

## **Reset** ***New Year No Regrets***

How to get past your past.  
- Philippians 3:13-15

### 1. The grip of guilt.

Conscience is the mechanism that you feel before you do something wrong. Guilt is what you feel after you've done something wrong, or did not do something right.  
- Psalm 38:3-11

### 2. The regime of regret. - 2 Corinthians 7:8-9, 7:10

### 3. The freedom of forgiveness. - Proverbs 28:13, 32:5; Hebrews 8:12

- Candor
- Clear
- Courage
- Concrete
- Confirmed

- Luke 7:37-50

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## Reset New Year No Regrets

This is the time of year that we tend to make big decisions about changing something from the last year or doing something different in this new year. And we'd like our resolve to be permanent, wouldn't we?

But sometimes we make quick decisions that end up being permanent, and we later wish they weren't; we end up regretting those permanent decisions.

I think one of those permanent decisions that people often make and then sometimes later come to regret is tattoos. I'm not here to make any statements one way or the other about tattoos or the people who get them. I know that a generation ago it was considered a sin to get a tattoo, and now for many people, tattoos are considered body art or personal expression. All I'm saying is that if you are going to make a decision about a tattoo, you should probably give it a lot of thought first. I would think you would want to think it through and make sure you like the design, and that you trust the tattoo artist. Otherwise, you may regret it, and then you can't really change it.

Let me give you a few examples of what I'm talking about. This first person probably should have double checked their design with an actual map:

Does that look right to you? If that person is ever lost in the woods, I hope they don't expect their partner to use their back as a way to get their bearings. Of course it's on their back, so maybe they still don't know?

Then there is this particular tattoo:

I totally agree that knowledge is power. But maybe you should have enough knowledge to make sure that knowledge is spelled correctly first?

Sometimes people get tattoos as a way to tell the world about their faith. That's certainly admirable that your faith is that permanent. But you might want to make sure you are quoting the Scripture correctly, or at least spelling it correctly. Here's an example of what I'm talking about:

First of all, you might want to take the time to make sure you are spelling the name of your Lord and Savior correctly. And then, that Scripture doesn't say "anything" – it says, "all things," (it's in Philippians 2:13) and it's not some sort of supernatural blank check; it is referring to being able to trust Christ at all times and be able to live the Christian life of love and service and witness to others.

I guess its admirable to ink yourself with motivational statements that will keep you inspired. But, again, you might want to make sure of your grammar. Like this guy:

I'm guessing he wanted to be able to look in the mirror, flex his muscles, and be inspired to keep working out and make those guns bigger. Unfortunately, this actually means "always give up." I think he's going to regret that one.

Sometimes the intent is right, but the execution fails. For example, you might think you are telling the tattoo artist exactly what you want, but don't be so sure:

I can just see it that this person said, "Give me a tattoo that says 'regret' in Chinese."

And speaking of regret, it's good to make sure you don't have any regrets. Because living without regrets and spelling it correctly are two different things:

It's an excellent sentiment – it really is. But there is a whole lot more to live a life without regret than just inking it on your arm, no matter how permanent.

I'm not making fun of these folks or any folks who get tattoos – I'm only saying you might want to think about it before you regret it! And, actually, that *is* what we are going to talk about today (not tattoos; about living a life without regrets).

Here we are, on the first Sunday of a new year – the actual New Year's Day. How many have already broken your new year's resolutions?

Usually we make a resolution because there is something we did over the last year that we regret – something that we didn't do, or something that we wish we would've done differently, so we resolve to do it differently in this new-year. But there are a great many of us who, in spite of our best intentions, live day to day carrying around a great deal of regret and guilt over what we did or didn't do, and it could've been from *years* ago. As I prayed about this, I began to sense the heaviness of heart that some of you have been living with—some for many years. Perhaps at times you find regret creeping into your conscious thoughts when you don't expect it to; like a sad, overweight ghost from yesterday that continues to weigh heavy on your heart and haunt your mind today. Everyday you might be confronted anew with the long-ago-but-easily-remembered problems of the past that you regret.

What we need to learn, and what I want you to hear today is that there is great hope—that you can learn today...

### **How to get *past* your *past*.**

You really can be set free from that heaviness you feel, that pain that is just below the surface of your busy life, those regrets of past actions and unrealized dreams, those haunting "what if's" that weigh you down.

We've all experienced regret over things in our past. It takes many forms:

*Regret over marriage.* You imagine how much happier your life would have been if you had married someone else. Or if you'd never married that person you are now divorced from. Or if you'd never entered that abusive relationship. Or if you hadn't messed up your marriage.

*Regret over divorce.*

*Regret over broken relationships of all kinds.*

*Regret over mistakes you made raising your kids.*

*Regret over bad career moves, missed business opportunities, poor vocational or money decisions.*

*Regret over something you did in your past that you wish you wouldn't have, or something you didn't do that you know you should have.*

*Regret over not obeying God in some area, or not following His call to ministry or missions.*

*Regret over sin and its consequences (fill in the blank).*

Regret has a way of keeping us chained to our past and then ruining our present and removing our future. When we live with regrets from our yesterdays, they have a way of skewing everything we see and do today and shaping our direction for the future. Failure takes on a life of its own because the brain remembers regret more strongly than many other things. Neuropsychiatrists have discovered what they call the “Zeigarnik effect.” It’s how we remember better whatever is unfinished or incomplete. You see, when we succeed at something, or complete a job or a goal, the brain places it in a special memory location. The brain no longer gives it priority or active working status, and over time some of the details slip away from us because we don’t need them anymore. Our brain shifts that event to “inactive” because we’ve finished it. But failures and regrets have no closure in our memory. The brain continues to spin the memory, trying to come up with ways to fix the mess and move it from active memory into inactive status. And since it remains active, it begins to shape everything we do; our perspective of life and other people is seen through those unclosed events that we regret. Our decisions today are based on those past regrets. We become fearful of what is ahead, because the memory of the failures, the guilt, and the regrets are always just below the surface, threatening to repeat themselves in the future. We don’t succeed at new things because we are tentative and afraid of failure. Worse yet, we don’t even try anymore because we are paralyzed by the past. And that piles up even more regrets and it becomes a terrible, destructive cycle. So we crucify ourselves between two thieves: regret over yesterday and fear over tomorrow.

But listen: *God will set you free—even from yourself and your past.* I am praying that when you walk out of here today, you will be saying what the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3—

“I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus. So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her.” (Philippians 3:13-15, ceb)

You need to forget the past and focus on pursuing God’s plan and call on your life.

To be able to do that, we have to address two powerful emotions tied to our past, and then we need to see how we can be set free. So let’s start with the first powerful emotion, which is...

## **1. The Grip of Guilt.**

It's important for us to recognize that there is a difference between *guilt* and *regret*. We'll talk about regret next, but we must first deal with our guilt. *Guilt* is defined as the feeling that we deserve blame or conviction; the feeling that comes when we have transgressed a legal or moral rule. In other words, guilt is what we feel when we have broken some law, or have sinned. Does that make sense?

Okay. But it's also important to make another distinction: Guilt and conscience are *not* the same thing – guilt is *different* than conscience.

**Conscience is the mechanism that you feel *before* you do something wrong. Guilt is what you feel *after* you have done something wrong, or did *not* do something right.**

Normally, with emotionally healthy people, when we feel guilt, we deserve it, because feelings of guilt are the natural consequence of sinful behavior. Guilt is a heavy, oppressive feeling that saps the strength right out of us. Conscience, on the other hand, is God's built-in warning system to help us do right, or not do wrong. It's our moral compass, and it works well – at least when we haven't messed it up with sinful thinking.

Think about King David, Israel's greatest hero king; he had sinned. I don't mean little sins, either. He committed adultery with another man's wife – and not just any man – a great soldier in David's own army and a man of great moral integrity. Well, David ended up getting her pregnant. So to avoid getting caught, David successfully arranged for her husband's murder. Talk about sin! Whatever guilt you might feel, he felt worse. It was from this feeling of guilt that he prayed to God in vivid ways. He described how this guilt felt in Psalm 38; listen:

“Because of God's wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes. My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.” (Psalm 38:3-11, niv)

Have you felt that kind of guilt? It's crushing you and you can't ignore it. Be honest with yourself: can you feel it just below the surface right now? Do you keep your mind busy so that you never slow down enough to let that guilt slip to the surface? Do you avoid time alone with God because you know that your guilt will be on his agenda? Do you hide that guilt, afraid if it becomes visible the whole world will know the awful thing that you did? If so, then you are in company with King David. Except that *everyone* knew about his sins. Fortunately for most of us, our sins are not broadcast on the national news. But they are broadcast over and over across the screens of our own hearts. Guilt keeps a tight grip on us, and we *need* to be set free.

But look at me and listen to this: God has *already* dealt with the issue of your guilt. The death that Jesus died on the cross for you was so horrible that it absorbed your guilt. He

took it even though he had no guilt; he had never sinned. And because of that God stands ready to forgive you and wipe your guilt free; if you are willing to ask Him to. He's already done it; you just need to ask for it! Because if we confess our sin to Him, He can be completely relied upon and will thoroughly forgive us, and will completely cleanse us to the point that the sin never even happened. That's in the Bible, from God's promise in 1 John 1:9. If you really want to move ahead into this new year, you had better first deal with the issue of guilt. Ask God to forgive you.

Second then is...

## 2. The Regime of *Regret*.

"Regime" is a word that is used to describe a brutal dictatorship. And "regret" is a brutal dictator of our emotional lives.

Maybe you remember a few years back on the news when a pig made a six-hour flight from Philadelphia to Seattle. And he didn't ride coach. Two passengers convinced the airline representative that the pig needed to fly with them as a "therapeutic companion pet" – like a seeing-eye dog. So the pig was allowed to sit with them in the first-class cabin of the plane.

Passengers described this three-hundred-pound pig as being "enormous, brown, angry, and honking." He was seated in three seats near the front of the plane, but the attendants had a difficult time strapping him in. One passenger said, "It became restless after takeoff and sauntered through the cabin. He kept rubbing his nose on people's legs trying to get them to give him food and stroke him."

When they landed, things only got worse. The news article said, "The pig panicked, running up and down through economy class squealing." Many passengers were also screaming by that time and standing on their seats. It took four attendants to escort the pig out of the plane, and then the pig escaped when they got to the terminal (it was later recaptured). US Airways spokesman David Castelveter said, "We can confirm that the pig traveled, and we can confirm that it will never happen again."

All of us at one time or another have travelled with a 300-pound pig of regret. Sometimes those regrets turn out to be so big that they run up and down the aisles of our lives wreaking havoc. No matter how hard we try to control them, they keep terminally escaping and running around our lives.

Regret is defined in the dictionary as "the emotion arising from a wish that some matter or situation could be different from what it is." The emotion may be accompanied by sadness, remorse, disappointment, dissatisfaction, or depression, and may arise from something done or said or from some failure to do or say something.

Regret is different than guilt, although it usually accompanies guilt. Guilt is what we feel when we have sinned, but we can feel regret when no sin is involved. Sometimes we've done something we wish we had done differently; but we didn't sin. We regret that, but we're not guilty. Guilt brings regret, but not every regret comes from guilt.

*We should regret everything we are guilty of, but we don't need to feel guilty over every*

*regret. (repeat)*

The reason this is important to understand is because you may be confusing the two; you might be beating yourself up with guilt over something that *was not a sin*. You made a mistake; in hindsight (which is always twenty/twenty) you realize that your choice wasn't the best. But sin was *not* the issue. You are confusing regret for guilt. Maybe you failed miserably. But what you are feeling is regret, not guilt. And more than likely God wants you to deal with it and learn from it.

I want us to look at regret, whether it is attached to sin or not, because regret keeps us oppressed and pinned to the past.

Sometimes people respond to guilt and regret by trying to undo the consequences of past choices in ways that are illegitimate. A man sinfully decides he's married the wrong woman, so he divorces his current wife and marries someone else, leaving a shattered family behind. Only to find that his second wife is not perfect either (as if he is the judge of perfect women), and then the cycle repeats itself. Or, a couple has sexual relations outside of marriage and the woman becomes pregnant. So they try to undo what they've done through an abortion, even though in their hearts they know that what they've created together is a living baby, a person, not a mass of cells that can be easily dismissed. And so the abortion creates even more guilt and regret.

Maybe you regret an event that happened in the past. Maybe your behavior in something was unchristian. You feel a heavy sadness that comes with any guilt and regret. And that may not be a *bad* thing, if it leads you to do something *good* about it. The Apostle Paul talked about this. He wrote a letter to the people who were in the church in Corinth. They were involved in some really bad sin. So his letter to them was very harsh, and he started to regret that he had made them feel bad. So he wrote again and said:

"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. Because you became sorrowful *as God intended*." (2 Corinthians 7:8-9, niv)

Did you catch that? *As God intended*. If you feel sorrow, it may be because God intends it. Why? Paul goes on:

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and *leaves no regret*. But worldly sorrow leads to death." (2 Corinthians 7:10, niv)

*Worldly* sorrow is that kind of regret that keeps you in bondage to the past. *Godly* sorrow brings change for the better: confession, repentance, and then God's forgiveness. You need forgiveness so you can move ahead! How do you get that? How do you get past the past? You find...

### **3. The freedom of *Forgiveness*.**

There are two kinds of forgiveness we are talking about here. And it has to do with both guilt and regret. Remember, guilt has to do with sin. Regret can come with sin, but can also be present when sin is not involved.



Listen:

**Forgiveness for guilt, *God gives to you.* Forgiveness for regret, *you give to yourself.***  
(repeat)

And that is why it is important to understand the difference between the two: so you know what you need to do. If you are experiencing guilt over sin, you will need both types of forgiveness; you will need to ask for God's forgiveness and you need to forgive yourself. If it is regret *without* sin, you don't need God's forgiveness, but you do need to forgive yourself. Do you see that?

Let's deal with the first: Instead of carrying that guilt and hiding your sin in shame, confess it to God. The Bible says in Proverbs 28:13...

"Whoever conceals his sin will not prosper. But whoever confesses them and forsakes them finds mercy." (Proverbs 28:13, niv)

Admit your sin, repent of it, then also take the next step—accept God's forgiveness. This forgiveness is something that God has dealt with by the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. You don't need to question or analyze it; you just need to accept it. King David said it right. He said:

"Then I confessed my sins to you; I did not conceal my wrongdoings. I decided to confess them to you, and you forgave all my sins." (Psalm 32:5, gnb)

Because of Christ, when you confess sin and ask God to forgive, God forgives—He forgives quickly and completely. God doesn't beat you up or punish you – his Son suffered *for you*. God's forgiven you. So let go of your guilt! God let go of it—He says:

"I will forgive you and remember your sins no more!" (Hebrews 8:12, gnb)

God will let go of your guilt; why won't you? *Forgive yourself.* So when it comes to the issue of guilt, God forgives. You must accept God's forgiveness and then also forgive yourself.

But then, whether for guilt or regret, how do you forgive *yourself*? Lewis Smeads gives excellent counsel on this from his book, *Forgive and Forget*: There are five things that you need in order to be willing to forgive yourself and be free from regret:

- **Candor.**

In other words, honesty. You must be willing to be honest with yourself and face facts. Own up to the responsibility that is yours in either your sin or your failure. Don't candy-coat it. If you can't be completely honest with yourself and take responsibility, you won't move forward.

Next you need to be...

- **Clear.**

You need to be clear headed enough to know what you are dealing with—whether guilt and regret, or just regret, so you know what to do about it.

Next you need...

- **Courage.**



It is going to take courage to forgive yourself. You've been living in fear for so long, that you are afraid of things that may not even exist. It will take courage to overcome your pattern of fear and regret and start living free. And keep in mind that self-righteous or legalistic people do not want you to forgive yourself. They want to accuse you and keep you in bondage. Self-righteous people don't want you to forgive yourself. Their judgment of you is how they justify their own guilt and regret. They want you to walk forever under the black umbrella of permanent shame. They want to keep punishing you. So when you walk and talk like a person who has sliced your sinful past from your present self, you'll need courage to face your fear and face the self-righteous crowd.

Then you will need to be...

- **Concrete.**

You are bound to fail at forgiving yourself if you refuse to be concrete about what you are forgiving yourself *for*. Be specific. What *exactly* do you need forgiveness for? For being a bad person? Nope—that's too vague. Be specific about that bad thing. Most of us can only deal with one thing at a time. Be concrete, and forgive yourself for one thing at a time.

Finally, your decision to forgive yourself must be...

- **Confirmed**

...with action. The best action that you can take when you forgive yourself is to show God's love to someone else. Act on that forgiveness by loving and serving someone else. There is a story in the Gospel of Luke in which a woman who had experienced the love and forgiveness of God in great measure turned around and demonstrated great love as a result. In essence, Jesus said:

"Whoever has been forgiven much, loves much." (see Luke 7:37-50, niv)

So if you have accepted God's forgiveness, and dared to forgive yourself, then begin to act on it by showing God's love to someone else. Lewis Smedes says, "Love is a signal that you have actually done it, that you have actually released the guilt and regret that has condemned and bound you. You won't always know exactly when you have forgiven yourself. It is like reaching the top of a long hill on a highway—you may not be sure when you have reached level ground, but you can tell when you have passed the top when you step on the gas and your car accelerates ahead. An act of love is like quick acceleration. A free act of love, to anyone at all, may signal to you that you do, after all, have the power that comes to anyone who is a self-forgiver."

Before you move any further into this new year, don't you think you should deal with your guilt or regret? Quit looking in the rearview mirror and start looking forward. If you want to move past your past, you must find the freedom that comes from forgiveness. It may take time, but you must start. Otherwise, you will be trapped, always tied to your guilt and regret.

I'll never forget Jerry. He was a friend of mine in Idaho. He was cranky, moody, and unpredictable. He smoked like a chimney and battled alcohol and some drug addictions. He didn't always bathe, and he never shaved; big, long ZZ-Top type of beard. He was a Vietnam Vet. He only spent two years in Vietnam, but it forever changed and chained and

scarred his life. He could never get past the things he saw and did in those two short years. It cost him two marriages and countless relationships. His addictions never buried that guilt and regret deeply enough. He was good at guilt, too—he grew up in a legalistic Nazarene church. Man was he cranky. But I loved Jerry. At least with Jerry, what you saw was what you got. Jerry was consistently cranky no matter who he was with! His singlewide trailer was filthy with mice running across the countertops and the couch reeked of tobacco so bad I swear clouds of stored smoke came up out of it when you sat on it. But I'd go visit him and he would make me a pot of coffee, and while I secretly prayed for protection from botulism, that coffee I drank with Jerry in that filthy trailer was some of the best I've had – because it was with him. He was foul mouthed and prone to angry outbursts. But he was honest. We laughed a lot too.

Finally Jerry trusted Jesus – desperately – because he knew he had to, to stay off drugs and booze. He loved his kids and grandkids and that helped. But he couldn't let go of his own guilt and regret.

When Jerry died several years ago and got to heaven, he was finally free of the ravaging toll that guilt and regret and all its symptoms had taken on him – which is great! But here's the sad thing – most of his life on earth was terrible. The quality of his life stunk worse than his trailer. The quality of his heart and mind was more cockroach-infested than his countertops and couch. And it was because he couldn't get past his own guilt and regret. It wasn't until the last few years of his life, when cancer entered his life, that he realized he'd better enjoy his family. He's free now – he's in heaven – but he could have been free *so much sooner!* God had forgiven him – he'd confessed and repented and asked God to forgive him. But he couldn't forgive himself.

What about you? Do you need to deal with guilt and regret? Have you accepted God's forgiveness for your sin? Have you taken the next step and started forgiving yourself from guilt and regrets?

*Prayer*

*Enemy is the accuser – Revelation 12:9-11*

*The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

*Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:*

*“Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God,  
and the authority of his Messiah.*

*For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,  
who accuses them before our God day and night,  
has been hurled down.*

*They triumphed over him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.*

*Benediction:*

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25)*