

II Corinthians 2:5-11 "The Blessing of Forgiveness"
February 3, 2019

Shall we open our Bibles this morning to II Corinthians Chapter 2 verse 5. II Corinthians 2:5.

Continuing this morning in a letter that Paul wrote to a church that he had planted, where he had spent a year and a half of his time there in Corinth, a very corrupt city. And the Lord did a great work. A church began in the midst of all of the perversion, and though the church had lots of troubles, God was at work. Several years later, Paul was in Ephesus planting a church there, towards the end of three years, when he really got the first report that there was trouble in Corinth. Somebody traveling said the place is filled well false apostles, false teachers. They are people into legalism and into works and away from grace. They are going after you big time, because if they can take you down, they can take down your legacy, your teaching, the doctrines you had left behind, the work that God had done through your life.

And so Paul was the subject of this anger and of their bitterness. They accused him of everything from having a bad look to himself, his posture, his speaking was contemptible. They questioned his honesty, his lack of decisiveness. They even questioned whether the money he was gathering for the poor in Jerusalem was actually going to make it there or not. So they turned on Paul in a big way.

Paul wrote a letter to them that we don't know how it got there, but it did. And they wrote a letter back that had more questions than answers. Paul then wrote I Corinthians, which you do have in your Bible, addressed a lot of things that he had heard and things that had been written to him about and sent it over with Timothy to deliver to them, he thought that would help. It did not. In fact, the church seemed to be more divisive than ever. And Timothy came back and said, "Man, these guys are rooted in the leadership. The people want nothing to do with you. The church is turning away big time from the

gospel that you had presented." And it broke Paul's heart. He made an unscheduled trip there. He mentioned it in this book. He thought that he could take care of things when he got there. He could not.

In fact, some unnamed leader -- we don't know who it is -- but he's the subject of what we're looking at this morning, publicly assailed Paul. He did it in open court, so to speak: In the church. Paul would write -- or say to him in this book, you ought to have been commending me, he said to the church, but instead you did nothing. And so they stood by. They watched. They were very passive. The attacker repeated those things that they would say about Paul when he wasn't there.

The surprising kind of humiliating attack against Paul, as well as the lack of church support, sent Paul back to Ephesus, where he wrote a much sterner letter. We don't have it. We know he wrote it because it's mentioned here. He sent it by the hand of Titus. He hoped that that maybe that would do it. It was much more in your face than the last one. And Paul then eventually left Ephesus after three years, got into northern Greece and to Macedonia, where he met with Titus, and Titus had good news. In fact, Paul's reaction is written in Chapter 7 of this book, that he was so happy to hear that some of the conflicts were subsiding. People were coming back to the Lord. They were turning away from these false apostles, false teachers. Not everyone was, and there were still some that were entrenched, work that had to be done, but things were improving. And Paul as a result from Philippi or one of those areas there in Macedonia wrote II Corinthians, this letter that we're studying and have been on Sunday mornings. Paul would eventually go back to Corinth. You can read about it in Acts Chapter 20. But he was just so happy to hear how things were going.

It appears from what we read this morning that the actions of the church once the church started to come back to the Lord against this leader, who had loudly opposed Paul, and made a name for himself in doing so, was met with church discipline. They actually, the church did, asked him to leave; that he was no longer welcome there; that this wasn't the way that we behaved.

You might remember in I Corinthians chapter 5 that there was a gentleman -- or we'll call him a man, not a

gentleman really -- who had had an affair with his father's wife, and he was sitting in the church in Corinth, but no one was saying a word about it. And Paul said, "Wait a minute. That's not going to work. You can't live in open sin. That's not the way the church operates." He wrote in chapter 5 verse 4, "In the name of the Lord Jesus, when you come together, together in my spirit, with the power of Jesus, you should deliver that guy to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that in the day of the Lord His Spirit might be saved." In other words, put him back out in the world. Let him live his life out there. If that's the way he wants to live, hopefully he'll come to his senses and realize all that he's lost and the goodness and the mercy and the grace of God, the fellowship of the saints, and he'll repent and he'll come back. And that was his advice to them. In fact, he said in that same chapter, I wrote to you in an epistle not to accompany sexually immoral people, but I didn't mean sexually immoral people in the world, or else you have to leave the world, but those who are among you. Those who are calling upon the Lord, you shouldn't allow them to live like that. A brother shouldn't be living that way. In fact, if he's living that way, don't even have dinner with him. Rebuke him.

We're supposed to judge what's within. This whole area of church discipline, which is kind of the backdrop of what we're looking at this morning, Jesus covered it in Matthew 18. And you might remember that in His discussion with the disciples He said, if your brother sins against you, then go and tell him his sin, and if he hears you, then you can stop it at that level; right? Between you and him alone. You've won a brother. If he's not going to listen, because he's still living in sin, he doesn't want to hear from you, but yet you care about him, then take two or three others, so in the mouths of two or three witnesses, everything can be established, and confront him again. You know what he's doing; it's not public knowledge, but you know and want to help. Again, if he hears you, then you've won him, but if he doesn't listen, then you have to tell the church. And if he won't listen to the church, then let him be to the church like a heathen or like a tax collector, and put him out.

And the Lord talked about church discipline. It isn't used very often. Most people just want people in the pews, so they'll look the other way, because, hey, at

least they're in church. But that's not the way church functions. We should help one another to do well. But it is in that context of putting him out that the Lord said to the church, I'll be with you in that decision. In fact, He said this: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst." Now, you've heard that used about prayer, but that's really misapplied. The Lord is there when you're there by yourself. He doesn't need two or three of you to show up. But in the context of church discipline, I will support the decision of the church in their dealings with those that are living in sin.

Well, that's where we are this morning, because this guy that was in Paul's face was the fellow that now had repented and wanted back in. He was sorry in what he had done. The problem was, Paul's supporters were in no mood to forgive him or to restore him at all. And so Paul, as their pastor, as their leader, he writes in this letter and focuses on the blessings of forgiveness. It's a big topic that we should be well aware of.

We live in a society today that views forgiveness not as a virtue, but as weakness. Everyone in our culture is a victim. You didn't look at me right, you said something wrong to me, you didn't mark on my coffee cup that the coffee was hot, I need to sue you. Everyone is a victim. I need a quiet space. You leave me alone. We can't get through the day without offending someone. Our heroes are vengeful, proud, making their enemies, and saying to them I'm your worst nightmare. Self-help books today will tell you that forgiveness is unhealthy because it interrupts the development of self-esteem. The victim mentality fuels vengeance and retaliation and blame shifting, and welcome to our world. Yet the price of unforgiveness is high. Hatred grows, animosity is fueled, anger and retribution follows. To not forgive locks you in the past. It makes you a prisoner. It keeps your pain alive. It's like picking at a wound that won't heal. If it goes on long enough, everyone around you will be affected. Paul will write in Chapter 12 in the book of Hebrews, "Be careful lest you fall from the grace of God, and some root of bitterness spring up in you, which will cause trouble and which will defile many."

Unforgiveness leaves your life in anger and turmoil. There's no peace, there's no joy. But forgiveness sets

you free and me free. It allows you to live a liberated, healthy life. Believers are never more like God when they are willing to forgive. Want to be like the Lord? Forgive. He is a God of forgiveness, Nehemiah Chapter 9. He's a forgiving God, Psalm 99. To Him belongs compassion and forgiveness, Daniel Chapter 9. Micah in his little prophetic book wrote in Chapter 7, "Who is like our God? Who pardons iniquity? Who passes over transgression? Who doesn't retain His anger forever? Who delights in mercy? Who's like Him? And the answer's no one's like Him. Because you're most like God when you forgive.

The parable of the prodigal son tells you and illustrates for you how willing God is to forgive. How He looks out over the horizon, watching for someone to come running to Him, arms open, heart willing. He meets with sinners. He forgives us. He cleanses us. He throws our sins, Micah Chapter 7, into the depth of the sea. He casts them behind His back, Isaiah Chapter 38. He removes them by His blood, which was shed. He puts them as far away as the east is from the west. He remembers them no more. Every one of you are here today counting on God's forgiveness. All He asks of you and I is that we do unto others what He has done to us. Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who despite fully use you, so you can be the sons of your Father in Heaven.

We're eternally grateful to the Lord for His mercy towards us, and we are in debt to Him, and He wants us now to extend that same mercy to others. It's the bottom line to walking with God. Matthew Chapter 18, there is that story of the king's servant who found himself in debt 10,000 talents. We don't know what that amount was, because 10,000 is the largest number in Greek. It just - - he's in debt, like he can't pay. The king in his mercy extended his mercy to this servant, forgave him his debt, because he begged him for help. The servant went out and found someone who was in debt to him very little, but rather than extending that mercy, he demanded his payment. Threatened him with lawsuits and jail time if he didn't pay up. The people standing by and watching and selling and knowing the whole story went to the master, went to the king, and explained how this fellow had behaved, and the master was angry. Went and grabbed the guy, delivered him over to the torturers until he should now pay him everything that he owed the king.

It's a fine story if it didn't end with these words: "So shall my Heavenly Father do to you, if from your heart you will not forgive your brother his trespass." All of a sudden, a nice story become horrible.

And then we have that difficult verse in the -- what we call the Lord's prayer. It's not really the Lord's prayer, it's the disciple's prayer taught to them by the Lord. But it said this, Matthew 6:14: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will forgive you. But --" I don't like that word "but" -- "if you don't forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you." Now, that's not a statement saying you'll lose your salvation. That's an eternal work of God. It has nothing to do with the issue of relationship. You won't fail to become God's child because you haven't forgiven, but you'll put yourself in a place where God's going to deal with you and you're going to lose the temporal benefits of walking with God in this life. Jesus was the perfect model of how we should be. Some of His last breaths formed the words, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

The apostle Paul understood the importance of forgiveness in the Lord. Boy, he had needed God's forgiveness in many things, both to the individual and to the body. And so in this passage Paul urges the Corinthians to forgive this guy that had been in his face and so embarrassed him, had assaulted him. But in so doing, Paul kind of puts his best foot forward, and he shows us his heart. Because forgiveness makes you more like the Lord. Verse 5 says this -- and see, we're there already, verse 5. Long introduction, short lesson. "But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent, but not to be severe, not too severe."

One of the things that keep us from forgiving is pride. We've been offended. We deserve compensation. And pride in terms of unforgiveness runs the gamut from wallowing into self-pity to violence and retaliation. Notice that Paul acknowledged that the individual had caused sorrow, but also notice that Paul refused to take it personally. He said if anyone's caused grief, it hasn't been to me. And I think in terms of how Paul wrote this, he wants to soften the animosity towards this offender. It's not about personal injury anyway. It's how does the church respond to hurt and offense? Paul said, well, maybe you got hurt by it, but look, it's not that big of a deal.

Not too severe. Really? You can't get over this? They yelled at me and you're upset.

You remember in I Corinthians Chapter 1 that there were those who are of Paul's party; right? I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Cephas. And apparently at least some of Paul's party there was very offended on his behalf. This man's repentance for them wasn't good enough. They wanted more than a pound of flesh. They wanted him to suffer a little bit more. This was unforgivable. You don't know what you did to me. You don't know how I felt. You know, the consequences. Paul here is dismissing the grief and the embarrassment that it's caused and asks the church to look at it a little more objectively. Come on, really? This is what you're going to keep this guy out of church for? Paul rises above the offense, forgives the offender, and refuses to be the victim or carry a grudge. It is a pretty good lesson for the church today in this culture in which we live. Paul's concern was with the action and the reaction of the saints. Some, had been impacted by this guy. Paul wanted to downplay the incident. Look, he's repented. Case closed. Let's move on. You can't forgive someone that's not repentant or if they continue to live that kind of life. I get it. There's nothing I can do. But this guy's sorry. He wants to do better. He wants to turn the page. He wants to move on. And Paul's heart was filled with the love and the mercy that God had shown to him. He wasn't going to let any anger steal his joy or impair his usefulness or dominate the church issue. It wasn't going to go that way. He was going to stand his ground. He was going to forgive.

You remember when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers? I would think that would leave a mark. "They all got together and sold me off into slavery into Egypt because they hated me and I was dad's favorite. They went home and told dad I was dead." For years that's the story they told, that's the truth that was believed. Motivated by jealousy, doing this despicable thing. Years later, they end up standing in front of Joseph, who has now been raised up by the Lord through many years of trials into being the second most powerful man in the world. The Vice Pharaoh, if you will, in charge of just about everything. His brothers were terrified. Their dad had died, and they said, "Well, Joseph has no reason to stop from hating us now, and I suspect that he's going to repay us for the evil that we've done." And they were

terrified. Joseph came out to see them in Genesis Chapter 50 and said, "Look, don't be afraid. I'm not God." Literally he said, "I'm not in the place of God. That's not me. As for you, what you did to me you meant to do as for evil, but God turned it around for good, so that he could save many people this day. So don't be afraid of me. I'll provide for you, and I'll provide for your little ones." And the last verse there in Genesis says, "And he comforted them, he spoke kindly to them, and he helped them." And you want to say, what? He had the chance to kill them, string them up, and get even with them. He did indeed. And he would have been less like the Lord that he served.

Forgiveness breaks the chains of pride and self-pity and revenge and vengeance, stuff that makes you despair and breaks relationships. Forgiveness resists your pride. Verse 6 tells us that forgiveness also reflects God's mercy. This punishment, which was inflicted by the majority, is now sufficient for this man. The punishment of church discipline is useful, it's biblical, and it can be helpful. Unfortunately, we live in a culture where if you said to someone, "Man, you can't be living like that openly in sin. You're going to have to get out of the church," he'll just go down the street somewhere and lead worship next week. People don't care. They just want you in. So we lose the benefit of group pressure. Here's how group pressure works: You all are very much on your best behavior now. You sing, you smile; no swear words, no drunkenness. You're amazing, as long as you don't go out that door. But punishment of church discipline upon this man was sufficient. It led to his repentance. In other words, Paul said, don't give him more than he deserves. I mean, God gives us mercy. He's come back around. Restore him in love. The same love that should confront him should restore him.

In the Bible church discipline, excommunication, disfellowship -- call it what you will -- is a severe kind of last step for wayward saints. But God would rather that it ends in repentance and then we're restored. The attitude is always one of bring them back. It's not getting even; it's getting ahead of the enemy who wants to destroy.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church, he said to them, "Brothers, in the name of Jesus, withdraw yourself from every brother that is walking disorderly and not

receiving the traditions or the commandments or the teachings that we've delivered to you. The same chapter, II Thessalonians Chapter 3, he said, "If anyone will not obey the words of this epistle, don't keep company with them, so that they might be ashamed. But don't count them as an enemy. Just admonish him as a brother." In other words, let love be the guiding force, even behind the separation that might have to take place. It is a tool that God uses to restore, but once it is accomplished, the door of grace should swing wide open. The problem for the Corinthians was they're mad and they're going to continue to be mad no matter what. That their goal was not restoration at all. The desired effect had taken place, and yet nothing had taken place in their hearts towards mercy.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Chapter 4, he said, "Be kindhearted one to another, and forgive one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven you." He turns and writes to the Colossians, "Bear one another's burdens. Forgive one another. If anybody has a complaint against another, even as Christ forgave, you forgive." He writes to the Galatians, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in a fault, you that are spiritual restore him in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself you could also be tempted." Seems like every church he wrote to had the same issue, and it was no different here in Corinth. Which is why I said you're never more like our Lord than when you forgive and show mercy to a repentant sinner.

He says in verse 7, "So that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one would be swallowed up with too much sorrow." Forgiveness should restore joy. This man had done the wrong thing. He was embarrassed by it. He was publicly chastised for it. He realized he needed to return to the Lord, and now he had, and he returned to the people that he cared for, and they weren't willing to receive him. And Paul says, don't crush this guy. Sorrow when you fail, that's bad enough. If God forgives, you forgive, lest he become swallowed up. The word means to be drowned by too much sorrow. We're not called to add sorrow to a person's life who's repented, because restoration is the goal. So he writes, on the contrary, comfort him. The word "comfort" is the Greek word "parakaleo," one who is called alongside to help. It's the word used to describe the work and the person of the Holy Spirit. So forgive this guy before he quits

altogether. Wouldn't it be horrible for you to go to the Lord today and say, "Lord, forgive my sins," and the Lord said, "Well, I might. Check with Me tomorrow, but I'm considering all My options"? No, you expect to hear, "You're forgiven." If you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you your sins, cleanse you from all unrighteousness. That's what you're depending on. God's only asking you to pass that along.

"Therefore," verse 8, "I urge you to reaffirm your love to him." The word "reaffirm" means ratify, like a covenant, as a deal that is made. The Corinthians had officially and publicly put this guy out because of his divisive ways, and they should have. He didn't need to be in the church. It was terrible. But now that he had repented, they should officially and publicly restore him, and love him. Reaffirm your agape. Because the word agape love is the love in the Bible of choice, of will. Not a sentimental feeling based on some kind of emotion, but rather a love that depends on obedience, on action, which is why when the Bible says to you and I, love your enemies, and we go, I can't do that. I hate him. In fact, if I start loving him, I'll lose track of him, because I know who I hate and those are my enemies. The Lord doesn't command you to feel love. He commands you to act in love. Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who spitefully use you. Walk in love, God's love. It's a love of choice. It's a love that God places in your heart, and the capacity to do it doesn't come from you, it comes from Him. Love as God loves.

Be imitators of God, Paul would write to the Ephesians. Walk in love as Christ loves us and gave Himself for us as an offering, a sweet-smelling aroma to the Lord. Love as Christ loved you. Love affirms forgiveness. And it's an act of obedience.

Verse 9, "To this end I wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you're going to be obedient in everything." Forgiveness is a test of your relationship with God. I'm always amazed at people, and because I'm in the position I am, I get critics. You might wonder why. But they'll go other places and badmouth me. And I don't mind it, because, I don't care. It's free to get in, free to get out. I don't know. I'm not about to be concerned with what other people think. But they will badmouth you. It'll come back to me, and then you'll see them and they'll be, like, the most spiritual people

everywhere else. Okay. Where's your test of your mercy? So Paul said, I wrote this to you because I want you to see where you're at spiritually. I want this to be a proving ground for you.

We must obey the injunction to rebuke sin when we see it in those around us so we can help them, but also when repentance comes, we should forgive. Jesus said in Luke Chapter 17, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him." Good enough. So it's a test, or it can be a test. The Lord often, by the way, did that, even in the Old Testament. When the manna began to fall from Heaven, the Lord said to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread down from heaven. I'm going to tell the people this is your quota to pick every day, and by this I'm going to test them to see if they'll walk in my law or not. If I tell them only go six days, on the day before the Sabbath collect enough for two days." And people went out and they collected enough for a month. And then it all rotted on the shelf. Then they got mad at God. God said, "Well, I told you just to get a little bit." Every day, grace for every day, and grace for every day. They failed the test.

In Deuteronomy chapter 8 when Moses gives his final farewell speech to the children of Israel before they go off into the land with Joshua, he said on them, "Look, remember how the Lord led you through the wilderness these 40 years, how He humbled you, and how He tested you, to see if your heart would be right with Him and keep His commandments or not." That wasn't God testing them to wonder because God wasn't sure what they would do; that was God testing them so that they would learn what they would do. I'm sure all of you have the best of intentions. If you're given a hypothetical, you go, oh, here's what I would do. And maybe you would and maybe you wouldn't. But you really won't know until you're in that position. So God puts you in positions where you can see, is your faith really the way that it should be or not? The Corinthians, by the way, passed this test. Titus's report, again Chapter 7 of this book, tells us that they confronted the sin and they restored the repentant one.

Finally, verse 10 and 11, "Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. If indeed I have anything to forgive, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should get an advantage of us. We're

not ignorant of his devices." Again, Paul's language kind of minimizes the issue. He said, I'll forgive with you, if I have anything to forgive. It's kind of like; it's not a big deal, guys. His greatest concern was that the offender now gets restored; that he wanted unity and fellowship back to the church. But verse 11's important, because he said unforgiveness is really a tool the devil uses against us. It's a way that, you know, what does God hate? Those who sow discord amongst the brethren. One the seven things God hates. Dividers in the church. The world "devices" means just that, wicked plans or schemes. One of the devil's greatest plans is to divide people, not bring forgiveness and mercy which united you with God, and can unite you with the person sitting next to you. Satan's goal for the church is just the opposite of the Lord's. So we have to stand against the wiles, the "willies," of the devil; not give him a stronghold. We're not ignorant of what he would want to do. Don't give him a chance. Go to Job Chapter 1 and you'll see his heart. He's the accuser of the brethren. Go to Zechariah Chapter 3 and he stands there to accuse. That's all he's interested in. So while the Holy Spirit convicts us so that we can turn back to Jesus, the enemy, he condemns us to drive us away.

Forgiveness is part of the mercy that God extends to the church. We should not allow each other to get away with sin. And if you have friends that are living in sin and you're looking the other way, shame on you. If you're a friend, you'll tell them. You should try to help them. We should watch over each other. It's not such a bad thing to have someone looking over your shoulder. The enemy's got all kinds of things up his sleeve. But we should also, the minute we find repentance, forgive. It will resist our pride, it will reflect God's mercy, it'll restore our joy, and it'll affirm His love. It's an act of obedience. It'll overcome the enemy. We don't do it near enough. But we will this week.