

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

Love at its Riskiest

(2 Corinthians 7:2-16)

Study #12

Introduction: A hard (but really good!) gift...

Some gifts are easy to give. Give your sweetheart candy and flowers and you're both happy. Give your kid a bike or an x-box and everybody smiles.

Other gifts, though, are more difficult. I'm thinking about when you give your friend the gift of admonition or correction. It's less delightful, for sure.

These harder gifts are hard on both the giver and receiver. But they can yield tremendous dividends for years to come.

Today, we witness the Apostle Paul's courageous willingness to give a hard gift to his friends and get to see the transformation that resulted.

We are continuing our study in Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth - which we learn is actually his third letter to that church.

Paul founded the church on his second missionary journey and then grounded the church in God's truth in the eighteen months that followed while he continued to live among them there in Corinth.

After he left, he kept in touch with the church through correspondence - letters, emails, texts, and tweets.

We have two of his letters in our New Testaments. But there was a third letter - one written between the first two - to which we no longer have access.

It was evidently a pretty severe letter, filled with rebuke and admonition.

But the fact that Paul sent that kind of a letter didn't mean that he didn't love them. He had a very special place in his heart for the folks in the church at Corinth and that special love comes bleeding through in the first words of our passage.

Paul's heart ached for relational closeness to these folks.

Affirming Love (vv. 2-4)

Yearning for Closeness (v. 2a)

[2a] Make room for us in your hearts¹

An ache for intimacy

During last summer's annual trip to the Rockies, the weather deteriorated one evening. Storms can be pretty extreme in the mountains and we found ourselves in quite a blow.

One of the guys on the trip had brought a tarp set-up that wasn't quite sufficient for this particular storm. So, between lightning strikes he dodged hail and rain, ran over to our tent and asked - very politely - if we could make room in our tent for him for the night.

Of course, Zach and I unzipped the tent and let him in - gladly! When someone is desperate for shelter from a storm, you let him in. We made room for him.

¹ It was not unusual for Paul to express his longings for the people to whom he wrote. We find pleadings like this one in Romans (1:1-5), Galatians (throughout, his heart for the Galatians is evident), Ephesians (chapters 1 and 6), Philippians (chapter 1), and the Thessalonian epistles.

The Apostle Paul was desperate for relational shelter. He longed for his friends, the Corinthians to unzip their hearts and let him in. Whether or not their hearts were closed off or not isn't clear. But Paul was just as bold as he could be about expressing his longing to be close to them.

It takes courage to make that request. There's risk in asking for closeness, relationship. And I love the way Paul makes his request.

An action plan for connection

Rather than *demand* closeness or manipulate with *guilt* and *shame*, he simply and honestly expressed his hunger for connection. He wanted a tight bond with them. His heart ached for them and he told them about it.

I don't know if you've ever done something like this. If you have, you know that it takes courage. You risk rejection. It's the ultimate "put yourself out there" move.

Paul was a courageous guy and my hat's off to him for seeking relationship without resorting to arm-twisting (love doesn't work that way, anyway).

Standing outside in the rain, waiting for the tent flap to open, he reminded them of their good times together.

Given to Another's Welfare (vv. 2b-3)

[2b] we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.² [3] I do not speak to condemn you; for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together.

Paul clearly has a clear conscience about the way he had behaved when he was in Corinth. And, like the marriage vows - "*til death us do part*" - Paul's commitment to the Corinthians was solid to the core. He was behind them all the way.

In fact, his heart was full of love - and pride! He tells them how proud he is of them. He boasts about the Corinthians to all his friends.

² Some commentators believe that Paul is contrasting his own apostleship with the "ministry" of the false apostles who are opposing him in Corinth.

Rejoicing in a Friend's Growth (v. 4)

[4] Great is my confidence in you, great is my boasting on your behalf; I am filled with comfort. I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.³

Clearly, Paul was thrilled with the "track" that his friends in Corinth were on. They were doing well, and Corinth was not a church that was well-known for doing well.

But something has happened that has freed Paul to write to them in such superlative terms, and we'll see in a couple of minutes what that "something" was.

But until quite recently he hadn't been so encouraged. In fact, as we continue reading we discover that Paul - the Apostle Paul! - had been racked by fears and anxieties.

Risky, Loving Pursuit (vv. 5-12)

A Testimony of Internal Pain (vv. 5-7)

A fearful apostle (v. 5)

[5] For even when we came into Macedonia⁴ our flesh had no rest,⁵ but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.

Hmmm. Paul had been afraid. That's remarkable.

Think about all the stuff he experienced throughout his life - imprisonments, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks - and he rarely mentioned fear.

³ One commentator has written of Paul's warm words, "It is not manipulative, in that he was trying to trick them into obedience....But, neither was he going to protect himself from hoping for the best in them by waiting until a clear pattern of obedience had emerged before he spoke encouraging words.

⁴ Paul takes up the story of his anxious waiting for Titus where he left off at 2:13.

⁵ In 2:13, Paul says that he had no relief for his spirit. Here, he says his flesh had no rest. Talk about a non-technical use of the terms "flesh" and "spirit"!

Whatever it was must have been something REALLY scary to prompt Paul to fear.

It's not that I can't identify with fear. I know fear pretty well. But I'm not used to thinking of Paul as fearful.

He continues and tells us that he had not only been afraid. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, the author of much of the New Testament and the founder of dozens of churches - had been depressed.

A sad, depressed apostle (v. 6a)

[6] But God, who comforts the depressed...

The word we translate here "depressed" can be translated "downcast" or "humiliated" but it essentially means to feel bad. He had been feeling blue. He was really sad.

I'll bet that many of us here today can relate. We know sadness. Some of you here may have experienced full-blown depression.

I understand. While God is always good, life can be terrifically hard. Life can send us for a loop and we can go reeling into deep sadness. Paul says that it is God's special ministry to touch in tender ways those who have been beaten down by life. He comforts the depressed.

(By the way, if you find yourself in that spot today, know that God still comforts the depressed. Please grab me or a friend at the end of the worship service and we'll be happy to pray for God's comfort in your life.)

Well, God can be extremely creative in the ways He chooses to comfort those who are down. And He brought comfort to Paul's fearful, anxious, and depressed heart by means of a report from Titus, a good friend, about how things were going back in Corinth.

A Healing Report (vv. 6b-7)

[6] But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus [7] and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.

Titus had been sent by Paul from Macedonia to Corinth, and the purpose of the visit was to get a level set on the health of the church. What Titus discovered was enough to bring a smile to an apostle's face!

Titus found the church in Corinth filled with people longing for more and more of God in their life, mourning over past failures - and this is really important - and anxious to see Paul.

The Corinthians were doing well. They had nothing but good things to say about Paul. Therefore, all was well with Paul's soul.

Now, perhaps the question in forming in your mind, "*What happened!?*" What changed the Corinthians' mindset from being antagonistic to Paul (which he had expected) to being anxious to see him? from being lackadaisical about God to longing for Him? from being mired in sin to mourning over sin?

In short, they had repented. And their repentance changed everything.

The Effect of Severe Interaction (vv. 8-11)

Repentance

The meaning of "repent"

The word "repentance" is one of the richest words in Scripture. It is a word made up of two Greek words that combined, mean, literally, "to change your mind."

Everyone who enters into a relationship with God through faith in Christ repents. They change their mind about Jesus. Whatever they had thought about Him - great man, good teacher, moral example - they "repent" and see Him as so much more.

He is Savior, the God-Man, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. With respect to eternal life, repentance represents a change of mind/thinking about Jesus and about our need for Him that results in faith.

With respect to growth as a believer, repentance represents a change of mind/thinking about specific sins. The result of repentance for the Christian is life change. The changes can be behavioral or attitudinal. But when someone who has already received the gift of eternal life from God repents, change follows.

Paul says (v. 9) that the Corinthians have “repented.” OK. So, of what behavior or attitude did they repent?

From what did they repent?

Frankly, we have no idea. Based on what Paul wrote to them about in the first letter, they might have repented of suing each other, getting drunk at communion, abusing spiritual gifts, or dividing the church into factions!

But we don’t know. Paul’s not specific here. All we know is that they had truly and obviously repented and that there had been a true and obvious change.

Fruits from their repentance?

[11] For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.

Repentance is a wonderful thing in the life of a child of God. It is God’s movement in the heart to return him or her to their first love and to spiritual vitality.

But the Corinthians’ repentance did not occur in a vacuum. Our passage tells us that what prompted their repentance was sorrow. The pain of deep emotional pain was the tool God used to move them to repent.

The pain of sorrow can produce repentance and it often does. But it doesn’t necessarily work that way.

Repentance followed sorrow

Worldly sorrow

[10]... the sorrow of the world produces death.

According to Paul there are two kinds of sorrow. One of them, what he calls here, “***the sorrow of the world***” is a spiritually unproductive sorrow.

It is not sorrow over the ugliness of sin. It may be sorrow over the unwelcome consequences of our sin, but it’s not sorrow that we rebelled against God. The sorrow of the world manifests itself in self-pity rather than in turning to God.

The sorrow of the world may be very bitter, but the sorrow of the world doesn’t lead to repentance.⁶

It is possible for someone to be very sorry and full of remorse without being repentant. It is possible for our sorrow to have nothing at all to do with God. And the world’s sorrow leads to death.

By contrast, there is a sorrow that leads to an enriched experience of God and to Jesus’ promised abundant life (John 10:10).

Godly sorrow

[10] For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation...

“***The sorrow that leads to repentance***” is the pain of me suddenly becoming aware that there is something about ME that is crooked, out of line, not right.

When any of us are struck with this pain, we are to put that pain to good use, turn to God, and allow Him to use that pain to change us.⁷

⁶ See Hebrews 12 where the story of Esau (from Genesis 27) is retold. Esau was extremely sorrowful over the loss of his birthright, but that sorrow didn’t turn his heart to God.

This sorrow that is according to the will of God is marked by “no regrets.”

When we turn to God from our rebellion there is not a constant looking back over our shoulders, or a self-flagellation for past misdeeds. We admit them and we own up to them. But they don’t own us.

The past has passed. Repentance may not allow us to escape the consequences of the past, but it rescues us from living in the past and frees us to look to the future with hope.

Godly sorrow is a sorrow that leads to a change of purpose and of action. It is not crying by your bedside because once again you have failed. It’s not just feeling bad.

Feeling “bad” after we’ve done something bad is a perfectly normal response. But feeling bad is not, in and of itself, repentance. Repentance is the act of turning to God when we are feeling bad for what we have done.

We know that King David suffered extreme sorrow because of sins he committed. He spent a whole year in internal agony as a result of his adultery and murder.

Yet that year was not a year of repentance. It was a year of wasting away, of unproductive bad feelings. It was when he turned to God and admitted, [2 Samuel 12:13] “**I have sinned against the Lord**” that marked the beginning of his repentance which also brought about his restoration.

Godly sorrow is an energizing sorrow. And that is the sorrow that prompted the repentance of the Corinthians.

So, the repentance didn’t occur in a vacuum. It was prompted by sorrow. But the sorrow didn’t appear out of thin air, either. It was prompted by a letter.

⁷ C.S. Lewis from Problem of Pain: The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows something is wrong when he is being hurt... Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

The sorrow-prompting letter

[8] For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it -- for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while -- [9] I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.

The letter’s content

As I mentioned earlier, Paul wrote a letter between the writing of what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians. It is a lost letter - even by the second century, church leaders had no recourse to it. But Paul has mentioned it in this letter before (chapter 2), telling us that he had written with anguish of heart and with many tears.

It was a letter that Paul knew was going to bring pain. Of necessity it was going to be a severe letter. He had determined that he was going to be brutally honest with the Corinthians.

Sadly, we don’t know anything about the specifics of the letter. But I have no doubt that Paul called the Corinthians on the carpet for their moral, ethical, and doctrinal sins.

Because of the severity he planned to bring in this letter, Paul had had doubts about whether he should have sent the letter in the first place.

Reluctant to hit “send”

[8] For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; **THOUGH I DID REGRET IT** (emphasis added)

After he had sent the letter (no doubt by Titus’ hand) Paul wondered if he should have sent it. He actually regretted sending it.

Have you ever felt like that about a letter you were about to send? I sure have!

I've sometimes had letters to send that contained "hard" messages. I've spent hours writing and re-writing those letters and then have sat on those letters for days before mailing them.

Then I've walked that long walk out to the mailbox, dropped it in, walked back and wondered, "*Should I send it?*"

I've even been so unsure at times that I've actually walked back out to remove the letter from the mailbox. One time, I went to take a letter back inside and to my horror realized that the mail truck had already taken it! I knew then exactly how Paul felt!!

(By the way, when it comes to "hard" communication, I've learned - the hard way - the more personal the better. Face to face if possible. Phone calls next. Then letters. NEVER via email or text.)

Paul wondered if what he had written was just "too much" or if the relational damage the letter might produce could ever be repaired.

At a certain point he wanted to go chase after the truck, but the truck had already left. He had second-guessed himself, an exercise I've gone through countless times myself. Maybe you have, too.

Didn't want to ruin relationship

Second-guessing is a time honored practice among those who sometimes have to traffic in hard communication. We second-guess because the hard, painful truth we need to tell is going out to people we love. We don't know how they are going to receive it.

And we really don't want to ruin a relationship.

If the Corinthians had not received this letter in the right way, well, that could be the end of their relationship. And he loved them!

So why did he sent the letter?

The tipping point

Given the mental and emotional anguish he went through to write this letter, why did he send it?

He and the church already had a tenuous relationship. There had been plenty of stress. Why not just let sleeping dogs lie? Why stir up trouble? Leave the letter on the desk.

Well, there finally came a tipping point that caused Paul to put a stamp on it, seal the envelope, and mail it. And the tipping point was love.

He saw these people in trouble because of their sin. They were already suffering spiritual stagnation - or worse! - and his love for their welfare trumped his longing for a safe, pleasant relationship. He took the risk of speaking hard truth and sent the letter.

Genuine love simply can't remain silent when it sees those it loves in danger.

If we see a neighbor's house on fire, do we kindly wait until morning to ring his doorbell to tell him about it, knowing that if we ring it at 2 a.m., our neighbor will have to get out of bed and come to the door? No! When his house is on fire, it is loving to roust him out of bed!

Does a surgeon look at a patient with a cancerous tumor and refuse to cut it out because the surgery will hurt? No! Can we imagine the doctor who would not inflict the pain of setting a broken bone because it didn't seem "nice" to do.

Paul did not allow his concern for the Corinthians' feelings to keep him from speaking the hard truth in love, because to be silent would have jeopardized their spiritual well-being.

He loved them enough to be willing to cause them pain.

Let that thought sink in.

We do not show love to someone by withholding the truth. Fewer statements are more evil and self-deceptive than, "*I love him too much to hurt him.*"

True, it may be the case that we do not want to hurt someone by telling the truth - but usually, that *someone* is us!

Paul told them what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear and not even what he wanted to say to them. That's courage. I mean, who doesn't enjoy pleasant more than tense conversations? But Paul did the hard thing.

All's well that trends well...

Despite great fear and anxiety (and now we know what he was fearful about - v. 5 - it was about how the severe letter would be received), Paul sent the letter. It produced sorrow - just like he knew it would. Then the sorrow morphed to repentance, just like he prayed it would.

When they received Paul's stinging letter, they experienced all of the hurt any of us feel when we are on the receiving end of rebuke. But, after that initial pain settled over them, they turned to God.

And God turned their repentance into something beautiful. Specifically, He turned it into the beauty of a changed life.⁸

Now, are you ready for a shocker? Listen as Paul informs the Corinthians and us as to his rationale for having written that severe letter in the first place.

The Goal of Severe Interaction (v. 12)

This IS NOT why Paul wrote...

[12a] So although I wrote to you it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended⁹...

⁸ As Peterson puts it in The Message, "And now, isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God? You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you've come out of this with purity of heart."

⁹ In verse 11, he refers to "The matter" but never tells us what "matter" it is. Some have suggested that it had to do with the incest of 1 Cor. 5, others that one Christian in the church had taken legal action against another, still others that the issue was that of wrangling over authority with Paul himself being the one offended (I personally think that this is the most likely scenario). We really don't know.

Interesting. He hadn't written it for the sake of the offender, that he might be restored. He hadn't written it for the sake of the offended, that he might be vindicated.

The real reason Paul wrote to them was not so much to straighten out this problem as it was to **instruct** and to **remind**.

This IS why Paul wrote...

[12b]...but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.

Paul's letter was written to remind the Corinthians of who they are in Jesus. Remembering our identity in Jesus is the first (and best) step to take on the road to right living.

Therefore, reminding our friends of their identity in Jesus is the first (and best) step to take in helping them get on the road to right living.

"The reason you let this matter (whatever the matter was) arise in the first place was that you forgot who you are. You forgot that you are sons and daughters of God, children of light. You forgot that you have a bond with Almighty God and that the Holy Spirit dwells within you."

His severe letter was intended, more than anything, to stir up a reminder of all that was true about them in Jesus. And you and I can have the same ministry toward each other.

Reminding each other of who and what we are in Jesus is a life-giving exercise. So many of the New Testament's instructions are based on the powerful formula:

Because you have been redeemed, therefore act like you are redeemed.

The formula is not aimed at humiliation, as in, "Shame on you! You should know better than to act like that!"

Rather, it speaks to the heart in terms of love and of our high calling. Consider...

- *[Colossians 3:1] Therefore if (literally, “since”) you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above...;*
- *[Colossians 3:12...as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, [13] bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.*

So this morning, let’s take a moment to remember who we are as Christians.

- We are forgiven sinners.
- We are children of God.
- We are heaven-bound because of the blood of Jesus.
- We are light in the Lord and the salt of the earth.
- We have “accepted Jesus” - but more importantly have been accepted by Jesus.

How do people like that live? They live to the glory of God!

Conclusion:

Ray Stedman once famously remarked, *“Everybody needs to repent.”*

I agree - and I’ll bet you do, too. Each of us needs to change. All of us have a long road to travel before we are whole and holy.

When it comes to the matter of change, can we all agree to be gracious givers and receptive receivers?

When someone comes to us with an admonition or a reproof and challenges us to change, let’s drop defensiveness and allow the Holy Spirit to have His way with us and actually change us. Receive hard gifts softly!

And when you see your friend tracking in a dangerous, wrong direction, pray, trust God - and then courageously/gently say the hard thing. Give hard gifts, but give them lovingly!