

Purity, Love & Unity in the Body

2 Corinthians 2:1-11

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For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 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, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 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 that I have for you.

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. Indeed, 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. – 2 Corinthians 2:1-11, ESV

The Painful Reality of Serious Sin in the Life of the Church

Today's passage presents us with a difficult topic. It reminds me of one of the reasons I believe in preaching through books of the Bible: When you preach through whole books of the Bible, verse-by-verse, section-by-section, you can't avoid difficult topics and passages you would rather just skip. Sometimes being a person with strong convictions is inconvenient, though, when you'd honestly rather talk about something else.

Today's passage deals with the necessary but ugly topic of sin in the church and the need for proper church discipline. Church discipline is about as difficult a topic as you can handle these days, and it reminds me of one of my favorite quotes on difficult issues, from a Presbyterian pastor and author, Steve Brown, who said, "Never go to someone about a difficult matter unless they first agree that it is a difficult matter." So, I'm going to agree right up front that church discipline is a very difficult matter, and I hope you will agree, too.

One way to see the difficulty of church discipline is to look at the stories of people who have been hurt by or deeply disappointed in the church. Very often it comes down to one if two issues:

1. Church leaders were engaged in serious sin – adultery, abuse, financial impropriety – and nothing was done about it.
2. Someone was stuck in a difficult life situation – dealing with marriage troubles, maybe some addiction, etc. – and they went to the church for help and got judgment and condemnation instead.

You've probably heard these stories or maybe even lived one yourself. It would be too easy to say that one kind of church doesn't take sin seriously enough and the other kind of church takes sin too seriously. I think that's reductionistic and misses the difficulty of loving people well, which includes helping them overcome the devastating effects of sin in their lives.

So, some of you might be thinking: Church discipline? Why would the church discipline anyone? But the reality is that serious sin in the life of a church can have devastating and far-reaching consequences, and churches that fail to deal with sin issues that arise within the life of the church are ultimately failing to both honor Christ as the Lord of the church and also failing to love the members of the church which the church is called to love and care for.

So, God has given us a great model in the Apostle Paul and how he handled sin in the Corinthian church.

Paul's Response to Sin in the Church: Pain, vv.1-4

First of all, we see in the first four verses of chapter 2 how Paul initially responded to serious sin in the Corinthian church. It caused him pain and made his heart ache and break for the church and for those involved:

For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 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, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 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 that I have for you.

Paul had made a painful visit and had written a painful letter, not out of a desire to cause pain, but in loving acknowledgement of the pain this serious sin had caused in the church at Corinth. Now, we don't know for sure exactly what the sin issue was or who was guilty, but my own thinking is that this is connected to the man Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians who was sleeping with his step-mother.

Turn back with me to 1 Corinthians 5, and I'm going to take a brief look at this whole chapter, because I think it is helpful background for what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians:

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. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Now, as I said, we don't know for sure that the sexually immoral man from 1 Corinthians 5 is the same as the disciplined and now repentant man from 2 Corinthians 2, but I think both passages are referring to the same man and the same sexual immorality. Otherwise, we would not know what happened with the man from 1 Corinthians 5, and we would have no idea what situation Paul is addressing in 2 Corinthians 2. Instead, I think God has given us the whole story in two parts so we can see both the seriousness of the problem and the effectiveness of the loving discipline applied to the situation.

Churches are rightly condemned as hypocritical when they loudly condemn the sexual immorality in the world and then they tolerate or cover it up inside the church. The Corinthians were boasting of their open-mindedness and their so-called freedom in Christ as they tolerated this immoral man in their midst. He seemed to have been a person of leadership and influence, too, and Paul asks them to purge him from their midst, exclude him from the fellowship. But as firm and clear as Paul was in 1 Corinthians 5, notice also that, even at this point, he was concerned for the man's salvation. He tells the Corinthians to excommunicate the man *“so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”*

One thing our culture does not seem to know or understand is the concept of repentance and true forgiveness. Instead, we have embraced a cancel culture that says that we are tolerant and celebratory of differences, but if you cross the line and do or say something our culture condemns, then you are cancelled, relegated to a non-person status, vilified, and condemned, period. No repentance. No forgiveness.

Paul's Desire for the Church: Obedient to Christ, vv. 9-10

Paul's Primary Concern: Christ & His Kingdom, vv. 10-11