

Godly Grief

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[0 : 00] So, I was at the men's retreat this past weekend. Fantastic time.

If you've never been and you're a guy, I would strongly encourage you to prioritize it next year. Fantastic time. Some guys I see who are there, you made it back for church.

I think a lot of our guys are still out there, but we had a great time. Friday night, have a fantastic time. I'm just catching up with people, eating great food, perfect weather, and then I lay down to go to sleep that night, and about three o'clock in the morning, I wake up, and I'm just filled with regret.

Nothing to do with the men's retreat. I'm filled with regret over something that happened like 35 years ago in elementary school in the fourth grade when some people were being mean to this kid, and I didn't do anything about it because I wanted them to think that I was cool.

And that's all I could think about at three o'clock in the morning. I think when it comes to regret, there are basically two categories that we can fall into with how we deal with regret.

[1 : 14] Some people, maybe some of you are like me, you tend to feel lots of regret and lots of guilt, and ruminating at 3 a.m. about something in elementary school sounds familiar to you.

I think there are other people who kind of lean in the opposite direction. There are people who tend to avoid or suppress feelings of regret when they arise.

There are 4.4 million posts on Instagram with the hashtag, no regrets, hashtag no regrets, which I always think is interesting.

You know, I see that on a post, and I just think, I don't believe that person. You know, I don't think you're being honest, you know? I mean, because there's a word for people who genuinely live life with no regret, and it's called a sociopath.

So, unless that is you, you know, 1 in 25 people, so it could be, but unless that is you, then chances are what that means really is that you're trying to avoid or you're trying to suppress your feelings of regret, but they're there.

[2 : 20] I mean, most people have to deal with regret. Most of us feel regret from time to time. And no matter which category you fall into, neither one is actually recognizing regret for what it is.

And that's what I want to talk about this morning. Regret is actually a tool. Understood correctly, regret can be a gift because regret is something that can actually help us become more truly human.

But in order to understand how regret works that way and how it can be a gift, we have to understand the way regret relates to godly grief. And we've been doing a series in 2 Corinthians, walking through Paul's amazing pastoral letter, and we come to this section where he talks about godly grief.

And so, we're going to first look at what is godly grief, and then we're going to look at how this works, how this works. So, let's pray, and then we're going to dive in. Lord, we thank You for Your Word.

Lord, we thank You for Your Holy Spirit that is present with us. We thank You for all of the ways that You minister to us, Lord, not only in the pleasure and in the joy of our life, but also in the pain and in the struggle.

[3 : 40] Lord, that in all of it, You're there, and in all of it, Your good purposes are at work in us and through us. And Lord, we pray that as we open Your Word this morning, You would speak, and that through Your written Word, we would come to see Your living Word, Jesus Christ, face to face.

And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. So, first of all, what is godly grief? I want to give you a little context about what's happening here in Corinth. There's conflict in the church in Corinth.

We're not sure exactly what is going on, but the word that is used in verse 12 means injustice. So, some form of injustice has been committed by one person or a group of people against another person.

Paul, who's the founding pastor, has gotten involved, and as is often the case, now everybody's angry at Paul. And so, Paul is trying to clean this mess up, and he's written a very stern letter confronting them in their sin.

So, he writes the letter. He most likely gives it to Titus, sends Titus off to deliver the letter, and then he's waiting for Titus to return to tell him how the Corinthians responded to his letter.

[4 : 51] And while he's waiting, he's plunged into a deep depression. Titus doesn't show, and he doesn't show, and he doesn't show. And Paul is...he's heartbroken over the pain that he has caused these brothers and sisters whom he loves.

He's worried that the letter is only going to alienate them further, that after this, they're going to want to have nothing to do with him. And by the way, these are feelings that every pastor knows well. You know, was I too strong?

Did I come across too...was it too much? You know, should I have said it differently or done it differently? So, he's wringing his hands, and then finally he finds Titus, and Titus tells him, actually, the letter worked.

The letter was successful. Many of the Corinthians are repenting. Their love and their zeal for you, Paul, has been restored. And so, Paul writes in this letter, which is a follow-up, for even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it, for I see that the letter grieved you, though only for a while.

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

[6 : 16] So, Paul's overjoyed because his letter did its job. It provoked them to feel godly grief over their sin. You ask, well, what is godly grief?

I think the Heidelberg Catechism, question 89, actually gives a pretty good definition. It says, to be genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it.

That's a pretty good definition of godly grief. But there's something I want us to see here. The opposite of godly grief is not no grief. It's not no regret.

The opposite of godly grief, according to Paul, is actually something that he calls worldly grief. You have godly grief and you have worldly grief.

And this is very important to understand. It is possible to feel regret, to feel remorse, to feel guilt, to feel grief, but in a worldly way that doesn't actually lead to life and salvation.

[7 : 16] It actually leads, as he says, to death. So, what's the difference between godly grief and worldly grief? I'll suggest a few differences. First, worldly grief tends to be me-centered.

Worldly grief over sin is grieving that I got caught. It's grieving that I've been found out. It's grieving the public embarrassment that I now have to face. It's grieving the blow to my ego.

It's grieving the consequences that I now have to face because people are on to me. Godly grief, by contrast, is God-centered.

It's God-centered. Godly grief recognizes that all sin we commit is ultimately not simply sin against ourselves or other people, but it's sin that we commit against God.

That God is the ultimate one that we are offending. As David says to God in Psalm 51, he says, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

[8 : 23] So, godly grief shares God's hatred of sin. It hates sin for God's sake. That's the first difference. Second difference, worldly grief tends to avoid or minimize personal responsibility.

So, worldly grief tends to play the victim. Worldly grief tends to blame other people. It tends to blame outside circumstances. It tends to blame parents, government, church.

It tends to say, yeah, I was in the wrong, but it was really this person's fault. It was really your fault. It was really their fault. Godly grief, by contrast, is willing to take full responsibility for sin.

For those of you who were at the vigil, we looked at the story of Jonah and how Jonah, when he looks at the storm and realizes that all of this, the storm and the terrified sailors, that it's all because of him, he says, I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.

He's not blaming anybody. He's not minimizing. He's not making excuses. He's saying, this is on me, and I deserve whatever I have coming toward me. That's the second difference.

[9 : 36] Third difference between worldly grief and godly grief. Worldly grief tends to lead us into self-pity and bitterness and resentment, things that carve us off from God and ultimately put us on a road that leads to spiritual death.

Godly grief. Whereas godly grief, according to Paul, by design, leads to repentance and then freedom. Godly grief is designed as a catalyst.

We are not meant to wallow in grief. We're not meant to wallow in guilt and remorse. It is meant to wake us up and spur us to action, to get us moving in the right direction.

So that's what godly grief is. Now, how does this work and how does it relate to regret at 3 a.m.? I want to kind of work this out with you.

Essentially, there's a kind of progression that we find ourselves following in our hearts, according to Paul. And here's how I would describe this progression.

[10 : 39] First, we need to listen to regret, attend to it. Then we need to use that as a way of identifying sin. And then we need to grieve that sin.

And then we need to repent from that sin. And then we need to embrace God's forgiveness. So let's just walk through that in more detail. First of all, when you find yourself feeling regret, it could have been something that you did yesterday or something from 35 years ago.

But when that regret comes upon you, you need to recognize it for what it is. You know, when you feel transient pain in your body, it's probably not a good idea to ignore that pain, especially if it keeps coming back.

Right? Pain is meant to show us, it's a signal that there is some sort of physical issue that needs to be addressed. That's the whole reason we feel pain.

And it's the same with feelings like regret and remorse and guilt. If they recur again and again, they're signaling to us that there is a spiritual issue that needs to be addressed.

[11 : 50] So regret is to sin what pain is to injury. And we need to listen to it. Right? No one likes to feel regret, but it is a necessary tool for spiritual health and growth.

And I'll say this. I believe that a sensitive conscience is a gift from the Lord. A sensitive conscience is a gift from the Lord. I think it's one of the ways the Holy Spirit works in us.

One of the ways that we experience sanctification is that our conscience becomes more and more sensitive to sin. So if you find yourself awake at 3 o'clock in the morning ruminating over something that happened, it's very tempting if that keeps happening to go to a counselor and get some techniques to stay asleep or to maybe start taking Ambien or Zolof.

And I'm not knocking, you know, those approaches, but the first thing that you need to do is to lean into those feelings. Maybe not at 3 a.m., but write it down.

And then the next day, lean into that. Ask yourself, what's happening here? Is there a spiritual issue that I need to address here? That's the first thing. Listen to regret.

[13 : 00] Then once we begin to listen to our regret, we need to begin to try to identify underlying sin. It could be a pattern of sin.

It could be that the thing that you're remembering isn't itself the issue. It could be that that's a formative moment when you begin to participate in a pattern of sin that you have continued to live out and replay again and again and again.

And it could be that that is the issue that needs to be addressed. Pray in the words of Psalm 139, search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me into the way everlasting.

You sort of open yourself up and say, if there's anything that I need to see and address, then please show it to me, Lord. Maybe you regret saying something or doing something that was hurtful to somebody.

Ask yourself, why did I do that? Where was that coming from? Have I been harboring resentment toward this person for a long time and it finally came out? Do I feel threatened by this person and diminishing them makes me feel bigger?

[14 : 05] Am I envious of this person? Is it coming from a place of pride? I think I'm better than this person. Whatever it is, ask yourself. Ask the Lord to reveal that issue to you.

Maybe you regret marrying the person that you've married. You wish you had been with that other person that you broke up with in high school. You wonder how your life would be different. Maybe you regret not pursuing some opportunity that would have led you in a completely different direction.

And you say, well, that's not sinful. Well, maybe not. But how often are you haunted by those feelings? Where's the sin in that? Are you sinning by failing to trust the Lord?

Are you sinning by failing to trust that God is always with you? That God has the ability to work in and through your choices? That God's good purposes are always being worked out in your life?

That God is not limited, limited by us when we make bad choices? He's not limited by our disobedience? Is it a failure to trust that God is always with you in His providence and sovereignty?

[15 : 16] Right? Maybe you regret a time when you should have spoken up but didn't. Is that a fear of man that still limits you?

Right? Is that an idolatry of approval? Is that something that you need to address? So whatever the case may be, whatever form of regret you feel, and there are different kinds of regret, ask yourself, where's the underlying sin here?

Lean into those feelings. And then once you have some sense of what it is, what the Spirit is trying to reveal to you, then you need to grieve that sin.

And to grieve sin is to meditate on the fact that God hates sin in general, and God hates it when we sin. God doesn't hate you.

He doesn't hate me. But He hates our sin. Our sin is an offense to Him. It's a slap in His face. And I think often it's very tempting to just sort of move past that.

[16 : 18] This is the step, I think, that we are most likely to skip. We want to jump straight from, yeah, I sinned too, but I know God forgives me. And I think that's an issue that this text is trying to draw out.

You know, about ten years ago, it's probably happening for longer than that, but about ten years ago, I started noticing how our kind of culture of authenticity was making its way into the evangelical blogosphere.

And so I began kind of reading people who would write in a kind of quasi-confessional tone about how they are the very worst kind of Christian in this way or that way, and they would sort of confess certain socially acceptable sins, like how they haven't given their kids a bath in a week, and they're like, but the pool counts, right?

Or how they helped organize the church picnic, but they confess that they actually hate church picnics, you know, things like that. And, you know, certainly, if you are the kind of person who, you know, is highly perfectionistic, you're highly legalistic, then reading something like that could be incredibly liberating.

But I recognize that there's something that comes with this sort of tone, and a lot of these writers share in common a distinct lack of grief over sin, you know, an almost cavalier attitude towards sin.

[17 : 37] And I think it's easy to miss the danger in that. And here's why godly grief, here's why taking sin seriously matters so much.

And I say this as somebody whose tendency is to read that kind of thing and laugh at it and love it and appreciate it, but I've recognized in my own heart the danger when I began to take that kind of attitude toward sin.

And here's the issue. When it comes to our experience, there's a distinct correlation between grief and grace. The more we experience grief over our sin, the more we feel relief in light of God's grace.

And this has absolutely been true in my own personal experience. If I don't actually grieve my sin, then God's grace doesn't matter to me very much.

But when I actually feel the weight of my sin, you know, when I reflect on how truly offensive it is to God, the fact that I'm living in a body that God has given me, in a world that God has made, and I'm completely denying Him with my actions, and how horribly offensive that is, then when I turn my focus to God's forgiveness, it actually becomes substantial, and I feel it.

[19 : 01] So our experience of grace is directly connected to our willingness to grieve sin. That's when grace ceases to be purely conceptual, and it starts to become something that we inhabit.

Right? So we need to grieve our sin. And then fourthly, once we've grieved our sin, we're not meant to, as I said earlier, stay and wallow in that grief. We're meant to actually take action.

We're meant to repent from sin. It's meant to move us into repentance. And as we've already said, as important as it is for us to grieve our sin, it is equally important that we don't stay in that grief.

Godly grief leads to repentance. I know this is kind of a cheesy reference, but it always comes to mind when I think about repentance. So caveats aside, the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

If you remember the end of that movie, a chasm has opened in the floor, and the grail, this treasure that they've been after the whole movie, is sort of balanced on the edge of this precipice, and it's getting ready to fall.

[20 : 07] And Indy has, he's hanging over the edge, and he's reaching out across the chasm for this chalice. And he keeps saying, I've almost got it. I've almost got it.

But his father has him by the other hand, and his hand is slipping. And if he keeps reaching for it, it's very clear that he's going to plummet to his death. And so he's reaching, I've almost got it.

I've almost got it. And in a very calm voice, his father says, Indiana, let it go. And Indy turns.

He sees the voice of his father. He stops reaching for it. He turns his attention fully, looks into the face of his father, takes his other hand, swings it up, and his father pulls him out.

And I, to this day, think that that's one of the most powerful visuals of repentance I've ever come across. Because every single one of us, our sin is a symptom of the fact that we are reaching for something other than God.

[21 : 08] And we are striving for it, and we think that we can have both. We think I can have a little bit of my father, and I can have a little bit of this thing, and I want it all, and it's almost there. And if you just let me do this one more thing, then I can get it.

And we're reaching for it. And it could be success, or comfort, or safety, or approval, or any of the other things that we elevate to God-like status in our lives. But the more we reach, at some point, we're going to plummet to our own death.

The things that we're reaching for are actually destroying us. And often, they're very good things. You know, they're after the Holy Grail, for goodness sake. It's good, beautiful, amazing things that we should want, but not more than God.

Right? And so, repentance means listening to the voice of your Father who is speaking your name into your life. And He is saying in a clear voice, let it go.

Let it go. And it means turning around away from that thing, turning our back to it, and reaching with all of our might toward our Father who already has a hold of us, and allowing Him to pull us out of the chasm.

[22 : 19] And you know, repentance is really the key to the Christian life. When Luther posted his theses on the Wittenberg door, the very first thesis says that repentance, that Jesus calls Christians to a lifestyle of repentance.

You know, repentance is the entire life of a Christian. It's not just something that we do here and there. I love what Frederica Matthews Green writes about repentance. She says, the first time Jesus appears, in the first gospel, the first instruction He gives is repent.

From then on, it is His most consistent message. In all times and every situation, His advice is to repent. And here's the thing, not just the scribes and Pharisees, not just the powerful, He tells even the poor and oppressed that repentance is the key to eternal life, is the key to eternal life.

And this is a radically countercultural message in our society where many people believe that only certain kinds of people need to repent. If you're privileged, if you're powerful, then you need to repent, but not if you're poor or oppressed.

So this is radically countercultural. Jesus calls everyone, it doesn't matter your status, your station in life, everyone needs to repent, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, and embrace a lifestyle of repentance.

[23 : 39] And the good news of the gospel is that every single time we repent, God's grace and forgiveness is there waiting for us again and again and again.

And so the last thing that we need to do once we have grieved and repented of our sin is embrace God's forgiveness. Jesus gave His life on the cross to atone for all the sins of the world, but we have to ask for it in repentance.

It's there for the taking, but we need to come and we need to receive it. And then we need to embrace that forgiveness. Paul says in verse 10, godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.

Without regret. So the point of the gospel is not that we wallow in regret and walk around in such a horrible person, which, you know, a lot of Christians do. I actually, frankly, kind of grew up in a church where that was a kind of way of exhibiting your holiness was to just talk about how sinful you were all the time.

That's not the way it's meant to be. We're meant to live life free from regret. But the only way to do that is to go through this process of identifying, grieving, repenting from, and then accepting forgiveness.

[24 : 44] Once we do, though, it sets us free. And this gives us a way to deal with regret and guilt and sin so that we can leave them in the past and truly move on with our lives and freedom.

So if you're like me and you've gone through that and the regret continues to perhaps haunt you, as I think some of us are, then if we indulge that regret, if we continue to allow it to affect us, we are in some ways calling God a liar because God has said, listen, I've forgiven you.

So those of us who don't want to deal with our regret, we need to deal with it. Those of us who continue to wallow in our regret, we need to, this is what we need to hear. If you've dealt with it, if you've repented, then embrace forgiveness. Be free.

So let me just apply this in a couple of ways before we close. First of all, there are times when it is necessary for us to cause godly grief in others.

There are times when it is necessary for us to cause godly grief in others. There is a strong temptation when somebody comes to you and talks about something they've said or done or something that they regret or feel guilty over.

[25 : 56] I mean, our instinct is to say, oh, I'm sure it's not that big a deal. Oh, I'm sure it wasn't totally your fault. I'm sure you did everything that you could. You know, we're all works in progress.

I mean, nobody's perfect and we're all sinners and my sin is just as bad as your sin. And you know, all of those things are true. All of those things are true. Right? But those are platitudes that run the risk of robbing somebody of the opportunity to actually deal with something and experience true freedom.

We are confining people to a kind of false freedom when we do that. So what we should actually do is to recognize that this is an opportunity for somebody to do business with Jesus.

And maybe our role is to help that happen. Right? That doesn't mean we enjoy it. There's a different sermon for you if you enjoy doing that kind of thing.

But it's sometimes necessary and it's sometimes the most loving thing that we can do. It's extremely hard for Paul. Note that. Paul writes this letter and everything he says in it is true and yet it plunges him into depression.

[27 : 11] And he's wringing his hands, have I destroyed my relationship? Have you ever had that experience with a close friend? You speak the hard truth, you say the hard thing and then you go to bed that night and you can't sleep because you're so terrified that you have destroyed the relationship.

Right? You're haunted by, oh my God, did I go too far? Did I say too much? They're never going to talk to me again. They're going to leave. I'm never going to see them again. It may very well be that that was the most loving thing that you've ever done in that relationship.

It doesn't mean we enjoy it but sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes that's what love looks like. And then there are many, many times, hopefully many more times, when it's necessary for us to feel godly grief.

You know, many, many Christians live their entire Christian life with a couple of things. On the one hand, they have kind of vague regrets and nagging guilt and on the other hand, grace remains purely conceptual.

They never really deal with their sin and guilt. They never really experience grace beyond a kind of theological understanding and the reason is they've never come together. They've never come together as they were meant to do.

[28 : 20] And so if you're a Christian and you've never really experienced grace, it could be because you've never really taken the time to grieve your sin and let it move you into repentance. Regret is a gift.

And if we respond to regret, if we allow it to move us to repentance, if we allow it to set us free, then we become more and more human. So when regret comes upon you, listen to it, allow it to lead you into a fresh experience of God's grace, and then for Jesus' sake, leave it behind.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the work that you do in us. And what we need now is not simply words and ideas, but we all need to do business with you.

We all need to come to you with our regrets and our guilt. And Lord, I know that we have had an opportunity to do that already by hearing your law and by crying out for your mercy, but Lord, we'll have an opportunity to do that again as we come together and confess our sin.

And then as we hear the absolution, I pray that you would press the truth of it into our hearts. And then, Lord, as we come to your table and we pray again that we're not worthy even to gather up the crumbs from under this table, I pray that you would remind us that it's because of your mercy, because your character is always to have mercy, that we come to this table.

[29 : 44] And then I pray that you would feed us and nourish us and therein set us free. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen.