

“GODLY SORROW”

A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, But by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken. (Proverbs 15:13 NKJV)

What does it mean when someone says, “I’m sorry.” It can mean a lot of different things. It can be hypocritical. A person may do something or say something that causes you pain and then say, “Oh, I’m sorry.” In fact, it was their intention to hurt you. They feel no remorse. “I’m sorry” can be an expression of indolence. Someone was responsible for some chore, some responsibility and they didn’t do it. As a result, many people may have been inconvenienced. Their expression “I’m sorry” does not mean they can be depended on to do it the next time. The expression “I’m sorry” can be dismissive. A person recounts to their friend, a major catastrophe in their life, a painful choice or a loss or a devastating financial blow. The person from whom they wanted sympathy or advice or support doesn’t want to be bothered. They say “I’m sorry.” It is a polite dismissal.

On a social media site, teenagers were discussing “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve been hurt all my life and all people can muster up is “sorry.” Sorry doesn’t fix it. Sorry doesn’t make pain go away. Sorry doesn’t make me trust you again.”

“The word sorry no longer has any effect on me. People who I thought actually meant the words they were saying have proven to me time and again how much of a lie I’ve been believing all these years. Sorry doesn’t cut it anymore for me, and sadly it’ll hurt me more in the future than it will help.”

Turning from teenagers on social media to classical literature, sorrow is defined as the memory of happy times now lost.

“This is the truth the poet sings,
That a sorrow’s crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.”

From Ulysses by Alfred Lord Tennyson

“There is no greater sorrow
Than to be mindful of the happy time in misery.”

From Inferno by Dante

1.) Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one. I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more. (2 Corinthians 7:2-7 NKJV)

Paul taught that Christians should not worry.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; (Philippians 4:6 NKJV)

Nevertheless, in the beginning of this chapter he bares his soul and speaks of anxieties that were deeply troubling him.

Paul heard that there were persons in Corinth who were accusing him of having wronged some people, corrupted persons, and cheated still others. It was causing trouble in the church. Paul searches his own heart, begs the Corinthians to do the same. He is innocent. Why haven't they stood up for him, defended him?

Paul made a brief visit to Corinth when he received disturbing reports about sinful conduct, abuse of authority, and wrongful practices in worship. After his return, he followed up his visit with a harsh letter of reprimand, rebuke, and exhortation to repent. He worries how the letter was received. Did he make matters worse?

Third, he was concerned about the safety of Titus. He was expected to be in Macedonia when Paul arrived. The more time passed, the more possibilities there were – shipwreck, bandits.

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2.) For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. (2 Corinthians 7:8-11 NKJV)

Both Tennyson and Dante defined sorrow as remembering happiness that now is gone. To repent means to turn around, to go back. The godly sorrow that led to repentance means to remember how happy they once were when they were obedient to God and there was peace and harmony in the church.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6 NKJV)

In these verses from Hebrews, see the happiness when they were right with God: enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. It is impossible to renew them again to repentance because they crucify again for themselves the Son of God and put Him to an open shame.

I don't know who the writer of Hebrews was referring to or why they couldn't repent. The Corinthian believers reflected on the happiness they had when they were right with God, obeying His Word. They had godly sorrow for lost fellowship with Jesus Christ. They repented. God was faithful and just to forgive them of their sins.

Worldly sorrow leads to bitterness and anger. It remembers the happiness of past days, but it does not lead a person to acknowledge their sins and ask for forgiveness.

3.) Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you. Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I am not ashamed. But as we spoke all things to you in truth, even so our boasting to Titus was found true. And his affections are greater for you as he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling you received him. Therefore I rejoice that I have confidence in you in everything. (2 Corinthians 7:12-16 NKJV)

“Him who had done the wrong” and “him who suffered wrong” may refer to the man who was living with his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5) or it may be someone who was directing accusations against Paul. In either case it was not for the sake of either the offender or victim that Paul wrote the painful letter, but for the sake of the whole church. Paul’s rebukes and correction in the letter were made because he cared for the believers; he loved them. They were his children in the faith. They were in his heart to die together and to live together.

If the church had continued to tolerate in their fellowship the presence of that man who was living in unrepentant sin, it would bring God’s displeasure on the whole church. If someone could openly unjustly accuse and criticize Paul and not be silenced and discipline by the very believers to whom Paul brought the Gospel, God in heaven would see and would withdraw His blessing from the Church. In Revelation Jesus refers to this as removing the candlestick which represents that Church. The purpose of Paul’s letter was “that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you.”

Paul was comforted by the safe arrival of Titus, when he heard that his painful letter had produced godly sorrow which led to repentance and restoring to the Corinthian believers the joy of their salvation. He was comforted to hear of their zealous love for him.