

Marks of the Minister's Love

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:4

© Mike Riccardi

Introduction

Well, after a considerably long break, we return this morning to our series of expositions in the Book of 2 Corinthians. And as I've said a number of times, 2 Corinthians is a book that teaches the people of God how to carry out a faithful ministry even in the midst of affliction. 2 Corinthians is a book about ministry. Many commentators call it “the fourth pastoral epistle,”—adding it to First and Second Timothy and Titus—because it focuses so much on the true character—the true nature—of the Christian ministry.

And I've stressed that the lessons we can learn from this inspired letter are applicable to all of us, because as Christians, we are all called to ministry. This is the reason the Lord Jesus Christ has left us on earth. There is an entire world of people out there who are lost—who have sinned against a holy God, and who face the punishment of His righteous judgment against their sin. And our Lord has sent us—His people—to take the Gospel message of the forgiveness of sins through faith in His name to that lost world, and to call them to repentance. This is what Paul calls the “*ministry* of reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5:18.

And then aside from the ministry of preaching the Gospel to the lost, we are also tasked—as the body of Christ—with the ministry of service to one another in the church. Life in the church is not passive. Christianity is not a spectator sport. It is, as 1 Corinthians 12 puts it, truly a membership. In Romans 12, verse 5, Paul says, “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” And that means if we're being faithful to our calling in the body of Christ, we each are called to ministry in the service of one another. In the human body, the heart is called to serve the body through the ministry of pumping blood throughout the veins. The lungs are called to serve the body through the ministry of breathing air and circulating oxygen throughout the blood.

And in the body of Christ, each one of us is called to serve the body through the ministry of our spiritual gifts to one another. 1 Corinthians 12:7: “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” And in Ephesians chapter 4, Paul explains the purpose of spiritual gifts. He says, Christ gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—He gave all those spiritual gifts—Ephesians 4:12: “for the equipping of the saints for the work of [the ministry (Gk. *διακονία*)], to the building up of the body of Christ.” The body of Christ is built up to maturity when the saints—the individual members of the church—are equipped to do the work of the ministry. You see, when the members of the church are involved in one another's

lives, when they're speaking the Word of God to one another, praying with and for one another, when they're confronting sin in one another, and serving one another by meeting practical needs—then that church is edified, and matured, and strengthened, and glorifying God.

And so we are all called to ministry, GraceLife. We are all called to lay down our lives in sacrificial ministry—whether to the world who needs to hear the Gospel preached to them, or to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ who need one another's help to put off sin, put on righteousness, and pursue their joy in the magnification of Jesus Christ. We are all called to ministry. And 2 Corinthians has much to teach us to equip us for joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction

And we've been learning those lessons as we've been observing the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, even as he labors among the Corinthians in the midst of severe controversy. Critical to understanding these lessons for ministry from the book of 2 Corinthians is understanding the context of events that occasioned the letter.

And much of that had to do with Paul's travel plans. According to 1 Corinthians 16, Paul had made plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, and then, as he traveled up through Macedonia, to come down to spend an extended time with the Corinthians in Corinth. Then, from Corinth, he'd cross the Aegean Sea and return to Jerusalem. But after Timothy delivered the letter of 1 Corinthians, he found out that the false apostles were inciting a rebellion against Paul.

So when Paul heard about this, he decided to change his original plans and go straight to Corinth immediately from Ephesus. He figured by going there in person, he could clear up any confusion and put the rebellion to rest. And so instead of going to Macedonia first, he decided he would go straight to Corinth, then only after that go up to Macedonia in order to collect the offering for the saints in Jerusalem. Then, he'd come back down *from* Macedonia and visit the Corinthians a second time, which, he assumes would be a blessing to them—to see him a second time and also to have a second opportunity to contribute to the offering for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor 1:15–16).

Unfortunately, that's not how things turned out. During that first visit, which Paul calls his “painful visit,” or his “sorrowful visit,” in chapter 2, he discovered that it wasn't just a minor dispute that could be solved by a quick visit. In fact, one of the members of the church—likely one of the false apostles—had openly defied Paul and publicly insulted him before the church. Now that was bad, but Paul wasn't such an ego-maniac that he would be distraught over a little name calling. What really grieved him was that the Corinthians didn't do anything to stop this offender. And that broke his heart—that his dear, spiritual children (1 Cor 4:15), whom he had as if they were birthed in the Gospel, didn't come to the defense of sound doctrine, but were being led astray by these false teachers.

So rather than going to Macedonia according to Plan B, he went to Plan C. He traveled straight back to Ephesus from Corinth, and wrote the Corinthians what we call “the severe letter,” or the “tearful letter,” based upon chapter 2 verse 4. And in this letter he sharply reproved them for failing to repudiate the accusations and the teaching of the false apostles.

And so with this second change of travel plans, and with a strongly-worded letter replacing what was a promised second visit, the false apostles seized upon this change in itinerary as a chance to further discredit Paul in the eyes of the Corinthians. They accused him of “vacillating,” chapter 1 verse 17. “All these changes in travel plans show that Paul is just capricious, and fickle, and unstable. He’s someone who says, ‘Yes, yes!’ and ‘No, no!’ at the same time. He’s a deceptive, untrustworthy conniver, who changes his plans whenever it suits him. He purposes according to the flesh; he’s guided not by the Holy Spirit of God but by his own fallen nature.”

And so it has fallen to Paul to defend himself and the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry, because to doubt Paul’s apostleship was to doubt Paul’s Gospel. For the sake of the Gospel—and for the sake of the souls of the Corinthians—Paul sets out to vindicate his character in response to these false accusations. And we saw last time, as we studied verses 15 to 22, that Paul began the defense of his integrity—not by explaining his decisions for the changes in his travel plans—but first by appealing to his theology. The God who sent Paul is the absolute essence of faithfulness. The Christ whom Paul preached is Himself the Truth. The Gospel that he proclaimed was not “Yes and No,” but is “Yes in Christ.” How could Paul preach to them the clear and unambiguous message of the faithful God and the Christ who *is* the Truth, and then turn around and behave in a deceitful and underhanded way? And Paul reminds them that it was through *his* ministry to them that they received the Spirit and sealed the work of God in their hearts with their “Amen.” If Paul was a phony, then their salvation is phony, because they only came to believe in Christ through the message he preached to them.

Well after first grounding his integrity in his theology in verses 15 to 22, Paul turns now to give a defense of his travel plans. In chapter 1 verse 23 all the way down to chapter 2 verse 4, Paul explains that it wasn’t because he was a coward who refused to face his detractors, or because he was a tyrannical manipulator who wanted to demonstrate his power over the Corinthians to do what he pleased. Rather, he explains in this passage that it was out of *love* that he acted the way he did. Let’s read our text for this morning, starting in chapter 1 verse 23: “But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm. ^{2:1}But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. ²For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? ³This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴For out of

much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”

And it’s in that final verse that Paul makes explicit the concept that he’s elaborating on in the entire passage. His actions toward the Corinthians were motivated by *love*. Everything he did with reference to the Corinthians was an expression of his true, deep, fatherly *love* for them. And so what we really have in this text is a clear example of what it means for ministers of the Gospel to love those whom they’re ministering to. What does true, pastoral, Christlike love look like between pastor and people? In our passage this morning we’re going to observe **four marks of the minister’s love** for his people—four attributes of the love which must characterize the ministry of the true servant of the Gospel.

Now, the most immediate application of this text is to pastors and those who serve the church in positions of spiritual authority. But as you hear this passage unfolded, remember that all of you are called to be ministers of the Gospel on behalf of one another. Whatever your sphere of spiritual influence, you are called to ministry, and so this passage teaches you about the love that *you* are to have for those you minister to. So keep that in mind as we study this portion of God’s Word together this morning.

I. Sensitivity (1:23; 2:1)

That **first mark** of the minister’s love is, number one: **sensitivity**. Look with me at verse 23: “But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth.”

Now you see right away that Paul feels like he’s on trial before the Corinthians. He opens this defense of his conduct by calling God to be a witness of the truthfulness of what he’s about to say. In verse 12, he had already appealed to the testimony of the highest *human* witness: the testimony of his conscience, which he has said has acquitted him. But the Corinthians know that it’s entirely possible for someone to declare that they have a clear conscience when they don’t. In Paul’s day, there was no lack of deceitful and underhanded liars who would be willing to hypocritically claim that their conscience acquitted them of wrongdoing, all the while knowing they were guilty. And besides that, because of the deceptiveness of our own hearts, we can sometimes have a clear conscience because it has been improperly informed. So here, Paul goes beyond conscience, and appeals to God Himself—the God who knows Paul’s every thought, word, and deed. This God who searches the heart, who tests the motives, who knows man’s inmost being, Paul now invokes as a witness on his behalf.

And not just as a witness, but as a judge! Literally, the phrase is, “But I call God as witness *against* my soul...” He’s basically saying, “If I’m lying, may God strike me dead!” And that is not something that was outside the realm of possibility. The early Christians knew what the

consequences were for lying to the Holy Spirit, as Acts chapter 5 can attest. Ananias and Sapphira lied to God about the price of the land that they sold (cf. Acts 5:4), and they were both struck dead. As Calvin said, “the man that appeals to God as his witness, calls upon him at the same time to be an avenger of perjury” (143). There doesn’t exist a more solemn oath than the one that Paul takes here in verse 23. He wants it to be unmistakable that he is speaking the truth.

And what does he say? “It was to *spare* you that I did not come again to Corinth.” Now what does that mean? Well look down to chapter 2 verse 1; that verse sheds more light on this. Paul says, “But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again.” Paul is saying that if he would have come to them again so soon after his painful visit, he would have most likely had to have come exercising apostolic discipline against the church, which would have only resulted in sorrow for everyone involved.

Paul speaks this way in both in 1 Corinthians and later on in 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 4, he speaks about what would have been the beginnings of the unrest in Corinth. He writes, in 1 Corinthians 4:19, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you *with a rod*, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?” And later in 2 Corinthians 13:2–3, he writes, “I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again *I will not spare anyone*, since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.” See, if those who are unruly don’t get in line before Paul’s visit, he says he’ll be forced to visit them with the rod of fatherly discipline. But he has no desire for a repeat of the painful visit. That would only bring sorrow both to them and to him.

Picture the situation Paul is in, here. He’s back in Ephesus after his painful visit to Corinth—just reeling that the Corinthians didn’t discipline the offender who openly challenged Paul’s authority, dumfounded that his dear spiritual children could have been being deceived by these false teachers, and worried for their souls. And he’s trying to decide what to do next. (1) If he does nothing and tries to give everything time to calm down, his silence risks making it seem like he was wrong and his opponents are right. They would be vindicated, the Corinthians would be further deceived, and Paul’s influence over them for the Gospel’s sake would be all but lost. (2) If he visits them again right away to put down the rebellion once and for all, he may just end up pouring gas on the fire and alienating the Corinthians beyond repair. (3) And if he writes a stinging letter, admonishing them to discipline the offender, his opponents will just say, as they did in 2 Corinthians 10:10, “See, his letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive. He’s meek when face to face, but bold only when he’s far away” (10:1).

Of course, Paul decided not to visit again, but instead to write that severe letter. And that only gave the false apostles an opportunity to insist that he had gone back on his word about his travel plans, that he was fickle and purposed according to the flesh, and that he was arrogant and authoritarian—doing what he pleased when he pleased in an effort to show the Corinthians who’s boss! But here Paul demonstrates his pastoral **sensitivity**. It wasn’t because he was fickle. It wasn’t because he was an unstable, unspiritual man. It wasn’t because he was indifferent to their needs. And it wasn’t because he was arrogantly posturing to exhibit his authority. In fact, his motivation wasn’t self-focused at all. Instead, he changed his plans in order to spare *the Corinthians* the pain of another sorrowful visit. He says, “I was thinking about *you*, and *your* welfare, and what would most serve *your* joy and *your* spiritual health.”

Paul was a wise shepherd. He wasn’t fearful of wielding the rod of discipline. But he wasn’t trigger happy either. He didn’t wield that rod as a result of lashing back in anger. If he ever did it, he did it with the intention of instruction and eventual reconciliation. Parents, you understand this, right? It is necessary to wield the rod of discipline with your children. And in those times when they’ve disobeyed significantly, in the moment it’s easy to want to discipline them out of anger. But you know that it won’t serve them for you to just lash out. That would only exasperate them and drive them to further disobedience. Well Paul was a wise spiritual father to the Corinthians. He was willing to wield the rod, but by delaying his next visit and writing the letter instead, he mercifully gave them time to examine themselves, to consider what they had done, and to repent. He knew Proverbs 15:23: “How delightful is a *timely* word!” And Proverbs 25:11: “Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken *in right circumstances*.”

And oh, what lessons this teaches those of us who desire to be faithful ministers to Christ’s flock! Sometimes it is necessary to correct the errors of those brothers and sisters who are in our lives. But this needs to be governed by a loving, pastoral **sensitivity**, as Paul models for us here. It is possible to give the right answer at the wrong time. And when we *do* give the right answer at the wrong time, it is often because we are not being **sensitive** to the reality that our brothers and sisters—like we ourselves!—are still in progress! They are still battling sin in their lives! They have not yet been made perfect, and so they don’t respond to truth in the way that they ought to. Now, that’s no excuse for failure to receive biblical correction. Not at all! But it *is* a plea to those of us doing the correcting to be *patient* with those we’re ministering to. We need to speak the truth in love, for sure. But then we need to give our brothers and sisters time to examine themselves in light of what counsel we’ve given them—time to search the Scriptures and see if these things are so—time for the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts and bring conviction. We can’t engineer any of that. And we can’t write people off if they don’t immediately receive our instruction and change course. Augustine said, “Severity is ready to punish the faults which it may discover. Charity [and we could say, ‘pastoral **sensitivity**’] is reluctant to discover the faults which it must punish” (cited in Hughes, 47).

Paul didn't make leadership decisions based upon what would be the most expedient for him. He made those decisions based upon what would bring the greatest benefit to his people. So also we, as we seek to serve the body of Christ faithfully, ought to consider others' interests above our own.

II. Servanthood (1:24)

And so the minister's love for his people is marked first by sensitivity. A **second mark of the minister's love** is, number two: **servanthood**. Look with me at verse 24: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm."

And we see Paul's pastoral sensitivity at work even further here. He's just affirmed to them that he postponed his visit in order to *spare* them the pain of judgment. But he knows that his opponents will seize on that confession of love and consideration for the Corinthians, and would twist it to suit their own ends: "It was to *spare* you that he didn't come? That's nothing more than a veiled threat! He might as well say, 'Don't make me come and destroy you!' Don't you see what a tyrant this Paul is?!"

So to make sure that he's not misunderstood, he adds this qualification: "Not that we lord it over your faith." What you have in this phrase is **the repudiation of a domineering spirit**. The truly loving minister of the Gospel—the loving shepherd of Christ's sheep—renounces all forms of despotism, domineering, and dictatorial power. Paul has absolutely no interest in lording his apostolic authority over the Corinthians. He has no desire to micromanage and domineer and control people's thinking and behavior. Paul didn't have a problem with authority structures in the church. He recognized differing roles and prescribed submission of the people to their elders. But what Paul did have a problem with was *lords* in the church. There is only *one* Lord in the church, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Turn over to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 5. There Paul puts it plainly: "For we do not preach *ourselves* but *Christ Jesus* as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake." "*We* are not your lords; *Christ* is Lord. We're just your slaves." This is a spirit of **servanthood**. In Luke chapter 22, verse 24, the disciples begin to fight about which one of them was the greatest. And in verse 25 Jesus puts it to rest. He says, "The kings of the Gentiles *lord it over them*; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the **servant**." You see, that heavy-handed, domineering spirit—that's what marks the rulers of the *world* system. But in the kingdom of *God*, true greatness displays itself in the humility of **servanthood** (cf. Hughes, 49). One more: 1 Peter chapter 5. Beginning in verse 1, the Apostle Peter writes, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your Pope...." No. "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as the head of the Church...." No. "Therefore, I exhort the elders

among you, as your *fellow elder* and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ²shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³*nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge*, but proving to be examples to the flock.”

If there were ever two men who had a right to claim lordship over the church, it was the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter. And both of them disclaim any lordly authority over the faith of the individual believers. Commentator Philip Edgcumbe Hughes wrote, “There is, then, no scriptural warrant for hierarchical domination or overlordship in the Church of Christ. Absolute authority is invested not in any supposed apostolic office or succession, but in the person and office of Christ who is the only Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Heb 3:1) and the one Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (1 Pet 2:25)” (49). This flies in the face of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Eastern Orthodoxy, of Roman Catholicism, and in many sections of Anglicanism, all of whom claim some sort of apostolic succession as the authority of their church. But the apostles *themselves* refused to exercise the kind of spiritual imperialism that these priests and bishops and cardinals seize for themselves!

But aiming a little more close to home, we who would claim to be ministers of the Gospel in the service of Christ’s flock, we need to be on guard against that domineering spirit in our own hearts. It is so easy for those who are naturally gifted as leaders to fall prey to this temptation. You give a prideful and insecure man a title, a little publicity, and a bit of a following, and he immediately starts kingdom-building. He likes being the guy in charge. He likes being the one to make decisions. He likes being the one that everyone looks up to, and respects, and reveres. And before long he becomes enamored with the glory of himself, and his ministry becomes less and less about the magnification of Christ, and more and more about the preservation of his ego. And so now, if anyone dares to contradict him, he takes it as a personal assault to the personal kingdom that he’s building. And so all of his energy goes into micromanaging and controlling every little decision, to increasing his power and broadening his influence, to making sure everyone toes the line. It’s that sort of cultish authoritarianism that marks just about every cult you’ll ever hear of.

That kind of thing could not be further from Paul’s mind when he speaks about sparing the Corinthians. “Not that we lord it over your faith.” Martin Luther expresses this concept well, in typical Luther fashion. He was finding out that a number of the Protestants who were following his example and leaving the Catholic Church began to call themselves Lutherans. And he wrote this: “What is Luther? Is it not true that the teaching is not mine! In the same vein, I have been crucified for no one. Saint Paul [1 Cor 3:4] would not allow it that the Christians would be called Pauline or Petrine, but just Christians. How did it happen to me that I, a poor, stinking sack of maggots, should have someone call the children of Christ after my unworthy name? Not so,

beloved friends! ... I am and wish to be master of no man. I have, along with the community, the one, universal teaching of Christ, who alone is our Master [Matt 23:8]" (Cited in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 8). Luther understood this principle of **servanthood**—that we are not in this to make a name for *ourselves*, but to make *Christ's* name famous. George Whitefield wrote in a letter, "Let my name be forgotten, let me be trodden under the feet of all men, if Jesus may thereby be glorified."

Oh, how we need an extra measure of this spirit of **servanthood**!—the repudiation of all ministerial lordliness! The true minister of the Gospel delights to make the confession of John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Pastor John calls that "The First Law of Ministry." Let us never forget, friends, that we are *ministers*, not masters.

If fact, that's what Paul says in the next phrase. Look again at verse 24: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers *with* you for your joy." He says, "I have no desire to be a despot. I have no desire to control your every thought, word, and action. I'm just a fellow-worker, laboring right alongside you. And my goal is your joy in Christ." He says the same thing in Philippians chapter 1. When Paul's talking about whether he'll be executed at the hands of Nero and go to be with Christ, or whether he'll remain on in the flesh to serve the church, he characterizes his entire life of ministry as laboring for the *joy* of God's people. Philippians 1:25: "Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and *joy* in the faith."

Friends, these verses teach us that **the essence of all Gospel ministry is laboring to increase one another's joy in Jesus**. You say, "Wait a minute. I thought the goal of ministry was to present every man mature in Christ, Colossians 1:28." Yes, absolutely. But the nature of that maturity—what it means to be a mature believer—is to see Christ as He actually is in all of His glory, and to be so satisfied by Him that every sinful pleasure in this universe is lost on you! has no place in your heart! Because your joy is full—your heart is satisfied with the glory of Jesus! When your joy is in Christ, you have no taste for the passing pleasures of sin. You pursue holiness as your greatest treasure, because holiness is where Christ is! *That* is spiritual maturity!

The essence of Gospel ministry is laboring to increase one another's joy in Jesus. You say, "Wait a minute. I thought the goal of ministry was the glory of God." Yes! Absolutely! But there is nothing that makes God look greater than for sinful people to forsake the pursuit of their happiness in sin, and to seek all their happiness, all their joy, all their satisfaction in the Person of His Son! Nothing magnifies the worth of God more than when His people can have Him, and desire nothing else!

Joy in Christ is the essence of spiritual maturity. And joy in Christ is the essence of glorifying God. And so **joy in Christ is the essential goal of all Gospel ministry**. Hughes captures this

when he writes, “So far from wishing, like some despot, to oppress and subjugate the Corinthians by the relentless imposition of authority, [Paul] desires to be a helper of their joy—that is, that he may assist them to arrive at that state of unclouded communion with God and fellowship with each other, in which their overflowing and constant experience will be one of joy unspeakable and full of glory” (50). Sam Storms defines that joy as “a deep, durable delight in the splendor of God that utterly ruins you for anything else. It is a whole-souled savoring of the spiritual sweetness of Jesus that drives out all competing pleasures and leads the soul to rest content with the knowledge of God and the blessings of intimacy with him” (Storms, 57).

This is what you are in the church to do for your brothers and sisters in Christ. *This* is the goal of all of your labors in ministry—whether you’re an usher, a greeter, a nursery volunteer, a teacher, or a faithful attender of a small group Bible study who faithfully prays for your brothers and sisters and always aims to steer the conversation toward Scripture. No matter what sphere of ministry, you are to order every aspect of your life—to do whatever it is that you have to do—so that your fellow believers can see, and know, and *enjoy* more of the Lord Jesus Christ. That means we need to ask ourselves, friends, “In every aspect of my life, what can I do to put the loveliness and glory of Christ on display? How can I think, and speak, and act, and live so that people see that the greatest joy imaginable is to be found only in Jesus Christ?” That, dear friends, is what it means to love people, as a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. To truly love someone is to labor—to do whatever it is that has to be done—to bring the beloved their greatest good and benefit. And everyone’s greatest good and benefit is to find eternal joy and satisfaction in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ!

So we don’t lord it over your faith. We don’t seek to domineer, and rule, and subjugate. We lay down our lives as your *slaves* so that you might find your joy in Jesus.

III. Satisfaction (2:1–3)

The faithful minister loves his people. And that love is marked, first of all, by sensitivity. That love is marked, secondly, by servanthood. The **third mark** of the minister’s love is, **number three: satisfaction**. And by using the term **satisfaction**, I mean this: that true, biblical love consists in the sharing of mutual joy—of seeking one another’s joy as one’s own. Look with me at the first three verses of chapter two: “But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. ²For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? ³This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all.”

Paul is elaborating on what he said in verse 23—that it was to *spare* them that he postponed his second visit to Corinth, because he didn’t want a repeat of a his painful visit. He didn’t want to

come before they had time to repent, and then have to come with the rod and punish unrepentant sin. That, he says, would not have tended to their joy. But here we learn that, though Paul's change in travel plans was out of consideration for the Corinthians first of all, they weren't the only ones he was trying to spare from sorrow. Listen to these verses again: "But I determined this *for my own sake*, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. ²For if I cause you sorrow, *who then makes me glad* but the one whom I made sorrowful? ³This is the very thing I wrote you, *so that when I came, I would not have sorrow* from those who ought to make me rejoice."

Is Paul being selfish? He's just repeating over and over again that his concern is that he would not be made sorrowful, and that he would not lose his means of gladness. Unless Paul has gone absolutely crazy, and has entirely forgotten what he's trying to accomplish as he's writing—namely, to convince the Corinthians of his *love* for them—and is now finally letting down his guard and showing his true colors that he's just a self-seeking manipulator——unless that's what's happening here (and it's not), what we learn from this passage is that there is a way to pursue your own joy and, at the same time, *love* people. And that is when you pursue *your* joy *in* their joy—when you seek the happiness of others *as* your happiness.

Listen to the way Paul is reasoning here. "If I came to you with a rod of discipline, I knew that that would cause you sorrow. And how can I be happy, if you are afflicted? Unless my visit cause you joy, it can bring no joy to me (Hodge, 407)." Again, I turn to trusted commentator, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. He writes, "The sense of this verse is that he cannot be made glad by those whom he has made sorry; for their sorrow is his sorrow, just as their joy is his joy" (53). And the great Charles Hodge: "Such was the apostle's love for the Corinthians that unless they were happy he could not be happy" (407). "Such was the apostle's *love*."

You see, dear friends, love is *not* disinterested benevolence! Love is *not* stone-faced self-sacrifice, no matter the cost! The point of love is not that we should go without some good things. The point of love is that we must do whatever needs to be done to *secure* those good things for our beloved! Love is not chiefly about our abstinence; it's about our beloved's happiness!

Valentine's Day is around the corner. Imagine that two weeks from now, you come home to your wife with a beautiful bouquet of a dozen red roses. She sees you with the roses, her eyes light up, she smiles ear to ear, and she throws her arms around your neck, and says, "Oh honey, they're beautiful! Thank you so much!" What's your response? "Yeah, don't mention it." Just disinterested. "Yup. Just doing my duty as a husband." Is that loving? Why not? Love is an action, right? I've dutifully performed the action of buying my wife roses for Valentine's Day. Love is self-sacrifice, right? I left work early, and drove 30 miles away to the best florist I know to find the most beautiful roses I could. How is that not love?

Oh, dear friends, because love is *more* than an action! Love is *more* than self-sacrifice! Love is seeking your joy in one another's joy! What's the loving response at the doorstep, when your wife thanks you for the flowers? It's taking her in your arms, smiling back at her, and saying, "Sweetheart, it is my *pleasure*. Nothing makes me happier than to see you happy." Which one of you ladies is going to call your husband *selfish* because he seeks his happiness in your happiness? Not one of you! Why? Because even if we're not always perfectly conscious of it, we understand that love is having someone else's joy so inextricably bound up with your own joy, that your heart as it were envelops their own heart—that their happiness *is* what sustains your happiness!

This is the love that Paul had for the Corinthians. Their joy is his joy. And then at the end of verse 3 he says, "...having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all." In other words, "Dear Corinthians, *your* joy is *my* joy. *I'm* happy when *you're* happy. And everything in me is hoping that *my* joy would be *your* joy as well—that what would bring you the greatest delight is not my grief and my sorrow, but my joy."

Oh friends, what a beautiful picture of true, Christian love! May God do a work in our hearts—may the Spirit of God so work *love* in the hearts of His people, that I would pursue *your* good *as* my good—that you would seek *your* joy *in* my joy—that we would seek *our* happiness *in* one another's happiness! Do you know what would happen then? Sacrificial, life-laid-down ministry to one another in the body of Christ would go from merely being our duty, to being our *delight*. Difficult, inconvenient service to our brothers and sisters wouldn't just be something we know we ought to do and will feel guilty for if we don't do it; it would be our joy—it would be our meat and our drink. Oh, *then* needs would get met! *Then* the body of Christ would truly minister to one another. *Then* the love of Jesus would be on display to a watching world!

IV. Sharpening (2:4)

Well, we've seen that the faithful minister's love for his people is marked by sensitivity, by servanthood, and by the mutual satisfaction in one another's welfare that is wrought by the Spirit of God. We come now, finally, to the **fourth mark of the minister's love**. Number four: **sharpening**. Look with me at verse 4: "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you."

In this verse, Paul explains the circumstances in which and the motivation for why he wrote the severe letter. It wasn't just some sort of retaliatory catharsis, where he was venting his frustrations on the Corinthians to make himself feel better. It wasn't because he was too much of a coward to be so forthright with them in person. It wasn't because he was trying to be a domineering tyrant, seeking to intimidate the Corinthians into siding with him. It was so that his

love for them would be made manifest. And his love for them would be made manifest when they considered what extraordinarily unpleasant lengths he was willing to go to in order to protect them from the damning effects of sin and false teaching.

He's basically saying, "Dear friends, don't think it was easy for me to write that letter to you. Despite what the false apostles are telling you, don't think I took some perverse delight in confronting you like that. My Corinthians, I tell you: it was out of much affliction and anguish of heart that I wrote to you—and with many tears! I had no desire to make you sorrowful. I don't love conflict. Frankly, it would have been much easier for me to avoid the situation entirely! But dear brothers and sisters, I love you all too much to abandon you to damning doctrines of the false apostles for the sake of avoiding difficult conversations! I love you all too much to *not* confront you about your sin." Paul's love was a **sharpening** love.

And because we're short on time, I want to draw out just two brief lines of application from this verse. First, the love that a faithful minister has for his people **requires him to confront sin in their lives**. You see, the watered-down, wishy-washy, sentimentalized version of "love" that is propagated by our self-indulgent, perennially-adolescent culture—and sadly which has been imbibed even in the professing church—is little more than Carl Rogers' notion of unconditional positive regard. To "love" someone, according to our society, is to affirm every decision they make and to applaud them just for being them. In fact, there is nothing more *hateful*, according to our corrupt culture, than to tell someone they're wrong, and that they need to change in some considerable way in order to be pleasing to God. But this is precisely what love demands.

I can't imagine being an oncologist. Having to tell patients, day in and day out, that the scan revealed they had cancer, and that any hope of their survival requires them to endure exhausting treatments of radiation and painful surgery. It can't be easy to inflict that kind of emotional burden on people day after day. In fact, I think it would be much easier for the oncologist to tell his patients that they *don't* have cancer—that all is well! But surely that would not be loving. Why? Because the disease will go untreated, and will eventually kill the patient.

The same is true in the church, friends. Discernment properly identifies sin for the cancer that it is. And love constrains us to have the difficult conversations with our brothers and sisters, in which we lovingly explain that, though they might not be aware of it, they've got spiritual cancer, and they need to do something about it before it ravages their soul. Sure, it's easier to ignore sin in one another. It's easier to not have people call you judgmental, and arrogant, and holier-than-thou because you've brought sin to their attention. It's easier to avoid resolving that conflict with your brother; in a big church like this, you can just pretend they don't even exist! It's easier to write people off and terminate relationships. But dear friends, that is not ministry. That is not **love**. The loving servant of Christ's flock is willing to endure all manner of difficulty for the sake of one another's mortification of sin and joy in Jesus. Proverbs 27:6: "Faithful are

the wounds of a friend,” because those wounds work in the soul a godly sorrow that produces repentance leading to salvation, 2 Corinthians 7:9–10.

And secondly, love requires not only that the faithful minister be bold in his confrontation of sin. Love also requires that that boldness be a **brokenhearted boldness**. Paul says he wrote “out of much affliction and anguish of heart” and “with many tears.” Paul’s preeminent reaction to the sin of the Corinthians wasn’t one of vexation or exasperation. He wasn’t just annoyed at them. He was grieved to the heart for them. He didn’t rebuke them because their sin made him mad. He rebuked them because his heart broke for them. He knew where the end of the road they were traveling led: it led to apostasy; it led to condemnation. And he couldn’t stand to think that those whom he loved so much might be severed from the Christ who is their indomitable joy and go into the torment of eternal punishment.

You see, the faithful minister is courageous enough to get over his fear of what people might say or do to him if he confronts them over their sin. But that same faithful minister also takes no perverse delight in delivering that correction. And we need to be on guard against that, because our hearts will deceive us into thinking we’re stalwarts for righteousness, when really we’re just hard people looking to beat up on others so that we don’t have to deal with the sin in our own lives.

Calvin said, “It is the part of a pious pastor, to weep within himself, before he calls upon others to weep: to feel tortured in silent musings, before he shows any token of displeasure; and to keep within his own breast more grief, than he cause to others” (148). So you see, we must be bold to confront, but that boldness must be a **brokenhearted boldness**. It must be sorrow—not exasperation—that drives us to confront sin in our brothers and sisters. And they should be able to tell the difference.

Conclusion

This is the love of the true minister of the Gospel. It is a love marked by sensitivity, by servanthood, by satisfaction, and by sharpening. I exhort you, GraceLife: love like this.

Let us be a church *full* of *ministers*, who are constantly ruminating on how we can serve one another in **sensitivity**, considering one another’s needs above our own; how we can minister to one another in a spirit of **servanthood**, mortifying any vestiges of a domineering spirit and a desire to make a name for ourselves.

Let us give ourselves wholly to the task of increasing one another’s joy in Jesus, laboring alongside one another for our joy.

And let us love truly, from the heart—not disinterestedly and dispassionately, and certainly not begrudgingly. But following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, let us be so large-hearted as to seek *our* joy *in* one another’s joy—to seek the joy of our brothers and sisters as our very own.

And let our love be a **sharpening** love. Let us be a people, unafraid to deal with sin in each other’s lives—driven by a brokenhearted boldness that labors for the church’s holiness.