

Tidings of Comfort and Joy, Part 2

2 Corinthians 7:5–16

by Mike Riccardi

Introduction

We find ourselves in the middle of a two-part series on 2 Corinthians chapter 7, verses 5 to 16, that I've titled "Tidings of Comfort and Joy." And I've given it that title because Paul repeatedly emphasizes that he has been comforted and is experiencing joy as a result of Titus's report from Corinth concerning the Corinthians' repentance.

And that requires us to once again review the sequence of events that have led to the current circumstances of our passage. Paul had made an ahead-of-schedule visit to Corinth in order to address a controversy that had arisen as a result of the false teaching of the false apostles. But when he arrived, an influential man in the church sided with the false apostles and insulted Paul before the entire congregation. And worse than that, instead of defending Paul's character and, most importantly, his Gospel, the Corinthians were taken in by this false teaching, and allowed this man's factiousness to go unchecked.

After this "sorrowful visit," Paul returned immediately to Ephesus and wrote the Corinthians a severe letter, sternly rebuking them for failing to properly deal with sin in the church, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He sent Titus to bring the letter to Corinth, and then arranged to meet up with Titus in Troas—or, if that didn't work, somewhere in Macedonia, likely Philippi—where he would report to Paul how the Corinthians received the letter and responded to his instruction. And 2 Corinthians 7, verses 5 to 16, is Paul's account of Titus's report to him. In this text, we learn that God sovereignly worked through Paul's severe letter, and through Titus's peacemaking ministry, so that the Corinthians repented of their sin and reaffirmed their love and loyalty to Paul. And that has ministered comfort and joy to Paul's heart in the midst of his ministerial affliction. This text is about how God comforts the downcast minister.

And therefore, as we said last time, this passage is a source of encouragement to all of us who experience affliction in the path of Christian ministry. And who experiences affliction in the path of Christian ministry? Answer: everyone who is living as a faithful Christian. Why do I say that? Because every Christian is called to ministry. Every follower of Christ has been called to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus in laying down their lives in service—both to those inside and outside of the church. There is no such thing as a faithful Christian who is not (a) regularly preaching the gospel to the lost, and who is not (b) using his spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ.

And neither is there any such thing as a Christian who is faithfully fulfilling his ministry who is unacquainted with affliction. The world that hates Christ hates His ministers, and so we expect persecution and affliction from the enemies of the Gospel. But even inside the church, we minister among people who, like us, have not yet been perfected—who still struggle with remaining sin. As we aim to come alongside one another in the battle of sanctification, those who are giving in to the desires of their flesh can buck against correction, can cling to their sin, and lash out against the one bringing it. Relationships can be strained as a result of pride, of gossip, of refusal to heed correction, and any number of other sins that even the people of God still struggle with. And so, insofar as we are faithful to be in each other's lives and minister to one another, we know what it is to minister in the midst of affliction.

And because of that, we can draw encouragement from this text in which God comforts His afflicted servant. In our first sermon, I proposed to work through this text in two parts—first unfolding the meaning of the text by observing **three reasons for Paul's present comfort and joy**. Then, having understood the meaning of the text in its own context, I began to apply this text to us by outlining several **lessons** this passage teaches us concerning the restoration of relationships in the context of ministerial conflict. And I want to do my best to just briefly review what we covered last time.

Review: Reasons for Paul's Comfort and Joy

First, we walked through the text by outlining it across **the three reasons** Paul gives for his present comfort and joy. And that **first reason** we find in verses 5 to 7: Paul is comforted by **Titus's Arrival**. Though the plan was to meet in Troas, Paul didn't find him there, and so he went on to Macedonia as planned. But Titus didn't arrive in Macedonia immediately either. And so Paul says in verse 5, "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had *no rest*, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within." "I wonder what's taking Titus so long. I hope he's not delayed by more conflict in Corinth! Oh, what if they treated him like they treated me? Now he has to bear this burden along with me! Maybe I shouldn't have sent him. Oh, and that letter! Why was I so harsh? I may have only made things worse! The false apostles are going to have a field day with that! Dear Lord, I pray they don't reject the Gospel. What will become of that church? Lord, what will become of Your name in Corinth?" He had no rest. Verse 6 says he was depressed.

"But," verse 6, "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus." God providentially comforted the downcast minister by sovereignly orchestrating his reunion with Titus in Macedonia. And he goes, verse 7, "And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning,

your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.” Things had gone well in Corinth! The Lord had used Paul’s severe letter to bring the Corinthians to repentance.

And that was the **second reason** for Paul’s comfort and joy, namely, **the Corinthians’ repentance**. Titus reports that the Corinthians experienced longing, mourning, and zeal for Paul. They were grieved over their disloyalty, and their refusal to discipline the man who openly denounced Paul, and they mourned in repentance, and in zeal they exercised the church discipline they had failed to implement before. And that mourning and zeal was accompanied the genuine longing for the restoration of fellowship with him.

He describes their repentance in detail in verse 11, when he speaks of their earnestness, vindication, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging of wrong. Where they had once been apathetic and indifferent about their sin, now they had beheld it for the offense that it was—both against Paul and against Christ who sent Paul—and they were eager to deal with it biblically and set things right. And therefore, in verses 8 to 10 he explains that, though he took no perverse delight in causing them sorrow, he was glad he had written as severely as he did, because the sorrow they experienced as a result of his letter was godly sorrow that led to repentance. He says in verse 12 that that’s why he wrote the letter—not merely to vindicate himself or even to stick it to the factious man, “but [so] that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.” So that you would remember your affection for me, because the false apostles deceived you into thinking and feeling about me in ways that I knew wasn’t what was in your heart. “For this reason,” he says in verse 13, “we have been comforted.”

Then, he speaks of a **third reason** for his comfort and joy. He rejoices, **number three**, because of **Titus’s joy**. Verse 13: “And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.” The Corinthians had received Titus with the reverence due to a genuine minister of the Gospel, and their obedient repentance served to endear them to him all the more. Verse 15: “His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling.” And seeing Titus blessed by their obedience was a blessing to Paul’s heart.

Review: Application

And so Paul was comforted because of Titus’s arrival, because of the Corinthians’ repentance, and because of Titus’s joy. Then, after understanding the meaning of this passage in its original context, we turned to consider what significance these verses have for us, especially as it concerns the restoration of relationships in the midst of conflict in the ministry. I mentioned last time that we can glean at least **nine lessons** from this text concerning faithfulness in ministry and the nature of repentance. We got to **three** of those last time, and I want to just briefly review them as well.

Review I: Faithful Servants Suffer (vv. 5–6)

That **first lesson** was that **faithful servants suffer**. Paul speaks of having no rest in his flesh or his spirit, of being afflicted on every side, of external conflicts and internal fears, and even of being dejected, downcast, and depressed. And the false apostles accused him of harboring some secret sin, because they couldn't understand how someone under God's blessing could suffer as much as he did.

But Paul was not unfaithful to Christ in his ministry. He was serving fallen people in a fallen world, and so was experiencing the affliction that is promised to all of Christ's faithful servants.

And this teaches us that, when we experience relational conflict in the context of our ministry to one another in the church, we ought not to automatically assume that God is punishing us for some unconfessed sin! Now, that may be the case. But if we have searched our hearts and we do discover a clean conscience, we must remember that **faithful servants suffer**. And that ought to encourage us, when we experience the sorrow and dejection that often accompanies ministry, to press on, to endure, and to flee to the God of all comfort.

Review II: God Comforts the Suffering (vv. 6–7)

And that brings us to our **second lesson**, that **God comforts the suffering**. Verse 6: "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus. Our God is the God who is characterized as the comforter the downcast! The One who is ever ready to comfort and console! In 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, Paul calls God "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." And so when we do face the afflictions that befall a minister of the Gospel in a fallen world and in a yet-unglorified church, we must take refuge in the bosom of our Heavenly Father, whose nature it is to comfort the downcast. We must cast all our cares on the Christ who cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). We must pursue communion with the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. And as we do, we will find in the Triune God the refreshment and the strength to press on in joyful, enduring ministry even in the midst of affliction.

Review III: God Comforts through the Church (vv. 6–7)

And the **third lesson** that we learned last time was that **God comforts through the church**. Faithful servants suffer, God comforts the suffering, and **God comforts through the church**. Verses 6 and 7: "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us *by the coming of Titus*; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." God

is the Comforter, but the instrument which God sovereignly employs to comfort His downcast servant is the company of his brother, Titus, and the report of the obedience of his spiritual children, the Corinthian church.

And this teaches that fellowship in the church is absolutely essential for the faithful, ministering servant of Christ. Paul could never have drawn comfort from the presence of Titus if he had not invested in that relationship with Titus as a brother in Christ, and if he had not served alongside him in the cause of the Gospel. And Paul could never have been so comforted by the news of the Corinthians' repentance if he had kept his guard up and had never let them get close enough to his heart to the degree that they could bring him the grief they brought him. It is only those brothers and sisters who we open up to—who we let in—that can be the instrument of supernatural divine comfort and joy in the midst of trials.

And so I exhorted you last time: Invest in those relationships. Get to Bible study! If you're in a Bible study, get together with individuals from your Bible study throughout the week. Serve people! Strengthen one another's hands in the fight for personal holiness. Invest yourselves in genuine discipleship relationships with your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, so that they might be a source of comfort in the midst of affliction.

IV. Sensitive Ministers Sharpen (vv. 8b–9)

Well, that catches us up to today's message. And we'll jump right in with the **fourth lesson** this passage teaches us. And that is, number four, **sensitive ministers sharpen**. And what I mean by that is there is this double-edgedness to a faithful servant of Christ's flock: he is sensitive to the sheep's weaknesses, and yet he is committed to sharpening and correcting them. In other words, the faithful minister takes no delight in grieving his people for grief's sake, but he does not shrink away from reproofing the sheep—even if it causes them sorrow—because he knows the genuine benefit such correction will bring them. And we see that in verses 8 and 9. Paul says, “For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it—for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while—I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.”

And you see that double-edgedness—that sensitivity and that willingness to sharpen—in Paul's comments here. From the very beginning, Paul had mixed feelings about writing that severe letter. He even says in chapter 2 verse 4 that it was “out of much affliction and anguish of heart that I wrote to you with many tears.” And when Titus reported that they had initially been very grieved over the severity of his reproof, Paul's initial reaction was to regret having written it! So you see that Paul took no perverse delight in rebuking them. He wasn't just taking his

frustrations out on the Corinthians, or lording his authority over them. He was genuinely grieved by their grief.

You say, “Well then why did he do it? Wouldn’t it have been more loving for him not to rebuke them so sharply? To not cause them sorrow? To have avoided all this conflict?” Well, that may have been the easier thing to do, but no, in fact it would not have been more loving. Why? Because genuine love always labors for the benefit—for the well-being and the good—of those whom it loves. And the Corinthians’ spiritual well-being was being severely threatened by the deceptions of the false apostles. If they continued on that course, they would have suffered great loss, he says at the end of verse 9—certainly the loss of unhindered fellowship with Christ; perhaps the loss of future rewards; and maybe even the loss of their very souls, if they would have bought into the Judaizers’ false gospel. And Paul loves them too much to abandon them to spiritual danger for the sake of avoiding a difficult conversation! He refuses to buy their affection at the cost of their spiritual well-being! See, Paul loves the Corinthians too much to *not* confront their sin!

How applicable this is to our own ministry to one another in the church! So often, when we observe sin in someone’s life, we struggle with bringing it to their attention because we know it’s going to grieve them or make them uncomfortable. And we buy into the lie that true love is incompatible with causing sorrow or bringing distress. If we confront someone in their sin, we may only increase their pain, and that sounds like cold-hearted hatred rather than warm-hearted affection. And because we love ourselves—and our own emotional peace and freedom from conflict—we fail to speak truth into our brothers and sisters’ lives. We don’t confront their sin, because it’s just going to be a difficult conversation, and so we sacrifice their spiritual well-being on the altar of our emotional well-being. That is not love! Love is being willing to endure any difficulty for the sake of one another’s mortification of sin and joy in Jesus. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend,” because those wounds work in the soul a godly sorrow that produces repentance leading to salvation.

Genuine love confronts sin. **Sensitive ministers sharpen.** But notice, again: sharpening ministers are sensitive. Just as genuine love cannot remain silent in the face of the beloved’s spiritual danger, neither can it fail to feel some regret for causing the necessary sorrow that comes as a result of the correction. Paul didn’t *revel* in their sorrow. He *regretted* that his letter had grieved them, even if only for a little while. A loving father takes no delight in causing his son pain as he disciplines him, but precisely because he is a loving father, he will not fail to administer that discipline, because he knows it tends toward his son’s well-being. And in 1 Corinthians 4:14, Paul says the same thing. He says, “I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.”

Sensitive ministers sharpen, and sharpening ministers are sensitive. The faithful servant of the church 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.

V. Sorrow Can Be Beneficial (vv. 8–10)

A **fifth lesson**, that flows naturally from the previous, is: **sorrow can be beneficial**. Sorrow is not always a bad thing. And as I said in the previous point, that’s not how we think! We think, “If it makes me sad, it must be bad!” But Paul says that, though he did initially, he does not regret that he caused the Corinthians sorrow—verse 8—because, verse 9, they were made sorrowful to the point of repentance, according to the will of God. There is a kind of sorrow that is according to the will of God; that is to say, there is a kind of sorrow that God *wants* you to experience, because, verse 10, this sorrow “that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation.”

This is teaching us that an essential component of true repentance is genuine sorrow over having grieved God and belittled His holiness. One of the most common definitions of repentance that you’ll hear is that repentance is *a change of mind*. And people say that because that is the literal, etymological definition of the Greek word for repentance: *meta-*, change, *-noeō*, to think. But some people take that to mean that repentance is nothing more than an intellectual alteration—acknowledging that you’ve sinned, and just thinking differently about it. But the “mind” that is changed in repentance refers to the inner consciousness of the whole person. Biblically, the *mind* and the *heart* are often used interchangeably.

And so repentance *begins* with an intellectual recognition and confession of sin, but it does not end there. There is also a “change of heart”—an emotional component in which the genuine believer mourns over having sinned against the God whom he loves more than anything. That’s why in that classic psalm of repentance, Psalm 51, David says, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” See, the person who is truly repentant is not unmoved by their sin, as if it was just no big deal. “Oh, broke the law of God again. Sorry God! So glad you’re so gracious!” No! If you’re truly repentant, you apprehend the offense your sin is to God—a God so good to you as to deliver His only begotten Son to death in your place, a God so patient with you despite the fact that, even after He’s saved you, you sin against Him still! When you understand that you’ve sinned against that glorious God, the only proper response is to be sorrowful. To have a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

And it is that broken spirit and contrite heart that motivates you to change course and return to God in faithfulness. John Calvin writes, “This is carefully to be observed, for unless the sinner be dissatisfied with himself, detest his manner of life, and be thoroughly grieved from an

apprehension of sin, he will never betake himself to the Lord” (274). One Puritan famously said, “Til sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” Genuine repentance is a matter of the heart. That’s why Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who mourn over their sin in Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Because it is only those who feel the shame of their sin—who feel the offense it is to the holiness of God and mourn over it—that turn from it in genuine repentance, and seek forgiveness by the grace of God, and are comforted by the God who does not despise a broken spirit and a contrite heart. **Sorrow, friends, can be beneficial.**

But it’s not *always* beneficial. While those who are genuinely repentant will experience sorrow over their sin, sorrow itself is not repentance. There is a kind of sorrow over sin that does not produce repentance, and therefore does not lead to salvation. Paul identifies it at the end of verse 10 as “the sorrow of the world [which] produces death.” And the chief characteristic of worldly sorrow is that it is fundamentally *self-centered*. Worldly sorrow revolves around the pain sin causes to oneself, rather than the offense and dishonor that it is to God. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes puts it this way: “It is not sorrow because of the heinousness of sin as rebellion against God, but sorrow because of the painful and unwelcome consequences of sin. Self is its central point” (273). This is the sorrow of self-pity, or the sorrow of getting caught, or the sorrow over the consequences sin brings. People who have worldly sorrow are often defensive about their sin and attempt to justify it or explain it away; godly sorrow causes you to own your sin and make no excuses. You know you’re experiencing worldly sorrow when you’re grieving for yourself—and the embarrassment you’re suffering, and the pain you’re feeling—rather than mourning over the grief you’ve brought to the Holy Spirit, for the way you’ve dishonored the grace of Christ, and because you’ve belittled God’s glory.

I think the clearest example Scripture gives of the worldly sorrow that leads to death is Judas. Matthew 27:3 says that Judas “felt remorse” for betraying Christ, that he “returned the thirty pieces of silver” by which he was bribed, and even openly confessed, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” Now, at this point, Judas’s actions are almost indistinguishable from genuine repentance. He confessed his sin, felt remorse over it, and even sought to change course. But ultimately, we learn this was not godly sorrow leading to repentance, but the worldly sorrow that produced death. Verse 5, when the chief priests and elders wouldn’t take the money back, “he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself.”

If Judas was mourning over the offense he had committed against the Son of God—if his grief was fundamentally *God-centered*—he knew, from walking with Christ for over three years, that he could have found forgiveness and restoration in Him. Judas knew that Jesus had come to die for liars and traitors just like him, and that forgiveness was available to those who would abandon their sin and trust in Christ for righteousness. But that wasn’t Judas’s concern. His grief

was fundamentally *self*-centered. He couldn't bear the shame and humiliation of having betrayed the Son of God, and rather than bringing that shame to the Savior who could pay for it, he sought to atone for his own sins by suicide.

Worldly sorrow produces death. Listen: Worldly sorrow causes you to focus on how terrible of a sinner you are rather than how gracious of a Savior Jesus is. The instinct of worldly sorrow is to try to atone for sin by brooding over it—by feeling so bad for yourself that you're reduced to despair. The instinct of godly sorrow is to run to the cross of Christ where the only atonement for sin was made.

VI. Genuine Repentance Bears Fruit (v. 11)

And that brings us to a **sixth lesson** this text teaches us. True repentance does not stop even with *godly* sorrow, but issues in a changed life. Number six: **genuine repentance bears fruit**. And we see this in verse 11, as Paul details what the Corinthians' repentance consisted in. And from this we can glean several characteristics by which we can assess whether our repentance is genuine.

First, Paul says, "For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you!" "Earnestness" refers to the Corinthians' eagerness to change their course and to restore their relationship with Paul. This is also expressed by the final three words: "What longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong!" At first they were apathetic and indifferent about supporting the false apostles and not disciplining the factious man. But God had granted them repentance, and so they beheld their sin for the offense that was, and were *earnest* and *eager* to deal with it biblically. With longing and zeal for Paul, they avenged the wrong done by disciplining the offender. And we learn from this that genuine repentance is not apathetic toward sin; it is not indifferent about making restitution or restoring a relationship that has been damaged by sin. People who are truly repentant don't need to be badgered into seeking forgiveness; they don't need to be cajoled into pursuing reconciliation; they don't need to be coaxed into making changes in their life that will ensure that no provision is made for the flesh in regard to its lusts. Genuine repentance beholds the seriousness of sin and is *eager* to deal with it biblically.

Second, he exclaims, "What vindication of yourselves!" True repentance is marked by a desire to clear your name of the stigma of your sin, a desire to have a reputation for righteousness rather than for iniquity. And how do you do that? You do everything you can to make sure your repentance is as public as your sin was. You conduct yourself so that everyone who knew of your sin now knows that you have put off that unrighteousness, and that you have begun putting on the appropriate fruit of the Spirit in its place. If your sin was gossip, you now endeavor to be known as one who speaks truth and never evil of another; if your sin was impatience toward someone, you now go out of your way to show them grace. You desire to be known for

righteousness because you bear the Name of the Righteous One, and desire to bring no reproach upon His reputation.

Third, true repentance is marked by indignation. Those who repent of sin are righteously angry with themselves for having sinned against God. This is a natural effect of godly sorrow, but it's more intense. Calvin says, "The first step is that evil be displeasing to us. The second is that, being inflamed with anger, we press hard upon ourselves, so that our consciences may be touched to the quick" (276). Charles Hodge adds, "This is one of the most marked experiences of every sincere penitent. The unreasonableness, the meanness, the wickedness of his conduct rouses his indignation; he desires to seek vengeance on himself" (561). The repentant person does not coddle himself with positive thinking. Repentance knows nothing of *self-esteem*. Repentance is concerned with *God-esteem*—or, as Paul puts it in the fourth characteristic of repentance, "the fear of God." Rather than concern for oneself, reverence for God and *His* wounded honor dominates the affections of the one whose repentance is genuine.

We covered the final three phrases earlier, and so Paul concludes with, "In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter." Which means, not that they had never been guilty of sin, but that they had borne such fruit in keeping with repentance that they had made things right, and could no longer be held to blame for the sin they had forsaken.

That is the **fruit of genuine repentance**. An eagerness and a zeal—not a reluctance—to demonstrate a changed life to all those affected by your sin. An indignation with yourself and your sin, born out of the utmost reverence for God rather than for yourself or what other people think of you. A longing for the restoration of any relationship damaged by your sin. And a genuine concern that justice would be upheld as sin is disciplined and dealt with biblically. As you face conflicts in the context of your ministry to the church, be sure to examine whether your repentance is marked by these biblical characteristics.

VII. Love Rejoices in the Joy of Others (vv. 7, 13)

Well, so far we've seen that faithful servants suffer, that God comforts the suffering, that God comforts through the church, that sensitive ministers sharpen, that sorrow can be beneficial, and that genuine repentance bears fruit. A **seventh lesson** we can glean from this passage is that **love rejoices in the joy of others**. We see this both in verse 7 and in verse 13. In verse 7, Paul says he was comforted "by the comfort with which [Titus] was comforted by [the Corinthians]." And then in verse 13 he says, "And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all." Paul's joy is bound up in his brother's joy! He is happy because his dear brother Titus is happy! He is refreshed because his fellow-laborer in the Gospel is refreshed!

And this teaches that **love rejoices in the joy of others**—that godly people find joy in the joy of their brothers and sisters in Christ! Biblical love consists in the sharing of mutual joy—of seeking one another’s happiness *as* one’s own—of having their 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!

Friends, this reminds us that true Christian love is not disinterested benevolence! It is not stone-faced self-denial! Some well-meaning teachers have so emphasized the *volitional* component of love that they evacuate it of all *affection*. Love does involve the act of the will. It *is* a choice! But it is *also* an affection of the heart! It is an affection that so *delights* in the happiness of another, that it wells up into joyful sacrifice to secure their benefit and well-being! One commentator captures it so well. He writes, “We see here the nature of corporate body life in which our affections and joy, as well as our sorrow and distress, are tied up with one another in the body of Christ. There is no place in Paul’s concept of Christianity or church life for the notion of the solitary saint who lives independently of others, untouched by their sorrows or unaffected by their joy. We are to be tightly knit with cords of love and empathy and understanding such that when others rejoice, we rejoice, and when they weep, we weep” (Storms, 30).

Brothers and sisters, does that describe you? Does it describe the relationships that you have cultivated at Grace Church and GraceLife? Are your hearts knit together to one another, so that your brothers’ sorrows are your sorrows, and that your sisters’ joys are your joys? If not, in what meaningful sense can you say that you love one another? You can’t! And if that’s the case, what are you doing to fix it? What relationships are you pursuing? What relationships are you deepening? What investments of your time and your energy are you making, so that you can become experientially acquainted with the **love that rejoices in the joy of others**?

VIII. Obedience is Endearing (vv. 13, 15)

Lesson number eight: obedience is endearing. Look at verse 13 again: “We rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because *his spirit has been refreshed by you all.*” And verse 15: “His affection abounds all the more toward you, *as he remembers the obedience of you all*, how you received him with fear and trembling.” Given the circumstances, there was some doubt about how the Corinthians would receive Titus. I mean, if Paul was distressed about having *written* the severe letter, imagine how Titus felt about *delivering* it in person, and dealing with the fall-out! There was great potential for Titus to be rejected, to come under the same suspicion and ostracism that the Corinthians had treated Paul with, and perhaps even to experience violence from the dissenters. But—thanks be to God—the Corinthians received Titus with fear and trembling! That is, they received him with the reverence due to a genuine minister of the Gospel, and heeded his counsel that accompanied Paul’s letter. And Paul calls that *obedience* on the part of the Corinthians, and says that Titus’s spirit was *refreshed* by it, and that even as Titus

spoke of their treatment of him to Paul in Macedonia his love and affection for the Corinthians only abounded all the more.

And I draw from this the **lesson** that **obedience endears** godly people to one another. Obedience is attractive to those whose hearts' eyes have been opened to treasure the glory and grace of Jesus, because obedience is indicative of the grace of God at work in the heart, and because obedience displays the glory of Christ in our lives. Think about it: what is obedience but the necessary result of Christlikeness? In Romans 8:29, Paul defines sanctification as becoming conformed to the image of Christ. To whatever degree Christians have been conformed to the image of Christ, to that degree we reflect the image of Christ's glory to one another. And if you're saved, you *love* to behold Christ's glory! And so the more of our Savior we see in one another, the more we love and enjoy one another.

In the last point I asked you if you have relationships in which your hearts are knit together. Some of you say, "No, but I'd sure like to have those relationships!" Well, one way you can go about **endearing** yourselves to other genuine believers is to ensure that you are walking in holiness—that you are reflecting the glory of your common Savior to your brothers and sisters, so that your very presence mediates the beauty of Christ that they love with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Genuine Christians want Christ. And if they can see Him in you, because by God's grace you are pressing hard after holiness, their delight in Him will result in a genuine, endearing love for you as well.

IX. Love Believes the Best (vv. 14, 16)

Finally, then, we come to the **ninth lesson** that this text teaches us concerning conflict resolution in the context of ministry in the church. And that is, number nine, that **love believes the best**. In verse 14, Paul says he had been *boasting* to Titus about the Corinthians! As Titus was preparing to take the severe letter to Corinth, and perhaps may have been understandably nervous about it, Paul was assuring Titus that he was confident that God's grace was at work in the Corinthians' hearts, and therefore that the Holy Spirit would cause them to receive Titus well. He even says in verse 16, "I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you." And when you think about the *Corinthians*—those who had split into factions, and abused spiritual gifts, and tolerated gross immorality, and took each other to court, and defiled the Lord's table, and on top of all of that had betrayed Paul and been duped by this false gospel—when you consider all of that, you're tempted to wonder if Paul's telling the truth when he says he boasted of their certain obedience!

But this teaches us, friends, that **love believes the best**. That godly ministers *boast* in the work the Lord is doing in those to whom they minister. That they are *resiliently optimistic* about the Lord's grace at work in their lives—even when they don't necessarily deserve that optimism—because that confidence isn't ultimately in *them*, but in the sovereign grace of Christ at work

within them. Dear people, love does not write people off! A loving servant of Christ does not experience being sinned against by other Christians and then abandon all hope of their repentance and faithfulness! “But do you know how long he has sinned against me? There’s no way he’s going to change!” “She’s been sinning, and asking for forgiveness, and sinning, and asking for forgiveness, for 40 years now! I’ve given up hope that she’ll get any better!” Friend, do you realize that when your attitude is like that, it’s not your brother or your sister you’re abandoning hope in. It’s *Christ* you’re abandoning hope in! You’re saying that their sin is too big for Christ’s grace to overcome! That Jesus is not so sovereign a Savior as to conquer that sin in your brother’s life! O how lightly we think of the grace of God!

Dear friends, Paul teaches us that this should not be our attitude toward one another! No matter how severe, how numerous, or how frequent the sins of our brothers and sisters against us, **love believes the best**. The faithful minister of the Gospel—the faithful servant of Christ—is possessed by an indomitable, unwavering, confident hope in the power of God’s grace to overcome sin in the lives of His people, an intransigent optimism that the Holy Spirit can change hearts and subdue sin, even in the most stubborn believers. And your brothers and sisters need you, friends—if they’re going to make any progress in mortifying the sins that so greatly distress you—they need you, in love, to believe all things and to hope all things on their behalf (1 Cor 13:7). They need to know that you don’t think they’re a lost cause, but that you have confidence that the grace of Christ is at work within them—that their sin is conquerable by the Almighty King of Grace Himself. Dear friends, “Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound!” And therefore we can be confident to **believe the very best** of God’s people, because we believe the very best of His sovereign grace.

Conclusion

And if you’re here this morning and you’re outside of Christ—if you haven’t yet turned from your sins and put all your trust in Him for your righteousness before God—you know nothing of this indomitable, sovereign grace of His, that conquers and overcomes sin in the heart of man! You remain bound in your sin, powerless against its dominion in your life, helpless to reform your behavior and improve yourselves. And I would just entreat you—all you who are weary and heavy-laden under the impossible burden of bearing your own sin—to come to the Christ who promises to give *rest*. He says, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls.” Why? Because He Himself bore the burden of sin in His own body, and died on the cross under the wrath of God to pay sin’s penalty. Because He bore the burden, He can now offer rest. Come to Him, and taste the power of His sovereign grace at work in your heart to subdue all the sins that you cannot conquer on your own.

And to my brothers and sisters who know that grace, heed the **lessons** of this text. Remember that faithful servants suffer, that God comforts the suffering, that He comforts through the church, that sensitive ministers sharpen, that sorrow can be beneficial, that genuine repentance bears fruit, that love rejoices in the joy of others, that obedience is endearing, and that love believes the best.