

Regret: Help or Hindrance?

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Here is an unpopular statement: Regret isn't all bad.

In our age when people push to feel good no matter what happens, regret is viewed as a negative emotion, a hindrance to mental health, a weight to be cast off.

The trouble is that regret is the legitimate aftertaste of doing wrong. It's part of the way God made us. I look back to the last time I launched a sarcastic line in a conversation—a delicious choice of words! But they carried a sting; they hurt someone, and I regret saying them. I should have been less pungent and more kind.

It is regret that pushes me to apologize to the injured person. It is regret that moves me to confess to God. It is regret that nudges me to guard my tongue more carefully in the future.

If I refuse to deal with regret, I can go no further as a Christian.

In a book I wrote called *Another Chance: How God Overrides Our Big Mistakes*, I outlined four stages of dealing with sin:

1. First comes the return of confidence, the understanding that maybe God can do something with this mess after all.

2. Then comes the need for confrontation. What happened cannot be forgotten, hidden in a woodpile, under the rug, or anywhere else. We are responsible.

3. Next, it's time for confession—getting verbal about the misdeed. Naturally, we don't like this. We'd much rather "not talk about it." But we must. We must say the same thing God says—that what happened was a violation of his guidelines.

4. Finally, we are able to move on to new things, a restored sense of self-esteem, an open future. We smile again because we are forgiven and restored by the One whose mercy endures forever.

Regret is the compelling force that prods us into stage two. It is a necessary part of the process.

But we must not stall at stage two. Some Christians have trouble moving along the rest of the track. They rehash and rehash the sins of the past, amplifying and distorting the tape as they go along. This is hardly God's intention.

Once we complete the confession stage, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," says Romans 8:1, 2, "because . . . the law of the Spirit of life set me free." The same author, Paul, wrote to the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

He wrote those things from his personal experience with regret. Paul had a past that would have kept a psychiatrist busy for years. The apostle could close his eyes at any moment and see himself guarding a pile of coats while, a few yards away, the skull of Stephen was being smashed by flying rocks. He could remember a score or more of midnight raids on the homes of Christians—beating down doors, jerking husbands, wives, and children out of bed, hauling them off to dungeons. He had terrorized a whole region, from Jerusalem to Damascus, until not a Christian was left who did not wince at the mention of his name.

How did he overcome the guilt? The regret? The nightmares?

To the Philippian church he wrote, "Not that I . . . have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (3:12-14).

An Akron, Ohio, counselor and former pastor, Dr. Richard Dobbins, tells about one woman in her middle forties who came to see him. Throughout two sessions, Evelyn (not her actual name) spoke in generalities about her life and difficulties, but in the third session the truth emerged. She had become pregnant as a teenager and had married the church youth group president only three months before their child was born.

Amazingly, they had stayed in the same area all those years and lived down the reproach. They even continued in the same church. But Evelyn always wondered whether her husband truly loved her or had married her only out of obligation. He said he loved her, he was a good husband, but still . . .

Now came a frightening twist. Her best friend in high school, who knew all the unseemly details, had moved away soon afterward—but was returning to town. And in Evelyn's mind, time stood still. She and this woman were teenagers again, and it was only a matter of weeks before the story would be all over town once more.

In Dr. Dobbins's office, she began to weep convulsively. Quietly he said, "Evelyn, have you asked the Lord to forgive you of this?"

"Ho!" she said through her tears. "Have I asked the Lord to forgive me? A hundred times!"

"Well, do you believe he has?"

"Oh, yes—that's not the problem. The problem is, how can I ever forgive myself?"

Dobbins again sat quietly for a moment. Then he said, "Tell me, are you holier than God is?" He paused. "Must God sacrifice another Son on another cross for the sake of your conscience?"

Another pause. Then, "If the death of Christ was good enough to merit your forgiveness in God's sight, is it not good enough for you?"

Evelyn was speechless. The truth came burrowing into her spirit. For ten minutes she could do nothing but weep. Finally she lifted her head, and there was peace on her face. They had prayer together, and then she said, "This is the first time in more than twenty years that I feel no condemnation."

Jesus died that the people of God might not hang onto guilt and regret. That is why 1 John 1:9 promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

◆ A SLAVE TO SIN / DEAN MERRILL

In his book *Will Daylight Come?* Richard Hoeffler tells a homey story about a boy and his sister visiting their grandparents' farm. Johnny was given a slingshot and began practicing, trying to hit trees with small stones.

His skill improved, and coming into the barnyard, he spied Grandma's pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The duck dropped dead.

The boy panicked. What now? Desperately he hid the duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes."

But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" She leaned over

to whisper in his ear, "Remember the duck!"

Johnny did the dishes.

Later, Grandpa suggested taking the children fishing. But Grandma said, "Well, I need Sally to help make supper."

Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing.

After several days of doing double chores—his own and Sally's—Johnny could stand it no longer. He confessed to Grandma about the duck.

"I know," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window when it happened. Because I love you, I forgive you. I was wondering how long you'd let Sally make a slave of you."

Regret is the nagging sister that
will not let our offenses rest. We fi-

nally realize we have no choice but
to own up to them.