

2 Corinthians 7:8

Godly Sorrow and the Seven Fruits of a Reached Conscience

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 7:8–16

“For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent; for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you! Yea, what clearing of yourselves! Yea, what indignation! Yea, what fear! Yea, what vehement desire! Yea, what zeal! Yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter. Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you. Therefore we were comforted in your comfort; yea, and exceedingly the more joyed we for the joy of Titus, because his spirit was refreshed by you all. For if I have boasted anything to him of you, I am not ashamed; but as we spake all things to you in truth, even so our boasting, which I made before Titus, is found a truth. And his inward affection is more abundant toward you, whilst he remembereth the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him. I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things.”

Grieved to Repentance — Not Merely Sorry

The apostle was not sorry merely that they had been grieved, and his object was not simply to grieve them. Grieved to repentance and simply grieved are two different things. He desired that they be grieved to repentance, and that is what was produced. In a care meeting where a matter had been pending for some months, a brother was asked whether he believed the person concerned was sorry, and he acknowledged that they were. But he said: sorry is not enough. This required godly sorrow unto repentance, and that is different from just being sorry. The matter went on another six months until everyone was satisfied that point had been reached. Not that any fixed period of time is the rule — the point is when godly sorrow unto repentance has been reached, which may take more or less time. That is the measure.

The principle applied to the assembly at Corinth as well as to the individual concerned in 1 Corinthians 5. The assembly had not merely been indifferent to the evil — it had been puffed up — and there needed to be repentance there also. The same principle: grieved unto repentance, not merely sorry. Hebrews 12:11 bears on this: “No chastening at the time seemeth to be a matter of joy, but of grief; but afterwards yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those exercised thereby.” The exercise is what is needed. Sorrow does not always turn out to be sorrow to repentance — it depends on whether there is exercise thereby.

Understanding Verse 8 — Darby’s Note

The whole of verse 8 could seem a little confusing: “I do not repent, though I did repent.” Darby’s translation handles it helpfully: “For if also I grieved you in the letter, I do not regret it, even if I have regretted it; for I see that the letter, even if it were only for a time, grieved you.” His note explains that the expression “if also” represents a Greek form which, while literal, is more delicate as an expression of feeling than “though.” He renders it “if even” in the other two occurrences to express an extreme case or admission of the furthest extent to which he went — i.e., regret. He was right and inspired, but felt the distress

individually, and would not leave them ignorant of how far his love went.

The grief he felt was something personal, held at the same time as the knowledge that he had done the right thing — not a matter of sequence where he first felt bad and then put it aside, but the two feelings existing together. His love for them did not change. He was happy that it turned to a good account for them; but his personal feeling of regret, arising from that very love, was there without his ever thinking for a moment that he had done the wrong thing. Truth enters the soul by way of conscience — that was a clear belief of the brethren of the last century. The letter was addressed to their consciences, not to the guilty man alone but to the whole assembly.

Grief According to God

In verse 9, Darby brings God directly into the expression: “grieved according to God” rather than merely “godly sorrow.” That is more helpful, because it is God who is at work in these verses and in the hearts of the Corinthians. It was a grief founded on bowing to the inspired Scripture that had come from God through the apostle Paul. That is exactly why the contrast with worldly sorrow in the latter part of the verse is so stark: worldly sorrow has nothing of God in it at all, and it works death.

The case of Judas Iscariot is the clearest illustration. He did what he did and then was sorry for it afterwards, with great sorrow — exactly the sorrow of the world that works death, and how ugly that death was. A passing question: one scripture says he went and hanged himself, and another says he fell down and his bowels gushed out. There is no contradiction; the rope broke. He hanged himself, the rope broke, he fell, and his bowels gushed out. God’s Word contains no contradiction. It is just the kind of thing critics like to fasten on, but it has a perfectly plain explanation.

Repentance, in the full scriptural sense, is more than changing one's mind about something. We often hear that someone has changed his mind. Does that mean he has repented? Repentance brings in God. It is to take God's side about a thing and sit in judgment on oneself. That is more than a change of mind. Grief according to God — bowing to what God has said through his inspired Word — is what produces that.

The Seven Fruits — A Complete Testimony

The seven things listed in verse 11 have a character that is given to them by the opening of the verse: “Behold this selfsame thing, your being grieved according to God.” The grief according to God was what gave character to everything that follows. Since they had been grieved according to God, what flowed from it was in accordance with the mind of God, and it was a manifestation that the conscience of the assembly had been reached in the matter. Seven is the number of completeness according to the glory of God, as against six which falls short. The very last words of verse 11 confirm this: “In every way ye have proved yourselves to be pure in this matter.” Seven things, a complete picture, and “in every way” pure.

The seven divide into three and four, as happens elsewhere in Scripture — the seven parables of Matthew 13 divide into four and three; the seven churches divide into three and four; the seven items in Colossians 3 divide into three and four; and here similarly. The first three have to do with a change in behavior, and the last four with a changed attitude and a godly view of the whole thing.

Diligence — The First of the Seven

Diligence was the first item. They had been careless; now they were showing diligence. Deuteronomy 17:4 gives some substance to this word: “And it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and inquired diligently, and behold it be true, and

the thing certain, that such an abomination is wrought in Israel.” Even having received 1 Corinthians with a clear statement of the case, they would still have been obligated to use diligence in the matter — to inquire, to establish the thing certainly. They had moved from a careless state to a diligent one.

Clearing — The Second

Clearing of themselves, or as Darby has it, excusing — Mr. Kelly notes that the force of it is self-clearing. That is, clearing themselves of connection with the sin, so that they should no longer be identified with it. By repentance and the action of excommunication that followed, they put a separation between themselves and that evil. There is a direction to do the same in 2 Timothy 2: “Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” The need for clearing is implied wherever something evil has been tolerated.

Indignation — The Third

They had shown what was effectively apathy before — worse than apathy, indeed, for they had been puffed up. Now there was indignation. Nehemiah 13:28 breathes with the sense of it: Nehemiah found that one of the sons of Joiada the son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite, and he says, “Therefore I chased him from me.” A grandson of the high priest in Israel married to the daughter of Sanballat — and Nehemiah chased him away. There is a certain graciousness and political correctness of behavior that does not like what Nehemiah did to that man. But Nehemiah was indignant with God. The Corinthians had their own form of indignation to show — an indignation directed at themselves for the spirit of indifference they had allowed before God. Real entering into the insult given to God in his glory in connection with that sin.

Fear, Desire, Zeal, and Vengeance — The Last Four

These last four have the Corinthians themselves and their own attitude very much in view — their own changed deportment before God. Godly fear — they got before God about it, and there was the fear of God that is characteristic of a conscience that has been reached. Then vehement desire — a longing to get right with God about the whole thing. Then zeal to obey the Word of God as delivered through the inspired epistle from God's appointed apostle, about whose apostleship many of them had been quarreling. And finally vengeance or revenge — which Darby renders as vengeance. This might seem harsh, but in the act of putting away that wicked man from among themselves, they were acting in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with himself in their midst. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. But the Lord was there in the midst, and his name was connected with the action. So it is not to be entirely separated from that.

This last item pointed toward themselves as well: it was a great affront to the person of Christ in the assembly that they had shown, and so this vengeance had themselves in view, coming into self-judgment before God over that spirit of being puffed up instead of getting on their knees for guidance as to what to do.

Purity in the Matter — The Assembly in Corinth

If they had done all seven of these things in attitude and never actually put the wicked man away from among themselves, they would have remained impure. If, on the other hand, they had put that man away from among themselves but none of these seven things had changed in them — no diligence, no clearing, no indignation, no fear, no desire, no zeal, no vengeance — then God would have had to come knocking at their door again to deal with their state of soul. These are not the kinds of things that God ordinarily takes a neutral view of in the hearts of his people. But the wonderful thing about Corinth is that in a city famous throughout the ancient world for its immorality and depravity, in such a city, all of these things came together under the power of God. The conscience of the assembly was touched, all seven results were produced, they acted to put

away that wicked person from among themselves, and in the midst of a filthy city, they proved themselves pure. In this matter, anyway. Isn't that wonderful?

The sin of Achan has some of those same parallels in a practical way. God's judgment was on the whole assembly of Israel, though by and large the sin was unknown. Joshua and the elders reacted to God's judgment at the hands of Ai, then used diligence to ferret out what the problem was, looking to the Lord to lead them to it. Then Joshua's indignation against Achan for the trouble he had caused. Then the judgment of the people on him. And then the testimony of stones raised up over him — not done in secret, but a public testimony to the purity of the camp, having put out that evil.

In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.