

REGRET—THE SILENT KILLER

BY BRAD JERSAK

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. —2 Corinthians 7:10 (NLT)

Various diseases have been labeled “the silent killer.” For example, “hypertension” is called the silent killer because it increases the risk of heart disease and strokes, two of the top causes of death in America. Other emotional and spiritual diseases could compete for that title: fear, shame, resentment and bitterness would be high on the list. But the silent epidemic we’ll examine now is *regret*.

It’s not that regret goes unnoticed. Oodles of motivational posters decrying regret litter the Internet. I say “litter” because they largely represent a worldly wisdom that exhorts us to move beyond regret, but only leave us feeling worse—regretting our regrets. Sampling this pseudo-sage advice, obvious patterns emerge.

Three Anti-Regret Slogans

1) **Thou shalt never regret.** Henry Thoreau wrote, “*Never look back* unless you are planning to go that way.” Or “*Make it a rule of life never to regret and never to look back.* Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can’t build on it; it’s only

HOW DO WE MOVE BEYOND THE BITTERNESS OF POOR CHOICES AND STOLEN DREAMS? HERE, THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS 2000 YEARS AHEAD OF US.

good for wallowing in” (Katherine Manfield).

2) **Thou shalt (not) regret what you didn’t do more than what you did do.** “The mistakes I’ve made are dead to me. But I can’t take back the *things I never did*” (Jonathan Foer). “Our biggest regrets are not for the things we have done but for the *things we haven’t done*” (Chad Murray).

3) **Thou shalt (not) regret not being yourself.** “One of the greatest regrets in life is being what others would want you to be, rather than being yourself” (Shannon Alder). “One of

my main regrets in life is giving considerable thought to inconsiderate people” (Jarod Kintz).

What are we hearing? You should not have regrets. Or, you’ll regret regretting, so let us “inspire” your willpower: just stop regretting! Why? Because regret is for losers. Those who have “arrived” boast, “*I regret nothing!*” They forget that Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, first coined the phrase. Here’s the double bind! If you have regrets, you’re lame; if you don’t, you’re a sociopath!

Shaming Regret?

All of this amounts to shaming us for the torment of regret, attempting to punish the disease out of its victims. As if regret were a bad choice. As if my regrets were completely in my hands.

What if we made mistakes in all sincerity? Should we now feel *ashamed* for feeling the grief over the consequences? What if our dreams were *stolen* by others? Should we feel *nothing* for our losses?

What if our dreams of an education or vocation, of getting married and raising a family were stolen by an accident of birth, an abuser, or a drunk driver? The painful memories and *if only* scenarios constitute a form of bitter regret. But shouldn’t they? On the flipside, should the abuser, the DUI killer or the death dealer truly *regret nothing*? Or if remorse is eating them alive, how does that help? If regret is a disease, its debilitating symptoms will inevitably show themselves.

Do you see the problem? It’s as if regret were natural and necessary while also being a toxic contagion. And the best and most brilliant solution to which we can arrive? *Thou shalt not regret!* Really? In fact, thou shalt not let regret prevent you from doing more things you’ll soon





sorrow brings death (2 Corinthians 7:10 NLT).

First, we start with this astounding possibility—a process that leaves *no* regret! It sounds too good to be true! Recall the worst thing you ever did, the worst thing you *didn't* do or the worst thing that ever happened *to you*. Those events are long gone, the memories are not. *Memories* are like storage units in your heart and mind. Past events are recorded there. So are the consequences of those memories. And so are many of the feelings associated with that memory. So while the people and places may not even exist any more, the emotions linger; they do exist, right now, in you. The horrible deed is done; the tormenting emotions remain. When I re-enter that “memory locker,” I may feel the fear, anger, hurt, shame or guilt all over again. I relive the events to the degree I re-feel the memory.

Of course we *wish* we could stop suffering the pain housed in our memories. We wish we could stop replaying past events. In fact, we *wish* it had never happened, because it just hurts so much! That is *regret*. Wanting freedom is a natural and necessary human reaction to nasty memories...*but* as we all know, that wishful reaction can become its own obsession—a self-defeating prison.

“...and leaves no regret.”

Reading Paul carefully, he doesn't say we should or should not have regrets. He has already moved past the folly of the world, which condemns us for having no regrets and shaming us if we do. Paul simply

regret! If we “struck out” last time, should we swing even more wildly this time? Seriously? Should we trust the opinions of those who tell us we'll regret trusting other's opinions?

Defining Regret in Context

One problem is that regret is ill defined—reduced to a bad feeling about a bad memory, which we're supposed to will ourselves to stop feeling. We know instinctively that regret is poisonous, so we resonate with the song in Disney's *Frozen*, “Let it go.” Okay...but how? The Serenity Prayer suggests, “By accepting what you cannot change.” I agree, but again, how? How do we move beyond the bitterness of poor choices and stolen dreams?

Here, the Apostle Paul was 2000 years ahead of us. He directs us to an insightful definition, a context and a treatment for regret that breaks the double bind. He says,

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Adolf Eichmann managed mass extermination during the Holocaust. After the war he hid out in Argentina and was finally tried and executed in Israel in 1962.

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acknowledges that we do experience regret. Why? Because we're losers? No! Because **regret is an authentic aspect of the human condition. We all have regrets.**

But Paul adds this note of hope: a way forward that "*leaves no regret.*" While regret is as inevitable as indigestion, what if there is a way to leave it all behind? Paul doesn't decree, 'Thou shalt leave it behind!' You don't *will* the regret away through inspiration or determination. Rather, he suggests there is a process that takes you *through* and *beyond* the regret so that one day, you will remember the events without feeling the pain.

Objection 1: Simple disbelief. We can't imagine recalling our greatest defeats without reliving the pain. Impossible!

Objection 2: Our deeper resistance surfaces when we cling to regret because we think it protects us—from further mistakes, from deeper hurt, from bad people...but also, sadly, from trust and from love. Regret becomes a false friend, promising protection by walling us in. It's a malicious guardian that traps in the pain it promises to keep away, but shields us from the abundant life we most want. Regret may be inevitable, but our loyalty to it need not be.

By assessing regret's broken promises and deep costs—and

becoming aware of all it steals—we become ready to break our allegiance to it. We can say to regret, "I've realized you aren't helping me at all. You're hindering me. I'm ready to try a different path that will lead to freedom." Bottoming out on regret—and our useless struggle with regret—is the first step. We are powerless to prevent regret or to drive it away ourselves, but we're *not* powerless to enter the path to freedom.

Sorrow Is Not Optional

Paul identifies two ways to deal with regret: godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. **Sorrow is not optional. That's life.** Unless we're psychopaths, life—and the journey beyond regret—will involve sorrow. The choice lies in opting for the path of *godly sorrow* (which leaves no regret) or continuing in *worldly sorrow* (which leads to death). What do these phrases mean?

Worldly sorrow re-enters and relives hurtful memories to nurture our bitter regrets. Worldly sorrow doesn't *face* the past—it *feeds* on the pain. Resentment, for example, literally means *re-sentiment...* *re-feeling*. Why? *Not* to rid

ourselves of those feelings, but to *reinforce* self-pity or self-loathing. Regret morphs from wishing away old grief or guilt into *needing* it in order to justify hating ourselves or others. Regret utilizes the past

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as a weapon, especially against ourselves. Regret is the 'ungodly sorrow' that does not free us from the past; it drives us back to it.

The obvious example is alcohol-driven domestic violence. A man gets drunk and beats his family, then deeply regrets it. The regret over his drinking and violence



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eats at him, driving him to get drunk and externalize his self-hatred by beating his family! It's a vicious irony, a disease... and no amount of punishment (self-inflicted or otherwise) can cure it. **You just can't regret away regret.** It's the silent killer, just as Paul warned.

Godly Sorrow

Unlike the popular anti-regret slogans, Paul's path to freedom does not detour around sorrow. *Godly sorrow* faces into the grief of our painful past. Remember, Paul knew regret from the days when he had killed Christians—family members of people he now worshiped with. Imagine trying to preach to a Christian woman whose husband you had murdered “in the name of God” ...would it ever feel “long ago” to him or them?

But Paul doesn't avoid that painful past. He wades into the sorrow, but in a *godly way*. This is the “way of repentance” versus the “way of regret.” Graceless religion has loaded so much guilt and shame into the word *repentance* that post-moderns only imagine it being shouted with a condemning snarl. But no, *repentance* is not the ungodly sorrow of demeaning *regret*.

For Paul, *repentance* is best defined as turning (with the sins and sorrows of your past) away from regret (with

its self-loathing pity-party) and turning to the kindness of God ...to heal your deepest wounds, forgive your

deepest wrongs and exchange your burdens for his grace.

In practice, we might allow Christ into those painful memories or bring those painful memories to Christ—with all the hurt, anger, fear and guilt—and we “grieve them out” in his presence. Hiding nothing, we lay all we've done or that's been done to us before him. We offer him all that's been broken or lost or stolen—including ourselves.

This is true *confession*.

We ask, “God, if I give you my regrets, what will you give me in return?” This is the

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point of exchange—the work of the Cross—described in Isaiah 61:1-3:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me...to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion....

Who receives Christ's mercy? Those who come to him, mourning

and grieving, not those who *regret nothing*. Then the trades and upgrades begin:

- to bestow on them a *crown of beauty* instead of *ashes*,
- the *oil of joy* instead of *mourning*,
- and a *garment of praise* instead of a *spirit of despair*.

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Isaiah's secret: picturing our emotional burdens and letting them go. But Isaiah knew we can't just “let them go”—we need to “trade them in.”

Then the storage rooms of our memories—the stories themselves—begin to change. Where we once *saw* ashes, we now *see* a crown. Where we once *felt* shame, we now *feel* peace. Where we once *seemed* alone, we now *experience* God with us. Our godly sorrow proceeds through repentance (turning and trading) that leaves *no regrets*.

So, authentic repentance is *not* guilt-tripping regret at all! It's your invitation to turn from the toxic tables of regret and instead, dine on the extravagant kindness of God! Perhaps it's time for a fresh upgrade to grace! ☐



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