

Text: 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Title: The Obedience of Forgiveness

Truth: The church must forgive and receive repentant sinners.

Date/Location: Sunday 11/16/2025 at FBC (rev. from 9/25/2005)

Introduction and Background

In the previous section of 2 Corinthians, we learned that Paul did not come to Corinth so as to spare them disciplinary action. He wrote a letter instead to straighten out the church situation, and so that they would recognize his love for them. He did not write to make them sad, but to achieve a corrective in which they could take joy. In 2:9 he says that he wrote in order to test their obedience.

But this raises the question as to what exactly they were to be obedient about? The present passage sheds light on that very subject (in addition to chapter 7, which picks up after a long digression).

From what 2 Corinthians says, it can be pieced together that the so-called “severe” letter purposed to sway the Corinthians to exercise the necessary discipline toward the one “who had done the wrong” (2 Cor. 7:12). They had not done this up to the point of receiving the severe letter, but we learn now that when they received it, they repented and removed the unrepentant troublemaker, as Paul commanded.

The precise nature of the sin is not known from what we can see in this letter. Some say that it is the incestuous relationship of 1 Cor. 5. But the sin here seems to involve Paul personally which that one does not (7:12, “the sake of him who suffered wrong,” that is, Paul; 2:5 “he has not grieved me;” and 2:10, “if I have forgiven anything.”) It is more likely that this individual was kind of a “mutineer” who rejected the authority of the apostle Paul. He refused to acknowledge him as appropriate for his office. This caused a division within the church. Whatever the nature of the sin itself that precipitated the whole chain of events, it is clear that the church was not properly handling the problem. They needed to repent of their ways and do what they were directed to do, i.e.,

discipline the individual to remove him with the hopes that he would turn away from his bad attitude.

It is apparent from 2 Corinthians that they had corrected the situation after receiving the severe letter. In the meantime, the offender has repented (2:6-7). Now what? Well, the next step is to receive him back into the church (2:7-8). Paul directs the church to do so in the passage we are studying.

But this requires...forgiveness. There had been a division in the church.

1. Sin Affects the Whole Church, v. 5

A. What Paul points out here is that the sin has not impacted Paul so much as it has the entire church. Paul may have been greatly insulted or offended, but you can sense that he is minimizing the effect that the incident has had on him. He is not out for vengeance. He does not want this to become too personal because that could hinder the progress of restoration.

This gives us a clue that the sin involved the man opposing Paul's directives for the church and perhaps Paul's entire ministry. This caused division in the church, which was unacceptable.

B. The qualifying phrase regarding not overcharging or being too severe has to do with the fact that Paul is trying to say, "the insult didn't hurt me too much, though it did hurt you, but I don't want to exaggerate the case too much or make too big a deal about it."

C. Other passages in the Bible make it clear that sin affects the church, not just the individual. Consider 1 Cor. 5:6-8 and Rev. 2:12-29 as well as the illustration of Achan in Joshua 7. And so, we can say with certainty that we are not islands unto ourselves, but our sin does affect the body. Certainly, some sins are more public than others, and they need to be dealt with at their level of outgrowth.

2. Unrepentant Sin Calls for the Majority to Act, v. 6

A. When someone is walking in sin, causing division in the church, the Lord calls on the church to act decisively to call the person to change their conduct, and if the person does not, to remove them

from the fellowship. This is a sad and difficult circumstance, but in this sin-cursed world it is necessary.

- B. In this case, the church has followed Paul's instruction in the sorrowful letter and carried out its responsibility. Paul called it *punishment*. That is a strong word, but that is kind of what it is! The Greek word can mean to express strong disapproval, to rebuke, censure, or warn. The word "censure" is a good word, but it means more than a formality, more than a slap on the wrist. It is God's church telling a professing child of God that he is out of line and needs to straighten up.
- C. It turned out that the censure resulted in the offender's repentance, so it was sufficient. This meant that the church disciplinary action was over, and the next steps need to unfold.
- D. The method of discipline is by majority consensus of the local assembly ("inflicted of many" or "inflicted by the majority"). It is not the act of one man in the church. 3 John 9-10 gives an example in which a single individual, Diotrephes, was putting people out of the church. He cherished the place of power in the church. This is not the Christian way.
- E. You might ask, "What are the subjects of church discipline?" The answer is members of the church (note the "inside" and "outside" distinction in 1 Cor. 5:12-13). Erring believers sometimes need correction (2 Thess. 3, particularly verses 6, 14-15; Matthew 18:17).

3. After Repentance, Full Restoration Must Happen, v. 7-8

- A. Restoration of full fellowship is the goal of disciplinary action. Discipline is not merely punitive. See Matt. 18:15 ("gained your brother") and 1 Cor. 5:5 ("that his spirit may be saved") and Gal. 6:1 ("restore...in the spirit of meekness").
- B. Reading between the lines, we know that the brother expressed repentance over the sin, so now the church must reciprocate. This is not an optional part of the process. The discipline was public (1 Cor. 5:4, "when you are gathered together") then the restoration must be also public. There are three actions that the church is to demonstrate, followed by a reason:

1. Forgiveness. As Christians, we are to be ready to forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ (Ephesians 4:32). Immediately upon the repentance of the offender, the church must forgive the offender. We practice this in the home and in personal relationships, and we must also do so in the church.
 2. Comfort. The offender must not only be forgiven, but must be comforted, encouraged, and assured of the fact that he is back in the good graces of the church.
 3. Love. Yes, that is LOVE, to be exercised genuinely toward the offending brother. Actually, it is not that the distance created by the discipline reflects a lack of love—it should be just the opposite, that loving discipline is exercised. A real love desires that which is best.
- C. The reason for this response is so that the offender will not be overwhelmed by sorrow. He has messed up badly. But he has repented, indicating he feels badly about it. If the church were to *not* accept him back into the fellowship, this would add even more burden to him.

The loving act of the church serves as an assurance to the erring brother that he has indeed properly repented and done what he should. The church judged him to be unrepentant before; now the church gives him assurance that his repentance is genuine. The church people must not leave him wondering if they still love him and have forgiven him, lest he fall into spiritual depression.

- D. The requirement of restoration ought not to surprise us. If the man has truly turned away from sin, then this act of the church simply reflects that reality of restored fellowship that has already happened between the offender and God. The church is a community that reflects the reality of our relationship with God. As sinners, we have messed up badly. But in Christ we can be forgiven *and treated as forgiven!*
- E. Oh how I wish that restorations after church discipline were a more frequent occurrence. But I am grateful that in a couple of cases we have experienced a repentant brother or sister, and the church has

been very good to receive that person with open arms. Let us pray for more repentance and more forgiveness, and less division!

4. These Things Test the Obedience of the Church, v. 9

- A. God is testing the church by means of Paul's letters. Paul wrote the "severe" letter and 2 Corinthians. The severe letter tested their obedience as to the exercise of church discipline; this letter tests their obedience as to forgiveness and restoration, to see if they will complete the job and bring the man back into the fellowship.
- B. God wants us to be "obedient in all things," not just in some things. In the hard things, in the easy things, in the big things, in the small things, in the home things, and the church things, in the private things and the public things—we must faithfully obey God.

5. Paul Agrees with the Church's Forgiveness, v. 10

- A. Paul recognizes that if a Spirit-led church acknowledges the forgiveness of a man, then he can do the same also. He agrees with their action to restore the man. Paul is at a distance and trusts that the church's response will reflect what God wants.
- B. Note Paul's initiative in forgiveness—he is ready *already* to forgive the man. Also note his attitude in forgiveness—once again, he minimizes any personal damage. He says, "if indeed I have anything to forgive." It is less of a big deal to him than what it has done to the church. The church is his higher priority, not himself.
- C. This forgiveness comes in the "face" of Christ, that is, in his presence. He can say that before Christ, he has truly forgiven.
- D. One VERY IMPORTANT note about the grammar of the text must be made here. Both of the last uses of the verb to forgive in verse 10 are in the perfect tense. This is a verb form that indicates an action that is completed and has ongoing results. Paul has exercised a real and permanent forgiveness in this matter. This is not a temporary thing. It is to forgive and ensure it stays forgiven. The offense is not used against the person, it does not come up again as a basis for punishment, etc. It is a durable forgiveness. How easy it is for us to forgive in a grumbling way, only to bring the offense back to the front burner again. Does God do that with us?

6. Forgiveness Undercuts Satan's Attack on the Church, v. 11

- A. Satan would be happy to get in the middle of things, drive the offender away, encourage bitterness in the church, cause the church to not receive him, and so multiply sin on top of sin. He will do anything he can to destroy a church.
- B. The Bible tells us that we are not (ought not!) be ignorant of Satan's schemes. What are these? He sows discord among brethren (which God hates, Prov. 6:19), he lies (John 8:44), he slanders, he accuses (Rev. 12:10), etc. See also Eph. 6:11.

Conclusion

When there is a problem in the church, we must recognize that it affects the whole church, like Achan's sin in Joshua 7 affected the entire nation. Appropriate censure is called for and then if there is repentance, the church is to forgive, comfort, and renew their love for the former offender so that Satan will not get the better of us.

If we do not do this right, there are two bad outcomes: the repentant offender is swallowed up in sorrow, and Satan gets a foothold in the church. That is not good for anyone involved.

If it be objected that church discipline is difficult to apply, or that it is hard to tell what cases to apply it to, those difficulties do not empty the Bible's teaching on the subject. Sometimes we have to do things that are not pleasant. We have to agree that cases such as 1 Cor. 5 demand the church to eliminate the offending brother and not arrogantly allow him to continue in the church, lest the sin-cancer spread. Furthermore, repentant folks must be restored to fellowship, no matter how hard or awkward that might be.

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