

March 21, 2021

A CALL TO FORGIVENESS

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

(4 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

This morning I want to do a few things in this sermon. First, I want to try to recreate the situation for us that Paul is referring to in our text. What I mean is that Paul is addressing something that happened in these verses, but he doesn't give us the details. Therefore, we have to do a bit of speculation. But I don't think we have to speculate without any basis at all—as if we're doing no better than guessing. Rather, I think we have enough information in these verses and in some verses in chapter 7 to put together a very plausible picture of what may have been going on that provoked the writing of these verses. This is not always needed in sermons, but I think it'll be helpful here, and so that's the first thing I want to do.

The second thing I want to do is draw some truths from what Paul writes in these verses that we need to be aware of and need to make sure that we're practicing as a church. This, actually, is pretty common for us to do each Sunday, so this one won't surprise you. But there are some rich truths that the church of all ages needs to understand, and there have been times in the history of the church that these truths were not understood and applied in a number of churches. In fact, now is one of those times when an unhealthy percent of our churches do not understand and practice the first truth we're going to look at in our text today, and it is a truth and practice that needs to be restored. Moreover, as a church ourselves we're not immune from drifting from these practices and truths and need to be reminded of them lest that happen.

And the final thing I want to do is apply this text in a corporate way. This text upholds the beauty of the church forgiving believers who have sinned and are now repentant, and this week the pastors received an email from a former member who had run after sin about eight years ago, and in that email she was expressing her repentance and desire to ask for the forgiveness of her brothers and sisters at Cornerstone publicly. And so we're going to end the service this morning by graciously responding to that with a public affirmation of our forgiveness and love for her. And, honestly, I am so eager for us to get to this that I'm tempted to skip right to that moment, but I want us to look deeply at this text first because I think it will make our corporate application of these truths more powerful and appreciated. So, with that said, let's see if I can describe what I think happened at Corinth that Paul is referring to in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

I think when Paul made that visit to Corinth on his way to Macedonia—that he describes as a “painful visit” in 2:1—he had a confrontation with a man who opposed Paul in a public way and was clearly walking in sin. Moreover, I think that either (A) some of the Corinthians were swept up in this attack this man was leading against Paul and the sin he was walking in or (B) they sat quietly by as Paul was attacked, and they did nothing as this man held to his sin despite Paul's rebuke. The reason I think there was mainly one man leading the way in this “painful visit” that Paul had with the Corinthians is because when Paul references this incident in our text, he continually uses the singular pronoun. He writes, “Now, if *anyone* has caused pain, *he* has

caused it not to me . . . for such a *one* . . . you should rather turn to forgive and comfort *him*, or *he* may be overwhelmed . . . reaffirm your love for *him*” (vv. 5-8). So, you can see Paul is speaking of one man here. However, the reason I think that this one man swept up others somewhat in his actions or minimally wasn’t confronted in any way by the Corinthians (who may have cowered) is because Paul speaks of the pain this one man brought to the church at large. He says, “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” (v. 5). Therefore, I think this man pained the church by sweeping them up in his actions or caused them the pain of shame in realizing they did nothing to confront this man and defend Paul who loved them dearly.

Therefore, as Paul left, he decided not to visit them a second time, but instead he wrote them a letter (again, this letter has been lost to history). It was a painful letter, and one element that made it painful was that Paul had to confront the Corinthian’s rebellion or cowardice in not acting to address this man who had attacked Paul. But the good news is that they responded to this call to act. Specifically, they “punished” him through removing him from membership—a process we know as church discipline or excommunication. I use the word “punished” simply because that’s how Paul speaks, writing in verse 6, “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough.” And we know that their response was driven by this painful letter Paul wrote because when you get to chapter 7, Paul talks about the fact that this letter produced in them a godly grief that led to their repentance. But listen to how describes their repentance. He writes in 7:11, “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 the matter.” So when Paul wrote this letter, calling them out for not defending him against this one who attacked Paul (and therefore the gospel), the Corinthians grieved and then jumped into action by confronting and disciplining this one who stood against Paul. And this is what Paul had hoped for and wanted to see. It’s why he wrote in 2:9, “For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.” And they had been.

But now it seems that this man has repented. And it should be a joyous occasion. But there’s a problem. The Corinthians are having a hard time getting past what this man did. Perhaps it’s their concern and love for Paul that’s leading them to be a bit resistant to forgive and welcome back this man who had attacked Paul. Therefore, Paul writes this section of his letter to exhort them to forgive him. We see this as he writes in vv. 6-8, “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

So, that’s the situation, I think, that accounts for all that we see here, but let me also draw out some truths from this text. Some of these are already obvious in what we’ve said thus far, but I want to make explicit. I’ll state them briefly. The first is that the church must exercise discipline against unrepentant members.

The church must exercise discipline against unrepentant members

Again, we've noted this, but this is what Paul is referring to when he mentions "this punishment by the majority" in verse 6. There are other texts we could refer to in saying this, but the expectation of the Bible is that when a professing believer refuses to repent of obvious sin, the church is instructed to remove that individual from its membership, not allow the individual to partake of the Lord's table, and allow the individual to feel a lack of fellowship from the body.

But let me add a few other notes about this. First, this is to be done only when there is unrepentance on the part of the church member. This isn't a situation where you say, "I'm struggling with anger," then you repent, and then a week later you tell a brother, "I lost my temper again at work," and the response is, "Well, then, you're not really repentant; you're going to have to face church discipline." Of course not. Discipline is reserved for only a refusal to repent of and fight obvious sin, not for those who struggle in the fight against sin—for that would be all of us. Second, ideally discipline is handled with the least amount of humiliation possible. In Matthew 18 Jesus will lay out a situation where the sin of an individual that has been committed in private is told to the whole church. Jesus actually says, "Tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17). But that is only after the individual has been confronted one-on-one and refused to repent and then was confronted by only a few and refused to repent. In other words, the aim is always to get repentance, but the aim is always to get repentance with the least amount of humiliation possible. If this can be achieved with only one person being aware of the sin, that is ideal. Next to that would be a few knowing. And it is only when there is a consistent refusal to repent that it rises to the level of the church hearing and taking action to remove the individual. Finally, there are some sins that are public, and so they are dealt with immediately at the public level. That seems to be the case in 1 Corinthians 5 as Paul publicly calls the church to deal with the man who was living in sexual immorality. Everyone knew it; it was public. There was no need to address him first one-on-one because his sin was already well known. The church simply needed to act in discipline, which is why Paul wrote to them, "Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor 5:13). But now let's look at the ultimate goal of discipline, which is repentance and restoration.

The goal of discipline is repentance and restoration

It's very clear that the punishment of discipline the church exercised on this man had brought about his repentance. Paul will talk about forgiving and comforting him, so it's clear the man has turned from his sin. And the reason that Paul could write a painful letter, calling the church to exercise discipline against this man and then pivot in our text to call for the church to comfort, forgive, and reaffirm love for this man is because the man has repented, and repentance is the goal of discipline.

In other words, discipline is never enacted as an end in itself. It is only practiced as a means to get to the desired goal of repentance. The aim is never permanent removal or punishment. The aim is always repentance and restoration. And once that is achieved, well, that brings us to a third truth I want to state: once there is repentance, the church must forgive and restore.

Once there is repentance, the church must forgive and restore

This is the main thing that we see in our text. Paul is calling for them not to continue to keep this now-repentant man from being restored to the body. He writes, “This punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (vv. 6-8).

If we fail to forgive, restore, and reaffirm our love for the disciplined one who is now repentant, we risk causing this brother or sister to be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I mean, imagine how much of a blessing our brothers and sisters are, and now you’ve been cut off—by your own doing. But then you see the need to come back to Christ in repentance, to be restored to the people of God who are your family, but then you find out that they’re unwilling to receive you back and forgive you. That is tragic. In fact, I’ll say something about that more strongly in a second. But just as the church can’t ignore unrepentant sin and must discipline, so the church cannot ignore repentant sin and must forgive. Indeed, it should be our delight to do so. And this brings me to the final observation I want to make from our text: if we refuse obedience here, we are working in league with Satan.

If we refuse obedience here, we are working in league with Satan

As Paul wraps up our section he writes, “Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (vv. 10-11). Paul said that to the Corinthians, but I can say that neither are we ignorant of Satan’s designs. Satan wants to divide and destroy any local church he can. We can basically know Satan’s designs because they are the opposite of the Lord’s designs. I’ve noted this in 1 John where John tells his readers that he writes as he does so that we might not sin, but then he notes, “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ he righteous” (1 Jn 2:1). As the Lord says, “Don’t sin, but if you do, here’s hope,” the devil says, “Sin, sin, sin,” and if we do, he pounces with accusations and condemnation, telling us there is no hope. Do you see? It’s the exact opposite.

Similarly, we know that the Lord wants us to love our professing brothers and sisters enough that we would take whatever steps necessary—even removing them from the church in discipline—to fight for their repentance. And when they repent, we rejoice and forgive and restore and reaffirm our love. And simply knowing these biblical expectations exposes Satan’s designs, doesn’t it? He would have us ignore unrepentant sin so that it destroys the life of the one walking in it and hopefully spreads to others in the church who are picking up on the message that unrepentant sin is okay. He would want us not to remove an individual so that the unbeliever can launch attacks of hypocrisy in the church when we seek to share the gospel with them. And then, if the disciplined individual repents, he would want us to keep them distanced, not forgiving but continuing to withhold fellowship.

So let us not be deceived. When we refuse to discipline the unrepentant member or refuse to forgive and reaffirm our love for the repentant one, we are working in league with the devil

himself. We are walking in his very designs. And whatever excuses we come up with—not to discipline or not to forgive—is merely us being outwitted by the evil one. Several years ago someone noted, “We live in a time in which *everything* is permitted and *nothing* is forgiven.”¹ I would dare say that statement becomes more of a reality with each passing day. But may it not be so among Christ’s people.

In contrast to Satan’s designs, when we discipline the unrepentant and when we restore the repentant one, we are working in league with Jesus himself. We are communicating through discipline that we love you as Jesus loves you and therefore want your holiness and salvation more than we want you to continue toward the fleeting pleasures of sin, death, and condemnation. And when we forgive and restore, we are reflecting the merciful and gracious heart of the one who showed us grace and mercy when we were most undeserving, the one who lived, died, and was raised for us, and the one who deals with us so gently and mercifully even now.

And now I want to finish in one of the most encouraging ways I can, by telling you that we get to put this text into practice as a church this morning. Eight years ago a member of our church named Shelbi French resigned her membership and shared the shocking news that she’d married a man who was a Jehovah’s Witness. As her pastors, we were obviously troubled, and we met with Shelbi and her new husband and warned her about walking away from the commands of Christ and expressed our deep concern for her.

According to Shelbi’s own testimony, she’s spent much of the past eight years pursuing anything outside of Christ and obedience to his commands that might make her happy—from fitness, to a career, to being baptized as a Jehovah’s Witness. But all through these years, she continually felt the Spirit convicting her of sinful rebellion.

Finally, as COVID hit, the Jehovah’s Witnesses quit gathering, and it gave Shelbi time to re-examine her life. She began to look into the Scripture more, and the more she read the Bible the more she was convicted of her sin. Consequently, she spoke to her husband, explained that she had to return to the Lord, had to base her beliefs off the Bible, and pointed out the error of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He told her that what she was saying meant that she would be shunned by everyone she has come to know and love in that community—including her in-laws and close friends she’s come to know over the last eight years.

Shelbi (whose last name is now Bond) reached out to Tom a few weeks back to let him know that she would be attending, and she wrote an email to the pastors this week, telling us that story and expressing her repentance. I’m going to share some of her words, picking up after noting that her husband told her she was to lose all of her family and close friends. She writes, “These are very painful things to hear my well-intentioned husband say, but nothing is more painful

¹ This quote is attributed to Alan Jones, former dean of Grace Cathedral. It is cited by Mark Seifrid in his 2 Corinthians commentary, p. 77.

than losing Jesus Christ in my life. I'm so thankful for God's mercy and grace on my life. I couldn't have done this of my own accord, and I'm in amazement that even after eight years of living my own sinful way with knowing biblical truth, God would draw me back to him. I'm thankful for what Jesus has done for me on the cross and through faith and repentance my sins are forgiven, even though I don't deserve it.

As mentioned, I repent of my sins to God, but I also want to openly ask all the members of Cornerstone for forgiveness. I'm truly sorry especially to the ones I've hurt when I turned my back on God and such a wonderful church family. I pray that you all can forgive me."

Now, I want to draw attention to the Lord's providence. I put together this sermon card in November of 2020, nearly four months ago. During that same year—perhaps in those very same moments—that I was putting together that sermon schedule, the Lord was working in Shelbi's heart to draw her back to himself. And so it was this past week that Shelbi sent this email—including the words that I just read in which she says, "I pray that you all can forgive me"—which was the very week that I was working on a sermon in which Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Turn to forgive and comfort him . . . I beg you to reaffirm your love for him," and I can't help but think the Lord isn't making very clear to us this morning that his message to us is, "Forgive and comfort Shelbi. Reaffirm your love for her, for she is my repentant child, and I do not want her overwhelmed by sorrow but to feel my grace and love and forgiveness through a family I've gathered for her at Cornerstone." Shelbi wants to pursue membership again, and we've talked to her about going through the membership class and doing that, but we didn't want her to have to wait in order to publicly her your declaration of forgiveness and love for her. So let us do that now as we prepare—with our dear sister—to come to the table. Amen.