
Genuine Repentance in Ministry Relationships

2 Corinthians 7:1-16⁸

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The church at Corinth is in deep need of genuine repentance...

Leadership failing to correct what was wrong...

Teaching influenced by the legalism of the Judaizers...

Corporate sin in unbiblical and unholy alliances...

Broken relationship with the church's founder and Apostle...

The Requirement because of God's Promises (7:1)

¹ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Paul urges the Corinthians to turn from the unclean and to seek God's holiness. He grounds this in the promises of God as he says in 6:16-18.

as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

The Promises Fulfilled

Now think about this for a moment. When those promises were made, God was speaking to Israel. But those promises have now been fulfilled. They were not fulfilled by Israel's obedience. They were fulfilled in the New Covenant. Jesus, the new Israel, obeyed God fully. Now, we are the people of God. Since we are on this side of the cross and the resurrection, we pursue holiness, not to become God's children, but because we are God's children.

Paul is then really raising a question. Will they show that they are truly God's sons and daughters by repenting of their sin, their broken relationships and be reconciled? If they are true sons and daughters, then the Spirit they claim will be empowering them to all that God requires.

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The Problem Encountered

What is the problem? The problem is that to pursue holiness because of being God's children is going to require repentance. They are going to have to turn around. Now Paul had sent Titus with his last letter to speak on his behalf. Titus was to press home their need to repent, be reconciled and return to godly living. Now he has that report back from Titus. But the story of receiving that report is now important to relate.

The Request because of their Relationship (v. 2-4)

Writing from Macedonia, Paul takes up the thread of his travel narrative which had been broken in Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

Further he wrote earlier (2 Corinthians 6:11-13)

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

And now...

² Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³ I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴ I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

His Requirement (v. 2a)

He asks that they make room for him in their hearts. This is his second appeal to them. Both of these are expressed as commands. Genuine repentance and reconciliation should open one's heart towards the other person. If it does not, then there are questions about how genuine, how godly that repentance really was. They cannot continue to hold an offense against him. They have taken an offense when none was offered. Though they have closed their heart to Paul for what feels like good reasons to themselves, they were wrong. Therefore, now they must open their heart to Paul to accept him and to have a godly affection for him.

His Reasons (v. 2b-4)

Paul asserts that he has never wronged them (v. 2b). While they may have taken offense or thought Paul had done something wrong against them, the simple fact is that he had not. One writer helpfully points out:

Without commenting on them in detail, Paul refutes three accusations currently being made against him. They said that he had wronged them, corrupted them and exploited them. We do not know exactly what the charges were, but they may have related to the collection of money for the believers in Jerusalem. Perhaps Paul

is being charged with dishonesty and corruption in these matters. Nevertheless, he does not write this to condemn the Corinthians (verse 3). If they are saying these things it will be due to the evil slander of other people. Indeed, he sees his future and theirs as being closely connected in relation to death and life; Paul would live or die with them (verse 3). As believers together they share a common destiny. (Adapted, Barnett, p.)

Paul also affirms that he has them in his heart (v. 3-4). Even though they have wrongly accused him, though he has reason to take offense at them, his own heart is open to them. He is proud of them. He is comforted by them. He is joyful over them. Now these words are sort of piling on. They are true. But the now sensitive, repenting souls in the Corinthian church would be even more grieved. To put it bluntly: Paul is making them feel bad.

They have no cause to close their hearts to Paul but they did. He has much cause to close his heart to them but he didn't. He shows them what an open heart to others is like. It is proud of others. It is comforted by others. It rejoices in others.

This is a very, very convicting paragraph.

Are you offended by someone? Are you carrying a grudge against someone? Are you absolutely positive that you are in the right? Are you carrying an offense for (not against, on behalf of) someone else?

Have you closed your heart to that person? Do you avoid them? Do you speak wrongly about them in your heart? Has your Christian affection for that person dissipated?

Is someone wrongly offended at you? Have you gone the extra mile to address the issue? Now, you are not to confess or apologize or ask forgiveness for something you did not do just to fix a relationship. But have you spoken to the person? Have you sought out helpers? Are you sure you are ok?

Have you closed your heart to that person? Do you avoid them? Do you speak wrongly about them in your heart? Has your Christian affection for that person dissipated?

The Relief because of His Partnerships (v. 5–9)

Paul expresses a twofold relief.

⁵ For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

Upon Arriving in Macedonia (v.5)

It was a very hard time. In Macedonia he was afflicted in body and soul; it seemed at every turn. There was spiritual conflict all around him. There was inner struggle as was concerned and maybe even worrying, about Titus's safety.

Upon Meeting the Messenger (v. 6)

Paul was discouraged. He was downcast. These difficult afflictions weighed on him. Echoing the beginning of the book, Paul recognized that God comforted him. How? By allowing Titus to arrive safely. Just having Titus near was important to Paul. Yes, there was more than that involved. But Paul loved those who partnered and served with him. Paul is pointing to their kind of relationship as what ministry partners are to be like.

Upon Hearing the Message (v. 7-9)

Paul is overjoyed to hear from Titus that the Corinthians had warmly received both Titus himself and Paul's rebuke, which resulted in their repentance. Titus reports of their longing for Paul. He tells of their mourning over the brokenness. Titus tells them how zealous, passionate, determined they were to be reconciled. This brought joy to his heart. Their relationship had been so strained, so difficult, so broken. Often, these are never mended. But now, there is hope.

He is told that his letter has grieved them. Paul is not sorry to cause the proper kind of grief. That is a hard thing to have to do; but, it is a necessary thing to do. Paul then rejoices that his hard words had a good effect. They were grieved, not just offended. They were grieved in a way that led them to change their ways.

Though Paul had spoken and written in what felt to them was harsh, he was glad. He was not rejoicing in the hard words. Even when they are necessary they must not be something we relish or boast about. Necessary hard words should still grieve the tender heart they come from. What he rejoiced in was that those words and the grief they caused were not wasted. They did bring loss. No, they brought something great...

The Repentance because of God's Work (v. 10–13)

Paul contrasts godly repentance with worldly repentance.

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. ¹¹ For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. ¹² 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. ¹³ Therefore we are comforted.

The Biblical Contrast (v. 10-11)

There are two kinds of grief. Paul is concerned that the Corinthians have the a true sorrow over their sin.

The first kind is **a godly grief**. It is brought about by genuine sorrow over one's sin and leads to salvation. It produces a genuine earnestness to be reconciled and to restore the relationship. Now, Paul may be speaking ironically here, but the underlying need is the same. Genuine repentance treats the sin seriously, confesses the sin, acknowledges the pain and difficulty it has caused others, accepts the consequences and takes Biblical steps to put on righteousness.

Now, I want to say something. This is being offered as a corrective and as a reorientation. Sometime a person will sin, genuinely repent, be forgiven and commit the sin again. What is needed is not a questioning of their earlier repentance. What is needed is repentance over the event of sin. Hopefully a person is identifying the root of a sin. But we are required by the Lord to forgive no matter how often a person sins against us. If they repent over the sin, then they are to be forgiven. If they doing the sin and keep repenting, they are to be forgiven. And, they may need deeper, fuller more skilled help to overcome the sin. It is sinful to say, "I am going to withhold forgiveness to see if they are genuinely repentant," when we think that genuine repentance means *they never commit the sin again*. We are always to forgive when a person repents. We are always to be hopeful and prayerful that a person will not sin again. But we are just as commanded to forgive another person as they are commanded to repent of their sin.

The second is **a worldly sorrow**. It is vain regret. It is false and leads to death (v. 10b). Vain regret and worldly sorrow usually are shame over having been caught. It is vain because it is focused on ourselves and the embarrassment that comes with guilt. Worldly sorrow does not lead to genuine repentance. It leads to apologies, deflection, manipulation, blame-shifting and excuse-making. Worldly sorrow may often be a stronger emotion and genuine grief.

How do we know the difference? Genuine sorrow leads to Biblical repentance. Wordily sorrow only leads to judgement and possibly death. Please remember that this is not spiritual death. This is physical death. Paul is writing to the church

whose unrepented of sinful attitudes and actions at the Lord's table had actually resulted in their death. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:28-32:

²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Therefore, a Christian who does not repent and is not dealt with Biblically may eventually be dealt with by God. Worldly sorrow may eventually result in the kind of chastening, the kind of "judgment" that God meted out – some had died.

We need to ask for the grace of guilt and repentance. We don't think like this much anymore. We don't address the small sins, particularly the relational sins. We don't confess and often we don't forgive them. As a result, in our marriages, in our churches, in our ministries, among our leadership is unresolved broken relationships. We feel justified and in the right. We feel sad about them, sometimes. But will we be reconciled to one another?

As gently as I can say this: I am talking to you. Yes, *you*.

Have you sinned against someone and need to confess it?

Has someone sinned against you, confessed it and you have not forgiven them?

Are you withholding forgiveness waiting to be sure they are genuinely repentant?

Is there anyone in your life now that you are not ok with? Anyone you are offended at or offended by?

Are there any broken, fractured, egg-shell like relationships in this room? Reading this manuscript? Listening to this recording?

The Underlying Cause (v. 12)

Paul wrote because there was an issue between people (v. 12). Because of the way he refers to it, this is an additional wrong and offense. There was something going on between people in the congregation that needed to be addressed. Paul is saying that he did not write to take sides or to push one or the other's agenda. He is acting as a wise counselor who steps in to help and represents God's agenda. It is very easy to move from being a helper, a counselor, a discipler to becoming an advocate and pushing someone's agenda.

Paul also wrote to expose their hearts (v. 12b) Apparently, some of the brokenness between Paul and the church was rooted in the issue between the two people. So he had written and is writing once again to give them an opportunity for heart change. The letter itself will be used by God to produce an earnestness, an eagerness, to do what is right.

The Personal Consequence (v. 13)

Paul was comforted. Remember how the book opened? Paul's suffering and sorrows were for their comfort. Now, their grief and suffering in godly sorrow brought Paul the sweetness of relieved comfort.

The Restoration because of Completed Mission (v. 13–16)

Paul's faith in the Corinthian church is reaffirmed by the fact they received Titus.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. ¹⁴ For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵ And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶ I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

Anticipations Fulfilled (v. 13b-14)

Paul had "boasted" to Titus about the church at Corinth. At first this might seem incongruous given the problems in the church and their attitude towards Paul. Boasting though, in the book, has been generally a negative thing. But Paul wants them to know that he always had hope that all would be well.

His anticipation that the church would receive Titus well are fulfilled. He was not embarrassed by them. They responded in line with his boasting, his hopeful and expectant words to Titus. They were refreshing to Titus. In spite of having been a discouraging weight for Paul, they were an encouragement to Titus.

Sometimes this is why a mediator, a messenger can be helpful. A trusted Christian friend who knows how to represent your interests and yet make a winsome appeal can be a real help in difficult or troubled relationships. God sent His Son as a mediator to reconcile us to Him. So, in some broken relationships, a mediator may be the best approach to beginning of healing.

Affections Renewed (v. 15)

As Titus delivers the letter, as the people in the church begin to repent, the mutual affection between Titus and the church rises. This causes Paul to rejoice.

Now, I want to note something. The church had not responded to Paul very well. He had been their founder. He loved them and worried for them. He had written them, visited them and engaged them. All to what appeared to be bad effect. But they responded to Titus. The encouraged him. Their affection grew. And there is not one bit of jealousy on Paul's part. Here is a truly great spirit. Most of us would be jealous. We might not say it. We might not want it. But there can be a tendency to fret when someone else accomplishes what we were trying to do.

Reflect and Respond

How do you handle broken relationships?

Do you hope the problems will go away?

Do you sinfully keep poking the hornet's nest?

Do you back away from your God-given responsibilities in order to avoid conflict?

Have you truly confessed your sins against another?

Have you Biblically forgiven so that there is full reconciliation?

Have you bought into a false idea about repentance?

Are you willing to respond well to a mediator who seeks to bring repentance and reconciliation?

Consider your own dealing with sin:

Do you treat your relational sins seriously?

Do you tend to be quick and insightful over other and generous and gracious over yourself?

Do you experience merely worldly sorrow?

Do you genuinely repent of your sins with all that it means?

May God be pleased to grant repentance, reconciliation and restoration to our broken relationships.