

The Book of 2 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Forgiveness and the Aroma of Christ

2 Corinthians 2:1-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Second Corinthians 2 weaves together two great concerns that are more connected than they first appear: the practical work of forgiveness within the body of Christ, and the weighty nature of the gospel that body carries into the world. Doctrinally, the teacher should be ready to handle several things clearly. Church discipline is presented here as restorative, aimed at reclaiming the offender, not destroying him, which corrects both a harsh, punitive spirit and a permissive refusal to address sin at all. Unforgiveness is presented as a genuine spiritual danger, a foothold for Satan. And in verses 15 and 16 Paul sets out the sobering reality of two destinies, those who are being saved and those who are perishing, with the gospel itself as the dividing line.

At the same time, every one of these truths is aimed squarely at the heart and life of the student. Paul is not lecturing about forgiveness in the abstract. He is pleading with real people to actually forgive a real man. The teacher's task is to let that pressure land. Most students are carrying some wound, some withheld forgiveness, some bitterness they have grown comfortable nursing. This chapter calls them to lay it down, both for their own freedom and for the health of the church. And the image of the aroma of Christ calls them to a sober awareness that their lives are carrying the scent of Christ, for better or worse, into every room they enter.

So aim at both targets. Help students understand the restorative purpose of discipline, the spiritual seriousness of unforgiveness, and the eternal weight of the gospel. And press them toward becoming forgiving, reconciling people whose lives are a true and sincere fragrance of Christ in the world.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says he wrote his painful letter "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears," and "to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (vv. 4). What does this passage teach us about the relationship between love and loving correction, and why is genuine love sometimes willing to cause temporary pain?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students feel how much Paul's hard letter cost him. He did not fire it off in irritation. He wrote "with many tears." This is the opposite of the critic who enjoys pointing out faults. Paul corrected the Corinthians because he loved them, and the correction hurt him as much as it hurt them.

This is a crucial truth for the Christian life. Love and correction are not opposites. In fact, the refusal to ever speak a hard word can be a failure of love, a willingness to let someone we care about keep walking toward a cliff because confronting them is uncomfortable for us. Real love is willing to risk the relationship for the good of the person.

Point students to the pattern of God Himself, who disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6). Loving correction is not harshness. It is the proof that someone cares enough about us to want us whole. The world often defines love as endless affirmation. Scripture defines it as seeking another's true good, even when that requires a painful word.

Underline the spirit in which Paul wrote: anguish, tears, and a desire that they know his abundant love. The tone matters as much as the content. A hard truth delivered with contempt wounds. The same truth delivered with tears can heal.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The compatibility of love and loving correction (Hebrews 12:6; Proverbs 27:6)
- The danger of a false peace that avoids all confrontation
- The right spirit for correction, marked by grief and love rather than anger or superiority
- Truth and love held together, not played against each other (Ephesians 4:15)

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we so often treat love and correction as opposites?
- What is the difference between correcting someone in love and simply criticizing them?
- How does the spirit in which a hard word is spoken change the way it lands?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think of a relationship where you have avoided a hard but necessary conversation. What fear has kept you silent, and how might true love for that person call you to speak the truth gently rather than to keep an uneasy peace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to locate a real relationship where they have chosen an uneasy silence over a loving conversation. Most of us can think of one quickly: a friend drifting into something destructive, a family member we have stopped being honest with, a fellow Christian whose conduct concerns us.

Help students name the fear behind the silence. Often it is the fear of conflict, or of being disliked, or of being told to mind our own business. Sometimes it is humility misapplied, a sense that we have no right to speak. Naming the fear honestly is the first step toward acting in love.

Be careful to distinguish loving honesty from nitpicking. The goal is not to become fault-finders, but to refuse to let cowardice masquerade as kindness. Galatians 6:1 gives the posture: restore gently, watching ourselves. The aim is the other person's good, approached with humility.

Encourage one concrete, prayerful step. This is not a call to go unload every grievance, but to consider whether love is asking for a conversation we have been avoiding, and to begin with prayer for the person and for our own heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's responsibility toward a brother or sister walking in error (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19–20)
- Discernment between loving honesty and a critical, fault-finding spirit
- Courage as an expression of love rather than self-protection
- The role of prayer and humility in approaching a hard conversation

Discussion Prompts

- What fear most often keeps you from a hard but loving conversation?
- How can you tell the difference between speaking the truth in love and simply criticizing?
- What would a humble, prayerful first step look like in a situation you are facing?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul instructs the church to “forgive and comfort” the repentant offender and to “reaffirm your love for him” so that he is not overwhelmed by sorrow (vv. 7–8). What does this teach about the true goal of church discipline, and how is biblical correction always aimed at restoration rather than mere punishment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul reveals the true goal of church discipline. The man had sinned, the church had acted, and he had repented. Now Paul is urgent that they “forgive and comfort him” and “reaffirm your love for him,” lest he be swallowed up by excessive sorrow. Discipline was never about punishment for its own sake. It was about reclaiming a brother.

Help students see the full arc of biblical correction: it confronts sin, it seeks repentance, and when repentance comes, it restores. A church that knows how to confront but not how to welcome back has only learned half of what Scripture teaches. Both halves are acts of love.

This guards against two errors. One is a permissiveness that never addresses sin at all, leaving people in harm's way. The other is a harshness that, even after repentance, keeps the offender at arm's length, treating discipline as permanent exile. Paul rejects both. The shepherd's heart wants the wandering sheep brought home.

Point to the joy of heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15). The church on earth is meant to mirror that joy. When someone turns back, the right response is not suspicion but celebration, comfort, and a clear, warm reaffirmation of love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restoration, not punishment, as the goal of biblical church discipline
- The full arc of correction: confront sin, seek repentance, restore the repentant
- The twin errors of permissiveness and unrelenting harshness
- The church's call to mirror heaven's joy over the repentant (Luke 15:7)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is welcoming a repentant person back just as important as confronting sin in the first place?
- What happens to a church that learns to confront but never to restore?
- How can we make repentance and return feel like a homecoming rather than a probation?

Question 4

Student Question:

Is there someone who has wronged you, perhaps even repented, whom you have not fully welcomed back in your heart? What would it look like to "reaffirm your love" for that person in a concrete way, and what is holding you back from doing so?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the spotlight inward. It is one thing to affirm that the church should restore the repentant. It is another to admit that we ourselves may be holding someone at a distance in our heart even after they have turned back.

Help students see that forgiveness is not merely a feeling but a decision and an action. We may not be able to summon warm emotions on command, but we can choose to release the debt, to stop rehearsing the offense, and to take concrete steps of welcome. Often the feelings follow the obedient action.

Press gently toward the concrete. What would reaffirming love actually look like? A conversation, an invitation, a willingness to work alongside the person again, a refusal to bring up the old wound. Forgiveness becomes real when it takes a visible form.

Name the cost honestly. Forgiveness feels like absorbing a loss, because it is. But remind students that this is precisely the shape of the cross. We forgive as we have been forgiven, and in doing so we are never more like our Lord than when we release someone who has wronged us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness as a decision and action, not merely a feeling
- Forgiving others as a reflection of having been forgiven by God (Matthew 18:21–35)
- The costliness of forgiveness, mirroring the cross
- Concrete reaffirmation of love as the proof of genuine forgiveness

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling forgiving and choosing to forgive?
- What concrete act of reaffirmed love could you offer someone you have held at a distance?
- How does remembering your own forgiveness in Christ help you forgive others?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says he forgives “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (vv. 10–11). How does unforgiveness give the devil an opening in a person’s life and in a congregation, and what does this teach us about how seriously God takes the refusal to forgive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul gives a startling reason for forgiveness: “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.” Unforgiveness is not a small, private matter. It is a doorway the enemy loves to use, both in individual hearts and in whole congregations.

Help students see how this works. Bitterness held over time hardens into resentment, then into division. A single unforgiven offense can split friendships, families, and churches. Satan does not always tempt with obvious vice. Often he simply waits beside a wound we refuse to let God heal.

This raises the stakes on forgiveness. It is not optional spiritual advice. Jesus taught us to pray for forgiveness as we forgive others, and warned that the unforgiving will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:14–15). To refuse forgiveness is to step onto the enemy’s ground.

Encourage students that the way to shut this door is not to minimize the wrong, but to hand it over to God, trusting Him to be the just judge (Romans 12:19), so that we are freed from the corrosive work of carrying it ourselves. Forgiveness is, in part, an act of self-defense against the devil’s schemes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unforgiveness as a foothold for Satan in individuals and congregations
- The connection between bitterness and division in the body (Hebrews 12:15)
- The seriousness of forgiveness in Jesus’ teaching (Matthew 6:14–15)

- Entrusting justice to God rather than carrying vengeance ourselves (Romans 12:19)

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen unforgiveness give the enemy an opening in a person or a church?
- Why does Jesus tie our being forgiven so closely to our forgiving others?
- What does it look like to hand a wrong over to God rather than keep carrying it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Be honest about any bitterness you are carrying. Is there a resentment you have been nursing, replaying an old wound, keeping a private record of wrongs? What would it cost you to lay it down, and what might it cost you to keep holding it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the searching, personal counterpart to the previous question. It asks students to name, honestly, any bitterness they are nursing. The word “nursing” is deliberate. Resentment is something we feed, replaying the offense, rehearsing our case, keeping the wound fresh.

Help students see the hidden logic of holding a grudge. It can feel like power, like justice, like protecting ourselves from being hurt again. In reality it chains us to the person who wronged us and slowly poisons our own soul. The one who refuses to forgive often suffers more than the offender.

Offer a realistic path. Forgiveness of a deep wound is often not a single act but a daily one, releasing the offense again each time it resurfaces. Encourage students to bring the specific resentment to God in prayer, to ask for His help to release it, and perhaps to seek the counsel of an elder or mature believer for wounds that are especially deep.

Hold out the freedom on the other side. Jesus does not call us to forgive merely as a duty, but as a release. To lay down a grudge is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The self-destructive nature of harbored bitterness
- Forgiveness as an ongoing practice, not always a single event
- The freedom that comes from releasing a wrong to God
- The wisdom of seeking godly counsel for deep wounds

Discussion Prompts

- What does it cost a person, over time, to keep nursing a resentment?
- Why does forgiveness often have to be repeated rather than done once?

- What is one wound you could begin to release to God this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

At Troas, Paul found “a door was opened for me in the Lord,” yet he had no peace because Titus was missing, and then he bursts into thanks that God “in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession” (vv. 12–14). What does this teach about how God leads His people in Christ’s victory even when our circumstances are unsettled and our hearts are anxious?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question highlights a very human moment. God had opened a door for the gospel at Troas, a real opportunity, yet Paul could find no rest because Titus had not arrived with news from Corinth. His heart was too anxious to seize even an open door, so he moved on to Macedonia to find him.

Then comes the sudden burst of praise: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.” The image is of a Roman general’s victory parade. Paul pictures himself as one led along in Christ’s triumph. Even in his restlessness and uncertainty, he was not wandering. He was being led, and led in victory.

Help students hold both halves together. Paul does not pretend he had perfect peace. He admits his anxiety. But over and through that anxiety he affirms a deeper truth: God was leading him the whole time, and the outcome was Christ’s victory, not Paul’s competence. Our circumstances can be unsettled while God’s leading remains sure.

This is enormously freeing. We do not have to manufacture serenity to be in God’s hands. Even our anxious, door-leaving, friend-seeking detours are folded into a procession that is already triumphant because of Christ. The victory does not depend on our feeling victorious.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s sovereign leading of His people even through unsettled circumstances
- The triumph of Christ as the assured outcome of the believer’s path
- Honest anxiety as compatible with real trust
- The difference between resting in God’s leading and resting in our own competence

Discussion Prompts

- When have you been too anxious to seize an opportunity right in front of you?
- What does it mean that God leads us in Christ’s triumph even when we feel unsettled?
- How does this truth free us from having to feel calm before we can trust God?

Question 8

Student Question:

When have you felt pulled between an opportunity in front of you and a worry weighing on your heart? How might trusting that God is leading you “in triumphal procession” change the way you carry your anxieties this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the truth of God’s leading into the student’s real anxieties. We are often pulled in two directions at once, an opportunity before us and a worry weighing on us, and the worry can swallow the opportunity whole.

Help students name a specific instance. Perhaps a chance to serve, to witness, to step forward, that they let slip because their minds were elsewhere. The point is not guilt but recognition of how anxiety can rob us of the present.

Offer the remedy Paul models: not the denial of anxiety, but the deliberate turn to thanksgiving and trust. He says “thanks be to God, who always leads us.” Gratitude reorients the anxious heart by reminding it who is actually in charge of the procession.

Encourage one practical habit for the week, perhaps pausing to give thanks when worry rises, or naming aloud that God is leading even in the uncertainty. The goal is to carry anxieties differently, holding them in the hands of a God who is leading us in triumph.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Casting anxieties on God rather than being ruled by them (Philippians 4:6–7)
- Thanksgiving as a means of reorienting the anxious heart
- Trust in God’s leading as the antidote to paralysis
- Living in the present as those being led by a sovereign Lord

Discussion Prompts

- What opportunity have you missed because worry had your attention?
- How can thanksgiving actually change the way you carry anxiety?
- What is one practical habit that could help you trust God’s leading this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Paul says believers are “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing,” a fragrance “from death to death” for some and “from life to life” for others (vv. 15–16). What does this teach about the gospel, the two ways people respond to it, and the eternal seriousness of how a person answers the message of Christ? Why does Paul

immediately add that we must not be “peddlers of God’s word” but speak “with sincerity” (v. 17)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the chapter, and it deserves careful, weighty handling. Paul says that through his ministry God spreads “the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere,” and that believers are “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” The same gospel, the same fragrance, produces opposite results depending on the response of the hearer.

Draw out the sobering reality of two destinies. Paul names them plainly: those “being saved” and those “perishing.” The gospel is not a neutral piece of information that people can take or leave without consequence. It is the dividing line of human destiny. To the one, the message of Christ smells like life leading to life. To the other, who rejects it, the same message becomes a savor of death leading to death. There is no third category here.

This is where the teacher should connect the seriousness of the response to the gospel with how Scripture says a person actually receives Christ. The gospel calls for a real answer: hearing the message, believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing Him, and being baptized into Him (Acts 2:36–38; Romans 6:3–4). To be among those “being saved” is to have answered that call and to continue walking in it. To be among those “perishing” is to have refused or neglected it. The eternal weight of these two outcomes should make both teacher and students take the gospel, and people’s response to it, with the utmost seriousness.

Notice why Paul immediately cries, “Who is sufficient for these things?” The stakes are so high that no mere human eloquence is adequate. That is exactly why he refuses to be a peddler of God’s word. In verse 17 he contrasts himself with the many who, like merchants watering down their wine, corrupt the message for profit or popularity. Paul speaks “with sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God.” Because the gospel carries eternal destinies, it must never be cheapened, softened, or sold.

Bring it home to the students. We are all carrying this aroma. The way we live and speak makes the gospel either attractive or repellent to those watching. And we are all tempted, in small ways, to peddle, to trim the hard edges of the message to make it more palatable, to keep quiet about repentance or the cross to avoid offense. Paul calls us to a costly sincerity, trusting God to make our faithful witness a fragrance of life to all who will receive it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as the dividing line of human destiny, producing life or death depending on the response
- The two and only two outcomes Paul names: being saved or perishing

- The biblical response to the gospel: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:36–38; Romans 6:3–4)
- Salvation as a present and continuing reality for those who walk in obedient faith
- The refusal to peddle or water down God’s word for profit or popularity (v. 17)
- The believer’s life and witness as the aroma of Christ to a watching world

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the same gospel can be a fragrance of life to one person and of death to another?
- How should the eternal seriousness of the two destinies shape the way we share Christ?
- What does it look like, in everyday life, to resist the temptation to water down the message?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole passage, the costly love, the call to forgive, the warning about Satan, the aroma of Christ. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through it. What is the single change He is inviting you to make, and what is your first step this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole chapter and asks for one specific, nameable change. Help students resist staying general. The chapter has pressed on costly love, forgiveness, the schemes of Satan, trusting God’s leading, and carrying the aroma of Christ.

Invite each student to discern which of these the Spirit is pressing on most directly. For one it may be a relationship that needs a hard, loving word. For another it may be a grudge that needs to be released. For another it may be a fresh seriousness about being a true and sincere witness for Christ.

Ask them to name both the change and the first step. The change is the inward turn; the step is the concrete thing they will do this week, a conversation, an act of forgiveness, a moment of honest witness.

Close by reminding them of the aim. We are not collecting facts about 2 Corinthians. We are being made, by the Spirit, into people who forgive as we have been forgiven and who carry the fragrance of Christ wherever we go. That is the disciple this chapter is forming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual formation, not mere information, as the goal of study
- The Spirit’s work in conforming us to Christ’s forgiving, sincere character
- Obedience as the proof that truth has taken root (James 1:22)
- The Christian life as a continual becoming, an ongoing transformation

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this chapter is the Spirit pressing on you most directly?
- What single change is Jesus inviting you to make?
- What is your first concrete step toward it this week?