

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

Restored, with a Heart to Restore

(2 Corinthians 1:12—2:11)

Study #2

Introduction: A flea market “treasure”...

A few weeks ago, Kathy and I went shopping for a chair.

She had seen a particular chair on an earlier shopping trip and wanted me to see it before buying it. The “store” was one of those antique shop/flea market places where you can sometimes find treasures mixed in with a lot of junk. This chair was junk.

It had a ripped wicker seat. The poorly applied third coat of stain was peeling all over. Every joint was loose. Mud daubers nest were attached to the underside. It was filthy.

The lady wanted ten bucks for it - a ridiculous case of overpricing. I thought about sitting in the chair to prove to her that \$10 was inflationary. I resisted the temptation, confident I'd end up sitting in a heap of kindling.

Kathy liked the design. One almost exactly like it had been in the family for a VERY long time. She figured I could “fix it up.”

So, we bought it (cash only). I tossed it in the back of the pickup and we drove home. That afternoon, I looked closely at my new project.

The chair had actually been put together quite carefully by a well-known manufacturer of sturdy furniture. There was some attention to detail in the construction. I knocked off some of the cracking stain and saw beautiful grain in the wood.

The more I looked at this chair, the more I was convinced that there was potential. So, I decided to tackle a restoration project.

If you've ever been involved in restoring something, be it a piece of furniture, a car, or a fixer-upper house, you know that restoration can be a painstaking process requiring time, energy, money - and sometimes, blood, sweat, and tears!

But the work is SO worth it when the project is completed and the object is returned to its original beauty.

Today, we are considering the ministry of Christian restoration. We discover that there can be a more “personal” side to a restoration project.

We also hear Jesus inviting us to join Him in that personal restoration work of helping our friends in Christ make it back to His original design and beauty. No clamps, glue, wooden dowels, sandpaper, or steel wool required. All it takes is trust in God and love.

This morning marks our second study in Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Whereas this week we are thinking about restorative, redemptive love, last week we considered pain and its benefits.

To review... (1:3-11)

The apostle Paul (who knew something about pain) told us that if we turn to Jesus when we are in pain He will turn that pain to something good.

He will comfort and strengthen us in our pain so that we can offer comfort to others who are in pain. AND, He will use pain to grow and purify our faith.

The same God who turned the death of His Son into salvation for all who trust Him is the same God who is able to use pain in your life and mine for good. Only an all-good God would do such a thing. Only an all-powerful God could do it.

That was the message from the first half of the first chapter of 2 Corinthians.

As Paul continues to write, he follows his comments about pain with some really wonderful affirmation. The words we read next are warm and friendly and loving.

To affirm... (1:12-14)

You can be proud of us

[12] For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. [13] For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; [14] just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud

Paul wanted the Corinthians to be proud of their spiritual parents - himself and Timothy and Silas. And he says that they can be proud of them because when they had been together, the apostles had stayed above reproach in their behavior.

They had not been out to “soak” the Corinthians, or to take advantage of them. No! They had been sincere, generous, holy, and totally committed to promoting holiness among the Corinthian believers.¹

And this Paul/Corinthian admiration society is genuinely “mutual.” He says that he is proud of them, too.

We're proud of you!

[14]...that we are your reason to be proud AS YOU ALSO ARE OURS (emphasis added), *in the day of our Lord Jesus.*

While he doesn't get specific here, he tells them that there were things going on in the church at Corinth that caused Paul's apostolic chest to expand with a fatherly pride.

¹ This is especially significant when we think of how the Corinthians had had ample opportunity to observe Paul during his eighteen month stay in Corinth.

Following these loving words, this Holy Spirit inspired letter transitions to, of all things, a detailed explanation of Paul's travel plans.

If that sounds little odd to you, we'll get to “why?” he discusses his itinerary in a minute. But that is exactly what he does.

Apostolic Travel Deviations (1:15--2:4)

Shifting Travel Plans (1:15-22)

Actual itinerary

I'll not go into a lot of detail about his travels. But I will tell you that he went from Corinth to Ephesus to Jerusalem to Antioch to Ephesus to Corinth to Philippi to Jerusalem.²

That's an outline of Paul's travels. It's what he actually did. But, that itinerary does not reflect what he had said he was going to do.

Stated itinerary

He had told the Corinthians that he was going to move from Corinth to Ephesus to Jerusalem to Antioch to Ephesus to Corinth to Philippi **TO CORINTH** to Jerusalem.

² Starting with the visit to Corinth recorded in Acts, we know that Paul traveled with Silas and Timothy to Ephesus for a short visit. Then it was on to Jerusalem and back to Antioch for some R&R. Then he traveled back to Ephesus for an extended stay of a couple of years. While in Ephesus he wrote 1 Cor. When the courier returned from having delivered that first letter Paul was confronted with the serious problems that still existed in the church there, and with the outbreak of new ones. These new developments required that Paul personally travel to Corinth from Ephesus to deal with the problem, a visit not recorded, but implied, in 2 Corinthians. (That is why Paul can make reference to wanting to come to Corinth “a third time” in 2 Cor. 12:14 and 2 Cor. 13:1.) This second visit was a sorrowful one highlighted by confrontation. Paul returned to Ephesus from Corinth and sent a stinging letter of rebuke that was mailed “*with tears*” (this is a letter written in between 1 and 2 Corinthians and referred to in 2 Cor. 2:3-4). Following the conclusion of his two year Ephesian ministry, Paul traveled north into Macedonia - to Philippi. Then he and his traveling companions went to Judea and Jerusalem.

Paul had told them that he was going to come straight from Ephesus to Corinth. But he didn't do that. He went from Ephesus to Philippi - and didn't pass through Corinth (which would have been a third visit) at all.

His detractors said that this change in plans PROVED that Paul wasn't a man of his word.

Accusation of vacillation

"That Paul - he lacks character. You just can't depend on him to do what he says. And, that being true, you can't really trust that what he says is true, either, like about Jesus and the Gospel and God."

They argued that anyone who says he is going to do one thing and does another - like altering a travel itinerary! - is shiftless and no account.

But, there were reasons why Paul had not gone to Corinth that third time. Two reasons, in fact.³

Reasons for Travel Shift (1:23--2:4)

#1 - Because Paul is not Lord

[23] But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. [24] NOT THAT WE LORD IT OVER YOUR FAITH (emphasis added),⁴ but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.

Paul the mighty apostle could exercise genuine leadership and authority in the churches. But, he's not the boss of the churches. Jesus is Lord.

The way I read it, Paul was unwilling to manipulate the Corinthians to get them to give a certain response to something going on in the church. He preferred to leave them to deal with God, on their own.

He was not about to put himself in a situation that would have him actually or appearing to "boss people around."

Now you could turn to passages in Paul's letters where he is VERY directive. I'm sure that there were times when he was with churches that he was QUITE strong.

But because of what was going on at Corinth, Paul had known in his gut that the church needed to take care of this thing without his handholding, without his directives.

It would be by their trust in the Lord that they would stand firm and take bold action, not by apostolic nagging. That's why he didn't come to Corinth after the "sorrowful visit" and the "severe letter."

And there is another reason why he had not traveled to Corinth. He didn't want to bring sorrow with him.

#2 - So as to not bring sorrow (2:1-4)⁵

[1] But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again.⁶ [2] For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? [3] This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. [4] For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.

Things had been in such a crisis state in Corinth that if he had gone there straight from Philippi as he had intended, he would have had to have gone with a rod of correction.

So, Paul chose to not drop in on the Corinthians to, (1). avoid the need of being harsh and causing sorrow AND (2). to give them the chance to correct problems on their own, with only the prompting of God.

³ He did go to bat for his reputation in Corinth, not so much because he had concern for what people thought about him, but because he knew that what they thought about him would impact the way they thought about the message of the Gospel.

⁴ Cf. 1 Peter 5:3; Romans 14:4; 1 Tim. 6:15; Ephesians 4:5

⁵ There is an unfortunate chapter division here, for there is no break in Paul's thought.

⁶ This clearly indicates that Paul had already made that sorrowful visit - different from the first one.

So, what was going on in Corinth? What's the big deal?

We discover what is the big deal in verse five. The problem is no big amorphous blob. It is a real life situation involving a real live person.

Love That Restores (vv. 5-11)

The Sorrow Caused by One (v. 5)

[5] But if any has caused sorrow, he⁷ has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree -- not to say too much -- to all of you.

Who is this guy and what did he do?

The "he" is not named. But the Corinthians knew who Paul was talking about. So do we.

There was a man, a Christian man who was a part of the church,⁸ who was involved in an immoral relationship with his stepmother.⁹

This kind of immorality explicitly violated Old Testament commands, which doesn't surprise us.¹⁰ What may surprise us is that even among the unsaved Gentile Corinthians, this type of activity would have been considered a deviance. (Not that Gentiles never engaged in this behavior, but that other Gentiles condemned those who did.)¹¹

⁷ Throughout church history there has been much debate about who this person is and what he did. Many scholars have equated him, as I do, with the brother who was guilty of sexual immorality, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Others believe that he was one of Paul's main enemies, who, in opposing Paul had caused such problems in the church that he needed to be publicly censured and disciplined.

⁸ The fact that discipline was brought to bear on this individual proves that he was a Christian, as the church has no business disciplining non-believers.

⁹ "His father's wife" almost certainly doesn't mean "his mother" or Paul would have said so. *[1 Corinthians 5:1] and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.*

¹⁰ *[Leviticus 18:8] You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.* Stoning was the Old Testament punishment for this crime.

¹¹ We don't know if the woman was currently married to the man's father, if she was divorced from his father or if she was widowed from his father. It is clear that this is an on-going, unrepented of, sinful relationship.

The wages of sin

This guy's behavior caused sorrow to Paul, personally. He caused sorrow to the entire church. It is never true in a church that *"My actions only affect me."*

Centuries ago, John Donne wrote, *"No man is an island"* and he was right. The actions of one always impact the broader world. And what is true, globally, is even more true in the life of the church.

Your involvement in ministry benefits everybody. Your gossip does, too. The break in your friendship with another affects every relationship. So will your reconciliation.

For good or ill, your actions impact those around you in the church. The actions of others in the church affect you.

This Corinthian brother has committed sin, and the tentacles from that sin have reached out and grabbed everyone.

So, what's a church to do when a believer sins, and does not repent, but continues in that sin, even revels in that sin?

Great question!

First, bold action is to be taken - action that had already been taken by the church in Corinth.

Strong, Loving Action by the Church (vv. 6-10)

Punish (v. 6)

[6] Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority¹²

In the first letter Paul had urged the Corinthians to cast the man out of the church.

¹² Interesting. It appears that not everybody was on board with the discipline. Were there some who didn't think it was the right thing to do?

It was something that Paul himself had done, spiritually speaking, from Ephesus, acting in his role as an apostle. He wanted the Corinthians to do the same there in Corinth.

Well, the church took Paul's words to heart and dis-fellowshipped him, even without Paul's apostolic presence. And that was the right thing to have done. Jesus said so.

It wasn't Paul who came up with a plan for dealing with an unrepentant, sinning Christian. The whole thing is the idea of the most loving Man who ever lived.

Jesus envisioned a situation like this arising in His church, so He prepared His disciples with a plan.

*[Matthew 18:15] "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. [16] But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.** [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

There are steps to be taken, in order, when a believer sins. Personal reproof. Confrontation. Taking witnesses. Then, dis-fellowshipping.

That final step in the discipline process had been taken in Corinth. It is a distasteful step to take (we know that here). Yet, that last step must sometimes be taken.

In Matthew 18 Jesus lays out how each believer is to act when faced with a friend in Christ who is engaging in sinful behavior.

Not many of us find this the most fun thing in the world to do. Confronting a good friend for misbehavior is not likely to become a wildly popular leisure activity.

Of course, it is threatening to do this.

Of course, such a confrontation is a challenge to courage.

Of course, it can be a fearful thing to approach a friend - not with a complaint that they irritate you - but with an honest rebuke because they have sinned.

But the fact that this sort of interaction is challenging is no excuse to not engage in it.

In fact, if you are a part of Northwest Community Church you have signed up to hold your brother and your sister accountable to walk with God. You are to follow Matthew 18's direction.

A distaste for "rebuke" doesn't exempt any of us from the role of a Nathan who will call a David on the carpet. When your brother or your sister is taking **inappropriate actions**, or using **unkind words**, or unleashing **outbursts of anger** you are to talk with them about it.

It is always a painful thing to do, but such engagements are crucial to the proper functioning of a healthy church. In a church where the first step of discipline is routinely carried out, members remind each other that they are concerned for each others' holiness.

When it doesn't happen, problems are not nipped in the bud. They fester and grow.

But Corinth, the problem church, had come through like a champ! And the church's severe action had produced the desired result.

The man had repented of his sin and was truly sorrowful about his past misdeeds. Paul goes on in the next verses to tell these Christians what to do now that repentance had occurred.

Forgive (v. 7)

[7] so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow

So, Paul calls the church to forgiveness. Let the past die a supernatural death.

In the church we can get hysterical over the misdeeds of others. And we can also get historical. Neither are appropriate when repentance has occurred.

What is appropriate - and more than that, what is BEAUTIFUL - is for individuals and for a church to say to the one who has been disciplined and has repented,

“I will not let my attitude toward you be governed any longer by this offense. I will never bring it up again.”

Forgive. And then love. Don't delay. Run, don't walk. As fast as you can - show that broken-hearted brother that you love him!

Love (v. 8)

[8] Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.” (v. 8)

Tell him that you love him. Show her that you love her. Include them in your get-togethers. Call. Text, just for the fun of it.

Extend the right hand of fellowship and give a warm embrace. No standoffishness.

And then restore. Put the fallen and now repentant Christian back in service.

Restore (v. 9-10)

[9] For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. [10] But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ

I picture a party. Complete with a fattened calf, ring, new shoes and a fancy robe!

As many of my commentaries have suggested, Paul is very likely envisioning a public gathering of the church for a special celebration.

During the entire time spanning the dis-fellowshipping until the repentance, this brother had been effectively removed from the life of the church. With repentance, though, all barriers are to be dropped.

The church is to always take the posture of the father of the prodigal, waiting with outstretched arms to receive the wayward who return home.

It would be a scandal to permit flagrant sin to continue unaddressed in the Body of Christ.

It would be just as scandalous to not restore someone to full-fledged fellowship in the warmth of the church after repentance. Church discipline that isn't aiming for repentance and restoration is not Christian.

The end game of any discipline is to bring a brother or a sister who has strayed to recovery, to restoration, to usefulness in the Lord again.

When repentance occurs, fellowship is restored, love is affirmed, sanctions are dropped, and the way back is clear for renewed service and fellowship within the church.

And then Paul ends this section with a comment that is at once provocative, intriguing, and very helpful.

The Schemes of Satan (v. 11)

[11] so that no advantage be taken¹³ of us by Satan¹⁴; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.¹⁵

Taken advantage of by Satan

If you are a believer in Jesus, you have an enemy. He has declared unholy war against you. And it is quite personal: He hates God. You love God. THEREFORE, he hates you. He is, as my good friend Hadley Reed says so well, *“the hater of your soul.”*

¹³ To be taken advantage of is to be outwitted, defrauded, and cheated.

¹⁴ “Satan” - the word means “adversary”

¹⁵ Paul discusses Satan's activity throughout 2 Corinthians more than in any of his other letters.

Satan's goal is to trip believers up by whatever means he can. And he is quite canny. He has been around a long time. He knows God's people, our weaknesses, and how the game is played. He knows what is likely to "work" as he seeks to take advantage of us.

If he can successfully work to neutralize the witness of a church or of a Christian, well, for him, that is Mission Accomplished.

Paul brings Satan into the discussion here for a reason. Dealing with each other in the bold, courageous way he has described is important, biblical, and redemptive. But, there are some satanically inspired pitfalls to watch out for when we encounter a fellow-Christian who has fallen into sin.

Not ignorant of his schemes

Not taking sin seriously

On the one hand, we might not take sin seriously enough. We might be tempted to dismiss it as "no big deal," to sweep it under the rug.

Or, realizing that it is a big deal, believers - or a church leadership - might still think, "*Don't get involved. Forget it. We might get sued. You will lose a friend.*"

When we refuse to address clear-cut sin issues, or to deal with each other as Jesus lines out for us in Matthew 18, we are showing that we really don't care much if our brother or sister grows in grace.

And when that disinterest is present, Satan has already won a great victory.

Not forgiving wholeheartedly

The other way for Satan to walk away victorious is for believers or for a church to not extend grace and forgiveness to the repentant Christian.

Satan doesn't want Christians to confront in love. And he certainly doesn't want us to live in healthy, reconciled relationships after confrontation.

I really believe that forgiveness is the high-water mark of Christian discipleship. Forgiving someone who has wronged us is about the most Christ-like thing we can do.

If we don't forgive, we are showing that we have not fully appreciated the forgiveness we have been given by God. But when we do forgive, we unleash God's awesome, gracious power.

Conclusion:

Christians, by definition, are people who have been recovered by God. We were lost – but have been found. Christians are also people who, having strayed, are in the process of being restored by God. And He uses His body, the Church, to aid in the restoration process.

I took that old chair Kathy and I bought for \$10 at the flea market and set it up on a workbench. I tapped every rickety joint loose until I had a collection of about twenty wooden parts lying on the garage floor.

I scraped and then sanded and then steel-wooled all of the parts to as smooth a finish as I could. I was able to reuse the original dowels, and, over a period of about a week, glued and clamped the chair back together.

It still needs staining and we've still got to place a wicker seat in it, but it's solid. Hopefully, once it's completely restored, it'll give a few years of good service, just as it was designed to do.

When refinishing a junky old chair, the necessary tools are wood clamps and glue, sandpaper and steel wool.

When the project is soul restoration, we use the tools of honesty, courage, love, and forgiveness. We give grace. And God takes these tools and uses them to restore a brother or a sister for whom Christ died.

A **CHURCH** living up to the name is a refinishing shop where people who have been wrecked by others, by life, or by their own choices get restored to His original beautiful design and purpose.

Lots of work, sure. But so worth it.