

2 Corinthians 2:5-3:6 – Truth and Forgiveness

Background from last time (2 Corinthians 1-12-2:4)

In our last study, we saw that Paul had failed to visit the church at Corinth when he had told them he would do so.

This was not because Paul cannot be trusted to keep his word. He reminds the Christians at Corinth that God always keeps his word: Jesus is the demonstration and proof that God is faithful to all that he has promised – in him, all the promises of God are Yes and Amen. Paul is a servant of this Faithful Saviour. He did not visit Corinth as he had planned because of problems in the church. He did not want to come in anger and face a confrontation. Instead, he wrote them a letter urging them to put things right before he came: a letter he had written in tears (2:4).

Have you ever written a difficult letter and worried anxiously about how it would be received?

Paul could not wait for a reply

Paul has sent Titus with the letter he had written to Corinth. And now he is in Troas, preaching the good news about Jesus and many are responding (2:12) – there are many opportunities for his ministry. But Paul could get no peace. He is continually worried about how Titus had been received.

Paul's great concern is for the churches to which he has ministered God's word (see 11:28); he is concerned that Christians should grow in likeness to Christ and not turn back from following him.

Paul is so troubled that he cannot wait for Titus to return to him in Troas. Instead, he sails across the Ionian Sea from Troas to Macedonia in the hope of meeting Titus on his way back from Corinth. And, in the goodness of God, they do meet up and Titus is able to tell Paul about how his letter was received.

It is good news! They have responded well to his letter and had dealt with the problems that so distressed Paul.

The triumphal procession

Listen as Paul describes how he feels in response to this news in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16.

This might seem an odd picture to us, but listen to the explanation given by Tom Wright in his little book, *Paul For Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, p.24

“Most people in Paul's world would know about triumphal processions. When a king, a general, or some other great leader had won a notable military victory, the whole city would turn out to welcome him and his troops as they came home in jubilation. They would bring with them the prisoners they had taken; they would display the booty they had plundered; and they would do everything to make it clear to their own people that they had indeed been victorious. All kinds of ceremonies and rituals were devised to make the point, and among them was the practice of the burning of incense. This celebrated the arrival of the triumphant general; it spoke to people in the crowds and in the neighbouring streets, of what was happening, whether they could see it or not. It reminded the victors of their victory, and the rewards that awaited them; and it reminded the conquered prisoners of their defeat, and the fate that lay in store for them. Prisoners were usually killed, perhaps by being forced to fight wild animals in the amphitheatre. Alternatively, they might be sold into slavery...

“[Paul's] point is that, as God's triumphal procession makes its way through the world following the victory of Jesus the Messiah over death and sin, people like himself,

who are in the procession, are wafting the smell of victory, the smell of triumph, to people all round. To those who are being grasped by the love and power of the gospel and who are responding to it, the smell is sweet: it means victory, joy, hope and peace even in the middle of present troubles. To those who are setting their faces against the gospel and all that it means, the same smell reminds them that the victory God won in the Messiah means victory over all the forces that oppose his healing rule of justice and peace; in other words, that those who oppose are signing their own death warrant.”

Christ has won the victory over Satan, sin and death and all the powers of this present age through his death and resurrection. His people are now following him in his triumphal procession – bearing witness to the world of the victory of Christ.

But there is no room for triumphalism among his followers, for we follow a *crucified* and risen Lord. Christ’s life is displayed in Paul and in the Christians at Corinth as they suffer with Christ in the sure and certain hope that they will share in his glory. This is part of the paradox of Christian discipleship.

But Paul still has concerns for the Corinthians

Although Paul rejoices in the news he received from Titus, not all the news he received was good news. The church at Corinth had obeyed Paul in dealing with someone who had done wrong. But Paul is now concerned that that their discipline of this person may have been carried too far.

The person concerned seems to have been sorry for what they had done. They had repented and changed their ways. Paul says that there needs now to be forgiveness and reconciliation. He urges the church at Corinth to show their love for this person who had done wrong; “You ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” (2:7-8)

The purpose of discipline is not primarily punishment but restoration – it is designed to put things right.

Paul warns the Corinthians that they should be careful that Satan does not outwit them. “We are not unaware of his schemes”, he says (2:11).

Satan’s schemes are to destroy the work of God – he opposes the triumphant work of Christ and seeks to divert Christians from following in his triumphal procession. He wants to destroy their testimony to the world. He has many schemes. He may work by encouraging immoral, unattractive or worldly behaviour in the church. The Corinthians had rightly dealt with this problem; the discipline of the church has brought this person to repentance – to change their ways. But Satan can work equally well by stirring up division and discord in the church where someone has been shunned or made to feel they no longer belong. The Corinthians need to be aware of this danger and to allow Satan no foothold. They need to welcome back the repentant brother and show him that they forgive him, love him and accept him.

We also must be continually aware of Satan’s many schemes, keeping a watch for anything that might turn people away from following Christ. Immorality and improper behaviour needs to be dealt with rather than tolerated, but equally, there needs to be a spirit of forgiveness and love towards those who have done wrong – for we all fall short of what we should be. We must make sure that we conduct ourselves in such a way that Satan does not spoil God’s work in us and damage our testimony to the world.

Finally, in these verses, Paul speaks of the nature of his ministry

Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth that he has been a faithful *minister* of the word. Unlike some others, he does not twist God's word to magnify himself or to gain personal support and profit for himself – 2:17.

But in this Paul is not commending himself. He does not wave letters of commendation before them (as some do) nor does he seek letters of commendation from them – 3:1. The Christians at Corinth are living letters, written by the Spirit. Their transformed lives are visible for all the world to see – 3:2-3. It is quite clear that God has been at work through the ministry of Paul. They are the living proof of the validity of his ministry; God's seal of approval on his ministry. Paul could not wish for better letters of commendation.

And this is because Paul is happy to admit he can do nothing in and of himself. The source and power of his ministry is God in Christ – 3:4-6.

What does all of this have to say to us?

Discipleship means following a crucified and risen Saviour. His death and risen life are to shape our lives and the life of our church. We are to be living letters, written by the Spirit of God, speaking powerfully to the world of the character of Jesus.

In particular, the truth of God is to shape our life and conduct. Where any are clearly not living by the truth – not living Christ-like and Christ-honouring lives – there may be the need for rebuke and discipline, but always in a spirit of love. Equally, we are always to be ready to forgive and to show our love for one another. We are to be careful never to allow Satan to outwit us and to gain a foothold in our church.

Do you like nosing around show homes?

The church is God's show home. We are his show home where the risen Christ dwells by his Spirit. We are to show the world the triumphant power of Christ as his word shapes our lives and Christ is formed in us. We are to show the world the glorious love and power of the risen Saviour.

Let's make sure that Satan does not damage our testimony.

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