

The Painful Process of Dealing With Sin

2Corinthians 1:23-2:11

Show of hands this morning, how many people have ever gotten hurt?

That happens from time to time right.

We trip and fall, we fall off of bikes, hit a finger with a hammer, slip with a knife, or a thousand other things that leaves us with scraps cuts and bruises.

One of my most painful experiences was at a church picnic.

I think it was four or five years ago now and we out at Mersea Park.

After enjoying some food and fellowship we decided to play some baseball.

It wasn't an actual game, just people taking turns batting and others fielding.

I had been to bat once or twice without incident but didn't really get a good hit, so when things were winding down and someone asked me if I wanted another at bat I said yes.

Have you ever heard the expression, "Quit while you are ahead"?

I should follow that more often.

After fanning on the first pitch or two I was able to really connect with the ball.

When I connected I felt a pain in my left side right under my rib cage unlike anything I had felt before.

After hobbling to first base on was on my knees in pain.

Over the next few hours it didn't get better and anytime I had to lay down or get up it was a new experience in pain.

Eventually I ended up at the hospital and after waiting several hours I was told I had a soft tissue injury of some kind and that I should go home and take some Tylenol and try not to aggravate the injury.

I eventually recovered, but for the next couple of weeks doing things that I normally take for granted were painful and challenging.

That happens in life doesn't it? We do things or things are done to us that cause us physical pain.

The same thing is true of emotional and spiritual pain.

True there are no cuts, bumps, or bruises, but it is nevertheless painful and can affect us in a number of ways.

[Why does that happen? It happens because of sin. What is sin, someone might ask? Sin is when we think, feel, act, or speak in a way that is against what God wants. You know what? That happens in the church. While believers are 'New Creatures' we still have a sin nature that we are fighting against and that means we mess up. Sometimes in the church individuals or even groups settle into a pattern of embracing sin in their lives. Jesus is very clear in Matthew 18 that when that happens the church needs to deal with it. That can be painful and that is what we find in our text this morning. In **2Corinthians 1:23-2:11** the Apostle Paul explains to the church why he didn't visit

them as he had planned. His reasons have to do with dealing with a difficult situation in the church. We have to do that! Ignoring serious situations may be easy in the moment but it is also harmful in the long term. Therefore, the church is called to deal with sin, but there is no getting around the fact that it can be painful. From Paul's example in this portion of God's word we can learn at least five things about the painful process of dealing with sin. Lesson number one is this...]

Point #1 – We must deal with sin for the good of believers. (Verses 23-24)

Because we are all wrestling with our human natures which desire what God's hates, our motivation for dealing with the disobedience of others can easily become tainted. Therefore, we must guard against self-centered desires and strive for what is best for others.

The verses leading up to verse 23 make it clear that some people in the Corinthian church were accusing Paul of being wishy washy, of saying one thing and doing another on account of changing his travel plans.

Rather than being inconsistent Paul explains that he remains steadfast towards on account of the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the gospel.

In **verse 23-24** he builds on that foundation by giving some of his reasons for changing his travel plans, let's listen together to what he says.

People who use phrases like "As God as my witness" or "I swear to God" in a thoughtless or deceitful manner are very foolish because they fail to see how serious of an offense that is against the LORD.

When Paul says it here, he is doing so knowing that God knows everything even the most hidden parts of the human heart.

He says this knowing that God is perfectly just and judges the most hidden attitudes of the heart.

He says this as a way of saying that before God he is being absolutely truthful to these believers.

He then begins to give his reasons.

He says he didn't come on the planned visit to "spare them".

Spare them what? The context suggests he intended to spare them further pain.

There would have been nothing new to say except the hard truth that he had already written to them about.

That hard truth was the necessity of bringing strict discipline against one or more people in the church who were refusing to turn away from their sin.

Notice he makes a point of saying, "Not that we lord it over your faith".

How easily that can happen in the church.

Leaders see themselves as kings and rulers.

Jesus, however, taught that things are supposed to work differently in the church.

Leaders are not rulers and masters, they are servants.

Paul does not say and write things to have power over people. What does he say here? He says that he and his fellow ministers “work with” these believers for their joy, for them to “stand firm” in their faith.

He has done what he has done for their eternal joy.

Is there any greater good than that?

[Children are a really good illustration of this point. How many parents are with us this morning? Quick show of hands, how many of you parents ever had to teach your kids to do something bad? Now if you are a good parent do you let them just carry on with doing bad things? No, you discipline them. Why? If you are a good parent it is because you want what is good for them.]

The principle here is the exact same.

It is not about power and control.

No church leader or member should ever say, “You do what I say because I’m in charge and you have to listen to me.”

Instead, we should say something like, “This isn’t good for you and we are against what you are doing because it is hurting you and those around you. It is not good for your faith or the witness of the gospel and we want to do what God says in order to turn you from it for your good and His glory.”

[That is not an easy thing to do. It often comes at a cost. We’ll see that here with the Apostle, but if we care about the good of God’s people then we must deal with sin. If we can see that, then we will also be able to see this second lesson about dealing with sin which is this...]

Point #2 – Inflicting pain must NOT be our goal when dealing with sin. (Verses 1-3)

Whenever things get to the point where church discipline is necessary we should never be happy with the necessity of the consequence.

Look with me at verse 1.

Because the goal of Paul’s gospel ministry is the joy of the people he is ministering to, he made the firm decision to postpone his intended visit.

Right there that tells us that he does not enjoy causing pain to the people of the church.

He continues on in **verses 2-3.**

The question he asks in verse 2 is a rhetorical one.

If he causes pain to the church, then no one will be left to make him glad.

The obvious implication of that statement is that he finds no happiness or satisfaction in causing this pain among these believers.

In fact the whole reason he wrote to them was to resolve the issue before his next arrival so that he

might rejoice over their having dealt with sin rather than inflict more pain upon them.

When blatant unrepentant sin is in the church Jesus tells us in Matthew 18 how to deal with it.

First, an attempt is made with a very small circle of people to call the person to change.

Next, the circle gets a little bigger.

If that doesn't work then the whole church is informed and confronts the person.

If that doesn't work then the person who is refusing to fight against their sin must be removed from the church.

Paul is at that very public level with these believers and he does not enjoy it one bit.

[How many people have ever heard the saying, "Spare the rod spoil the child?" It is based on Proverbs 13:24 which says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." That raises a question or two, "Why spare the rod? Why avoid discipline? Because good parents do not enjoy inflicting pain upon their kids. Why do it then? Because it is necessary to shape them in a good direction. Letting children get away with anything may seem easy at the time, but it will lead to problems getting bigger and bigger over time and will do them great harm in the long run.]

The same thing is true in the church.

It often seems easier to ignore things. To come up with cool catch phrase like, "God loves you just the way you are" or "We need to be comfortable with messiness" or whatever.

Phrases like that take good theology and mix it with lies.

It is wonderfully true that God's loves sinners. How many people are happy about that this morning?

It is wonderfully true that we are to be patient and walk alongside people who are fighting against their sin.

It is not true that we are to ignore sin or worse celebrate it for the sake of avoiding the emotional pain of dealing with it.

[At the same time we must also recognize that the pain of church discipline is never the goal of it. It is an easy thing to become self-righteous and turn discipline into condemnation. It is an easy thing to enjoy people getting a consequence for sinning against us. Turning the other cheek and bearing insult go against our natural desire for revenge. Jesus calls us to a better goal than merely causing pain. So, how can we know if our motives are right? Paul shows us here in verse 4. Instead of enjoying the pain he has caused these believers we see from his example that...]

Point #3 – Dealing with sin produces anguish in the heart. (Verse 4)

If we have any sense at all of the dangers and consequences of defying God, then sorrow for the church and those caught up in evil things will be what we feel most.

Far from enjoying the need of dealing with this painful situation, Paul tells us this in **verse 4**.

This verse shows us the power of the Holy Spirit to change a person's heart.

Before Paul became a Christian he was a Pharisee and the picture of Pharisees that we find in the gospels paint them to be cold hearted men.

They were offended when Jesus ate with sinners.

They were quick to write people off and cast people out.

They had no problem with people getting what they deserved.

That is the kind of man Paul was.

We get a glimpse of that in Acts 8:1 where he was pleased at someone being stoned to death.

Now he is dealing with the Corinthians, a church that was filled with people who had lived extremely wicked lives by the standards of any good Pharisee, and what do we find?

We find the apostle writing to them not out of anger and condemnation, but instead "out of much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears."

The cold heartedness of his self-righteous heart is long gone and has now been replaced by deep sense of compassion for those in the grip of sin.

That is very important for us to see.

The difference between the attitude of the cold hearted judgmental Pharisee and the heart moved by gospel of Jesus is NOT the standard for righteousness.

Jesus' standard for morality is actually much higher than the Pharisees.

The difference is Jesus wants to save people from their sin.

That is why Paul is in such anguish here.

He knows that whatever the problem in this church is, it is bad for them and it is grieving him in the depths of his heart to see them be complacent about things that will lead to their destruction.

Paul loved these people enough to say painful things for the sake of turning them from the evil that would harm them.

Do we love people enough for that?

We should. That should be particularly true in the church.

I've been on both ends of that on more than one occasion and I know firsthand the truth of what Paul writes here.

It does cause tremendous grief to confront people about their sin.

I've been called names many times, I've been lied about and lied to, I've watched people be hurt, and I've watched people hurt themselves.

I've had to admit that I was wrong, I've had to change my ways, and none of that is easy.

[If we can be cold hearted about dealing with sin, then we have a heart problem as believers. If we are unwilling to deal with sin because we want to avoid the pain of it, then our love for Jesus and His people are far too weak. Dealing with sin is going to cause anguish in our hearts that is impossible to avoid if we truly love one another. The situation, however, is far from hopeless. In the next few verses Paul shares this next lesson which is absolutely vital for us to know. Here is the lesson...]

Point #4 – The pain of sin is overcome by forgiveness. (Verse 5-8)

This is really the heart of the good news concerning what Jesus has done for His people. That people who mess up can be restored.

Paul gives us very little here in terms of what the specific issues are, but it is clear that it is most serious and verse 5 suggests that it was fairly personal to the apostle.

Why does the apostle feel the need to tell the church that the pain caused was not caused to him?

The only reason I can think of is that the moral failing of certain individuals in the church must have had something to do with him directly.

We can only guess at what it may have been but it likely involved some kind of slander against Paul.

Essentially what the apostle is saying here is that his primary concern is how the sinful actions, some of which were intended to hurt him personally, have affected the church.

Can you see what he is doing here? This is so important for laying the groundwork for forgiveness.

He is taking something that is a big personal offense and he is making it a small thing as far as he is concerned.

Our natural tendency is to do the opposite to take small things and make them big things which kills our capacity to forgive.

Paul understands that the biggest issue with sins committed against him is not the harm that is caused to him, but instead the offense that is committed against the LORD and His church.

That is what compelled him to write hard things to the church and verses 6-8 tell us that his instructions were obeyed and had a positive effect (**Verse 6-8**).

The church brought discipline against the people in unrepentant sin and it grieved them to the point of sorrow and repentance.

When that happens the time for discipline ends and there is forgiveness and the reaffirmation of love it says.

In other words there is restoration.

Whatever harm the ongoing sin was causing has been stopped and its negative effects are reversed.

[I couldn't help but think of the parable of the prodigal son. That son totally disrespected his dad, took his inheritance and wasted it all in sinful living. He ends up working for a pig farmer being so hungry that he wants to eat the pig slop. It was really bad and then he comes to his senses and goes

home to his father. What does his father do? He forgives his son and welcomes him back home. He says, “This son of mine was dead, but now he is alive.”]

That is the power of forgiveness.

That doesn’t happen if we hold onto bitterness and anger.

It doesn’t happen if we give into fear and worry, it can only happen if we forgive.

The best way to cultivate that in our hearts is to remember what the LORD has forgiven us on account of our faith in Christ.

Let’s ask ourselves, “How much of our sin is forgiven when we look to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus?”

All of it! He paid for it all and it is all forgiven.

Do we have any appreciation for that? Do we have any sense of how great the debt we owed God was?

If we do it will incline us to be forgiving and that has the power to overcome the pain of sin.

[Forgiveness is incredibly powerful and its power goes beyond restoring relationships between believers. Paul tells us in the next few verses that it has the power to fight against the supernatural forces of darkness at work in this world. More than just fight the schemes of the devil we are told here that...]

Point #5 – Satan’s design for sin is defeated by forgiveness. (Verse 9-11)

The devil wants us to be bitter, self-centered, and hostile towards one another. Sin does that and He loves when that takes root in the hearts of people especially when it happens in the church. God calls us to something much better. He calls us to trust Him with every wrong and forget about trying to hold the mistakes of others against them.

Paul gives yet another reason why he wrote the painful letter in verse 9.

What the ESV translates here “that I might test you” could be more literally translated, “that I may know your character.”

Painful situations, while certainly unpleasant, have a way of revealing how much people have grown up in Christ and they also have a way of growing us up in Christ as well.

Would they do what is right even when it was hard? Turns out they did which brings Paul back to the idea of forgiveness in **verse 10**.

He has zero desire to hold back forgiveness, in fact he says that he has already forgiven people for the sake of the church “in the presence of Christ.”

It is possible that he may mean a few different things here, but what seems to make the most sense is that he is entrusting judgement of this whole situation to the LORD.

He is going to Christ in prayer to get rid of any anger, bitterness, or malice.

He is going before Christ letting go of the wrongs that were committed against him, telling the LORD that he holds nothing against them.

Why does he do that? **Verse 11.**

It seems to me that the logical implication of not being outwitted by Satan means that his schemes for our destruction are defeated.

Wow! The power of the devil stopped by forgiveness.

[Several years ago I was pumping up a tire in one my children's bikes. I had pumped it up pretty good, gave it the old squeeze test, and thought it needed a couple of more pumps. It didn't and it blew up wrecking both the tube and the tire. That happened because there was too much pressure in the tire. That is true of many things. If you put too much pressure in them they blow up.]

That is a good illustration of a spiritual reality. When we hold onto bitterness, anger, resentment, hatred, and alike it is like putting another pump of air into a container.

If you keep doing that eventually the container explodes.

That is what devil wants you and me to do.

He wants us to hold onto all that stuff because he knows if we do it will do us great harm and worse yet it will do great harm to the church.

Forgiveness that we declare in the presence of our Saviour is like a pressure relief valve.

It removes significant barriers between believers, it puts to death sin in our own hearts, it reminds us of the infinite grace that God shows us in the gospel, and because of that it overcomes the schemes of the Devil in our lives.

Amazing.

You know there is no getting around the fact that dealing with sin is a painful process, but it is impossible to be obedient to Jesus if we don't.

Jesus wants us to care about the good (the highest good) of His people. That means dealing with sin.

Not with the goal of causing people pain, but with the goal of them feeling the weight of their sin so that they will turn from it.

Not delighting in the process but being broken hearted over the necessity of it.

Not condemning but willing to forgive so that pain of sin and the power of the devil might be overcome in the life of the church.

May the Lord give us the courage, wisdom, and grace to do these things according to His will, for His glory, and our good.