



## **How do You Know When Someone is Truly Sorry?** **Leslie Vernick**

*They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail upon their beds.*  
Hosea 7:14

It's not always easy to tell if someone is truly repentant. The apostle Paul speaks of two kinds of sorrow—worldly sorrow that leads to death, and godly sorrow that brings repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9–10). As Christian counselors, it is crucial that we learn to distinguish between the two—especially when we are doing couples work.

Worldly sorrow is a self-focused sorrow. It may contain great emotion, tears, and apologies, but the grief expressed is for one's self. The person mourns the consequences of his or her sin and what she has lost. This may be a marriage, a job, a reputation, friends and/or family, or can even be one's own idea of who they thought they were. Here are some of the things we often hear a person say when they are sorrowing unto death:

- I can't believe I did such a thing
- Why is this happening to me?
- Please forgive me—Implying, please don't make me suffer the consequences of my sin
- Why won't he/she forgive me? (In other words, why can't reconciliation be easy and quick?)
- I'm so sorry (sad)
- I'm a horrible person
- I wish I were dead
- I hate myself

Judas is a good example of this type of sorrow (Matthew 27:3-5). After he betrayed Christ, he was seized with remorse; yet it did not lead to godly repentance, but self-hatred and suicide.

It is natural that we feel compassion for the person suffering such emotional and spiritual pain. However, it's crucial that we not confuse this kind of sorrow with the kind that leads to biblical repentance—especially when we are working with both the sorrowing sinner and the one who has been sinned against.

Godly sorrow demonstrates grief over one's sinfulness toward God, as well as the pain it has caused others. John the Baptist said, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8).

Below are eight things I have found that demonstrate those fruits of genuine repentance.

- Accepts full responsibility for actions and attitudes; doesn't blame others or situations
- Acknowledges sinfulness, (instead of "I can't believe I could do such a thing")
- Recognizes the effects of actions on others and shows empathy for the pain he/she's caused.
- Able to identify brokenness in detail, such as abusive tactics, attitudes of entitlement, and/or areas of chronic deceit
- Accepts consequences without demands or conditions
- Makes amends for damages
- Is willing to make consistent changes over the long term, such as new behaviors and attitudes characteristic of healthy relationships
- Is willing to be accountable, and if needed, long term

In my work with couples who have experienced grievous sin, I have found that it is not sin that ends most relationships. All couples experience sin. Rather, it is our blindness and refusal to acknowledge our sin—and repent—that makes reconciliation and healing impossible.

*As a Christian counselor, what have you done to help someone move from worldly sorry toward godly sorrow?*