

“SORROW, REPENTANCE & JOY” **(2 Corinthians 7:5-16)**

One of the key elements in every great movie is tension. The movie begins with a problem or dilemma – How will Cinderella escape the clutches of her evil stepmother and jealous stepsisters? How are Dorothy and Toto going to get home to Kansas? How is Indiana Jones going to get out of his latest predicament? The tension of the story is heightened by suspenseful music like the movie *Jaws*... dun, ta, dun, ta. It's this tension that keeps us on the edge of our seats, and when the tension is resolved in the last five minutes of the movie, there is a collective sigh of relief and a sense of satisfaction that all ends well.

Our passage today in 2 Corinthians 7 has all the elements of tension and release. It begins with great tension and stress, then there is resolution followed by great joy. 2 Corinthians is unique in that we get to see the heart of the Apostle Paul on full display, as he reveals his innermost feelings and emotions. It's good for us to see this because we can easily get the idea that the great, transcendent Apostle Paul was above feeling worried and anxious and discouraged. Paul was a very remarkable person, but he was every bit as human as you and me, and we can all relate to the tension he faces in this passage.

We're going to look at 2 Corinthians 7:5-16 this morning, and the sermon title I choose is not super creative, but it summarizes what the passage is all about in three key words. The first word is sorrow – which provides the tension of the story. The second word is repentance – a key word in this passage – and it is repentance that brings resolve to the tension. The third word is joy... sorrow is resolved by repentance that leads to joy. That's our passage in a nutshell.

To make sense of what Paul is going to say in this passage we have to take a little time to review the background of his letter to the Corinthians. Five years earlier Paul came to the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey and started a church made up of mostly newly converted Gentiles. They had come right out of a pagan culture and were very young in the faith. Paul spent 18 months teaching and discipling them before he moved on and made his way across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus where he stayed for three years. It was in Ephesus that Paul heard reports of several problems in the Corinthian church – problems like rivalries and conflicts in the church, sexual immorality and divorce by members of the church, and misunderstandings about certain doctrinal topics such as the Lord's Table, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. This prompted him to write the book we know as 1 Corinthians.

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul sent his protegee, Timothy, to visit the Corinthian church, and Timothy came back with disturbing news – many of the problems addressed in 1 Corinthians still persisted, and worse yet – divisive teachers and leaders had come into the church who opposed Paul and tried to drive a wedge between the church and Paul, and threatened to undo all the work he had done in Corinth.

Paul immediately put everything aside and traveled to Corinth to try and put things right. He refers to this trip in chapter two of 2 Corinthians as his “painful visit.” It did not go well. He was opposed and treated disrespectfully by one particular individual, and the members of the church either sided with Paul's opponent or did nothing to defend Paul. Paul left discouraged and defeated.

But Paul didn't give up – a short time later he wrote the church another letter he refers to in 2 Corinthians 2 as the “tearful” letter – a letter we no longer have – but we know that his letter included a harsh rebuke for the way they treated him, and a call for the church to discipline these those causing division.

Paul sent Titus – another young protégée – to deliver the letter, while he anxiously waited for Titus to return and give a report on how things went. Today we would just shoot a text off and give a minute-by-minute update – but communication in the first century took weeks, if not months, to take place. (SLIDE). Before Titus left, Paul made arrangements to meet up with him in Troas, but when Titus didn't show up, Paul decided to head north to Macedonia, which was on the main road to Corinth, and where the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea were located. He figured he would eventually run into Titus at one of these places through the network of churches.

We pick up the story in 7:5 where Paul writes... “For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.” Paul was not in good shape – he was physically beat up and exhausted, and we know from the book of Acts that a certain group of Jewish opponents were following him from town to town trying to disrupt his ministry. On top of all this external conflict, he wrestled with nagging fears within. It's easy to think that someone like Paul did not have fears, but fear, like every emotion, is normal – fear is an involuntary reaction that frequently arises because we're human – and Paul, like everyone, had fears.

His fears most likely revolved about what was happening in Corinth... “How did they receive my letter? Did it make them mad and hate me even more? And how were they treating Titus? Did they shoot the messenger? And where was Titus anyway? He should have been here by now. Did something happen to him?” Paul couldn't rest until he had these answers.

Then one day, lo and behold, Paul looked down the road and here came Titus... Verses 6-7 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. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.” All of Paul's fears and concerns were relieved in an instant. First of all, Titus arrived – what a relief – he was safe and fine and Paul is overjoyed. Before Titus could take a breath, Paul asked, “How's the church? How did they receive you? How did they respond to my letter? Do they hate me? Is the church going to make it?”

Titus only had good news... “The congregation loves you, Paul – they care about you and long to see you – and they're sorry, very sorry, for what they put you through.” Like getting a call from your doctor that your biopsy came back negative, a huge burden is lifted from Paul, and all the sorrow he felt just seconds before has turned to unspeakable joy. Hallelujah... praise the Lord!

Don't miss the beginning of verse 6 which says, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” As our Heavenly Father, God looks after us and comforts us in our time of need. One way He comforts us is by His presence – as Psalm 23 says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.” He also comforts us by His Word and the promises contained in it that breathes life into our troubled souls.

But another way He comforts us – and one that we often overlook – is through other believers – and in Paul's hour of need, God comforted Paul by sending Titus. As we learned in chapter one, God loves to use those who have received His comfort in times of trouble to come alongside of and comfort others who are troubled with the same comfort they have received. It's another reminder of the wisdom of God in giving us the local church to support and encourage each other – and it is God's people that become one of the primary ways He uses to comfort us in our sorrow.

In verses 8-9 Paul expresses to the Corinthians how he felt upon receiving this good news... “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.”

Looking back in hindsight, Paul says, “I know my letter stung, I know it was harsh and to the point, but I don’t regret it, although I did regret it at first.” Every parent can relate to what Paul’s saying. Your child does something wrong and you discipline them. You don’t like doing it, and you sometimes even use the line your parents used with you... “This hurts me as much as it hurts you.” No kid believes that, but you tell them that anyway. You discipline your child because you love them, and you hope it has a positive affect – but sometimes you question yourself... Was I too hard? Did I embitter them and drive them away?

These are the questions Paul wrestled with for weeks, but now that he hears how well the Corinthians received his letter, he says, “I don’t regret sending you the letter because – even though it caused you pain and sorrow to hear my words – God used it to lead to your repentance. Circle the word “repentance.” Repentance is what turned their relationship around and what turned sorrow into joy. So much of the pain and sorrow we see in our world could be alleviated by the simple act of repentance.

A huge barrier stood between Paul and the Corinthians and the only way that barrier was going to come down – the only way their relationship was going to be restored – was by repentance on the part of the offending party. Paul went to great lengths in the first six chapters to explain that his conscience was clear before the Lord in that he had done nothing to wrong the Corinthians. He addressed every concern they had about him, cleared up any misunderstanding, and assured them of his love for them. But as their spiritual father, he also called them to repent of their failure to support Paul and to stand up against those trying to destroy him and the church in Corinth. Much to Paul’s relief and joy, they did repent, and the tension between them was resolved.

What does it mean to repent? The Greek word – *metanoia* – means to make a change in the way you think, feel, and behave. True repentance engages your mind, emotions, and will. The first step in repentance is to change your mind and admit you’ve done wrong. That’s not easy. When confronted, our natural response is to defend, deflect, and deny. We immediately put up a wall, deny the accusation, and try to deflect the problem back on the other person. We usually have an explanation to minimize any blame on our part. Do you remember Fonzie on the Happy Days show? He was too cool to ever admit that he was wrong. Someone would say, “Go ahead, admit it, you were wrong.” Fonzie would say, “I was wr-r-r-r.” He couldn’t get the word out. It’s hard for us to do – but it’s vital that we do.

A big part of what changed the Corinthian’s minds was hearing Paul’s side of the story. For months they had been listening to false rumors and slander against Paul, but when they received Paul’s letter and learned the truth – rather than put up defenses, they repented and changed their mind. So much conflict and sorrow could be resolved if we would put down our pride and defenses, and talk things through until there is clarification and resolve.

But there's more to repentance than changing your mind – it also involves a change of emotions. When I know that my actions have caused you pain, there will be a feeling of remorse and sorrow – I will feel the effects of what I have done. If I don't in some way feel the weight of the wrong, then I've not really repented. Empathizing with what the other person has felt from my wrongdoing is a sign that I get it. Real repentance is both an admission that what I did was truly wrong, and a deep sense of regret about what I've done – and that's exactly what the Corinthians did.

But that's not all – real repentance also means a change of behavior. It's not enough to say, "I know I messed up and I'm sorry about it." It also involves the intention to change and not do the same thing again. If a person is having an extramarital affair, he or she may know that it's wrong and feel bad about what they're doing, but they're not repentant until they cut off the adulterous relationship. As John the Baptist said, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance," and the fruit of repentance is a change in behavior.

The steps of repentance are beautifully illustrated in the story of the prodigal son. After running off and squandering his inheritance in wild living, he found himself poor and destitute, eating food fed to pigs, and then it says he "came to his senses." I love that – he had been in a spiritual stupor, living like a fool, and then came a moment of moral clarity, and he changed his mind. He acknowledged his guilt and said, "I have sinned against heaven and my father." Emotionally, he felt the full weight of guilt for what he had done, and his repentance was completed when he changed course – he got up and went back his father to seek his forgiveness. And just like that, the tension between father and son was resolved and a party was held to celebrate the reunion.

In verse 10 Paul further defines what true repentance looks like... "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." When we're confronted with sin, with something we've done wrong, it's never a good feeling. We feel a sense of sorrow – but the question is: what kind of sorrow is it? Is it Godly sorrow or worldly sorrow? Worldly sorrow is how you feel when you get a speeding ticket. You feel sorry, not for breaking the speed limit, but for getting caught and handed a ticket – and if you didn't get caught, you'd likely keep breaking the speed limit. Worldly sorrow is not only feeling bad that you got caught, but feeling embarrassed about how it makes you look, and having to suffer the negative consequences of your actions.

Godly sorrow, on the other hand, is the deep sorrow you feel in offending God. Even if you've sinned against someone else, you've ultimately sinned against God by causing pain to someone made in His image. Godly sorrow is the kind of sorrow King David felt after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then put her husband on the front line of the battle so he would be killed. For nearly a year he carried the burden of what he had done, and in Psalm 32 he said, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away, day and night your hand was heavy upon me, and my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." When God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him, and instead of defending, deflecting, and denying, David said, "I have sinned against the Lord."

The difference between Godly and worldly sorrow is also illustrated in the lives of Judas and Peter. Both sinned against the Lord – Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and Peter denied Jesus three times. Both of them were overwhelmed with guilt for what they had done – both of them wept – both of them wanted relief from their guilt – and both of them said, "I have sinned." Rather than take his guilt to Jesus and running to Him for forgiveness, Judas went and hanged himself. His sorrow did not lead to repentance and restoration, but to his death. Peter, on the other hand, took his guilt to Jesus was forgiven, restored, and used of God in a new, mighty way.

Paul goes on in verse 11a to give a list of evidences of repentance shown by the Corinthians... “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.” (**Leave verse on screen through all seven bullet points**).

Paul’s letter brought about seven tangible changes in the Corinthians, starting with...

- Earnestness. Paul’s words woke them up and got them to seriously consider what they’d done.
- There was also an “eagerness to clear themselves.” Paul had confronted them about their disloyalty to him, and they were eager to show him that they had changed.
- They felt “indignation” against the person who opposed Paul and against themselves for letting the situation get out of hand.
- There was “alarm” or “fear” of God’s judgment if they did not repent.
- There was a “longing” to make things right with Paul.
- There was a “concern” or “zeal” to honor Paul and protect the ministry of the church.
- There was a “readiness to see justice done” and make sure that Paul’s offender was held accountable.

Based on these tangible evidences, Paul concludes in 11b that... “At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.” You were guilty, but by your repentance you are now innocent.

In verse 12-13a Paul reviews the primary purpose for which he wrote his painful letter to them... “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.” “The main reason I wrote to you was not to get you to discipline my offender and seek justice for me – although that is one of the reasons I wrote – but the larger reason I wrote was to restore our relationship. My letter was not meant to be condemning, but redemptive – and even though it caused you pain, my ultimate goal has been realized, and that is your renewed love and devotion for me.”

Repentance leads to joy, and Paul’s joy continues in verse 13b... “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.” Everyone in this story felt the strain of this broken relationship, including Titus who was tasked with delivering the harsh letter to the Corinthians. That would not be a fun job. Titus was one of the unsung heroes of the early church. He was led to Christ by Paul and part of his inner circle. Whenever Paul needed someone to straighten out difficult situations he turned to Titus. Years later Paul left Titus on the island of Crete to help bring order to the churches there and appoint elders in every town.

Titus was a guy who was willing take on difficult assignments, and when he came to Corinth with Paul’s letter, he did not know what to expect. He didn’t know if they were going to shoot the messenger and take all their anger out on him. But he was delighted to find a warm, welcoming church that responded well to his coming, even though he brought with him a harsh letter.

In verse 14 Paul says... “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.” Paul was the eternal optimist. He said to Titus, “I know this task is tough, but I know they’re going to respond well to you.” Now he tells the Corinthians, “You didn’t let me down.”

It's so important when wrestling through relationship issues that we show a proper balance between truth and grace. Paul said some really hard things in his letter, but he tempered it with positive encouragement. That's what people need after confrontation – they need to know you love them and have forgiven them – and they need positive encouragement as they heal from the wounds of confrontation.

Verse 15-16... “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.” What's so amazing about this passage is the turnabout – where the congregation at Corinth had turned their backs on Paul, and Paul felt alienated and betrayed, the barrier between them was torn down and their affection for each other was restored. The church also entered into a close, affectionate relationship with Titus. It was a love-fest and everyone came out a winner. And the reason for the shift was the obedient attitude of the Corinthians – Titus' visit sobered them, and they read Paul's letter with fear and trembling, eager to repent of their actions.

As we wrap up this passage, I want to give you three quick thoughts in way of application. Number one, remember that tension in relationships is normal because we're all fallen human beings – and it shouldn't take us by surprise when there are misunderstandings. Rather than retreat and grow bitter, we need to do what we can, like Paul, to reach out and communicate. That's what brothers and sisters in Christ do.

Number two, don't forget the power of repentance – the one simple act of the Corinthians saying, “We were wrong, we feel awful, and we're willing to do whatever we can to make things right,” this act of repentance turned the tide and restored a broken relationship.

Number three, what can you do to bring comfort and joy to someone this week? How can you be a Titus and lift someone's spirit through your words and presence? How can you be a healing influence in a tense situation?

I pray that this message will provoke you to take some kind of action – whether it's repenting to God for offending him, or repenting to someone you have offended. The world is in desperate need of the kind of restoration we see modeled in 2 Corinthians 7, and may it begin with us today.