

## When Enough is Enough: *The Grace of Forgiveness*

OK, as we continue our series Messy Grace we drop into a specific mess that happened in the Corinthian Church. Originally I didn't plan on spending much time on this passage. I thought we'd take a couple minutes and then move on.

But as I spent time in these 7 verses I realized they deserved more time than that. What happened here was an important pivot point for the church and their relationship with Paul. I also think the Lord has some relational wisdom tucked away for us to discover.

We've seen that Paul paid a painful visit to Corinth, then wrote them a painful letter, and now we're going to see that some of that pain was centered around one person.

*<sup>5</sup> Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup> For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup> For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup> so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. 2 Cor. 2:5-11*

Pray.

Here's what we know: someone in Corinth had sinned in such a flagrant way that it caused the church and Paul a lot of pain, and the church had taken the extreme step of excommunicating him.

A lot of commentators over the years have believed that this person is the person mentioned in 1 Cor. who has having an illicit relationship with his step-mother. Others believe that he is someone who publicly opposed and attacked Paul during his "painful visit" and the severe letter he wrote after he left was written about this offender.

Paul references this in chapter 7: *For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. <sup>9</sup> As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us... <sup>12</sup> So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. 2 Cor. 7:8-9,12*

Whether he's the man mentioned in 1 Cor, or someone who attacked Paul and stirred up division in the church, God chose not to reveal that to us, which means we don't need to know who he was or what he did to learn the lessons God has tucked away in this for us.

At this point we're coming in at the end of it, but this was a mess. Whatever this man did, it was a serious enough sin that Paul called for the church to put him out and treat him like an unbeliever. This is one reason why many believe this passage refers to the man Paul wrote about in 1 Cor. 5:2 who was guilty of sinning with his stepmother because Paul's command to them, *let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

This painful step of removing someone who refuses to repent of their sin from fellowship and the sacraments was given to the church by Jesus in Matt. 18.

***15** "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Matt 18:15-18*

## **Lesson #1 – church discipline is sometimes necessary because some sins will ruin an entire church**

We're calling this series Messy Grace because even in a healthy church where God's grace is actively working there's going to be some mess too. And what we mean by mess is sin happening. The process of church discipline isn't meant to be triggered every time someone in the church sins. If we removed everyone in the church with sin in their life, I'm not sure who'd turn the lights off on their way out. There'd be no one left.

We need to be ok with mess. The church is to be a safe place for broken people. They called Jesus the friend of sinners because he welcomed sinners. So obviously Jesus doesn't mean every time someone falls or fails, we're showing them the door. Paul deals with a lot of sin in his letters, but he only calls for putting someone out of the church in the case of extremely serious sin: incest, divisiveness, and possibly in this case, seeking to publicly undermine and attack an Apostle sent by the risen Christ.

There are sins, however, that are toxic sins. Left unchecked, they will rot a church from the inside out. In these cases, love can't just ignore the sin, anymore than a good doctor can ignore cancer in a patient.

The painful letter Paul wrote with anguish through a curtain of tears was written out of love for the church – and love for the sinner. Like the pain a surgeon inflicts when they cut out a cancerous growth Paul took the scalpel of his pen and inflicted pain on the believers in Corinth in order to cut out the sin before it metastasized.

And they took it to heart. They removed the offending person from their midst. They put him out of fellowship. And it did what Jesus intended it to do: it broke this man's heart and it scared him.

The goal is two-fold: to protect the church from toxic sin, but also to move the offending person towards repentance. And that's what we see happened with this man. He is crushed. He is in danger of being overwhelmed – literally swallowed up – by his grief and guilt. That's not a bad thing, that's a good thing. But Paul sees that enough was enough, and so the same Paul who had called them to put him out now calls on them to bring him back in.

As we continue, I want us to transfer some of the principles here out of the context of church discipline because that's not something most of us are dealing with on a regular basis. But we do experience relational breakdowns due to offenses and sin and conflict. We do experience a wide variety of mess in our relationships, and this paragraph is among some of the most sensitive, careful words Paul ever writes.

## **Lesson # 2 – In painful and fragile situations, choose words that promote healing**

Paul writes, <sup>5</sup> *Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.* Pain was inflicted on me, but even more on you he says. But he's using careful words that have the offending party in mind. *In some measure...not to put it too severely.* He is well aware of the power words have and he's measuring them carefully.

That old adage, *sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me*, is exactly wrong. Words can hurt a lot worse and a lot deeper and a lot longer than getting hit by sticks and stones.

Listen, Paul was a blunt man. He didn't mince words or tip-toe around when it came to being honest. If you were super sensitive, you probably got your feelings a little roughed up around Paul.

We live in a time when some people get offended pretty easily and if we tailor our words towards people like that, we're gonna feel like we have to wrap every word up in bubble wrap. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher Spurgeon said that he found the more he walked on egg shells not to offend certain people the more offended they go, so he was just going to love people and speak from the heart. Good advice.

But there is a time when things are fragile or volatile and we can choose to either defuse or detonate. We can either build our case, or build a bridge. Paul says, enough is enough, it's time to build a bridge to this man. Says it with words that promote healing.

### **Lesson # 3 - Show the grace of forgiveness as a way of affirming love**

*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.* Vv. 6-8

Paul doesn't use the common word for forgiveness. He uses the word *charizomai* which means the graciously offer of forgiveness. As Christians, forgiveness – free and gracious forgiveness – is to be a way of life, because it's what we have received from Jesus Christ.

Christian author John Stott shared about the time a leading British humanist was interviewed on television, and in a moment of surprising frankness, she said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me."

Sometimes churches get so serious about dealing with sin, they pendulum to the other extreme and struggling people don't feel loved or welcomed. Messy lives aren't tolerated, so broken people don't feel safe or welcome, and eventually those who stay in the church start to hide their sin. It goes underground.

Paul says, affirm your love. Encourage your brother. Accept him. Forgive graciously.

### **Lesson #4 – God's work is never just about "them" – He's also working in us!**

*For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup> so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.* Vv. 9-10

Paul's got one eye on the guy, and one eye on the church. Would they obey God's word in this? They passed with flying colors! But now Paul says, listen, this guy inflicted pain on you and on me. You forgive him, I forgive him.

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Again Paul chooses to tread lightly – “if I’ve forgiven anything (he did) it’s for your sake in the presence of Christ. Forgiveness promotes the presence of Christ in the church, and it protects us from the schemes of Satan: *so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.*”

**Conclusion:**