

## “Repentance...or just regret?”

- 2 Corinthians 7 -

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**2 Corinthians 7** *Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. 2 Open [your hearts] to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one. 3 I do not say [this] to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. 4 Great [is] my boldness of speech toward you, great [is] my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. 5 For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside [were] conflicts, inside [were] fears. 6 Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, 7 and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more. 8 For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance [leading] to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing [of yourselves, what] indignation, [what] fear, [what] vehement desire, [what] zeal, [what] vindication! In all [things] you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. 12 Therefore, although I wrote to you, [I did] not [do it] for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you. 13 Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. 14 For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I am not ashamed. But as we spoke all things to you in truth, even so our boasting to Titus was found true. 15 And his affections are greater for you as he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling you received him. 16 Therefore I rejoice that I have confidence in you in everything.*



7:1

Paul, speaking in the voice of the Father, begins this chapter with the words “...*Because we have these promises...*” What promises is he speaking of? For they clearly affect this chapter of text and how we receive it. The promises Paul speaks of are actually found at the end of the last chapter...chapter 6, promises wherein God said He would “...*live in them and walk among them.*” He would “*be their God, and they will be His people.*” He said He would “*be their Father, and they would be His sons and daughters.*”

However, that standing...*that status*, had an “if” as so many of God’s promises do. That ‘if’ was broadly contingent upon their obedience, and in this case, narrowly contingent upon their separation from the worldly and fleshly, and their walking in holiness. It was contingent upon their repentance.

What a concept! *Holiness!* One nearly lost in the pages of our modern time.

I am reminded of the account in 1 Kings 22 wherein the practice of following God had so profoundly faded into history that no one knew where the scriptures actually were and what they said. One day a priest by the name of

Hilkiah happened to stumble onto a dusty copy in some back room and sent it to the king. When the king Josiah had it read, he “tore his clothes”...a cultural practice which reflected extreme emotion, passion, and often remorse. He wept over this situation, and more importantly he quickly moved to correct the situation.

God desires to bless and engage both individuals and people groups. But they come with a hitch. Obedience to His directives. Lives of holiness. It’s just that easy and just that hard. But for sure it *IS* a principle that is just that un-complicated! The promise of intimate fellowship in exchange for committed obedience.

So Paul begins chapter seven with the word “*therefore*” or, in light of these promises, this is what we need to do: “*let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness because we fear God.*” So much for the extreme Calvinist view and modern adaptation of Christianity, where it is “all God” to such a degree that we need not extend any effort or take any responsibility in our lives whatsoever. “It’s all God! It’s all God! ...we can’t do anything...It’s all God!” Then if that is the case, then why would Paul call the Corinthian church and even us to “*cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit?*” To “*work toward complete holiness with a fear of God?*” That sounds a long way from living out our faith with our hands in our pockets!

Before you bristle at those words, may I point out that Paul’s call herein was clearly not meant to be a club, but rather a rose. He appealed to them with the word “beloved,” or “my dear friends.” His words were coming from the heart of a brother...out of his love for them!

“**let us cleanse ourselves...**” As we spoke of in the previous chapter, herein lies an instance of the call to personal discipline in our lives. God provides His power to change through the infilling of His Holy Spirit, but we must make both the decision and apply the effort to allow God to do in us and through us what He needs in order to “conform us into the image of His Son.”

Note: 2 Peter 1:3-

“...His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, **giving all diligence, add to your faith** virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.”

Isa 16-17 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow."

We cannot escape the scriptural fact that living the Christian life requires some effort on our part. He absolutely will do His part...empower you and hold you up. But will we step up to the plate to see that relationship a reality?

“In the Old Testament, leprosy is a very appropriate picture of sin, for it begins seemingly insignificantly, but spreads insidiously. When Naaman, a prominent Syrian ruler who had contracted this terrible disease, was told by his servant girl that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure him, he sent a message to the king of Israel, who, in turn, sent for Elisha. Expecting Elisha to pronounce some sort of magical incantation over him, Naaman was “wroth” when Elisha told him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. After all, Naaman thought the Jordan nothing more than a muddy creek compared to the rivers of his own country. Thus, Scripture says he “turned and went away in a rage.”

“But his servants didn’t give up so easily. ‘If Elisha had asked you to do something difficult, you would have done it,’ they said to Naaman. ‘Therefore, why not see what happens if you comply with

this seemingly simple command?’ So Naaman did, indeed, dip himself into the Jordan seven times—the number of completion—and he came out healed and whole.” (Commentary, John Courson)

By our obedient actions, we are “perfecting holiness” in our practical lives and tangibly manifesting the power of the Holy Spirit when indwelling a life. Indeed “perfect holiness” will never be attained in this life, yet we seek to become more like Christ with every passing day. It is *perfecting*, not *perfect*.

All of this should have in it a fear of God. Ahhh...once again we potentially bristle at this principle! We don’t like that dynamic, despite the fact that scripture uses the phrase or the idea behind it over 300 times in scripture! Maybe we need to find that principle again like Hilkiah the priest, blow off the dust, and get back to living Christianity as prescribed by the focus of that faith and stop trying to re-write the definition of Christ into something akin to Santa Claus or maybe Gandhi.

The loss of that serious respect and submissive fear has had a cancerous and profoundly negative effect upon the modern church and it’s street cred. For when we cease to fear Him, we cease to obey Him.

7:2

Paul now begins to speak of what was apparently a heart of repentance and a subsequent revival of spirit being lived out in the Corinthian church. At first...back on the heels of Paul’s first letter to this church, there was seemingly overtures of regret, remorse, and even sorrow. But more importantly, following those initial “knee-jerks” came the biblical practice of “repentance.”

All that Paul had taught over the first letter and thus far in 2 Corinthians was ultimately to bring that church to this specific point. It seems that he instinctively knew that there would be a real knee-jerk reaction from those within the church there in Corinth because of all that he has felt compelled to say and do. Thus he implores them to re-open their hearts to him.

Indeed Paul was never without his critics, and every pastor that is “worth his salt” has some. Yet his life and character were righteous and his intentions transparent. He hadn’t taken advantage of anyone. He hadn’t come to pass the offering plate to better his lifestyle. He had only loved them and preached the Word, and he did both without holding back or padding their impact!

7:3

Despite the hard things he had said to these believers, he now assures them that he was not trying to be the “ax-man.” This is a hard position to be in as a pastor. The blessings, the grace, the joy and all the good things God gives us is an easy delivery. However, the hard things, the corrective and exhorting scriptures and teaching are not always received with open arms. The pastor must teach the whole of the scripture, though, so sometimes he is apt to “take it on the chin” from his flock.

Paul wants them to know that they are in his heart, that he is one of them, to “die together and to live together.” He is not taking the high road as some sort of special elite hand of God. He is ‘one with them’...*one of them*, on all he has taught.

7:4

Because of Paul’s calling, as well as his heart toward these believers, he felt he had license to speak boldly to them. His words were not just corrective and exhorting, for he was also overheard on numerous occasions bragging about these Corinthian saints! I certainly can relate. Despite some blunt and direct teaching coming from this pulpit, I wouldn’t want any other church on earth, and I am proud of all of you.

Even though they had received a lot of correction, and frankly, quite deservedly so, Paul claims he was still “filled with comfort.” He was still exceedingly joyful and blessed despite all the tribulation he had endured, even some of which was at *their* hands! Let us note that God, through all his sacrifices and battles, had not

removed Paul's tribulations, and he was "the man!" So we can certainly count on our God to deal with us in similar style. He gave Paul joy through the trials, and He desires to do the same for us if we just give Him a chance to do so.

7:5

Paul hearkens back to his trip to Macedonia; it apparently wasn't an easy trip! He was tired. Imagine that! Tired in ministry! "Troubled on every side...conflicts and fears!" It doesn't sound very glamorous, does it?

Again we must note that God does not take away all of our troubles and trials. But verse 6 answers the cry of verse 5 with the words "*But nevertheless, God...*" Ahh, yes! Despite the difficulties, He's always there to comfort us through the hard stuff. We don't go around it, we are not removed from it...but He gives us path **through** it.

7:6-7

God sent a brother to the rescue, a fellow pastor named Titus. Apparently, Titus had done some ministry there in Corinth too. Rarely if ever is any ministry a "one man job!"

Titus brought Paul encouraging news! He had news of the Corinthian response to Paul's first letter to them. He brought news of repentance, a desire to make things right, a mourning and action in their souls over their actions. Despite Paul's hardcore letter, they still had a "zeal" for Paul, which apparently was a more than just a relief for Paul; the news made him rejoice!

7:8

Paul acknowledged that his first letter had no doubt upset the believers there in Corinth. He acknowledges that at first what he had to say to them even caused **him** some trepidation. But he was a true pastor and so he sucked it up and stepped to the plate. In the end, he was glad he did it because their very lives ...their *eternities* were at stake!

This is meant spiritually, of course, but perhaps even their very breath was on the line! Certainly, the fruit from their redeemed lives was on the table. Or rather the lack of fruit was on it! So Paul had done what he had to do. He stepped up and answered the call of God upon his life, which was to "shepherd the flock amongst Him." 1 Peter 5:2 says such men are to "*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly...*" Paul served at the "pleasure of the king" and that is not always easy or comfortable.

7:9

Paul was adamant. He was going to preach the truth no matter what. After all, He understood clearly that he was not the source but only the messenger! He knew the call came from God and the real work of the Spirit would be done by the Holy Spirit. The "proof" of a man or woman's heart is laid manifest by their response.

In light of that reality, he was now rejoicing that despite everyone's initial discomfort over his letter, they had actually repented. Because they had turned from the worldly road they were pursuing, they would "*suffer loss from us in nothing.*" Oh! If we too could embrace this truth! Yet Satan wants you to believe that you have gone too far and that there is no return. Or what was said in correction to you was too harsh. Or what was being asked of you was too hard. And thus we plow forward to our own destruction. We "shoot off our foot to spite our face."

7:10

These Corinthian believers however were experiencing not simply regret, shame, or earthly sorrow. That part is remarkably easy and certainly common in our world. Everyone is *sorry*. Everyone *feels bad*. And so did the Corinthian believers! Indeed they were in the full embrace of godly sorrow! And we know that it was *Godly* sorrow because godly sorrow leads to salvation, and real and "no-turning-back" redemption. *Worldly* sorrow

just produces heartbreak, depression, loss, and ultimately *death*. If we are Spirit filled, we *will* repent because the Spirit is compelling us...controlling us, and our actions validate that standing.

7:11

What was going on in the Corinthian church was the real thing. And we know that by what it produced. It produced a serious diligence. They proved their heart by turning from their sin. They made things right with both God and each other, changed their life direction and were thus vindicated. They didn't just "talk the talk." They didn't just "feel bad." Regret is a feeling of remorse that is a negative emotion as it leads one to think continuously about his past action or behavior and causes more shame, guilt, anger, disappointment etc. Repentance begins with **a positive emotion** as it makes one learn about his mistake, and he avidly seeks to not repeat it in the future.

Regret so easily masquerades as repentance. Both carry similar initial postures, but confusing them can be devastating. Regret and repentance are readily mixed up because they often begin in the same spot—pain. Godly grief has its place—but for a believer, grief over sin can never be a destination; rather, it's a tunnel through the mountain. We don't stay there. When we fail to make things right means the original sin is still there, still active, still in play. Meaning *we keep on sinning*, and that of course casts extreme doubt on the eternal state of that believer.

7:12

When Paul wrote that first letter to the church in Corinth, it no doubt seemed harsh in its language. It was a tough issue he was facing directly and he was taking a risk in that this church might not have taken well. However Paul knew what he had to do, what he had to say, no matter how difficult it was for the believers to hear.

It would have been one of those many times a pastor would be tempted to compromise, to take the easy road for the sake of calm and peace, even if it was only a false and/or temporary peace. Paul clarifies his intentions in that his handling of this mess was not primarily for the individual who had done the wrong, nor even for the one wronged.

Paul's objective was for the whole church to be able to see the situation for what it was and to decide just where they stood before Christ. Further, they needed to decide just where they stood in relationship to God and to Paul himself. Let's face it, it is easy to hear the good things, the comforting and encouraging words of grace and love. But how would they react to words of correction? Would they still love their pastor and listen to what he was saying? It is a test that every church goes through from time to time. God will allow us to pass through such testing from time to time so that we might look in the mirror of who and what we are and take stock. If we reject God's direction and correction, then we are thus faced with a salvation dilemma. Everyone falls, but the failure to get back up says you are indeed "down for the count."

Repentance doesn't ultimately fix us. It's simply how broken people, with broken lives, inhabit a broken world until Christ takes us home—all the while experiencing substantial healing and transformation from the God who longs to be in relationship with us.

7:13-14

Ironically, despite the imperfections readily seen in this church, Paul still bragged to others about this body of believers. He didn't brag falsely, despite the fact that this church did indeed have issues, just as all churches do. People are imperfect, therefore, there is no perfect church. But Paul could boast about them because when they had to be corrected, they did the right thing: they repented of their behavior and made things right. What pastor could ask for more?

Did the Corinthian church lose some people over this issue? Scripture doesn't record it, but if they are average on this account, there's no doubt they did. Some people will not receive correction on any level, and do not

want a pastor to take upon himself that role, despite the scriptural mandate to do so. Any parent knows the temptation to “look the other way” when their children are misbehaving, but to do so is not an act of love, but rather an act of self.

Children are to be raised in love, but love that includes discussion and yes, even discipline. When the children respond to that correction, a parent has real reason to be proud of their kids. Such does not occur because they are perfect, but because they hear correction and respond righteously. Like it or not, you are my children in the Spirit.

7:15-16

Paul rejoiced in the report from Titus. Note there was no carrying on about the sin that had occurred. Rather, there was joy in the saints response of humility and repentance. Each of us will have to take on the mantle of brokenness and repentance if we are to walk the path of maturity and growth in Christ.

Titus was a blessed young man to have participated in ministry on the “front lines.” Ministry is more than just preaching and teaching; it is innately the raising of children. Such a statement is not meant to be in any way condescending. It is just the reality of ministry in simple practice. Titus was given the blessing of witnessing all of ministry: the beautiful, as well as the “not-so-pretty.” Such is war, and that is where we are: war. Through it all, Paul was able to now say he had confidence in them and the actions of their hearts. He had confidence in them “in everything.”