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## **Prison Wall Three: Regret**

### *Wisdom Worksheet*

Jesus likened withholding forgiveness to a prison (Matthew 18:21-35). The irony is that the person who will not forgive is the one locked inside the four walls. *Forgive* means “to let go.” In order to forgive someone who has wounded us, we must *let go* of four prison walls that incarcerate us in the prison of un-forgiveness. The first prison wall is *revenge*. The second prison wall is *resentment*. The third prison wall is *regret*.

Remember that in Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving debtor, He described three scenes illustrating the three applications of the story. Scene one portrays the largest debt ever incurred (150,000 years’ wages) being forgiven, or *let go*, vertically from the king to his servant. Scene two paints a similar scenario; however, the debt incurred horizontally between the forgiven servant and his fellow servant is comparatively quite small (a hundred days’ wages). The servant who had been forgiven the largest debt ever incurred will not *let go* of the small horizontal debt with his fellow servant. He wants to *hold on*. Scene three casts a dark reality. Word of the forgiven servant’s behavior reaches the king who responds by throwing the unforgiving servant into prison. Jesus concluded the parable with quite possibly the most sobering words in Scripture, “*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart*” (Matt. 18:35).

As we see in Jesus’ concluding statement, forgiveness flows from the heart. The Bible teaches us that two heart conditions exist: *proud* and *humble*. A proud heart is hard



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and unforgiving. A humble heart is soft and forgiving. A proud heart holds on. A humble heart lets go. When someone harms us, we either *hold on* or we *let go*. Grace received vertically from God warrants grace issued horizontally to others. Forgiveness is the vehicle that transports grace.

### **What is regret?**

*Regret is the thought that I could change the past.* When I withhold forgiveness from holding on to regret, I think about how I could have changed the past in a way that would have eliminated or minimized the offense. In order to be free, I must let go of the third prison wall of regret. Jesus said that I should forgive from the heart. The heart is one's mind, will, emotions, and spirit. Whereas *revenge* emphasizes the will and *resentment* emphasizes the emotions, *regret* emphasizes the mind. Regret is intellectual sorrow. Words of regret are usually prefaced with "*I could've, would've, or should've.*"

### **How does regret affect my vertical relationship with God?**

Regret is pride's way of holding on to the *thought that I could change the past*—either the offense and its consequences, the offender, or my behavior. It flows from a proud heart that leaves no room in my thoughts for God (Ps. 10:4).

Regret commits at least two offenses: it *fears* and *protects*. Regret *fears* the loss of my pride, and it *protects* my pride. In essence, regret is anxiety about the past. *Anxiety* means a divided mind—one that only partly trusts in God and partly trusts in me.

*Fear* and *protection* are the two defense mechanisms of my fallen mind of pride. Every inclination of my thoughts is bent toward evil, trusting in myself rather than God



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(Gen. 6:5; 8:21). Jesus said that these evil thoughts come from a divided mind (Matt. 12:25; 15:19; Mk. 7:21). Regret, the thought that I could change the past, is an evil thought rooted in pride that is diametrically opposed to God's design because it trusts in me, not God.

*Fear* can be defined in an acrostic: *frustrated expectations assume regret*. Fear stems from unrealistic expectations about the past offense, the offender, or my behavior. It minimizes or reduces expectations that people will sin against me, and that I might not respond wisely. Unmet expectations are the cause of frustration that feeds regret which leaves me saying, "*I could've, would've, or should've.*"

*Protection* seeks to defend my unrealistic expectations in order to keep my pride. In my mind, I think that if I can protect my pride in changing the past, then I can be victorious over the offender.

*Regret imprisons me in the past and robs me of the present and the future*. When I am imprisoned in withholding forgiveness by holding on to regret, I do not trust God's forgiveness. When I don't trust God, I am not loving Him with all of my mind—the vertical portion of the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37; cf. Deut. 6:5). This robs me of fully experiencing His *presence* and the future that He has designed for me.

### **How does regret affect my horizontal relationship with others?**

*Regret fears and protects*. I live out the thought that I could change the past, not only in my relationship with the offender, but also in my relationship with others. The result is that *regret imprisons me in the past and robs me of the present and the future*.



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The danger is that I define myself by the past offense and its subsequent regret—the thought that I could have changed it. This violates the horizontal portion of the greatest commandment to love my neighbor, including my offender (Matt. 22:39).

An example from the Bible of someone who allowed thoughts about the past to imprison him was King Saul who *feared* David, God’s anointed successor to the throne. Saul’s thoughts of “*I could’ve, would’ve, or should’ve*” were often followed by the words “*killed David.*” Saul’s divided mind led to his repeated *protection* of his own kingdom as well as an on-again, off-again relationship with David and others around him.

### **How do I let go of regret?**

*Repent*, which means to change my mind—this is a 180 degree turn from the *thought that I could change the past* to *I could change the past thought*. Rather than holding on to the thought that I could change the past—the offense, the offender, or my past behavior—I learn to change my thoughts about the past. I trust in God for the freedom of forgiveness.

Repentance is a turning that includes two components, one representing what I *turn from*, the other what I *turn to*: I *let go of the past*, and I *hold on to the present* (which leads to the future).

### **How do I let go of regret vertically with God?**

*Repent, trusting in God for the freedom of forgiveness.* Whereas, intellectual sorrow leads to imprisonment, repentance comes from godly sorrow that leads to



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salvation's freedom and leaves no regret (2 Cor. 7:10). Paul said that he *let go of the past* in order to *hold on to the present* that led to his vertical future (Phil. 3:13-14).

*I let go of the past.* I must recognize that God does not change the past, and yet, His most frequent Old Testament command is "*Fear not.*" I humble my mind by letting go of *fear* and *protection* language: "*I could've, I would've, or I should've.*"

In order to do this, I *pray*, asking God to search me and reveal any regret—any anxious thoughts that I could change the past, thoughts of *fear* and *protection* (Ps. 139:23-24). Then, I let go. When imprisoned by anxious thoughts, prayer aligns my mind with Christ's (Phil. 4:6-7).

*I hold on to the present (which leads to the future).* In order to hold on to the present, I must *learn* wisdom and receive the forgiveness discovered in the *presence* of God. Wisdom changes my language from words that hold on to regret to words that hold on to learning: "*I can, I will, and I shall.*" "*I can learn, I will learn, and I shall learn to repent and be free from the imprisonment of regret.*"

In order to do this, I *read the Bible*, storing its wisdom in my mind (Heb. 4:12). Solomon said that wisdom is stored up in my mind so that I might trust God (Prov. 22:17-19). Only when I trust God can I love Him with all of my mind (Matt. 22:37). I set my mind on things above (Col. 3:2) and receive the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Jesus said, "*Learn from me*" (Matt. 11:29).

A biblical example of letting go of regret is King David who wrote Psalm 139. David would not let the sin against him by his enemies, including King Saul, imprison



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him with the thought that he could change the past. Instead, he *let go of the past* and *held on to the present* that led to his future (Ps. 139:23-24).

***Pause and let Wisdom Work.***

Print on a note card David's prayer recorded in Psalm 139:23-24. Memorize it and make it your daily prayer for the next thirty days. On the reverse side of the same card, print Philippians 4:6-7. After praying David's prayer, read aloud the words penned by Paul, and experience the freedom from imprisonment.

**How do I let go of regret horizontally in relationships?**

*Repent, trusting in God for the freedom of forgiveness.* Rather than harboring the thought that I could change the past: the offense, the offender, or my past behavior, I change my thoughts about the past. I let go of the past and hold on to the present.

*I let go of the past fear and protection.* I must let go of my unrealistic expectations that I am holding against the offender. I *pray* and ask God two revealing questions which can uncover my hidden cause of regret: "*What do I fear?*" and "*What am I protecting?*" If I am honest, each answer will include the word, *pride*. Let go.

*I hold on to the present and learn.* I must learn to love my offender with my mind because he is my neighbor (Matt. 22:39). In order to do this, I must first *read the Bible* to *learn* the prerequisite to loving him. Paul said that in humility, I need to consider others better than myself (Phil. 2:3). This includes my offender. Thus, I turn from the thought that I could change the past to changing my thoughts about the past. This frees me to live and learn in the present.



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***Pause and let Wisdom Work.***

Picture the offender against whom you are holding on to regret and subsequently withholding forgiveness. Pray to God, asking “*What do I fear? What am I protecting?*” Then, confess the fear and protection of pride that you are white-knuckling. Read Philippians 2:3, speaking each word out loud. Ask God to teach you how to wisely humble yourself toward the offender.

**How do I experience freedom?**

I continue to practice the instant forgiveness experiment. When someone sins against me, I instantly let go of the prison walls of revenge, *resentment*, and *regret*. I let go of regret by *repenting: letting go of the past and holding on to the present*. Rather than operating with pride, I live in humility toward Christ and others. I give up pride’s *fear and protection* language, “*I could’ve, would’ve, or should’ve*” for humility’s words of learning “*I can, I will, and I shall.*”

***Pause and let Wisdom Work.***

Do this by taking every thought captive and making it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). When someone sins against you, instantly *let go* of the thought that you could change the past and *repent* by changing your thoughts about the past. *Let go of the past fear and protection* and *hold on to the present and learn*. Renew your mind daily through the above prayers and Scriptures (Rom. 12:2). The Spirit of God and the Word of God will free you to live wisely among the people of God.