

March 14, 2021

ASPECTS OF LOVING ONE ANOTHER

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

(3 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

We know 1 Corinthians 13 as the love chapter, and rightly so. It is a powerful picture of what love looks like. Preaching on that chapter a few years ago I came to appreciate all the more the picture of love it displays, and I have tried to return to it repeatedly in order to remind myself of all that love looks like. But as powerful as those words are, it can be equally as powerful to get a picture of the very author who wrote that chapter living it out, and that's what we get in 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4.

This letter is perhaps Paul's most pastoral, and I mean that in a couple of ways. First, it's pastoral in that he's reaching out through this letter to minister to a people who are tempted to dismiss him, and he engages their hearts in a very pastoral way. But another way it's pastoral is that Paul reveals his own heart *as a pastor*. And our text this morning lets us see Paul's heart for these people in a powerful way. He speaks of his joy and pain in dealing with them, how he wrote to them with tears streaming down his face, and of his "abundant love" for them. In other words, we get to see a picture of how Paul lives out what he speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13. We get to see what love looks like as it flows out of his heart toward these Corinthian believers.

And for us, once more, it's an opportunity for us to take this picture of love in all its many aspects that we will see here, and hold it up alongside ourselves to see if it is representative of our lives. And this is no small matter when we consider the importance of love in the life of the believer. All our responsibilities before the Lord revolve around love. It is the first fruit of the Spirit listed in Scripture. God's greatest and second greatest commandment to us involve us loving—him and our neighbor. And without it, nothing we do amounts to anything. Therefore, let's allow ourselves this morning to examine what Paul shows us about love in his own words and actions and then take steps to ensure that we're imitating that in our own lives. And first we see that love aims for the joy of others.

### **Love aims for the joy of others**

You've no doubt heard someone say, "I just want him/her to be happy." Sadly, that's often said when a parent won't correct a child or someone doesn't want to address what they know is a harmful practice in another's life. But what those moments reflect is not that it is wrong to pursue the happiness or joy of another. Rather, they show the tragedy in seeking merely shallow and fleeting happiness over substantive and lasting joy. Paul makes clear in our text that he seeks the joy of the Corinthians.

He begins our section by reiterating his integrity when he decided not to make a second visit to them as he first thought he would. He writes, "But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth" (1:23). Again, after his first visit had

been painful—probably requiring rebuke and meeting resistance among some of the Corinthians—Paul had decided not to come to them in person again. Instead, he wrote a letter, which he makes reference to in 2:3 (one of the letters that has been lost to history). But it's as if in the midst of writing that language of "sparing" them, he recognizes that he could suggest that he is lording over them, not recognizing them as responsible people themselves, and so he addresses that in the next verse, writing, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith." In other words, Paul recognizes that they must stand firm themselves, and he is unable to stand for them, and so instead of lording over, he is working with them to help enable them to stand well.

But what I want to point out is what Paul notes as his aim or goal in working with them. He says, "We work with you *for your joy*." Brothers and sisters, this is what love requires of us—that we work for the joy of another. If we secretly hope that another misses out on joy, we are not being loving. And if we want them to experience some kind of shallow, fleeting happiness that comes with sin instead of lasting, substantive, true joy found in knowing and loving God, then we are not being loving either. Love requires us to seek the joy of one another—realizing that the greatest joy we can know is walking in a loving, faith-filled, obedient relationship with the God who loves us and sent his Son for us. That's the first place love begins, and if we realize that we've been encouraging anyone in the name of love to seek something less than that, then let's use this morning as an opportunity to repent and then seek to love them properly.

Yet this point raises a question, doesn't it? How do I love someone who is actively walking in sin? And that leads us to our second point: love is willing to cause pain for the good of others.

### **Loving is willing to cause pain for the good of others**

One observation that can't be missed to this point in Paul's encounters with the Corinthians—whether in person or through letter—is that he has been willing to cause them pain. As Paul starts into describing again why he didn't make that second visit, he writes in 2:1, "For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you." The implication here is that in Paul's first visit, he *had* caused them pain. And though he didn't visit them a second time, he did write them a letter, and this too caused them pain. He'll make reference to this letter again in chapter 7, noting that his letter "made [them] grieve" (7:8).

So, the question is, why is Paul willing to make the Corinthians grieve or cause them pain if he claims that he is seeking their joy? And though we can guess the answer, Paul will make it explicit later in this letter, writing in 7:8-9, "For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting." The answer, of course, is that when someone is walking in sin, we must recognize that sin is not a pathway to joy but an obstacle to joy and therefore needs to be addressed. And when we address it, it can cause pain and grieving in the person who might want to hold to it so tightly.

We can see this most easily in very young children. Think of a toddler who has grabbed a fork and is crawling toward the electrical socket. You make eye contact, and the toddler smiles, perhaps never seeming happier than she is in this moment, and if you love that child, you're about to disrupt her happiness and cause pain, aren't you? Simply by taking away that fork, the child will go from smiling and laughing to screaming and crying. You've caused pain. You've caused grieving. Yet you know that love required you to cause that pain because you're seeking a joy for the toddler that the combination of that fork and electrical socket would disrupt. Again, we can see this clearly in our young children.

Sometimes, though we forget these same realities when they grow up. When your daughter who professes faith and seems to be working hard to obey Jesus faces years of loneliness, wondering why God has not brought some godly man into her life finally calls you with an excitement in her voice because she went out with this really great guy last night. He speaks kindly to her, shows her respect, and opens the door for her. The only problem isn't a believer. And in that moment, our hearts can deceive us, can't they? We might find ourselves getting more excited that there might be a reprieve from those years of loneliness than we are focused on what the Scripture requires.

What we need to see in those moments is that though it might seem different in a hundred ways, this is the same basic scenario that played out when you saw her years earlier crawling toward that electric socket with a fork in hand. The main difference is that you know the pain will be greater, won't it? I mean, in the toddler scenario, she'll shed some tears, that's for sure. But sometimes it only takes pointing her in the direction of another shiny toy for those tears to disappear. The pain you know you're going to cause when you answer her excited voice over the phone with the solemn reminder that she shouldn't go down this road of binding herself with an unbeliever could be met with more than brief tears. You may well hear despair in her voice that breaks your heart or might get an argument or her hanging up the phone or her claiming you don't love her—in more extreme cases. But love is willing to cause pain for the good of another, and causing pain is necessary when those whom we love are holding fast to or chasing after sin.

And let us remind ourselves in those moments that we are representing the Lord in the life of the person for whom we're causing pain. It is the Lord who tells us, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' . . . God is treating you as sons. . . . For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:5-11). As Paul models his own faithfulness after God's faithfulness (which we saw in 1:18), may we be willing to cause pain—if necessary—for the joy of another. God demonstrates that to us in his own actions toward us, and love requires no less.

Yet, there is a qualifier that we need to see here, namely, that love does not delight in causing pain in others.

**Love does not delight in causing pain in others**

This is probably the message most clearly seen in our text. Paul did not delight in causing the Corinthians' pain. It pained *him* to do so. In 1:23 and in 2:1 he tells them that he refrained from making another painful visit to them because he did not want to cause them pain, adding in 2:2, "For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?" In other words, when he caused pain to the Corinthians—by confronting them, rebuking them, and the like—it didn't cause him joy but pain. That's why he tells us he wrote to them. He didn't want to suffer the pain of causing them pain in a face-to-face confrontation. He writes in 2:3, "And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice." Then, he even tells them that when he wrote the letter—which he thought would be less painful for both of them than him visiting—he did it with tears streaming down his face. He writes in 2:4, "For 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 I have for you."

Sometimes there can be people we encounter in life that seem to enjoy rebuking. They live for the opportunity to confront others, seemingly unaffected by the pain it causes. Sometimes they may fashion themselves as proponents of truth or righteousness, but if we find pleasure and delight in causing a brother or sister pain, then we're simply not being loving. Love requires that we're willing to cause pain as we seek the joy of another, but love also requires that we do not delight in causing that pain.

Now, someone might counter that we shouldn't project from the pain that Paul felt in causing pain to the Corinthians onto ourselves as if we are demanded to mimic Paul in a situation that may have been very particular to him and his relationship with the Corinthians. However, I think that both in our willingness to cause pain (in our pursuit of joy for another) and the absence of delight in causing that pain, we're actually representing the very heart of God.

The clearest example of this comes from the book of Lamentations. Lamentations is a painful book, serving as a memorial of Judah's sin and of God's terrible judgment on his people at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC. And throughout the book the Lord makes clear that this judgment is the work of his hands. It's not that the Babylonians simply pulled a fast one over on the Lord who had every intent to protect his people from their attack. No, rather, it is the Lord using the Babylonians as a tool in his hand to bring judgment and discipline to a people who would not turn from their sin. And right in the very center of the book we read an amazing statement. But before we get to that statement, let me elaborate a bit on why it is important that this amazing statement happens in Lamentations 3:33.

You may well remember, since it wasn't that long ago that we studied through Lamentations, that the book is divided into five poems, represented in the five chapters of the book. The first two chapters and the last two chapters each are divided into twenty-two poetic verses. The middle chapter, on the other hand, is composed of sixty-six poetic verses. This is the author's way of drawing us to the center of the book as the high point or most emphasized part of his writing. This is the way Hebrew poetry works. If there is a balance in the structure, the author is drawing your attention to what he puts at the center of this intentional structure. And if that's

the case, then we might conclude that the very center of this center chapter is the greatest emphasis the author wants us to see. And that would be Lamentations 3:33. What does he say there? Let's back of a few verses just to get the context.

Here's what Lamentations 3:31-33 tells us: "For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; [and now here's verse 33] for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men." Now recognize the Lord is telling us that he is the one causing this grief. That's why he says, "Though he cause grief." But he also notes that we shouldn't see this as if God is getting his kicks out of causing grief. The literal translation of the word "willingly" is actually "from his heart." God is telling us that when he causes grief—which he is willing to do for our good—we shouldn't receive it as if he is delighting in causing us pain. He's not doing it from his heart.

In Dane Ortlund's excellent book, *Gentle and Lowly*, he notes about this verse: "[God] is not reluctant about the ultimate good that is going to be brought about through that pain; that indeed is why he is doing it. But something recoils within him in sending that affliction. The pain itself does not reflect his heart."<sup>1</sup> When he lavishes mercy and grace on us, it is certainly "from his heart," to use the language of Lamentations 3:33, but when he causes us pain—which he does, for our good—he wants us to know that the pain does not reflect his heart.

Therefore, when we imitate the apostle in feeling pain when we have to cause another pain and not delighting in the pain for pain's sake, we are not merely following Paul's example, we are reflecting the very heart and nature of our God. Love does not delight in causing pain in others. And finally Paul reveals a basis or foundation from which we find ourselves willing to pursue the joy of others, even through pain: love assumes the best of others.

### **Love assumes the best of others**

Notice how Paul speaks at the end of 2:3. He says, "For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all." Paul expresses the confidence he felt they would share in one another's joy. In other words, Paul was confident that the Corinthians would repent where necessary and would long for Paul to know the joy that he would find in their obedience. In the words of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is modeling for us what it means to hope all things and believe all things. Love assumes the best of others. And this provides for us strength and hope when we do have to cause another pain as we seek their joy.

In other words, if I say to myself, "I'm not going to go to my brother because he's not going to repent," that is an unloving posture to take toward your brother. Love assumes the best of others. We approach others with confidence, assuming they have the same heart and Spirit within them that Christ has given us. And I would add that we would do well to express that confidence to them if indeed we have to have a painful interaction. We might say something

---

<sup>1</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 138.

like, "I know you want to obey the Lord, and so I just want to come alongside you and help you because I want you to know much greater joy that is found in sin." And if we can say that with genuine tears in our eyes, we will picture the apostle and more importantly the heart of our Lord. And we will never get a clearer picture of the heart of our Lord than when we remember his life, death, and resurrection for us. Therefore, let us fix our eyes on him and pray for strength to love in the manner we see here as we come to the table. Amen.