

Godly Sorrow and True Repentance

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

Today we get to the end of a long section we've been studying in which Paul has been defending and describing his ministry as an Apostle and messenger of God to the Corinthians in order to combat the false messages being spread about him by the false teachers trying to infiltrate the church and lead them astray. In chapter 7 he now returns to the story of his recent travels he had been describing back in chapter 2.

He had been telling them how after sending Titus to Corinth to see how they were doing, he and his team went the other way and were making a loop from Ephesus to minister to churches in Asia and Macedonia before ending up in Corinth. They got to Troas where it appears they were expecting to meet Titus but he wasn't there and they were worried. So they left and continued their loop into Macedonia hoping to find him there. We pick up that story again, now in chapter 7, and in this chapter Paul will be describing his relief and joy upon reuniting with Titus and hearing a good report from Corinth.

Paul was concerned because his most recent interactions with them had been very difficult. While in Ephesus he heard some alarming news, probably about one of his opponents who was still in the church in Corinth and stirring up problems for Paul. He made an emergency visit to deal with the situation, but the church wasn't supportive at all. They didn't remove the person, which was very hurtful, and instead of coming down hard on them right there and then, Paul left, went back to Ephesus and sent them a severe letter. That was the last he heard of them and why he was anxious to see Titus and hear a report on how they were doing.

There are several different ideas in this chapter, but the main one has to do with the remorse he heard about in the people in Corinth. One of the things we experience in life is the sting of consequences when it comes to temptation and sin. When we give in and do something we know is wrong, we often face consequences that can be really unpleasant. It might be the feelings of guilt and shame and self-loathing that well up after we've done something. We feel bad and we chastise ourselves for our behavior – “Why did I do that?!”

Or consequences might be more tangible. We might harm ourselves or property or someone else in a fit of rage, and when it's over we have to pick up the pieces. We damage our reputation, our credit score and people's trust. We might wreck a car or get a ticket or fine or even end up in jail. We might lose money, or friendship, or create tension between you and a loved one. Your girlfriend might break up with you or your spouse might file for divorce. There are all kinds of painful consequences when we turn against God and disobey him and those consequences lead to sorrow and grief. Everyone feels bad when they go through those things.

This morning I want us to think about those feelings and what they mean. Do they mean you're a good Christian? As long as you're sorry and feel bad and regret what you've done, is that a good sign? Does that mean God is pleased? If you call yourself a bad name and admit how bad you screwed up, is that what God wants? Should sorrow for sin give you assurance you're right with God? Paul will make this very clear in our passage this morning and some of us may need to hear it.

Paul begins with a final appeal for the Corinthian believers to trust him and fully partner with him again. Several were already there, but some must have been holding back, so as he ends this section of defending his ministry, he makes his final appeal...

2 Corinthians 7:2-4

²Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

This is one of the strongest expressions of affection and longing for a group of believers that Paul makes in his letters. He was very zealous for the church in Corinth and it was agonizing to him when they faced the threat of veering away into false teaching. So he's very bold here, expressing his love and commitment and urging their trust, affection, and partnership with him. He's like a father to them.

When you spend so much time with someone like Paul did, and have that much vested interest, you are eager to see them remain true to the gospel and your leadership. And you are relieved when you find out they're staying true. Paul felt that kind of relief when Titus finally showed up and he talks about that in the next paragraph. So this is what brings us back to where he left off in chapter 2...

2 Corinthians 7:5-9

⁵For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. ⁶But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸For 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. ⁹As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

Paul was having a really hard time in Macedonia, struggling with anxiousness and discouragement, but then Titus showed up with news from Corinth and it was a great report. When the church received Paul's letter, they felt deep remorse. But notice in Vs. 9 it didn't end there – they were grieved into repenting. They took action, they removed his opponent and were filled with longing, mourning, and zeal for Paul. It wasn't just that they were grieved, but they were grieved into repenting – that was key and that's what brought relief for Paul.

He says it was hard for him to send his severe letter because he didn't want to make them grieve, but he also knew that it was necessary to lead them to repentance. So when Titus brought word that that's what had happened, Paul rejoiced. He could see that they had experienced a grief that was godly, which was very important, and he writes more about that next. Notice what this kind of grief looks like and what it leads to. Compare it to how you respond when you feel the painful consequences of sin.

2 Corinthians 7:10-13a

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. 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. ¹² So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. ¹³ Therefore we are comforted.

So godly grief was very different than worldly grief. Godly grief produced repentance that led to salvation, worldly grief produced death. That's a big difference and makes it very important that we know the difference and don't settle for worldly grief. Sometimes people mistake grief for repentance. "If I feel bad about my sin, that's repentance." Remorse is not repentance! Remorse is just remorse and repentance is what has to happen next in the life of a believer.

I've had people come into my office broken and sorrowful because of sinful choices they've made and the consequences they're going through. The pain makes them want to get right with God, and that's great. But there are many times when nothing happens after that. I had one guy come in ready to turn back to God because he thought he got his girlfriend pregnant and was overwhelmed. I prayed with him and told him I'd meet with him to help him grow in his faith. He agreed and left my office and found out his girlfriend wasn't really pregnant, and I never saw him again.

That's the kind of grief that produces death. But godly grief produces repentance. It's when Paul saw that in the church in Corinth that he felt relief. In their case, not only did they feel grief, but that grief produced earnestness and eagerness to clear themselves. It produced indignation, fear, longing, zeal, punishment. It produced follow through and action and didn't just end in feelings. They had proven themselves to be righteous and innocent when it came to dealing with Paul's opponent. And that brought great comfort to Paul. The letter he sent to rebuke them revealed their true devotion to Paul in the sight of God.

That's the kind of grief, or sorrow, or remorse for sin that is pleasing to God. It wasn't just grief, it was grief that produced repentance. That's the kind of remorse we're looking for and need to strive for when we feel the consequences of our sin.

Paul ends this chapter with more praise for the Corinthian church...

2 Corinthians 7:13b-16.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. ¹⁴For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

So I don't know if this is stirring anything up in you... But let's not be satisfied with just feelings of remorse when it comes to the consequences for our sin. Remorse and confession are part of the process, but they aren't the end! There needs to be repentance, change, something needs to be different. That fruit is the evidence that the Holy Spirit is alive in you.

There are times where it's easy for me to be content with just feeling bad about my sin, but God is calling out for more. He's expecting more. Not because I have to be stronger or better to be to meet his approval, but because he's put his Spirit in me and that Spirit is always leading me to become more like Christ.