



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

2 Corinthians 7:5-16

“The Repentance That Brings No Regret”

TRANSCRIPT

At the 8:30 service, I commented on the second stanza of number 444 and just simply made the point that it's very appropriate for us always to sing with understanding the things that we do sing in our hymns. Now, this is a fine hymn. It's been sung for a long, long time and one can tell from the words of it, the age in which it was composed. Mr. Watts writes about -- to him, well, the second stanza particularly -- “From north to south, the princes meet to pay their homage at his feet. While western empires own their Lord and savage tribes attend his word.” And one gets the impression that what he is thinking about is the Christian west is over against savage -- what was to him -- not the third world, but just out there, so to speak.

And it's very interesting that today, there may be more people in the third world who are owning Christ as Lord, than those in western empires. But one can certainly see the age in which that hymn was composed, by the things that are written. He writes, of course, of the time when there will be universal knowledge of the Lord over the face of the earth, and that's what the Scriptures do set forth before us.

Now, for our Scripture reading today, we're turning to 2 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 5 through verse 16. For those of you who are new, we have just finished Paul's section on the Christian ministry. And it was called forth by the joy that he had at

meeting Titus in Macedonia and finding out that the conditions among the Corinthians were good as a result of the letter -- the stinging letter, it has been called by New Testament scholars -- that had been written to them. And what he stopped in chapter 2 in verse 13 is now continuance specifically in chapter 7, verse 5. That was a magnificent parenthesis on Christian ministry that began at chapter 2, verse 14 and concludes at chapter 7 in verse 4.

We have commented on the fact that the climax of that great section on the ministry -- the greatest in the Bible -- was chapter 5, verse 20 and 21 where the apostle speaks about, “He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” So now the apostle goes back to the things that were on his mind as he reached Philippi and heard the good news from Titus. Verse 5,

“For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. 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 -- 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, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. (Literally “from us”) 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. For behold (You can see Paul has almost a note of exaltation here as he thinks about the way they have responded to the stinging letter that he wrote them) 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! (That evidently refers to disciplinary judgment that was executed upon Paul’s opponent in Corinth who had been stirring up difficulties for him and them) In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended (that would be Paul), but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.”

Now, some of you have the Authorized Version, and it has not, “your earnestness on our behalf”, but the reverse. It has, “our care for you.” The reason for this is that as often in the New Testament since the pronouns are very similar -- meaning you and us -- that the copyists frequently confused them and copied the wrong pronouns. We have -- that is true in the manuscript testimony in many places in the New Testament. That’s the reason for this. It’s most likely that what I’ve just read, “your earnestness on our behalf” is the correct reading at this point. might be made known to you in the sight of God. For this reason we have been comforted.

Now, you know, we have often said that the verse divisions of the Bible and the chapter divisions were not made by the authors of the Bible. They’re made by people later. And so here is a good illustration of mistakes made. The first line of verse 13, obviously belongs to the preceding section. And the translators of the New American Standard Bible have sought to agree with that and clarify it and so, they have, “For this reason, we have been comforted” period. But then the next word, “and” begins with a capital and also in heavy emphasized print. Now, if we had been -- if we were dividing the book into verses now, verse 13 -- a would conclude verse 12, and we would begin verse 13 with the words,

“And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even more for -- even much more for the joy of Titus because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For in everything, I have boasted to him about you. But I was not put to shame but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth.” (I won’t say much about that in the message because I think it’s pretty simply explained by just the reading of the text. But it’s clear that when Paul sent the letter with Titus, he told Titus, “I’m very confident that the Corinthians will respond in the right way.” Titus may have had some doubts about that, knowing professing believers, but was confident that they would and now he says that his “boasting before Titus proved to be the truth.” Verse 15,) “His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you.”

We have further indication in this passage of course, that the apostle came from southern Tarsus because you’ll notice that verse 13 ends with, “refreshed by you all.” And then in verse 15, we have, “the obedience of you all.” That’s why southerners speak the way they do. They want to be biblical [Laughter]. May the Lord bless this reading of his word and let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are indeed thankful to Thee for these portions from the word of God that we so often neglect. We thank Thee for the ways in which they reveal to us the personal aspects of the ministries of those who were involved in the spreading of the gospel in the earliest days of the Christian church. And we praise Thee for the apostle and for Titus, and Timothy and others associated with them in making the gospel known over the Western world.

And we thank Thee for the fruit that has been wrought through their agency, but particularly by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And so we worship our triune God, Father,

Son and Holy Spirit. And we especially give Thee thanks for our Lord who offered the sacrifice by which sin may be forgiven to those who come to him. Lord, we pray that some in this audience, as well as in other audiences listening to the word, may respond in belief in Christ and the reception of the forgiveness of sins in grace.

We pray for our country. We pray for the whole body of Christ, the church. We ask especially for the Chapel and its ministries, for its elders and for its deacons and for the members and the friends and the visitors who are here with us and those who listen over the radio. We pray for all of them that together, as we seek to worship and serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that we may do it effectually and fruitfully in a way that is pleasing to Thee.

We pray for those who’ve requested our prayers and for those who are experiencing difficult times; the trials of life which characterize all of us sooner or later. We pray for them, ask Thy blessing upon each one of them. Bless our time of fellowship together. May, as we sing, we sing unto the Lord. And as we listen to the Word, may we be strengthened and built up in our faith.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Now, I think that was probably, Mark, the first time that I have sung that hymn. And occasionally we agreed as we were singing along. But I like that and I hope we’ll sing it again. Isaac Watts and William Cowper. I know that you are going to say, “Why surely, his name is pronounced COW-per,” but no, in Scotland, they did pronounce it “Cooper.” And the only reason I know that is when I was in Scotland, I was going out to have a cup of tea with a fellow who was writing his doctoral dissertation on Cowper, and he mentioned it to me and he said, “Now, you probably pronounce it Cowper.” And I said, “Yes. That’s right.” And he said, “But the Scots pronounced it Cowper.” So since then I’ve been calling him Cowper and nobody has understood what I was talking about in this part of the country. So -- but he was a godly man, a man with

some unusual problems but nevertheless, a godly man and his hymns are, of course, unusual and very good. I do hope that we sing that again because the sentiment is very appropriate for the message this morning.

We’re turning to chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians and the subject is, “The Repentance That Brings No Regret.” I’m sure, as I have often said in preaching through the books of the Bible, that this is not a text that many preachers would ever choose if they were preachers who preached on topics or on particular texts as the characteristic of their ministry because it’s one of those sections that is primarily concerned with the apostle’s explanations of things that happened in his own life. And it does not have, one would think at the beginning, texts that really stand out as you read it. And so it’s a very much neglected passage. But it is important, and as we look at it, I think you will see that at least, there are several things in it that we do need in our Christian experience.

There is, first of all, the contrast between godly sorrow and the sorrow of the world because there is a great deal of misunderstanding about that very fact. One can think of the sorrow of Judas, who confessed, “I have sinned,” and went out and hanged himself. In fact, that has been so significant and so prominent in the New Testament, that some have wondered if Judas really was, after all, a true believer. I think that we recognize that there is a sorrow that is a sorrow of the world that is not a sorrow of God.

In Peter’s case, one can see the difference because Peter denied the Lord. And when our Lord looked at him, he went out and wept bitterly. And the difference between Judas and Peter is illustrated by the results of their actions and their actions’ end result. Peter repented, became an apostle of singular fruitfulness, one whom we thank God for to the present day. Judas went out and in an act of rebellion, committed suicide as the Scriptures teach.

There’s another thing that stands out here in this passage, and that is the problem and the nature of true repentance. What is true repentance? For example, is sorrow repentance? Is weeping necessary for repentance? Is weeping necessary? Is sorrow

necessary for repentance, according to the Bible? Those questions, we’ll deal a bit with in a few moments.

Then finally, this passage illustrates I think the place of the rebuke in the building of shattered relationships. It is necessary that a rebuke be given to our friends and to us by our friends at particular points in our experience. We are all, I’m sure, grateful for those -- sometimes we don’t like it but nevertheless, we are grateful for those who have spoken sharply to us when we need it. As the proverb said, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”

And so it’s surely a biblical principle that the things that are rebukes to us are often the things that we need and not the words of flattery. Or, “Reprove a wise man and he will love you.” So the apostle illustrates I think for us here in this passage the value of the friend who rebukes. So if you have someone who says a legitimate word of rebuke to you, the proper response is not to get angry with them. The proper response is to respond to it and give them thanks for pointing out things that need correction in your own life. I think one of the interesting things about this is that what Paul wanted by this rebuke that he sent in the letter that he wrote to them, he did obtain. He says in the first line of verse 13, “And for this reason, we have been comforted.” And so he got what he wanted.

Now, I think it will help us for just a moment because there are some of you who have never been here, or have not been here much, to recount the situation, because what the apostle has done in verse 12 and 13 or verse 14 of chapter 2, to chapter 7, verse 4, is to engage in very lengthy digression. Now, we are very grateful for the fact that the apostle has engaged in this lengthy digression. Now, we’re very thankful for the fact that the apostle has engaged in this lengthy digression. If he had not engaged in it, we would not have this most magnificent treatment of the ministry of the gospel of Christ. There is hardly anything in the Bible that can compare with it.

If one thinks about what it is to minister the gospel of Christ, one thinks immediately of this great section. Beginning in chapter 2, verse 14 and concluding in chapter 7, verse 5. In fact, Paul -- if he were like some of my friends -- would have said, as he came to chapter 7 in verse 5, “But now to come back to the subject after I’ve wandered from it for this lengthy period of time.” Because you see, what had happened was this. Paul was the one who brought the Corinthians to faith in Christ by his first visit there. Then he wrote them a letter and that letter we do not have. He refers to it in 1 Corinthians in chapter 5. So what we know as 1 Corinthians is really at least second Corinthians. He may have written other letters, but we know he wrote one. Now, after finishing second Corinthians, he heard that there was -- that there were difficulties in the church. Some individuals had arrived who were seeking to overthrow the ministry of the apostle in various ways. We’ll talk about that later on. So the troubling news that came to them led him to make a visit to Corinth that is not recorded in the Book of Acts or here. He merely mentions, “This third time I’m coming to you” in this epistle, when all -- so far as we know from the written records, he’d only been there once. So we know he made a quick trip from Ephesus over and came back.

Well, he was still a bit troubled by the news that continued to come and so he determined to send a third letter. So our 1 Corinthians is really his second epistle. Now, he sends a third, which we don’t have, but which he refers to as a third letter to the Corinthians. This is the stinging letter, according to New Testament scholars, and in it Paul spoke rather sharply to them. And in order to lend a bit of authority to it, he asked Titus to go and take the letter.

Now, Titus was not a pastor of a church. Titus was a representative of the apostle. He was what we call an apostolic legate. He and Timothy, Paul used them, sending them to various places to perform tasks in his name. And so Titus took the letter and Paul told Titus as he went, “Now Titus, you’re going to have some difficulties.” He no doubt, explained to him all of the things that were happening in Corinth. And he said,

“However, I know that those individuals, the great mass of them, have truly received the Lord Jesus as their Savior and are genuine believers, and I’m confident of them. In fact, I boast about them in the way they have responded.” Now, we know that because he says that in this chapter. He didn’t say that -- we don’t have any record of him saying that to Titus in the context of sending him there. We have him saying it later, “I boasted and now you see that my boast of them has been justified.” So he still is concerned. He’d been in Ephesus. He sent Titus over with the third letter, the stinging epistle.

He evidently had an arrangement with Titus to meet him back at Ephesus or perhaps Troas. He knew he would -- as he came around, he would follow the land route at least to Philippi and evidently, that had plans to meet, possibly at Troas.

So the apostle left Ephesus. He went to Troas. No Titus. He waited. He was very much concerned about this. He had “no rest in his spirit,” he says and since fall was in progress, and the time was coming when no ships would be coming from Philippi, and after that time passed, the apostle realized that Titus was not coming by boat. He must come by land. And so he himself started out by land and finally he reached Macedonia -- probably Philippi -- and there he saw Titus again.

And Titus gave him the good news. And out of that meeting, the apostle then wrote fourth Corinthians, which is really 2 Corinthians, from Macedonia. And that’s the epistle that we are reading here. He writes from Macedonia -- and that’s the traditional place incidentally, of the origin of this letter -- and he writes the Corinthians, rejoicing over what has happened, how they have responded to Titus, and to the letter.

Now, if you’ll turn back to chapter 2 in verse 12, we read, “Now, when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me and the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother. But taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.” Now, suddenly we remember, when we reached this passage in our exposition, we pointed how the apostle suddenly breaks out in this thanksgiving to God for no apparent reason. “But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ

and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place,” and he does not come back to the subject in narrative form until chapter 7 in verse 5. So from chapter 2 in verse 14, this praise -- this poem of praise to God for the privilege of the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

So he’s now finished his magnificent digression and in verse 5 you can see he picks up the point here. And he thinks, as he’s with his pen. He says, “I better get back to the subject, to look at what I’ve written all of these pages.” So in verse 5 he says, “For when we were -- we came into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest but we were afflicted on every side. Conflicts without. Fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus. And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you. As he reported to us, your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more.”

Now, I think that’s very plain and I think we can pass by it, except for this comment. You might wonder why the apostle says, “Conflicts without and fears within.” Because we don’t think of Paul as being a fearful man. In fact, we don’t think of Paul as being a man who was ever in anxiety because he’s the one who exhorts us -- as he does in the letter to the Philippians -- “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayers and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” So how could it be possible that he would have fears within? Well, I dare say that one of the reasons that the apostle exhorts us not to be anxious for anything is because he recognized that as a peril that we all have. And he himself was subject to it.

But then there is another reason for this specific thing. The apostle is not talking about fears with reference to Paul. He’s thinking about the fears that he had with regard to the Corinthians. And so when he speaks of, “Conflicts without and fears within,” he’s fearful for his converts. This is not the nervous panic that you and I have, and that perhaps the apostle had upon occasion. But this is the earnest care and love and concern

for the Corinthians, that they would respond to his message through Titus in an affirmative way.

Well at this point, the apostle goes on to explain the cause of his relief at Titus’ coming. He says in verse 8, “For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it, although I did regret it, for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while. 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 in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.”

In other words, writing the letter to them and administering to them the rebuke -- whether strong or mild, we don’t know because we’ve not read the letter. That letter did not bring the apostle any pleasure. Their way of receiving it, however, did. I know a very few people who like to administer a rebuke. Even those who know one must be administered, and who themselves are free from any blame in the matter. But the administering of a rebuke is not a pleasant thing.

But nevertheless, the apostle says, as he says here, “The presence of the godly sorrow” is the thing in which he rejoiced. God’s will was that they not have loss and that the apostle should not be negligent in what he had to do. And so he expresses that, in that last clause of verse 9, “That you might not suffer loss in anything through us.” What is godly sorrow? That’s raised here by the apostle’s expression where he talks about sorrow, and in a moment, he will use that expression. He says, “You were made sorrowful according to the will of God” or, according to God.

What is godly sorrow? Well, godly sorrow is the kind of sorrow in which the sinner is conscious of his sin, but conscious of his sin before God. That’s godly sorrow. “Sorrow according to God” is Paul’s literal expression. It’s the recognition, the consciousness, that our sin is a sin in relation to God the Holy One. And the person who has godly sorrow is one who feels that its inmost soul of pain is found in the loss of the communion with God that God has graciously given him in the past. He has wounded a

love that is dearer to him than he is to himself. That is godly sorrow. Sorrow in which our experience is related to God and to the word of God. To know this, is really to grieve. And that not with a self-consuming, but with a healing, hopeful sorrow. So, godly sorrow is that sorrow that is produced from the consciousness of our sin before God.

Now, the rebuke I say is what the apostle administered to them. It was painful to him, as he says, but nevertheless, the result was what he was hoping and what he got. I think that the apostle and anyone who administers a rebuke in God -- that is, a spiritual rebuke in a spiritual way -- is very much like a surgeon who does not like to take out a scalpel, at least, I’ve always thought that. I hope that surgeons feel this way -- at least when they’re going to operate on me -- that they just don’t like to pull out that scalpel in order to slash a bit with it. But they actually hate to do what they have to do, but rejoice in the fact that the pain is the means to the recovery that lies beyond it. So the apostle, in administering the rebuke, has the same kind of aim and goal in mind. He doesn’t enjoy the rebuke, but he is plainly enjoying the results of it in the change of life in the Corinthians.

Now, it brings us to the 10<sup>th</sup> verse in which we have the issue of godly sorrow brought before us and also the doctrine of repentance. In fact, this doctrine of repentance is raised here in a way that has caused some students of 2 Corinthians to describe this as the best statement of repentance in the whole of the New Testament. Now, there are some important points that it will be helpful for us to recognize, and I’ll try to go through them with a minimum of difficulty. You know when you read the New Testament, that there are two closely related words, “repent” and “regret.” In fact, they are both found in this context. For example, in verse 8 we read, “For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it.” And then of course, in verse 9 we have the word “repentance.”

Now, these represent two different Greek words. One, the word -- the first word -- translated “regret” here, sometimes translated “repent” in the Authorized Version -- I think mistakenly -- means to literally -- now remember, we don’t establish the meanings of words by their roots. Sometimes they’re illuminating, but you establish the meaning of words by their usages. But at any rate, this word by its root, means something like -- or suggests something like -- “to become a care to one afterwards,” to regret. It’s a negative kind of word. It’s a retrospective word. It looks at the past. It has strongly emotional elements in it.

The other word, the word “to repent,” a word that is compounded of a preposition, as is the word for regret, but with the word *noeo*, which means “to bind,” related to the Greek word *nous*, which means “bind.” This word is a word that, according to its root means something like, “to change the mind.” Or even more literally, “to have an afterthought.” In fact, that’s really what it means, “to mind afterwards.”

Now, usually since “to have an afterthought” is to have a different thought from the one you had before. That’s why we use it, “as an afterthought.” Well, then, that word has come to mean something like, “to change the mind.” It represents an afterthought or the change of mind. So the word “repent” has as its basic force, the idea of, “to change the mind.” It’s therefore, it’s -- by the way, it’s related to the Old Testament word, “to turn” and the prophets frequently called upon Israel to turn -- that’s what they meant. To repent. So that Hebrew word *shuwb* means essentially the same as that Greek word *metanoeo*. It is therefore an intellectual word, to have an afterthought. It is an emotional word because it has certain emotional proceedings and followings. And it’s particularly a volitional word too expressing -- expressive of the change.

Unfortunately, in English, that word has been translated in the Authorized Version as “repent.” The reason for it is traceable to the Latin Vulgate, which was the common version back some centuries ago, which anyone read if they read the Scriptures. And the word *repoinitet* in Latin, is the word from which we get repent and it meant essentially “to

be sorry.” So the term “repent” has come in daily usage to have the force of or have strong connotations of “to be sorry.” That’s unfortunate, because while sorrow may accompany valid and true repentance, sorrow itself is not necessarily accompanied by repentance, as we can see right here. So when we think of repentance, we shouldn’t think as if that equals “to be sorry.”

We all have known people who have wept tears of sorrow. In fact, we have an expression, “They wept crocodile tears.” But yet, they didn’t really have any sense of repentance in the biblical sense in the situation. That is, they were sorry, but not sorry before God and his word. There’s a whole lot of difference between them. And one can see it in many of the experiences recorded in the Bible. We’ll refer to them in just a moment.

Now, it’s clear from this passage, since Paul is talking about Christians, that repentance is not simply something that the sinner does unto salvation. But repentance is something that may and ought to characterize the life of believers, as long as they live and as long as they sin. So repentance may be unto salvation. For the unsaved individual, he needs to repent. But for the Christian, he too repents unto restoration to fellowship with God.

One reads the Book of Revelation, the second and third chapters, the Lord Jesus in the letters to the churches calls upon them to repent often. Six or seven times the word is found there. So repentance is a change of mind and thoroughly applicable to men who are outside of Christ as well as to those who are inside Christ. In fact, when Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, the very first of those theses was one about repentance and about the fact that believers ought to be characterized by a continual repentance. That is very true. We should be. Repentance is something we should know constantly, for we constantly sin, and we sin before God.

Now, looking at the types of sorrow here that the apostle mentions because I think this may clarify things for us. He says for example in verse 9, “I rejoice that you

were made sorrowful, that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance, for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God.” Godly sorrow. Verse 10, “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God.” Literally, simply according to God. Three times he uses that expression. “Produces a repentance without regret leading to salvation but the sorrow of the world.” So there is a sorrow according to God. There is a sorrow of the world.

Now, that means essentially this. That sorrow may be true sorrow that leads to repentance, but it not necessarily leads to repentance. Divine sorrow, sorrow according to God, looking at what we have done in the light of the word of God, may produce repentance. But incidentally, that’s not repentance itself, is it? If divine -- if sorrow, according to God, produces repentance, then it’s not repentance. So one may have sorrow according to God, but he may not yet have repented. Those are not the same. So to have sorrow of the world is not repentance. To have sorrow according to God is not the same as repentance. It leads to repentance. It produces repentance. But it’s not the same thing. Please be sure to keep those things in mind.

The divine sorrow leads to repentance. In itself that means that sorrow, in itself, has no remedial power. Only godly sorrow has remedial power and leads to repentance. So when we think about sorrow, and we see somebody weeping tears in a spiritual context, we’re not necessarily to conclude from that that we see in evidence true repentance. Almost everyone would think that that would be true repentance. But if you have ever been around an evangelistic meeting, particularly in years past, when we used to have sinners come to the front -- to the front of the auditorium -- and the mourners bench then see their lives afterwards, we know there are many people who weep and cry and have outward expression of sorrow that is not sorrow according to the will of God.

The apostle makes that all very clear -- plain here, but you see, this is not a commonly preached passage. It’s not a commonly referred to passage, and that’s one of the problems. What usually happens is this. The sorrow according to God is the sorrow

in which we see our sin in the light of the word of God and in the light of the will of God and before a personal holy God. And then there is the kind of sorrow -- and its tears may be more profuse, maybe larger, may last longer, may provoke more pity and compassion on the part of others -- but they are sorrow -- their sorrow is not the sorrow because they have transgressed the word of God, but their sorrow is because of its penal consequences. How it’s affected them. How their life is affected by it. It’s sorrow that’s turned inward. It is -- as someone has said, the melancholy -- the melancholy compound of self-pity and self-disgust. But that’s not repentant sorrow.

In other words, it’s possible for a person to feel, “I’m a sinner” and disgusted at himself, but that’s not necessarily godly sorrow. In fact, you can see forms of that on the athletic field even. Where a fellow is disgusted with themselves and even you can see these big behemoths crying on the sidelines because they missed a tackle or dropped a pass or something like that. That of course, is the extreme but nevertheless, that kind of thing happens in the religious life as well. And think of the people in the Bible whose names come to mind when you think of that. There’s Cain, who went out a vagabond, speaking of how he had been affected by the penal consequences of his sin, but no evidence whatsoever, of a change of life. Or King Saul or Ahitophel, David’s counselor, to whom he went for the finest of counsel, but who betrayed him and ultimately was the Judas of the Old Testament and went out and committed suicide. And Jesus, in the Upper Room discourse, uses him as a typical -- as a type of Judas himself, in the betrayal that Judas would carry out. Judas himself, in that long line of individuals who illustrate the sorrow of the world, but not the sorrow according to God.

On the other hand, David, having committed his great sin of adultery, meeting Nathan and Nathan having brought to his mind evidently the seriousness of his sin, speaks of in Psalm 51, in that great Psalm of the repentance that he experienced over confessing, “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.” He saw his sin in the light of the word of God. And repented and expresses it in that great Psalm – the 50<sup>th</sup> Psalm – and

then the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm and then also in Psalm 32, expressing the same kind of repentance over his past sin, and even talking about how he suffered for a whole year. The pangs of an individual who saw his sin as a sin against God.

So what shall we say about true repentance? Well, it’s a change that is produced by convincing knowledge -- because it has to do with the mind -- which is not effectual itself. Usually accompanied by sorrow, it issues in a change of life. So there is usually sorrow. There is the recognition that we have broken the will -- the word of God. There is the change of mind that occurs as a result of it, and then that issues -- and it must issue -- in a change of life. It is, incidentally, something given by God. It’s done by us. We repent, but that repentance is given by God.

I don’t have time to do anything but just refer to one of the passages. I assure you, there are a number of others. But in Acts chapter 5 in verse 31, I think you’ll see that repentance, like faith, is the gift of God. This is what Peter says, “He is the one whom God exalted to his right hand as a prince and a Savior to grant or to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sin.” Man’s act, God’s gift.

One might ask the question, how does this compare with faith? Well, faith is the more comprehensive word. In fact, sometimes in parallel passages, what is called repentance in one is called faith in another. So faith is the more comprehensive word, including repentance. It’s striking. Now, I think in support of this, that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John for what reason? You all know. He has chosen certain signs in order that men might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that in believing, they might have life through his name. How many times does John use the word “repentance” in the Gospel of John? Not once. So it’s evident that one may come to the knowledge of the Lord and possess spiritual life without knowing the doctrine of repentance, per se, because the Gospel of John is one of the nicest propaganda documents -- a gospel document that we have in all of the Bible. The Apostle Paul uses “repentance” a relatively few times.

Repentance had particular significance because the prophets used the term -- term “turn” so much. But we must insist that when we talk about repentance, we generally talk about sorrow, and we talk about a change of mind, and we must emphasize that it must be followed by the fruits of repentance. That’s the way John the Baptist preached. He spoke of the coming Savior and he told them, as they made confession of repentance unto forgiveness of sins, to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. So we must stress that. We must have fruits worthy of repentance.

I wish I had time to talk about the relationship to conversion, but it’s not all that significant. I just want to say this, that we must not decry godly sorrow. I hope you won’t understand me as saying that. That, I think, is a final thing that we ought to say when we talk about repentance. Godly sorrow is one of the blessed fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of an individual. And therefore, we should not decry godly sorrow, but we do not have to express it in a -- an outward physical way.

Thomas Watson and Henry Smith had some things to say about repentance. One of them said, “Wouldst thou know when thou hast been humbled enough for sin when thou art willing to let go by sins.” That’s true. And Henry Smith said, “The wicked do but weep for their sins past but the godly purpose to sin no more.”

Now, the apostle, in the light of that, in this really magnificent treatment then of the relationship between sorrow and repentance, and repentance unto salvation has said, “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.” One sees that so often in the New Testament and the Old Testament. And men who express outward regret because of the penal consequences of what they have done, but no true seeing of their sin before God. Judas stands out of course. Judas when he said, “I have sinned”, and went out and committed his act of rebellion in suicide, was feeling what might be called the pain of his sin, but that was all.

Now, Paul concludes by rejoicing with Titus over what has happened among the Corinthians. They have responded and the result is, as he says in verse 11, “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’ve demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. These are the fruits of repentance.”

Now, time is up and I must close by simply saying this. This entire account, I think, illuminates the problem and nature of true repentance, the sorrow that proceeds it, the fruit that follows it, and it also I think, underlines something that should characterize the life of all true believers. Repentance. Repentance, not simply for the way in which we have, in our saving -- in our experience of salvation -- come to understand our sin and Christ’s atoning work. But this is something, my Christian friends, that char -- should characterize us constantly in our daily life, because we continue to sin: the realization that when we sin as believers we sin before God.

And therefore, godly sorrow, repentance, and the fruits of it, in a kind of life that grows spiritually is what we should see in the lives of Christians. The Corinthians illustrate this so beautifully. Here are individuals brought to repentance that saved, then listening to the siren voices of false teaching, and then being critical of the apostle by the apostle’s Christian rebuke, brought back to realize their sin, to recognize that they have wronged him and wronged others, the indignation they felt at the way they had acted before, and how he says, “You’ve demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.”

I can’t think of anything else that would be more necessary for a body of believers than to recognize this. It’s well to remember what one of the old Puritans said, and this applies to us as believers, “By delay of repentance, sin strengthens and the heart hardens. The longer ice freezeth, the harder it is to be broken.” We see that in the lives of so many believing people through the years. Failure to repent has led to hardness of heart.

And the longer we persist in not repenting -- seeing our sins in the light of God -- the harder our Christian hearts become. May God deliver us from that.

If you’re here today and you’ve never believed in Christ, we remind you that the repentance that you should experience, is the repentance over your attitude of thinking that you can be saved by the things that you do, by the works that you perform. We cannot be saved by works. We are saved by grace. We are saved by what Christ did because we are sinners. Christ has died for sinners and has made it possible for them to have, as a free gift, eternal life. May God and his wonderful grace move your heart to believe in him, to life everlasting. And after you’ve come to know him, may your life be characterized by the same kind of attitude toward God. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are thankful to Thee, Lord, for these marvelous words from the apostle, explaining things that we have so often confused. We recognize, Lord, that often our sorrow is not sorrow for what we have done before Thee, but sorrow over the consequences that affect us. Deliver us from that self-serving kind of sorrow. Enable us to see ourselves in the light of the Word of God and to change our minds and to follow it with change of purpose through the strength that Thou dost give.

For those, Lord, who may be here without Christ, we ask that Thou wilt bring them to the knowledge of him and to know his life eternal.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

“The Repentance that Brings No Regret” by S. Lewis Johnson  
Copyright © 2007 Believer’s Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.