

At CPC, we have a number of Core Values that define who we are and how we operate as a church community. One of the Core Values we have is that of Grace. We want to be a community that exudes grace. What does that mean? What does it look like? Well, let me read straight from our website how we envision this as a church:

The church should be a place where lost, hurting, and broken people are free to be authentic while yearning for and moving toward continued growth. Jesus Christ came to seek the lost, heal the brokenhearted, and transform lives to reflect His glory. Transformation doesn't happen overnight with any of us; it takes place in an environment of both grace and truth—grace that frees us to be transparent about our hurts and failures and truth that encourages us to walk in obedience to Him.

I want you to notice the tension built into this Core Value. Grace means he loves and accepts us just as we are, even in our sin and brokenness. Grace means, because of the cross, we're not only forgiven but made righteous in His sight. And grace means we need to love and accept each other in the same way God does. But grace also means we're being transformed into the image of Jesus; we're growing and learning to walk in obedience to Him. So we live in this tension between who we are and who we are becoming. We're righteous sinners—there's tension in that.

I think we feel this even more acutely as we look back on 2020. As we look back over the year, some of us are just grateful we survived, but each of us can also think of areas where we've fallen short. God has been so good to us, but the list of our failures is a long one: resolutions unkept; bad habits unbroken; anger left unchecked; Scripture and prayer neglected; words spoken that shouldn't have been; other words unspoken that should have been; opportunities missed. While it's always nice to have a fresh start, this can also be a time of regret. So we're thrown back into this tension where we are loved and accepted even in our sin and brokenness, yet still yearning and even striving to be more like Christ.

We're jumping back into our study of 2 Corinthians. Our passage begins in chapter 7, verse 2. This is a passage where this tension plays out. The Corinthians had received God's grace, but they were still very broken and sometimes even rebellious. And this played out in their relationship with the Apostle Paul. Paul had a complicated and rocky relationship with them. Of course, he's the one who brought the Gospel to them. He'd spent over a year

there, but after he left, things started to fall apart. Immorality and divisiveness were rampant in the church. Paul wrote letters to them and then made another visit to try to put things right. But his visit to Corinth turned out to be a humiliating experience for Paul.

They not only rejected his instructions but followed a certain man in the church who ridiculed his apostleship. Paul left rather abruptly, which his critics used as evidence that he didn't care about them in the first place. But Paul did love them, and he could not leave things as they were. He wrote another letter to them, to be delivered by his associate, Titus. Back in chapter 2, he told them he wrote it "*out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears*" (2:4). After sending the letter off with Titus, he was worried sick over how they might respond, so he traveled to Macedonia to find Titus. When he finally found him, Paul was relieved and overjoyed to learn they had a change of heart towards him. They repented and wanted to restore their relationship with him. But there were still some things to work out, and Paul writes 2 Corinthians in that regard.

In this passage before us, Paul reflects on all of this and shows us something of the tensions of grace. I want us to look at this passage from the standpoint of how we, as broken and sinful people in need of grace, can continue to grow in grace to be more like Jesus. Read the full passage carefully.

Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but

because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. I am glad I can have complete confidence in you. 2 Corinthians 7:2-16

In this passage, we see three important lessons on how we, as broken and sinful people in need of grace, can continue to grow to be more like Jesus.

We need loving and firm confrontation in the body of Christ

The first thing we need is loving and firm confrontation in the body of Christ. Again, the reality is we're all broken and sinful, and so from time to time, we need correction. It's like when I drive my car on the freeway. If I loosen my grip on the steering wheel, the car will inevitably veer to the right or left. It never just keeps going straight. That's why cars need wheel alignments, and that is a good picture of us as well. We're constantly out of alignment.

And how do cars get out of alignment? Well, part of it is driving on bad roads. The more potholes and bumps you hit, the faster your wheels will be out of alignment. We live in a culture where there are many potholes and bumps to knock us out of alignment. You might say the roads are bad here. If you want to follow Jesus with all your heart, this is a hard place to do it. So, from time to time, we all get out of alignment; we all get off course. And that's why we need loving and firm confrontation from our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Someone might argue, "I thought we weren't supposed to judge others?" That's true with regard to unbelievers, but within the body of Christ, it's different. In 1 Corinthians 5:12, Paul says, "*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?*"

There are two sides to this. First, we need to be willing to give it. This is the role Paul played in the Corinthians' lives. We can learn a lot from him on how to do that. He teaches us to do it in love. Notice this whole passage is just oozing with love and affection. "Make room for us in your hearts. You have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I take great pride in you. I have boasted to Titus about you and you have not embarrassed me." You can just see the deep love he had for them. It was this love that moved him to pursue them and confront them about their sin. Paul also teaches us to do it in humility. He says, "We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one." This shows me he'd searched his own heart. He'd taken the log out of his eye before he tried to take the speck out of their eye. Finally, do it believing the best about them. Paul says at the end, "I am glad I can have complete confidence in you."

We need to be willing to move into those painful and sensitive areas of people's lives with love, humility, and confidence in them. I'm not saying we should be people who love going around confronting others. If you enjoy doing this, something is wrong. Paul didn't enjoy it. In fact, in verse 8, he says that at first he regretted sending the hard letter. Have you ever done that? I have! You send a text, email, or even a letter, saying something hard that needs to be said. But then you begin to regret it. That's how Paul felt. So this shouldn't come easy to us. We should be much more eager to encourage each other, affirm each other, and honor each other. It's like when I used to coach my kids' teams; we'd try to say at least three positive things to every one negative. Most of what we say to each other should be positive and encouraging. But we also need to love each other enough to have hard conversations, conversations where we gently hold up a mirror and help people see what perhaps they're blind to. This isn't just for pastors; this is the job of every person in the body of Christ.

When you do this, pray like crazy. Pray you'd be both tough and tender, humble and firm. Be sure to separate minor issues from major issues. We're not talking about things that irritate you in that person; we're talking about sin. I must tell you I speak to so many people who need to have a hard conversation like this, and they keep putting it off. Some people would rather leave their church than do this, but that's a cop-out. It might be with a spouse, a son or daughter, a parent, or a friend, but whoever it is, love them enough to tell them the truth. Is it a risk? Yes! You might be rejected. You might be told it's none of your business. You might have your stuff thrown back in your face.

But here's the other side—we also need to be willing to receive it. If someone comes to you and lovingly confronts you, don't react. You might want just to throw it all right back in their face. You may think, "Who are they to judge me? I could say a few things about them." But, instead, listen to them. You should even thank

them for loving you enough to tell you the truth. *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend," Proverbs (27:6a)*. It also says, *"The one who heeds correction gains understanding" (15:32b)*. And it turns out that this is what the Corinthians did. They listened. This leads to the second lesson on how we, as broken and sinful people in need of grace, can continue to grow to be more like Jesus.

Let loving, firm confrontation lead to godly sorrow and repentance

We need to let loving and firm confrontation lead to godly sorrow and repentance. In verses 8-13, we get a glimpse of how the Corinthians responded to Paul's hard letter. The word repeated over and over again is sorrow. It's a very simple word. It means to be hurt or grieved over something. It's an emotion. Sometimes we downplay emotions too much, but there's a place for emotion in the Christian life. I love how Fanny Crosby put it in a hymn she wrote:

**Down in the human heart,
Crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart,
Wakened by kindness,
Chords that are broken will vibrate once more.**

There can be feelings buried deep in our hearts, feelings awakened by the loving touch of a friend. Tears may flow freely from a place we didn't even know existed. Sorrow is one of those emotions we usually try to avoid but notice there's a kind of sorrow that's good. Paul says in verse 9, *"For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us."* There's a sorrow God intends! Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt 5:4)*. David agreed and prayed, *"a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17b)*. The point isn't for us to manufacture this emotion. This is the work of God in our hearts. It's a work of grace. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. He illuminates our heart to see our sin for what it is. He causes us to mourn over it, to see the damage it's done and the offense it is to God.

Notice Paul contrasts godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. He says, *"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."* This is important. The opposite of godly sorrow isn't having no sorrow. Our enemy is much more subtle than that. There's a kind of sorrow that's worldly and actually leads to spiritual death. So how do we know the difference? Well, worldly sorrow is when you feel sorry for something you did because of the consequences. You feel sorrow because your actions have led to your own embarrassment or punishment. It's really all about you. But godly sorrow is about God. You grieve over how you've wounded the One who loves you and brought His name into disrepute. Not only that, godly sorrow comes as a result of God's Word and the Holy Spirit,

putting his finger on sin in your life. Worldly sorrow is more about the opinions of people whose favor we fear we've lost. We feel sorrow for something because people around us will think less of us for doing it. Again, it's all about us. What people think of us and not what God thinks becomes the criteria.

Notice Paul says loving and firm confrontation lead not just to godly sorrow, but this godly sorrow also brings repentance. Repentance involves a change of mind, heart, and actions. Notice what this change looked like in the Corinthians. This whole experience induced several qualities in them. Paul says,

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. v. 11a

These are the kinds of things that show real repentance. Repentance isn't just the beginning of our Christian life, but it's also the pathway of growth. Frederica Mathewes-Green writes,

Repentance is the doorway to the spiritual life, the only way to begin. It is also the path itself, the only way to continue. Anything else is foolishness and self-delusion. Only repentance is both brute-honest enough, and joyous enough, to bring us all the way home. But how repentance could be either joyous or vibrantly true is a foreign idea to most of us...

Living in this tension of grace means we let loving, firm confrontation lead to godly sorrow and repentance. But what's the end game? I mean, the life of grace is about more than drowning in sorrow and constantly repenting. So there's a third lesson on how we as broken and sinful people in need of grace can continue to grow to be more like Jesus.

Repentance leads to comfort and joy through restored relationship

Paul said in verse 10, *"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation..."* He's not talking about salvation from the penalty of sin (that's already been taken care of; these people were already believers), but rather a salvation and freedom from the power of sin. And it's quite clear in this passage that this salvation leads to comfort and joy. In fact, those two words, comfort, and joy are all over this passage.

We see how Titus was comforted and encouraged by the reception the Corinthians gave him and how they responded to the letter. Paul says in verse 13, *"we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you."* And this comfort and joy spread from Titus to Paul. Paul describes how he went through some great adversity and trial while waiting for Titus in Macedonia, and then he says, *"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him" (vs. 6-7a)*. So Paul can say, *"I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles*

my joy knows no bounds" (v. 4b). Mark that: "in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." Can you say that? "In all my troubles my joy knows no bounds?" He goes on to say, "*my joy was greater than ever*" (v. 7b). And this comfort and joy clearly comes in the context of community as love and affection is restored. Paul says Titus' affection for them grew when he saw their obedience (v. 15). And Paul was comforted and encouraged when he heard of their longing for him and their ardent concern for him (v. 7).

As we grow in grace, God never brings sorrow without comfort, joy, and restoration of relationship on the other side of it. God isn't out to make us miserable; he's out to bring us comfort and joy; he's out to refresh us and restore us in relationship with one another. And let's not forget, all if this is possible because of the cross. Without the cross, there's no forgiveness; there's no redemption; there's no comfort and joy.

You know, Paul and Titus could have chosen to have a peace at all cost relationship with the Corinthians. They could have swept all the hurt under the rug. The Corinthians could have responded with hard hearts and been unwilling to hear the truth. But they both chose to live in this tension of grace.

In our core value of grace, we say transformation takes place in an environment where we're free to be transparent about our failures and where we're encouraged to walk in obedience to Him. We all yearn for open, honest, and transparent community, but so often, we opt for what Scott Peck calls "pseudo-community." These are friendships, marriages, and families that stay on the surface. No one says anything to rock the boat. You don't discuss misunderstandings, hurts, or frustrations. You don't ask the hard questions. There's an invisible "do not disturb" sign over the relationship. There's peace and quiet, but it's flimsy. Things aren't really being dealt with. Feelings stay underground. This ultimately leads to detachment, mistrust, loneliness, and a kind of submerged resentment. It's the story of so many relationships.

It's interesting, Peck says the only path to real community is to enter into a kind of chaos where lovingly and gently hurts are uncovered, resentments are disclosed, and sins are confessed. Paul and Titus were not settling for pseudo-community. They were willing to risk and enter the chaos of loving confrontation. I also see the Corinthians willing to enter the chaos of sorrow, repentance, and change. And I see how this results in real community, not pseudo-community.

How can we, as broken and sinful people in need of grace, continue to grow to be more like Jesus? We need loving and firm confrontation in the body of Christ. We need to let that loving

and firm confrontation lead to godly sorrow and repentance. And we need to let that repentance lead to comfort and joy through restored relationship.

All this is God's grace—from start to finish. It's grace that leads us to lovingly confront. It's grace that leads us to sorrow and repentance. And it's grace that leads us to comfort and joy through restored relationships.

Yes, the very act of repentance is a grace. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "But the same badness which makes us need it [repentance], makes us unable to do it." This was driven home to me years ago. I've shared this with you before, but I'd lied to my seminary professor about a reading assignment I said I completed. Years later, I was lovingly confronted about this, and I experienced godly sorrow. My repentance was expressed as I wrote him a letter and confessed, telling him I'd gladly go back and finish the assignment, but also knowing he could take my degree away from me.

Not long after, he wrote me a letter, which I still have. In it, he said something I'll never forget. He said, "I accept your confession as a sign of God's grace in your life, and you should too!" I must tell you when I read that gracious letter; my sorrow turned to comfort and joy! I think the whole thing brought him some comfort and joy as well. It was the comfort and joy of grace, grace that frees us to be transparent about our hurts and failures, and grace that encourages us to walk in obedience to him.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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