

Crisis Management *Regrets*

This morning we begin a four-week series on the theme of *Crisis Management*. There are experiences that we have that can cause us to get stuck. So, I want to identify four common things that we all probably have faced, are facing, or most likely will face, and then talk about some practical ways to get unstuck. These are all things that if we don't manage them well, have a very negative impact in our lives.

The four topics for the series are: **regrets, busyness, expectations and identity**. Today, we begin with regrets.

I. Regrets: What Are They?

Dictionary.com defines *regret* as:

- A sense of loss, disappointment, dissatisfaction, etc.
- A feeling of sorrow or remorse for a fault, act, loss, disappointment, etc.

We can relate to that, can't we? Regrets come in all sizes, shapes and colors. I was thinking this week about different causes of regrets. Here's what I came up with.

- Relational regrets – regrets for how I have treated another person; things I have said or things left unsaid; some of my regrets in life are how I parented. Thank goodness, God can overrule those and work, even in spite of me.
- Occupational regrets – I wish I had done this or that differently; If only I had taken that other job, or done better at the job interview.
- Spiritual regrets – I wish I had gotten serious about my relationship with the Lord sooner; I regret my lack of enthusiasm for spiritual things, etc.
- Behavioral regrets – I regret the way I acted... (fill in the blank); I can't believe I was so foolish in my younger years, etc.
- Financial regrets – I wished I had saved more money; I regret I threw so much money away on foolish, extravagant things.

- Physical regrets – I wish I had taken better care of myself; I regret the risks I took in life.

II. Regrets: Their Impact

Whatever the causes, regrets have consequences; they take a toll on us. One of the primary effects of regret, I think, is guilt. We live with this guilt that can easily degenerate into discouragement, second-guessing, even despair and depression.

The experience of regret might lead to paralysis of action. We have been burned before because of bad choices, bad decisions, bad actions; the only “safe” thing, we think, is to do nothing. And so, we get stuck in the emotions and the fallout of regret.

Perhaps there is no more classic illustration in the New Testament of suffering regret than Peter. Turn in your Bible to the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament. Let’s start the story in chapter 16 (page 1044). There’s some build-up that we need to see to lay out the pattern that results in Peter’s personal crisis.

Matthew 16:21-23

Now, over to chapter 26 – **Matthew 26:30-35**

Jesus is betrayed by Judas, arrested and taken before the Jewish high priest and the Council. Then we pick up the story at verse 69 of chapter 26.

Matthew 26:69-75

Can you imagine the regret that Peter is experiencing? Denial, betrayal, failure and all that came along with it: deep sorrow, crushing guilt, bitterness and disappointment in himself.

Now turn to John’s Gospel, a few books further into the New Testament. Jesus has been crucified and then raised from the dead. He has appeared to his disciples, showing himself alive. But can you just imagine the thoughts that continue in Peter’s mind – the lingering guilt, fears of his Lord’s disapproval and censure, a sense of being disqualified to amount to anything of value in Jesus’ kingdom and work.

How does Peter get unstuck? How does he deal with his regret? And what can we learn from his example for how we deal with regret? I want to suggest **three important steps** to getting unstuck.

III. Regrets: Getting Unstuck

A. Forgive Yourself

One of the ways we need to deal with regret is learning to accept forgiveness. It begins, obviously, with accepting God's forgiveness. Some people struggle with the notion that God could really forgive them for something they have said or thought or done.

But listen, if you are not willing to accept God's forgiveness, you are, in essence, saying that Jesus' death was insufficient or inadequate to cover the guilt of your sin. Or perhaps it is that you don't feel you have done enough to atone for your actions. But that's the point of grace, isn't it?

There is nothing you can do to earn God's forgiveness, to make yourself worthy of his grace. That's why God offers his forgiveness to his children when they confess their sins to a loving heavenly Father. The Apostle John writes in his first letter:

If we confess our sins (that is, agree with God concerning our sins), he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

– *1 John 1:9*

God offers forgiveness. Forgiveness, in the Scriptures, means essentially “to release the debt.” We owe a debt that results from our actions, words or thoughts. To be forgiven means that the debt is no longer charged to our account; it's no longer held against us. To experience God's forgiveness in our lives requires that we receive, we accept, his releasing of the debt.

There is also the forgiveness of others. As badly as we might have hurt someone else, when they in turn grant us forgiveness, we need to accept that as well.

I believe that for a lot of Christians, even those who accept God's forgiveness and that of others, the bigger challenge is in forgiving themselves. Don't you think that Peter must have struggled with this?

“I have failed the Lord; worse than that, I denied I even knew him.” It’s a wonder that Peter didn’t choose the same remorseful course of action as Judas. Surely, he must have doubted that he could be forgiven. Or that he could even come to the point of accepting the Lord’s forgiveness and get unstuck. And that doesn’t even address the issue of forgiving himself.

Let’s pick up in John’s account, chapter 21. Jesus comes to the sea where some of the disciples, including Peter, have been fishing. He reveals himself to them and has breakfast with them. Think of the conflict here in Peter’s heart. “What do I say?” “Will the Lord even want to speak to me?” “Where do I go from here?” His heart had to be torn with grief, doubt, regrets.

But then, Jesus does speak to Peter: **John 21:15-17**

Peter’s denial was a public act; now Peter’s restoration is a public act.
Peter’s denial was three-fold; now his restoration is three-fold.

I love the symmetry. Jesus restores Peter. He restores Peter for his own sake. Peter was a defeated man – humiliated, devastated, shamed. Can you imagine how he must have cringed within when in the very presence of the one he so cowardly denied? He needed restoration for his own sake.

Jesus also restored Peter for Jesus’ sake. God was not through with Peter. He was restored so that he might be a more effective servant of Christ.

Peter denied his Lord three times; he affirms his love for the Lord three times; and three times he is commissioned to serve the flock of God.

Peter experienced the wonderful grace of God – even in his greatest failure. But don’t miss this point: Peter had to be willing to receive restoration; he had to be willing to get unstuck from his regrets and to receive, through this restoration, forgiveness of his actions.

There is an interesting word play in these verses. I don’t want to overstate their significance, but I do find it interesting. There are two different Greek words for the English word “love” used here. The verbs are:

Agapaō – used to describe the attitude of God towards his Son, Jesus, towards those of the human race and especially those who are his children by virtue of a spiritual birth. When we exercise this love towards others, it is a selfless love, a

love that flows from the one loving rather than some aspect of the person being loved. The other word is:

Phileō – this is the tender affection of brotherly love. So, here’s the conversation between Jesus and Peter, using these two words:

“Peter, do you agapaō me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I phileō you.”

“Peter, do you agapaō me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I phileō you.”

“Peter, do you phileō me?” “Lord, you know everything; you know that I phileō you.”

It’s like the Lord said, “Okay, Peter, I’ll come to where you’re at. Let’s go from there. Let’s start where you are.” There has to be a starting point when you are getting unstuck from regret.

Do you remember the story Jesus told of the Prodigal Son? He demanded of his father his share of the inheritance. He moved abroad and squandered all he had. He got to the lowest point in his life, so low that he hired himself out to a Gentile farmer and was sent out to feed pigs. How disgusting!

He was so hungry that he wished for the feed given to the pigs. Then, Jesus says, and I want to quote the text literally: “he came to himself,” that is, he came to his senses. Here’s what he said:

How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” – *Luke 15:17-19*

Here is a young man filled with regret. He goes home. His father sees him from afar, runs to him and embraces him. The son says his piece. But the father responds by telling his servants:

Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. – *Luke 15:22-24*

Here is the father extending grace and forgiveness to his wayward son. But there is one thing required of the young man if he is to move on past his regrets. He must be willing to accept his father's forgiveness, and – he must be willing to forgive himself. The father has released the debt, and the son must do likewise. Otherwise, he would have remained stuck.

When I was with the Christian Embassy, one of the couples in government circles who became good friends was Don and Barbara Hodel. Don was Secretary of Energy and then Secretary of the Interior. They had come to personal faith in Christ a few years before through a family tragedy.

Their older son committed suicide on his 16th birthday. If you have experienced a similar loss or know someone who has, then you know a little of the guilt and regrets that people wrestle with. But a loving community of believers reached out to them and loved them unconditionally and unjudgmentally.

Through different paths, both Don and Barbara responded to God's grace and became believers in Christ. But, even then, Barbara, in particular, struggled with guilt and regret.

And then one day it dawned on her. God had forgiven her for all her failures and sins, yet she was unwilling to forgive herself. Then she thought, "If God has forgiven me but I refuse to forgive myself, this is really an inverse form of pride. I'm saying that my standards are higher than God's."

And Barbara was unstuck from regret. She found the freedom that grace supplies.

Now, here's a second thing that is important in getting unstuck from regret:

II. Move On

Peter surely thought that his usefulness to the Lord was over. Regret sometimes says, "That's it. There's no future. I am of little use to God or to others."

Did you notice that each time Peter answered Jesus' question, Jesus called Peter to move on; there was work to be done.

Listen, regrets are part of being human. Perhaps only a sociopath never experiences regret. You have regret, but don't stay there. The Lord, lovingly but

firmly, says to Peter: “Move on.” This requires an act of the will, a choice. You will either stay stuck or you will choose to move on.

Anybody here Scandinavian? Like me, then, you will really identify with this story. Garrison Keillor of the Prairie Home Companion radio show makes this point in one of his hometown tales. Keillor talks about the goings on in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. In one story he talks about “Larry the Sad Boy.” Keillor tells it this way:

“Larry was saved 12 times in the Lutheran church, an all-time record. Between 1953 and 1961, he threw himself weeping and contrite on God’s throne of grace on 12 separate occasions. And this in a Lutheran church that wasn’t evangelical, had no altar call, no organist playing ‘Just as I Am Without One Plea’ while a choir hummed and a guy with shiny hair took hold of your heartstrings and played you like a cheap guitar! This is the Lutheran church, not a bunch of hillbillies. These are Scandinavians, and they repent in the same way that they sin: discreetly, tastefully, at the proper time.... Twelve times! Even we fundamentalists got tired of him.”

Keillor then adds, “God did not mean for us to feel guilt all our lives. There comes a point when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and start grappling with the problems of the church furnace and...make church coffee and be of use, but Larry kept on repenting and repenting.” (Quoted in “What IBM Taught Me About Repentance,” by John Ortberg, in *Christianity Today*, August 12, 1993).

Folks, when faced with regrets, we will either stay stuck or we will move on by God’s grace. A final thing I would suggest that fits with many types of regret is this:

III. Be Content

Look on in John’s Gospel – **John 21:18-22**

“Peter, be content with my plan for you.” Regrets have a way of making us very discontented with our place in life. And it is really easy to get stuck in the mire of “what ifs” and “if onlys.”

Some of this comes from comparisons we make with other people. We see their lives, their successes, their families, etc., and we are filled with regret that ours hasn't turned out like theirs. And we become discontented.

Contentment is finding our joy, our identity, our sense of well-being in Christ, not in our circumstances. It means we don't get locked into the past which we cannot change, but seek to find the meaning and fulfillment of our lives in the present.

The problem comes when we allow the past to dictate the present and the future. The Apostle Paul understood this issue in the spiritual arena of his life. He wrote, "Forgetting the things in the past and reaching forward to the things that lie ahead, I press on..." This one who called himself the "chief of sinners," a vicious persecutor of the church, would find the way to forgive himself as God had forgiven him; he would move on with the life God now called him to; and he would learn contentment.

Growth is stunted when we stay stuck in the past – in our regrets – and don't or won't move on. Lucy explained to her manager, Charlie Brown, at the end of the game why she lost sight of the baseball hit to her: "Sorry I missed that easy fly ball, manager. I thought I had it, but suddenly I remembered all the others I've missed, and the past got in my eyes."

Are you stuck in regrets today? If so, I have two suggestions:

1) **Admit** – admit you are stuck. Honestly acknowledge that regrets are dictating how you respond to life, to God, to others. Admit to God that you are stuck and that you are powerless, in yourself, to change.

2) **Ask** – ask for help. Ask God to help you deal with your regrets, to give you the willingness and courage to face your regrets, to choose to live in the present, not the past. And ask God for the strength to move on and to learn contentment.

Ask for help from others to assist you in the journey to spiritual and emotional health by dealing with the past and moving on, by faith, in a life of devotion and service to Christ. There are people who are ready to help you do that.

Regrets – learn to manage them or they will manage you.