

Regretfully yours: Leaving perfection to God

by [David Paul Deavel](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

My wife, a teacher of philosophy at a Catholic university, likes to begin introductory ethics courses with a hypothetical question. If you were to live to be 80, what would you like to be able to say about yourself? Her students, who are mostly Catholics and Lutherans—and often practicing ones—sometimes impress her with sensitive responses about virtue and character. But in the last few years she has noticed that more and more of them answer that they want to be able to say that they have no regrets, that they wouldn't do anything differently. The avoidance of moral regret seems to be their life goal. She's been surprised at how often this answer has come up. It bothers her and has long bothered me, because unfortunately it's not limited to callow freshmen.

A short time after my wife mentioned this pattern I went to the funeral of a woman who had died from a degenerative disease in her late 30s. She had married shortly after her diagnosis and had moved to a city far from her family. Her husband had proclaimed his love and his readiness to care for her, but he failed in his duties and essentially abandoned her, then obstructed her family's attempts to secure better care for her. Through the help of some good lawyers, family members were able to obtain a divorce so that they could bring her back home. Never having nursed a dying wife, I have no interest in passing judgment on the young man. I hope that I would react differently, but when I think about the situation I hear the words of St. Paul, "He who thinks he stands, let him take heed lest he fall." What struck me was the attitude of the young man at the funeral.

While it would have been understandable had his wife's family asked him to stay away, they graciously asked if he wished to give a eulogy after the funeral. This act of Christian charity and forbearance was repaid when the young man began his recollection of his wife with the line, delivered in a staccato that sounded like a challenge: "No regrets." After his brief recollection of his wife he concluded, repeating twice more, "No regrets. No regrets." Who was he trying to convince?

In a recent issue of *AARP*, the magazine of the American Association of Retired Persons, octogenarian actor Sidney Poitier was asked, "Do you have regrets—is it

even okay to have them?”

It was refreshing to see a philosophical question of this sort asked in the relentlessly peppy journal for the over-50 crowd. The *idée fixe* of the magazine and those like it seems to be to encourage those whose flesh is showing signs of decay to put their trust even more heavily into that flesh, and to be ever more satisfied and complacent with their lives and wrapped enough in physical comforts to avoid regret or guilt. Unfortunately, Poitier’s answer fit comfortably into this philosophy:

Ah, it depends upon your philosophical point of view, how you see life. I don’t. I have none. I have behaved in despicable ways, and I recall them. I don’t regret them. That came out of an understanding that I arrived at much, much later in my life—that there is not one choice I made, not one, that I would change. Because then my life would have led to somewhere else.

Poitier clearly thinks the question has to do with moral regret. His answer is that he has ended up well. The ends apparently justify the means, no matter how “despicable” those means were.

Poitier’s defense, though stated in a secular fashion, has its own sacred terminology. “God writes straight with crooked lines.” I’ve heard this expression attributed to a number of people, from Paul Claudel to St. Augustine. It’s a perfectly orthodox belief and has a very nice pedigree. God in his mercy does not merely let us suffer the consequences of our sins, but often makes them the occasion of giving us great good. We can see this in Genesis when Jacob’s son Joseph, having been sold into slavery by his brothers, reveals to them what has happened. They fear that Joseph, now governor of all Egypt, will take his revenge. Joseph, however, is as philosophical as Poitier. “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Joseph does not tell them not to regret what they did; he tells them not to be distressed or angry with themselves. It is clear from subsequent events that Joseph’s words are not meant to indicate that what the brothers did was morally upright.

After the death of Jacob, Joseph’s brothers come to him with a message purportedly from their father, asking, “Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers, and their sin, because they did evil to you.” The brothers add their own petition for forgiveness and declare to him, “Behold, we are your servants.” Rather than

declaring, “Hey, you were young and didn’t know better,” Joseph affirms that there is certainly ground for apology. “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” What there is no ground for, especially in the light of God’s mercy in turning those evil actions to good, is revenge on Joseph’s part. “Fear not, for am I in the place of God?”

It’s all over the Bible. Jacob obtains both his birthright and his blessing as head of the tribe thanks to deceit. God brings forth the Savior of the world out of the line of King David and his wife Bathsheba, whom he married after having her husband killed to cover up their adulterous affair. There is even a sense that the wonderful gift of the incarnation was due in some way to that afternoon in the garden when the woman and her husband disobeyed God. *O felix culpa!* “O happy fault,” go the lines in the *Exultet*, that marvelous hymn sung at the Easter Vigil in much of Western Christianity, “that merited to possess such and so great a redeemer.” The hymn even includes the line “O truly necessary sin of Adam” (*O certe necessarium Adae peccatum*). Is it really true that it is because of the fall of humankind that the Son of Man came among us to make us share in the life of God? While it is true that we couldn’t be forgiven without having fallen, it seems wrong to take this hymn to mean that the gift of divine sonship bestowed upon us could not have been intended all along, but must have been only an afterthought occasioned by the events in the garden.

“Next to thinking you can do without God,” wrote English priest and writer Ronald Knox, “the most dangerous mistake you can make is thinking God can’t do without you.” Even if it can be stated in pious language, no-regrets thinking is a variety of this mistake. We should ignore the temptation to believe that God cannot do without our sins, that God’s writing “straight with crooked lines” is an endorsement of crooked lines. It implies, as Sidney Poitier illustrates, that any good but unintended consequences of our sins are made possible by those sins. God couldn’t give us this blessing, the reasoning implies, without that sin. The sons of Jacob would all have died of famine without selling Joseph into slavery; Jacob could not have become head of the tribe without lying to his father; David could not have been the forefather of the Messiah without killing Uriah the Hittite; God could not have become incarnate and given us a share in his divinity without Adam and Eve’s sins—or ours. These are simply not logical conclusions.

Nor should we think such faulty logic appropriate in our lives. Years after a husband has committed adultery, both husband and wife may say that that act actually resulted in a better marriage, writes theologian Ian Ker in his book *Mere Catholicism* (Emmaus Road). “But it would still be very odd, to say the least, if that unfaithful husband were to exclaim to his forgiving wife, ‘I’m so glad now that I committed adultery—aren’t you?’” If the sin was necessary for the blessing, then God is not merciful and our thanks are superfluous.

Aside from being illogical, such reasoning ignores the fact that though God gives blessings that flow in and even from the consequences of our sins, he does not take away other consequences. We have seen how, even though Joseph promised not to harm them, the other sons of Israel continued to live in fear because of their sin against him. Though Jacob became head of the tribe, his own sin resulted in his never again seeing his mother, who assisted him in deceiving his father. Though the Messiah was drawn from the line of David and Bathsheba, their first son died and David’s entire kingship was punctuated by the attempts of some of his own sons to kill him—and one another—and gain his kingdom. They had learned only too well from their father’s example. Our own sins, even if forgiven, still have painful repercussions, even if some of them seemingly only make us feel mental and emotional pain.

My wife’s students are right in a way, though. The human goal *should* be no regrets. God doesn’t want to give us his blessings only through the pains of our sins. He wants us to hear his voice before we make our mistakes. He wants us to be better husbands and wives without first committing adultery. He wants to make us better friends without betrayal, better disciples without his having to call out to us “Get thee behind me, Satan.” But the fact is that by the time we are in college we will already have regrets, possibly major ones.

So being able to say “No regrets” is a false goal. We can attain it only by denying that we are sinners and that our sins, no matter what good God brings out of them, hurt others and hurt ourselves. Even if God has forgiven us, our growth into the likeness of his Son has been delayed. We must take a different attitude. As Knox wrote in a sermon on God’s forgiveness:

Those apostles of cheap optimism who have abounded in our day will commonly tell you that it is useless to waste your time in vain regrets over

what you did wrong in the past; you should be looking ahead and making bright plans for the future. That, you see, is the exact opposite of our Lord's teaching. He does not want us to be exercised over the future; we are to ask each day for the bread which will be sufficient for that day, no more. He does want us to be exercised over the past; our old sins are to be a continual subject of conversation between us and him. Not that he wants us to be scrupulous or timorous about them, wondering whether in the past our contrition has been genuine, our confessions entire. Rather, he seems to take our sins as part of the day's work; we are sinners, we must not expect to be anything else. But we are to be sin-conscious, always.

We should want to have as little moral regret in life as possible. We should want to have listened to God's warnings rather than waited until we needed forgiveness and help out of the hole we've dug for ourselves. But we are past that. We do have things to regret. It is only when we regret them that we can come to realize how merciful God is and how much it is that we owe to God. Given that fact, whether we are 18 or 80, we should want a few regrets.