

“BALANCING GRACE AND TRUTH” **(2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11)**

This morning I want to talk to you about a very important topic that impacts how we operate as a church and interact with people in every area of life – and that is balancing grace and truth. As believers we are called to practice both – we are to live according to the truth of God’s Word and hold each other accountable to do the same, and at the same time we are maintain a spirit of grace and mercy towards each other as we’re in the process of becoming more like Christ.

When I was growing up my church was part of an affiliation of about 15-20 churches, and every month the pastors of these churches would meet to fellowship with each other and make plans for an annual summer bible camp sponsored by all the churches. One the pastors in the group had a moral failing and stepped down as pastor from his church. He confessed, and began the process of being reconciled to his wife and to his church. Another pastor in the group was especially condemning of the fallen pastor – even after he repented – and didn’t even want the kids from this pastor’s church to come to camp. He was adamant that the rest of the churches have nothing to do with this pastor or his church. Not long after all this took place, lo and behold, the unforgiving pastor had his own moral failing. He left his wife and family and took off with another woman.

I remember taking all this in as a teenager who knew both of these pastors and their families, and took note that those who are the loudest in condemning others of a certain sin are often guilty of the same sin. I also took note of how the larger group of pastors handled this difficult situation with grace and truth. They held the fallen pastor accountable for his sin, while at the same time they extended grace and mercy to him and his family as they went through the process of restoration.

All of us – depending on our personalities, life experiences, and spiritual gifting – tend to lean in the direction of truth or grace. Some folks are very black-and white, right is right and wrong is wrong – and they value truth above all. That may describe you. Others are more naturally given to mercy and compassion, and they value how others feel. When a difficult situation arises – such as when a person falls into sin like this pastor – these two approaches often collide. The person who values truth looks at the person who values mercy a being too soft and enabling poor behavior. The person who values mercy looks at the person who values truth as being harsh and uncaring. The key is balance.

God’s Word instructs us as a church to hold each other accountable and correct those who stray into sin. We do this for three reasons. First, we do it for the sake of the person who has strayed – we love them and care about their spiritual well-being and try to keep them from going down a self-destructive path. Second, we do it for the sake of unbelievers who are watching to see if how we handle these situations is any different than the rest of the world. If we tolerate sin, they will label us as hypocrites and write us off. Third, we do it for the sake of peace and unity in the church. Galatians 5:9 says a little leaven leavens the whole lump – one person’s unaddressed sin negatively affects the whole church.

At the same time, God’s Word instructs us to deal gently and lovingly with those who have sinned, and maintain a soft heart towards them. We are always to seek restoration, and when they repent, we are to forgive and comfort them.

Finding a balance between grace and truth is challenging, and our passage today gives us guidance on how to do it.

We're in the book of 2 Corinthians, and this morning we'll be looking at the last two verses of chapter 1, and the first eleven verses of chapter 2. As a quick review, the Apostle Paul started a church in the Greek city of Corinth during his second missionary journey, and spent 18 months getting the fledgling church off the ground. He then moved on to Ephesus, but continued to get updates on how the church was doing.

The reports were not always positive. Corinth was a pagan city and many of the new believers were struggling to separate themselves from the immoral lifestyle of their culture. In addition to this, there were influential people in the church who opposed Paul and tried to discredit him in the eyes of the congregation. Paul made a quick trip to Corinth to try and clear things up, but his visit did not go well. He was treated disrespectfully by his opponents, and he was disheartened that many in the church were siding with the opposition, and others were not willing to stand up to them. Paul did not stay long, and left defeated and discouraged.

A short time later he wrote them a letter he referred to as the "tearful" letter. His letter included a harsh rebuke of those opposing him, and a call for the church to discipline these those causing division. The good news is – as we find out in our passage this morning – there was repentance, at least on the part of one individual. Now the question was: would the church receive this repentant man back into fellowship? Would they forgive and restore him as a brother in Christ?

Our passage today is divided into two sections. In the first section, from 1:23 to 2:4, Paul models grace to the Corinthian during a very difficult time. No one would ever accuse Paul of being a naturally merciful person. Before becoming a Christian, Paul was a zealous persecutor of Christians, and judgmental of anyone who didn't see things his way. It's remarkable to see the transformation that takes place in Paul over the course of time, and we see that transformation on full display in these verses. Paul is a great example of someone who balanced grace and truth. He was not the least bit afraid to preach truth and confront those in error. He was a truth-teller, but spoke the truth from a heart of love and compassion – wishing to build up and not tear down.

The second section we'll look at is 2:5-11 in which Paul calls on the Corinthian church to follow his example of grace by showing the same to the sinner who had repented. That's the big idea of this passage... "Here's how I treated you when you hurt me, now this is how you should treat the person who hurt you."

Let's begin by looking at Paul's example of grace, beginning in 1:23... "I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you" (1:23-2:4).

Last week we saw that one of the accusations leveled against Paul by his opponents was that he could not be trusted, and they pointed to his change in travel plans... "Paul tells us that he's going to come visit us, but he never does. He says one thing and does another."

Here Paul explains why he didn't visit them as he previously had planned. The reason, he said, is because his unscheduled visit was so painful – both for himself and them – that he wanted to give the church time to confront their issues and discipline those causing division. If these issues were not settled, his coming to them would only mean more pain and confrontation, and he wanted his next visit to be joyful. He strongly sensed that more time should go by before he came to see them.

In these verse Paul models three qualities of grace in a strained relationship. The first quality is **discernment**. Ecclesiastes says there is a time for everything under the sun. There is a time to confront and tell the truth, and there is a time to back off and allow time and space for the Lord to work in people's lives. Paul sensed from the Lord that it was not time to go back to Corinth. If they had not confronted the problems in the church, his coming would only bring more grief and distress, and he wanted his visit with them to be pleasant and encouraging. In his previous visit, he had to confront them, but now he backs off. It's similar to the father of the prodigal son who let his son go – he didn't chase after him and badger him to come home – he gave him time and space to recognize his sin and return home on his own. Paul is doing the same with the Corinthians.

The second quality Paul models is **humility**. In 1:24 he says, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy.” Paul was *the* Apostle Paul, divinely appointed by God and given authority over the churches. He had a lot of clout, but he was not going to use his power to domineer them. He saw himself as a servant leader, modeled after the example of Christ who came not to be served but to serve. God gives pastors and church leaders authority lead the church, but they are to use their authority not to dominate and control, but to serve.

Peter puts it this way... “Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). This was Paul's attitude. He says, “I don't want to lord it over you, but work with you... to come alongside you and foster a relationship of peace and joy.”

The third quality Paul models in this strained relationship is **love**. In verse 4 he says... “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.” Paul knew that visiting them while their problems were unresolved would only lead to more confrontation and pain. Instead, he wrote a letter, and in his letter, he affirmed his deep love for them.

The essence of love is seeking the highest good of another person. Sometimes the highest good of another person is correction. Some people view any kind of confrontation or correction as unloving for the simple fact that it is painful – and anything that causes pain can't be loving. But that's not true. The Bible says that God is love – He is the personification of love – and yet Hebrews 12 says that He chastens those He loves. That's what parents who love their children do – they discipline them for their own good – so that they grow up to be mature, functional adults. Is discipline painful? Very much so, but withholding it when needed is unloving.

Sometimes the highest good of someone is grace – to come alongside them – once discipline has been administered – and assure them of your love – and that is what Paul does here. Twice he talks about wanting to bring them joy, and for them to bring him joy. He longs for the issues confronting the church to be corrected so that they could once again enjoy a light-hearted spirit of fellowship.

Paul writes often in his letters about joy. One of the marks of a mature church is a joyful atmosphere – where we enjoy being together without conflict and tension – and this joyful atmosphere is achieved by each of us doing our part to balance grace and truth in all our relationships.

Paul models for them what grace under fire looks like, and now in verses 5-11 he says to the Corinthian church, “Follow my example and show the same grace to the man who hurt you as I have shown to you.” He writes... “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. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. 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. Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

Paul writes about a man in the Corinthian church who had sinned and whose actions caused great grief and distress in the church. The church followed Paul’s instructions to discipline this man, and this discipline had the desired effect in the man repenting. Now Paul says, you need to forgive him and restore fellowship with him.

We don’t know who the man was or what his sin was, but two possibilities have been set forth. Some think that this is referring to the man talked about in 1 Corinthians 5 – a member of the church who was sleeping with his father’s wife – his step-mother – and the church had done nothing to address the problem. Paul told them to confront him, and if he didn’t repent, they needed to remove him from fellowship. The purpose of this action was to convey the seriousness of his sin, and that the pain of being disciplined would bring about his repentance. The highest need for this man and for the church was truth. Some think that this man did repent – the discipline of the church had its desired effect – and now that he has repented, the church was to extend to him grace and forgiveness.

The other possibility, that I think is more likely because of the context, is that the one being disciplined was one of Paul’s opponents – an influential man in the church who had turned the church against Paul. This man’s actions brought Paul great pain and caused division in the church. The church had apparently followed through on removing this man from fellowship, which was exactly what Paul was waiting to hear.

But now another problem arose. Whereas the church had initially been reluctant to confront the man in truth, they now had a hard time showing him grace. He had repented, he was remorseful, and he wanted to come back to church, but many in the church continued to give him a cold shoulder and make him pay for what he did.

While I was preparing this message, I read an article about the destructive nature of cancel culture. Cancel culture, if you are unfamiliar with the term, refers to our current culture that ostracizes, boycotts, and shuns people for doing or saying something that they deem to be offensive. Everyday a well-known person is condemned for some perceived infraction and cancelled. The worst part about cancel culture is that there is no room for forgiveness – once you have messed up, there’s no redemption, no amount of penitence can restore someone to good favor. Christianity, in contrast, is based on redemption and the fact that God forgives repentant sinners and restores their broken relationship with Him. When He forgives, He remembers our sin no more. The Bible teaches that we are to extend to others how have sinned against us the same grace Christ showed when we sinned against Him.

Let's walk through Paul's argument. He starts in verses 5-6 by acknowledging the grief this individual caused him and the church. It was painful, and the deeper the pain, the more grief there is. In verse 6 Paul says, "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient." "You stood up to this person, you removed him from fellowship, and your tough love measures resulted in his repentance. You don't need to do anything more – you don't need to keep punishing him – the time for speaking truth has passed, and the time for grace has arrived. If you keep punishing him – if you keep holding his sin against him – you are now the ones who are sinning."

Verses 7-8 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." The goal of church discipline is not vengeance, but restoration – so that the pain of being disciplined will cause the person to realize the seriousness of his or her sin and bring about their repentance. I think of King David in Psalm 32, after he committed adultery, he felt the heavy weight of guilt upon him, so much so that it caused his bones to ache and his body to be weakened. His guilt was used by God to bring him to repentance.

It appears as though the man who brought about so much pain to the church at Corinth was now experiencing the pain of being removed from fellowship, and he felt extreme sorrow for what he had done. Paul says, "Once a person acknowledges their sin, once they are remorseful, once they have agreed to follow the biblical steps of restoration – they should be welcomed back into fellowship and embraced."

They are to proactively do three things. One, they are to **forgive him**. To forgive someone is to release them from your resentment and anger. Forgiveness is a decision – an act of the will – not to hold something against another person. Forgiveness does not come naturally to any of us – it's a supernatural act that comes from first being forgiven by God for our sin. Once we've been forgiven, we are divinely enabled to forgive those who have wronged us.

Forgiveness does not mean that trust is automatically restored. If I loan my car to a friend who drives it recklessly and causes an accident, I can forgive him for wrecking it, but I'm not going to loan him my car again anytime soon. After an offence, boundaries must be established until trust is regained. Trust is an important goal you should work towards, but trust must be earned and trust takes time.

Secondly, they are to **comfort him**. As we saw in chapter one, comfort means to come alongside someone and lift them up and encourage them. When a repentant sinner comes home, we are not only to forgive them but embrace them, treat them well, and support them as they reestablish trust.

Third, they are to **reaffirm their love for him**. The word "reaffirm" has the idea of officially and publicly reestablishing the repentant sinner into the church community – to say "We forgive you and welcome you back." A great illustration of this is found in the little book of Philemon. Philemon had an indentured servant named Onesimus who likely stole money from him and ran away. Onesimus providentially came into contact with Paul, was converted to Christ, and sought restoration. Paul writes to Philemon, a fellow Christian brother, and says, "Welcome Onesimus back – treat him no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ." Then Paul adds, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, I'll take care of it – put it on my account." The goal in any confrontation is restoration and reconciliation.

In verses 10-11 Paul states the reason the church is to forgive and restore those who repent... "Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."

Paul was the one sinned against, yet he models for the Corinthian church a forgiving spirit. He was willing to let the past go and forgive this individual who had caused him so much pain. He didn't want the church to bear a grudge against this man on Paul's behalf. Paul says, "I'm willing to forgive him, and so should you. Notice the little phrase, "If there was anything to forgive..." There was a lot to forgive, but now that the man had repented, Paul minimized the offense. For his sake and the sake of the church, it was important that the man's sins no longer be held against him.

If the church refused to forgive him, if they did not welcome him back into fellowship, they would be playing right into Satan's hands, who wants to disrupt, divide, and destroy churches. One way he seeks to destroy churches is to diminish truth – if a church does not hold fast to the truth and hold biblical standards for their membership, then the church will lose its testimony and cease to be a light in a dark world.

If a church, on the other hand, does a good job of holding to the truth, but does not display grace and mercy to repentant sinners, continues to hold grudges, and refuses to forgive – Satan wins in a different way. Paul says, "Hold to the truth, don't overlook sin... while at the same time maintain a spirit of grace and readiness to forgive when the prodigal son comes home. When you balance grace and truth, Satan is defeated and the Spirit of God is free to work."

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we see a beautiful picture of the gospel in this passage. The gospel declares that God is a God of truth and grace. From the very beginning of the Bible we are told the truth about our condition – that we are sinners separated from God. Because God is God of grace and mercy, He could have overlooked our sin – but being a God of truth and holiness, that was not possible. Sin is rebellion against a holy God, and to live forever with God in heaven our sin must be atoned for.

In our sinful state the Bible says we are all doomed to spend eternity in hell, forever separated from God. But God in His grace and mercy sent His only begotten Son to take the punishment of our sin upon Himself. When we repent of our sin and trust Christ as our Savior from sin, God forgives us and remembers our sin no more. He then welcomes us into His family with all the right and privileges of being His children.

The gospel is the supreme example of upholding truth and extending grace upon repentance. Because God forgave us of all our sin, we can in turn forgive those who have sinned against us.