

The Joy of Genuine Repentance

2 Corinthians 7:1-16

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Introduction

2 Corinthians 7:1-16

What comes to your mind when you think of the word “repentance”? What is your gut response?

If I had to guess, for many of us, our gut reaction when we think about repentance is likely negative. We may think of guilt, shame, pain, and condemnation... In fact, even pictures of ascetic practices and acts of penance may come to mind...

Yet, to have such thoughts and feelings would be to have an incorrect and skewed view of this theological doctrine. Now, of course, there is a reason why we think of negative things. That is because repentance is connected to sin. It is sin that leads to the need for repentance. And we should sorrow over our sin. However, repentance should not be categorized as a purely negative thing that only carnal and immature Christians need to do. Rather, repentance is something that should mark the lifestyle of all Christians, and we should recognize that repentance is a gateway back to the joys of the Lord.

This is what we are going to see here in 2 Corinthians 7. 2 Corinthians 7:1-16 describes two things:

- I. The Call for Repentance (7:1-7)
- II. The Characteristics of Repentance (7:8-16)

It is my hope and prayer that the Lord would use this passage to make us a people of repentance and reconciliation so that we may all experience the joys repentance brings, especially the joys of restored relationships.

Let us begin by looking at The Call for Repentance. Paul writes, “7:1-2a.”

I. The Call for Repentance (7:1-7)

The Call (7:1-2a)

Now, it's important to note that the chapter divisions in our Bibles are not inspired. They were added later for ease of reference. And I point this out because, to be honest, this is an unfortunate chapter division. We are still in the flow of Paul's thought from Dan's sermon last Sunday. 7:1 is really a continuation of what Paul was saying in Ch. 6.

At the end of Ch. 6, Paul explained to the church, by referring to a combination of theological truths rooted in multiple OT passages, that God promises to "dwell in us" and "walk among us" because He is our God and we are His people and because He is our Father and we are His children. So, when Paul says, "Therefore, having these promises," he is directly referring to these promises just mentioned in Ch. 6. And the Apostle connects these profound promises regarding our relationship with God with the specific application that, therefore, Christians are to pursue holistic holiness.

He says, "beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." The phrase "defilement of flesh and spirit" speaks of the spiritual stains of sin. It speaks of the moral filthiness that accompanies *all* sin. When Paul refers to the sins of the "flesh and spirit," he has in mind the holistic way in which sin relates to us as humans and image-bearers of God. Humans are a unity of flesh and spirit. We are both physical and spiritual. We have both material and immaterial elements. So, here in 7:1, Paul is speaking of all sin. Both those sins that are more related to the body and those that are more related to the heart alone.

Now, to be clear, all sin originates in the heart/soul. Jesus said in Matthew 15 that it is "out of the heart" that sin proceeds, and this is what "defiles a man." The body can't force you to sin, and there is never a moment when your heart is not engaged.

However, the sins of “the flesh” refer to those sins that are more physical in nature, such as sexual immorality, drunkenness, gluttony, and violence. On the other hand, the sins of the “spirit” refer to sins that exist in the heart, although not seen physically, such as greed, lust, pride, and evil thoughts. But Paul’s point here is that all of these different types of sins, whether of the flesh or spirit, make one dirty, polluted, and filthy, morally speaking.

Because of this, this is why Paul says we are to “cleansing ourselves” from all these things. And this is an active verb. Meaning, this is something you need to work at! We are to actively purge our lives of all sinful activity. Of course, ultimately, it is God who provides the waters of cleansing that sanctify us. But you must be like the leper Namaan in 2 Kings 5 and go down into and dip yourself in the waters of the Jordan according to the word of God, and it is then that you will find yourself spiritually restored and clean. God cleanses us, but you must step into the waters of His grace.

But brothers and sisters, let me remind you that in the Christian life, entering the cleansing waters of repentance is not a one-time event. Repentance doesn’t just happen at conversion. In 7:1, Paul says that we are to “cleansing ourselves from all defilement ... [and] *perfecting holiness.*” “Perfecting” means to complete or accomplish. And this is a verb in the present tense, meaning that it is an ongoing action. This verse is *not* saying that we’ll be able to achieve sinlessness in this life. But it *is* saying that we are to be engaged in the process of completing and drawing closer and closer to that full and final sanctification that will be brought about when we are with the Lord.

This is the doctrine of progressive sanctification. It is because of verses like this that the very first of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses that kicked off the Reformation was the thesis that “the entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance.” We do not repent once and enjoy sinless perfection the rest of our days. We repent day after day, and in the practical affairs of life, we grow to cleanse ourselves more and more from the stains of sinful living...

And all of this is to be done “in the fear of God.” The fear of the Lord is a humble, reverential, and worshipful submission to Yahweh, and it is to be the driving

motivation behind all growth in holiness. It is this heart posture before God that leads us to depart from defilement and seek out sanctification and holiness.

So, in 7:1, Paul calls the church to turn away from all sin and pursue holiness, but he also adds in 7:2a, saying to the Corinthians, “Make room for us in your hearts.” Remember, in this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul is defending his ministry against false teachers. So, Paul is calling upon the Corinthians here to maintain their loyalty to him, which is really just loyalty to Christ and the gospel. He is calling upon them not to push Paul and his gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone out of their hearts, in order to embrace false apostles and false gospels. The Corinthians need to remain committed to gospel truth.

So, the repentance being called for here includes practical holy living, but it is also a call to remain committed to gospel truth. Christians must not only turn away from wrong living, but also from wrong teaching. Christians must keep their hearts set on the truth...

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in light of the fact that God is your Father and you are His child, pursue holiness! Recommit yourself this Lord’s Day to purge your life from the defilements of sin. Ask yourself: In what ways am I playing in the muck & mire of sin? What habits of life are hurting my relationship with God? Am I at all growing cold to the gospel and the Scriptures and being fascinated with unbiblical teachings? Pray to the Lord: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: Try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24, KJV). And once the Spirit reveals this to you, turn to the Lord, confess and repent of whatever defilement you find, and receive the gracious cleansing from God...

This is Paul’s call to the Corinthians, and Scripture’s call to us today. But additionally, I want us to take note of The Care Behind the Call...

The Care Behind the Call (7:2b-3)

Notice first in v.1 that before he gives this call to repentance, he refers to the Corinthians as “beloved.” He uses a term of endearment and expresses the love of God towards them, but also the love of his own heart.

But then, notice what he says immediately after his exhortation. “7:2b.” Again, Paul defends the integrity of himself and his ministry partners. They didn’t have an angle. They didn’t have ulterior motives. They weren’t secretly ministering in selfishness, but in it for the Corinthians.

Continuing in v.3, he says, “7:3.” Paul makes it abundantly clear he does not intend to condemn them harshly. He does not have a cruel or cold heart towards them. Far from it, actually! Paul says that if you were to look into him and see what was in his heart and see what was near and dear to him, you would find the Corinthians. Paul deeply loved them. In fact, he loved them so much that he was not only willing to live together with them, but he was also willing to die with them. In a context where persecution and death were not unheard of, Paul says his “love is as strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6). This is the epitome of a Christlike love, because “greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

That is the level of Care Behind the Call. But also, I want us to notice The Confidence Behind the Call in 7:4-7.

The Confidence Behind the Call (7:4-7)

He says, “Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf.” Paul was like a proud parent. Despite the fact that the Corinthians were obviously far from a perfect church, you’d still find Paul going around bragging about these believers and what the Lord was doing in and through them. Paul is saying here that he can give such a bold exhortation of repentance as we saw in 7:1-2 because he is confident that they will respond well.

And Paul’s confidence in their ongoing repentance is rooted in how they’ve proven themselves through past repentance. Paul writes, “7:4b-7.”

See, here Paul is picking up on the narrative he was telling back in Ch. 2. It appears that Paul had plans to meet up with his ministry partner, Titus, in the city of Troas. But upon Paul's arrival, Titus was nowhere to be found. So Paul continued west to Macedonia.

During this time, all of the pressures of life are coming down on Paul. He said that he had "no rest" because he was surrounded by "affliction." *Externally*, his time of ministry in Macedonia was marked by conflicts and strife. Per usual, there were people opposing his ministry, both outside the church and likely inside the church. But he had not only external conflicts but also *internal* fears. We see Paul's humanity here. He admits that he was fearful. He was fearful and worried about the state of the Corinthians. Are they ok spiritually? Would they respond well to his letter? Or would they follow false teachers? Furthermore, he was fearful and worried over the welfare of Titus. He did not know how Titus was doing or if he was even alive. So, Paul is very open and honest and shares that in 7:6, he was "depressed."

But, praise the Lord, our God is a God of comfort. And he comforted this depressed minister in his time of need by sending the right messenger and the right message. God sent Titus, and Paul was relieved to learn he was okay. And Titus shared the wonderful news with Paul that the Corinthians had responded well! They had reaffirmed their love and commitment to Paul and the gospel. And in light of this news, despite being surrounded by affliction, Paul's heart was overflowing with joy.

So, what is Paul's point in bringing up this story? His point is that he was using this story to encourage the Corinthians that, just as they had been faithful to repent in the past, he was confident they would be faithful to repent again.

With all this said, there is a valuable lesson of application for us all to grasp from this. In this section on The Call for Repentance, we should learn from Paul's example on *how* to wisely and graciously call others to repentance. Paul is putting on a masterclass on how to have hard, confrontational conversations wisely and biblically in a loving way.

Brothers and sisters, it is really easy for confrontation to go bad. But take note how the Apostle has gone about doing this here under the inspiration of the Spirit, and let us seek to follow in like manner.

When you need to call somebody to repentance or have a hard conversation, use terms of endearment with the other person. Remind them how deeply you love them! If you mean it, remind them your love for them is stronger than death! Make it clear that you are not bringing up this conversation to condemn them or manipulate them. You are not against them, but for them. Recount their past faithfulness. Express how you have seen how they have been faithful in times past, and you trust that they want to continue in faithfulness moving forward. By wisely approaching these conversations as Paul did, we can make hard truth easier to swallow.

Brothers and sisters, this is not some self-help tactic to get your way. This is a Spirit-inspired example of how to biblically lead others to repentance and Christlikeness for their good and the glory of God.

So, what we've seen here in 7:1-7 is The Call for Repentance and the Care and Confidence Behind The Call. But starting in 7:8, we come to our second and final main point this morning: The Characteristics of Repentance (7:8-16).

II. The Characteristics of Repentance (7:8-16)

Paul writes, "7:8-9." Due to the litany of sinful activity taking place in the Church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote a severe letter of rebuke to them. Paul is honest and says that he had mixed feelings about sending it. On the one hand, he felt some regret about sending it to them. Likely, Paul questioned if he had been too severe. Again, Paul had the heart of a parent towards them. Last weekend, we had the Parenting Conference, and when speaking on the topic of discipline, one of the speakers shared how he didn't enjoy disciplining his children. He didn't rejoice in having to bring correction. But he did it out of love for his children. Likewise, this is how Paul felt with the Corinthians.

But despite this regret that Paul felt about rebuking them, it was only temporary. And that is because he saw what it produced in them. Paul didn't rejoice in causing sorrow for sorrow's sake, but he rejoiced "not that [they] were made sorrowful, but that [they] were made sorrowful to the point of repentance."

And it is here in these verses that Paul will now begin to lay out what is likely *the* most foundational biblical text on the doctrine of repentance. Specifically, here in 7:8-11, Paul explains The Nature of Genuine Repentance.

The Nature of Genuine Repentance (7:8-11)

Look at v.10 with me. Paul writes, "7:10." Here, Paul explains what true repentance is and contrasts it with what is false.

So, the first thing to note is that genuine repentance starts with sorrow. However, not all sorrow is equal. The Bible gives us different categories of sorrow here. There is a sorrow "according to the will of God," a "godly sorrow" (7:11). But there is also a "worldly" sorrow that "produces death."

What's interesting is that the same word is used to describe both categories. The term "sorrow," meaning the act of feeling sadness, distress, pain, grief, and vexation, is used in both cases.

So, what is the difference? The difference is that godly sorrow, which is according to the will of God, *produces repentance*, while "worldly sorrow" never leads to repentance.

So, with worldly sorrow, someone may feel real pain over their sin. But it doesn't lead to a change of mind or life. It doesn't lead the way to turn to the Lord. It merely stays at the point of emotion; it never extends into a change in actions. And the fact that this type of sorrow doesn't lead to change demonstrates that it is lacking a Godward focus. Rather, it is focused on self. Someone with worldly sorrow will be sad. But they will be sad for entirely different reasons. They will be sad because they got caught. Or embarrassment/consequences. So, despite having a feeling of guilt over sin, it never goes anywhere.

However, on the other hand, godly sorrow produces repentance. Genuine repentance starts with true sadness and grief over one's sin. But it doesn't stay there. It goes beyond mere feelings and moves to a change of heart and a change of life.

This is exactly what Paul says in v.11. He writes, "7:11." Here, Paul outlines seven changes in the Corinthians that marked their genuine repentance. And while this list was specific to the Corinthians, it also teaches all of us what godly sorrow and genuine repentance look like in action.

First, true repentance is marked by "earnestness." Those who are truly repentant will wake up from their spiritual slumber and put to death their spiritual indifference. They will get serious about their walk with God! Second, Paul speaks of how they "vindicated themselves." "Vindication" is the Greek word "*apologia*," which speaks of how they sought to prove themselves true. Third, genuine repentance is marked by "indignation." Repentant people will be righteously angry at their sin, and this anger propels them to resist it going forward. David Powlison has a book on this topic called *Good & Angry* and writes in the introduction that "we all have firsthand experience with anger gone wrong ... And yet anger done right is a great good ... It says, 'That's wrong' and energizes us to address real problems" (1). Fourth, true repentance is marked by "fear." I believe Paul is likely harkening back to 7:1 and speaking of how genuine repentance is marked by the fear of the Lord, which is a humble, reverential, and worshipful submission to Yahweh that is the driving motivation behind all growth in holy living. Fifth, genuine repentance is marked by "longing." Repentant people have an overwhelming desire to make things right. Sixth, real repentance is marked by "zeal." It is marked by strong energy and determination for righteous living, good works, and the glory of God. Seventh, true repentance is marked by "avenging of wrong." Those who have genuine repentance will want justice to be brought about.

These were the seven particular attributes that marked the Corinthians' response to Paul's letter of severe rebuke. And through all of this, the Corinthians demonstrated that they had a godly sorrow over their sin because it led them to

change their ways. It is this change of mind and life that is the fundamental difference between worldly and godly sorrow.

And perhaps the clearest living pictures of these concepts are found in the contrast between Judas and Peter. Both were disciples of Christ. Both committed the same grievous sin of forsaking the Lord Jesus Christ. Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish religious leaders. Peter betrayed Jesus by denying Him three times. Both of them felt sorrow over what they had done.

Judas, upon seeing Jesus bound and being led like a sheep to the slaughter to be put to death, “felt remorse” and “he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:3, 5). Judas felt extreme vexation of soul over his sin, even to the point of taking his own life. But he is a living picture of worldly sorrow because his sorrow never led to repentance. His sorrow never looked back to God and led to a change of life. His worldly sorrow didn’t produce repentance, but instead a noose around his neck. It produced death.

On the other hand, Peter likewise felt sorrow over his sin of denying Christ. After realizing his public rejection of Jesus, Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75). But it didn’t end there. After news of Jesus resurrection, Peter literally runs back to Jesus. John 20 tells us that Peter ran to the tomb! And John 21 explains Peter’s restoration. Matching Peter’s threefold denial of Him, Jesus asks him three times, “Do you love me?” Peter reaffirms His love for Christ and then goes on to live a changed life because of it. The man who denied Christ before a little girl goes on to be the man who boldly proclaims Christ and goes on to die for Christ. Peter is a living picture of a godly sorrow that leads to repentance... And this genuine repentance is a precious gift from the Lord. Paul in 7:9 uses a passive verb when he says to the Corinthians that they “*were made* sorrowful according to the will of God.” It was God who brought this about in their hearts! Yes, they volitionally made a personal decision to break with their sin, but the ultimate explanation was that this was a sovereign work of God.

And the final destination of this sovereign work of God is salvation. Godly sorrow not only leads to repentance but also to salvation. And it is hard to overemphasize

how important this truth is. Hear me clearly: Without repentance for sin, there is no salvation. Only the repentant will make it to heaven.

So, have you recognized your sin? Have you recognized your guilt before God? Are you grieved of heart that you scorned Your Creator and lived a life centered around your own wicked desires? I hope that you have. But even that is not enough. You can't just recognize that you are a guilty sinner. You must repent. You must turn from your sin. You must turn to God. In the words of Peter: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

But for the saints of Cornerstone, understand that repentance is not only needed at conversion but throughout the Christian life. The Christian life, from beginning to end, must have ongoing godly sorrow when sin arises and ongoing repentance to find ongoing relational restoration from the Lord. And take heart in knowing that a life of repentance leads to life eternal.

So, The Nature of Genuine Repentance is that it starts with a godly sorrow that is rooted in a Godward focus. And this sorrow isn't merely an emotion; it propels one toward a change of heart and life. It leads one to truly turn from sin in repentance. And this repentance leads to salvation and life. And all of this is a sovereign gift of God's grace...

But the grace of repentance does not stop there. The grace of repentance isn't restricted to future salvation. Repentance also brings grace that bursts into the present. Specifically, the major, overarching grace found in the rest of Ch. 7 is The Joy of Genuine Repentance. Paul writes, "7:12-16."

The Joy of Genuine Repentance (7:12-16)

Here we find how, through the Corinthians' response to Paul's letter of rebuke, they demonstrated themselves to be earnestly committed to the Apostle Paul and the true gospel which he preached. The Corinthians genuine repentance proved to be a fount of numerous blessings. Their repentance is said to have brought about

comfort, joy, refreshment, increased affections, and reaffirmed relational confidence.

V.13 says that as Paul heard the report of the repentance of the Corinthians, consolation and solace swept over his soul. His heart was filled with happiness and cheerfulness. Titus is described as experiencing refreshment, rest, and relief.

Also, v.15 explains that through the Corinthians' repentance & reception of him, Titus' love and "affections are [even] greater" for them now. This demonstrates that faithfully dealing with sin and achieving restoration doesn't just bring things back to where they were before; it can actually be blessed by God to increase love and affection among believers to a degree not previously known. The reality is that repentance is redemptive. And it is because of the Corinthians' faithful repentance in the past that Paul feels confident to address them again and call them again to remain with him in gospel faithfulness. That is why Paul can be thinking about the Corinthians' repentance and end this chapter by saying, "I rejoice."

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, the Spirit of God speaks to us all this morning through this passage and calls us again to repentance over known sin. We are called today to cleanse ourselves and maintain gospel fidelity. We are to have a godly sorrow over our sin that leads us to change because of it. So, brothers and sisters, let us embrace and pursue genuine repentance, foremost to honor the Lord, but also because it is a pathway to joy!

To illustrate this point, let me close with this. As a bit of a history nerd, I've watched full-length documentaries on WWII/Korean War/Vietnam War/War on Terror. And specifically, I remember how the brutality of the Vietnam War and hearing soldiers recount the extreme strain of constant ambushes & assaults. And because of this, during the Vietnam War, the US would try to get our servicemen to go on "R&R." R&R stands for Rest & Recuperation. During the Vietnam War, servicemen would be taken out of the warfare and sent to places like Hawaii to enjoy rest and relaxation. And what I want to submit to you all today is that we need to recognize that sin brings about turmoil & chaos, but repentance is like

R&R. Repentance is like the plane that takes you out of turmoil and brings you into lands of rest and recuperation.

So, brothers and sisters, this morning we are called to sorrow over our sin. But let that sorrow propel you to turn away from sin & turn to Christ. When you do so, you will come to taste & see the comfort, refreshment, and joy it brings. You will experience that Genuine Repentance is the gateway that leads to the paths to Joy and Salvation.