

## **A Time to Turn**

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

February 4, 2007

We don't take sin seriously.

We don't even like the word.

And we **really** don't like the word "sinner." It sounds very harsh. Downright mean. Only crazy people with bullhorns call people sinners. Right?

The problem is, the things we call sins are always moving—away from us. Sin is never something that we do, or that the person next to us does. It's something that other people do, people who are far away.

A lot of change attitude about homosexuality has to do with this. Forty years ago, the average American was convinced that homosexuality was wrong. It was sick. It was weird. It was gross. It was deviant.

But then Rock Hudson died of AIDS. And then they found out that their maybe their cousin Mark was gay and living in a "committed relationship". Then gay and lesbian characters began to show up on TV and in movies. And you like cousin Mark, and you like the gay guy in the movies. What was once seen as deviant seems to become more and more acceptable.

I've seen pastors, men with fine theological educations, throw away what they know what the Bible teaches, when their son or daughter "comes out of the closet." Then they suddenly "discover" that the Bible doesn't say what it obviously does say. That would be a truth too close to home.

I don't want to make this all about homosexuality. Let's take the favorite sports of heterosexuals: infidelity and divorce. I can still remember when the very word divorce had a ring of shame. Now some people try to make it almost a badge of honor. Am I crazy, or are there too many divorces? I don't think so!

There was a time when the divorce rate of the general public was significantly higher than that of Bible-believing Christians. Now it's identical. As a matter of fact, I saw one survey that said that so-called Bible-believing Christians were slightly **more** likely to get a divorce!

But we can't just stay camped in the area of sexual sins. Sometimes the world thinks we Christians are obsessed with sexual conduct, and sometimes I think they have a point. What about **pride, greed, gluttony, laziness, arrogance, and anger**? Aren't these sins too?

Add to that the fact the Bible lumps in **false worship, false doctrine** as sin as well. The Ten Commandments starts with *don't worship false gods...don't worship idols*. You know, the biggest sin is **failing to love God with all your abilities**—with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.

When we really understand that **sin is about punching God in the eye by failing to love Him as we should** and turning in our own direction, or when we fail to love others the way we love ourselves, **then we get God's perspective on sin**. It's not the little things we do; it's the wholesale denial of God and His rights. We stop asking the question, "Is it a sin to take a drink, or to go to the movies, and so forth?" Instead we understand that sin is when we fail to honor God as God, to love God

and His ways, that we understand what sin really is.

When we see sin this way, then we want to go to war with it, starting in ourselves. Instead of defining sin as something farther and farther away from us, we see it first as something within us, that rebellious part of us that wants to overthrow God's claim on our lives. And we are willing to name sin as sin no matter how close to home it comes, because we honor and love God above all else.

Every Jesus-follower has to come to grips with this. **Jesus died for our sins.** It must be pretty bad stuff if the Son of God goes to the cross to wage war against it.

But there's another dimension that may be even tougher. Namely, the New Testament calls upon the churches to take seriously the issue of sin within their membership. As a matter of fact, there is a whole body of very clear teaching on the subject of **church discipline** to be found in the New Testament. The teachings of Jesus and Paul are absolutely consistent when it comes to church discipline.

The New Testament provides three grounds for exercising church discipline. The **first** is **unrepentant moral wrong**. The Corinthian church was told to expel a member who was sleeping with his stepmother in 1 Corinthians 5. That's an example of unrepentant moral wrong.

The **second** is **disorder**. By that we don't mean someone who has disagrees or has a bad day and is grouchy, but someone who is simply a troublemaker through and through. 2 Thessalonians 3 tells of a such a case, and Paul told the church to "have nothing to do" with someone like that.

The **third** grounds is **false teaching**. In sheer numbers of references, this gets the most attention in the Bible. In 2 John 7-11, John tells us to watch out for false teachers, to exclude them from the church and not to support them financially in anyway. In Titus 1:13, Paul tells us to rebuke false teachers sharply.

Here in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 we have a complicated case of church discipline that was near its end. In this case, there was a man who was slandering Paul. It seems it was a combination of false teaching and disorder. The "Shock and Awe" letter that I mentioned last week, the letter we no longer have but that we know was very direct and blunt and called for the Corinthians to get their act together, must have directly challenged this man and called upon the church to exercise discipline against him. It was like what Paul did in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul calls on the church to discipline that man who was having sex with his stepmother.

But there's a happy ending. The church took action, and the man repented and sought restoration to the fellowship. Let's look at the passage.

*<sup>5</sup>If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. <sup>6</sup>The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. <sup>7</sup>Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, <sup>11</sup>in order that*

*Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

My friend Scott Hafemann is professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell seminary in Massachusetts. He has a great observation on this passage:

*In Paul's day, the Corinthians struggled to know when to stop the punishment; in our day, we struggle whether we should ever start.<sup>1</sup>*

Let's unpack this passage in terms of four things the Lord wants us to know.

1. **In the body of Christ, we're all connected.**
2. **If we talk about discipline, we need to talk about forgiveness and restoration as well.**
3. **It requires faith to forgive.**
4. **What's on the line isn't my reputation or the church's reputation—it's the reputation of Jesus.**

### **In the body of Christ, we're all connected**

What one guy does affects everyone. Your service affects me, your worship affects me, your love affects me and your sin affects me too. Your godly deeds bless me and your ungodly deeds drag me down.

The church confronted this unnamed guy who was slandering Paul and he came around. He wasn't just off doing his thing. What he was doing was like an anchor, holding back that church from the fullness of God's intent. Happily, he realized that and turned and now it was time to "forgive and comfort him" as Paul says in vs. 7.

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<sup>1</sup> **2 Corinthians** (The NIV Application Commentary). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000. Page 95.

That was also not just for his own personal benefit, but also to the benefit of the whole church. Now the church can experience together the power of forgiveness and restoration. Once they looked at him as a slanderer; now they needed to see him again as a brother. In the world, there are no second chances. In the church, we specialize in second chances.

One of our statements of value as a church is that of "the family of God":

*We were made to experience being the family of God. We believe that real fellowship means time **together**, study **together** and service **together**...*

"Together" is the key word. The government has "No Child Left Behind." We have "No Believer Left Behind." For good or bad, we're all in this together. We are family—God's family.

**If we talk about discipline, we need to talk about forgiveness and restoration as well.**

The whole concept of taking our connected so seriously, and of taking sin so seriously that we would actually discipline members is scary to many of us. Yet why have a church covenant, as we do, if there is no sanction for breaking it? Why say we believe in the authority of God's word if we are unwilling to live by what it teaches? In Luke 6:46, Jesus puts it bluntly: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

Obviously, discipline can become a legalistic hammer to whack people, but that's not the way it's intended in the Bible. It's intended to hold one another accountable for our actions. And to express tough **love** one for another.

It's not loving to watch a brother or sister in Christ drive their lives off a cliff and do nothing. The loving thing to do is to try to **stop** them, even if it makes them angry. It's like taking a drunken man's keys away from him so he doesn't kill himself or somebody else.

But when that's past, it's time to really test your faith: will you love and accept and forgive and trust that person again? Our human instinct is to say, "That's it, I've had it, and I can't take anymore of his nonsense." Well, it's a good thing God doesn't do that with us. He puts up with a lot of nonsense from us. The call to forgive the broken-hearted, the truly sorry, is a call to love the way God loves. Colossians 3:13 says,

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***

The cross is our model. That forgiveness came at a great price—the death of the Son of God. Forgiveness of one another comes at a price as well—it would be easier, emotionally and in every other way—just to write people off. But the cross is our pattern. We will bleed if need be to make things right with our brothers and sisters, and will we bleed if needed to take that person back into the fellowship of God's people.

### **It requires faith to forgive.**

Discipline, forgiveness and faith are all connected. Go back to the Lord's Prayer and see how this all works. In Matthew 6:12, we read Jesus telling how to pray:

*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

This was the only part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus commented on, and it's right after the end of the prayer, in verses 14-15:

*14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.  
15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Not to forgive is a sign we haven't understood God's own forgiveness. More than that, not to forgive is a sign of deep spiritual sickness. Jesus warns us that it may even mean that we are unforgiven ourselves—that we aren't right with God.

It's a little scary—either to forgive a person, or to confront a person. It's scary to forgive them because you never know if they might let you down or abuse you. It's even scarier to confront a person because they might get mad, or threaten a lawsuit, or because other people might think that you think you're so much better than they.

We place our faith in God, and in His word, to overcome that fear. The Lord has given us a pattern, both on how we are to hold one another accountable, and how we are to seek reconciliation and to forgive and accept one another. Follow that pattern in faith, and God will reward. I didn't say it would be easy, but in the long run, it's the right way. In the long run, it's the way with the most blessings.

One more thing this passage reminds us of:

**What's on the line isn't my reputation or the church's reputation—it's the reputation of Jesus.**

Look again in vs. 10-11:

*<sup>10</sup> If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to*

*forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, <sup>11</sup>in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

Paul had been slandered, but that wasn't important to him. Even the church being slandered wasn't Paul's main consideration. What was a real problem was the idea that the reputation of both Jesus' authority and Jesus' love could be compromised by how the church handled the slanderer.

If they did nothing, the reputation of Jesus' authority would suffer. Do we believe that Jesus is really Lord, and that He has a claim over our lives even when it's hard? That's what was on the line.

Also, if they didn't forgive the man once he came around, the reputation of Jesus' love would suffer. Do we believe in the power of the cross to break sin's power and to wipe the slate clean, or not? That was also on the line.

And if they fell into either trap—the trap of inaction or the trap of harshness, who would benefit? Vs. 11 tells us: Satan. Satan was trying to "outwit" them. Satan had his schemes. At the heart of every scheme of Satan is his desire to throw mud on the name of Jesus. That would work either if the church didn't deal with sin, or if it refused to forgive a repentant person.

Our desire is to bring Him honor and glory and to stand firm against all devilish schemes. It's time to turn to God, to turn to Scripture, to turn to truth and to turn to the power of the cross of Jesus. Yes, it's time to turn. Let's pray.

**PRAYER/END**