

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: The Deadly Difference Between Regret and Repentance

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 7:2-16

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I want to talk today about one of life's most painful experiences—the feelings of regret and remorse that can overwhelm us when we have done something wrong that we suspect might change the course of our life forever. The first time I remember feeling that way was in junior high school. I can't even remember the specifics of what I had done, but it could have been just about anything considering my junior high years. I do remember with utter clarity the fact that I could not sleep and was gripped by incredible fear of the consequences of my behavior. I remember getting out of bed late at night, going into my parents' room, and begging them to help me.

My fear, mind you, was not that I would go to hell, because I was already a believer at that time. In fact, had I not already given my life to Christ, I suspect my conscience would not have been nearly as active. But I knew I was a Christian, I knew I had no justification for what I had done, and I was just overwhelmed with feelings of remorse. Wisely, my parents counseled me to confess what I had done, then prayed with me to accept God's forgiveness. I think the reason I remember it so well is because a virtual miracle then happened—I calmed down and went immediately to sleep.

Unfortunately, that is not the last time in my life when I have been overwhelmed by a guilty conscience. I think I have an unusually active conscience, and while at times I wish it would leave me alone, I know it is a gift from God to keep me from making even worse mistakes. In the process of struggling with the remorse I feel when I violate my conscience, the single most difficult question for me is this: to what extent is the pain I feel centered on the possible consequences of my sin, as opposed to the fact that I have violated the character and commandments of God? In other words, am I worried that I will get caught, or am I truly sorry that I sinned?

Everyone lives with regrets; unfortunately some people never get *beyond* regret to true repentance. In one of the most powerful sections of the letter of 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul points out the deadly difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow, between regret and repentance. The paradigm biblical examples that reveal this difference are two well-known characters, David and Judas. Both sinned grievously; both experienced tremendous remorse for their sin; but David repented while Judas went out and hanged himself.

This topic in 2 Corinthians 7 is found in a context of loving confrontation between a pastor and his people, and it's important that we understand it within that context.

The characteristics of a loving pastor (2-9)

I want to begin by reading 2 Cor. 7:2-4:

Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

He encourages his flock. (2-4) If you have been with us for our study of the first six chapters of 2 Corinthians, you are aware that this church of Corinth has been very hard on their founding pastor, the Apostle Paul. After he established the church and spent 18 months laying a strong foundation of truth and discipling leaders, he left to continue his church-planting mission elsewhere. Unfortunately, some of those who stepped into leadership after Paul began to move the congregation in new directions— philosophical, doctrinal, and moral. These leaders, who were really false teachers, knew they could never pull the wool over the eyes of these people so long as Paul was held in high esteem, so they undertook to discredit the Apostle—ridiculing him for his looks, his lack of eloquence, his suffering, and even such petty things as a change in his travel plans. It was an unscrupulous campaign of character assassination.

Paul was clearly hurt by these charges, and he could have allowed himself to withdraw emotionally from these people or even attack them for their ingratitude. But instead he reaches out and begs them to open their hearts to him. He reminds them that during the whole time he was with them he wronged no one, corrupted no one, and exploited no one. In fact, he loves them so much he would live or die for them—whichever would promote their welfare. This man was an encourager, *par excellence*.

He delegates ministry to qualified individuals. (5-7)

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Let me set the stage here. While Paul was away from Corinth on a long missionary journey he received reports about the church that concerned him deeply. In fact, he became so troubled that he couldn't even complete the ministry God had opened a door for him to do in Troas. But what could he do about the situation in Corinth? He had made one return trip himself to Corinth, but it had ended badly, with at least one of the leaders publicly rebuking him and very few supporting him. So he decided to send his friend and colleague, Titus, to go as an emissary to Corinth in his place to try to resolve the situation and bring back a report. Titus did just that, and apparently he was very effective in convincing the believers that Paul was their friend, not their enemy. He was able to report back to the Apostle that the situation was vastly improved.

One lesson we can learn from this is that no pastor can do everything. No pastor can connect with everybody or reach everybody. All of us have to know when it's time to ask another gifted believer, like Titus, to take our place, minister in our behalf, or even be a go-between in a conflict situation.

He hurts his people but does not harm them. (8-9) Look at verses 8, 9:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not

because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.

Here Paul is looking back at the situation and reminiscing. He had sent a bold and blunt letter along with Titus, calling sin “sin” and rebuking the perpetrators. It stung the congregation.

I want to make a very important point here—it’s OK to hurt people (when necessary), but it’s not OK to harm them. Parents, there are times when you need to hurt your children, but you should never harm them. Discipline hurts, but when it’s done the right way it doesn’t harm. God hurts us often, but He doesn’t harm us.

Paul’s hurtful letter was not easy for the congregation to receive, but neither was it easy for Paul to write. At first he regretted having written it, but that was only momentary. Now he is glad he wrote it—not glad that they were hurt but glad that it produced the desired result—repentance, and therefore they “were not harmed in any way.” Paul uses a phrase here in verse 9 that is extremely important to understand: “you became sorrowful as God intended.” What does that mean?

The difference between godly and worldly sorrow (10-11)

Verse 10 and 11 read,

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

The characteristics (or results) of godly sorrow: (10)

1. It produces repentance. “Godly sorrow brings repentance.” What is repentance? Repentance is a change of direction produced by a change of heart or mind. It’s not enough to just have a change of heart; it’s not enough to feel regret; it’s not enough to cry. The change of heart must produce a change of direction. Godly sorrow *always* produces a change of direction.

So how do I know whether that late-night visit to my parents in junior highschool was godly sorrow? Did it lead to a change of behavior? And the answer is, “no,” at least not immediately. Eventually God got hold of my life in a new and profound way, and my senior high years were a vast improvement over those junior high years. But I would have to admit that there was probably more worldly sorrow evident that night than godly sorrow. At other times in my life I can look back and say with confidence that the sorrow produced by an active conscience was godly sorrow, because I stopped the behavior, having truly repented.

2. It leads to salvation. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation.” I suggest to you that I believe true repentance must necessarily accompany salvation. This is a controversial topic among certain conservative theologians. There are some who are so enamored with the doctrine of “grace alone” that they deny the necessity of repentance for

salvation. One popular study Bible lists repentance as “a false addition to faith.”ⁱ And a well-known theologian wrote that there is an “overwhelming mass of irrefutable evidence [making it] clear that the New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation.”ⁱⁱ If we are saved by grace, they say, then there is nothing we can possibly contribute to the process. In fact, they offer the following syllogism:

The Bible says we are dead in our trespasses and sins.

Dead people can’t do anything.

Therefore, they can’t even repent until God regenerates them.

I admire their desire to protect the grace of God (although I’m not sure He needs our protection). Their motive is good—to eliminate the notion that man can save himself; clearly he cannot. But is calling repentance a necessity for salvation really suggesting that man can save himself? I don’t think so. It is God, after all, who convicts the heart in the first placeⁱⁱⁱ; it is the Holy Spirit who helps us recognize that we have violated the character and the commandments of God; and it is Jesus who paid the penalty of our sin allowing us to be declared “not guilty.”

So clearly God starts the process and He completes the process. But along the way God asks, even demands response from us. He calls upon us to recognize and repudiate our sin (which is repentance) and to receive the Savior (which is faith). Are these “works” that contribute to our salvation? I don’t think so; they are merely the necessary response of a convicted heart.

3. It leaves no regret. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.” This is an interesting statement. What does it mean? Does it imply that when a person has felt godly sorrow, repented, and experienced God’s forgiveness, it no longer matters what he’s done? Can he just completely release all his sin and think no more about it? Is his slate automatically clear? Well, in one sense, yes, at least before God’s eternal bar of justice; God promises to justify him, i.e. to treat him as “not guilty,” even righteous! But on another level it matters a great deal what he has done; the consequences remain and the regret remains. In King David’s case did godly sorrow mean he no longer regretted the death of Uriah or the death of his infant son? Of course not! What about Karla Faye Tucker, who brutally murdered several individuals with a pickaxe. She experienced godly sorrow, she repented, and her repentance led, I believe, to her salvation. But she lived with regret for a wasted life until her dying day when the state of Texas executed her.

I think when Paul says that godly sorrow starts a process that leaves “no regret,” he’s not referring to regrets about the sin or the consequences; rather he is saying there is no regret for having turned to God! He will never regret his repentance. Instead, he is eternally grateful for the experience of God’s grace and mercy in his life.

Well, if the results of godly sorrow are that it produces repentance, leads to salvation, and leaves no regret, what is the result of worldly sorrow? Paul offers just one comment:

The result of worldly sorrow: It brings death. (10) The sorrow of the world has no ultimate solutions; it produces guilt, shame, resentment, anguish, despair, depression,

hopelessness, and even death. If it doesn't lead to actual suicide, it leads to emotional, psychological, or spiritual suicide. I've already mentioned the example of Judas. He experienced deep remorse over what he had done in betraying an innocent man, a friend no less. But he saw no way out; he didn't believe such a heinous sin was forgivable (as clearly it was, for Peter who betrayed Christ, was forgiven). His only way out of his misery was self-destruction.^{iv}

The biblical examples of David and Judas are very instructive, but I want to share with you this morning a contemporary example of worldly sorrow that almost led to death. It's going to be presented in the form of a testimony—not a pleasant one, not a G-rated testimony, but one I think is valuable for us to hear within the context of this passage. Matt Brown has been a friend of mine since I pastored here in the 70's. I lost track of Matt for many years, and I had no idea what tragedy those years held for him until we renewed our friendship when I returned to Wichita. Matt, will you come and share your story with God's people?

Matt Brown Testimony: When giving a personal testimony there are twin dangers that one must avoid. On the one hand, there is the "spiritual trophy" syndrome where the forgiven sinner is set on a pedestal because of the extent of his sinfulness. On the other hand, it is easy to minimize our sin and fail to realize that even the petty sins of gossip and pride are in themselves sufficient to send His Son to the cross. The fact is ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and each one of us has sinned sufficiently to shame ourselves before the Holy God who made us, and necessitate the death of His sinless and beloved Son to save us.

My testimony is one of shame, and regret over lost opportunity. I made a profession of faith in Christ just after I had turned sixteen. Billy Graham's film, "Thief in the Night", came to a local theater. I remember vividly Graham preaching about the blessed hope, and that it should be a source of comfort and joy to believers. Let us say that I was not among the comforted. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, I went to a neighbor who had been talking with my parents, and he explained the gospel to me. It was as though a light turned on in my life. I prayed the sinner's prayer and professed faith in Jesus Christ that afternoon on his doorstep.

I was intellectually converted that day, but genuine spiritual growth and fruitfulness did not follow because I did not allow Christ to address or penetrate a darkness in my soul that was destined to nearly consume me. For nearly as long as I could remember, I had an unhealthy attraction to men. I thought it was something I would "grow out of," especially now that I was converted. But my newfound Christianity, to whatever extent I understood it, did not relieve me of my hidden conflict or the guilt which overpowered me.

To those not familiar with my struggle, however, I was making impressive progress. I knew what I was supposed to know, and I could say what I was supposed to say better than most. No one was surprised when I finally decided to seek my "calling" in seminary. Strangely, it was in seminary that I first became involved in a homosexual liaison with another man, attempted suicide, and was summarily dismissed from school.

After being released from a Christian psychiatric facility, instead of repenting, I tried to patch

my life together on my own. I went to work for a large corporation, made more money than I had ever imagined, and life became one of "bright lights and big city". But I drew far away from God, and became involved with the homosexual community in that city.

During this time, several people I knew, aware of my religious background, encouraged me to become active in the Metropolitan Community Church--a church that gives a homosexual spin on Christianity. But I could not do this. Whether it was the prodding of God, or simply intellectual integrity, I knew they were preaching a false gospel. I knew the truth, and, to coin a phrase, the truth would NOT set me free to follow a lie. By the grace of God I soon "crashed and burned". Fortunately a deacon at a church I sought for help told me I needed to call my family, tell them about my failure, and turn to them for help.

If ever I had wanted an illustration of God's love--a fleshing out of the parable of the forgiving father, or as most have come to know it, the prodigal son--I found it in the response of my family. In spite of all the sorrow and pain that I had brought them, they told me to come home, and undertook the arduous task of putting me back together. They did not do this grudgingly, but with a gentle and forgiving love. And soon I was able to go back to work. I even returned to school to pursue a second career. In the process, I began to attain some sense of maturity, and wanting to leave that dark closet behind that had haunted most of my life, I decided to "re-socialize" myself, to pursue a heterosexual life and perhaps even get married and have a family.

But I realized that I had been living a high-risk life, so as an afterthought I decided to be tested for HIV. I still remember the day that I was called into the doctor's office, and heard the words that made the world stand still. I was HIV positive.

Suddenly, all the plans I had been making for a normal life evaporated like a mist before my eyes, and cold reality set in. I was no longer able to avoid the consequences of my past. I returned home to tell them that I was HIV+, and we collapsed in one another's arms. But out of these tears God began His true work of redemption in my life. It was not until I was faced by the ugliness of my own perversity and its consequences, that I understood the magnitude of God's grace, the wonder of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on my behalf, and the fearsome glory of God's salvation. Only then did I begin to ponder what it meant to say that Jesus Christ was, in fact, my Savior and Lord. You see, it is true that the magnitude of debt for which one is forgiven affects the depth of one's gratitude. And so my life began to change.

No, it did not change overnight. I was still plagued by shameful temptations. And I learned that when the Bible speaks of a "way to escape in order that I might endure it", the escape isn't always a trap door that immediately opens beneath my feet. More often, I might have to figuratively or literally follow in the footsteps of Joseph, and run, even if I must leave my garment behind. I learned what it meant to "flee" such lusts. And slowly, as I began to read the Bible anew, to pray more purposively, and to live in the light of what I was learning, my dark closet was opened, and the airing out and cleaning out could begin in earnest.

God allowed me to return to seminary and finish my education, and has blessed me with skilled

medical care. God has allowed me to live now nearly twenty years with the symptoms of AIDS. And I know, in a way that I never knew before, that each day is a gift of God. The past recedes beyond our reach, and the future awaits us in the gracious hand of God. This day, this time, this hour, this minute is all I truly have to praise my Lord and Savior and live in obedience to him.

I know what worldly sorrow is all about, and I know it leads nowhere good. But I also understand godly sorrow and repentance. Do I have regrets? Oh, yes. But not what some might imagine. I regret the time I could have invested for God, the time I could have spent enjoying His fellowship, serving His people, and praising His name. All the skills I had been given by God, that I could have laid at His feet, I squandered in a far land in riotous living. When my life of deception crashed about me, and I found myself feeding the pigs and yearning for their husks...when I returned home to my family and my God, only fit to be a servant, I began to understand the true nature of salvation. Now I am willingly a servant of God's servants, and I share my testimony as a cautionary story.

The gospel, friends, is truly a life and death matter. And I actually thank God that He was willing to give me HIV so that I might understand this, and find him, or, more truly, stop running that I might be found by him.

Shakespeare once said it well in one of his most famous sonnets, XXIX. I presented this sonnet in a mother's day card to my mother, but insofar as God used her and my father to demonstrate the depth of God's love for me, it truly belongs to God:

*WHEN in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee,—and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

Thank you, Matt. I appreciate you sharing your faith story. As we turn back to 2 Corinthians 7, we see beginning in verse 11 that the Apostle reveals the evidences of true repentance that he has seen in the lives of the Corinthians, and I have seen some of these in yours as well. Let's read verse 11: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter." Note

eight evidences of repentance in this one verse:

The evidences of repentance (11)

1. Earnestness. Godly sorrow produced a new desire for righteousness on their part. It ended their indifference toward Paul and their complacency about their sin.

2. Eagerness to clear oneself. They desperately want to free themselves of any blame in the matter, to remove the stigma of their sin and prove themselves once again trustworthy. Sometimes, friends, all that takes is confession and a plea for forgiveness. At other times, however, it may require restitution. If you have stolen someone's possessions, what good does it do to tell them you're sorry if you aren't willing to return what you stole? The important thing is that the Corinthians wanted to make sure that all those who knew of their sin also know of their repentance.

3. Indignation. They were actually disgusted at themselves for offending Paul and for sinning against God. They now hate the sin they once cherished.

4. Alarm. I think this indicates that they had arrived at a renewed reverential fear and awe of God as the One who disciplines and judges.

5. Longing. This speaks of their deep, heart-felt desire for the former relationship with Paul to be restored.

6. Concern. This is the same term often translated "zeal" elsewhere in Scripture. They had become zealous for holiness and righteousness.

7. Readiness to see justice done. Truly repentant people have a strong desire to see justice done and to make restitution for the wrongs they have done. Instead of being defensive of their behavior, they openly accept the consequences of their sins. I can't help but think of Chuck Colson here. Compare his actions and attitudes after the Watergate scandal blew wide open to those of his boss, Richard Nixon. And compare the effectiveness of both of their lives following the revelation of their crimes.

8. Recovered innocence. The last phrase of verse 11 is remarkable: "At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter." They were *not* innocent, so the point Paul *must* be making is that they have recovered innocence through repentance. In recent years there has been a movement among Christian young people to renew their commitment to purity even after having made moral mistakes. Critics have referred to it as "secondary virginity" and have scoffed at the notion that innocence can be recovered. But I don't think God scoffs at these young people. As a matter of fact, whenever God dresses any of us in the white robes of righteousness, He is not declaring us innocent; rather He is declaring us "not guilty," and there's a huge difference. He knows we have sinned; He knows we have violated His character and His commandments. But the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin and restores and recovers

our innocence in His eyes.

Now in the final section of our chapter Paul speaks of the ultimate value of godly confrontation.

The ultimate value of godly confrontation (12-16)

So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

I spoke earlier of the fact that it is possible, sometimes even necessary, to hurt people but never to harm them. We hurt people when we confront them with sin in their lives. We hurt them when we demand higher standards. We hurt them when we push them to become all God wants them to be. But none of this harms them; it actually helps them.

Godly confrontation is, for the most part, a lost art in the church today. One of the small but important ways we are trying to recover that lost art is through a Lay Bible Institute Course called “Peacemakers: How to Resolve Conflict Before it Destroys.” And believe me, it can destroy. God has raised up an organization called Peacemakers, which is devoted to helping Christians learn how to confront, how to confess, how to reconcile, how to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Here in this paragraph Paul tells us three things about the ultimate value of godly confrontation.

It reveals who our real friends are. (12) Paul indicates that the real value of his harsh letter is not to finger the bad guys, nor to vindicate the victims, but rather to help the congregation to see that Paul was looking out for them; he was their real friend, not the false teachers and false apostles who had undermined him. Sometimes we need to be reminded who our real friends are. Teens, do you sometimes think your parents have it “in” for you, that they don’t understand you, that the only ones who really care about you are your friends at school? Think again!

Church family, do you sometimes feel that your Elders don’t care about you, that they make decisions in an ivory tower that contradict your welfare? Think again! Oh, I’m not suggesting for a moment that parents and elders never make mistakes; but I am saying that every hurt you feel is not harmful. I am saying that the vast majority of believing parents and Elders want what is best for you and are seeking God’s will.

It vindicates the trust we put in one another. (13, 14) Again Paul brings up Titus and again he shows how valuable a colleague Titus is to him. I especially like verse 14, which Peterson paraphrases well: “If I went out on a limb in telling Titus how great I thought you were, you didn’t cut off that limb. As it turned out, I hadn’t exaggerated one bit. Titus saw for himself that everything I had said about you was true.” Godly confrontation almost always vindicates the trust we put in one another.

It increases the love between believers. (15) Speaking of Titus Paul says in verse 5: “his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient.” If Paul hadn’t confronted them, they probably wouldn’t have repented, and if they hadn’t repented, Titus wouldn’t have been able to rejoice in their obedience. But since Paul did confront, and since they did repent, the love between the believers is all the greater.

Conclusion: As I close this morning I return to the repentance which Paul addresses in verse 10: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.” I want you to listen to J. Philip Arthur:

It is not unusual for some people to feel miserable when they hear someone preach about the holiness of God and the certainty of judgement (sic). They may even feel profoundly disturbed. By itself, that is not repentance! Has your sense of alarm led you to stop living for yourself and to seek the mercy of Christ? You say you are sorry for your sins. Are you sorry enough to give them up?

The key issue is to seek the infinite mercy of Christ. He is able and willing to forgive you and restore you.

i. Ryrie Study Bible, 1950.

ii. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:372. Both the Ryrie Study Bible and Chafer’s theology seem to make the point that repentance, viewed as simply a change of mind rather than a change of heart, is included in faith, but must never be seen as a separate requirement for salvation.

iii. In fact, there are at least two passages that indicate that God Himself *grants* repentance. See Acts 11:18 and 2 Tim. 2:25. Of course, repentance is much more often commanded or required than given. This is true of faith, too; it is often required, commanded, even demanded, but an occasional passage indicates it is “given” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Perhaps the ultimate conclusion is that we are required to repent and to believe, but if we think we can do either on our own, without divine help, we are mistaken. If they are gifts (and they are), they are not gifts we can receive passively but rather must receive actively.

iv. Another biblical example is Esau. When he was deceived by his brother Jacob into selling his birthright, his sorrow was profound. The Scriptures tell us he wept bitterly. Nevertheless, there is

no indication that he learned from the experience, and, for all his tears, there was no repentance. Listen to Hebrews 12:17: “Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.” In fact, Genesis 27:34 says “he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, ‘Bless me—me too, my father!’” On the surface, it sounds from Hebrews 12:17 like Esau was trying to get his father Isaac to change *his* mind, but the original language implies otherwise. The New English Bible seems to have the translation right when it says, “He found no way open for second thoughts.” He just couldn’t bring himself to repent.