

July 18, 2021

UNITED WITH CHRIST AND BOUND TO ONE ANOTHER

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

*(16 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

One of the realities that is precious to us as believers is the truth that you and I have been united with Christ by faith so that what is true of him becomes true of us. Knowing that he died to sin once for all, we get to rejoice that we have died with him. Knowing that he was raised from the dead, we exult in the reality that we have life because we've been raised with him and will be raised from the dead at the resurrection. But there is another glorious reality of belonging to Christ that we may not think of as often, and that is the reality that having been united with Christ we've also been united to one another. The Scripture speaks repeatedly of the fact that we are united with and bound to other believers. In 1 Corinthians 12 and in Ephesians 4 Paul uses the imagery of believers all being parts of the same body, so that it is only when each body part—connected to all the others—functions correctly that the whole body grows in maturity, love, Christlikeness. The Scripture also uses the imagery of a church as a family. Therefore, Jesus can speak of us having fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and children in the body of Christ. And Paul repeatedly refers to people he's only related to in Christ as "brother" or "sister." If we think about it, this is the implication of the truths that Paul held out to us last week in noting that we're children of God. If all who believers have God as our Father, then it is reasonable (and right) to conclude that we are all brothers and sisters in one family.

As I've mentioned, though, we can sometimes miss this reality as believers, thinking that salvation simply means that we've been reconciled to God and not necessarily that we've been reconciled and united to other believers. Moreover, even if we give mental assent to the theological truth that we're united with and bound to other believers it is still quite a thing to begin living that out, isn't it? After all, what does this mean for us? What responsibilities do we have toward those whom the Scripture says are part of our family? What care must we show toward those whom the Scripture teaches us are simply other parts of the same body that we belong to? I believe that 2 Corinthians 7:2-16 goes a long way in giving us a picture of what this looks like. In this text, Paul lets us see his emotions as he works with the Corinthians, his joy in them, his hope in them, and then he brings Titus into the picture of well, showing these elements with him. But we shouldn't read a text like this and say, "Well, it looks like Paul, Titus, and the Corinthians had a unique relationship." Rather, I believe, we should get a view of what it looks like to live out the reality that we've been bound to one another as believers in the same family and body, even as we've been united with Christ.

But before we dive into seeing those elements in the text, it might be helpful to consider what Paul is talking about in our verses. He's mentioning being fearful and downcast, sending a letter that grieved the Corinthians, getting news from Titus, rejoicing because of their repentance, and on and on. So we may be asking what Paul is even talking about here? Or, if you've been with us through this entire series, you may feel like you're already familiar with this chapter because we had to draw from it early on to make sense of what Paul was talking about in the earliest

chapters of this letter. So, whether this is new to you or a reminder of what we've heard before, I want to try to explain what's going on here. We know that at one point in his interaction with the Corinthians, Paul had made a painful visit to the Corinthians, and we know that because he tells us in 2:1 that had made up his mind not to make "another painful visit" to them. In this painful visit Paul had made to them, it seems that there was a man who opposed Paul or attacked Paul in a public way. We know that because Paul refers to this one man in 2:5-8. However, though Paul was chiefly opposed or attacked by one, it appears that either some in the church were swept up in his attack against Paul or (perhaps more likely) the church stood silently by while this man attacked Paul and did nothing to address or discipline him (2:5—"He has caused pain . . . to all of you"). Therefore, Paul left and decided that he wouldn't make the second visit he had planned to make because he knew he'd have to confront them, and that could be rough if done face-to-face. Instead, he decided to write them a letter to confront them in writing, calling them to repentance.

The letter was a painful letter that made Paul anxious to write. He sent it by the hand of Titus, and he was so anxious about how the Corinthians would respond to him that when he found himself in Troas with an open door to preach the gospel, he couldn't do it. He had no rest in his spirit as he was eager to hear from Titus how the Corinthians had responded (2:12-13). Therefore, he left Troas and headed to Macedonia, hoping he'd run into Titus there and bring some peace to his anxious soul. Thankfully he did, and Titus had good news. Titus came passing along not their rejection and dismissal of Paul but their "longing . . . mourning . . . and zeal" for him (7:7). The letter had been painful for them to read. They had grieved. But they "were grieved into repenting" (7:9). They were eager to "clear [themselves]" before Paul and prove themselves "innocent in the matter" (7:11), so they remained silent no longer and addressed Paul's attacker through church discipline (2:6), a "punishment" (7:11) meant to bring the man to repentance (and did lead to his repentance—2:7-8).

When Paul heard this, he was "comforted" and "rejoiced," not only because of their repentance but because of Titus' joy at seeing the Corinthians show their genuine faith (7:13). But their repentance not only brought Titus joy (and Paul, in turn), but it raised his affection for them (7:15), seeing that all the good things Paul had said about them were true (7:14).

Now, with this said, it's clear that Paul was still being attacked from some (even after the good reception of that letter) whom Paul sarcastically calls "super-apostles" (11:5), and there may even be some among the Corinthians who were still being swayed by these attackers. That's why Paul has defended his ministry throughout these early chapters of 2 Corinthians. But in our text this morning, he's changing his focus. He's going to come back to defending his ministry and addressing the dangers these false apostles threaten in chapter 10, but from chapters 7-9, Paul focuses on those in the Corinthian church who have already responded positively to him (which includes the majority of them), laying out their responsibilities as believers. And as he does so, he provides us a picture of how we who are bound together in Christ to feel, think, and act toward one another. And I want to start where Paul does here—we should pour out our affection for one another and invite it in return.

## **We open our hearts, pour out our affection for one another, and invite it in return**

Paul is far from reserved in his affections—whether pouring them out or inviting them in return. He begins by asking them to open their hearts to him, writing, “Make room in your hearts for us” (v. 2). Now, remember, in this section Paul is not necessarily speaking to a group within the church who is against him. It seems that he’s speaking to the majority who have longing and zeal for Paul (v. 7). And yet he’s pressing them to open their hearts to him more, to allow him to be the object of their affections.

And he doesn’t tell them to open up their hearts while keeping his reserved. Rather, he says, “You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together” (v. 3). He tells them that he had “great pride” in them (v. 4), that he was comforted by hearing of their longing for him (vv. 6-7), that he rejoiced at news of their repentance (v. 9), and that he rejoiced because of his confidence in their obedience (v. 16). And all of this after Paul ended the letter of 1 Corinthians writing, “My love be with you all in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 16:24). My mom’s dad didn’t become a believer until shortly before his death from lung cancer, and my mom would often tell me, “He didn’t really tell us that he loved us, but we knew he did.” Believers’ in Paul’s life couldn’t say the same. He showed them and told them. And he brings other in as well, noting in verse 15 that Titus’s affections toward them have grown.

In other words, the picture here of how believers who are bound together in Christ walk together isn’t one of reserved and closed-off affections. It is rather one where hearts are opened and affections are affirmed, expressed openly, and invited from others. And, again, don’t think that this is some exceptional relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. As I’ve noted before, Paul speaks in this way toward all the churches, acknowledging the shared love they have for one another. He speaks of being “torn away” from the Thessalonians when he left them (1 Thess 2:17), told the Philippians that he held them in his heart (Phil 1:7), and was confident that the Galatians would have gouged out their eyes and given them to Paul (Gal 4:15) because he was sure of their love for him.

And so we must ask ourselves if this characterizes our relationships within the body of Christ. Do we open our hearts to one another? Are we willing to be open and affirming in our affection for one another and receiving of others’ affection for us? Are we willing to speak as Paul does, noting that we hold one another in our hearts and have joy in one another?

Now, I know that for some, this can be terrifying. We’ve opened our hearts and been hurt or abused by those who should have loved us. But the great reality of the church is that we’re dealing with people whose hearts have been changed, who don’t think less of anyone else because we know it’s only by the grace of God we know who we are, and who want to obey Christ who commands us to love one another. So let’s make this our goal as a church to reflect Paul in opening our hearts to one another, pouring out our affection, and inviting that in return.

But that’s not all. We also see in these verses that we should find joy in others growing in holiness.

## We find joy in others growing in holiness

This is perhaps the clearest reality that we see in this text. Paul says in verse 4 that he is “filled with comfort” and “overflowing with joy.” He begins verse 9 saying he rejoices. He tells us in verse 13 that he is “comforted” and “rejoiced still more.” And finally, he begins verse 16 saying he rejoices. Why? What is causing his overwhelming comfort and overflowing joy? The answer is the Corinthians’ holiness. He’s comforted because they’ve repented and pursued holiness (vv. 7-9). He’s rejoicing because they’re pursuing obedience. What this shows is that what brought Paul great joy was those believers whom he loved growing in holiness.

And we actually see the same thing from the Corinthians, simply stated in an opposite way. Let me show you what I mean. In verses 8-12 Paul talks about this letter he wrote them. As I’ve noted, I think it was a letter calling them to repent and exercise discipline against this man who had opposed Paul. And they had responded well, which is what Paul notes in verse 11, writing, “For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in this matter.” But what precipitated their response of repentance was grief. Did you see that? Paul says in verses 9-10, “As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”

Now, why were they grieving? Obviously because of their sin, but also no doubt because their sin affected Paul. And as long as he was negatively affected by their sin, it grieved them. They wanted to repent and walk in holiness in hopes that Paul might not be hurt and downcast (v. 6) and grieved but overflowing with joy. And so they didn’t just grieve, they repented. This is the difference between the “worldly grief” Paul mentions in v. 10 compared to the “godly grief” he mentions in v. 9. Anyone can have grief over sin and being caught in it—even unbelievers. But godly grief doesn’t just mourn but asks the question, “How can I keep from doing this again?” That is to say, it leads to repentance. The Corinthians repented for Paul’s joy, and Paul found joy in the Corinthians’ repentance. This is how the church is to operate. We understand that our joy is found not simply in individual holiness but in the holiness of our family (and body, to use the metaphors Scripture does). And so we pursue our joy by pursuing each other’s holiness. We labor for holiness, pray for holiness, and serve one another in our corporate pursuit of holiness. And this makes complete sense if we understand the imagery of us as individuals being parts of one body. No part of our body rejoices if another part isn’t functioning well. Nor do other parts ignore the failure to function of another part of the body. We are concerned. Thinking literally about our bodies, we rejoice when each part is working well and grieve when one part (or many parts) aren’t. And so the same is true with the body of Christ. But with the body of Christ the health of each part of the body isn’t our physical health but our spiritual growth and maturity. And so we should grieve when other parts of the body with which we’re connected aren’t walking well, and we should rejoice at repentance, the pursuit of holiness, and the display of faith working through love in others with whom we’re connected. This is one reason why we

rejoice when we see repentance and love to forgive and restore, isn't it? After all, could you imagine deciding that you wanted to isolate or punish part of your body for not functioning well? The absurdity we feel in answering that question is the absurdity we should feel if one decides to withhold forgiveness from a repentant one instead of rejoicing in that repentance.

But we should ask ourselves if what Paul pictures here is a picture of us. What makes us feel joyful? Or when you think of what might make you joyful, what do you imagine? If we were to have done an exercise this morning and each of us had come up with a list of things to make us joyful, I wonder how many of us would think of the holiness of others in the body of Christ. If we lose sight of our connection to others in the body and who we are as one body and family, we lose a basis for joy.<sup>1</sup> So let's remember that we're one in Christ and open our hearts and rejoice in the holiness of one another. And, finally, let me note one more item.

### **We love others in all the ways that Scripture demands**

Now that is a broad statement, so let me explain what I mean. As you read these verses, recognizing that Paul is the one who wrote them, it's hard to miss the fact that he is living out the very things that he said that are demanded by love in 1 Corinthians 13. In other words, earlier Paul had written a letter to this very group, telling them to love and describing love for them, and now he is showing that he practices what he preaches.

We know that Paul had been wronged by the Corinthians. That's why he left, didn't make a second visit, but instead sent them this letter that made them grieve. And now that Titus came to them, they've repented. Now, do you think for one second that the Corinthians were wondering, "Do you think Paul will hold us at a distance now because we didn't support him against his attackers?" Of course not. Why? Because they know that the apostle who defined one aspect of love as keeping no record of wrongs (2 Cor 13:5) loves them. He was going to (and did) live out the picture of love he'd given to them.

But it's more than that. Paul had told that loves hopes all things and believes all things. In other words, love anticipates the best from our brothers and sisters. So, after the Corinthians had responded so poorly to Paul that he had to leave them and write them a letter calling for their repentance, what do you think was Paul's mindset? Was he telling Titus, "I bet they won't repent"? No, that isn't what he said to Titus. Rather, we read in verse 14, "For whatever boasts I made to [Titus] about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true." Do you hear that? The Corinthians had given Paul reason to write them off or even slander them, and instead he was *boasting* about them, anticipating that they would give a godly response. And that's not a one-time thing. He

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hafemann has written, "All too often the church is . . . emaciated when it comes to experiencing deep and lasting joy in the midst of adversity because we no longer gain our identity by living within the community of faith. What we love, and therefore what we get excited about, is no longer wrapped up with the progress of God's people. The basis of our contentment is not the growing Christ-likeness of our church, but the comfort level of our personal circumstances. . . . What makes us sad is no longer the sting of our sin, but the frustration of failed dreams."

ends this section reiterating it, saying, “I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you” (v. 16).

Doesn't this make us examine our own lives with regard to our brothers and sisters in Christ? Has a believer ever hurt you, and your approach has been to write that person off and make sure to keep a distance from them? That's not what we see in Paul. And scriptural love demands otherwise. Love keeps no record of wrongs—just as we see with Paul. When there is a need to address someone in their sin, do you approach them already angry because you anticipate their poor response? Love hopes all things and believes all things—just as we see with Paul.

Brothers and sisters, when the Lord united us with himself, he gave us the richest blessing we could ever know. The one who lived, died, and was raised for us allows the blessings that are his to come to us. But one of those rich blessings is that as each of us is united with him, so we are bound to one another. We are one body. We are a family. We belong to one another in Christ. But this blessing brings some demands. We must be a people who open our hearts to one another, share our affection for one another and invite it in return. We must not find it strange to read Paul say, “You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together” (v. 3). We should pray that such a statement resonates in our own hearts. And we must find joy in one another's growth in holiness. Again, just note the number of times Paul tells us he is rejoicing and overflowing with joy because of nothing that's happened to him but because of others' growth in Christ-likeness. And, finally, we love one another in all the ways that Scripture demands. We hope all things, believe all things, bear all things, keep no record of wrongs, rejoice in the truth, and on and on.

Interestingly, there was one thing explicitly that Jesus told us would send the strong message to the world that we are his disciples, and it's our love for one another. So, let's strive all the more as those bound together in Christ to follow the glorious example of what that can look like that we see in this text. Amen.