

“Time to Get Off the Couch”

Acts 22:1-21

Series: Starting Over Week 5. Living Beyond Your Regrets

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The Growth Group that meets at my house on Monday night just finished. Everyone is ready to leave. Yet I have one more task for them. A new couch for the family room is on its way. So I need to move the old faithful blue and tan plaid couch. The easiest thing is to dump it on the curb for trash pickup. But I love this couch. Though it's stained, worn and lumpy, I can't part with it. So I ask my poor unsuspecting Growth Group members to help me move it upstairs. They wrestle it down the hall, up one flight of stairs, across the living room, up a longer flight of stairs to the second floor. It's all going well. It's going to work...until we hit the tight turn up the final flight of stairs into my office. They push, pull, shove, shimmy and do everything but swear. They are men on a mission. Yet in the end, it just won't budge. So they take it back down the stairs, across the living room, down more stairs, through the hall and back to the family room where they now need physical therapy treatments from my wife.

The very next day I meet with a group of pastors. When the meeting is over, the host pastor says she is getting a new couch and she asks us to move her couch out the door. We almost give up. We are ready to cut it up when one last push gets it through the door and out to the curb. Pastor's love the couch. Why? Well pastors are SAINTS and the word SAINT stands for Sunday Afternoon Is Nap Time.

Whatever else it may mean, the couch is the official sponsor of American laziness. Couches are made by La-Z-Boy. The couch is the symbol of avoiding something – the lawn, the laundry, exercise, homework, the bills. You have couch potatoes and couch to 5Ks. Last Sunday millions of people desperately needing exercise sat on couches and watched twenty-two football players desperately needing a rest. And when the game was over what did we say? “We won! We did it!” The only thing we did was sit on a couch and stuff our faces.

In our series *Starting Over* we explored how to get rid of our regrets. It starts with recognizing your regrets. In the past maybe you avoided them, justified or denied them. Now you look at them and discover they may be:

- Regrets of Action – something you wish you didn't do
- Regrets of Inaction – a missed opportunity you wish you took
- Regrets of Reaction – something that happened to you. It's not your fault yet it still controls you with regret.

Whether these occurred last week, last year, or decades ago, we long to make things right – to change direction, to begin again. We want to break free from the “Sorry Cycle.” The good news is this: Regret doesn't have to be a finish line. It can be a starting line. During this series we've walked through a three-step process to help us start over:

- Recognize our Regrets - face them head on.
- Release Our Regrets - which usually involves seeking or offering forgiveness.
- Redeem Our Regrets - we let God bring good from our regrets – even the bad ones.

Yet there's a chance some of us are still stuck on the couch – we are still stuck in regret. Here are a few questions to ask if you want to get off the couch and start over:

1. Instead of recognizing my regret, am I closing my eyes on my couch? There are endless reasons why we might close our eyes and keep lying on the couch of regret. Sometimes we **minimize** our regret. You say, “It’s no big deal. It doesn’t bother me. I’ve dealt with it years ago.” It gets put on the back burner like that dirty casserole dish you just don’t want to take the time to scrub clean. If it keeps coming to mind, causing arguments in your head and disturbing your sleep, maybe it deserves another look and a little work.

Sometimes we **obey** our regrets. You assume your regret is simply too big or too painful. You’ve tried to get rid of it but it keeps coming back. You doubt any good will come from dealing with it so you let your inner-Eeyore call the shots.

Sometimes we **avoid** our regrets. You know it’s important to face your regrets, but you’re afraid of the pain which will bubble to the surface if you do. And if this is you, I want you to know, you’re not alone. Recognizing a regret is like ripping off a bandage – there will be pain involved. It’s almost unavoidable. Yet facing your regrets head on is the only way to begin to heal. Risking the short-term pain is well worth the long-term reward.

As we’ve gone through this series I noticed something: God loves to work through people who are full of regrets. Moses regrets murdering a man. Jacob has so many regrets God has to wrestle him to the ground. David regrets adultery, murder and a host of family problems. When Jesus chooses the twelve disciples He is surrounded by regrets – Peter denies Him, James and John want to torch the Samaritans, Matthew works for the enemy as a tax collector, Mary Magdalene had seven demons. Got regrets? You’re in good company.

The Apostle Paul has a resume full of regrets. He could’ve ignored them - but he chooses not to. Listen to how he describes his ugly past:

I persecuted the followers of this Way (that is, the followers of Jesus) to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. (Acts 22:4-5)

To the church in Corinth he admits:

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9)

Paul never closes his eyes to his regrets. He owns his mistakes. If we ever hope to start over, you and I must open our eyes, recognize our regrets, and get off the couch. We can’t move forward until we face them head-on.

2. Instead of releasing my regret, am I comfortable on my couch? In some cases, our regrets can feel as comforting as a blanket. Sometimes people hold on to their regrets so they can feel sorry for themselves, so they can feel like a victim or a martyr. Self-pity can be a powerful force which keeps us chained to our couch. We might even feed our regrets, rehearse them, review them, ruminate over them, play them back again and again in our minds to prove how much others hurt or wronged us. They may have hurt you very badly. Yet is this any way to live – chained to the memory of what others did to you?

The Apostle Paul was zealous and driven to arrest and wipe out followers of Jesus. He thought he was doing this for the Lord. Then on the road to Damascus he met the Lord.

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting," he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. "What shall I do, Lord?" I asked. "Get up," the Lord said, "and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do." My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. (Acts 22:6-11)

Saul/Paul is convinced he was right. He is comfortable with his views. He is certain he was doing God's will. So he goes on a search and destroy mission to stop Christians. Then Jesus blinds him to show him how blind he is, knocks him down so he will knock it off, and then tells him to get up off his self-righteous couch so he can go out and help others receive the righteousness of God. Now comes the moment of decision. Does Saul/Paul stay down wrapped in the comforting blanket of his old way of life? Does he wallow in guilt and regret? No. He gets up, leaves his regrets behind, and asks his friends to lead him toward the new life God has in store for him. Don't stay wrapped in the blanket of guilt, shame, self-pity or regret. Release your regrets. It's time to get off the couch.

3. Instead of redeeming my regret, am I clinging to my couch? Maybe you recognize and want to release your regrets but you decide you are going to do this yourself. You don't need help. You can manage it. You can do it. Guys tend to be like this. We don't want to appear weak. We don't ask for help – not even from God. In some cases, this works fine. Yet with tougher regrets we hit the wall. Let's take something simple like smoking. Three things may happen:

- You stop smoking but don't deal with the stresses which made you light up
- You stop smoking but it transforms into something else like overeating
- You can't stop smoking

Pride won't let us reach out to God for help. When we do, we discover He wants to free us and He has the power to free us. Jesus doesn't simply erase our regrets – he longs to redeem them! Our pain can be used by God to bring hope and healing to a desperate world.

For three days Paul sat in darkness. Then Jesus sent Ananias to him.

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

"Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:12-16)

Paul could have said, "No thank you. I can take care of this on my own. I like my old way of life. And besides, I think I'm getting used to living in the dark." He doesn't. Instead, helpless and powerless, he surrenders to God, receives baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and let God redeem him. When he dies to his old way of life God raises him up to new life. He starts over.

If, during this series, you were able to recognize, release and have God redeem your regrets I must tell you there is a great temptation to fall back on the couch. Even though the attempt to move my couch upstairs failed, I could not give up. So a few months later, I took out the hide-a-bed, carried the frame upstairs and then broke through the wall to get it in the room. That was the reason I got rid of the low hanging wall that hit my head – the one I talked about in a previous sermon. Okay I'm clinging to my couch. I know I have a problem. I'm a couchaholic. I counted 6 couches in our house. I'm going to a support group for it. Don't judge me.

After Jesus saves and calls him, Paul still flops back on his couch. He says,

When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.' "'Lord,' I replied, 'these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' (Acts 22:17-20)

Even after Paul becomes a follower of Jesus, his regrets creep back in. When God presents His grand plan to use Paul to reach thousands, what is Paul's initial response? Dig up the past! He says, "Remember all the bad things I've done." He lets his regrets return. He slouches back to the couch. After this, Paul goes back to his hometown of Tarsus and disappears from the book of Acts for a while. Scholars don't know what he does during this time. I think he is sleeping and sulking on the couch in his parents' basement.

God isn't done with him. Jesus says, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." (Acts 22:21) Through the encouragement of Barnabas, Paul comes back and starts the incredible mission which spreads the Good News around the Roman world and down the ages to us. God refuses to let Paul stay stuck in the "Sorry Cycle." He refuses to let Paul's past define his future. Instead he wants to redeem Paul's regrets by using him to help millions find their way back to God. So what are you going to do the next time you feel regret start to creep back in? Instead of resisting the work God wants to do in and through your life, will you let him redeem it?

When regret wants to drag us into the "Sorry Cycle," let's work the "Starting Over Loop." The moment we feel that twinge of regret, recognize the regret. Stare it in the face, name it for what it is, decide to own it, instead of letting it own you. Next time, release your regret. Seek or offer forgiveness. Leave your regret in the past and move forward into a new future. And finally let God redeem your regrets, bringing something good from them as only he can do.

One thing we have to understand about the Starting Over Loop: to recognize, release, and redeem our regrets is not something we do once. It's something we do over and over again. Living beyond regret is not a one-time decision, it's a way of life. The prophet Jeremiah says:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Did you catch that? Every morning. That means each day, each sunrise, each breath is a chance to experience God's mercies - an opportunity to breathe in his grace, love, and forgiveness.

And here's the kicker: The Starting Over Loop isn't just for us. When we allow God to redeem our regrets, who gets the glory? God! Tell others how God took your stubborn regrets and turned them into something beautiful. When you live the Starting Over Loop you show others how they can live beyond their regrets. Help others discover their regrets are not the finish line. They can get up off the couch and start to live.