

Forgiveness

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[0 : 0 0] I would like if you would turn back with me this evening to 2 Corinthians where we will continue our study. There are some notes connected with that sermon in your bulletin sheet as well. And we are going to be looking at the next section, a section that we read from verse 5 to verse 11 of chapter 2. And by way of introduction what I want to do is I want to update you on the fictional church plant that we spoke about before when trying to bring the Corinthian situation as it were up to date into our own situation, fictional church plant in Corsetorfen. And I hope that by so doing that it might help us to relate to the situation that we find in Corinth. As you remember before we looked at this fictional church plant and we saw that people had been converted from the community who had no church background at all, no knowledge of Christianity. But they had come together under a guy who had been a church planter, who had been preaching the gospel, who had been in the community and they had come to faith and so this church had grown up in Corsetorfen. And there was probably about 30 or 40 people and sometimes they would meet in homes but they would also meet in a school hall because the numbers were growing. But remember the church planter who had originally set up this church had moved on and he had moved on to Perth to plant another church there. And so it is a young church and it is an inexperienced church and the leaders within the church are young and inexperienced as well. And already there is beginning to be problems in the church and difficulties. There is factions, there is people doing different things and some are questioning the authority of the Bible and the relevance of the Bible to their own situation. And then they find themselves in this really deep seated moral dilemma in this young group of people who are gathered together.

One of the guys in the church is in a really unhealthy relationship, an incestuous relationship really with his stepmother. Not good. And not only is that the case but it is kind of really public and it is well known and it is beginning to affect everyone in the congregation.

They all know about it. And the young church leaders really are not that clear on how they should progress and what they should do. They are not that sure of scripture and they are not that sure of their own authority. And so when they confront the guy about his behaviour he objects to what they say and he questions them and he questions their authority and he questions the relevance of the Bible and he questions whether he is doing anything wrong at all. And so this young church actually don't do anything about it at all. And things are beginning to go sour in many ways. Then the church planter, the guy who set up the church in Perth hears about that and he comes back to visit them and he comes back to speak to them and he speaks to them all and he opens scripture to them and he opens God's truth about their need for dealing with the situation and the sinful behaviour that is being allowed to flourish in the congregation in this young church. And as he speaks to them the spirit of God is powerfully descends on them and it convicts them that that is indeed the case.

They hear the word of God and they know it is correct and the leaders and indeed the majority of the members recognise and know that they need to do something about what this guy is doing and how he is flaunting God and how he is damaging himself and the relationships of those around him, things are disastrous. So they decide to act and to expel him from this fledgling church in Crestorfin, pleading with him to turn away from his behaviour and from his sinful relationship. The majority of them. There is a small minority who aren't happy that any action has been taken whatsoever. What on earth right do they have to say anything to anyone about how they live? It is all just how we are before God they say. The Bible doesn't have authority over us in these areas but nonetheless they do what they do. So the man ends up not walking the streets because he is homeless but walking the streets of Crestorfin Village because he has been shunned. And as he does so he is thinking about what has happened and he begins to recognise what he has lost and the company, the love, the freshness, the unity, the transformation he had seen in people's lives who had become

Christians and he begins to realise the situation that he was in, the behaviour that he was engaged in and the spirit of God powerfully exposes his own heart and he breaks down as he is walking the streets, recognising he has indeed been absolutely selfish and he realises that his behaviour was masking all kinds of bitterness and wanting to get back at his father for things that had happened years ago and different issues that were behind his behaviour and were motivating his action and he knows the sin that he has been engaged in and the pain that he has caused to others and his guilty conscience he recognises that was what was causing him to doubt and question the authority of the Bible and as he does this he just goes into one of the parks in Crestorfin and just sits down and bows his head and asks God for forgiveness and he feels, he brings to mind the words that we open to service with tonight, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson they shall be as wool and these words he takes to be the very words of God into his own situation and forgiveness and healing and relief and his release floods his soul and he knows that he is forgiven and after a short time he returns to the people in the church there in this young church plant in Crestorfin, what courage that took for him to do and he goes back to them and he expresses that God has forgiven him and he knows that God has forgiven him and he is repentant and he wants to come back and all the people, they come and they welcome him with open arms and they hug him and they are delighted, oh sorry, sorry that is not the right chapter, that is not the right ending, that is the ending we all wanted, that is the Hollywood ending but that is not what happens actually, what happens is when he comes back and when he declares his sense of God's forgiveness and when he looks for their acceptance he finds cold shoulders, he finds cynicism, he finds that the people who were well they may be weren't so keen to intense to get disciplined in the first place but they are certainly not that keen to forgive either, they are suspicious, they think it must take much longer, how can God forgive something like that so easily and they don't want to accept him, they don't want to receive his forgiveness and they don't want themselves to forgive him, that is actually a parallel of what we believe was happening in Corinth, it is a kind of modern day parable or insight into the kind of situation that Paul is writing into in Corinth, we don't know exactly where we are putting together some of the different facts that we get from 1st and 2nd Corinthians but that certainly is the kind of truth, the kind of reality, the kind of situation that [9 : 05] Paul is writing to here especially where we read from verses 5 to 11 where he wants to deal with this lack of forgiveness among the people for someone who has been engaged in a flagrant sin and who has damaged both himself and the Christian community and they are unwilling when he is repentant to receive him to themselves again.

So what is God teaching us about himself, about the church as a body of Christ and indeed about the ugliness of sin and the importance of forgiveness?

Want to spend a few minutes looking at some of these things this evening from this section. We know undoubtedly from both that parallel, from our own experience and from scripture that sin damages the Christian community, sin damages the body of Christ.

He says in verse 5, 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. They had been grieved, they had been broken, they had been damaged by this divisiveness and by the name calling and by the taking of sides and by the false teaching and by the immorality that had crept into the church unchallenged.

And we recognise that to be the case. This is not about setting up a system of tiptoe, I don't want to tiptoe around church procedure or individual rights or degrees of sin or making judgments in a known blame society today.

[10 : 59] Noram I wanting to discuss the horrific abuses that the church has made of authority and the use of authority or discipline in the past but I simply want to express what the Bible teaches for us individually and as a church that God's word makes clear as does experience that sin damages us.

It damages our relationships, it damages our church life and it damages our relationship with God because sin is rebellion against God's love, against God's leading and against God's law in our hearts.

That's what it is and it pits us against Him and it pits us against His love and against His grace and against His sovereign authority in our lives.

So we find in ourselves and in our churches if there is no submission to Christ and to His word, if there is no obedience to His truth and to His sovereign glory, if we don't recognise that then it will tear us apart.

It will tear us internally apart in our relationship with God but it will also tear us apart as a people if we allow sin to be something we countenance, something we think is well it's okay, it doesn't matter, it's the 21st century.

[12 : 34] How can you expect us to be obedient to God? We live in a non-submissive society so we can't possibly expect that we are going to follow these all fashioned ways of living.

But we know that sin is not really about time and about being in or out of date, it's about our moral relationship with God and whether we are secretly holding on to sin or whether we are kind of living a hypocritical life or whether it's more blatant and public as it was in this case, then we recognise it brings grief into our lives and it brings grief into our churches.

My rebellion is going to affect you and your rebellion will affect each other. So none of us sin with impunity, none of us choose to rebel against God and it not only doesn't affect us but it affects the whole congregation.

If we are cold spiritually, we are bringing down the temperature of the whole congregation spiritually. We have that responsibility because we are part of one body together.

So sin damages the body of Christ and Paul as he sets out principles here of church throughout the kingdom until Christ returns, he is reminding us of that.

[14 : 09] He wants us to know that it's damaging to engage and to allow and to regard lightly behaviour that is going to break our relationship with God and with each other.

So sin damages the body of Christ. We also recognise here in kind of seed form that church discipline is biblical. In verse 6 Paul speaks about the punishment that was inflicted on him, that is on this person who was under discipline in the church.

Punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. In 1 Corinthians where we kind of get some of our information from 1 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 5 the whole chapter speaks about expelling the immoral brother which is what I have taken a parallel from here.

1 Corinthians 5 verse 5 he says, when you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and I am with you in spirit and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

That simply means remove him from the protection and the comfort and the joy of the fellowship of God's people so that he will recognise exactly what he is doing and will be drawn back into the kingdom.

[15 : 45] Any loving gospel community will be broken by public scandalous damaging behaviour in its members and when that is the case church should act, act in love, act in tears, act in humility, act in grace but nonetheless should act for the glory of Christ and for the good of the individual because we believe that such a public denunciation of Christ and His ways by a Christian is going to be damaging for that person.

So the majority of the members as we are told in verse 6 they were moved by God to act on behalf of His name to keep the congregation close to Jesus Christ and that involved them, involved the whole congregation we may have something to learn from that in our procedures but it was costly. It wasn't high handed. It was tremendously costly. This guy was removed from the privileges and from the fellowship of God's people.

The aim was to bring him back, to restore him, for him to be healed, to know what he had lost, to make him aware of the danger of his life, of high handedly holding his hand up to God and just shaking his fist or putting his fingers up and saying I don't care about God and His holiness.

I just want all that I want, whatever the cost and to bring him yet to that place of healing and restoration and that is always and must always be and will always be the nature very unpopular I recognise today in our anti-authoritarian, anti-submissive society to be engaged in any kind of church discipline.

[18 : 05] It only works in the context of love, in the context of cost, in the context of trust and faithfulness and commitment to each other.

It only works in the context of community and we recognise that and it is nonetheless tremendously biblical.

So the third thing that we can take from it is that repentance is the Holy Spirit's home pitch. It's very much what the Holy Spirit inspires within us in our lives.

In Ephesians 4 verse 30 we are encouraged just to not grieve the Holy Spirit of God for whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice, be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just in Christ God forgave you.

[19 : 06] The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth and as we have God in our hearts then we find that His work continually in us is plowing up our hearts to repentance, to get rid of the things that separate us from God, the things that just are well bedded in our hearts that we've been born with.

We're happy with being selfish and being bitter and being independent and doing our own thing and not having God rule over us. He's beginning to work that out of our system and He does so through repentance as we see who we are and we come to Him for cleansing and healing and it's His home pitch, that's what He's happy with, that's what the Holy Spirit works and reveals Himself most powerfully.

We seek to do that in our lives as individuals and also in our lives as a congregation that we live in the atmosphere of repentance as a people individually, we're used to it and as a congregation that we do and I believe when we do that, when we live in that atmosphere of re-aligning our lives to God rather than the other way about where we look at God and we want Him to be realigned to where I am, rather when we want to realign our lives to God through repentance and faith, when we do that humbly, when we do it in love, when we do it to honour Christ individually and as a people together, I believe powerfully that God will bless that and God will bless it in a miraculous way, in a way that we couldn't predict and that can't just be analysed into our lives but God will bless that and maybe the last thing we want to do, maybe the last thing, even as individuals who love each other and who maybe are aware of something really radically wrong in our best friend's life and we take them aside and we, against all kind of natural love, we speak to them about the direction they're heading and with kind of just stuttering words and with just this great fear of intrepidation of their response, it's counter-cultural and it's absolutely radical but in love, as we prayerfully and genuinely do it, God will honour that because we care about people and we care for their healing and we care for their lives in the light of God in His Word and as we do so, we believe that God will heal us and God will redeem us, so much pain, so much unspoken hurt in our lives, so much, such a lack of healing spiritually because we don't allow the light of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit into the deepest, darkest parts of our hearts because it hurts, because it's not easy, because it's not cheap and so we're content with just looking good spiritually and saying the right things every so often and turning up at the right times in church and saying the right things from Scripture but we keep God and the Holy Spirit away from the recesses of our hearts that need healing and we make sure nobody else comes near them either and we take offence and we take the huff and we move away when people get too close to these things.

Huff and we recognize that, it's not in any way about being sensorious or judgmental, this is not a sermon about defending church procedure or organizational control or heavy shepherding or authoritarianism in any way or in any sense, rather seeing the body of Christ as a family, as a people, recognizing the misery of sin that is allowed to fester and grow and develop unchallenged in our lives and the cost of true love, genuine love, love which is willing to put Christ before friendship but at the same time values friendship and Christ as the greatest thing of all.

So repentance is Holy Spirit's home pitch and then lastly and really in a sense this is for me the most important part of the section which is that forgiveness is a double edged grace.

[23 : 59] Forgiveness is a double edged grace. He speaks here Paul about the grief that they had endured, he speaks about the punishment that had been inflicted by them, by the majority but he also realizes they were unwilling to forgive this guy when he comes back and he goes on in verse 17, he says, now instead you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him and he writes this because this is part of their walk of faith and he writes and challenges on that because he knows if they don't forgive him Satan will come into the congregation and blow it apart.

So he moves you see, do you see how wonderful this is? He moves from the recalcitrant sinner who is repented and he moves to the people who may be in danger of looking down their noses at this guy and saying look at them I've never done anything like this and turns the whole picture around and says you are the ones now who are in danger of causing damage to the cause of Christ because of your partisan and unforgiving spirit and there's always that isn't there in God's word?

It's always about God challenging us to look at ourselves, not look at our neighbour, not look to judge ourselves by how everyone else is doing, it always will take us back to ourselves so that forgiveness even in a context of church discipline will always ask us to look at our own lives and our own selves.

Forgiveness is a double edged sword. The danger you see for this people where they were cynical of this guy's repentance, they wanted time, they wanted to take time out, they wanted to see whether there was any change, there was maybe a degree of pride in themselves but repentance is that genetic code of grace and forgiveness is part of that.

[26 : 24] So forgiveness is always a double edged sword. Forgiveness which we receive will help us to be more forgiving to others. In other words we are better at forgiving people when we know our own hearts and when we know how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

See if we don't forgive other people it's because we are not really aware of how much we have been forgiven. If we are quick to judge others and slow to forgive them it's because we have an imbalanced view of our own hearts.

It means that we are standing in judgment and we find that easy and we haven't really bowed the knee to the God who asks us to challenge our hearts before Him and His holiness and yet see how He is forgiving us despite our rebellion and our sin which we eat up every day.

So we are better at forgiving when we know our hearts and we know what we have been forgiven ourselves and how submissive we are to be. But also forgiveness is something that as we experience it changes our own heart of grace and grace always has open arms.

See we should be like the prodigal father not like the elder brother. It's amazing, it's amazing parable isn't it?

[28 : 03] The prodigal father's arms were always open. He was always looking for his son to return. He was always ready to forgive him when his son recognised his guilt.

And grace always has open arms. I was speaking to a minister this week and we were talking about these kind of things and he said well on the last day I'll be happier if God has said to me you were too graceful.

You were too slow to make judgment on others. He said I'd rather that be the condemnation that is made rather than that you were too correct.

You were too orthodox but maybe too loveless. And grace always has open arms because it's a recognition of what we have received from the God of grace ourselves.

But also in forgiveness we recognise as Paul speaks of here is that forgiveness is as much about obedience as obedience is.

[29 : 19] Maybe that doesn't make sense to you. It makes sense to my kind of perverse mentality. But in verse 9 he says the reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

And that includes forgiveness to be obedient in forgiveness. Forgiveness in other words not just about feeling good about someone or feeling that you want to forgive them.

It's a command. We don't have the option we are just as we are asked to love which is more than just an emotion it's a gift of grace. So forgiveness is just as much about obedience as obedience is. So when he asks us to be forgiving it is an act of obedience to forgive and an act of disobedience not to. So we don't have the option say I don't like that.

I'm not going to forgive. I'm going to carry this grudge. I'm going to bear this as if we have the choice as if it's up to us who we forgive and don't forgive.

[30 : 23] If someone comes to us repentant seeking our forgiveness we have no right to declare that we will not engage in forgiveness and we recognize there's so much that we can even just plaster over this so small beer or so small change that we don't even need to offer forgiveness we just we can be wronged you know because it's not that important.

We can just be wronged about lots of little things because we know there are lots of little things that we do that people overlook in our lives and are willing to be wronged about our behavior so we too are able to do that because that's what obedience is.

It's about obedience to these loving and soft kind of elements of grace as well as the doctrines of grace is at war.

Forgiveness which is a very real a reality in our lives is something we are asked to do and be engaged in as an act of obedience because if we cannot forgive, and this is the last thing I say, if

we cannot forgive, Satan laughs and he gets to work.

Satan will laugh and he will get to work in this fellowship and in your life and in our lives if we choose not to forgive, if we choose to be bitter and harbour wrongs, if we choose not to have the open arms of grace.

[31 : 52] Paul warns of that I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake in order that Satan might not outwit us. Do you really think that your wisers are cleverer than Satan? Do we think we've got it licked as far as Satan goes?

He knows God and he knows Scripture better than we ever will in this life and he will outwit us if we try and take a detour around forgiveness and justify our own behaviour and justify our own sin or justify our own lack of grace towards others.

He will take that, laughing and get to work in our lives and get to work in our church. He will be destructive and he will bring Christ's cause down.

It is deadly serious being a Christian as well as full of joy and you mustn't just pander to your sinful nature and I mustn't pander to mine and think it doesn't really matter.

It is deadly serious because we have a spiritual enemy who will wipe us away if we allow him in, if we don't follow Christ, remember that I am still fairly young I hope to think but I have been around long enough to see churches ripped apart when Satan gets in, when people stop acting gracefully.

[33 : 26] I have been broken hearted by it and it is the worst of all feelings and experiences because it is the heart of the matter and we know it is a spiritual war that we are allowing a defeated foe to have a victory that he doesn't deserve.

Grace and forgiveness, they are wonderful things and this passage speaks powerfully about both. Just as I spoke of forgiveness has been a double edged grace in many ways.

Grace and forgiveness are a double edged blade, a double edged blade of the divine surgeon who is doing heart surgery in our lives piercing our hearts but at the same time bringing glorious healing by his skilled hands.

If we allow him, if we allow his grace and his forgiveness to work in our hearts, make us complete as individuals and as a church and his light will shine in the darkness and there will be an expose of our hearts which sometimes is uncomfortable but let him because there is great healing there and also let him heal our relationships by being forgiven towards one another.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father we ask that you would help us to recognise and know your forgiveness, release that and know the healing tears of repentance falling down our cheeks.

[35 : 15] Help us to know the power of God in his healing power. May we know these great words, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though their red light crimson they shall be as wool.

May we know that from our own experience in our own hearts, from a brokenness that has been healed and redeemed and may the reality of God in our lives change us and give us grace and forgiveness but also give us courage and strength not to allow sin especially in kind of scandalous and public ways, destroy the congregational life and destroy the hearts of those who we love with all the energy that we possess.

So Lord bless us we pray and guide us and remember the city of Edinburgh and the churches that will gather tonight at the Usher Hall and praise and in worship of the God who has the name is above every name and may there be a great sense of unity and of purpose in that worship this evening.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.