

Godly Sorrow, Repentance and Restoration

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

This evening's passage is about sorrow or grief. We all experience it sometimes, like when a friend dies or we lose a job, and the pain it causes is very real. It hurts. Even Jesus wept at Lazarus' grave.

But often, our greatest sorrows result from sin. When we sin, we grieve over our fallen natures, the weaknesses of our character, and the fact that we've offended the God who saved us. We also grieve when others sin against us, but differently. Then we mourn the betrayal and loss of trust that sin introduces into relationships. And we sorrow when others sin, even though their sins may not have been against us personally. This grief comes because we're members of one another. The Bible says, *And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.* Both Paul and the Corinthians found themselves in this situation in our text.

In 2 Corinthians, sorrow resulted from the church's discipline of an offender. We don't know who the offender was or what he did, but most commentators believe he's the man Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians 5, i.e., the man who had an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. Although we can't be certain, they're probably right.

But whatever the situation was, it brought tremendous sorrow to everyone involved. Paul mentioned his own sorrow in verses 1, 3 and 4. He was also concerned about the sorrow of the Corinthians. After all, they're the ones who had to deal with the situation. We see their sorrow in verses 2 and 4. And finally, Paul was concerned with the sorrow of the offender, who had repented by the time he wrote our text. He commented on this man's sorrow in verses 5 through 7.

This evening, these are the three things we want to consider.

Paul's Sorrow

We know Paul could be firm when he had to be, but we also know he had a very tender heart toward the people of God. The church at Corinth was a particular burden for him. He had come to know and love its members during his eighteen-month ministry among them on his second missionary journey.

But between his stay in Corinth and when he wrote 2 Corinthians, a lot had happened. He wrote a letter to the church (1 Cor. 5:9). The church responded to it by informing him of various problems — things like a party spirit, lawsuits, questions about food offered to idols, and abuses of both the Lord’s Supper and spiritual gifts. Then Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with these and other matters. But he wasn’t content to leave it there. He traveled to Corinth a second time, probably either during his three-year stay at Ephesus or shortly after arriving in Macedonia on his third missionary journey. Although the book of Acts says nothing about this trip, Paul mentioned it twice in 2 Corinthians, noting that his next visit would be his third (chs. 12:14; 13:1). The purpose of this visit was, no doubt, to resolve the church’s problems. It’s also possible that Paul wrote a third letter to the church, either before or after his second visit. And finally, he wrote 2 Corinthians to explain his severity and encourage the church to move forward in the grace of God.

In chapter 1, verse 23, Paul explained why he chose not to stop at Corinth on his way to Macedonia (cf. v. 15). He didn’t stop because he wanted to spare the church. Previously, he had said a lot of hard things. He had to. But he also understood that the church couldn’t grow spiritually if he stood over it like a mother hen and dictated everything it should do. If it was to grow, which it had to do, the church needed to rely on the grace of God for itself. Paul was confident that it would. Thus, he wrote at the end of verse 24, *For by faith ye stand.*

But Paul’s decision not to stop at Corinth wasn’t just for their sake. It was also for himself. If he hadn’t allowed them to grow without smothering them, he would never know the true condition of their hearts before God. Verse 2 says, *For if I make you sorry, who is he then that maketh me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me?* This is also why he wrote 1 Corinthians. Verse 3 continues, *And I wrote this same unto you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all.*

The church was always in Paul’s heart. He sorrowed over it. He said that he felt an *anguish of heart* and shed *many tears* on its behalf. And he wanted the saints at Corinth to know the extent of his love for them.

The Corinthians’ Sorrow

Paul wasn’t the only one who experienced sorrow. So did the Corinthians. They experienced sorrow because Paul made them sorrowful. He said so in verse 2: *For if I make you sorry....* And we might add that he made them sorry on purpose. As the Puritans used to say, the purpose of preaching is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. It’s only when the gospel afflicts the comfortable that we see real repentance and change. And that’s what Paul wanted. He had to make

the Corinthian sorrow so that their sorrow might be turned into joy. Psalm 126 says, *He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him* (v. 6).

Paul's willingness to address the problems in Corinth, despite the challenges they would face in dealing with them, reflects Solomon's advice in Proverbs 27:5–6. The wise king wrote, *Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.* Calling out sin with an attitude of compassion and a desire for repentance is the most loving thing we can do for an erring brother.

In this instance, Paul's severity found God's blessing. He sort of hints at this in our text, but he spoke plainly in chapter 7. He wrote, *For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing* (vv. 8–9).

Every sin, whether we've committed it or someone else has, should make us grieve because sin is always a shameful thing. Our response should be the same as David's. He wrote, *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law* (Ps. 119:136). But do we really sorrow over our sins? Do they afflict our souls until we find safety and deliverance in Jesus Christ? And do the sins of others torment us so much that we cannot help telling them that the only remedy is to trust Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of those who believe in him?

Paul's love for the Corinthians demanded that he make them sorrowful, but can you imagine the joy that he and they shared in the end? It must have been wonderful!

The Offender's Sorrow

Our text also addresses the sorrow of the offender. He must have been grieved when his pastor read 1 Corinthians during public worship. He probably knew beforehand that Paul had singled out his sin, but can you imagine how embarrassing it would have been? Yet, the disclosure of his sin to the congregation wasn't his greatest embarrassment or most profound sorrow. The church already knew about it. Rather, it was the realization that he had grieved God by his sin. He sorrowed because God sorrowed. We know this because he not only repented but took the chastisement so much to heart that Paul was concerned that he might become *swallowed up with overmuch sorrow*.

There's an important point here that we shouldn't overlook. The offender in our text didn't repent until Paul confronted him by letter and the church disciplined him. This isn't unusual. David didn't repent until Nathan said, *Thou art the man* (2 Sam. 12:7). And Peter didn't repent until Jesus

questioned him about his commitment, saying, *Simon, son of Jonas, love us thou me more than these?* (John 21:15–17). The fact that someone doesn't repent until he's confronted doesn't, by itself, mean that his repentance is phony. Sometimes, it just shows how much we need others to draw our sin out of us so that we can deal with it. This is exactly what Paul did and asked the church to do.

Our text also shows that sometimes we're a little too severe in dealing with the sins of others. The church at Corinth was bordering on this. Here's a case of the pendulum swinging too far in the opposite direction. Having been sinfully lenient, now it was becoming sinfully severe. Neither is good. So, Paul wrote, *Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many* (v. 6). He instructed the church to correct its excessive severity in three ways.

The first is in verse 7. We need to forgive restored offenders. Paul wrote, *So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him*. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to *forgive us our debts* (Matt. 6:12). The word *forgive* means to dismiss or release from debt, i.e., to let it go. But in our text, Paul used a completely different word — a form of the word *grace*. It means to show favor, just as God shows his favor to us. In other words, it's not enough to let the debt go. Scripture also requires us to seek the welfare of the restored offender. This may take a long time and be very hard, depending on the offense, but it can begin right away with a few simple and practical steps, like occasionally asking the offender how he's doing.

Next, Paul adds comfort in verse 7: *Ye ought to rather to forgive him, and comfort him*. We must comfort restored offenders. The word Paul used here is a form of *paraclete*. The Holy Spirit is our *paraclete* in the gospel of John (vv. 14:16, 26; 15:26), and Jesus is our *paraclete* and 1 John 2:1. A *Paraclete* can be many things depending on its context, but it literally means 'someone you call to stand beside you.' A *paraclete* is the first person on autodial on your telephone. According to our text, we need to be that person to restored offenders. We shouldn't keep them at arm's length. We shouldn't avoid crossing the street to help them, as the Levite and priest did in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. On the contrary, we make it our business to help them.

And third, Paul added love to the list in verse 8. We need to love those who have been restored. Admittedly, certain people can be hard to love. Some Christians are like this. It's especially hard to love Christians whose sins we find particularly offensive. But what did Paul say? He told us to love them anyway. We're not allowed to withhold our love just because we find someone unlovable. In fact, not only are we to love restored offenders, but we must also confirm our love for them. That's what our text says. It means that we must ratify our love with deeds of thoughtfulness. Think of the Samaritan, an enemy of the Jews, who laid aside his natural inclinations and cared for the man who fell among the thieves. Or better yet, think of Jesus, the purest and loveliest of all, who offered himself to an accursed death on the cross for the worst — for you and me. Romans 5 says, *But God*

commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.... For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life (vv. 8 and 10).

Is it easy to forgive, comfort and love? No. It was hard for Jesus, but he did it anyway. He did it so that we could live with him forever.

Today's text ends with several observations. I want to mention them briefly, though it's not my plan to dwell on any of them at length.

One is that Paul exhorted the Corinthians, both in person and by letter, so that he might know whether they would be obedient in all things. Their willingness to discipline the offender and then restore him after his repentance reflects the condition of their hearts. Would they follow through with Paul's instructions?

Another is that forgiveness should be contagious. When the Corinthians forgave the offender, so did Paul. Why? Because extending forgiveness to others is the work of Christ.

And finally, the church needs to sorrow over sin and rejoice over repentance so that Satan can't get the upper hand. We know that he's a roaring lion looking for prey, so we have to guard ourselves constantly, not giving him even the slightest opportunity to destroy the ministry of the gospel.

No church is exempt from this, including our own. But we can't rely on our own strength; we have none. As Paul reminded the Corinthians in the last verse of chapter 1, we stand only when we stand by faith, i.e., always looking to the Son of God for forgiveness, growth, wisdom and salvation. That's when the work of God goes forward. So, let's exhort one another to stand firm in the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ at all times. Amen.