

Confront, repent, forgive * 2 Corinthians 2:5-7

April 30, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Today's episode is actually a call back to something that happened in season one of Keeping up with the Corinthians. A man was sleeping with his mother-in-law and all the Corinthian Christians seem to have been ok with it. Paul on the other hand knew that it was NOT OK and so in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 he tells them 'Church, YOU HAVE TO DEAL WITH THIS. You have to confront this man with his sin and if he won't turn from it, you have to kick him out of your fellowship.'

Now, here in 2 Corinthians 2, we find out what happened to that man, and it's actually a really neat chance for us to think about sin in the Church. What do we do when one of us sins? Do we just ignore it and hope it goes away? Do we turn a blind eye and say 'oh well, nobody's perfect?' Do we kick 'em out and never talk to them again? What do we do as church when one of us sins?

I want to use this episode in the Corinthian letters to answer that question and I really think you can sum it up in three words – confront, repent, forgive. Those three words characterize the best case scenario that Paul describes here and I think that we need to carefully and humbly and intentionally apply them when major sins arise in the church.

Let me show you what I mean.

As you know, there was some spectacular sin going on in the Corinthian church and nobody in the church seems to have cared. Maybe they misunderstood the 'judge not lest ye be judged' thing; maybe they just didn't want to deal with it. But for some reason, they put up with a man and his mother-in-law tied up in some pretty significant sin.

And so Paul wrote to them in 1 Corinthians to say – 'Look, you can't let this stand. You have to confront this sin.'

And so there it was – would the Corinthian church call sin a sin and hold these people accountable for it?

Well, as it turns out they did – they confronted the man with his sin and called him to turn away from it. (now – quick aside – Paul doesn't seem to address the mother-in-law – it's just the man – my guess is that that's because the woman was outside of the church and so he had no authority to tell her what to do. The man though claimed to be a Christian and so he could be held accountable). And they went to him and said 'this is sin!'

Well, now the ball is in his court. What's he going to do? Listen humbly to these convicting words or double down and harden his heart and keep on doing what he wants to do?

That's a big question and one that we need think about. Nobody likes being told they're doing wrong – and when that happens it's easy to get defensive and put up a barrier.

But from God's point of view, we need that intervention. We need somebody to come alongside and say 'buddy, you're swerving off the road here.' We need to acknowledge the risk that this person is taking, confronting our sin, humble ourselves before God and turn from it. We need to repent. We need to be willing ourselves to call a sin a sin.

The church is not made up of sinless people – St Augustine used to say ‘the church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints’ – but we are a forgiven people who should want nothing to do with sin. So if we DO sin, we need someone to hold us accountable so that we can humbly repent.

James put it like this over in James 5 - 19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins (Jam 5:19-20 NIV).

Now again, best case scenario – that happened in Corinth. The man was willing to listen to his brothers and sisters, his eyes were opened to the sinful reality of the situation and he repented. He turned his back on that sin and renewed his desire to follow Jesus.

Well, now the ball’s back in the church’s court. What are they going to do? You’ve got a sinner here who’s got some real dirty laundry – do you let him back in? Do you make an example of him so people won’t follow his lead? Do you put all sorts of restrictions on what he can do and subconsciously shun him for what he had done?

Well, here’s what Paul says – verse 7 of chapter 2¹ –

Forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Reaffirm your love for him.

Forgive him. Comfort him. Reaffirm your love for him.

Paul’s focused in on something really important here – the way that the church treats sinners should be the same way that God treats sinners. If this man has truly repented and turned his back on this sin, then it is paid for by the death of Christ on the Cross. God no longer holds it against him. On the basis of what Jesus did, He is forgiven in God’s eyes. He should be forgiven in our eyes too. The church should forgive him just as God forgave us.

But the church hasn’t always done that, has it? I don’t know about Langford specifically but I’m sure that there have been plenty of unwed moms who came to Christ and still got shunned by the church. I’m sure that there are many drug addicts and alcoholics who gave it up to follow Jesus and got nothing but contempt at the front door of the church. And what does that do in that person’s mind? It makes them question whether GOD forgives them if God’s people won’t.

But Paul says here – forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow – you reaffirm your love for him so that he can tangibly feel God’s forgiving love.

When there is sin in the church, we need to gently and humbly confront that sin, watch for repentance and then practice the same radical forgiveness that Jesus does when it comes. Confront, repent, forgive.

So, let’s just quickly run it through a case study here. Heaven forbid, but imagine if someone here at Langford starting having an affair with another person. What would we do? Turn a blind eye? Hope it resolves itself? That’s not loving. To the person, or to the spouse. It’s certainly not honouring to God. And so as a church, we would need to gently and humbly confront that person with their sin.

Having put that before them then, we would wait to see how they respond. If they keep up with it, we keep praying for them and at some point, we would have to start talking about asking this person not to come to church on Sundays if they're going to ignore God Mondays Tuesdays and Wednesdays... BUT best case scenario – they hear our concern and recognize their sin and turn from it and repent.

Well then, it's up to us to forgive them. If they have turned from that sin then God has forgiven them. And we need to show it through our love. We need to build them back up and help them to walk straight, all the while knowing that next time, it could be us who needs that gentle rebuke.ⁱⁱ

Confront, repent, forgive – that's the way of the Church.

ⁱ 5 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent--not to put it too severely.

6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.

7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

9 The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

10 If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,

11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

(2Co 2:5-11 NIV).

ⁱⁱ NIV Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Gal 6:1 NIV).