

Hearts Wide Open: The Minister's Guide to Conflict Resolution

2 Corinthians 6:11–13; 7:2–4

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Introduction

Well we return this morning our study of 2 Corinthians, so turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 6. In the course of my study for this week's sermon, I came across the following comment from a fairly well-known pastor. He wrote, "The failure of the church to love its own is an ugly blemish on the public face of Christianity." (Storms, 215). That's a startling evaluation. And it may be—because we are privileged to belong to a very sound church with extremely loving and caring members—that at first blush that statement sounds foreign, or even inaccurate, to you. And in fact I hope that's your initial reaction.

But the reality is: the people of God are not immune to interpersonal conflicts. There is no magical forcefield surrounding the church building that refuses entry to strife, discord, and enmity. If we've been a Christian for any length of time, we have all seen that ugly blemish, and for some of us we have felt the pain that comes as a result. It's not how it ought to be, and in fact Scripture commands us to put away bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice (Eph 4:31; cf. Col 3:8–9), but even those commands themselves would never have had to be issued if that kind of relational dysfunction didn't exist within the church. It does. And the presence of remaining sin in our flesh all but guarantees that it does.

And it seems to affect every one of God's people, at one time or another. Church members may begin to doubt the integrity or qualifications of their leadership. Perhaps you've listened to gossip, or believed unsubstantiated reports concerning another brother or sister, and, instead of going to that person to hear their side and to pursue reconciliation, you allow that misinformation to dampen your affections for that person, and allow a rift between the two of you in your heart. Maybe the leadership of the church has had to make a difficult decision in exercising the spiritual authority that the Lord has delegated to them, and that decision has affected you negatively. Perhaps you've been rebuked for sin or have been removed from a ministry position, and you're chalking it up to heavy-handedness rather than servant-leadership. And instead of pursuing your shepherds and laboring for openness, honesty, and genuine reconciliation, you silently nurse a grudge and become embittered against them, and there is little room for them in your heart.

Or maybe you've been on the receiving end of these tensions. Perhaps, as you've labored in ministry among the body of Christ, the very brothers and sisters for whom you pour yourself out in service have misinterpreted something you've said or done, and are distrustful of you. The very people you've labored among—sometimes for years—who have walked with you and have

prayed with you and have seen the genuineness of your character, now call your character into question. And you think, “After all we’ve been through, and all the time and effort I’ve invested in them, how can they refuse to believe the best of me and not give me the benefit of the doubt?”

Whether you’re the one putting up barriers for perceived offenses, or the one being shut out because of them, these kinds of conflicts sting. They take their toll. And they’re especially painful because we all expect that, of all people, Christians should get this right! We expect this kind of conflict and difficulty in the world! But we who have been saved by the Gospel of Christ—while we were guilty, and when we could do nothing to earn our forgiveness, and were graciously forgiven of all our sins only because of what Christ had done—you’d think that the recipients of grace would be the best at showing grace to one another! But so often that doesn’t seem to be the case. And when it affects us, and when our best efforts for reconciliation and resolution seem to fall on deaf ears, it is just too easy to withdraw from one another, to put up our guard, and to close our hearts off from one another.

But we learn from our text this morning that that is not how the Apostle Paul would have us handle these interpersonal conflicts in the church. Paul was no stranger relational tensions among the saints. In fact, his entire interaction with the Corinthians has been one long, drawn-out, painful conflict. The church at Corinth had been infiltrated by false teachers claiming to be apostles from the church in Jerusalem. As we’ve explained before in our series, these false apostles were Judaizers, claiming that salvation required not only faith in Christ, but also observance of the customs of the Mosaic Law. And these men knew that if they were going to get the Corinthians to believe *their* false gospel, they were going to have to discredit *Paul’s* Gospel. But because Paul’s *message* was in fact the truth, the false apostles took aim at the *messenger*.

“Could Paul *really* be an Apostle of Christ when he suffered *so* much? I mean, how could someone who goes through trial after trial, beating after beating, imprisonment after imprisonment—how could someone like that be approved of God?” “Was he *really* an accredited Apostle? I mean, he wasn’t part of the original twelve! He never saw the Risen Christ in the flesh! He wasn’t sent from the original church in Jerusalem!” “And he’s such a poor preacher! It’s plain that he hasn’t been educated in the arts of rhetoric and oratory. His speech his contemptible!” “And look at how few people are believing his message! If he were really a preacher sent in the power of Christ, he’d have a bigger following! But his message is so obscure! He’s fussing over whether good works are the *ground* or the *evidence* of saving faith! He’s such a nitpicker on these obscure points of doctrine!”

So with that kind of rebellion on his hands, Paul decided to change his original travel plans and visit Corinth immediately. He likely assumed that if he could just be there with the Corinthians he could clear up any misunderstandings, vindicate his character, and thus vindicate his Gospel.

But that's not how things worked out. When Paul arrived, the church was entirely suspicious of the validity of Paul's apostleship. Things had even gotten so bad that one of the members openly defied Paul and publicly insulted him before the whole congregation. And perhaps even worse than this open insult, the rest of the church didn't take disciplinary action against the offender, but sided with him.

This whole painful episode led Paul to refer to his second visit to the Corinthians as "the sorrowful visit." And though he had originally planned to visit again quickly, he says in chapter 2 verse 1, "I determined for my own sake that I would not come to you in sorrow again." Instead of another painful visit, he wrote them a letter sharply reproving them for not disciplining the offender and for being taken in by the false gospel of the false apostles. Chapter 2 verse 4: "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears."

He sent the letter with Titus, and gave him instructions to meet him in Troas with news of how it went. And Titus arrived with a mix of wonderful and sorrowful news. First, he reported that the Lord used Paul's "severe letter" to bring the majority of the church to repentance. They had put the offender who had openly flouted Paul's authority under church discipline, and by God's grace he repented (2:6). And they themselves had mourned over the way that they had doubted Paul—how they questioned the genuineness of their dear spiritual father in the faith (7:7). And Paul was overjoyed at the news!

But the false apostles had a field day with the severe letter. "Look at how harsh he is with you! This is the little man who, when he was here face to face with you, was timid and mousy and weepy. But now that the Aegean Sea is between us he's a tough guy!" Paul even records in 2 Corinthians 10:10 that one of the accusations his opponents made against him was, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive." "That Paul, he talks a big game, but he's all bark and no bite!" "And what's with this letter? Didn't he say he was going to come back in person? First he changed his plans to visit immediately, now he changes his plans again. How can someone who claims to be receiving divine guidance from Christ Himself be so fickle? Are you sure he's an apostle?" "And after the way he's talking to you, he still has the nerve to ask for money? How do you know that money is going to the poor saints in Jerusalem, and not right into Paul's pocket? No wonder he doesn't charge you for his ministry! He steals from the collection!"

And though the majority of the church saw these charlatans for what they were and reaffirmed their loyalty to Paul, there was still a significant minority who were deceived by the baseless slander and adulterated gospel of the false apostles. The opposition against Paul, though now in the minority, was nevertheless continuing to intensify. And so, before his third visit to the Corinthians (cf. 12:14; 13:1), he decides to put pen to paper once more, and writes this letter that we have been studying together.

That is something of a summary of Paul's present conflict with the Corinthians. And at the heart of that *relational* conflict is a *moral* crisis. The Corinthians' rejection of Paul is bound up in their rejection of the Gospel and the embrace of the false teaching and corrupt practices of the false apostles. And as we come to our passage this morning—chapter 6 verse 11 through to chapter 7 verse 4, a passage that might be called the very climax of this letter—we come to a series of powerfully-emotional, intensely-personal appeals from the Apostle Paul to his spiritual children related to both of these concerns. He appeals to Corinthians to decisively separate themselves from the unbelieving false teachers, and to once again embrace without reservation both him and his ministry of the true Gospel.

And that first appeal—the call to holiness—comes sandwiched in between a twofold appeal for them to open their hearts and be reconciled to him. In 6:11–13, Paul calls them to reciprocate his love and affection for them; then in 6:14 to 7:1, he calls them to separate from unbelievers by breaking fellowship with the false apostles; and then in 7:2–4, he basically reiterates his appeal for them to once again embrace him and his ministry. And this morning, we're going to focus just on that appeal to relational restoration in 6:11–13 and 7:2–4. So let me read that passage to you once again. “^{6:11}Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. ¹²You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. ¹³Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also. . . . ^{7:2}Make room for us in your hearts; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one. ³I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. ⁴Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.”

As long as we're not yet glorified, there will be relational struggles and conflicts within the church. And that means that we as the church need to know how to deal with those conflicts biblically. And in our passage for this morning, Paul's appeal to the Corinthians models an approach to conflict resolution. As we observe his example in his dealings with the Corinthians, we'll be able to derive several helpful lessons for how we as believers ought to deal biblically with relational tensions.

And as we unpack what the Holy Spirit has given us in this text, our approach will be, first, to give an explanation of the text so that we understand its meaning. And we'll unfold that meaning across **four units of thought**. And then, trusting that we will have adequately understood the content of Paul's appeal, we'll draw out **five lines of application** that will prove instructive for us as we live with and minister to one another even amid relational conflict.

Explanation

At the beginning of chapter 6 Paul has urged the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain, but to prove their reconciliation to God by being reconciled to *him*, God's servant. And he has just finished outlining the "blizzard of troubles" that he experienced because of his ministry, as well as the sustaining graces by which he endured those difficult circumstances. He then presents those nine defining paradoxes that characterize the ministry, as the genuine servant of Christ lives between two worlds—experiencing the unspeakable joys and unutterable sorrows that the ministry brings *at the same time*. And as he rehearses his many afflictions, he is reminded that he endures them all for the sake of the Corinthians themselves! And that thought issues in this powerfully affectionate declaration of love, of which there are **four movements**.

I. An Affirmation of Affection (6:11; 7:3)

First, there is **an affirmation of Paul's affection** for the Corinthians. And we see that burst forth in chapter 6 verse 11. He says, "Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide!"

And the first thing you notice about this verse is that Paul addresses the Corinthians directly by name—a great indicator of the warmth of his affection for them. Elsewhere in Paul's writings, he only uses the direct address when his emotions are deeply stirred. For example, in Philippians 4:15, he feels deeply the bonds of brotherhood as he thanks the believers at Philippi for being willing to share in his afflictions by supporting him financially when no one else would, and he affectionately calls them by name: You Philippians. Even though the Corinthians have been such a cause of sorrow in Paul's heart—doubting his integrity and being suspicious of his message in favor of the false apostles—Paul is not holding them at arm's length! He hasn't shrunk back and closed off his heart from them! This is no dispassionate request! His heart is full of affection for them, and it spills out even in the way he addresses them: "*O Corinthians!* My mouth and my heart stand open to you!"

And he affirms his affection for them in two ways. First, he reminds them of his open, honest, and frank speech to them. He says, "Our mouth has spoken freely to you." Literally, "Our mouth stands opened to you." One Greek dictionary says the phrase means "to be completely open with someone" (Louw and Nida). Paul is saying, "I have spoken openly and frankly to you! I haven't held anything back from you! Whether it was to tell you of my great sorrow from my previous visit (2:1), or the anguish of heart and streams of tears that birthed my last letter to you (2:4), or to encourage you with the great triumph that I experience in Christ (2:14), or to inform you of the great afflictions that I have suffered in the course of my ministry (1:8–9; 4:8–12; 6:3–5), or to call you to repentance and holiness and separation from the world (6:14–7:1)—I have spoken openly to you! I haven't held back anything from you! I haven't manipulated you by façade and pretense; you've always known my heart and my mind, because I've always disclosed them to you!" And because you're not open and honest, transparent and frank, with just anyone, but you

bear your heart only to dear friends and loved ones, he holds forth his openness and honesty as a mark of **affection** for them.

And because “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the *heart*,” Matthew 12:34, open and frank speech issue from an open and welcoming heart, which he holds up as a second mark of his affection. “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our *heart* is opened wide!” This is astonishing! “My heart stands open to you, dear Corinthians!” They are unjustly suspicious of him; he knows they doubt his genuineness and sincerity; they refuse to be open and trusting in him; and he has sternly rebuked them for all of that! And none of that causes Paul to put up his guard and close his heart off! Despite all of that, he says, “My heart is open to you, dear friends. There is plenty of room in my heart for you. I stand ready and eager to receive you, if you’ll only have me.”

And he only reaffirms this affection in chapter 7 verse 3, where he says, “For I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together.” This is not feigned love! This is not ‘put on a happy face and do your best to tolerate one another’! “You are in our hearts to die together and to live together!” This is the genuine love of chapter 6 verse 6! It’s the fervent love from the heart that Peter commands of us in 1 Peter 1:22! And I love what Philip Hughes says about this. We’re tempted to think, “Ok, come on, Paul. You’re laying it on a little thick, here. Try to get a hold of yourself.” No! Hughes says, “This is not the language of romanticism, but of Christian reality. That genuine love which is the expression of communion and fellowship in Christ . . . can neither be destroyed by death nor impaired by the changing circumstances of life” (261).

This is a statement of true, genuine friendship. It’s reminds me of Ruth’s pledge of affection and friendship to Naomi. After her husband dies, and her sister-in-law Orpah returns to her people, Naomi tells Ruth that she should return to hers. And Ruth says, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may Yahweh do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me” (1:16–17). “In death and in life, we are knit together. My place is with you and your place is with me. You are in my heart. And neither the pains of death or the afflictions of life can remove you.” What an **affirmation of affection** from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians!

II. An Evaluation of the Conflict (6:12; 7:2b)

Second, after this affirmation of affection there is **an evaluation of the conflict**. If Paul is so open to the Corinthians—both in speech and in affection; if he has them in his heart to die and to live together—why is there this tension? Well, here Paul gives **an evaluation of the source of**

the conflict between them, and he says, “It’s not me; it’s you.” Verse 12: “You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections.”

And it’s clear that Paul is responding to accusations here. He continues to reaffirm his affection for them, precisely because the false apostles had twisted every event they could in order to portray Paul as loveless and manipulative of the Corinthians. He changed his travel plans just to toy with them; he pretends not to charge for his ministry but then collects an offering; he’s bold in his letters but unimpressive in his personal presence. And so in 2 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly reaffirms his love for the church. Chapter 11 verse 11: I boast about you. “Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!” Chapter 12 verse 15: “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” And chapter 2 verse 4: I wrote the severe letter not to cause you sorrow, “but that you might know the *love* which I have especially for you.” “No, if there’s any **source of conflict**, it’s not my restrained affections; my heart is open wide.”

“And neither is it any offensive conduct on my part.” Chapter 7 verse 2: “We wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.” And Paul again seems to be responding to charges and accusations. He had wronged none of the Corinthians; he had treated no one unjustly. It’s almost certain the false apostles were pointing to his severe letter, and his instructions for dealing with the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5 and with the defiant man spoken of in 2 Corinthians 2, and accusing him of lording his authority over the church. But Paul says, “No, I wronged no one.” Church discipline is almost always viewed by someone as the elders of a church throwing their weight around. But there is no impropriety in dealing with sin in the church. He had corrupted no one. And this word speaks of moral decay and corrosion. Paul says that he’s never led anyone into sin. In chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, he says he’s conducted himself in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God—both in the world and especially toward the Corinthians. And he took advantage of no one. This speaks of exploiting people financially. Here he repudiates the charge that he steals the money from the offerings for the saints. He says in Acts 20:33, “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes;” “I worked hard with my own hands to ensure that no one could say I ministered for profit.” So far from taking advantage of the Corinthians for personal gain, the opposite was true! He endured great afflictions in order to minister the Gospel to them! He says in chapter 4 verse 12: “So death works in us, but life in you.” “I die daily in the ministry, so that you would experience the blessings of God’s promises!”

So **the source of this conflict** lies neither in Paul’s restrained affections nor in any offensive conduct. Rather, it lies in the affections of the Corinthians themselves. Verse 12: “You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections.” We have the expression, “narrow-minded,” in English; well this is to be narrow-*hearted*. He says, “*Our* heart is opened wide to you. There is plenty of room for you in *my* heart. The problem is that there’s no room for

me in yours. You've filled your heart with accusations and suspicions of me, and also with the moral and doctrinal corruption of the false apostles. There's no room for love and loyalty to the one who had brought you the Gospel of Christ while you're enamored with the worldliness of the false teachers." And that is precisely why he calls them to separate from them in the following paragraph.

III. A Supplication for Reciprocity (6:13; 7:2a)

Then, following his affirmation of affection and the evaluation of the conflict, there is, **third, a supplication for reciprocity**. Chapter 6 verse 13: "Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also." And in chapter 7 verse 2: "Make room for us in your hearts."

If the problem is not that he's closed his heart to them, but that they've closed their hearts to him, he pleads with them to reciprocate his love and affection: "Make room for us in your hearts. Open your hearts wide to us also." And notice, he makes this **supplication for reciprocity** first on the basis of *equity*. He says, "Now, in a like exchange." And that word speaks of that which is given in return as a recompense. One commentator says, "Paul is asking for repayment in the same coin, namely complete candor and warm love" (Harris, 490). For all the love and affection that the Corinthians have received from Paul, it is only right that they should requite his love and return his affection in kind.

But notice a second basis for his **supplication for reciprocity**. It's not just that it's the right thing to return love for love and affection for affection—not merely, as one writer said, because of "the justness of a legal equivalence" (Hughes, 241). But he also appeals to the Corinthians on the basis of their *familial relationship*. He says, "I speak as to children." He appeals to them on the basis that they are his spiritual children in the Gospel! that they know the grace of Christ and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Him precisely because of *his* ministry to them! And so in 1 Corinthians 4:14–15, he says something similar. He says, "I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." And just as it is right for the love of a father to be requited by the love of his children, so Paul appeals to them to reciprocate his affection for them. He has loved them; he has cared for them spiritually; he has nurtured them as spiritual father nurtures spiritual children. Now he calls them to open their hearts to him and love him in return.

And as we mentioned, because Paul knows that that's impossible while they still clung to their sinful associations with the false apostles—that their hearts were not big enough for the both of them—he devotes chapter 6 verse 14 through to chapter 7 verse 1 to calling them to break their ties with these false teachers, to come out from them and be separate (6:17), and to perfect holiness in the fear of God (7:1).

IV. A Declaration of Confidence (7:4)

But then, a **fourth movement** in this reiterated appeal for love and affection comes in chapter 7 verse 4. There has been an affirmation of affection, an evaluation of the conflict, and a supplication for reciprocity. Finally, there is, **number four, a declaration of confidence**. And look with me at verse 4: “Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.”

And this is truly an astounding verse. With all the reasons to doubt the Corinthians’ sincerity, spiritual maturity, and perhaps even their *salvation*, Paul nevertheless expresses a buoyant optimism for his dear spiritual children. You see, he’s not just deceitfully declaring his love and affection for them, only because he knows that they’re never going to respond to him, and when they don’t he’ll be able to point to his words and his behavior and say, “Well, see? I did everything I could.” No! His pleas for the reciprocation of his love are absolutely genuine. And not only does he want their love in return; he expects it. In spite of their track record, Paul knows that love believes all things and hopes all things (1 Cor 13:7), and so he is extremely reluctant to believe anything but the best he possibly can of those whom he loves (MacArthur, 240). And especially because Titus has brought the news that the majority of the church has repented and has heeded the exhortations of the severe letter, Paul is **confident** that the Holy Spirit will be at work in the lives of that minority who had not yet repented.

And he’s not just confident; he boasts about them to other Christians! The Corinthians! The problem-church! He brags about the grace of God at work even in this motley crew of sinners! He himself speaks of this boasting in chapter 7 verse 14. He says, “For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth.” He basically says, “I *told* Titus you were going to repent! I told him the saints at Corinth would welcome him and refresh his heart! And you’ve proven my boasting true by serving him the way you have!” And in chapter 8 verse 24, as he requests financial support for the poverty-stricken churches in Jerusalem, he says, “Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.” Again: “I’ve boasted about the generosity of the Corinthians to the other churches! Come now and prove me to have been telling the truth!” Like a proud spiritual father, Papa Paul is bragging on his spiritual children!

And besides that, he is “*filled* with comfort,” and “*overflowing* with joy” even in the midst of all the affliction he faces. And I love what the commentator Paul Barnett says about this. He writes, “One of Paul’s remarkable God-given abilities, apparently, was a pastoral objectivity that enabled him to separate the various areas of difficulty in a church from his involvement personally. ... In the midst of so many problems Paul is able to rejoice that this one difficulty—

admittedly a major one—had been satisfactorily dealt with. Paul’s spiritual enthusiasm at evidences of the grace of God working” is something all of God’s people ought to aspire to (363–64).

Application

Well such, then, is the meaning of our text: an affirmation of affection, an evaluation of the conflict, a supplication for reciprocity, and a declaration of confidence. And beside the implications that I trust the Holy Spirit of God has already been impressing upon your heart as we’ve sought to open up the meaning of this text, we come now to consider how this text ought to intersect with our own daily living? What principles can we apply to our own lives as we seek to resolve conflict with one another as we minister together in the body of Christ? I believe this passage teaches us at least **five lessons**.

I. Speak the Truth (6:11a)

And that **first lesson** is, number one, **speak the truth**. No matter what the circumstances, our foundational commitment must always be, as Ephesians 4:25 says, to “Speak truth each one of you with his neighbor.” As we seek to engage in biblical conflict resolution, we must always speak openly and honestly with one another. And we see that from verse 11 of our text, where Paul says, “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians.” Even in the midst of difficult conflict and tense disagreement, Paul had always been open with them. He made no pretense with them. He wore no mask. He never sought to manipulate them or artificially quell the conflict by pretending to be someone he wasn’t or by couching his true intent in false words of flattery. He says in chapter 1 verse 13, “We write nothing else to you than what you read and understand.” No need to read between the lines. What you see is what you get.

And I can’t emphasize enough how important that is in the life of the church—especially when seeking to resolve conflicts. I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again: we cannot play politics in the body of Christ! We cannot be angling and maneuvering among one another, choosing our words like politicians so as not to reveal our true intent! You ought to always say what you mean and mean what you say—to be clear, straightforward, consistent, genuine, transparent, and unambiguous. Your yes is to be yes and your no is to be no. Your speech ought to be an open window into your heart, so that people never have to guess if you’re telling them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And that kind of openness ought to extend even to giving correction, as long as it is profitable for the hearer. In Acts chapter 20, verse 20, Paul says, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,” and in verse 27, “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” Those weren’t always comfortable conversations. And they weren’t in

the context of relationships with people that Paul would just as soon not be friends with. These were his brothers and sisters in Christ. And though it had the potential to offend, and to bring tension into a relationship, Paul loved his fellow-believers enough to speak freely to them, to tell them the truth.

Genuine love for one another constrains us to have the difficult conversations with our brothers and sisters. Sure, it's easier to ignore sin in the body, and to be spared being called judgmental, and arrogant, and holier-than-thou because you've brought sin to their attention. It's easier to avoid resolving conflict, to put up your guard, and to just pretend your brother or sister doesn't even exist! It's easier to write people off and terminate relationships—especially when they've genuinely hurt you in some way. But friends, that is not ministry, and it 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 Cor 7:10), as Paul's dealings with the Corinthians testify to.

The **first lesson** we can learn from this passage is that we must **speak the truth**—that we must always speak openly and honestly with one another, and never seek to paper over conflict with flattery and falsehood.

II. Correct without Condemning (7:3)

A **second lesson** this text teaches us is that we must **correct without condemning**. That is to say, when we do speak the truth to our brothers and sisters and Christ and inflict the "faithful wounds of a friend" in bringing correction to them, we ought to bring that correction **without condemnation**. One of the more remarkable things Paul says in this passage comes at the beginning of verse 3, where he says, "I do not speak to condemn you." Which is amazing! Because if there was ever a church that seemed worthy of condemnation it was the Corinthians for the way they had mistreated Paul and embraced false teachers.

And yet he doesn't condemn them. He doesn't desire their condemnation, but their restoration. He isn't passing the final verdict of God's judgment on their life, angrily declaring them to be beyond the reach of God's grace. He isn't flexing his apostolic muscle in order to put them in their spiritual place. He lovingly and affectionately entreats them to reconciliation, even as he brings them correction and rebuke.

And that ought to be our practice as well. If there are times when faithfulness demands we bring correction to a brother or sister—when we know we'll have to insist that they have sinned in some way—our attitude, our demeanor, the words we choose must all communicate our earnest desire for their restoration and repentance. We ought to be able to say, "I'm not saying these

things to condemn you—to say you’re a sinner beyond the pale of God’s forgiveness. No, in fact I say these things to you because I’m confident that you’ll receive them—that you want to know when you may be falling short so that you can deal with sin, and enjoy unhindered communion with Christ.” We need to **correct without condemning**.

III. Maintain Integrity (7:2b)

A **third lesson** this text teaches us is that we must arouse all diligence to **maintain our integrity** in our dealings with one another. The only reason Paul was able to say, in chapter 7 verse 2, that he “wronged no one,” “corrupted no one,” and “took advantage of no one,” is because he actually hadn’t done those things. When accused of being in the ministry for the money, the only reason he could say in Acts 20:33 that he’d never even desired any man’s silver or gold, is that he had actually done the hard work of guarding his heart, and cultivating such a satisfaction in Christ alone, so as to keep his character free from the love of money (cf. Heb 13:5). In the midst of a conflict, a misunderstanding, a situation in which you’re being accused of something and doubt is being cast on the purity of your motives, what a glorious, freeing thing it is to be able to say, in good conscience, “I hear what you’re saying, friend, but the fact is you’ve misunderstood. I affirm to you before the Lord that I simply haven’t done what you accuse me of.” There is no freedom like the freedom of a clear conscience! And the only way to have recourse to a clear conscience is to live a life of **integrity**.

Some of you can be very task-oriented in your sanctification—very pragmatic, very externally motivated in your approach to the Christian life. You read your Bible because you know someone’s going to ask you about what you’ve read. You pray each day because your brother or sister is going to keep you accountable. You come to church and to GraceLife because you know your friends will come calling for you if you’re not here. You live your Christian life the way you do because someone’s watching. But we must be men and women of integrity! We need to be the same person even when *no one’s* watching! So that when misunderstandings happen and false accusations come, we can say, “Friend, I live my entire life before the searching gaze of God Himself. And by his grace, I’ve kept and guarded my heart, and have cultivated a single-minded devotion to Christ, so that I don’t even have the desire to do the things you’ve accused me of.” What freedom a life of **integrity** brings in the midst of a conflict!

And closely related to that, when we *are* suspected of wrongdoing, Paul’s example teaches us that we ought not to take personal offense at the accusation, but to calmly offer a simple and straightforward affirmation of our conduct. “We wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.” Paul doesn’t say, “You’re accusing me of what?! What’s the matter with you! Well, I have never been so insulted in my life! How dare you accuse me of sin!” Why? Because you’re not a sinner? Because you have achieved such a measure of righteousness that it’s beyond even the realm of possibility for you to do this? No you haven’t! Listen, I understand

that it's hurtful to have our motives suspected or to be falsely accused of unrighteousness. But we need to not be offended by accusations of sin, as if we're beyond sinning in the ways in which we're accused. We are sinners! Law-breakers! Criminals so vile that it took the death of the One who lived the perfect life for us to go free! It is only by grace that we don't continually sin every second of our lives! And so our posture when falsely accused must be, "You know, because I know the wickedness and deceitfulness of my own heart, I understand why you might suspect me as you do. But,"—calmly, simply, straightforwardly, without taking personal offense—"by God's grace what you've accused me of isn't true." How much wrath would be turned away with a gentle answer like that!

IV. Open Our Hearts (6:11b–13; 7:2a, 7:3b)

We must speak the truth; we must correct without condemning; we must maintain integrity. A **fourth lesson** is that we must **open our hearts**. "Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians! Our heart is opened wide! I've said it before and I'll say it again: you are in our hearts to die together and to live together!"

Dear GraceLife, do you know anything of what Paul models for us here? Do you have any experimental acquaintance with the kind of **affection** for your brothers and sisters in Christ that Paul expresses in this text? Does your heart stand open to your brothers and sisters? Even to those brothers and sisters who have wronged you, who refuse to trust you, who make false accusations against you? Can you look one another in the eye and declare with integrity: "You are in our hearts to die together and to live together!"? O that we would be a people marked by such familial **affection** for one another! That we would be possessed of such a sense of brotherly love for one another that we can say what Ruth said to Naomi: "Where you go, I'll go; where you live, I'll live; your people are my people; and where you die, I will die"! And what Ittai the Gittite said to King David in 2 Samuel 15:21: "As Yahweh lives, as my lord the king lives, surely wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be"!

Dear GraceLife, is your **heart open** to your brothers and sisters? Or are you restrained in your affections? Are you a narrow-hearted person, who allows the slightest conflicts and offenses to squeeze your fellow believers out of your heart? When there is tension between you and a fellow believer—when someone wrongs you or offends you—do you put your guard up? Do you close off your heart? Do you dampen your affections? Do you keep that person at arms' length?

All was not well between Paul and the Corinthians! This wasn't an affirmation of affection and a plea for reciprocation between two parties who were getting along fine and just needed to deepen their love for one another. There are few people in history who can say they've suffered at the hands of their fellow-Christians as much as Paul had suffered from the behavior of the

Corinthians. And yet his heart remained open to them! He still held them in his heart, and he begged and entreated them to be reconciled to him—to welcome him into their hearts.

May the Holy Spirit work in us something of the large-heartedness that He had worked in the Apostle Paul! May we be possessed of that spirit of magnanimity and brotherly affection so that we would be vulnerable with one another—open-hearted to one another, not restrained in our affections, with our guard up, holding one another at arms' length, but reciprocating familial affection to one another! Dear GraceLife, make room for one another in your hearts!

V. Believe the Best (7:4)

And finally, in addition to speaking the truth, correcting without condemnation, maintaining integrity, and opening our hearts, we must **believe the best**. After all this church had put him through, Paul can speak the words of verse 4 from his heart: “Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.”

It's just amazing. Paul doesn't use the insults he's received from the Corinthians as an excuse to write them off as a lost cause! He doesn't pigeonhole them into the category of “problem church” or “spiritually immature” and hold their sin against them for the rest of their relationship! Paul models here what he wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 13—that love keeps no record of wrongs! That love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things!

Dear people, I am convinced that 80% of the conflicts we experience within the church would disappear if we simply determined to believe the very best of one another in every circumstance. And I'm not calling for naivete, but for confident joy in the Holy Spirit's work as He graciously works in hearts to sanctify Christ's people. Rather than spying out one another's faults, identify evidence of grace at work in one another, and let that cause you to overflow with joy, even in the midst of affliction.

Speak the truth. Correct without condemnation. Maintain integrity. Open your heart. And believe the best.