

To Let You Know My Love For You
2 Corinthians 1:23 – 2:13

Turn to 2 Corinthians 1 please. The end of 2 Corinthians 1. This is a sermon about loving the church. Our text today does not *teach* about love. This part of 2 Corinthians is a kind of *love letter*, the apostle Paul showing and explaining his love for the Corinthian church, and he has to explain it because they do not love him back.

At the end of 2:4 Paul writes that he wrote “*to let you know the depth of my love for you.*” Our text today has three separate paragraphs, but that theme holds the three together. Some in that church do not like Paul, and he’s writing to let them know the depth of his love for them.

There’s a bit of a story going on between Paul and the Corinthian church, and I will tell that again. Paul made a quick visit to Corinth, the second time he’d been there, and then he left, and when he left he said he would go through Macedonia, and then he’d come back to Corinth fairly soon again.

But after Paul left Corinth, that second visit, he changed his mind about going back quickly. The second visit had not gone well, and he decided to send a stern letter to them instead. So he sent Titus to carry a severe letter. That Paul sent a letter instead of coming, as he said he would, was used against him in Corinth. “You can’t trust Paul, he does not love us or care for us.”

First Paragraph: Paul’s Reasons for the Letter instead of the 3rd Visit – 2 Cor 1:23 – 2:4

1:23-2:1 – 1st Reason – to Spare them. *I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. ²¹ So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.*

Paul postponed his third visit to spare the Corinthians. It was for their good, it was to protect the Corinthians that he did not return.

2 Cor 13:2 – *I already gave you a warning when I was with you a second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.*

Paul’s second visit did not go well. More on that later. As he ended that visit, he said, *On my return, I will not spare those who sinned earlier, or any of the others (who need confronting).*

Paul has not changed his mind about that. On his third visit, he will not spare them. But after he left, he decided he could not quickly go back like that. Paul knew he had to go back, and he knew that then he could not spare them. But not so soon.

1:23-2:1 - *I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.* ²⁴ *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.* 2 ¹ *So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.*

Understand that for Paul, both sparing them, and not sparing them, come from the same love for them, and his great desire to see that church strong in Christ. The goal is not to spare them, nor is the goal to not spare them, rather the goal of love was to see that church stand firm in Christ.

For Paul, that goal meant spare them now, and later do not spare them. Both choices from his love for them, and his desire that those believers stand firm in Christ.

2:2-3 2nd Reason to not Visit – If I make you sad, who will make me glad? - *For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?* ³ *I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.*

It will be hard on them when Paul does not spare them. He will confront, and will not back up. They will be distressed, they will be grieved. And if the Corinthians are distressed and grieved, who will cheer Paul up? He can only be cheered up by them.

So he wrote a severe letter, to get some of the painful work done before he actually got there, so the 3rd visit would not be so hard, so that there would be some joy in Corinth to comfort Paul.

2:4 3rd Reason for the Letter instead of Visit – So they would know his love for them - *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.*

Paul was not having a good time with that church. Great distress. Anguish of heart. Many tears. Do you think Paul exaggerates here? I doubt it. “How you doing today, Paul?” “Great distress today, anguish of heart and many tears today. How you doing today?” What to do about that church, and writing that stern letter to the church, tied his soul in knots.

Paul wrote so they would know how much he loved them. I don’t know how exactly the letter showed that, but that was his motive. He was not sure they knew how much he loved them, so he sent the letter instead of making the 3rd visit, to let them know the depth of his love.

The Corinthians were a worldly, immoral, and rebellious church. Paul loved them with all his heart. Are there now worldly and immoral and rebellious churches? Yes. It is a problem, but it is not new. It is an old problem. Do we love such churches? Usually not. Did Paul love such? Yes.

Do you think Paul loved the worldly and immoral and rebellious Corinthian church more than Christ loved the Corinthian church? Not a chance. Paul embodied Christ’s love for that church.

Christ poured his love into Paul, that's where Paul got it. Are those churches as bad as we think? Yes, they are that bad, Christ would agree on that. But not outside his great and distressed love.

Second paragraph: Forgiving the Offender – 2:5-11

Some more of the Corinthian story. From reading 2 Corinthians we learn that during that short second visit, someone in the Corinthian church openly tore Paul down. Some kind of severe accusations. That still happens in church meetings. It is not new.

The rest of the church did not defend Paul. Paul did not retaliate. The bigger problem was not the offender, but the church's silence. Paul did not confront, he seems to have let it happen. He left them saying he would not spare them when he returned.

This matter was a significant part of the severe letter, which we do not have. They needed to deal with this before he returned. Later, in 2 Cor 7:12, he writes about someone who injured another person, and someone who was injured, in connection with this letter. Because here in chap 2 Paul speaks of his forgiving someone, we assume he was the one injured by another person there.

2:5 The Real Issue not Personal - *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.*

Paul's first line about this difficult matter refused to make the real issue between Paul and the offender, the one who injured him. That's what they expected, but Paul down-played it. Did not ignore, *he has not so much grieved me*, as changed the direction. The real concern here is that this event damaged the whole church.

2:6-8 Enough Punishment, now Love - *The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. 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.*

When the Corinthian church got the letter, they did the right thing, they went after the offender, the one who injured Paul. They punished him. Details not known, I will not speculate.

Paul did not object, apparently something needed to happen, but now it is enough. Now be good to this person. Forgive the offender, comfort this person, show your love for this person.

2:9 Another Reason for the Letter - *Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.* That severe letter that we don't have was an obedience test for the church. And they passed the test!

2:10-11 I have Forgiven this Person - *Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. 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.*

Did this injuring person confess to Paul and ask for Paul's kindness? Not likely. "If there was anything to forgive" – there was something for Paul himself to forgive, the Corinthians all knew that, but again Paul downplayed it.

He very much wanted that church to be strong in Christ, that was Paul's real goal. Paul kept that wider view in mind. His personal satisfaction was not a big player. The important thing was the Corinthian church stop supporting this person, that's what really needed to happen, and it had.

What there was for Paul to forgive, he had already done. He wants the Corinthian church to forgive the person, and if they forgive him then Paul forgives him.

"If you don't forgive and comfort and affirm love," Paul tells them, "we will lose the offender to Satan. Satan would like that, he wants to take your obedience to that result. We know this," says Paul, "so forgive the person, comfort, and show love."

3rd paragraph – To Preach the Gospel, or not to Preach? 2:12-13

Paul wrote this severe letter while in Ephesus. He sent it to Corinth with Titus. Titus would read them the letter, explain it, and guide the Corinthians toward the right response to the letter.

Then Titus would travel north through Macedonia, then head around east to Troas. Paul for his part would go north from Ephesus to preach the gospel in Troas, and meet Titus there. Then Titus would tell Paul how the Corinthians had responded to Paul's stern letter.

Let's read what happened: (2:12-13) *Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.*

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. He was called and sent to proclaim Christ where the gospel had not been preached. Paul had gone to Troas to do just this, and it was going well. *I found that the Lord had opened a door for me* (v12b). That means that Jews and Gentiles were coming to faith, they were turning to Christ.

What happens then I can hardly explain, only report what Paul reports. Paul had great internal distress in the middle of this successful evangelism. The Lord himself had opened the door in Troas for him to preach there! Did you get that?

But Paul had no peace of mind, because Titus had not gotten to Troas, so Paul did not know how the Corinthians had responded to his letter. In 11:28 Paul will write that more than all his other painful troubles was that he "faced daily the pressure of his concern for all the churches."

Paul assumes his choice is right, that his anxious mind from his concern for that church meant God was okay this him leave his preaching to go find Titus.

I get the feeling that God would have been fine either way on this. Paul does not say God told him to go find Troas. Paul went because he could not stand the uncertainty.

He does not seem to have agonized at all about the Lord's will. Should Paul stay and continue successful evangelism? Does the Lord tell him to go to Troas? Our Scripture has no interest in these questions, no interest in that topic.

Paul assumed he was free to stay and preach, and he was free to leave to find out about the Corinthian church from Titus. He went to find Titus because he had no peace of mind. This was Paul's love for a church that was worldly, immoral, and rebellious.

Back to chapter 2, to preach or not to preach. *Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.*

Paul the evangelist puts pastors like me to shame. His love for the churches, to see them stand firm in Christ, and how devoted he was to that. I pray that God will make me more like Paul.

Be Happy?? There is a persistent notion around that if we trust and obey Christ we'll be happy and at rest. Not so for Paul. 1:8 – *we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.* 2:4 – *I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears.* 2:13 – *[In Troas] I had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there.*

BUT: At no point in 2 Corinthians does Paul sound like he feels sorry for himself. Not a speck of self-pity in this letter. But just as Christ had many sorrows and discouraging times, so also Paul.

So this idea that: IF we have times of despair and distress and anguish of heart, THEN we are not trusting the Lord because the Holy Spirit does not want us to feel like that, well, brothers and sisters, lose that logic. Don't feel guilty about what's normal and healthy.

Paul loved the Lord, and trusted the Lord, and served the Lord, and worked many signs and miracles, and was often filled with the Spirit. And for him, times of despair and distress and tears and anguish of heart and no peace of mind, those were all part of serving Christ.

Love the Church - This sermon is about love, how a servant of Christ loves the church. To spare sinning believers, or not to spare them? Both are acceptable. What builds up the church's faith and obedience? Should we forgive an offender? What's good for the church and the offender?

Preach the gospel? Or not preach the gospel? In this story, Paul's concern for an established church comes before preaching the gospel. To let the church know the depth of Christ's love for them. And for us. This is how Paul lived out Christ's love for a church that was worldly, immoral, and rebellious. Amen.

Father in heaven, you have given us love for your Son Jesus, and you've given us love for each other. May our love increase still more and more, in the kind of wisdom and knowledge we have read about today. Thank you for putting your love for churches in Paul. We ask that the God who calls us will be faithful to actually increase our love, here in this church. Help us imitate Paul as he imitated Christ. And Father, thank you for how much you love the churches, even wayward and worldly churches that distress you. That is good news for us all. Amen.