



Painful Joy

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

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I'd like to draw your attention once again to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We have been going through this letter the last few weeks, and we will be finishing up the first chapter this morning, actually heading into the second chapter. This is one of the examples of an unfortunate division of chapters. I will remind you that the versification and the chapter divisions in your Bible are not inspired. They did not come from God, but they're helpful divisions given to us by the church throughout the centuries.

This morning, we will be looking at chapter 1, from verse 23 down through the fourth verse of chapter 2. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians, chapter 1, beginning at verse 23:

But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?

And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, that in your Word we might see your mighty work, a mighty work accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ, a work he has accomplished and that he is yet still performing in us to make us more and more like himself. We pray, O Lord, that you would set our eyes upon heaven. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Authority is controversial, especially here in America. We are skeptical of those who are in authority over us. Often, we believe there are ulterior motives at work when someone who's in authority takes an action. We see that every single day, especially now in our current circumstances. It's hard to read one news stories or to see one article in which someone is not accusing someone else of acting out of an ulterior motive, out of self-interest and not the interest of those over which they have authority.

The same kind of thinking is also true, unfortunately, in the church. We suspect authority, and we suspect that we're being abused, of being used for self-gain by those who are in authority or power over us. In truth, we do see this throughout the history of the church and even in many places in the church today. We see abuse. We see authority being taken out of its proper context and used against the people it should benefit.

But there is an old saying: the abuse of something does not preclude the use of a thing. Just because something can be abused does not mean it cannot be properly used or that it was not intended by God for proper use. Sin does not undermine God's purposes. So, Paul this morning gives us an example of proper authority, that authority is necessary, that it's good, that proper authority is focused on the good of others, that authority is sometimes hard, but it is designed to bring joy.

So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, *love in authority*; how we are shown love in authority by Paul. Then secondly, I would like us to see *pain in authority*; that sometimes authority brings pain both to those who are in authority and those who are under authority. Then thirdly, *joy in authority*; that authority is designed by God to bring about joy, to bring about blessing to his people. Love, pain, and joy...all a part of what Paul is telling us this morning about authority.

Love in Authority

Let's begin, then, by looking at love in authority. To do that, we must begin, first, by defining some terms. The first term is that of *authority* itself. What do we mean by authority? The Greek word for *authority* is used very often in the New Testament...102 times to be exact. Paul uses this word *authority* twice in 2 Corinthians: once in chapter 10, verse 18, and once in chapter 13, verse 10. He uses it to describe the power or the right the Lord has given to him to build up the church.

That's what Paul began with at the beginning of this letter, describing how he is one who has been given authority by God as an apostle. The basic meaning of this word for *authority* is a right. That's often how Paul uses it in his first letter to the Corinthians. From that meaning, a right, we get the idea of a right to govern or a right to control, a right to command. This can be done for bad or for good.

While Paul describes his own authority in each of his epistles, he also describes an authority (the same word) that Satan has. He describes Satan as the *prince of the power of the air*, or we might say, the prince of the *authority* of the air. Power equals authority here. That's often our sense of authority: that authority is bad, that it's used by others to deny us our rights.

I think of an example from the Old Testament in which Moses rescued an Israelite from an Egyptian who was beating him, and Moses rescued the Israelite by killing the Egyptian. He turned then to the Israelite expecting thanks, and the Israelite turned and looked to Moses and said, "Who made *you* a prince and a judge over us?" That's often how we view authority. "Who are *you* to tell me what to do? Even if it may be for my good, you can't tell me what to do for my own good. You should not have any authority over me." But authority, the Bible tells us, is given by God. It's good.

We saw this in our previous study in Romans, chapter 13: we are to submit to the authorities because God has placed them in our lives. We see it in the authority Jesus claims in Matthew 28 when he says, "All authority is given to me," and it's that authority he gives to his apostles to spread the gospel throughout the world. We see it in the authority Paul claims here in 2 Corinthians as he opens the letter by telling us that he is an apostle by the will of God. Authority is good and given by God.

The second term I think we need to understand is *love*. What is love's relationship to authority? To do that, to understand what true love is and how love has a relationship to authority, we have to cast off false views of love that our culture has ingrained in us. The first false view we see so commonly is that love is a sentiment, that love is something that makes me feel good. In that way, love can't even be defined, and it changes from day to day. You have to feel it in order to know it.

If you don't know what this means, think about virtually every movie you have ever seen. It doesn't even need to be a romantic movie. Even movies for children have the message brought across to them: "Follow your heart. It doesn't matter what you believe. It doesn't matter what you know. It doesn't matter what you think. It's what you feel right now that's important." That's what love is to our culture.

Tied in with this is a second view that's prominent in our culture: that love is selfish. I don't think anyone would stand up and define love that way, but the way we think about love in our culture virtually defines it as being selfish. Love is primarily about *me*. Love is not just a feeling; love is about how it makes *me* feel. Not anyone else; it's about how *I* feel. If I'm not getting what I want, then it's not love and I have to move on from that, because love is something that makes *me* feel good, something *I* have to have.

This philosophy in our culture, if we can so generously term it a philosophy, is at its root responsible for the destruction of the institution of marriage. It's also responsible, I think, for a great deal of harm that has been done in our day and age to friendships or to relationships in general, because we have been conditioned by our culture to view relationships based on what we can get out of them, but true love in the Bible is putting others first.

The greatest example of this is the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrifice Jesus made for *you*, a sinner. Jesus was not thinking of himself or what *he* could gain; he was thinking of *you*. John tells us that love is "not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Paul makes it clear in Romans, chapter 5, that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

The Corinthians should have known about what love is after having read 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, that Paul had written to them. The Bible is very clear that love is self-sacrifice, that love looks for another. So love in authority means using your authority for the benefit of others. That's what Paul shows us here. He shows us true love in practice with authority.

Now, remember the context of Paul's letter that we have spoken about several times. Paul and the Corinthians had experienced conflict. There were some in Corinth who were slandering Paul, and his efforts for that church and his work for them were underappreciated, unappreciated. Paul would have had every reason in the world to lash out at them, to give up, to say, "Who cares anymore about you? You just want to hurt me. I'm not putting out any more effort for you at all."

Instead, Paul calls God to witness of the truth of what he is saying, that his love motivates his authority. Look with me at verse 23. "But I call God to witness against me..." This is the strongest possible way that Paul could assure the Corinthians that he is telling the truth. In essence, he is testifying that he loves them, and he's saying, "If I'm lying, may God kill me."

Remember, this is Paul speaking. Paul knows that God knows the very thoughts and intentions of the heart. Paul knows you can't pull a fast one on God, that you can't pull the wool over his eyes. Paul is saying in the most emotional, the most heartfelt way possible to the Corinthians, "Let me tell you what I think of you. Let me tell you how I love you. Let me tell you how I want to serve you, and if I'm lying, may God strike me dead."

To the Corinthians hearing this, anyone who would know Paul and his theology and his mission, they would pay attention. They would know there is no chance at all that Paul is lying. Paul reminds the Corinthians, then, in verse 24, how his love, and love in general, limits authority. He says, "It is not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith."

What Paul is telling them is that he has not been and has no intention in the future of being domineering. He doesn't want to play the king over them. He doesn't want to lord it over them. He doesn't want to show them who's boss. If anyone had the right to be the boss of the Corinthians, it was Paul. After all, he was the means of their conversion. He had sacrificed a great deal for them. He had brought all of this about. They owed him everything.

Humanly speaking, they even owed Paul their souls because he had brought them the gospel, but Paul says that's not how love works. Love doesn't try to control others. Can you hear 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 in your head? You should be able to, but let me help you. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

I want to remind you that when Paul is writing in 1 Corinthians 13, he is not describing an emotion. He is not describing a feeling. He is describing a person. He's describing the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is testifying that as he follows after Jesus, as he is made more and more in the image of Jesus Christ, that is reflected in his relationship with the Corinthians. He reminds the Corinthians that his authority is for *their* benefit, not his own.

He does not stop and say to them, "Look at all I've done for you." Have you ever had someone say that to you? Or perhaps in a moment of weakness *you've* said that to someone else. You wanted a response out of someone. You wanted someone to show their gratitude, and you said, "Look at all I've done for you. You could have never made it without me. Now love me because of what I've done."

That's not what Paul does here. Instead, he uses a different kind of verb: *work with*. He says he was partnering with them. Now, at first glance, we may think this seems foolish. How could the Corinthians partner with Paul? Paul is the one who knows the gospel best. Paul is the one who has planted the church. Paul is the one who's trying to set them on the right path.

Right now, so to speak, to this point, the Corinthians have had the job of messing up, of causing a problem, of not doing what they should. So why does Paul say that he works *with* them, that he partners with them? He's partnering with them for *their* joy. Do you see that? "We work with you for *your* joy..." Why? "...because you stand firm in faith."

Paul reminds the Corinthians, and he reminds you and me that your faith is your own. It's not Paul's faith. It's not something he can do *for* you. You stand because of *your* faith before God, and it is Paul's job, it is my job as a minister of the gospel, it is your job as a Christian, to come alongside others and to encourage them in the faith, to work with them that they might become more and more like Jesus. That's what the job of authority is.

True love seeks the best for others. It is selfless, not selfish. How can you seek the best for others in your life right now? How can you sacrifice for the benefit of others? How can you use your authority for the blessing of others? That's what true love looks like, and I encourage you right now, this week, to find ways to help others, to influence others for their good.

Pain in Authority

We also have to remember that authority is a responsibility. Saying that authority is motivated by love does not merely give someone everything they ask for. Paul shows us that there's not only love in authority but there's also pain in authority. Paul makes it very clear that authority also means accountability. He tells us in verse 1 of chapter 2 that he wanted to spare the Corinthians making another painful visit. Now what does *that* imply? It implies that there was a *previous* painful visit. He had already made one, and he doesn't want to make another one.

Paul had previously changed his plans to visit Corinth. He had planned to go to Corinth and then to Macedonia and then back to Corinth, but instead, he had previously made a quick visit to Corinth after Titus and Timothy had brought news of problems at Corinth. This is the "painful visit" of chapter 2, verse 1. I believe it's a visit not recorded in the book of Acts. That in itself is interesting, that Luke determines not to record this painful experience for Paul as he went to Corinth.

Now, why was this visit painful? Well, it appears from what we know, piecing together the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, that there was a matter of discipline Paul had pointed out that the Corinthians needed to take the lead on, and the majority of the church knew Paul was right. They knew they needed to discipline someone in order to follow God's Word, but they were reluctant to cause tension in the church. They were reluctant to cause conflict or problems.

Often in churches this is the case. There is open sin in a church that is tolerated because the church does not want to do the hard work of setting things right in accordance with Scripture. They would rather wait or paper sin over or avoid tension and conflict. This was also heightened because there was a minority in the church at Corinth that thought Paul was being too strict, that he was meddling in the affairs of people, that he was making a big deal out of nothing, that this matter really wasn't something for discipline; it wasn't really a sin worth worrying about; it might not have even been a sin.

So what Paul did was he went to Corinth and exercised his authority to hold the church accountable. Can you imagine how awkward, how tense, how painful that visit would be? Paul rolls into Corinth, and they say, "Paul, it's so good to see you. Do you want to come to the church potluck?" and Paul says, "We don't have time for a potluck. We've got to call a meeting. There's something very serious here. I'm very disappointed in you all. We need to sit down and look at God's Word and take some action."

You can just imagine the air getting sucked out of the room as Paul, the apostle, the founder of the church, the one who saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, has come in to upbraid them, to put them in the rights, to show them the way to go. In fact, Paul tells us it was such a painful experience he deliberately avoided going back. That's what he tells us in verse 1. "For I made up my mind..." The Greek there is just as vivid as the English. Paul had made a conscious decision with his mind. He had weighed the pros and cons, and he made up his mind not to go back and at this point relive that pain.

Instead, he wrote them a letter, the so-called painful letter of verse 4. He wrote them a letter out of much affliction and anguish of heart. Even in this pain, Paul was motivated by love, not by a desire to hurt. This shows us a principle in action: God gives authority to hold us accountable. Now, accountability is not pleasant. We see this all the time in the relationship between parents and children. Parents have to discipline their children. They have to tell them not just what to do but what *not* to do.

This is not a pleasant experience in the family. Children rebel, and they say, "Well, why *can't* I do that? I *want* to do that. Why are you making me do this other thing? You're doing this because you don't love me." The parents will say, sometimes to unconvincing stares, "No, I'm doing it *because* I love you. I'm doing it for your own good. If I *didn't* love you, I would let you go along the way you're going, but I've got to stop you from going along this path."

This is also true in our spiritual lives. We are accountable to God and to his Word, but God uses others, including authorities, to apply that accountability to our lives. When you feel the pain of accountability for your sin, do not get angry. Be thankful. Be thankful that God is holding you accountable and he's doing it for your own good. That's why God has given spiritual authority. Think about Paul. Think about the Corinthians. God gives us spiritual authority for our own good and blessing.

Now, there's something else you need to be aware of. Holding someone else accountable is also painful. Thinking about parents and children again, have you ever heard the saying from a parent, "This hurts me more than it hurts you"? I'm sure that at the time, if it was said to you, you thought to yourself, "Yeah right. This hurts me a lot more than it hurts you, if it hurts you at all." But there is truth to that saying.

Do you know why many parents do not discipline their children? It's not because they don't care; it's because they don't want to go through the pain. They want their children to like them. They want their children to be their friends. They don't want any kind of conflict or tension, and they know that accountability, discipline, breeds conflict and pain, so they avoid those situations.

Paul's example here is something we need to take to heart in our homes and in the church and in society. Paul obviously loved the Corinthians. He makes that very clear in verse 4. He talks about the abundant love he has for them. He took no pleasure in causing them pain. In fact, it was actually quite the opposite. He had spared them, he told us in chapter 1, verse 23. He deliberately made up his mind (chapter 2, verse 1) not to visit them so as not to cause them more pain.

Paul is making every effort to spare the Corinthians pain, yet he would not abandon them. Do you see the difference between doing nothing and doing what you can to minimize pain? Paul could have just let the matter go. He could have spared the Corinthians *all* of this pain he brought to them, and that would have spared Paul all the pain that came to *him*. He would not have had grief. He would not have had much tears.

He suffered both in his previous visit and even when he was apart from them. If Paul would have let the matter go, he would have spared himself all of this pain, but Paul knew it was critical for the Corinthians. It was not just some abstract theory about discipline; it was critical for them and even for himself that he press the matter, so he was willing to bear the pain that came about from it.

That is why accountability is so important. When we fail at accountability in the short term for our ease, what we cause is long-term pain, both for others and for ourselves, but at the same time, we cannot forget that pain is involved in accountability. Accountability is not done abstractly. It is very personal. It hurts.

So, if you are in a position of authority (I'm talking now to parents, to teachers, to Sunday school teachers, to church officers, to employers and bosses), remember that you are to use that authority for the benefit of others, the long-term benefit of others. There is no place for lording it over others. Paul makes it clear in verse 24 that he does not do that, but Paul *did* want the Corinthians to grow in Christ, and sometimes, quite often, growth is painful.

Joy in Authority

So, why would Paul do all this? Why would he show his love through pain? Well, that brings us to Paul's third point. Not only is there love and pain in authority; there is a joy in authority. If using authority means exercising love, then there must be some purpose behind this, because it's a difficulty. It's hard. It's even harder to hold others accountable for their benefit, because often, they don't see it that way. They only see the pain, and they resist that accountability, that benefit.

To top it all off, true biblical authority brings pain to the one who is exercising it. If we love others, we don't want to cause them pain, and doing so, we actually bring pain upon ourselves. Paul explains in verse 2 of chapter 2 that he desires joy from his relationship with the Corinthians. Look with me at verse 2. "For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?" Paul says he wants the Corinthians to make him glad.

Now, this word *glad* literally means he wants to celebrate with them. This is an image of a party with hugs, with singing, with feasting, with rejoicing. That's what Paul has in mind here. Can you picture that? Can you imagine what life will be like on the other side of this coronavirus crisis? Will you be glad? Will you rejoice? Will you party with friends and family? That's the picture you should have in your mind of Paul's desire of his relationship with the church at Corinth.

Paul writes in verse 3 that the goal of all he has done has been this joy. "And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all." That's what Paul is saying here. This seems odd at first. We've been talking about all the pain that has been caused. "If Paul really wanted joy, why didn't he just avoid all of this mess?" we might think.

Well, the first reason is that Paul wanted a permanent kind of joy, not just a temporary one. The second is that Paul wanted the Corinthians to have joy in him as much as he had joy in them. He wanted them to see the joy that comes from being united in Christ, from being alongside one another, from working together for the gospel.

Now, we've already seen that love is hard. Love means putting others before yourself. It means sacrificing. It means causing pain for the good of others, pain to others and pain to yourself. Paul emphasizes this in verse 4. "For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

Paul tells us that he wrote out of *affliction*. This is a sharp word. It means to be pressed down. It's the word we use to describe persecution, to be squeezed painfully. He also tells us he wrote with anguish of heart, with distress. This word is only used one other time in the New Testament by Luke in chapter 21 of his gospel. It's when Jesus describes the distress of the nations at the coming again of the Son of Man.

What it refers to is not knowing what to do. Paul is pouring out his heart here to the Corinthians, just like he poured out tears for them. He doesn't know what to do. He wants to help them. He's not exactly sure of how to bring this about, especially in the best way. What this shows us is that true joy is the fruit of love. "I did it," writes Paul, "not because I had to or not because I was supposed to. I wasn't just following the rules of the Bible."

I think oftentimes that can be how we use our authority, how we use our accountability. We find a checklist in the Bible, and we want to press it down on everyone to make sure everyone is in line. Paul says, "That's not why I did it; I did it because I love you." True accountability acts out of love. True discipline acts out of love, and the fruit of that love is joy.

"All of this happened," Paul says, "because of an abundant love I have for you." Paul doesn't mean he loves the Corinthians more than he loves others. He writes this way to show how great his love is. It's the same word he uses in chapter 1, verse 12, to describe the supreme grace of God to them. Paul says, "I love you, and because I love you, I want you to experience the joy of living in Christ."

Well, it is not easy to live under authority, but it's also not easy to exercise authority in a biblical way either. To do that requires love. To do that requires sacrifice, and it *will* bring about pain. Not the pain of a callous hurt but the pain of growing more and more into the image of Jesus. When Jesus is our focus, whether we're under authority or exercising authority, we will think the best of others. We will look forward to the joy that is set before us, despising the pain, just like Jesus did at the cross.

Do you know that Jesus experienced pain for you, that he shed his blood on the cross so you might be forgiven? Jesus loves sinners so much he paid the ultimate price. He endured the greatest of all pain, separation from the Father, but he did that with joy set before him. Look for *that* joy. Seek *that* joy. Believe in Jesus today, and experience his great love.