

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • November 6, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
Luke 18:9-14 (*The Message*)

He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’

“Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

THE MESSAGE
“You Need to Get Out More: Seeing What Is”
Mark Briley

Regrets. Do you have any? None? Even Frank Sinatra had a few – but too few to mention, I guess. “No regrets!” seems to be the spirit of most... especially in America. We say, “Look forward, never look back.” I get it. I’ve probably said that plenty of times in my life – always following it with some version of “Well, those experiences some might call regrettable are the only reason I am who I am today so... no regrets.” I also had one or two of those t-shirts in middle school that simply said, “No fear.” What was

that about? Wearing the shirt didn't change the fact that I had been fearful before and would likely experience fear in the future, too. No fear? No *regrets*?

Psychologists suggest that regret can be a very useful emotion. Psych Professor Aidan Feeny, says it would be a “*very, very bad idea to eliminate regrets in your life.*” He says, “*Regret is one mechanism for learning how to improve your decision-making,*” which is an important signal that we may need to rethink our strategies about how we maneuver through life and relationships.

Regret is a complex emotion in this way. It requires the capacity to imagine alternative courses for events that have already happened that you later deem would have been more preferable. It's why you don't likely have any regrets about your life before you were seven years old. We're not yet equipped for that level of complex thinking before that age, so anything regrettable in your life in those years are essentially our older projections on what happened to us or what life was like before that time. It's like your memories. We're often wondering if we remember some things from our early years or if we just think we remember because we've seen pictures or heard stories told about that time in our lives.¹ *Regrets. Do you have any?*

One study found that regret was the second-most frequently mentioned emotion in everyday conversation – the most mentioned emotion being love. Romantic regrets were the most common. As Taylor Swift says on her new album that currently fills each of the top ten slots on the Billboard Charts which has never been done before: “*I regret you all the time.*”² Taylor also announced her tour dates this week. One woman posted a video blog about the tour dates. She was in tears as she learned the day Taylor's concert will be in her city is the same day of her wedding next year. She was devastated. We've all got things going on, right? Beyond romantic regrets, the others focused on social relationships – all which boosts the idea we've often heard that says, “*Nobody on their deathbed wishes they had spent more time working.*” *Regrets. Do you have any?*



Most people feel that immediate pang of regretted action; that moment you say, “*I wish I hadn't done that!*” We get to meddling in the Apostle Paul's life who wrote, “*Why do I always do the thing I hate, and I don't do the thing I want to do.*”

¹ —David Robson, “How to live with your regrets,” *BBC.com*, February 9, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220207-how-to-live-with-your-regrets>.

² From Taylor Swift's newly released *Midnight's* album and song, “Would've, Could've, Should've.”

Regrets – he had a few. Studies show that regret over inaction lingers longer than anything. The chance we didn't take. The one that got away. We'll never know. Best-selling author, Daniel Pink, dove headfirst into this study. In preparation for a book now released entitled, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, he launched an online *World Regret Survey*. Over the course of 18 months, 19,000 people from 105 countries contributed their regrets. We really do have a few it seems. So, what do we do with them? Are we to wallow in shame? What about forgive and forget? What about stay positive and press forward? Daniel Pink says, "*Regret is hard to handle, but it is not a bad emotion.*" The positive power of regret is the way it can shape a more positive future. You can decide if that's true.

We roll with Jesus today in the Gospel according to Luke's witness. Jesus tells a parable about a religious man with no regrets and a man who had a few. You heard the story. Jesus says, "*Two men went to the temple to pray – one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*" If you were listening to the story in that moment, the immediate understanding was that the Pharisee was a devout person, and the tax collector was not so much. The parody of good guy/bad guy is already established with the crowd. They get it and it didn't need to be quantified. Jesus often set up his parables this way. I wonder if people started catching on to the tactic. I mean, if you've heard enough of Jesus' stories, you know the outcome is always the flip of what you would normally expect. Spoiler alert: the presumed sinner is going to come out on top of this thing. Anyway – Jesus describes the Pharisee first as the guy who walks right down the center aisle larger than life – waving and smiling like he's running for office – making sure everyone knew he had arrived. Front and center, with fog machines and laser lights, he prays in a voice that sounds nothing like the way he talks to his buddies at happy hour, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other people. Shall I name them? Thieves, rogues, cheats, or even*" as he points at the tax collector who's in the room too, "*that I'm not like that guy right there. Yeah, you.*" He goes on, "*God... you know my score card – that regular fasting I do and that fat check I wrote at the Casino Night fundraiser for that charitable deal.*" The guy had no regrets. He prays by reading off the highlights of his resume.

Among other things perhaps, this is a humility issue. The man prays, "*Thank you*" but it's more like, "*Dear God, you're welcome.*" Jesus' point is not really about the words he prays but a matter of the man's spirit. We all may do some of this comparative praying at times; a spirit that says, "*Well at least I'm not as bad as them or my problems are fewer than theirs or even with a little anger – why me, God, when I'm doing all the religious stuff?*"

Part of the issue is that we're often more willing to stare directly at the sun than we are to look at ourselves in the mirror – a true gut check of our motives. Jesus, then, moves the story to the other man; the tax collector.

The tax collector slips in the back of the temple and is much less consumed with putting on a show. He pounds his chest and simply prays, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" He reads no resume nor defends any dissertation. He recognizes his shortcomings and knows his reliance is fully on God. Regrets – he had a few. His profession, commonly known in that time, was corrupt and always bent toward greedy benefit of the tax collector. Not the most popular people, and Jesus knows this as he tells the story. One of the very next stories found in Luke's Gospel is about Zacchaeus – a chief tax collector – who ultimately helps break the social stereotype. Could the tax collector of this story have actually been Zacchaeus? Doesn't really matter other than it's interesting that Jesus works again through the anti-hero to make a point and expand people's hearts and minds about other people.

You may be fine with your tax person. But, if you could think of some person in a role that you've got some real feelings about – you were burned by the system, or your ethos is repelled by the others, etc., you can start to feel how this tax collector would have been detested. But he prays, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*" and Jesus says to the group, "*I tell you what – it's **that** guy who went home justified and not the Pharisee.*" The humble will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will ultimately crash hard.

The Pharisee put faith in himself, and the tax guy put faith in God, offered his regrets and was forgiven. All is well, I suppose, except that it still sounds so transactional. I'm not so sure about all of this. Where are the consequences for his actions? His sins? Justified doesn't mean there are no repercussions. The Pharisee didn't even see any need for repentance so, of course, he left unchanged – no transformation. But one who can humbly and honestly cry out, "*God, have mercy; make me new,*" has a chance.

Daniel Pink says "*Regret reveals what makes life worth living. There are some things in life that we really, really care about.*" You want to be right with God? You start with humbling yourself. You want to be in right relationship with your spouse or your adult kids or whatever significant relationship you want to picture right now? It starts with humbling yourself. Only in humility are we moldable, open to God's shaping of our character.

Pink interviewed a woman, one of the 19,000 in his regrets survey, who broke down and cried about one of her deep moral regrets – "*She bullied a kid on a school bus when she was eight or nine years old.*" She was humbled and honest about it, and she's allowing that regret to mold the way she treats people now. There may be

something like this in your own life. Until we can confess it, it's hard to transform it. As long as we're performing like the Pharisee, God surely notes, "*Ah... he's not ready yet. She's not open yet.*" Until we can see what truly is, we've not likely reached that place where we can simply say, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*"

I don't think Jesus dropped this parable to make people feel guilty. I'm not about guilt trips either. I think Jesus knew that a person who feels they've got it all together and are superior to everyone else can *destroy* the world while a humble person who can say, "*I own my wrongs, and I'm up for redeeming them*" is one who can *build* a kingdom. Maybe a good test for us this week is the way in which we'll go to the polls.

When it comes to politics, how many times have you prayed, "*God, I thank you that I'm not like **them***"? Jesus warned about such a prayer, right? This room is more diverse than you think – politically and theologically that is. If we all filled out a survey, I'm confident this would prove true. We were raised differently, had different life experiences... and these things impact how we see the world, how we see God and the things we value most. It comes out in our politics, too. Andy Stanley said, "*You may bristle but political disagreement is usually fueled by divergent life experiences, not low IQ.*" He said, "*Neither is it fueled by a lack of character.*" Yikes. This has some cutting truth to it, I'm afraid. When we automatically associate someone's political views with a low IQ or lack of character, we're doing unto them what we don't want done to us. We're sizing them up. "*I've never walked in your shoes, and I haven't had the experiences you have but I am confident I understand you perfectly.*" This sounds a lot like, "*Thank you, God, that I am not like them.*" We need to get out more and hear some other stories before we write each other off.

The truth is... Jesus followers can't really go there. Jesus didn't. Jesus has every reason to size me up and write me off but that's not how he rolls. And if he won't do that for me, for you, for the people we love, then Jesus won't write off those you disagree with either. In reality, Jesus disagreed with every single person he ever met about most things. If his relationships were contingent on full alignment with his worldview – even half-way aligned – then Jesus would have had zero relationships. He'd have been the only person in his echo chamber. He brought a wholly new worldview which meant every conversation was typically with someone who didn't get it and who didn't respond the way Jesus hoped they would.

What does Jesus do anyway? He leans in and says, "*I think we can do some amazing things together. I think we can change the world.*" As Stanley wraps thoughts on these differences he says, "*We can disagree socially, culturally, and politically **and** love one another unconditionally because Jesus did, and he calls us to follow him.*"³

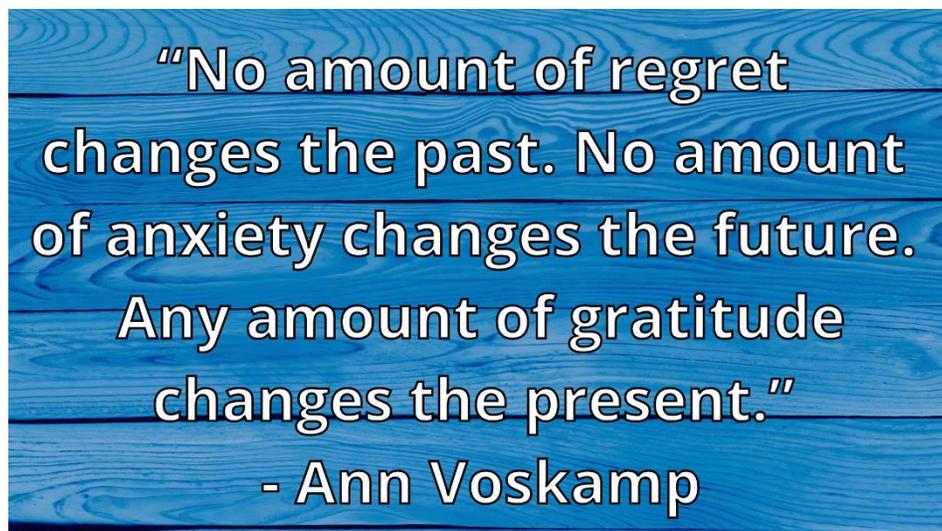
³ As shared by lead pastor, Andy Stanley, in the North Point Community Church podcast on October 16, 2022. "*Be Rich 2022: The Bridge Between Our Differences.*"

And then the big gulp question: “*Will we?*” How will we go home – justified with God and one another – or arrogant – assured that we’re better than the rest? The beauty of the tension of our differences is that the tension can be used for good. We can be a part of something that transcends politics and every other tension. The truth is, when non-religious affiliated respondents are asked in most surveys if Christians reflect well the values and teachings of Jesus, only 2% answer that we represent the values of Jesus “*a lot.*” The largest percentage answers that same question by checking the box: “*not at all*” (some 30% of respondents).⁴ We can quip back or get bitter about it, or we can get out more, be humbled, and live with moldable spirits that are quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. We can welcome more fully and allow our common stories to bring new hopes. We can allow our regrets to fuel our renewal.

I’ve got my own confession today. I regret that in some of the tiring struggles of this season, I’ve been more negative than I hope is generally true of my demeanor. Some of it’s just trying to find the faithful way forward, and we can get lost in the weeds sometimes. Maybe you’ve had some struggles, too. But this moment is new... never before lived among us... and we’re together. We can pray our own versions of “*God, have mercy on me a sinner. Mold me. Make me new.*”

And then we live with greater gratitude. Have you ever met a grateful person ... someone who truly lived with gratitude, and you just knew it, felt it, experienced it? Have you ever met a grateful person that didn’t encourage your own growing gratitude?

Writer Ann Voskamp wrote a word that’s been sticking with me this week. She said,



“No amount of regret
changes the past. No amount
of anxiety changes the future.
Any amount of gratitude
changes the present.”
- Ann Voskamp

⁴ Emily McFarlan Miller and Jack Jenkins, “*Episcopal Bishop Curry says, ‘more to do’ as poll shows Christians viewed as hypocrites.*” *Religion News Service*, March 9, 2022, <https://religionnews.com>.

No matter what is happening in the world, in your own life, and even in the depths of your own spirit – hold onto that last word: “*Any amount of gratitude changes the present.*”

Whatever you hold this morning... whatever regret has held you back... use it for good in this moment. Confess it in a simple prayer, “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” And be grateful... for something *in* you and *of* you is ready to be shaped anew.

May it be so.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH