

SESSION 13: TIME TO FORGIVE, PART ONE

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

July 6, 2025

PREFACE

In the passage before us, vs5-11, the apostle Paul never gives specifics; although it is clear he refers to an incident that took place during his last (“painful”) visit, he does not offer any details about the transgression; most modern commentators agree that he refers to a specific individual in the church, but he mentions no name; most modern commentators agree that the individual in question is *not* the one accused of incest in First Corinthians, but this must be gleaned not from the text itself, but by reading between the lines.

Nonetheless, bereft of these specifics, this is a treasured passage with a wealth of wisdom for today’s churches, teaching much about proper church discipline, grace, forgiveness, and *koinonia* love. In fact, even that lack of specifics speaks volumes about Paul’s character, and the importance of his approach as he teaches the church.

The passage can be easily subdivided:

v5 the sorrow (or grief) caused by the offender;


vv6-8 forgiveness and encouragement to be showed the offender

vv9-11 further reasons for forgiveness


Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

v5

But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you.

The first few words of this verse—“But [*de*] if [*ei*] any  [*tis*]”—sound, to our modern ears, as if the apostle is speaking of general principles instead of a specific situation and person. But in first-century context and taking into consideration how Paul typically writes, that is not the case.

or “anyone” or “someone”

The earlier topic (vv1:23-2:4) is continued, but now with “a mild shift in topic” Guthrie); *ei* (“if”) refers not to some theoretical scenario, but to a real situation; and *tis* (“any”) is Paul’s typical way to indefinitely refer to his opponents in this letter. 

e.g., also 10:2, 12; 11:20-21.

We may interpret this as an expression of his apostolic grace—or just wise politics.

The verb tense here describes an ongoing situation of grief; after an extended period, it lingers on. Paul, with his less-specific words and anonymity of the offender—even the nature of his offense—is not glossing over the negative impact of the situation, but keeping in mind his intent of healing and restoration, rather than punishment.

Another confusing part of this verse is the clause “he has caused sorrow not to me.” Well now, immediately we recall what he has just written, especially in v4: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears.” Of *course* Paul experienced sorrow, heart-pain over this! So what’s going on here?

The confusion for us stems from Paul employing an “Hebraic expression whereby a comparison is made to stress the greater importance of the alternative” (Guthrie). To us it *sounds* like an absolute negation, but it is not. He does the same thing elsewhere, for example in Chapter Seven.

Read 2 Corinthians 7:12.

Paul certainly *did* write for the sake of the offender, as well as the offended, but he presses the third point as that which is more important. So here in our text. In v5 Paul downplays the effect on himself, while emphasizing the effect on the church.

And one more part of this verse that might benefit from some explanation is that phrase set off by em dashes: “in order not to say too much” in the LSB (“not to put it too severely” in the ESV). The word *epibaro* means to put a burden on someone, such as a heavy weight on a servant’s back. Our various versions are all correctly translated, but for the context the LSB and NASB “in order not to say too much” is probably the closest to Paul’s implication; he didn’t want to overstate his case—especially since he probably came down pretty hard on it in his severe letter.

In v5 Paul is emphasizing the relational connection between the church and himself.

Barnett: The “offender” and the “grief” he caused Paul were the chief reasons the apostle abandoned his plan to return directly to Corinth, sending the “Severe Letter” instead.

Seifrid: Someone in the church had done damage to the relationship between the apostle and the church. Damage therefore had been inflicted on the whole church.

v6

Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather graciously forgive and comfort him, lest such a one be swallowed up by excessive sorrow.

It is easy to see why, traditionally, this passage has been interpreted to be referring to the individual from Paul's first letter to the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1.

There are, however, a number of reasons why, as virtually all modern scholars agree, this passage in the second letter refers to someone else. First, although we may *assume* the two punishments are similar, they are not. The offenses are no doubt different, and the punishments are different.

In First Corinthians the offense was heinous; it would have been a scandal even in Greek secular society. Paul's judgment was
in the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.
(1 Corinthians 5:4–5)

Putting it bluntly, Paul commanded that he be put out of the church. His reasoning we find in the next two verses: "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, also was sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:6–7). Paul's hope was that the man would repent and eventually be saved, but his offense was a horrible cancer within the body of Christ, and it was necessary to cut it out entirely.

The situation in Second Corinthians seems to be different. What we refer to as the "Corinthian church" was actually comprised of a number of small home gatherings; these—perhaps every week, perhaps less often—would come together in a "plenary session" for worship, the Lord's Supper, baptism, etc.

This man's punishment was less dramatic: a suspension from at least the plenary gathering, and perhaps even the home gathering. So it follows that his "crime" was less dramatic than the one committing incest. It was not intended to "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh," meaning, "put the man out of the church [excommunicate] and into the world where Satan reigns" (Garland). Today anyone excommunicated can just walk down the street to join another church body, but in first-century Christendom, to be kicked out of one's church was a devastating and perhaps life-changing punishment.

Do we know what offense this man in this second Corinthian letter committed? All we can say with some certainty is that he instigated a contentious rift between Paul and the church. He could have been a solitary actor, a spokesman for a group, or, more likely, encouraged a number in the church to agree with him and follow him in his "insurrection." More than that we cannot say with any certainty, and there is little profit in trying to guess (as many commentators do).

We take it from the wording of v6 that the church took some form of a vote and a majority voted to suspend him from attending their gatherings. Yet, slightly disturbing is that if there was a majority there also had to be a *minority* that did *not* support the disciplinary action.

v7

...so that on the contrary you should rather graciously forgive and comfort him, lest such a one be swallowed up by excessive sorrow.

The purpose of church discipline is to ignite repentance in the offender, then restore him to fellowship—not just punishment alone, and certainly not retribution. It should also include a healthy dose of introspection within the body, as Paul wrote to the Galatians.

Read Galatians 6:1-2.

But here also is grace—grace in abundance—exhibited by the apostle. The evidence seems to indicate that it was this individual who, more than anyone else, was responsible for the painful rift between Paul and the church, the cause of the painful visit followed by the painful letter, as well as the need for *this* letter.

Yet it is Paul who counsels them to “graciously forgive and comfort” the one responsible for all this (not necessarily that he did it all single-handedly, but that he was at least the instigator). In fact Paul will state in v10 that he has already forgiven the man.

graciously forgive and comfort him

Perhaps many of us who have grown up in the church take forgiveness for granted; we need a reminder that “forgiveness constitutes one of the most salient motifs in the biblical literature and thus is foundational for true Christian community” (Guthrie). Guthrie passes along the following from John Stott, who “reports that when a leading British humorist was interviewed on television, in a moment of surprising frankness, she said, ‘What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me.’” Mark Seifrid cites a remark made by Alan Jones, former dean of Grace Cathedral, who observed that we live in a time in which *everything* is permitted and *nothing* is forgiven.

The Christian’s inclination and ability to forgive is a grace instilled in us by God. Whether bestowing or receiving forgiveness, we should never consider it lightly. It is a supernatural gift from God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus.

Hidden beneath the English of our text is a Greek word not typically used for “forgiveness”; that more common word would be *aphiemi*, translated “forgive” 143 times in the NT. Here Paul uses, instead, *charisasthai*, which is acknowledged in our versions only in the LSB: “graciously forgive.” This “communicates the idea of giving something graciously or freely as a favor, to cancel a debt, or as here, to be gracious by forgiving someone for a wrong committed” (Guthrie).

Likewise the word translated “comfort” implies more than just a pat on the back with “There, there...” In this context *parakalesai* includes the idea of encouragement, and thus, as David Garland writes, “is not unrelated to spurring others to live worthily of the gospel. It does not mean making others feel comfortable about their past sin but leading them to godly sorrow where they find God’s forgiveness.”

...lest such a one be swallowed up by excessive sorrow.

There is a lot of strong imagery going on in the second part of this verse. The church has dutifully followed Paul’s command (probably part of the painful letter) to discipline the man; now it is time to forgive—which means, I take it, repentance has been stated or demonstrated by the offender.

Last week I spoke again about the value in referencing more than one version of God’s word. What one eventually learns by comparing different versions—and here I speak of true translations, not paraphrases—is that there is not one version that is always the best, the most accurate or precise. For, verse by verse, they each have their weak translations and each their strong translations.

From a strictly lay-person’s perspective, one of my complaints is that too often translators seem to *homogenize* the text; for example, different passage may use different “flavors” of the same word with subtle shadings of meaning, but instead of emphasizing those shadings, the translators will settle on a general term that they apply overall—and *all* versions are guilty of this at times. Personally, I *seek out* all those shadings, those differences, because they are what bring the Bible to life for me, for in truth it is not at all a dry, sterile tome that puts one to sleep. It is rich, full of varying textures, drama, humor, tragedy—all delivered with the unerring veracity of God’s voice and Spirit.

There is nothing wrong or inaccurate with v7 in the ESV and NIVs that make it “otherwise such a one might be **overwhelmed** by excessive sorrow.” But *how* is one overwhelmed?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:54.

“Death is swallowed up in victory.” Now that’s powerful imagery; immediately what comes to our mind is a picture of death itself being literally consumed, going to a grave itself, forever and for all time—as is stated clearly in The Revelation:

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them, and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:13–15)

Talk about “swallowed up.”

The same word translated “swallowed up” in this passage is used in v7 of our text. The English “overwhelmed,” can represent varying levels of misfortune; like today’s use of the word, “stressed,” it can mean just being pulled in too many directions. But Paul means something deeper in v7 with the Greek *katapothē*, which, along with swallowed up can mean drink down, drown, or even destroy. Polybius, in the second and third centuries BC, uses it when he writes of a city being swallowed up by the sea. Thus in v7 we have a picture of someone “being consumed with something, and perhaps carries the idea of being destroyed. Paul is concerned that excessive sadness might engulf the offender, drowning him in a sea of remorse” (Guthrie)—implied, from which we may never recover.

Thus the apostle, in v8, adds one more word to “forgive and comfort”: “Love.”

Therefore I encourage you to reaffirm your love for him.

We will pick this up at v8 in part two.