

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 2: Forgiveness and the Aroma of Christ -- 2 Corinthians 2:1-17

There are letters that are hard to write because we do not know what to say, and there are letters that are hard to write because we know exactly what to say and it will cost us something to say it. Paul's previous letter to Corinth had been the second kind. He tells us here that he wrote it "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears." He had to say hard things to people he loved, and saying them tore him up inside. He did not write to wound them. He wrote, he says, "to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." Sometimes the most loving thing a person can do is also the most painful, and only love would be willing to pay that price.

The chapter opens a window onto a delicate situation. There had been an offender in the church, someone whose sin had caused real grief to the whole congregation. The church had finally dealt with it, and the man had repented. Now Paul writes with a surprising urgency, not to pile on more punishment, but to make sure the church forgives him, comforts him, and reaffirms its love, so that he is not "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." The goal of discipline was never destruction. It was always restoration. And Paul warns that if they fail to forgive, they will hand Satan an opening, "for we are not ignorant of his designs."

Then the chapter lifts into one of the most beautiful images in all of Paul's writing. He pictures God leading His people in a triumphal procession in Christ, and through them spreading everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of God. We are, he says, "the aroma of Christ" in the world. To some that fragrance smells like life, and to others like death, depending on how they respond to the One it carries. It is a sobering and weighty thought, that the way we live and speak carries the very scent of Christ into the rooms we enter.

This chapter asks us to take two things seriously that we are often tempted to take lightly. The first is forgiveness, the hard, costly, freeing work of releasing those who have wronged us and welcoming the repentant home. The second is the weight of the gospel we carry, a message of life and death that is never to be peddled or watered down, but spoken with sincerity, "as commissioned by God, in the sight of God." Read these verses and ask the Lord to make you both a more forgiving person and a truer carrier of the aroma of Christ.

Group Discussion: Paul urges the church to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm its love for a repentant offender so that he is not "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow," and he warns that failing to forgive lets Satan gain an advantage (vv. 7-11). Why is forgiveness so often the hardest thing for a wronged person or a hurt church to extend, and what damage does unforgiveness do, both to the one who withholds it and to the wider body of Christ?

Personal Reflection: Paul says he wrote his hard letter "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears," not to grieve the Corinthians but to show them his love (v. 4). Is

there a hard but loving word you have been avoiding speaking to someone, or a hard word someone once spoke to you that you have resisted receiving? What holds you back, and what might love actually require?

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-17

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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)?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 18:15–17, the goal of restoring a brother who sins; Ephesians 4:31–32, putting away bitterness and forgiving as God in Christ forgave us; Luke 15:17–24, the father who runs to welcome the repentant son home; Colossians 3:12–14, compassion and forgiveness as the clothing of God's people; 2 Corinthians 4:3–4, the gospel veiled to those who are perishing