

THE MINISTRY OF FORGIVENESS
2 Corinthians 2:1-17

In First Corinthians 5 we studied the principles of church discipline.

1 Cor 5:1-2

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ESV

The message of Second Corinthians 2 is the forgiveness of a repentant church member. Forgiveness is as much a responsibility of the church body as is discipline.

Allow me a word about forgiveness. It is politically correct in our culture to talk about "unconditional" forgiveness. Brother Gables preached a series on forgiveness that deals extensively with the proper attitude towards forgiveness.

We must forgive when the offender asked to be forgiven. To be ready to forgive is commanded but forgiveness is not "unconditional."

One indication of a believer in Christ is a willingness to forgive.

Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. ESV

Now let's be careful to also point out that while we are not obligated to forgive someone who has not acknowledged their offense and we must not hold on to bitterness.

What are we to do when we are offended?

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

But isn't there a limit to how many times we must forgive someone?

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

In Second Corinthians 2, Paul exemplifies genuine forgiveness.

1. PAUL'S ANGUISH OF HEART

1-4

For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ²For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

What does Paul mean, "... another painful visit?"

This is an unfortunate chapter division as the first verse of Chapter 2 continues with the thought in 1:24. Paul deferred his visit for their benefit; to allow time for them to put matters right. The first letter was severe.

Paul got no pleasure in causing pain to the very people who would give him joy. Their behavior had forced him to grieve them; but it also caused him grief.

This is why he wrote to tell them of his changed plans; because he loved them. [1 Cor 16:5-8]

If Paul came to a resentful people his grief would prevent the purpose of his ministry, viz. their joy. [1:24]

Paul's "anguish of heart" (4)?

This is what it cost Paul to write his severe letter. Some believe Paul refers to another letter that was lost. However, it is more likely that he refers to First Corinthians. Imagine how Paul feels about the scandalous behavior he deals with in First Corinthians.

When you love someone it is not pleasant to have to deal with their sin. [4]

2. PAUL'S FORGIVING SPIRIT

5-11

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Paul refers to the man in the immoral relationship with his “father’s wife.”

Paul directed the Corinthians to excommunicate this man.

Paul points out that the pain this man caused was not to him so much as it was to all of them. Everyone who tolerated this man’s sin was damaged by it. [1 Cor 5:2]

The act of putting this man out of fellowship has resulted in his repentance. “The punishment by the majority is enough...” The goal of church discipline should always be restoration.

Having repented the man should be received back into fellowship otherwise he might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Another reason for First Corinthians was to test their obedience to his apostolic authority. They proved their genuineness by putting out the offender. Now they should be willing to obey him in restoring the man.

The forgiveness of the man must come from the party injured by him. But Paul assures them that their forgiveness is shared by Paul himself.

Satan had more to gain than the destruction of one sinner.
Satan’s “designs” are fraud and deceit.

We are not ignorant of his designs. If this man’s sin was allowed to remain what other immoral conduct would the church tolerate?

Let's look at Paul's forgiving spirit:

- a) He is sensitive to the fact that the culprit's behavior has brought pain to the entire church, and not just to himself (5).
- b) He regards the disciplinary action of the church as having been sufficient for the wrongdoer (6).
- c) He recognizes the importance of forgiveness, comfort, and love as a means of restoring the erring brother to the fellowship of the other believers.
- d) He sees their willingness to discipline as a test of their obedience to his apostolic authority, which had been called into question, perhaps by the very person being disciplined.
- e) He places himself in full accord with the church, sharing the forgiveness and restoration, just as he did the discipline.
- f) He recognizes the danger of undue rigor in carrying out discipline in such a way as to give Satan an opportunity to gain a victory, not only over the sinning brother, but also over the church.

3. PAUL'S RENEWED PEACE OF MIND

12-17

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Paul had sent First Corinthians with Titus. He could have no peace of mind until he learned how they had received it. So he sets out to find Titus. He leaves Ephesus and goes to Troas. When he did not find Titus there he crosses the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, perhaps to Philippi.

He finds Titus and all is well (chap 7).

In vs. 12 Paul says that the opportunity and success of his ministry of the gospel of Christ was "in the Lord."

When Titus failed to arrive Paul was anxious about the outcome in Corinth. Paul loved the Corinthians so much that he was unable to continue at Troas. He then goes to Macedonia. It was therefore “a great proof of his very special affection for the Corinthians that his concern for them would not let him rest anywhere, not even in a place that offered great hope of success, till he had news of them.” [Calvin]

“No good purpose is served ... in any Christian’s attempt to serve when his or her interest lie elsewhere.” [Luther]

The image used for Christ is of a victorious Roman triumph which the emperor would grant to a victorious general and shared by his staff. (14). The image is continued, for on such occasions burning incense carried the aroma of victory everywhere.

Preaching (witnessing) is not to be taken lightly (15-16). Paul is a chosen vessel by God and his gospel is always a sweet aroma to God, no matter whether men are being saved or perishing. The gospel divides men into two classes. One has life and the other has death.

“The Gospel is preached unto salvation; for that is its real purpose, but only believers share in this salvation; for unbelievers it is an occasion of condemnation, but it is they who make it so... The proper function of the Gospel is always to be distinguished from what we may call its accidental function, which must be imputed to depravity of men by which life is turned into death.” [Calvin]

“And who is sufficient for these things?”
If an apostle had pause when the eternal significance of the Gospel ministry was considered, what about lesser men?

Merchandising the gospel. (17)
Some men are “peddlers” of the Word of God. They use “god words” but they do not preach the hard truth. They are men-pleasers who tickle sinners’ ears with flattering words of peace and prosperity, health and wealth, when what the sinner needs to hear is that he is a guilty sinner and that there is a sufficient Savior for those who repent and believe in Christ as their only righteousness.

... but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Paul’s preaching is from Christ and is sincere, not motivated by any selfish design.