

SMALL GROUP LESSON

No Regrets



Lesson Aim

This lesson will teach you why it is important to live without regrets despite your life's circumstances.

Preparation Necessary

To illustrate this lesson, download some pictures of Harry S Truman, ancient Egypt, and an artist's depiction of Joseph.

Scripture Text

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45)

Looking Deeper:

Read Genesis 37, 39-50 to get the full background on Joseph.

Read the Pulitzer Prize-winning Truman by David McCullough (or the Harry S Truman page on www.wikipedia.com.)

INTRODUCTION

He was a man of average intelligence, who loved his wife. He was a failed small businessman, who held a small regional political office. He exited that position in hopes of running for governor or U.S. Senate, but only became a candidate after three other men turned down the opportunity. He then beat the other Democratic candidates before trouncing the sitting Republican by 20 percent. Despite his wife hating Washington D.C. and spending long stretches of time at home, he was reelected to the Senate. Two years later he became the compromise vice presidential candidate for his party, where he was virtually ignored by his incumbent running mate. Less than three months after the inauguration, his running mate died, and Harry S Truman became President of the United States as World War II still raged. As a careful diligent student of history, he guided the free world to victory, then dealt with a tumultuous aftermath that started the Cold War with the Soviet Union. He was often overshadowed by the brilliant men in his cabinet, one of whom won the Nobel Peace Prize. He fired the hugely popular General Douglas MacArthur from the Korean War, that ended in stalemate. He defended corrupt friends in government positions because they were friends. He left office with record low 22 percent job approval rating. Today, most historians consider Harry S Truman—the last choice Senate candidate, the last choice Vice Presidential candidate, the unpopular, average-intelligenced Missourian—one of our top five presidents.

Here was a man who repeatedly failed, yet persevered into historic success. Here was a man who had regrets, yet lived without regrets.

Here was our American Joseph.

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THE IDEAS

1. The Reality of Regrets

Obviously there's no such thing as "no regrets" in a life. We may regret that decision about our Summer job, the lemon we purchased that we thought was a reliable vehicle, or the cool roommate that turned into a terror.

All of us do or say things that we wish we hadn't afterwards. Sometimes, immediately afterwards we apologize or blush at our stupidity, yet even when the offended party forgives us, we mentally kick ourselves for our mistakes. Sometimes we don't realize our mistake until weeks, months, or even years later, then burn in frustration or personal disappointment at ourselves.

Other times we hesitate to speak up to defend someone or something valuable. Other times we're too insensitive to the depressed friend needing compassion or too self-absorbed to realize we're ruining our Christian witness.

Be it via commission or omission, we can all list those regrets, though most often we try to forget them as quickly as possible.

Interaction

If you're feeling brave, share a legitimate regret you have from your own life with the group. When you're done, ask if anyone else would like to share a regret they have. Be sure not to pressure anyone into sharing delicate issues in their lives if they don't want to.

The other way not to have regrets is understand that it's impossible not to have regrets. Yet it is possible to live without regrets that cripple you psychologically or spiritually. There's an old cliché about "you can get bitter or you can get better" and that's what we're going to explore today. We all warm to the great American success stories of heroic people who never give up and somehow, somehow overcome impossible obstacles to become Olympic champions, business tycoons, or even presidents of the United States. Yet, the reality is more often than not; our choices won't lead to headlines and media interviews, but simply a life worth living.

2. When Real Life Interferes

The end of the story is always better than the beginning and middle. After all, what happens when you beat out a slew of candidates for a job, begin making more money than you've ever made before and maintain a strong work ethic while growing your department into areas they've never previously explored—then find yourself the victim of a departmental reorganization that leaves you jobless? Is living on unemployment God's will?

What happens when you work yourself to death on the key project in an important class, and your teammates on the project don't do their part, damaging your grade and forfeiting the academic scholarship you have to have? Is it possible to look at these teammates without anger?

What happens when you accomplish a list of career successes over a six year period after that, only to find your Christian boss has decided to lay you off despite the fact that he'll be living off the fruits of your success? Are you now gun shy, wondering if you should give your best to the new job?

What happens if your brothers betray you, throw you in a pit, discuss murdering you, but instead decide on the more "humane" option of selling you into slavery? Do you plot revenge on each and every one of them? Do you dream of the detailed ways you will murder them once you get free?

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Do you pray God's wrath upon them?

Joseph blazes into the Bible as a 17 year-old know it all. After telling on his older brothers, he unveils two dreams that he's been given—about how all his older brothers (and even Mom and Dad) will someday bow to him. While his father mulled over the prophetic elements within it, Joseph must've been sure he was the Chosen One who soon, so very soon, would be ruling his family and maybe even more.

So then his brothers' betray him, fake his murder and sell him to slavers.

All that said, just because Joseph survived similar mental/psychological setbacks/distress in the Bible doesn't make it easier to deal with today. Joseph's eventual ascension to ancient Egypt's Prime Minister equivalent doesn't guarantee you a well-paying job or next month's house payment.

Yet, he does provide a template on attitude and reliance on God. He does model a method of living without regrets.

Interaction

Does Joseph's story seem unreal to you? Can you relate to it or does it feel like a do-gooders fairy tale?

3. How to Live with No Regrets

Perhaps you weren't betrayed to slavers by your brothers like Joseph, but perhaps you've been crippled by a vehicle accident. Perhaps you've had a roommate disappear and ended up stuck with all the apartment bills. Perhaps your credit is ruined by a duplicitous friend. Perhaps you're the unwilling product of a nasty divorce. Whether or not it's "fair," it's true, it's your life, and you have to decide how to deal with it.

This is a point made in contemporary literature. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men* (p265 Vintage paperback, 2005), Sheriff Bell goes to an old friend trapped in a wheelchair due to being shot by a convict. Bell is deeply troubled by the changing moral landscape in his native Texas. A key portion of the conversation (Note: The lack of punctuation is correct.) goes like this:

What's your biggest regret in life.

The old man looked at him, gauging the question. I dont know, he said. I aint got all that many regrets. I could imagine lots of things that you might think would make a man happier. I reckon bein able to walk around might be one. You can make up your own list. You might even have one. I think by the time you're grown you're as happy as you're goin to be. You'll have good times and bad times, but in the end you'll be about as happy as you was before. Or as unhappy. I've knowed people that just never did get the hang of it.

I know what you mean.

I know you do.

Here are four points to learn how to live without regrets:

Step One: It's vanity to think you won't experience heartaches in life—Just because the American media insists everyone should remain happy, scripture tells us it rains on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). There's no major character in the Bible who doesn't suffer setbacks and tragedy and heartache (think: Daniel, Jacob, Peter), sometimes repeatedly (think: Hosea, Elijah, Paul). The sooner you recognize that fact, the sooner you can move on with life.

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Despite Joseph's dreams of greatness when he was a teenager, he seems to have recognized his reality and accepted it without much self pity.

Step Two: Forgiveness means forgiving yourself and others—By the time Joseph's brothers reappeared in his life, he assured himself of their sincerity toward their family, then forgave them without recriminations. Though he had the power to kill them, he chose not to. He chose to love them instead. Later, after his father died, and he was ethically able to take any revenge he might choose upon them (being the nominal head of the family), he chose love instead.

That said, it didn't mean he wasn't scarred by the experience. It didn't mean he didn't feel frustration well up within him when they reverted to their old selves. It didn't mean he was always on a spiritual high of love and forgiveness.

Neither will you be. Forgiveness is a continual choice you must make daily. It isn't easy. Sometimes it isn't realistic. But it's always the best choice forward.

Step Three: Remind yourself that your Life is in God's Hands—Sometimes we forget we are not our own. Paul wrote, "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" (I Corinthians 6:19).

By choosing to follow Christ, we must trust that He has our best interests in mind for the long term.

Step Four: Continue to Set Goals to Achieve Excellence for the Kingdom of God—Just as Harry Truman made/took advantage of every effort he had in perhaps the most unlikely journey to the presidency, Joseph did his best at every way station in his life. After being slaved out to Potiphar, he worked hard to get noticed. His excellence was rewarded—until he ended up in prison. When he worked hard to get noticed in prison, he became the inmate in charge of daily matters. God even anointed him into interpreting a victorious dream for Pharaoh's butler. Yet, despite Joseph's plea to be remembered, the butler forgot about him for the next two years. Still, he didn't waver in his pursuit of excellence. God rewarded his superior attitude. At age 30, he was the prime minister equivalent of the most powerful empire in the ancient world.

Setbacks only mean we have to figure out another path to reach our spiritual destiny. For some it will be at their home church, for others it will be traveling the globe and for still others, it will be a strange mix of the two. Yet for all, it's the will of God to continue on without bitterness and unreleased regrets.

CONCLUSION

It's impossible not to make mistakes and create regrets. It's possible to live a life with no regrets—you just must choose to deny the natural guilt and bitterness that setbacks can create in everyone.

The stories of Joseph in ancient Egypt and Harry S Truman in 20th Century United States prove this fact if we refuse to see them as "feel good" stories, but instead recognize a templates for our lives.

We must refuse pity, we must constantly seek to place our lives in God's hands—no matter how it looks to us in the short term.

The truth is, it is most often in brokenness that God uses our weakness so that He is obvious. The psalmist wrote, "The LORD is high unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of

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a contrite spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Or, as the Canadian poet Leonard Cohen wrote in “Anthem:” Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.

The light gets in—and shines out—through the cracks in our lives that illustrate triumph with no regrets.

LED-BY-THE SPIRIT QUESTIONS

Why do some people seem unable to overcome their past setbacks and/or tragedies?

Has your biggest regret (or near biggest) from the past changed your current behavior? If yes, how? If no, why not? (NOTE: Be careful not to press to get them to reveal their biggest regret(s) if they’re hesitant.)

Name the examples in your life that inspire you when you suffer setbacks and tragedies. Why do they inspire you?

Of the four steps to live with no regrets—remind yourself it rains on the just and the unjust, forgive yourself and others, remind yourself you’re in God’s hands, continue to set goals for the Kingdom—which one will be hardest for you to apply to your life? Why?

When we meet again next week, how will you be able to measure your progress in one of these areas?

Is there someone you can partner with to help you measure that progress?

PRAYER

Lord, we’ve all suffered numerous hurts in life. Many of us have been victims of unprovoked hurts. It’s hard to choose the better path even when we’re trying to avoid bitterness, anger, and scars inflicted upon us. Please help us to live our lives so that we will choose to have no regrets every day, no matter what happens to us. ★