

Why Can't I Change?

If you are like me, you've had plenty of times when you were face to face with a sinful habit that you just seemed unable to quit. We're growing Christians so this is going to be a pretty constant place for us. Even as we overcome one thing, the onion layer peels back to reveal another struggle. Why do those pesky sins keep hanging on? What if I could share a passage that pinpoints one of the main reasons, if not the main reason? Would you want to see it?

Here it is.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

—**II Corinthians 7:10** (ESV)

Repentance is a change in thought that leads to a change in action. But what leads to that change? Sorrow. "I've had plenty of sorrow because of my sinful habits," you say, "Why doesn't that change anything for me?" Paul makes it clear that not just any kind of sorrow actually works. Worldly sorrow doesn't produce repentance, and therefore, it won't change the sins in our lives that lead to death (cf. **Romans 6:23; James 1:12-15**).

Worldly sorrow is, I believe, marked by the things of the world described in **I John 2:16**. "For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world" (ESV). There have been plenty of times I've been sorry and sad, but not for any good reason. I've been sad because I didn't get something I wanted—the lust of the flesh and the eyes. I've been sad because of personal embarrassment and shame—the pride of life. Why are you sorry for your last outburst at your spouse? Because you ended up having to sleep on the couch? Why are you sorry for the lie you told? Because you got caught and lost your job? Why are you sorry for the gossip you shared? Because you got called on the carpet and looked bad? Why are you sorry you looked at that pornography? Because you feel like you let everyone down and now you don't measure up to the rest of the folks at church? It is not necessarily wrong to have these kinds of sorrows. But none of them is going to produce real change.

Think of a great example of this in the rich young ruler. In **Matthew 19:22**, he left Jesus sorrowful. But his sorrow was bound up in preserving his material goods. The lusts of his flesh and the pride of the wealthy life were his focus. Therefore, his sorrow didn't lead to repentance and change. He abandoned Jesus and walked headlong to death.

Oh, sure, worldly sorrow will often lead to short term change. When you are sorry you bounced a check because you hated having to pay all those fees and you are ashamed that you aren't as financially sound as your friends, you spend the next few months keeping your checkbook balanced. But once there is a little leeway and the pressure of that sorrow fades, you'll let the balance and budget slide. Then the checks will start bouncing again, and you'll wonder why you always get back to this point.

Why does this happen? Because this sorrow is about your personal embarrassment, your passions and desires, and your glory. This sorrow is focused on you. In this case, the struggle to quit whatever sinful habit you're concerned about is just a competition between competing personal passions. After all, what keeps you from balancing the checkbook? Your personal passion for ease, convenience, and pleasure. After all, balancing the checkbook is no fun. In that moment, the sorrow of having to do something you don't want seems more painful than the distant, back in the past or off in the future pain of the bounced check. But the heart of the problem is that either choice you make here is all about you, your lusts, passions, and pride. That is destined to cause you to fail somewhere.

Someone has said that until the pain of staying the same is worse than the pain of the change, you won't change. But **II Corinthians 7:9-10** explains when the pain/sorrow of staying the same will actually become more than you can bear. That happens when it is godly sorrow. That is, when it is a sorrow that is in accord with God. When your sorrow is anchored in God and His glory instead of your lusts, then repentance will follow. When your sorrow is not bound up in the worldly things that appeal to your flesh, but over the fact that your sins detract from God's glory (cf. **Romans 3:23**), repentance will come.

Consider a great example of this in David. After committing adultery, conspiracy to murder, lying, multiplying wives to himself, coveting, theft, and probably a host of other sins, he said in **Psalms 51:4**, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (ESV). David's greatest sorrow was not what his sin had done to others. It wasn't what his sins had done to himself. His greatest sorrow was what he had done to God with his sins.

Why does this sorrow cause change? Because your thinking has changed. You're no longer thinking about you, but about God. When your greatest desire is to glorify God and therefore your greatest sorrow is detracting from His glory, your behavior will change. It won't happen because you're afraid of what others will think of you. It won't happen because of some temporal benefit you receive from doing right versus some temporal trouble you go through because of doing wrong. It won't happen because of the potential consequences to you. It will happen because you're focusing on God and His glory.

So, what is not changing in your life? Put a name on all that sorrow you've felt about it. Why is what you've done and endured so bad? If it gets back to something that fits under the headings of lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, or the pride of life, you've put your finger on why the change isn't happening. Focus your heart on delighting in God and being mortified by dishonoring Him. Then feel the sorrow that comes from knowing you've detracted from His glory. Focus on that every time you commit the sin again. Repentance will follow. I don't want to act like it will be a flipped switch, but it will happen. Godly sorrow produces repentance.

—Edwin L. Crozier