

The Blessings of Forgiveness, Part 2

2 Corinthians 2:7-11

47-9

I was having a conversation on the telephone last night with a very dear friend of mine from Florida. We were talking on the phone about a number of things and he said, "What are you teaching on Sunday morning?"

And I said, "I'm teaching through 2 Corinthians."

And he said, "Have you done that before?"

I said, "Never." And when I first started I was asked why have you waited so long to teach 2 Corinthians, and I don't know what the answer is at that particular point, in my mind I wasn't sure. But the longer I teach this the more I think the answer might be that God never wanted me to teach it until now because you almost need twenty-five or thirty years of experience in the ministry to feel this book. There's so much depth here that is revealed from the heart of the Apostle Paul as he unfolds his attitude toward life and ministry. It's not a book for the shallow minded. It's not a book for the novice. It's a book really to be fully grasped only by someone who has spent a number of years in ministry so that he can identify more closely with what it is that's really going on in the heart of this great apostle. This book runs very deep and I find it probing extremely deeply into my own heart. And I thank God for every moment I've been able to spend and there's so much more yet to go as we move through all thirteen chapters.

We find ourselves in the study of 2 Corinthians this morning in chapter 2 verses 5 through 11 and the theme is forgiveness. We began to look at this text last Sunday and we will complete it this morning and in it I suggested to you that there were seven reasons to forgive. We covered two of them last time, we'll cover the remaining five today.

But let me begin with a bit of an introduction so we can set the stage for what this text says. Forgiveness is a wonderful and lovely reality. In fact, forgiveness is the most noble act that one sinner can do for another sinner. Forgiveness is the most noble act that one sinner can do for another sinner.

J. Adams further writes, quote: "Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of the Christian home and church running smoothly," end quote. Nothing is more important to life in the home or life in the church than forgiveness.

In Ephesians 4:32 Paul wrote, "And be ye kind to one another, tender hearted." Then he said, "Forgiving each other just as God in Christ has also forgiven you." You are to forgive one another just as God in Christ forgave you. How did God forgive us, then? If we're going to repeat that same

manner of forgiveness then we must understand its nature. Let me see if I can't help you with that. With all that you know about forgiveness, and you certainly in your own mind have some kind of definition of what it is, it may be your own personal definition and it may as well be a biblical one, or theological one. But with all that you know about forgiveness maybe you never thought of it in the way that I want you to think of it now, and that is this...forgiveness is a promise. Forgiveness is a promise, it is a promise from God to the repentant sinner, to the one who comes to Him with a broken and a contrite heart, affirming his own desperate need, his own sinfulness, and reaching out for the provision of Jesus Christ, it is a promise from God to that sinner...and here's the promise...that his sin will never be remembered, that his sin will be buried in the depths of the deepest sea, that his sin will be removed as far as the east is from the west, that his sin will never again be brought up in the mind of God or the tribunal of heaven. It is a promise that no charge will ever successfully be laid against that sinner, that accusation against him will ever stand, a promise that under no circumstances forever will he be condemned. That's the promise. A magnanimous, far-reaching, startling and astounding promise given purely and simply out of the heart of a loving and gracious God to a penitent sinner. And that is how we are to forgive. We are to make a promise.

When someone comes and asks to be forgiven, we make the promise that their sin will never be remembered, it will never be brought out into the open, it will be buried in the depths of the deepest sea, it will be removed as far as the east is from the west, as much as that is possible with us, it will never be held against them, no charge against them could ever be successfully laid in our presence. We will never reestablish that sin, reidentify it and by it condemn them. That's the promise.

Forgiveness then is the noblest thing that one sinner can do for another sinner, and that is to cover his sin permanently, never to remember it, never to bring it up in one's own mind willfully, never to bring it up to the sinner and never to bring it up to anybody else ever. It is a promise to forget. It is a promise to bury. It is a promise to remove away from all thoughts and all words the wrong that was done against you.

Now by very definition, this has to start in the heart, doesn't it? It can't be something external because the heart has to do this. So forgiveness is an attitude in the heart that holds no personal pride, no self-pity, no wounded ego, no thought of bitterness, no desire for vengeance. It is a heart attitude of love that longingly, lovingly, eagerly wants to see the sinner restored. It is an attitude that says, "But I will never be the barrier to forgiveness, my wounded pride, An offense done against me will never be an obstruction to full reconciliation. Forgiveness starts in the heart and the heart holds that love and the heart holds that forgiveness and it waits to give it when the sinner comes in repentance. Until the sin is confessed, until the sin is repented of, the fullness of that forgiveness is never given and reconciliation and restoration doesn't take place. Forgiveness, though, starts in the heart and the heart holds it and waits to give it.

The best illustration that I know of to demonstrate this kind of forgiveness is, of course, Christ. On the cross, listen to what He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they're doing." Jesus expressed there a number of things, first of all He affirmed that God is a forgiving God at heart, right? He knew that God had a heart of forgiveness. God has loving kindness, that's part of His nature, He's gracious, merciful, tender-hearted, kind toward sinners. He also in that prayer affirmed the fact that sinners do things that are witless and stupid because they're sinners. And He was expressing not only the fact that God is a forgiving God and sinners are foolish, but He was expressing the fact that He wanted God...listen to this...to treat the sinners who killed Him the same way He would treat any

other sinners. That was the magnanimity of that prayer. It might have been that Jesus said, "Father, don't forgive these folks. I mean, it's one thing to sin against a man, it's one thing to sin against a God you can't see, but to murder the incarnate God, that's unforgivable. They've gone too far, Father, I'm asking You not to forgive them, the sin is too great, the crime is too heinous, the rejection is too complete, don't forgive them." He didn't say that.

Praying consistently with what He knew to be the heart of God for it was His own heart as well, He's expressing the absence of personal vengeance, the absence of personal bitterness, the absence of any hate, or animosity. He had none. And what He's saying to the Father is this, "Make available to the people who killed Me the same forgiveness You make available to any sinner." That's what He's saying. The same forgiveness that You would give to any sinner, give to these. I hold no ill will against them. But He knew that the Father could hold that forgiveness in His heart, hold it equally toward His very crucifiers and they would never experience it unless they came in repentance and faith in Him. Right? So Jesus is saying I want You to treat them like You would treat any repentant sinner.

And how does God treat a repentant sinner? With total, complete instantaneous forgiveness. And that's how we're to treat sinners, as God in Christ has forgiven us. How has He forgiven us? He holds forgiveness and love in His heart awaiting the penitent sinner who comes and seeks that forgiveness.

So, in our heart is love and humility, not a wounded ego, no vengeance, no bitterness no matter what anybody does to us, and we hold there a loving, eager, anxious longing to forgive when that sinner comes to seek the forgiveness we offer. This is Christlike. This is Godlike. And our text today is a rich illustration of that very kind of forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul, you remember, had been falsely assaulted. His character, his virtue, his spiritual office and calling, his teaching, all of it had been assaulted by some false apostles who came to Corinth. They found willing ears among the Corinthians and they were able to raise a mutiny and a rebellion against Paul. In fact, when Paul made a visit to Corinth, most likely one member of the Corinthian church who is the object of this particular text, confronted him to the face and publicly and openly and shamelessly assaulted him, public discrediting this beloved Apostle, this authority, this one who spoke for Christ.

Well, the man had to be dealt with because the authority of Paul was so crucial in the early church. You can understand why because there was not yet the canon of the New Testament and if people lost confidence in the apostles who spoke the Word of God by revelation, there would be no source for truth. The integrity, the credibility of Paul was crucial. It would be tantamount to the integrity and credibility of Scripture today.

Undermining Paul's life and ministry, undermining what he taught, in effect, would be to totally distort divine truth. So when someone in the congregation stood up and attacked the integrity of Paul, it was no small issue. Not like today when someone could attack the integrity of an individual, like myself or some other minister, but still have to deal with Scripture. In those days, to deal with the man was in effect to deal with the source of truth. This is not a small issue.

Paul then embarrassed publicly, shamed publicly and realizing that this man could lead a further

extension of this rebellion if he got away with this and could find some other people who would chime in told the Corinthian church personally, most likely, and by a letter that he wrote them called "the severe letter," you have to deal with this man. You have to confront him. You have to call him to repentance. What he has done is serious and must be dealt with for the sake of the church.

He sent Titus with that severe letter, which is not in the New Testament, and he waited for Titus to come back because he wanted to hear a report from Titus. Titus did come back, gave a good report and the report was, the man was disciplined. But that's not where the report ended. Having been disciplined, the man repented. And so Paul writes in verses 5 to 11 and says it's time now to forgive the man. He's repented, that's enough...that's enough.

Based on the report of Titus Paul urges that all discipline cease and that the man be restored fully to the fellowship. And that's what he's saying in verses 5 through 11.

Now in this section as it unfolds and he discusses this issue as we shall see, we find seven reasons to forgive laid out for us, a magnificent flow, seven reasons to forgive. And if ever you were searching for good reasons to forgive, you're going to get all of them right here.

Let me remind you of the two we looked at last week. Number one, to deflect pride, or to deflect self-pity. Look at verse 5 and notice how Paul minimizes the offense. "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." Now what I told you last week is that the Apostle is simply discounting the significance of this man's sin. He is saying if he caused sorrow, it's not to me, I didn't take it personally. I don't want you to think you've got to pound this man into a pulp because he's offended me and I'm offended. I remove the offense. I'm not considering it. It doesn't matter to me. My egos not involved. He wasn't wallowing in self-pity or in vengeance. He has caused sorrow, that's a condition of fact. But not to me, I'm not concerned over this. It isn't some personal thing that I'm moping around about, he was too great a man, too godly a man, too humble a man, to Christlike a man to have carried that around.

And then he says it's only in some degree and we don't want to overstate it an offense to you, or a sorrow to you. Let's not make more of this thing than we ought to make. Let's not get our egos involved. Forgive the man because it deflects your pride all the way from self-pity to vengeance.

Secondly, we forgive to show mercy. And in verse 6 he said, "Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority." What he is saying is you brought him into the church, you publicly by some majority disciplined him. It indicates a public, formal, official chastening by the church. He was put under church discipline. He went through the one person and the two and three witnesses and it went to the church and the church dealt with him. You have done the binding work, you have bound his sin to him because he wouldn't repent, and that's enough, sufficient is the punishment the man endured at the hands of the majority. And the point here is it's obvious he's repented and Paul says it's time for the loosing work. Remember I told you last time there may have been some who wanted to pound on the man a little more. Some might have said, "Well, look, I mean, he was only under discipline for a little while and then he repented, and you know, he's repented so soon, we really need to put more pain on him, what he did was horrible." It may have been the Paul party, you know, the "I am of Paul" group who said he hasn't had enough pain, we've got to inflict him some more, let's give him more of the same. And Paul says, "Look, the man repented, the time issue is not a factor, he has suffered enough, you now must give him mercy."

James 2:13, "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." Certainly that was the point of the parable of Matthew 18 where the man came and sought forgiveness for an unpayable debt, he was forgiven by the king who represents God. He went out and grabbed another man who owed him a few pennies and strangled the man and threw him into prison because he wouldn't pay him. And the chastening began. The tormentors came out and went after that man. Chastening will come to the one who doesn't forgive, the one who doesn't forgive mercy but who is so willing to receive it. Paul says that's enough. Once the man repents, that's enough. No more punishment, it's time now for mercy. Forgiveness deflects self-pity and pride, it shows mercy. And mercy is a wonderful godlike virtue.

Thirdly, and now we'll get into these last points, we forgive to restore joy...we forgive to restore joy. Verse 7, "So that on the contrary," that is apart from sorrow and punishment, "you should rather forgive and comfort him lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." You need to bring him joy. In Psalm 51 David confessed that sin destroys joy. And that is certainly a confession with which all of us can identify. You remember what he said in Psalm 51 verse 12, "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation." Anytime the sinner falls into sin, it is going to steal joy. Down in verse 14, "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation, then my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness. O Lord, open my lips..." give me back joy, give me back a psalm, a song to sing. "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation."

Paul says, "Look, you should rather forgive and comfort him so that he's not overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Put joy back in his life, he's had enough pain. The pain has brought him to repentance, it's time for joy. You should be as eager to bring the joy as you were to bring the pain, that's the heart of God.

I love what Isaiah said about God. In fact he was talking about the Messiah. And it's recorded also by Matthew in his gospel in chapter 12 verses 18 to 20, what it says is, concerning the Messiah, "That a bruised reed He will not break and smoking flax He will not extinguish." That's an absolutely magnificent insight into the heart of God and one of my favorite statements about God. In ancient days shepherds would make little flutes to entertain themselves with music. They would take a reed and they would prepare that reed with the appropriate holes so that it could be used by their fingers to play a little melody. They could blow in one end and the air would go through, and they would play tunes. They would pass the hours playing their little reed flute until the time would come when the saliva that went into that flute through all the hours of playing and just the weathering of it would cause it to not be able to make the sweet sound anymore and its sound would be muffled or its sound would be not true. Perhaps the shepherd would just snap it and throw it away and make a new one.

The prophet Isaiah said the Messiah will never throw away or discard the little flute that doesn't play the perfect tune. That's the heart of God. God wants to restore the melody, He wants to bring back the song. It's the heart of God to give mercy.

When a little lamp in ancient times was lit, it was simply a little bowl and in it was a pool of oil. And floating in the oil was a little wick and the wick would be lit. But there would come a time when the wick was crusted and burned and all it would do would be smolder with smoke and it would be extinguished and discarded. But it's not the heart of God to take the smoldering wick and throw it away, it's the heart of God to cleanse it and fan it so that it can bring the light again. God wants the

joy of His people. John said, "These things are written unto you that your joy may be full." God's Word comes to us that it might produce joy. God wants joyful people. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy... And Paul is simply saying to them...Look, the man has suffered, he has repented, now it is time for joy, bring back his joy, restore his joy.

Look at verse 7 in particular, "So that on the contrary," instead of increasing or continuing his punishment, since his true repentance and grief are clear, there's only one course of action, "You should rather forgive." You've had it in your heart, I hope, you've been longing and desiring to offer the loving forgiveness that's held in your heart. The man repented, now give it to him...don't hold it back.

The church cannot set false borders on grace. You can't set false limits on mercy. You can't put up self-made walls on forgiveness. The church cannot deny a penitent, no matter how serious his sin was.

You say, "Well, but we want to be sure he'll never do it again." You can't have that assurance. If he sins seventy times seven...forgive him how many times, seventy times seven, says Matthew 18. Failure to forgive then becomes a sin that steals your joy as well as his joy. Failure to forgive restricts God from forgiving you, Mark 11:25, you don't forgive him, He won't forgive you. Failure to forgive will bring you under discipline, Matthew 18:31 says, failure to forgive will corrupt your worship. Before you can even worship you've got to go and forgive. It's time to forgive.

A beautiful analogy to that is back in Leviticus chapter 13. There was a prescription here for how to treat a person who was a leper. And he was to be designated unclean. But down in verse 13 when the priest examined him, he shall pronounce clean, him who had the infection. It has all turned white and he is clean.

Whatever that particular disease was, when it reached the stage where its manifest characteristics, its symptoms were a whiteness, it indicated that he was no longer contagious. Forgive him, he is clean, let him back into the family, let him back into the community. That's the only course of action. When someone comes and they've repented and they're white because they've been washed as white as snow, to borrow Isaiah's words, let him back in, forgive him, don't ask for anymore punishment. Loose him from the sin and its penalty. And don't stop there, and comfort him. Here comes the positive side, the negative side is we don't hold the sin against you, we promise never to remember it, to bury it in the depths of the sea, to remove it as far as the east is from the west. It will never be successfully brought up again, it is over, it is done with. And we start with you with a fresh slate this moment. But it is more than just that, it is the positive comfort, parakaleo, to come alongside, to strengthen. Galatians 6:1, to restore such a one in love, to come alongside and build him up and lift him up and strengthen him so that he can walk in obedience. Such a tremendous truth.

Hebrews chapter 12 and verses 12 and 13 call for the same kind of thing with regard to someone who's being chastened. Strengthen the hands that are weak, the knees that are feeble, make straight paths for your feet, the limb that's out of joint, heal it. It's a restoration ministry. Now there's repentance, bring him back, strengthen him. Lest somehow such a one...I love the anonymity of that, he doesn't need to mention this man, no reason to name the man because the man has repented..."Lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Not only the sorrow of his punishment but the punishment of his rejection. "Overwhelmed" means to be swallowed

completely. It means to be engulfed, katapino, it is used of animals who devour their prey completely. It is used of waves that drown people. It isn't God's desire that somebody be drowning in sorrow, that somebody be overwhelmed in grief over their sin. God wants them to come only to the point where they see it as sin and are willing to confess and repent and then God wants them to know joy.

God finds no pleasure in unending and excessive morose kind of despair. God seeks our joy, not our sorrow. God is not a cosmic killjoy. He is not going around trying to destroy everyone's happiness, and neither must we. Personal vengeance, self-pity would lead us to keep the person miserable, have them spend a life time in pain and a life time in despair. That is not a godly virtue. That is not true righteousness, that is self-righteousness. That is artificially putting walls up around grace and saying it goes no further, putting borders up around mercy and say it goes no further. But forgiveness seeks the person's joy as God seeks the person's joy. And as soon as it is possible to forgive, you forgive. And then the sinner knows joy and then you know the joy of forgiveness and then the church knows the joy of unity.

To forgive then is to deflect self-pity, to show mercy and to restore joy. Fourthly, to forgive is to affirm love...to affirm love. Verse 8, "Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."

Based on the desire to make him joyful rather than sorrowful, overwhelmed with excessive sorrow, based on the desire to make him joyful, Paul says, "I urge you to reaffirm your love for him, I beg you." He is pleading at this point.

"Reaffirm" is a very interesting word. The language that Paul chooses is very important. It is the word kerosi(?), it's basically a technical term. It is a term to legally ratify something. It means to make a formal conclusion, a matter of certainty. And it would probably involve in this case a public announcement. In other words, we saw from verse 6 that there was a public punishment inflicted by the majority. That is it reached the many, it reached the church. And the church did formal discipline. Now he is asking for the same kind of formality in concluding the matter by a formal reaffirmation of love.

Frankly, unforgiveness is simply a lack of love, isn't it? But forgiveness fulfills the law of God, the law of Christ, the royal law, the law of love. And he says your discipline was public, it was done with a formal process and so should your restoration.

Paul is then asking them to make a public ratification by formal announcement of the restoration of this man to the church, thus the church displays their collective as well as their individual love for him. We remember Paul's words to Timothy that an elder who sins, rebuke before all that others may fear. You deal with sin publicly so that everybody understands how serious sin is. Well listen, you deal with restoration publicly too so that everybody understands how important forgiveness is. Grace is at least as important as law, right? Loosing is as least as important as binding. Heaven is as concerned about loosing as it is about binding.

The word "love," agape, the love of choice, the love of will, the love of serving with humility. Listen, forgiveness is such a precious jewel, it is such a treasure, it is so rich in the life of the church, it is so crucial to Christian fellowship. Churches are torn up and fractured and split and fragmented because of a lack of forgiveness. It starts with a lack of discipline of sin so they never really bring the person to the place where they're penitent. Just let sin exist in the church. Just let it go and ramble its way

through the church and never deal with it, that will tear a church to shreds.

On the other hand, you can work with the sinner, you can discipline the sin but if you don't ever come to the point of forgiveness, that too will tear the church to shreds. Forgiveness is what brings back the joy, the love, the mercy, the humility. What a treasure.

That's how a church should be known, should be known for its forgiveness. "By this shall all men know that you're My disciples if you have love one for another." How do they know we love? How does John 13:34-35 come into reality? How does the world know we love each other? Because we socialize? No, they socialize, too. How do they know that we really care deeply? How do they know that there's something transcendent about our life? I think no other way to see this than when it is manifest in the matters related to forgiveness. Forgiveness, as I said at the very beginning, is the most noble act that one sinner can do for another. And it is at the same time the most difficult one.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said, "Be imitators of God," you would ask how? Here's how, "Walk in love." What does that mean? "As Christ loved you, and gave Himself up for us an offering and a sacrifice to God." In other words, you are to love as Christ loved. How did Christ love? He loved in giving Himself to provide forgiveness for sins. No greater demonstration of love exists in the church than how we forgive. I'm happy if we...if we socialize and people say, "Boy, they like each other over there, that's nice. That's wonderful. They care for each other over there." But the real test, the heartfelt test is do we forgive when we're offended? Are we holding in our heart loving forgiveness just waiting for the reconciliation and the restoration will come when the person comes to seek it? That's how you affirm love.

And nothing can ever fracture a church like that because nothing is ever left to be an issue. It's dealt with, it's forgiven, it's gone. You see, that's...that's why it's so crucial that a church do the discipline work because it brings the forgiveness and reconciliation that keeps the unity of the church intact.

So, we forgive because it reflects...it deflects self-pity, it reflects humility, it shows mercy, it restores joy, it affirms love. Number five, we forgive to prove obedience...we forgive to prove obedience. Now listen to something that I'm going to say. Forgiveness has all the foregoing noble aspects...humility, mercy, joy, love...those are noble things. Forgiveness has all those noble effects. But listen, if it had none of them, if it had none of them, if those benefits were not a part of it, it would still be right to forgive. Why? Because God has commanded that we forgive. Look at verse 9. "For to this end also I wrote that I might put you to the test whether you're obedient in all things."

Relatively easy to be obedient in some things. The Bible says that we're to sing songs of praise to the Lord, that's not too tough. The Bible says we're to pray, we can do that, at certain levels of desperation that comes relatively easy. The Bible talks about serving the Lord, there's some areas of service we enjoy. The hardest thing the church ever does is deal with sin. That's the hardest work we do. Everything about it is difficult. Going after the sinner, that's hard. Bringing the sinner to a point where he's recognizing sin, where we're dealing with sin is a very relentless task and the more belligerent, obstinate the sinner is, the more difficult the task is. And even picking up the pieces after the sinner has repented and trying to put it all together and strengthen him and bring him back into the fellowship, it's hard work. And Paul said for the benefits of forgiveness, I'm glad that it produces humility and mercy and joy and love, I'm glad for all of that. But the bottom line is, I put this responsibility on you with regard to this man because I wanted to test you to find out whether you're obedient in the hard things.

Verse 9, "For to this end also I wrote." He's referring here to the severe letter he wrote in which he must have referred to the discipline of this man. To this end I wrote calling for you to deal with this offender, as well as confronting the false apostles, I urge your confrontation, I urge you to discipline him. Why? That I might put you to the test. Listen to this, it wasn't primarily for the man, it wasn't for me, it was for you. I wanted to test you to find out whether you're obedient in the difficult things. It's difficult work to do it and it's difficult unless your heart is right before God to forgive someone who has seriously offended you, isn't it? That's a spiritual ability. That's not natural. That's not endemic to the fallen human race to forgive, take a look at our culture. Take a look at world history. Fallen man does not forgive. We now not only don't forgive, we see forgiveness as a weakness and vengeance as a strength. He's saying I want to know whether you have passed the test of obedience, to do the task which is the hard task, and to forgive from the heart which is the evidence of your spiritual character.

God has been testing people for a long time. Back in Exodus chapter 16 verse 4, the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day that I may test them whether or not they will walk in My instruction." I want to find out where their level of obedience is. In Deuteronomy chapter 8 you find a very similar Scripture, verse 2, "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart whether you would keep His commandments or not." Verse 16, "In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know that He might humble you and that He might test you." Chapter 13 of Deuteronomy verse 3, talking about false prophets, he says, "You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." God is testing His people all the time. Will they obey Him and do the hard work of discipline? Will they obey Him and forgive?

I'll tell you a sad thing. The church as we know it today has largely failed this test abysmally. Churches don't do the hard work of discipline, do they? They don't confront sin. They don't go after the sinner. They don't do that difficult work. They're not willing to be obedient in all things. Many churches where the work of discipline isn't done at all and the Lord has to ask whether they love Him with all their heart and soul, whether they're willing to obey Him in all things. It's easy to do some things, like, you know, show up, not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, sing the praises, do things like that, maybe even give to the Lord. The hard thing is to confront sin, pursue it and then have a totally willing heart to forgive the offender.

Paul's just saying the real issue here is not that guy, the offender, and not me the offended, the issue is you and I'm writing this letter to find out what level you're at of spiritual commitment. In Philippians 2:22 Paul said about Timothy, "He is a proven worth." He had passed enough tests. Paul is testing their spiritual character to see if they're worthy. Over in chapter 13 verse 5 he even suggests that they need to test themselves to see if they're in the faith. But in this case I want to know whether you're obedient in all things. I want to know whether there's nothing too hard for you if it's been commanded, whether you're submissive to the authority of God as He's spoken to you.

We remember, don't we, in Matthew 18 that discipline is the hard work and that's why Matthew 18:18 to 20 says that when we get involved in doing it the Father is there doing it there with us, heaven is in agreement and even Jesus Christ is gathered where two or three are gathered in that discipline situation. It is hard work, God the Father, God the Son are involved, heaven is in agreement. He said

I want to test you.

Now you want to hear some good news? Most churches today don't pass the test. That's sad. Corinth did. This church was changing from the first characterization we get of it in 1 Corinthians. It was changing wonderfully. Go over to chapter 7 down to verse 12, "So although I wrote to you it was not for the sake of the offender, nor for the sake of the one offended." It wasn't for me or for him that I wrote this severe letter telling you to deal with the sin, "But that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God so that you could get your finger on your own spiritual pulse," is what he's saying. So that the level of your earnestness toward me as the representative of Jesus Christ might be manifest to you before God. That's what he's saying. I was testing you to see the level of your commitment to me, the one who represents Christ so that you could take a look at it and know that if you didn't do what I said and you basically were saying...we reject the Apostle of Christ and we do so in the full view of God...or if you obeyed you could say...yes we submit ourselves to the authority of Christ coming through Paul.

And what did they do? Which way did they go? Verse 13, "For this reason we have been comforted." The word came back from Titus that they responded. They disciplined when they were supposed to discipline and they forgave when they were supposed to forgive. And besides our comfort, verse 13, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus. What made Paul happier than what made Paul happy was what made somebody Paul loved happy. Paul's greater joy than his own joy was the joy that he shared with Titus because Titus was happy because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. That church changed. From the chaos of that first epistle something has dramatically happened, they're now submitting to the authority of the Apostle, in spite of the mutiny, in spite of all of that that was going on in the rebellion of the false apostles, here Titus comes back and he says they did what you asked, they disciplined the guy. Their hearts are full of loving forgiveness and I was so comforted in that.

Verse 14, "For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame." I was so glad caused I told him how wonderful you were and you turned out to be as wonderful as I told him. "And as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth." He said I didn't want to get the reputation of not telling the truth and when I bragged about you and boasted about you that you would do what was right, that you could be put to the test and you would pass the test and I told Titus you would and I told Titus that it was true. And he went, and he came back and he said it is true.

And verse 15, "His affection abounds all the more toward you as he remembers...here it is...the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you." That is the great story that has to follow the first epistle, doesn't it? They did obey. They did respond. Forgiveness is a matter of obedience. We are commanded to forgive. Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; Matthew 6:14 and 45...6:14 and 15; many other places, Mark 11:25; we're commanded to forgive. This is a test. And as I said, it's a grieving thing to me and to God as well that so many churches fail the test. They don't even do the discipline in the first place so they're not obedient to do that, and then in many cases they don't forgive the sinner even when the sinner's penitent.

Forgiveness, what a blessing, it deflects pride, it shows mercy, it restores joy, it affirms love, it proves obedience. Number six, these are brief. We forgive to restore fellowship, we forgive to restore fellowship. Notice verse 10, "But whom you forgive anything, I also, for indeed what I have forgiven if

I have forgiven anything I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ." Here's his humility again. He is saying...Look, if you've forgiven the man, I forgive him. Don't let the Paul party tell you they've got to be beaten on him. If he's repented, you've forgiven him, me too. I join with you in that forgiveness. In fact he said, "For indeed what I have forgiven if I have forgiven anything I did it for your sakes. Why wouldn't I, it's only for your sake." And he minimizes his offense again. If I did forgive anything, some small forgiveness I might have given, I just did it for your sakes. And it wasn't for me, it wasn't some big cathartic trauma that God had to do to bring me to the place of forgiveness. No, I...if I did any forgiving at all, it was such a small offense, maybe I never even thought about it that much, but if I did any forgiving, I did it not so much for me and not so much for him but most of all for you. I want the fellowship restored, is what he's saying. I want you to be rejoined to the man. I want unity in the church. So don't let anybody say, "Well, we may be able to forgive him but, boy, Paul might not because after all he was the one offended."

Paul says, "No, it's done, all I want is you people to just get together. I just want the restoration." Whatever I may have forgiven I did it for your sakes. I want to set that aside. I want to make sure that man could be fully, immediately restored. And I give my forgiveness.

And then he adds, "In the presence of Christ." Paul lived his whole life very much aware that everything he did, everything he thought, everything he said Christ knew. And he said I live my whole life in the presence of Christ. I live my whole life in the sight of God. Down in verse 17 he closes that verse, "In the sight of God." Over in chapter 4 verse 2, he closes that verse, "In the sight of God." He was so overwhelmed by this realization that everything he did in his life was in the sight of God, in the presence of Christ. He even told Timothy one time when he was telling him to preach the Word, "Timothy, I am ordering you to do this in the presence of God and in the presence of Christ with that all pervasive omniscient God, aware of everything you do." Paul is saying I live my life realizing that Jesus Christ is present all the time and eagerly and anxiously am I forgiving this individual because I have been forgiven by the Christ and the God in whose presence I live. I want to please my God. I want to please my Lord. I eagerly forgive. And all my forgiveness is for your sake. God knows that. And he's affirming the integrity of that testimony that he did care about them, he did love them and whatever he did was for their sakes.

He was concerned that the church be restored, that unity come back, that the man be brought into fellowship. And that's what was on his heart, I believe, in verse 10, just open your arms, don't hold back on my account. If I've forgiven anything I've done it long ago for your sakes, I just want the church to be united. That's why forgiveness is important. Where it doesn't exist there is rift and fracture and discord and disharmony, bitterness, vengeance, that just tears a church up.

Forgive to deflect pride, forgive to show mercy, forgive to restore joy, to affirm love, to prove obedience and to restore fellowship. Lastly, forgive to thwart Satan.

We all know what Satan wants to do, tear up the church, create pride, destroy mercy, eliminate joy, love, obedience, fracture the fellowship. He wants sin. He wants...he wants sin to exist in the church. He wants sin to just run freely through the church and if the church is going to deal with sin, then he wants it dealt with harshly and without grace and without mercy and without joy and without forgiveness. He has all kinds of schemes. Look at verse 11, and Paul says, "We have to forgive in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan for we're not ignorant of his schemes."

When we don't forgive we fall into his trap. It hinders humility, mercy, joy, love, obedience, fellowship,

just tears up the church. He wants to produce animosity. He wants free-flowing sin and if people are going to try to deal with sin, then let them be hard and abusive and unforgiving and merciless and want to heap on the person an undo amount of harshness. That too will fracture the church. You can destroy a church a lot of ways. Libertinism has destroyed its share and so has legalism. Tolerance has destroyed its share and so has intolerance. A lack of dealing with sin has destroyed its share and a lack of forgiveness has too. Satan's got every imaginable angle on it, every corner is covered. He wants to drive people into sin and if they're confronted to drive them into despair he wants to take the sin against people and drive them into bitterness and self-pity. He wants to tear the church up. He goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, disguised as an angel of light coming in to deceive and his messengers are also angels of light. He wants to sift us like wheat, as he wanted to do with Peter, to destroy our faith if he can. We are not ignorant of his noemata, his designs, his devices, his plots, his wiles, his cunning craftiness and deceit as Ephesians 4:14 demonstrates it.

So, we've got to be very careful or this is an unimaginable and borders on a blasphemous thought, Satan will become the head of the church, delineating his will in his way in the life of the church through sin or a lack of forgiveness or both. And so Paul says forgiveness is crucial to the life of the church, even though the man sinned a heinous sin against the most significant person in the kingdom at that time, in terms of impact, the Apostle Paul. He must be forgiven. Such is to deflect pride, show mercy, restore joy, affirm love, prove obedience, restore fellowship and thwart Satan.

Folks, I'd like to belong to a church like that, wouldn't you? Where all that was true? Should be. A humble, merciful, joyful, loving, obedient, fellowshiping church where Satan had no place...wow...forgiveness can do that. It will do that.

Let me sum it up. Notice verse 5, forgiveness, first of all, verse 5, affects the one who forgives. That's what Paul is saying. Secondly, verses 6 through 8, it affects the one who is forgiven, that's what he's saying there. Finally in verses 9 to 11 it affects the whole church. And what does it do? It produces mercy, joy, love, fellowship, purity. That's why I say, the greatest thing one sinner can do for another is...what?...to forgive.

Father, we come to You this morning realizing the truth is clear, the message very obvious. Lord, all that is left is the test, are we obedient? Put us to the test, are we obedient? Do we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul? Are we willing to be obedient in all things? Are we willing to submit ourselves to Your laws and statutes as You asked of Your people of old and still ask? Are we willing to do the hard work of discipling sin and the joyful work of restoring the penitent sinner? O God, test us and then, Lord, grant us in our hearts the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control, all those components certainly must coexist with a forgiving heart. And may this fellowship be known as a fellowship of forgiving hearts where people who sin are confronted and people who repent are lovingly restored that we might be the true representative of your Son and our Savior in this world for it's in His name we pray. Amen.

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