

Godly Sorrow vs. Worldly Sorrow

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To clearly see the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow and how the one differs from the other, we must first know and understand the general meaning that is given to the word “sorrow” and how an individual in each category looks at it. Sorrow by definition, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, is “the mental suffering caused by injury, loss, or despair.” We can see in this definition that sorrow, as the world looks at it, has absolutely nothing to do with God or with sin. On the other hand, sorrow, as Scripture indicates, can be defined as the feeling of regret or contrition over one’s sinful behavior and attitude toward God or the sufferance of pain as a result of sin. Thus, sorrow in the biblical sense has everything to do with God and with sin.

Now that we have established the basis for understanding sorrow in these two categories, we are in a better position to understand the way a person in each category would react to sorrow. According to Paul in II Corinthians 7, worldly sorrow works death. Why does Paul say that worldly sorrow leads to death?

The way I look at it, the world has no hope. The world does not believe in God and therefore has no hope or source of strength. The consequences of sin follow every man, be it Christian or not. Since the world has nowhere to turn when the consequences of sin take their toll on it, and since the world does not know or have the forgiveness and grace and mercy of God, sorrow under such circumstance leads to despair, hopelessness, and eventually to death. In Christ, God himself works sorrow, which is godly sorrow, in the heart of the believer, giving him grace and leading him to repentance. God’s grace and forgiveness are applied to the believer and become a source of strength unto him or her. When the Christian or believer obtains forgiveness and mercy of God, he or she obtains also grace to endure and bear the sorrow. Eventually, the believer regains his or her strength and experiences joy. On the other hand, the unbeliever does not have the forgiveness and mercy of God, and the pain and sorrow of sin weigh heavily upon him or her unto death.

Godly sorrow brings joy to the believer because there is hope for him with God. In I Thessalonians 4:13, addressing the issue of sorrow from another angle, Paul points out that a believer’s attitude to sorrow with regards to death—also a consequence of sin (see Romans 5:12)—ought to be different from that of the unbeliever. The world can sorrow because it has no hope, but the believer should not sorrow as the world sorrows because there is hope for him or her. Thus, Paul would not have believers sorrow even as others (the world) which have no hope. There is great hope for us believers in God. Sin and death don’t have the victory over us. We have victory over these and we ought to rejoice in the Lord. That’s the reason why godly sorrow ought to bring joy to believers in Jesus.

It must also be clear to us that godly sorrow, as regards sin, is not the mere act of feeling sorry or bad about sin. Rather, it is feeling sorry for sinning against God and repenting from the sin. For godly sorrow brings about repentance and God, in His infinite mercy and grace forgives, comforts, and gives the strength to overcome sin. His love and mercy and grace are with us even in difficult times, including when we sin against Him, because we are His children whom He loves so dearly. He punishes sin and chastises us when we do wrong but He does so in love, assuring us of His love, giving us the grace to endure chastisement and pain, and He forgives us and leads us to repentance. God's love for His children is so great and beyond any measure or comprehension.

God, in giving us His Word, recorded many examples of servants of God who were before us so we could study their lives and learn from their experience with God. One bad example of sorrow is Cain. Cain was warned of God about the sin that was taking root in his heart yet He disregarded God's warning. He went right ahead and did as his sinful heart prompted him to do. He killed his own brother, Abel. Cain did not sorrow for his sinful attitude and act against God. He sought not forgiveness of the Lord. He simply was not sorry. Though Cain sorrowed later, it was not godly sorrow for sin. It was worldly sorrow for the suffering of the penalty and consequence of his sin. God does not want His children to sorrow the way Cain did. Cain's story is recorded for us so we do not follow his example.

Another bad example of sorrow is Judas Iscariot who, after realizing the wrong he did in betraying the Son of God, sorrowed but did not turn to the Lord and seek forgiveness from Him. He therefore experienced worldly sorrow that brought about his death. He found no hope outside of God.

On the other hand, a good example of sorrow is David. His sin is recorded for us in II Samuel 10-12. Even though David sought to hide his sin from men, it was not hidden from God. God sent his prophet Nathan to tell David of his sin. And David sorrowed for his sin, asked God for forgiveness and repented of it (see Psalm 51). In the New Testament, Peter, after denying the Lord Jesus three times, sorrowed and wept bitterly, asked the Lord for forgiveness, and recommitted himself to God. We can clearly see that godly sorrow brings about repentance and favor with God.

Sorrow! It kills and destroys every day! Is yours worldly or godly?

“For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” 2 Corinthians 7:10.