

Godly Sorrow: the Doorway to Great Joy

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

July 22, 2007

It was an uncomfortable moment. I was a brand-new pastor, just months out of seminary, counseling a couple preparing for marriage. In the course of our conversation, they freely admitted that they were living, and sleeping, together. I gently reminded them that their living arrangement wasn't in line with God's word.

The guy, Bill, said, "Nobody believes that's wrong anymore, do they?" I told him, in quiet tones, that the Bible hadn't changed. Then I told them in very low and even tones that I wasn't willing to proceed with the wedding unless they acknowledged that their sexual relationship was wrong and unless they lived apart until the wedding.

Bill was shocked. His fiancée, Caroline, began to cry. Bill turned to me, white hot angry, and said, "There! You happy? You made her cry! What kind of pastor are you? Pastors are supposed to make people feel good!" They stormed out of my office, slamming the door behind them.

I felt about three inches tall. Had I blown it? Maybe we can answer that together as we look at this passage from 2 Corinthians 7:2-16.

It's been a while since we've been in 2 Corinthians, so let's get grounded here again. Although Paul was the founding pastor of the church in Corinth, his relationship with the church had been a rocky one. This is the second letter of Paul to the church that we have, and there's another letter that Paul mentions where he had to strongly rebuke the church there. (We called that the "Shock and Awe" letter.) There's a part of the church in

Corinth that was angry with Paul for all kinds of reasons. Some wanted to make the message of Jesus more "Corinth-friendly" by taking out the element of suffering and turning Jesus into a helping, healing, wealth-making god. Others just didn't like Paul—some distrusted him.

A large portion of this letter was written to try to straighten out that part of the church—basically from the beginning of the letter to right here in chapter seven. But from this point on, Paul turns his attention to the believers in the church, not the troublemakers. Remember when Steve Robbins was here and he talked about the three groups in every church—the caterpillars (they just crawl in and out each Sunday), the pillars (the good-hearted stalwarts) and the pills (the ones who drive everyone else a little crazy)?

Well, chapters 1-6 are pretty addressed to the pills! And, like Steve said, most pills think that they're pillars, but they're not. The "pills" were trying to run things in Corinth, so Paul takes them on.

But now, chapters 7-13 are addressed to the pillars—solid Jesus-followers who want to please God with all their hearts. We're going to get a lot of teaching about growing in godliness, about generous giving, about relying on God's grace and about understanding God's purposes in our lives when we undergo hardship. This is six chapters of sirloin, of rich meaty teaching, we have ahead of us.

One more thing before we plunge in: to understand what Paul's talking about here we have to make a quick detour back to chapter 2. He says that after he moved on from Corinth, he became concerned about the church, worried sick about it. In 2:12-13, he writes,

12Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, 13I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

So Paul was over in Troas, on the far side of the Aegean Sea, and things are going great but he can't get his mind off the church at Corinth. He's expecting Titus to come and to tell him how the church is doing, but he's a no-show. So he crosses over to Macedonia (northern Greece) to look for Titus and to find out about the health of the church in Corinth.

What's a little maddening is that suddenly Paul drops the story right there. I want to know what happened when Paul went to Macedonia? Did he find Titus? Did Titus have news about the church at Corinth? And he doesn't pick up the story again until 7:5. It's like everything in-between is a great big side-story. (New Testament scholars call it an *excursus*.) I think of it kind of like this:

2 Corinthians

1:1-2:13 (2:14-7:4) 7:5-13:14

Now we get to find out what happened. Well, let's find out!

The Report of Titus

Let's read 2 Corinthians 7:2-7:

2Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. 3I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. 4I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

5For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. 6But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, 7and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

The conclusion of the story: there was a happy ending. The majority of the church in Corinth read Paul's tough "shock and awe" letter and repented. They changed their minds and their hearts and responded in faith to Paul, and to the Lord Jesus. O happy day!

Joy! Life is hard but God is good. He encourages the church to "make room in their hearts" for Paul and his words. Keep the faith door, the growth door, open, he says. God wants to write a new chapter in their lives. He's excited about being a part of it.

You see, that now-lost letter, the Shock and Awe letter, had its desired effect. Look again at the end of vs. 7, what Titus told Paul about the Corinthians:

He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

On a **personal basis**, the Corinthians were ready to get over their problems with Paul. They'd come to recognize that their problems were petty and small and silly.

On an **emotional basis**, the Corinthians experienced "deep sorrow." And Paul recognized that was a good thing. And why that's good is what he discusses in vs. 8-13a:

Godly Sorrow is a Good Thing

Listen carefully:

*8 Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— 9yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. 10**Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.** At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. 12So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. 13By all this we are encouraged.*

This reads so real! Let me kind of paraphrase Paul:

My letter made you sad. I don't regret that. Well, I did kind of regret that for a little while. But it turned out well, and that's why I don't regret it. You were sad in the good way, the way that makes people clean up their act. There's another kind of "sorrow" where people feel bad, but they don't move an inch toward God, so what good is that? You guys turned to God, set the wrongs right. So I'm happy!

I want us to think deep and long and hard about this. I want us to come to the place where we understand what good, godly sorrow is like and what worldly sorrow is like. The reason I want us to think long and hard on this

is because the only way you can get to joy is through godly sorrow. I know that sounds strange, but it's true.

Remember that couple in my office? I was giving them a chance for joy by going through godly sorrow. My purpose in telling them that I wouldn't proceed with their wedding wasn't to condemn them. It was to give them a chance at joy. Only by aligning their lives with God's ways and God's will would they have a shot at the joy of Jesus in their lives. I should mention that they were both professing Christians, and that Bill was a member of my church. They were the ones wanting a Christian wedding. I wasn't holding non-believers to a Biblical standard. I was holding believers to God's standard. And for them, godly sorrow would have been a good thing. (By the way, if you want to know what happened to that couple, ask me **after** the message!)

It's kind of like a man who goes to his doctor. He has sharp pains in his right lower abdomen. The doctor feels him there and the pain is so intense that he yelps. Then he announces, "It's your appendix. It's infected and could burst anytime. I've got to cut you open, cut that out and sew you up." But what if the man says, "But Doc, that's my appendix. I've had it since I was a baby. It's nobody's business but mine. You say it's infected? That's an awfully harsh word. I think it would be nicer to call it 'bacteria-challenged.' I thought doctors were supposed to make people feel better!"

That would be crazy. Just as crazy as a pastor telling a couple that God's ways can be ignored without harm. There's no healing there and there can't be any joy without some godly sorrow first.

There's another kind of sorrow Paul mentions here—he calls it “worldly sorrow that leads to death.” There are a lot of reasons people can feel bad about the things they've done. Sometimes they feel bad about the consequences. A woman feels bad because her adultery was found out—because her kids despise her and her husband may abandon her. That's worldly sorrow. It's sorrow, but not the kind of sorrow that leads to real life and God's joy.

I found this quote; I don't know who said it, but it's worth repeating:

Recognition of sin by itself is not repentance; it may be defiance. Nor is sorrow of sin repentance, if it were alone in the mind; it may be remorse or despair. Abandonment of sin by itself may be no more than prudence.

All that is what Paul calls worldly sorrow that “brings death.” It's better than nothing, but it's not enough to bring God's blessing.

You see, the heart of **godly sorrow** is that it's **sorrow for offending God**. It's not sorrow for the consequences, or sorrow for getting caught. Or sorrow for the moment. It's **sorrow for the offense of defying God, and it always leads to real change.**

Godly sorrow has two parts. First, there's an awesome sense that before anyone else, **we have offended God Himself.**

A good example of that is found in Psalm 51:4. David wrote Psalm 51 as a record of his spiritual turmoil and restoration over his adultery with Bathsheba. He sinned against her, against her husband Uriah, and really against the whole nation of Israel by breaking trust with them. But what does he write in Psalm 54:4?

Against you [God], you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...

The sorrow David felt wasn't for just about getting caught or even doing mistreating the people involved. It was for offending God and breaking His law. What broke his heart most was that he'd broken God's heart.

I said that there's a **second part** of godly sorrow, and that is that it's the sort of sorrow that leads to **real change**.

Look again for the evidence of change there in vs. 11a:

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.

This is faith shown by its works. Don't just feel sorry; **do something about it.** What are you prepared to **do about it?** Godly sorrow is truly sorry about breaking God's law, and breaking God's heart, but it doesn't stop there. The desire of God is not just to make you feel bad, but to change you, and that starts with some new actions on **your** part.

The old Anglican Book of Common Prayer has a prayer of confession that gets this just right. Some of those old Anglicans were great and godly people, and this prayer perfectly captures the spirit of the Bible when it comes to confession, to godly sorrow and to changed living. We're not quite done, but would you pray it with me? (It's on the screen, and I've got it on the message outline.)

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from your ways like
lost sheep, we have followed too much the
devices and desires of our own hearts,
we have offended against your holy laws,
we have left undone those things which we
ought to have done, and we have done those
things which we ought not to have done.*

*But You, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
spare those who confess their faults,
restore those who are truly sorrowful,
according to your promises declared to
mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord;
and grant, O most merciful Father, for his
sake, that we may hereafter live a godly,
righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your
holy Name. Amen.*

Wow. That's powerful. That's real praying.

One more thing:

The Outcome of Godly Sorrow is Godly Joy

Remember, God doesn't just want you to feel bad. Satan wants you to feel real bad. Jesus says that the devil's mission is to kill, steal and destroy. God's mission to give life, give love and restore people to real joy.

Look now to 2 Corinthians 7:13b-16, and look for all the references to joy:

*In addition to our own **encouragement**, we were especially **delighted** to see how **happy** Titus was, because his **spirit has been refreshed** by all of you. 14I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. 15And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers*

*that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. 16 I am **glad** I can have complete confidence in you.*

The outcome of the godly sorrow of the Corinthians was that Paul was happy, Titus was happy and the Corinthians were happy. Not just happy, but **joyful**.

The believers at Corinth had taken a soul bath. They'd washed the scum of distrust and compromise and immorality off. Now they felt clean in their hearts. They'd come through the godly sorrow to the place of joy.

You can't get this joy any other way. You may have things in your life that you're ashamed of, things that you know are godless things, sinful things. You have tried to compromise with them, declare a truce with them, but you know that they're wrong.

Today as you've heard this message, you've seen yourself. You've felt the guilt. Maybe you too need some godly sorrow, and I'm not going to rush that. Sometimes you need to feel that for a while for the message to get through. Feel it, meditate upon it, know it. But the time will come to experience renewal, cleansing and to break through to new deeds and to real joy.

I want to close with the prayer of David from the Psalm I mentioned earlier, Psalm 51. Would you pray with me?

10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:10-12)

In the name of Jesus, Amen.