

Desperate People Repent

2 Corinthians 7

See if this scenario sounds familiar to you. . . You are living your life, working hard, and being a fairly responsible person. But then you “blow it” - you give in to some temptation. The temptation could involve anger, deceit, sensuality, laziness, gluttony, or a dozen other things. You immediately feel guilty. You feel terrible that you’ve compromised and failed to live the way you really want to live. You can barely even pray to God because you feel so guilty.

But an amazing thing happens. . . After a couple of days the guilt begins to wear off. Maybe you aren’t such a loser after all; maybe you were being too hard on yourself earlier. Your life and your emotions get back to normal. . . until you find yourself giving in to the same temptation a couple weeks later. The cycle begins again.

One of the reasons that we don’t break out of that cycle of sin is because we don’t understand the role of legitimate guilt, and we don’t understand the process of repentance. To repent simply means to make a change or to have a change of heart. When you repent you take a different path than before. People who repent live their lives different than before. Too often we stop short of repentance; we feel guilty for a while but never have a permanent change of mind and change of life. We are going to see that repentance isn’t punishment; repentance is a gift that allows us to live differently.

Today as we continue our series entitled “desperate,” we are going to consider a very specific type of desperation, namely the type of desperation we have because of our own sin. We introduced this topic last week when we studied James 4. There James challenged his readers to “be miserable and weep and mourn” over their sin; he challenged them to be brokenhearted because they had been unfaithful to God. He challenged us to get to the place where we are desperate for God to do a deep work in our lives.

In 2 Corinthians 7:8–11 Paul has a very insightful discussion of the process of repentance. He gives us some categories that are very helpful when we’re desperate for God to do something in our lives.

Understanding the context of this paragraph is important. Paul had founded the church at Corinth some years earlier. Our best understanding is that false teachers from Jerusalem had arrived in Corinth and tried to dissuade the Corinthians from being loyal to Paul. They accused Paul of trying to take advantage of them financially and that the message he taught was a perversion of the truth. The Corinthians - Paul’s spiritual children - didn’t defend him against these accusations. Apparently they began to waver in their commitment to Paul and (more importantly) to Paul’s gospel about Jesus Christ.

When Paul learned what was happening, he wrote a letter to the Corinthians to try and set things straight. We no longer have this letter which was written between the writings of First and Second Corinthians. It is called “the severe letter” because he confronted

the Corinthians very directly about their lack of commitment to him and to Jesus Christ. There was no guarantee that they would respond well and move back toward Paul; there was the possibility that they'd be offended and move further away from Paul.

Paul was greatly relieved to find out from Titus (who delivered his letter) that the Corinthians had received Paul's letter and had reaffirmed their love for him. In verses 8 through 11 Paul recounts the Corinthians' response and articulates what happens when we respond to our sin with genuine repentance.

Godly sorrow is the catalyst for repentance. (2 Corinthians 7:8-10)

8 For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it—for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while—

Initially, when Paul learned from Titus that his letter had caused the Corinthians "sorrow" he was troubled; he regretted that his words had cut them so deeply. But upon further reflection, he did not regret causing them sorrow because their sorrow was only temporary. Notice how his regret turned to joy when he heard that their sorrow led them to repentance.

9 I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.

Paul was full of joy over the realization that their sorrow wasn't an end in itself. They were made "sorrowful to the point of repentance." As we'll see in verse 10, it is possible to be sorrowful about our sin without being moved to repentance. Sometimes people feel horrible over their sin but don't attempt to change the core attitudes or behaviors behind those sins. But thankfully, the Corinthians were "sorrowful to the point of repentance": their sorrow prompted a change of mind and a change of heart. Such sorrow was "according to the will of God" because it produced the effect that God intended (i.e., repentance). If they hadn't repented, they would have "suffered loss" - either through severing the relationship with Paul or through the hardness of heart that comes with a refusal to repent.

Paul continues his explanation of the process of repentance in verse 10:

10 For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

"Repentance without regret" is a fascinating expression. Paul is saying that when sorrow functions as God desires, you won't regret that you've repented. I've never heard a person regret that he had repented. But I've heard plenty of people regret that they hadn't repented of some sin. When godly sorrow leads you to repentance, you experience an internal confirmation that following Jesus is superior to living in sin. Paul says that such sorrow "leads to salvation." At conversion, a person repents, believes in

Christ, and experiences salvation. Since Paul is writing to people who are already believers, I think he's talking about the fruit of salvation, namely, more life and fulness.

By contrast, "the sorrow of the world produces death." If a person's sorrow over sin doesn't lead to repentance (only to bad emotions), the result is a deadening of our spiritual vitality; we are less and less expectant that God will do a deep work in us, and we lose interest in God working through us.

Verse 11 begins with the word "for," indicating that Paul is giving the reason why he was so confident that the Corinthians had actually repented (instead of merely feeling sorrowful). The takeaway for us is that **repentance involves taking decisive steps of obedience**. Notice how this was true of the Corinthians. Remember that their offense was failing to defend Paul before those who tried to discredit him.

11 For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.

After receiving Paul's "severe letter" they were eager to vindicate themselves. They were indignant toward the false teachers who opposed Paul. They exhibited "fear" or alarm over their own disobedience. They showed affection for Paul and longed to make things right with Paul. Once convicted of their sin, they were zealous to correct the situation (no apathy or hesitation). They avenged their wrong by exercising church discipline on the persons within the church who opposed Paul. Paul ends this catalog of praise for the Corinthians by saying, "In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter." Their response was so complete and sincere that the matter was closed as far as Paul was concerned.

The process of repentance is pretty simple: respond to sorrow over sin with a change of heart and specific acts of obedience. The goal of repentance isn't merely to feel better; the goal is a change of life and obedience.

In a few minutes we're going to look at an example of repentance to show how we might respond whole-heartedly with "godly sorrow." But first I want to address an issue that can either make or break this whole process. The issue is whether or not we believe that we can actually repent and take a different course in specific areas of our lives.

As you know, dogs illustrate many spiritual truths. . . One morning last week Brenda put our dog Molly on her leash out in front of our house (photo #1). After about an hour I walked out front to bring Molly back inside. Guess what the other end of Molly's leash was fastened to? (photo #2) It wasn't fastened to anything! It's normally fastened around our hose, but I'd taken the hose out back the night before and left the leash just lying there. But Molly just sat there for an hour without wandering off even though she could have. Not to go too deep into dog psychology, but **her behavior was guided by what she thought was true, not by what was actually true.**

When it comes to our repentance, if we are convinced that repentance “won’t work” for us, then it probably won’t. You will have made a self-fulfilling prophecy. There can be lots of reasons why you might think that repentance really isn’t a live option for you. Perhaps you think that your past or your sinful habits are greater than God’s grace. You really believe that you are leashed to an immovable object. You need to know that if you have trusted in Jesus alone and have become a new creature in Christ, that way of thinking is a lie. Not to be insulting, but you’re like my dog sitting in the front yard who only thinks she can’t get away.

If the gospel says anything, it says that Jesus died and rose again to give us freedom from our sins. Listen to Hebrews 2:14-15.

14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Jesus became one of us in order to “render Satan powerless” in our lives and to give freedom those who have been enslaved their entire lives. We saw this last week in James 4:6, “But He gives a greater grace” - grace that is greater than our sin - to the humble. When we humble ourselves and repent we place ourselves in a position to receive that grace.

Perhaps you’ve been fixated on yourself - your competence to live the Christian life, your commitment to change, your willpower to avoid sin. In repentance you fix your eyes on Jesus and His sufficiency, His competence as our great High Priest, His power that we experience through the Holy Spirit. If our sin has made us desperate (i.e., we have godly sorrow over our sin), we can respond with repentance and take decisive steps of obedience. We do this by faith, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit and not in ourselves.

Let me give you an **example of the type of repentance** we’ve been discussing. If you are the least bit sensitive to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, there will be times when you realize that you have sinned with your words. James wrote that the tongue is “a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (James 4:8). What might repentance look like if you become desperate at the realization that your words are poisoning others’ lives instead of nourishing them?

You can begin by confessing your sin to God and ask for cleansing. Be as specific as possible in naming your sins of the tongue. “God, I have been selfish and careless with my words. . . Instead of being quick to hear and slow to speak, I only wanted to be heard. . . Heavenly Father, I tried to take the speck out of my brother’s eye without even noticing the log in my own eye. . . I was more concerned with being ‘right’ than helping the other person . . .” Spend some time in Psalm 51 if you want a great example of how to confess your sins to God. After sinning with Bathsheba, David skillfully and specifically laid out before God what he had done.

If your confession is vague, your repentance will be vague. If your confession is specific, your repentance can be focused and (like the Corinthians) you can take decisive steps of obedience.

Your repentance will surely include saturating your mind and heart with God's Word. I'm not talking about reading a verse a day on your phone. That's good, but that won't form the deep structures of your thinking. You need to spend significant amounts of time in Scripture if you want the "word of Christ" to "dwell richly within you" (Colossians 3:16). Over time you will have more encouraging and helpful things to say to others; and you will have the will to say them.

You could memorize a verse a week for 10 weeks; you could memorize verses that teach and challenge you in your speech. Proverbs 15:2 says, "The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly." Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." Each week you could practice your verse once a day. Try to discern the need of the moment and then meet that need with words that give grace.

If you're thinking, "That sure sounds like a lot of work. . ." you are correct. Everything worth pursuing in this life is a lot of work, requiring effort. I think that the process of repentance is often short-circuited in our lives because we think spiritual transformation should be easy and effortless. Perhaps you've heard G.K. Chesterton's insightful comment:

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.

G.K. Chesterton

Repentance is very difficult, very strenuous. But it's absolutely worth it because Jesus is worthy of our lives. You will never regret repenting of careless speech. You'll never think, "I wish I were still in the habit of saying careless, selfish words that unnecessarily offend family and friends. . ." No, sorrow according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret.

Considerations re: Repentance. I want to mention briefly four issues that are relevant to our repentance.

1. Consider sins of commission (doing things you shouldn't do) **and** sins of omission (not doing things you should do). The example I just gave involved a sin of commission, saying things you shouldn't. A sin of omission might be prayerlessness or lack of compassion for people without Christ or lack of generosity/giving. My study of prayer this year is really an expression of repentance. God convicted me that I haven't been praying as I should and (not surprisingly) I haven't been leading the church in praying as we should. So I'm taking decisive, tangible steps to learn how to pray as the Bible teaches.

2. Value the role of others in the body of Christ. We mention this almost every week. You were not meant to pursue repentance all alone. You will probably need accountability; you will probably need the wisdom and discernment and prayers of others if you are actually going to chart a different course in some area of your life.
3. Evaluate your progress daily. Generally speaking, what we do daily we really do. If you are really pursuing repentance in some specific area of your life, take a few minutes at the end of the day to evaluate whether or not you've followed your plan. Confess any sins. Look forward to seeking God when you get up in the morning.
4. Make sure your repentance is an expression of faith. I mention this because repentance can become a self-centered endeavor. Instead, express your confidence in God throughout the process of repentance. "God, I trust that You will teach me as I meditate on Your Word. God, show me how you are providing grace/help as I humble myself before You. I trust that I will experience Your strength in my weakness."

Remember that repentance is not punishment. Repentance is a gift that allows people who are desperate over their sin to chart a different course, a course that invites the grace of God that is greater than our sin.

Scriptures about repentance to ponder this week:

Psalms 32

Psalms 38

Psalms 51

Romans 2:1-10

Isaiah 30 (esp. verse 15)