

Godly Sorrow and Repentance

2 Corinthians 7:8–11
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

Not all repentance is equal. Some people say they've repented, but they leave us shaking our heads because their lives show no fruit. This was true of the Pharisees and Sadducees, to whom John the Baptist said, *Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance* (Matt. 3:8). Repentance and obedience go together. Jesus said, *Every tree is known by his own fruit* (Luke 6:44). Our catechism reflects this when it says that repentant sinners must not only promise but also “show real amendment” before being restored to the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthians needed to understand to hear this. Why? Because they had allowed a church member who was openly living in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother to remain in the church (1 Cor. 5:1–13). They hadn't even tried to address his sin; rather, they boasted that they were big-hearted enough to overlook such things. Paul rebuked them: *Your glorying is not good* (v. 6). He instructed them to *purge out ... the old leaven* (v. 7), i.e., to exercise loving discipline. He even told them to *deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus* (v. 5).

Was the apostle too harsh? Not at all. But it would have been cruel of him not to say anything at all since unrepentant sin leads to everlasting misery. In the next chapter, Paul wrote that fornicators and adulterers, i.e., those who continue to live in such sins, *shall inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor. 6:9–10). The most loving thing we can do for any sinner is warn him of the danger his sin places him in. But it's an act of hatred to withhold the light of the gospel.

We all need severity at times because our sin becomes so entrenched in our being that softly spoken words accomplish nothing. So, in this evening's text, although Paul questioned whether he had been overly severe with the incestuous man, his doubts turned into joy when Titus arrived and told him how the Lord had used his severity to minister comfort to God's people. He wrote, *Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.*

Worldly Sorrow

But what about those who pretend to repent? How are we to distinguish sincere, godly repentance from that which masquerades as repentance? Our text helps with this. In it, Paul contrasted the two. So, let's first look at what Paul calls worldly sorrow, i.e., the fake stuff.

Verse 10 says, *The sorrow of the world worketh death*. It not only ends in death, but it also produces death and destruction along the way. It harms both the sinner and those around him. Worldly repentance doesn't produce any fundamental change in behavior or show any spiritual life. It leaves the sinner condemned under the judgment of God.

Several people whose repentance was of the worldly kind come to mind here. Let's consider two of them.

The first is Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ for a mere thirty pieces of silver, i.e., almost nothing. Matthew 27:3 says that he repented after doing this and tried to return the money to the priests. At first, this sounds like a good thing. He realized that he'd done something very evil and tried to fix it. But this isn't exactly what happened. He 'repented' not because he hated his sin or because he had wronged Jesus, but because he learned he was condemned. Matthew wrote, *Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders*. It's one thing to repent when we're confronted with our sins (that's what Matthew 18 is for), but it's a very different thing to repent *only because we've been confronted*. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference, but that's where the fruit comes in. Did Judas go to Jesus, like the woman who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Luke 7:36–50)? No, he turned to those who had orchestrated Jesus' death. He thought they could calm his troubled conscience, but they were every bit as dead in their sin as he was in his. And when the priests refused to accept the money from Judas, we see another fruit: *he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself*.

There's no question about Judas' trajectory. He went from death to death to death. He started out dead in his own sin, then he conspired to put Jesus to death, and finally he executed his own death. That's what worldly sorrow offers a sinner. Proverbs 8:36 says, *But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death*.

The second person who illustrates worldly sorrow is Esau, Jacob's brother. The book of Hebrews says, *Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears* (Heb. 12:16–17). The point here is that Esau had no regard for the holiness of God or his Word. He despised his

birthright, i.e., he despised his place in the line of God’s covenant promises, so much that he sold it for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29–34). And it didn’t bother him because he was more concerned about his present needs than laying in store for the future. But when he discovered that Jacob had also stolen his blessing, Genesis 27:34 says that *he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father.* But the matter was out of Isaac’s hands.

Esau sought repentance with tears and bitter cries because he knew he had given up everything. He still despised holy things. He had no genuine humility before God. His grief sprang out hating the consequences of his sin rather than hating the sin itself. He was just as dead in his sin as he ever was.

Worldly sorrow is full of regret — regret for hurting those we love, regret for letting others down, regret for the pain you inflict on ourselves, regret for missing opportunities, regret for ruining our marriages, regret for losing our jobs, regret for not spending enough time with our families, and so forth. But that’s all it is: sorrow over something we can’t have anymore.

Godly Sorrow

Now, let’s look at godly sorrow. Our text has a lot more to say about this.

First, note that the sorrow that comes with genuine repentance is only temporary. Unlike worldly sorrow, it has an expiration date. Paul wrote in verse 8, *I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season.* The words translated *for a season* are literally ‘for an hour’ (πρὸς ὥραν). Today, we might say, ‘for a few minutes.’ You see, godly sorrow is brief because it’s the opposite of the eternal glory the Lord gives us as his children. Earlier in this epistle, Paul wrote about the renewal of the inward man. He said, *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory* (ch. 4:17).

And second, we don’t lose anything with godly sorrow. Losing something is the only thing worldlings are interested in, though their sorrow results only in greater loss and they give up their souls in search of it. But verse 9 says to believers, *That ye might receive damage by us [or suffer loss from us] in nothing.* Godly sorrow is always a gain. Jesus said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth* (Matt. 5:3–5); and, *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it* (Matt. 16:24–25).

And third, godly sorrow, in contrast to worldly sorrow, leads to life and salvation. In verse 10, Paul wrote, *For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation.* It has no regrets but looks forward to a

life of unending joy and happiness in the presence of the triune God. Verse 10 says that it's *not to be repented of*. Those who truly humble themselves before God will never say that they made a mistake.

But the one thing that really stands out in our text is that true repentance produces an abundance of fruit. Paul listed seven of them for us in verse 11. He wrote, *For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!* Let's consider these one at a time.

1. *Carefulness*. A better translation of the word used here would be 'eagerness' (σπουδή). Real repentance leads to an urgent and strong desire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. *Clearing of yourselves*. Here the Greek word is ἀπολογία or 'defense.' But it's not really about apologizing or defending our behavior. Rather, as Calvin explained, it's "a kind of defence that has more to do with seeking for pardon than with rebutting charges." In other words, those who truly repent run to Jesus for forgiveness.

3. *Indignation*. Repentant sinners are indignant with themselves. We're appalled that we ever lifted our hands to sin against the Lord or even thought to do so. A vow we make when we join this church reflects this. It says, "Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God...?"

4. *Fear*. Throughout the Old Testament and occasionally in the New, the word *fear* is a synonym for religion. Paul used it this way in Ephesians 5:21 — *Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God*, i.e., concerning true religion. And the first verse of the chapter now before us encouraged the Corinthians to perfect holiness *in the fear of God*. Truly penitent sinners want to know God. We want to fellowship with him, to love and serve him. Our goal is not only to glorify him but also to enjoy him in unbroken fellowship.

5. *Vehement desire*. What is the object of our intense desire? Verse 7, which uses the same word, suggests that it may be a desire for the ministry of the gospel. Those who are repentant want to hear God's Word more than anything else. We want its promises and reassurances. We want to hear about the love of God that brought Jesus Christ into the world to die for lost sinners.

6. *Zeal*. This word is often a synonym for the carefulness that we spoke about a minute ago, but we can distinguish the two like this: carefulness or eagerness is the desire to serve Jesus Christ, and zeal is focusing our energy on doing it. Our Savior gave everything for us. How can we not give him everything in return?

7. *Revenge.* The NKJV translates this fruit as ‘vindication’ and other translations have ‘avenging’ and ‘punishment.’ Are such things really a fruit of repentance? I’m not convinced that any of these words quite capture Paul’s meaning. I believe he meant a desire to do the right thing concerning the sins of others. Consider the incestuous man. The fruit of godly repentance is understanding that church discipline, hard as it may be, is the Lord’s prescription for dealing with sin. We embrace it, knowing how much it hurts.

So, you see, the Bible is very specific about what constitutes godly repentance versus worldly repentance.

As we consider this today, we have to ask ourselves where we stand? Do we mourn over our losses as if they were all that mattered? Do you look for comfort in ourselves, other people or material possessions? If so, then our repentance is the worldly kind that leads only to death. We need to stop focusing on our losses and looking for comfort in the wrong places, and humble ourselves before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Or does our repentance move us to find all our joy in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work? Does our temporary sorrow encourage us with God’s promise to use our loss to work his grace in our lives? Does it promote an eagerness to serve him, a desire for genuine righteousness and true religion, and a willingness to give our lives for the one who gave his life for us? If that’s where we’re at, we can take comfort. Jesus’ death secured these things for us. His Holy Spirit has caused us to believe and he will hold on to us forever, never letting us return to unbelief and spiritual death. He says that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.