

Battling the Unbelief of Regret

by John Piper

Regret is a universal problem that can be overcome by feeling it, making right as much as possible, and seeking forgiveness from God and others through faith.

Duration: 35:35

Scripture: 1 Samuel 12:19-25, Psalm 107:13-43, Romans 8:28, Romans 8:37

Topics: "Overcoming Regret", "Gods Forgiveness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the topic of regret and how to overcome it through faith. He shares personal experiences of feeling regret and making amends. The two key issues that faith must embrace to conquer regret are the forgiveness of God and His sovereign ability to turn it for good. The speaker emphasizes the importance of seeking reconciliation with those we have hurt and making things right as much as possible. He also highlights the destructive nature of sin and the need to honor God in all our actions.

Transcript

Well, we're in a series of messages this fall called Battling Unbelief. And I want to sort of bring us up to speed. I know we have visitors who haven't been in on the series, and I know that it's been two weeks since we had one of the parts of the series.

And so, let me give you the foundation, the assumption, the thesis of the series. Namely, that all sin that we commit is owing to unbelief in our hearts. The tap root of sinning is unbelief in the promises of God.

Or, to put it positively, all righteousness comes from a heart of faith, a heart of trusting in the promises of God. And wherever sins crop up, whether it be attitudinal sins or outright behavioral sins, they are the sign of lurking, growing, incipient, or large-scale unbelief in God. Now, perhaps a text or two to provide foundation for that assumption.

One, you recall, was Hebrews chapter 3, where the writer says, Take care, brethren, verse 12, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. Now, I went over that probably too fast for anybody to catch it. Take heed, lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief.

Notice the connection between unbelief and evil. An evil heart of unbelief. The root of the evil is the unbelief.

I think that's confirmed as we read on. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Now, the logic then flows, don't let there be unbelief in your heart because what it will lead to is a hardening and a deception that gives rise to sin.

So that's a verse, two verses, 12 and 13 of Hebrews 3, that provides a biblical warrant for saying sin rises from a heart of unbelief. Failing to trust in God, in specific concrete promises that should liberate us from the constraints that are causing us to sin in any given moment. Now, the other side, namely that righteousness or good deeds come from faith, I take from a little phrase that comes twice in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

In 1 Thessalonians 1, verse 3, Paul remembers before our God and Father your work of faith. Now, that little phrase, work of faith, suggests to me that what they had begun to do now that they were converted were performing works, acts of obedience, and he calls them of faith. That is, they're growing out of faith, they're coming from faith.

And the same little phrase is used in 2 Thessalonians 1, verse 11. To this end, we always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his call and may fulfill every good resolve and work of faith. So our goal in our behavioral life as Christians should be to perform works of faith.

So to trust the promises of God that we are liberated from inclinations to sin and are empowered by inclinations toward righteousness. The implication of these two premises is that life is war. Or, to use the phrase of Paul in 2 Timothy 4, 7, life is a fight of faith.

I have finished my course, I have kept the faith, I have run the race. I can get that right. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.

Fought the good fight and kept the faith are virtually synonymous, I think. What fight has he fought? He's fought the fight to keep the faith. Or, as he says to Timothy in the first letter, chapter 6, verse 12, he says to Timothy, fight the good fight of faith.

Take hold of eternal life to which you were called. And I think that's what we have to do. So I am commending to you always, Sunday after Sunday, that you be good warriors in the fight of faith.

Because if you win the fight of faith, then out of that taproot of faith will come righteousness. And if you lose the fight of faith, out of that taproot of unbelief will come sins. Now, the way we're approaching this, this fall, is taking that little phrase from Hebrews 3, 12, take heed lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief.

What would that evil heart look like? That's the question I posed myself in July at the cabin. What would that evil heart look like? And I came up with a list of about 11 states of unbelief. Sin, sinful states of the human heart that have to be fought against and conquered by faith.

And tonight's state of the human heart is regret. Regret. It's a state of the heart that can do you in, can ruin your life, can cause you to make shipwreck of faith and bail out of the Christian experience because you just give up because of so many past things that you feel regret for.

And so there has to be a way biblically to fight this thing called regret. But now, as soon as I pose the question like that, somebody, thinking critically as you ought to, will say, wait a minute, there's a good place for regret, isn't there? I mean, regret isn't all bad. It isn't always owing to unbelief, is it? Let's turn to 2

Corinthians together this time because we're going to stay here a minute.

2 Corinthians chapter 7. And I want to answer that question with yes, because Paul does. Yes, there is good regret. There is godly regret.

Now, he uses the word grief, but if I read it in context, you'll see that the meaning is what we mean by regret. We'll read 2 Corinthians 7, verses 8, 9, and 10. Even if I made you sorry, so here it is, regretful, with my letter, so he had written them a letter, a pretty stinging or indicting letter evidently, I do not regret it, though I did regret it, before he understood what he had accomplished, for I see that 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.

Now, the Greek there is a grief according to God, a grief that accords with the way God is. We'll come back to that. Verse 10, for godly grief, for grief that accords with God, produces repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regrets, in the end, but worldly grief, or grief of the world, produces death.

Now, let's just think about these two kinds of grief for a minute. He wrote them a letter, right? They had done wrong. We won't go into the details, it doesn't really matter.

For our purposes of what they had done, the church was at fault. He stung them with an indicting letter, and at first he heard that they were hurt by this letter, and it grieved him, and he didn't know what would come of it. And then he got word that the hurt had gone beyond hurt to repentance, and beyond repentance to salvation in life, and they were making amends.

And then he says, it could have been different. There is another kind of grief that might have been produced, and he called it worldly grief, and he said it could have produced death. So, that's why this is an important issue.

There is a regret, there is a being stung that kills. Looking back upon something you've done, having somebody bring it to your attention, and being so overwhelmed by the significance of that, that you never make recovery, or that you become embittered, or depressed, or just make shipwreck of faith, thinking there is no future. Satan begins to lie and tell you that that was so stupid, or evil, or wicked, or hurtful, or painful, there's no way that you will recoup in the future from that shortfall.

And Paul said that would be worldly grief. That's the grief according to the world, not the grief according to God. Let me use two biblical illustrations.

There is a biblical person, I'll just tell you, it's disciples. I'm going to let you tell me who they are. There was a disciple, one of the twelve, who experienced the one kind, and there was a disciple who experienced the other kind.

And they both did the same thing wrong. Who are they? Who experienced the grief that was according to God, that led to repentance and life? Who was that? Peter. Who experienced the grief that was according to the world, and led to death? Judas.

Turn with me to Matthew 27. I want you to see this. I hadn't really noticed Judas in this light before, but it says in Matthew 27, verse 3. Now, we've got to be careful with a word in this verse, at least in the RSV.

I didn't check the other English translations, but the word repentance in Greek is metanoia, change of mind. The word repentance in this verse is not that Greek word. It's the same Greek word translated regret in 2 Corinthians 7.10. So, be careful here now as we read verse 3 of Matthew 27.3. When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he... Now, here's the word.

It says repented. Now, that could be very misleading, because repentance is a glorious and godly thing that leads to life. This word metamelemi is not the same word.

It means he felt regret. That's what it means. He felt regret and brought back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders saying, I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.

Now, that's a good thing to say. But his regret did not accord with God. Why? What was missing? What was the difference between Peter and Judas? They really did the same thing.

Have you ever thought about that? I mean, there wasn't that much difference between betraying him and denying him. It's just a matter of timing to stand there and say, I don't know him. To use a curse to say, I don't know him.

You take him, I'm going out. I'm not part of this. That's the words of Peter.

All Judas said was, he's out in the garden. That's all he said. But Peter, when the Lord looked at him and stung him with his look of love, wept also.

But he didn't kill himself. Judas killed himself. Why? And I think the answer is faith.

You remember what Jesus said in Luke 22, 32, I think it was. He said, Peter, Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that, who can finish it, that your faith fail not. His faith failed some, but it didn't fail totally.

When Jesus looked at him and he broke him and he went out and wept, as he wept, faith returned. He remembered the kind of Jesus that he served and that there would be a reconciliation and the rest of the story is just marvelous because at least three times in the Gospels, it says, go tell my disciples and Peter, I go before you to Galilee. Why does he get that special attention? Well, it's very clear why.

He needed it very badly. Judas was already dead or maybe he would have gotten it too. If Judas had wept, had gone to the rooms with the disciples, had been a broken man and believed in the kind of Jesus that Jesus really was, Jesus would have looked at Judas too that way.

He said, go tell the disciples and Judas and Peter, I'm going before you to Galilee. But he didn't believe. He gave up on Jesus.

So, we have two kinds of regret. Regret according to God and regret according to the world. And I want us to just analyze here in the next 15 or 20 minutes the nature of regret according to God.

Because that's the kind that you get victory over, the kind that leads to repentance and life and joy and newness, not death. What marks or characterizes it? Well, before I ask that, let's just think about regret for a minute. Let's think of some instances.

I tried to do a little rehearsing in my own life to think if I could think of times of regret. And I came up with a bunch of categories that gave me twinges to even remember. But I'll tell you a few of them.

Here's some categories. Letting someone down. Letting someone down that you made a promise to.

It might be as little as, let's start a Bible study Saturday morning at seven. Okay, good. Let's start it two weeks from now.

And you wake up at eight. And you remember it at nine. And you say, why did I forget that Bible study? I'm the one who started it.

And you just, you're so angry. And you wonder, will the Bible study survive now? Because you forgot the first Bible study. I've done things like this.

It's just, it just twists inside. And you could just carry it with you all day long. Why, why, why? You just want to, you know, you know the feeling? That's a little piece of death that's happening there.

Here's another category. You hurt someone by accident. I can remember in 1980 when I preached and I was brand new here and I remember giving an illustration.

I can't remember the content of it, but I received a letter in the mail on Tuesday from a young single woman. She might even be here for all I know because it was unsigned. And she just laid into me because the illustration sounded like I was slighting singles, single people at Bethlehem.

And I just was, I was so upset at myself. I didn't, it was the last thing from my mind that what I had said would hurt anybody. And yet she had taken offense and perhaps others as well.

And so you just live with that and it tortures and you say, I didn't want to do that. I didn't mean to be read that way. And so you try.

We've got to find a way to handle this. Here's another category. You miss out on a good thing.

Today is the 23rd. In two days we celebrate the one year anniversary of what? David? Or anybody? Black Monday. Right? October 25, 1986.

What was it? Well that 25 was when we met in the, to have our annual meeting, have our meeting and voted. That was not black. That was glorious because the vote was, this illustration is still going to work.

What was it, 19th? No wonder you didn't know. Black Monday, whenever it was. Suppose the day before Black Monday when the stock market fell, how many points? 500 or whatever.

You had just really invested and just, the next day you can imagine what your regret would be. What a dumb thing to do, you would say to yourself. How could I do that? And you lose all this money.

So you miss out on a good thing. Or I can remember as a little kid, I just remember, almost want to cry that I'm going to a party. They're supposed to meet at church at six and then go on a hayride to the farm and I'm late and they're gone.

And I just feel so sad and you just want to, and your mother says, Oh, we'll catch him. We'll catch him. Just hop in the car.

I don't want to do that. I'll feel stupid. And so you go home and just eat your heart out the rest of the night.

And I haven't mentioned the most important one because none of the ones I've mentioned are sinful. Sin is the biggest problem, isn't it? Dishonoring God, dishonoring the Lord. All right.

Well, there's some categories that I hope all of you can find somewhere to empathize with. This is a universal problem. It can be very destructive if we don't find a way to fight the unbelief that is at the root of ongoing destructive regret.

What characterizes then regret and makes it regret according to God? First, it must be felt. If you've sinned, and I'm going to shift over to sin now, first of all, since it's the most fundamental, but if you've sinned, you must feel regret. Psalm 32.

This is a very, very important word in Psalm 32 because it says that if you hold in your sin, don't admit it or acknowledge it or feel it, your bones are going to rot. It says in Psalm 32, 3, when I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, thy hand was heavy upon me.

My strength was dried up as the heat of summer. And here comes the solution. I acknowledged my sin to thee and I did not hide my iniquity.

I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. So the first step in a godly regret is to have it.

Feel it. Admit it. Admit it.

Don't hide it. Anybody. Say it right up to God's faith.

I blew it and it was ugly and a dishonor to you and I'm so sorry. That's step number one. If you try to hide it from the Lord or from key people in your life, then your bones will rot.

Second, we need to make right as much as possible. Make right as much as possible. So you write a letter to the person you've offended and you try to make up and fix things.

Zacchaeus comes to my mind as a person who when he was pricked by the Lord's love and felt guilty for being such a greedy, covetous tax collector, he repented and he started making amends and restored fourfold and gave half of his goods to the poor. And that's right. Let me give you an illustration from my own life.

In 19... I forget when it was. We had the BGC annual meeting in San Diego and there was a speaker at San Diego who I thought badly misused a text. I mean, made it say something terribly wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. And so, I was so upset about this, I came home and I shot off a long exegetical letter to The Standard, our magazine, and they published it. This speaker got very angry and told the editor, this is not something that have been put in The Standard.

It's not something that should have been put in The Standard. He should have come to me first. Hmm.

Hmm. And I lived with that for three years thinking, well, it was a public, it was a public lecture and it was a public criticism. But it gnawed away at me that that would have been the brotherly thing to do.

I'll write him a letter instead of... So, the person happens to be the president of Western Baptist Seminary, Earl Rodmacher. And I was invited to Western Baptist Seminary to speak last February. And, so I went out

there and, who's the theology professor who used to be at Bethel? Bruce Ware.

Bruce Ware is there, great brother, used to be here. And he said, he took me aside, he said, John, Earl Rodmacher is still real mad at you. I said, really? After three years? He said, yes.

I said, oh. Well, on the third day of my lectureship, I was supposed to sit down on the steps and field questions from the students after chapel with Earl Rodmacher sitting beside me fielding the questions. And I had this in the side and I said, now I got to do something about this.

And he had been very cool, just kind of polite. And, so we were sitting down there, students were getting out and mingling. And I, I took him by the arm and said, you know, if I had it to do over again, Dr. Rodmacher, I would write you that letter instead of putting it in the standard and I'm sorry that I didn't do that.

He almost melted. The whole atmosphere just totally changed as the brotherliness returned and we had a great interview with the students and the rest of my time there was terrific. So there was an illustration of making right something that was sort of gnawing.

I was keep trying to justify what I'd done. So, the same thing happened at Santa Clara. Worst message I ever heard in my life from one of the speakers there.

And I went back to my, went back to my hotel room, got out my computer and banged out six pages of criticism. This is just awful that our people have to listen to this kind of thing. And I mailed it to him flat out.

And he called me on the telephone from San Diego. This is a big wheel pastor. Not in the BGC.

And it was a great conversation. This is the way it ought to be done. The point is seek to make things right face to face if you've got a regret inside of you because of something you've done that hurt somebody or let somebody down or sinned against someone.

Now, I see my time is just about gone here. I'm going to take five or seven more minutes. And I need to do this.

I need to tell you that there are two big issues that faith must lay hold of in order to get victory over regret. One is the forgiveness of God and the other is the sovereign ability of God to turn it for good. Now, I've got a lot of text written under each of these categories.

The forgiveness of God and the sovereign ability of God to turn this faux pas or this sin for good. But let me just maybe mention one on each side of the ledger. With regard to forgiveness, my text announced for tonight which I haven't even touched on yet is 1 Samuel 12 19-25.

Let me just tell you the story because I think you know it. I preached a whole sermon on it before. Namely, the people asked for themselves a king.

These Israelites did so that they could be like all the nations of the world and then Samuel comes along and says, that was evil. I'll do what you said because God told me to go ahead with this but that was evil and they're so frightened. They say, Samuel, pray for us.

And Samuel says, the Lord will not cast away His people for His great namesake. Only fear the Lord, walk in His statutes and you will prosper. Now, that's the kind of text that says, God is slow to anger, abounding

in mercy, full of loving kindness and compassion, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

We need stories like that and texts like that. This is the sword of the Spirit with which you fight against the unbelief of your heart that says, I've sinned too badly. I can't be forgiven.

I mean, I blew it so badly. Let me show you one of the Psalms that I go back to again and again and I use it in counseling again and again with people who feel that the kind of thing they've done or the aggravated circumstances or the repeated nature of the sin makes them beyond hope. Psalm 106 and 107 are tailor made and written by God Himself for people like that.

Both of them are. Let me just point out a couple of verses in one and a couple of verses in the other. In Psalm 106 verses 6 to 8 it says, Both we and our fathers have sinned.

We have committed iniquity. We have done wickedly. Our fathers when they were in Egypt did not even consider thy wonderful works.

They did not remember the abundance of thy steadfast love but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea. Now that's cause for depression. But the next verse says, Yet He saved them for His namesake that He might make known His mighty power.

Then turn over to Psalm 107. This one's even more to the point because three times in this long psalm people are pictured in hopeless guilt, affliction, bondage and sickness and God redeems them. Start at verse 10 of Psalm 107.

Some sat in darkness and in gloom. This is why this psalm is so good for people who are just burdened to the pits by regret. Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in affliction and in irons for they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor. They fell down with none to help. So they are... He's cataloging their reason for being hopeless, right? No.

Verse 13 goes on. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and He delivered them from their distress. I really believe if Judas had done that he would have been saved.

They cried to the Lord in their trouble and He delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and gloom, broke their bonds asunder. Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love, for His wonderful works to the sons of men.

And then the same thing is true in verse 17 following. And here this is so valuable for people who think that their sickness is a judgment from God. I get people ask me often, am I disabled or am I sick because I sin? And I generally say I don't know and it doesn't really matter.

Look at Psalm 107, verse 17. Some were sick or afflicted through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities they suffered affliction. They loathed any kind of food and they drew near to the gates of death.

But then they cried to the Lord in their trouble. He delivered them from their distress. He sent forth His Word and healed them and delivered them from their destruction.

So the point on this side of the ledger, the forgiveness side that you need so bad when you've done something that you feel regret about. The point here is that there is ample evidence in the Word of God.

There are hundreds of texts, hundreds of promises, hundreds of stories that say God will receive the truly penitent person and forgive you and wipe away all your sin.

Now there's one more concern. We just feel like the mistakes we've made are going to botch our lives. I mean I've lost all this money in the stock market or I've got all these people mad at me or I made a fool of myself in public or I mean my future is gone or one of the places that I struggle with most is that we'll be planning something around here and we'll plan it and then we'll get into it and something doesn't go right.

You know, the fan blows Leah's music off or the lights don't come on or an instrument doesn't work or you know, I'm sitting back there behind the pulpit and saying, Lord, Lord, don't distract. Don't let this happen and you wonder can the future be bailed out? Can God handle this? Can he turn it for good? And of course, Romans 8.28 and 8.37 are the bulwarks of our faith. God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose and verse 37 says, well, it comes earlier, what shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written, for thy sake we are being killed all day long.

We are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors and the only way you can be more than a conqueror is to turn your enemies into your servants.

So that I'll tell you the way I fight this fight of faith on this side of the ledger that is having taken care of the forgiveness side, what about the side of it's just my future's gonna be botched. I mean, I've just wrecked it. I just go back to the sovereignty of God again and again and say, there is nothing.

There are no circumstances. There is no past or present act that I've ever done that God can't weave into a tapestry that is good and beautiful. That's the kind of God we have.

And so you must fight the unbelief that says, it's all over. My future is unredeemable and I might as well just go ahead and live for the devil because I've blown it so bad it could not be made right or good or beautiful. That's just unbelief talking and therefore the root of regret that accords with the world and leads to death is unbelief.

And I commend to you the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. Take it up and read those great promises of forgiveness and promises of the sovereignty of God that He can turn all things for our good. Even the things that we committed through sin and for His glory.

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