

“Connected in Repentance”

2 Corinthians 7

October 22, 2017

We continue our series on 2 Corinthians this morning by examining the Connected in Repentance. Mike last week kicked off a brief series in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation by discussing “The Priesthood of All Believers.” In each of our callings, we are priests of God in this world. Today, we look at another watchword of the Reformation: Repentance.

2 Corinthians 7:9–11

⁹ As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

The 31st of this month marks 500 years since Martin Luther did something that initiated a sea change in the world: he nailed to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral his 95 Theses. Don’t get the wrong idea, though. The Cathedral door served as somewhat of a bulletin board for the university faculty, so Brother Martin wrote his 95 Theses (points to debate) in Latin for the purpose of debating with his fellow university professors.

The immediate concerns had to do with a monstrous construction project taking place in Rome, the building of a new St. Peter’s Cathedral, which was just about to completely bankrupt the church. To raise additional funds, the Pope began to push the sale of indulgences, that is, if you give money to the construction project, then your time in purgatory to pay for your sins could be reduced. As one of the most notorious hawkers of indulgence, Tetzel, preached, “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

Luther wanted to start a debate with university faculty about these abusive religious practices, so he posted his 95 talking points to the bulletin board. With that, the world began to change.

But where did his disputations begin? We may expect that he would begin with some of the themes that would define the Reformation in years ahead, but not so. The first thesis was not about justification through faith alone, although this truth came to dominate the entire movement. His debate did not even begin with salvation by grace alone, either. He started with repentance.

The very first thesis Luther wanted to debate in the university was this: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.” Repentance is not only the way *into* the kingdom of God, it is every step of life in the kingdom. Repentance is the growth plan for the Christian faith. We never outgrow our need to repent, because until we are with Jesus we will never outgrow our sinful heart. We continue in a lifestyle of repentance until the Spirit completes his work of transformation.

In our text this morning, the Apostle Paul places two ideas in sequence that we often overlap: grief and repentance. But they are not the same. We could understand it as remorse and repentance, or sorrow and repentance; however, these words do not mean the same thing. Feeling guilty and feeling sorry are not the same thing as what the Bible calls repentance, the kind of life that characterizes the Christian lifestyle, as Luther puts it. Look at v. 10, *For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.*

While they may begin in a similar place, mere remorse masquerades as repentance, but is a counterfeit or as Paul says here, *worldly grief produces death.* Grief, sorrow, remorse is simply a step on the path of repentance.

Counterfeit Repentance leads to death.

One of the best biblical examples of counterfeit repentance, or as Paul puts it is a *worldly grief that produces death*, is Judas in Mt 27. Flip there with me. You remember the story: Judas had betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. It was Judas who told the authorities where Jesus would be; it was Judas who fingered him for arrest.

After the arrest, Mt 27:3, *Judas the betrayer saw that Jesus was condemned, returned to the chief priest and tried to give back the blood money.* But you remember, the leaders replied, v. 4, “What’s this to us?” They didn’t want their money

back; the deed had been accomplished. They couldn't care less how Judas felt about what he'd done. Judas, v. 5, [threw the money down in the Temple, went out and hanged himself.](#)

So we can readily see, that Judas felt horribly about what he'd done, right? He felt a deep grief, sorrow and remorse for his betrayal. He even tried to make restitution, to return the money. What's more, he called what he did sin. He didn't pull punches to issue a non-apology apology before the news cameras. He accurately described his actions: I have betrayed innocent blood, he said.

Judas felt sorrow and grief, deeply, and that grief literally ended in death for him, in suicide. But it wasn't repentance. Being sorry does not always indicate that we have repented, because we can be sorry over things that ultimately have nothing to do with God—like being caught, or some loss in the eyes of the world—reputation or standing or privileges that are lost. As with Judas, that is a worldly grief, grief according to the world, or before the world, that saw his plan backfire and humiliate him.

Here's the principle: Counterfeit repentance ends in death because it deals in consequences or getting caught. It grieves some loss *before the world* NOT with the sin that has offended the Lord. Even in his sorrow, Judas remained self-centered; even in his confession, he was looking for ways to feel rid of his remorse. As he threw the money onto the floor in the Temple, essentially he was saying, "Here is the money back. Take it so I can feel innocent again. Take my guilt from me so I can feel clean when I feel so dirty." That sort of grief is a first step in repentance, but that is NOT where it ends.

Of course Judas felt sorry, because being forced to deal with the consequences of our actions can bring extremely hard-hitting realities. He wanted immediate relief from the feelings; he wanted to feel release from the consequences of what he had done by sending innocent Jesus to the cross. His efforts to get rid of the grief didn't work. To him, there seemed like no other option than death because there was no way to manage the shame.

Worldly grief is a sin management program, seeking to manage our shame or loss in eyes of someone else. Some of what may initially sound like repentance in our life is counterfeit, too, getting stuck in grief over consequences (grief according to or before the world) instead of grief over our offense against God. Let's take some examples and evaluate.

Is this remorse or repentance? "I'm sorry you took my words in the wrong way. Please forgive me." This is a little remorse jiu-jitsu, not repentance at all. Instead, it is focusing blame on you—you took my words the wrong way—and still trying to sound humble-ish.

Or, "I'm sorry for hurting you. Please forgive me." That sound better? A bit, but still, the focus is on the consequence, hurting you, which not owning up to my critical or condemning words I used as a means of hurting you. I'm still grieved over the consequence...not over the offense itself.

Or, let's say you have made terrible choices, making a mess of your life and potentially losing your family. Is this remorse or repentance when you say: "Honey, I sinned against you and the kids, I let down the church, I can't believe the mess I've made of my life. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I'm going to change." Not to be too critical, but what still is the focus? Consequences. The shame of losing a spouse or family, or losing a reputation before the church family, is what is grieved. This sounds more about bringing relief from the pain than it is restoring the glory of God by acknowledging what I've done to him in my actions and my thoughts and how I've specifically harmed others in that rebellion.

As long as our hearts are preoccupied with getting rid of the feelings of guilt or shame because we were caught, or managing some loss we feel before the world, we are stuck in remorse...not genuine repentance. At the end of the day, when we are more concerned with the consequences, our lives continue to feel like death, because soon enough we will figure out we are not wise enough, powerful enough or strategic enough to be able to foresee and prevent all consequences from coming home to roost.

True Repentance leads to salvation.

Looking back at v. 10 again, godly grief also has a direction, but instead of producing death, godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.

Grief is not the same as repentance; rather, feeling sorrow or grief sets our feet on the path of repentance if it is godly. Paul had wounded them, he had caused a grief, in confronting these people with their sin. Yet, the wound was a means of bringing healing, the grief to bring salvation. Literally what Paul says is grief according to God produces repentance. The contrast becomes clear when we set them alongside one another: grief before the world vs. grief before God. This means a grief with reference to God or before the face of God produces repentance.

That little phrase is so important for it distinguishes at the core the difference between counterfeit and true repentance: grief *before whom!* True repentance is rooted in the truth that at the nub, God is the primary One our sin offends. Our sins against one another are terrible because they violate our Creator's best and plan for us. Every sin is a sin against the Lord. And for our heart to change from grief over consequences or simply grief that we got caught to a desire and power to change, we must realize that it is God first whom we have offended in our sin. He is the holy Judge and we have violated his law, his instruction, his best for his world. We have sinned first against him! Our business first and foremost is with him before it is about managing the fallout of consequences.

What do we do with that grief before God? Repent!

Repentance is a word for turning. What Paul is saying to us this morning is that when we grasp our grief for our sin is ultimately before the face of God, and we want to turn away from that sin, our turning is first a turning toward God.

God does not promise an undoing of consequences when we repent. We may have to face broken relationships, shattered trust, some painful loss when confess and turn away from our sin. But, what he does promise is himself, and that is oh, so much better.

This is the really good news that lies at the heart of what Luther was driving in his first Thesis. When we turn away from our sin, we don't turn to good works to try and make it up to God. Instead, we turn to the Lord for salvation without regret. We can turn away from sin by his power, and toward a holy God without regret because Jesus has *already* gone to the cross to cover the penalty for our sin and rebellion. When we turn to God we turn to a loving heavenly Father with his arms open as wide as the cross to shower us with his love, his affection, his fellowship.

We turn away from sin to the Lord as a lifestyle because we have nothing to fear from him for punishment. Our turning is a turning to the cross. Our grief over sin drives us to the cross where we find the smile, the delight, the fellowship of God.

This is what Paul means when he says "without regret." Follow his thought here. Our regret/grief over our sin, when seen as a violation before God's face, then turned to the cross of salvation, leaves us without that regret any longer. **Regret taken to the cross leaves us without regret!** Just like in Pilgrim's Progress, when Christian drops his pack of guilt at the cross, his load of guilt is gone. Grief over sin taken to the cross, remains at the cross.

There is a joy in salvation because our fellowship with God is restored and his delight reigns over his children. There is a joy in repentance to know that God has done something about the stain of sin in our lives, and he has begun the work of removing it by his grace.

But, the devil, the accuser HATES regrets left at the foot of the cross. If he is unsuccessful in preventing your regret and grief over your sin, then he will do his best to keep you from *dropping* your guilt at the cross. **The Accuser specializes in a wallowing guilt, a lingering guilt, an unspecific sense of shame, a deep bondage to what Jesus died to remove.** If your eyes are opened to your need for forgiveness by the Lord, the accuser will work to keep you from feeling that forgiveness freely offered at the cross. Regret left at the cross leads to salvation without regret.

Then we turn to one another in humility, no longer attempting to manage consequences, but rather willing to accept them and trust God for healing. Repentance has fruit and evidence worked by the Spirit in a changing life.

Back to one of our examples earlier. Instead of consequence management of "I'm sorry you got hurt; please forgive me," repentance sounds like, "I'm so sorry I said, x,y, and z about you. I slandered you before others and the Lord. I can understand that you are very hurt by my actions. I've confessed them as sin before the Lord and now before you and will actively seek to repair the damage done to you by my actions. I humbly ask for your forgiveness." That is what repentance sounds like. It is specific, God-oriented, accepting of consequences, honest because the cross has removed our shame, and finally humble and gracious.

Does that sound humiliating? Miserable to you? Or is it freeing to be able by the grace of God admit our offenses and have a power at work within us to take steps to repair what is broken?

We repent as a lifestyle because we just keep on sinning. We repent as a lifestyle because Jesus keeps on forgiving. We repent as a lifestyle because the Spirit keeps on changing us.

So on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let's take a page out of Luther's playbook. How about a reformation in your own soul? Let it begin with repentance, the grace of and joy of repentance for your guilt is nailed to the cross and the Spirit alive within you to change you from the inside out.

May the grief over your sin before the Lord drive you once more to the cross, and there lay down your burden. In humility turn to his smiling and empowering face to be reminded of his love. Then in humility turn toward one another, to repair what is broken...and the power of the Reformation comes to life in us all.