

Read 2 Corinthians 2:3-11

Introduction

Some letters are hard to write, particularly when they have to address difficult matters with those with whom we are close. Paul refers to such a letter which he had written earlier to the believers in Corinth (**2 Cor 2:3-4**).

Summary

In 2 Corinthians 2:3-11, Paul was relieved to hear that strong disciplinary action had been taken by the church, but he was now concerned lest the repentant offender be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow and so he urges the Corinthian believers to turn and reaffirm their love for the offender.

1. Grave Sin vs. 5

Paul writes of someone who had 'caused pain', not only to the apostle himself, but also to the whole congregation at Corinth (**2 Cor 2:5**). Many think Paul was referring to the immoral man mentioned in **1 Cor 5: 1-13**. The situation had been compounded by the fact that the church had been reluctant to act (**1 Cor. 5:2**).

Here we come to the aftermath of this situation. The church, stung by Paul's words in the earlier epistle, had risen to the challenge and withdrawn from the man (**1 Cor. 5:13**).

When the apostle wrote that the man had not caused him pain, he makes the point that the real damage had not so much been done to him personally as to the church in Corinth as a whole.

The sin of one church member can have a devastating effect on the whole of a local church and every member in it. This shows itself in a number of ways:

First, the debilitating effect of public disgrace. Secondly, within a local church, the sin of one member can have a grievous effect on morale. Thirdly, The sin of one church member can have a disastrous effect on those who tolerate it.

Paul had warned the church that '... a little leaven leavens the whole lump' (**1 Cor 5:6**). In the same way, one careless believer can wreck the testimony of a whole church. Who, in his right mind, would want to be responsible for such a disastrous outcome?

2. Church Discipline vv. 6-11

It is very encouraging to note that Paul's prompting in his earlier letter had led to considered and deliberate action by the church in Corinth.

The reference to punishment being 'by the majority' suggests a formal act on the part of the church acting corporately.

It is taken for granted in this passage in 2 Corinthians 2 that the man repented. Church discipline is not merely a matter of vindicating the good name of a local congregation: it also looks for the restoration of the offender. This can be seen in the way that Paul indicates that the time had now come for a change of approach (2:6). A new danger now threatened; the man might be left to drown in self-despair (2:7). Just as the church had taken formal steps to exclude the man from church fellowship, now it must take formal steps to receive him back (2 Cor 2:8).

Paul's letter would have the added benefit of revealing whether the church would respond rightly to his leadership (2 Cor 2:9). The apostle goes on to say that if the church forgave the man, so would he (2 Cor 2:10). On the one hand, it seems to have been a vote of confidence in their procedures. Perhaps, he also intended his words to function as a catalyst, a way of spurring them on.

The believers in Corinth also needed to be alert to the terrible possibility that Satan could take advantage of the situation (2 Cor 2:11).

If the church at Corinth lost the services of a discouraged and defeated man, despite the genuineness of his repentance, if the opportunity to show the power of forgiveness to a watching world had been lost, the enemy of souls would have gained a victory that should never have been his.

Satan triumphs on the one hand where there is too much readiness to tolerate sin but he also triumphs on the other when there is too much severity.

3. Two important Lessons

This passage contains two outstanding lessons.

The first concerns the man at the heart of the controversy.

Modern Christians have every incentive not to fall into sin as he did.

The consequences of just one sin can be very far-reaching indeed.

No one can afford to indulge the attitude that says,

1 Cor 10:12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

Secondly, we need to pray for our leaders as they attempt the difficult balancing act of church discipline.

Two extremes need to be avoided: on the one hand, the cowardly failure to intervene that leaves the impression that 'anything goes' in a particular church, and, on the other, the hard, unrelenting rigor that leaves a genuinely repentant offender dejected and downcast because there seems to be no way back.