

## THE CHURCH AS A FELLOWSHIP OF FORGIVENESS

### *SERIES: THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF GRACE AND PEACE*

by Doug Goins

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I use a diagnostic tool in premarital counseling called the Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis Test (TJTA).(1) It has 180 questions to assess personal attitudes, temperamental tendencies, and behavioral patterns. One of the first questions on the test is significant: "Am I, by nature, a forgiving person?" It is an important question when considering relationships. I want us to consider individually if we are forgiving, or if it is an area of difficulty for us.

A biblical view of relationships in the church defines us as a fellowship based on unconditional forgiveness extended to one another because of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. In our study of 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, we will examine this third hallmark of life in the body of Christ. Previously, we have focused on our universal identity in the church as a fellowship of suffering and comfort ([Discovery Paper #4630](#)), and then as a fellowship of transparency and vulnerability with one another ([Discovery Paper #4631](#)). In this three-part series we are answering the question, "What kind of church does God want us to be as we enter the new millennium?"

For the apostle Paul, forgiveness is a foundational issue. He writes out of his own gratitude that God had forgiven him through Jesus' death on the cross. In writing to his spiritual son, Timothy, Paul says, "...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all" (1 Tim 1:15b). Paul never takes for granted his own forgiveness in Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul quotes King David of Israel, another man who understood personal forgiveness (Romans 4:7-8):

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS  
DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,  
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.  
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD  
WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.

Paul writes to the Christians in Colossae regarding Jesus, "[God's] beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13b,14). Finally, Paul says in his letter to the church in Ephesus that as forgiven people we are to be graciously forgiving toward one another: "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). Paul's gospel message is centered in our forgiveness in Christ.

For anyone familiar with the Corinthians letters it is not shocking that this particular church had difficulty with forgiveness. It was not one of their strengths or even one of their interests. If they had taken the TJTA, their answer to the first question would have been, "No, we are not by nature forgiving people."

We will begin our study by reading Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 in *The Message*. Paul writes of a man who had been restricted from fellowship by the church leadership because of sin in his life, sin against the fellowship, and sin against the apostle Paul himself:

*Now, regarding the one who started all this--the person in question who caused all this pain--I want you to know that I am not the one injured in this as much as, with a few exceptions, all of you. So I don't want to*

*come down too hard. What the majority of you agreed to as punishment is punishment enough. Now is the time to forgive this man and help him back on his feet. If all you do is pour on the guilt, you could very well drown him in it. My counsel now is to pour on the love.*

*The focus of my letter wasn't on punishing the offender but on getting you to take responsibility for the health of the church. So if you forgive him, I forgive him. Don't think I'm carrying around a list of personal grudges. The fact is that I'm joining in with your forgiveness, as Christ is with us, guiding us. After all, we don't want to unwittingly give Satan an opening for yet more mischief--we're not oblivious to his sly ways!*  
(2)

Personally, I find that it is much easier for me to preach the gospel of forgiveness than it is for me to forgive. And if someone has sinned or injured a person I love, it is probably even more difficult for me to forgive than if they had sinned against me. As I studied this paragraph, I realized how much I need this urging and gentle rebuke from Paul's heart. He asks the Corinthians to forgive a man who sinned against them (unnamed in the text), and then to restore him back into fellowship.

There are four important principles in this little paragraph, and I will repeat them a number of times because they are so crucial. Firstly, the gospel of forgiveness takes sin seriously. Secondly, the gospel of forgiveness includes discipline and restoration. Thirdly, the gospel of forgiveness is expressed for the Lord's sake because of his concern about the process. Finally, the gospel of forgiveness rejects the satanic influence of an unforgiving spirit.

### **The gospel of forgiveness takes sin seriously**

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:5 that the gospel of forgiveness takes sin seriously:

**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 sin of the individual in question was serious. Paul uses a strong word, "sorrow," to describe the injury that resulted. Although we do not know many details about what occurred, there are several clues in the letter itself. On Paul's second visit to Corinth, the unscheduled "painful visit" (2:1, New International Version), there was a public meeting in which Paul tried to deal with the ongoing problems of sexual immorality in the church. A man, who Paul calls "the offender" in 7:12, publicly challenged the apostle's theology and his pastoral authority. There is a reference in 13:3 to someone demanding proof that Christ really was speaking through Paul on the issue. While this occurred in the public meeting, the leaders in the church apparently had done nothing to support Paul.

As we saw in the section preceding this, Paul chose to leave Corinth. From clues in this 2 Corinthian letter we know that he wrote them a severe letter, "a sorrowful letter," after that visit. That letter is not in the New Testament, but 2:1-4 indicates that his desire in writing was to avoid another painful encounter with them. Paul apparently had rebuked the leadership for remaining passive when he was publicly confronted. He challenged their obedience, their submission to apostolic authority, and he called them to show their loyalty by exercising church discipline on the individual who had challenged him. As Paul makes clear in 2:5, by rejecting apostolic authority, the man had sinned against the church community as a whole.

From verses 5-11 we see that the church leadership responded well to the severe letter, and they exercised discipline toward the individual. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:11-12, "For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you it was not for the sake of the offender, nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God." The leadership finally had taken the sin seriously, and the man had repented of his sin against them. He had asked forgiveness, but, like some churches today, the Corinthian church was one of extremes. At first they had done

nothing when Paul was publicly challenged, and then when Paul asked them to do something about it they responded with a vengeance. They meted out punishment to the extent that they lost sight of the redemptive goal of the disciplinary process.

### **The gospel of forgiveness includes discipleship and restoration**

In verses 6-8, Paul addresses the issue of balance. The gospel of forgiveness must include both discipline and restoration:

**Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.**

Paul urges the church with pastoral passion, but it is not an apostolic command. He is not bossing the Corinthians, but pleading with them to have spiritual sensitivity in every step of the process.

### **Spiritual sensitivity in exercising church discipline**

Verse 6 emphasizes that he wants spiritual concern, even in the discipline itself. He uses the word "punishment," referring to a disciplinary action with which the entire body of believers had been involved. Although we do not know what action was taken against the man, perhaps he had been excluded from the worship life of the church for a period of time. Whatever happened, Paul says it has been enough, and now the church needs spiritual sensitivity in forgiveness and restoration.

### **Spiritual sensitivity in forgiveness and restoration**

At the end of verse 7, Paul writes of the man's sorrow, which shows that the church discipline had been effective. The man had repented of sin, and now Paul's desire is that the church not be so severe that he is demoralized. If the offender's remorse and sense of failure overwhelmed him, the danger would be that he might not accept God's forgiveness or forgive himself for his sin against the fellowship. So there is strong language about the church being proactive in the process of restoring the man. Paul wants them to extend their own forgiveness to encourage and comfort the man. As Peterson paraphrases it, "help him back on his feet."

Paul uses an uncommon Greek word for "forgive" in this paragraph. It is not the word in the New Testament that means to forgive in response to a request for forgiveness. Appropriately, when we are asked to forgive, we are called to respond with forgiveness. But this word means to forgive even before we are asked for forgiveness. It literally means to give freely, to forgive on the basis of being gracious toward the person. Behind the vocabulary that Paul uses is his overwhelming awareness of God's grace in his own life, the forgiveness we received when God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Paul writes to the Romans, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Forgiveness was extended through the cross before we even knew to ask for it, while we were still rebellious towards God. God said to us in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, "I forgive you." Jesus told his disciples, "...freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

### **Spiritual sensitivity in loving reaffirmation**

Verse 8 takes the concern about spiritual sensitivity in loving reaffirmation a step further. Paul says, "Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him." Paul's call for this community confirmation of love may have been a request for a formal act by the congregation to reinstate the offender to the fellowship of the church by assuring him publicly of their loving acceptance. It was to be done without suspicion or mistrust, without a wait-and-see attitude. Any other response is unloving. That is why Peterson paraphrases it, "pour on the love." If the Corinthians are worried about the man being overwhelmed by sorrow, Paul urges them to overwhelm him with forgiving, accepting love.

The Corinthian church had as much difficulty being loving as being forgiving. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, a beautiful exposition of love, because they did not understand the essence of love. He says about forgiving love, "Love is patient, love is kind...does not take into account a wrong suffered...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:4a,5b,7).

The gospel of forgiveness takes sin seriously; it expresses spiritual sensitivity in exercising discipline, forgiveness and restoration; and it expresses loving reaffirmation of relationship.

Galatians 6:1-5 summarizes 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 in terms of the gospel of forgiveness. Paul writes, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual [i.e., you who are spiritually sensitive] restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness [not with harshness], each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens [invest physically, emotionally, relationally in the process of helping them back on their feet] and thus fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself [if someone thinks they are spiritually superior they are deluded; in reality, they are nothing but a forgiven sinner]. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load [when we are clear who we are in terms of our own forgiveness in Christ, then we can extend forgiveness to one another]."

I am grateful that I am part of a church family that understands this dynamic. Two times come to mind of my failure as a friend, a brother, and a pastor. One time was an issue of explosive anger when I blew up at a brother in Christ. I was certain I was right, that my position somehow justified the anger. It took awhile for me to be convinced of my sin toward my brother, and I am thankful for people who gently and firmly confronted me, and then walked with me through the process of restoring the damaged relationship. Another time I was lovingly confronted on taking shortcuts in my ministry. There was embarrassment and pain in admitting the truth, but I am grateful for the men who cared about sin and took the matter seriously. Their willingness to walk with me as I sorted out issues before the Lord restored me to relationship and ministry.

**The gospel of forgiveness is expressed for the Lord's sake**

There are two more important principles in the last three verses of this section. In verses 9 and 10, the gospel of forgiveness is expressed for the Lord's sake. In both of these verses, the Lord Jesus is central:

**For to this end also I wrote that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.**

The issue is obedience to Jesus Christ.

**But whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ,**

Jesus cares and is involved in the process of forgiveness and restoration.

Verse 9 emphasizes our community responsibility to one another. Each one of us is called individually and then collectively as the body to obey Jesus Christ in living as a fellowship of forgiveness. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 18:15-17, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED**. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

The goal was stated in the first verse: "...if he listens to you, you have won your brother." Forgiveness is the goal of discipline, whether it is on a one-on-one level, the small-group level, a ministry setting, or in the context of the whole church. Paul says he wants to put the Corinthians to the test. For us, the test, or the proof, is how we respond to tough love and its

application as expressed in Paul's letters. Again, I am grateful that our church is not one that has settled for what J.I. Packer calls "hot-tub religion," where we care more about the warm, soothing water of good feelings than encouraging each other to obedience. It has been a place where truth is spoken and confrontation takes place with the commitment to restoring people to fellowship.

### **Our own standing as forgiven in Christ**

This gospel of forgiveness expresses spiritual sensitivity toward our own standing as forgiven in Christ: "But whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything" (verse 10). Paul downplays his own forgiveness as the main focus; rather, he did it for the Corinthians' sakes in the presence of Christ. He offers his own forgiveness with the acute sense of how deeply the Lord cares about it and is actively involved in the process. According to Galatians 6:2, as we enter into this, we are fulfilling the law of Christ. He is the one who laid it down.

Paul's personal forgiveness of the individual who caused him pain provides an important model both for the Corinthians and for us today. Paul does not just preach forgiveness, he forgives. This verse brings to mind Jesus' important model of prayer: "...forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). If we ask God to forgive our sins, we ask because we are willing to forgive anyone who sins against us. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, told of a man who once commented to him with great pride, "I never forgive." Wesley responded with a quick wit, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin."

### **The gospel of forgiveness rejects an unforgiving spirit**

The final principle, in verse 11, is that the gospel of forgiveness rejects the satanic influence of an unforgiving spirit. Paul says that he has forgiven the offender, and he did it for the Corinthians' sakes in the presence of Christ,

**...in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.**

The "us" includes the apostle himself, the man who had sinned against him, and the entire church in Corinth. It points out the fact that Satan can have inroads in these areas if we are not aware of how he functions. Our best defense against Satan is knowing his offense, his purposes, and his methodology.

There are two warnings for us in this section. Firstly, Satan loves it when churches and individuals do not know how to discipline. If we are focused on discipline as vengeance rather than loving correction and redemption, it can result in Satan gaining a foothold in the life of the person being disciplined by overwhelming him or her "with excessive sorrow." It can lead to a person's alienation from the community, and perhaps even from their own faith in Jesus Christ. Satan desires to undermine faith and smother the grace of God in individual families, relationships and churches.

Secondly, there is a warning for us as a congregation as well. Satan can take advantage of a harsh, legalistic, unforgiving spirit. It will drive away weaker people when they sense that a church has that attitude, and will sow division and dissension in the church itself. A man told me of his friend who is a pastor in a church that is splitting over an issue of discipline, whether the disciplinary act issued has been too harsh or too soft. The pastor says he feels like he is being torn down the middle because there are people he loves on both sides of the issue. Legalism will result in the unity of the body of Christ being torn apart.

Paul counsels the Ephesians, "...SPEAK TRUTH, EACH ONE of you, WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.... Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:25-27, 29). Our only chance of speaking gracious and wholesome words, words of forgiveness, is if we have experienced the grace of God in our own lives

through our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It is the grace of God that enables us to live as a fellowship of forgiveness. We express forgiveness for the Lord's sake out of a concern and responsibility for our community life, and we express it out of an awareness of our own standing as forgiven people. The gospel of forgiveness rejects the satanic influence of an unforgiving spirit.

A few years ago, I struggled to forgive a brother in our body who had sinned against me in a public setting. From my perspective, it betrayed almost 20 years of friendship and ministry together. I felt personally attacked, mistrusted and disrespected. I struggled between understanding what was true, what God wanted me to hear, and the overwhelming sense of my own hurt, resentment, bitterness and anger toward the man. I was tempted to discredit him and fight back. I didn't want to let him off the hook. I remember the painful process of God bringing me to a place of forgiving him unconditionally. Freedom came when I embraced God's call to forgive the man from my heart, whether or not he ever understood or had a desire to work out the relationship. Later, God was gracious to give us an opportunity to work through some of the issues and experience a renewed relationship. Again, I was thankful to be surrounded by godly people who pointed me toward the God of forgiveness, and helped give me spiritual objectivity and sensitivity in making the relationship right.

The gospel of forgiveness takes sin seriously. The gospel of forgiveness includes a sensitivity to discipline, to forgiveness, to restoration, and to loving reaffirmation. It is expressed for the Lord's sake, out of our love for the community, and a clear awareness that we are forgiven in Christ. Also, the gospel of forgiveness rejects the satanic influence of an unforgiving spirit that divides us. It takes us back to focusing on the cross of Christ.

The Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1950's was Dag Hammarskjold, a devout Christian. In his book, *Markings*, he wrote, "How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent. For him who looks toward the future, the manger is situated on Golgotha and the cross has already been raised in Bethlehem." (3)

It is appropriate to rehearse the message of the cross at this season of Christmas. Its message is that we can be free in relationships. We are free from the bondage to sin so that we can live in freedom with one another. We can be free to speak the truth to each other in Christ, free to forgive one another in Christ, free of suspicion and mistrust of one another, to live hopefully and optimistically toward one another in the body. We can live out of our new nature in Christ and can answer the question, "Yes, in Christ, I am by nature a forgiving person."

We need to apply this message personally, maybe to a very difficult relationship. Jesus said that God can bring to mind the need for reconciliation, even while sitting in church: "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24). The first thing we must do is ask God to bring to mind someone whose forgiveness we need to seek, or whom we need to graciously forgive. Then we must go and be reconciled. Imagine healing relationships as we move into the new millennium, experiencing our churches as fellowships of forgiveness. If we have been sinned against or have sinned against somebody else, God gives us the power to make it right.

#### **NOTES:**

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2. Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message*. © 1993, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 371.
3. From *Markings*, translated by Leif Sjoberg and W.H. Auden. © 1964 by Alfred A. Knopf Inc., and Faber and Faber, Ltd.

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2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Third message

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