past imprisoned her present, and she yearned for freedom. She bought an eight-room farmhouse plus one hundred sixty adjoining acres. She hired sixteen carpenters and put them to work. For the next thirty-eight years, craftsmen labored every day, twenty-four hours a day, to build a mansion.

Observers were intrigued by the project. Sarah's instructions were more than eccentric ... they were eerie. Each window was to have thirteen panes, each wall thirteen panels, each closet thirteen hooks, and each chandelier thirteen globes. The floor plan was ghoulish. Corridors snaked randomly, some leading nowhere. One door opened to a blank wall, another to a fifty-foot drop. One set of stairs led to a ceiling that had no door. Trap doors. Secret passageways. Tunnels. This was no retirement home for Sarah's future; it was a castle for her past.

The making of this mysterious mansion only ended when Sarah died. The completed estate sprawled over six acres and had six kitchens, thirteen bathrooms, forty stairways, forty-seven fireplaces, fifty-two skylights, four hundred sixty-seven doors, ten thousand windows, one hundred sixty rooms, and a bell tower.

Why did Sarah want such a castle? Didn't she live alone? "Well, sort of," those acquainted with her story might answer. "There were the visitors who came each night. Legend has it that every evening at midnight, a servant would pass through the secret labyrinth that led to the bell tower. He would ring the bell...to summon the spirits. Sarah would then enter the "blue room," a room reserved for her and her nocturnal guests. Together they would linger until 2:00 a.m., when the bell would be rung again. Sarah would return to her quarters; the ghosts would return to their graves.

Who comprised this legion of phantoms? Native Americans and soldiers killed on the U.S. frontier. They had all been killed by bullets from the most popular rifle in America -- the Winchester. What had brought millions of dollars to Sarah Winchester had brought death to them. So she spent her remaining years in a castle of regret, providing a home for the dead.

You can see this poltergeist place in San Jose. You can tour its halls and see its remains. But to see what unresolved guilt can do to a human being, you don't have to go to the Winchester mansion. Lives imprisoned by yesterday's guilt are right here. Hearts haunted by failure are in your own neighborhood. People plagued by pitfalls are just down the street, or perhaps sitting near you right now.¹

Here we have an example of worldly grief, the kind that leads to deep regret, the kind that radically squeezes the life from a person. This is not how God intends for us to live! The good news is that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus you and I can live, abundant life, joyful life. Being Christian does not insulate us from adversity or

¹ Max Lucado, In the Eye of the Storm, Word Publishing, 1991, pp. 193-195.

suffering. Choosing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ does mean that the source of our joy and life energy changes. It doesn't come from worldly pleasures and desires. It doesn't come from money or the things it can buy. It comes from God.

Perhaps there is a correlation between the number and intensity of our regrets and where we find meaning in life. The more we trust in the things of this world...in other words, the more we trust in technology and status and power, the more we will feel regret. The more we trust in God, the less regret we experience. This makes sense, does it not? When decisions are made primarily on the basis of how they advance our position and power, the greater the likelihood that we will regret those decisions.

Do you ever wonder how your regrets compare with other Americans? Psychologists Neal Roese and Amy Summerville researched the question, "What We Regret Most... And Why." Their findings rank the categories that trigger regret, in the following order of frequency: education (32%), career (22%), romance (15%), parenting (10%) and self (5%) were the top five.

For the most part, people agree. They would rather look back and regret the things they did than the things they didn't do. Studies have proven however that regrets of inaction persist much longer than regrets of action. People generally feel worse for not trying than for trying and failing.² How about you? Which do you regret most? Your actions or your inactions? I invite you to turn to a neighbor and talk about this question right now.

The lesson here is simple. Make your list of things you want to do before you die. Then begin. You will likely not finish the list but the point is that you tried. I have regrets around parenting four children. But I don't regret all the giving and sacrificing that goes into loving children for a lifetime.

It is important to acknowledge that regrets are normal. We all have them and we're likely to have them in the future. But the closer we walk with God the less intense the regrets. For it follows that the more we engage in intentional faith development the better our decisions, and we should have less to regret.

So how do we tell the difference between godly and worldly grief? The good news of the gospel is that worldly griefs that lead to deep regret that suck the life from our souls can be transformed to godly grief. All of our regrets, no matter how deep or intense can be forgiven. We can have a transformed life that moves us from darkness into the light. We can begin again because of what Christ has done for us.

² Retrieved 1/27/09 <http://lifetwo.com/production/node/20080116-what-are-the-greatest-regrets-in-your-life>