

The awkward tension of pastoral ministry \* 2 Corinthians 1:16-2:4  
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Read 2 Corinthians 1:16-18, 23-24; 2:1-4

As I read this part of Paul's letter, I couldn't help but think of the awkward tension of pastoral ministry.

On one hand, pastors have a responsibility to hold their people accountable before God and to say the tough things that (need to be said) will help to get them back on track. (that people don't want to hear)

On the other hand, pastors are to shepherd their flock with love and grace, gently expressing the forgiveness of God to their people.

On one hand, pastors hold a position of authority; on the other, our position is to serve.

It's an awkward pastoral tension and one that I know all too well. And I know that Paul knew it too.

This part of 2 Corinthians - 1:15 to about 2:4 - recounts a very specific episode in Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church. Paul had founded the church at Corinth (Acts 18) and he continued to minister to them as he travelled the ancient Mediterranean world.

According to 2 Corinthians 1:16, he was traveling through to Macedonia and planned to visit Corinth both on the way there and on the way back, but evidently, word got to Paul that there was some serious sin going on in the Corinthian church.

Now we don't know for sure what was happening, but again, remember back to season 1 of Keeping up with the Corinthians, that there were people in Corinth who were ok with a father and a son sleeping with the mother at the same time. Messed up, right? In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to them to say – stop it! – and apparently, something even worse had happened, because instead of visiting in person, Paul cancelled his visits and wrote another letter to say – STOP IT!!

Now, in the sovereignty of God, that letter has been lost to time. And I'm not really surprised. I mean, what kind of makes copies of a letter that says 'you should stop letting guys sleep with their moms and worse' and circulates that around? Nobody, right? So that letter is lost to time but Paul tells us about it here. 2 Corinthians 2, specifically 4 says -

2 Corinthians 2 - 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you (2Co 1:15-4 NIV).

That's the tension I think at the heart of pastoral ministry.

Pastors need to say things that people don't want to hear. Pastors need to speak truth into dark situations to pull people back from the brink of disaster.

But it gives us no pleasure to do so. First, it grieves us that we have to say something in the first place for our hope is that our people are all striving to live God honouring lives. Second, it hurts to have to say to someone we love – 'you're doing wrong and you gotta stop.' And third, there's the awkward

awareness that this person might just say 'you can't tell me what to do' and go on doing their own thing. Great distress and anguish of heart with many tears just about sums it up.

But look at the prime motivation for this as Paul puts it in verse 4 – I wrote to you to let you know the depth of my love for you.

Love is not letting a person go on hurting themselves; it's gently and carefully and graciously calling a person back to safety, not from a place of superiority, but of love and humility and genuine concern.

And that's the balance that I try to keep, the goal that I strive for.

Thankfully, we haven't had any real spectacular sins at Langford, but we all need to be reminded from time to time to stay active in our faith, to think carefully about our priorities and to refocus on God. That may mean sometimes that I'm going to say things that you don't want to hear. That may mean that I need to challenge your worldview or the status quo.

But know this – I am not doing it to cause anyone pain. And don't worry – I'm not telling you all this so that I can give it to you with both barrels a few weeks down the road – this just came up in the flow of 2 Corinthians.

But it's a neat chance for me to be able to say – I feel for all of you. I mourn when you mourn. I celebrate when you celebrate. I want the absolute best that God has for you and I don't want any of us to live anything less than the abundant, holy life that God has prepared for us. And so I will maintain that balance of challenge and encouragement, of reproof and comfort because that's my job.

If this was just a social club, then it wouldn't be my place to hold you to a higher ethical standard would it? And there are some people who want just that from a church – I come, pay my offering, you just make me feel good about myself and then say 'go in peace' – but that's not really a church. The church is the family of God, a group of fallible people striving together to follow Jesus faithfully, iron sharpening iron. And so I'm going to keep pointing us back to this – 2 Corinthians 1:21 –

21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,  
22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

You are treasured by God. He has anointed you, claimed you and promised you eternity. We don't earn that eternity by our works, but because we have it guaranteed to us, we want to live a life that is consistent with the Kingdom of God and honouring to God. I'm going to do all I can to get you ready.