

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

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2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11 (NIV)

“I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 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. 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. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 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, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

The title for today’s message is “Tough and Tender.” I was influenced in giving this title by the fact that in the LA Times this week there was a preview of a Barbara Walters program this Monday night on television where she is interviewing—of the A Team—Mr. T. She said to Mr. T., “What does the ‘T’ in your name stand for?” He said, “It stands for tough and tender.” And I

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

thought, “Well, that describes exactly what Paul is talking about in the passage of Scripture for this week. He’s being tough and tender.”

There was a problem in the Corinthian church. And thank the Lord, by the way, for problems.

Do you realize that almost all the letters that Paul wrote were in response to problems? If there had been no problems we’d have very few of his letters. That’s the same thing with our life.

God’s bringing good things out of our problems that we’ll later look back upon and say, “Thank God we had that problem.”

There had been a discipline problem of some kind in the Corinthian church. A majority of the membership at Paul’s urging had inflicted discipline upon that member. No doubt it was an excommunication of that member or an expulsion of that member from worship until such time as they had repented. We’re not exactly sure who the one disciplined is. There are some who feel that the person being referred to in 2 Corinthians 2 is the one that Paul talks of in 1 Corinthians 5, the one who had been living with his father’s wife. And the church had been so proud of its liberality and tolerance that it had not even disciplined him. There are others who say, “No, Paul wrote a severe letter to the Corinthian church and made a painful visit. It must have been after the writing of 1 Corinthians and refer to a prominent member of the Corinthian church who had been rebellious against both his authority and his apostolic teaching. Paul had made a visit and sent a letter to try to get that person to receive God’s authority and God’s Word. The person had been rebellious against it. The church had finally decided to side with Paul and discipline him. Now that person is repentant and wants back into the church. And Paul is saying, “If he’s truly repentant, then it’s time to forgive.”

It could take an hour to link together all of the evidence that would support either the 1 Corinthian 5 person or this other rebellious person. But I’m not so sure you’re here this morning

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

to have some kind of rational explanation or debate as to what exactly the problem Paul's referring to in 2 Corinthians 2 is. So I'm not going to try to solve it, since more learned persons than myself are still debating the issue. We'll just simply say that there was a person in the Corinthian church that had been disciplined. Now he had responded to that discipline by repenting. Some in the church had said, "Let him suffer longer, he hasn't repented enough yet." Paul is writing this letter to say to them, "It's time, if he has repented, to bring him back into the full fellowship of the church."

This passage of Scripture gives rise to some crucial questions that I think are relevant for us right now. I want to surface the critical issues for us that arise out of the passage and the context of the problem that Paul's dealing with.

The three questions I put before you this morning are these:

I. Why do Christians sometimes abandon godly leaders?

That is an underlying issue here at Corinth. Paul, the godly leader, the apostle, the one under whose ministry most had come to their faith in Christ. Many over a course of time abandoned his leadership and followed what he calls later in this letter "super-apostles" They departed not only from him, which was of small consequence, they departed from the doctrine of faith in Christ which he preached. And that was of large consequence. Why is it that sometimes the body of Christ and Christians abandon godly leaders and begin following leaders that turn out to be flakes, or snowballs, whichever might be the case? Some answers arise from both this passage, from the two Corinthian letters, and from the totality of the Scripture.

A. One principle—and I think there are at least four that explain this abandonment of godly leaders—the first principle: The devil is always at work sowing tares, sowing weeds. That's what Jesus says in Matthew 13. The devil is a psychotic person, he's mentally ill. No one in their right

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

mind would take a bag full of weed seed and sow it through some farmer's soil. You'd have to be criminal or sick, and the devil is both. Jesus is telling us that it is the purpose of the enemy within the church to sow weeds. Therefore the devil's top priority is to destroy the leadership of the church. He will try to corrupt the leadership from within or subvert it from without. First Timothy 4:1 says, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons."

You know me well enough to know I am not the kind of person that looks for the devil personally under every bed. So I'm not trying to scapegoat and say all problems are the direct result of personal instigation of the devil. But I think we are wise enough to recognize that behind every human problem the devil is at work seeking to exploit it for his advantage. There are occasions when indeed the devil, working through human personalities, does deceive.

B. The second reason why people abandon godly leaders: There is a human desire to find leaders and teachers who tell us what we want to hear or speak to us in the way we want to hear it, ways that we ourselves would like to be affirmed, gospels that we would like to hear preached that seem to satisfy us and what our desires may be. Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3, "The time will come when persons will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." That is certainly a problem at Corinth and it's a contemporary problem as well. Sometimes even, it's not what a false teacher is saying that we want to hear, it may even be that we won't hear a message unless it is said in a particular kind of way. Sometimes we abandon godly and wise teaching and counsel because the way it comes to us is not a way that we esteem to be spiritual. I reflect back upon my early years as a Christian and my own preparation for the ministry. I literally thought there were three words that described good preaching. And unless

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

you reflected these three words in your preaching, you would not preach in an anointed way. The three words were these: “high,” “loud,” and “fast.” If a preacher were preaching to me and he were not high, loud, and fast, I just said, “He’s dead. He’s got no anointing”. Everybody knows that an anointed preacher starts in a high voice, gets louder as he goes on and speaks faster the more anointed he gets. There’s still some of that in me, by the way. I never believed it was possible to talk to people in a normal tone of voice. I thought when you got behind the pulpit you had to put on the pulpit tone. People have got to know that you’ve got authority, so there’s a special tone of voice that goes with standing behind this microphone. I had a rough time listening to people who just “talked” to me from the pulpit. I thought, “They’re not preaching, they’re talking.”

I had to go filter through some of that. Some of the things God has most shared in my heart have been through people who have said it to me in a way that I wasn’t accustomed to. God can work through high, loud, and fast. And He can—I guess—work through low, slow, and soft.

C. The third reason why sometimes we abandon godly leaders is the pull of others. We’re in a group that pulls away, that begins to criticize someone who really does have godly character and anointing. This is the problem at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1, they’re saying, “*Ego de eimi...Cephas...ego de eimi...Paul...ego de eimi...Apollos*”; “I am of...I am of...I am of.” Sometimes those *ego* needs clump together in a group and we’re pulled away because of the influence of others upon us.

D. Maybe a fourth reason why people abandon godly leaders is their failure to be sufficiently grounded in the faith. The Berean church in Acts 17 avoided this problem because they searched the Scriptures to see whether or not what the apostle was telling them was true. So we also ought to carefully assess any teaching of God’s Word.

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

We must take this problem of authority seriously in our lives. Because we must all come to grips with who our authority is. Is our authority from within ourselves? Is it from what others tell us? Or is it from tradition? Or is it from the Word of God? If there are those who come to us who are godly in their leadership and they declare to us the Word of God, then we have no reason for abandoning that counsel and that ministry.

There's a story told of an officer in the Navy who had always dreamed of commanding his own battleship. He finally achieved his lifelong dream and was given the commission of captaining the newest and proudest ship in the fleet. One stormy night, as his ship plowed through the sea, the captain was on duty at the bridge when off on portside he noticed a strange light rapidly closing in on them. He immediately ordered the signalman to flash the craft this message, "Alter your course ten degrees to the south." Almost immediately, the reply came back, "Alter your course ten degrees to the north." Determined that his ship would take a back seat to no other, the captain snapped out an order to be sent, "Alter your course ten degrees. I am the captain!" Back came the response, "Alter your course ten degrees. I am seaman third class Jones." Now infuriated, the captain grabbed the signal light and with his own hands fired off, "Alter your course. I am a battleship." Back came the response, "Alter your course, I am a lighthouse." All courses must be altered to God's Word. That is the principle Paul is contending for at Corinth. Sometimes when you read Paul, doesn't he sound a little argumentative? What is so important to defend? His authority...how important is that? Is he on an ego trip or what? No, he's telling people, "You've got to get back to the lighthouse. You've got to alter your ways and conform to God's ways. If you don't, you're abandoning it and you're going to shipwreck in your faith."

II. The second question which arises out of this passage is: How do you correct a wrong?

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

Obviously, Paul is concerned to correct a wrong that had been done at Corinth with some prominent person in the church either living in moral sin or living in the spiritual sin of rebellion. How does he go about correcting that wrong? There are some valuable principles that are reflected in this passage and throughout the whole situation of 2 Corinthians.

A. The first thing I would say right off the bat, maybe stating it in a negative way first: Paul avoids a better-than-thou, domineering attitude. Paul, for example, says in verse 24 of chapter 1, “Not that we lord it over your faith.” In correcting whatever the problem was, he does not do it from the standpoint of some bossy, self-appointed, autocratic individual. He is keeping with the word of the Lord given to all Christian leadership, Matthew 20:25–26, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you”; and 1 Peter 5:1–3, “Prohibit elders from lording it over those entrusted to them.” Paul does not lord it over the church.

How different that emphasis is from some of the stuff in modern times we have heard in regard to the submission movement where persons are taught that they even must ask some human “lord” that they have been discipled under to do this and that, perfectly normal kinds of things. Paul says, “My purpose isn’t to lord it over your faith at all but, in fact, it is your faith and your working it out, and it’s by your faith you stand firm.” Writing to the Romans, he says in Romans 14:4, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls [that is, to Jesus]. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Believers have their standing in faith. Not by simply complying with the earthly demands of some human lord. Paul’s avoidance of a better-than-thou domineering attitude kept him away from saying something in a way that was so loud people couldn’t hear what he really had to say.

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

It's possible to say something that is right, but say it in a manner that is so wrong that what you're trying to say isn't heard at all. The tone of voice we take in correcting a problem, cheap shots, harsh ridicule, demeaning terms like "blockhead" and "dummy" do not come from persons who practice Christlike correction.

I recall someone commenting—and this is an old story—about a preacher who was thundering against sin. They said, "He seems to be taking a little bit too much glee in his denunciation of the subject."

Paul finds no joy in giving discipline. There's no better-than-thou attitude. In fact, there is an attitude that says, "I have prayed for this person before I ever sought to discipline him." What a principle to keep in mind when we are at odds with someone! If we will make—before we say anything—if we'll make that person a matter of our own prayer, really care about them in prayer, our whole attitude toward them is going to have to be shaped and changed because we've been praying about it. Have we prayed for the person we're attempting to correct?

B. We must not only avoid a better-than-thou domineering attitude but I think the second important thing, and Paul demonstrates this: We're to communicate clearly what is wrong and what steps need to be taken to make things right.

Paul had done this, certainly in the 1 Corinthians' context; he told the church exactly what to do with the man who had been living with his father's wife. And evidently, if this is not that person but another person who rebelled against his authority, he had also told the church what to do.

The majority of the church had acted and disciplined that person. It always helps when we are very expressive in being exact as to where we see a wrong and how we'd like to see another person change. They can't change unless we tell them. They can't know that they've done something wrong unless we find a way to communicate that to them.

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

Failure to communicate results in what's called "anger displacement." There's a delightful little story about the husband who got chewed out at work by the boss. He knew he couldn't answer back to the boss so he came home and chewed out his wife. She knew she couldn't answer back to him so she went and bawled out their teenage boy. He went and kicked the dog. And the dog went and bit the cat. And the cat scratched the baby. And the baby pulled the doll's head off. Nobody was talking to anybody about why they were mad. They were just taking it out on the next person down the line. We need to do more than say what's wrong. We need to be explicit about it and tell someone how it can be made right.

C. The third critical principle of correcting a wrong revealed in this passage is that we are to keep perspective. The one who is now a source of grief to us is the same one who is meant to become a source of joy. Paul very clearly says in verse 2 of chapter 2, "For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?" What a tremendous way of looking at a person with whom we have disagreements. They are a source of grief to us. But Paul says, "You must see it this way: they—that same person who is causing you grief—are meant by God, their placement in the body of Christ, is meant to be a source of joy for you." If we take the perspective that they're always going to be a millstone around our neck, that they're always going to be a source of grief to us, then we'll always treat them that way. We'll push them out there and not give them any hope for change. We'll not give ourselves any hope for change at all. But to see that a person that is grieving us now is the same person that's capable of giving us great joy of a healing flow created in that relationship...that changes our whole attitude. How that ought to be a perspective, especially in family. I wouldn't be a bit surprised that in an audience of this size there may just be a husband and a wife that have really had a spat this week. And have come here to church today with that unreconciled. You're getting ready to take

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

communion and maybe you're looking at it and saying, "Oh no! I forgot it was communion Sunday!" That one who has been a source of grief to you is the same person who is meant to be by God a source of joy to you. In working through that, don't lose sight of the fact that mate of yours who has caused you sorrow is the one who will bring you and brings you the greatest joy in your life. Approach whatever problem you have from that vantage point. You want to turn this relationship of grief into a relationship of joy. How can we do that? Can the Lord help us to do what we've not been able to do for ourselves?

D. The fourth thing, and one of the most difficult things to do in correcting a wrong, is to avoid taking things personally. To distinguish between issues and personality. This is so difficult. Paul demonstrates that he's been able to do this, though in verse 5, he says, "If anyone has caused you grief he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely...[Then later in verse 10] And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive." That is, he's already forgiven it so there's nothing left to forgive. He's already done it. He was able to take the attacks directed against him and stayed away from being touchy.

When we are in conflict with another person, we need to be strong enough in our own spirit to throw them a lifeline. We can't do that if we are preoccupied with self and how we're going to be perceived and how we've been hurt. God wants us to be strong enough within our own hurt to reach out and help the person out of their hurt. And it is by helping the person out of their hurt, and redirecting the focus of our energy from ourselves to them, that great healing is able to come. Avoid taking things personally.

This then brings a third question to mind as we look at this passage. Not only "Why do people abandon godly leaders?" and "How do you correct a wrong?"

III. A third question that arises from this passage is: Why should we forgive?

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

There are Corinthians that are asking that, “Why should we forgive? We’ve disciplined the guy. We think he should suffer a little bit longer. Let him squirm a while. He caused us to squirm, you let him squirm.” Some indeed are very quick to punish and very slow to forgive. God would always be more pleased if we’d be quicker to forgive than to punish.

Why should we forgive?

A. We should forgive for the sake of the one who has done the wrong. That’s the first reason Paul says, “So that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Corinthians 2:7, NIV).

The word “overwhelmed” in the New Testament is used in 1 Peter 5:8 to describe a lion overwhelming or devouring his prey; in Hebrews 11:29, of the Egyptians being overwhelmed or drowned in the sea; it’s used in 1 Corinthians 15:54 of death being swallowed up or overwhelmed by the resurrection of Jesus. So here the repentant person is being overwhelmed in their isolation and exclusion and sorrow. Paul says, “If you keep this up, if you don’t forgive, you’re going to cause that person to drown in their sorrow. But you must forgive and comfort.” The word which is used for “forgiving” here is literally “to give grace to,” “to give *charis* to,” “to *charistisize*” and “to encourage.” To forgive and to comfort is to act graciously toward and to act with help toward.

So when someone has done wrong and they are repentant, we’re under the obligation—for their sake—to forgive; that they might not undergo undue sorrow which God does not want for them and would totally discourage them.

B. The second reason why we should forgive is that our forgiveness is our own test of obedience to Jesus. Paul says in verse 9, “The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.” Now he’s calling upon them to be obedient. Once they’ve been obedient to discipline him, now it’s to be obedient to forgive. Jesus explicitly says in Luke 17:3,

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Tough and tender. If he sins, rebuke. If he repents, forgive.

C. Then thirdly we’re to forgive so that Satan will not get an advantage over us. It’s an intriguing phrase in 2 Corinthians 2:11, “in order that Satan might not outwit us [or, “secure an advantage over us”). For we are not unaware of his mindset.” The Greek word is the word *nous* which stands for “mind, pattern of thinking.” We’re not unaware of the way he thinks. How does Satan think? He wants to produce unforgiving people. He wants to produce an unforgiving church. Why does he want to do that? Because if he can produce that, he’ll get a whole collection of harsh and judgmental people. And there’s nothing that will kill the work of God quicker than a group of harsh, critical, judgmental, argumentative, and pharisaical people. There’s nothing I know of that will destroy God’s work and God’s cause and God’s people quicker than that kind of spirit. So if he can turn that to his advantage and produce a bunch of cynics and a bunch of critics and a bunch of harsh-spirited, mean-spirited, little-minded people, then he’s got an advantage over the work of God.

Paul says, “We’re not unaware of what he’s trying to do. It’s time, Corinthians, to forgive.”

In the war years, there was a practice called triage (it’s a French word). It referred to a policy by which medical assistance was given through the means of color tags. In emergency medical situations on the battle field, where there were limited medical supplies, it was in some places the practice to tag a wounded person. There were three tags employed: If the person looked like they had been wounded but were well enough to recover without much assistance, they were given one color of tag; if they had been wounded so severely that it looked like they would die no matter what medical assistance they were given, they were given another tag, a tag that represented hopelessness—leave them alone, let them die; a third tag was given to a person that

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

was critically wounded who would not recover on their own but might recover if they were given medical assistance.

There was a man—in a story told by David Rockhill of Rockport, Indiana—a man named Lew on the battlefield who was badly blown apart. One leg was severely wounded. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lew was a hopeless case, that he would not recover even if he had medical assistance. So he was given the color of death—“leave him alone.” But a nurse noticed that Lew was conscious and began to talk to him. In the course of their conversation, they discovered that they were both from Ohio. The nurse did something which was against the regulations. She just couldn’t let him die that way so she changed his color to the third color that suggested a positive prognosis if he were given medical assistance. So Lew was picked up by the medics, taken on a two-day trip on the back of a truck to the hospital. He spent months in the hospital but he made it. He met a girl in the hospital who later became his wife. He went on to live a full, happy life with one leg. All because a nurse broke the rules of triage and changed his tag. Someone has said, “It is the task of the church to go around changing tags.” That’s what Paul is doing at Corinth. There is a man who has been disciplined that has been regarded as hopeless and the church has excluded him. Paul is saying, “It’s time to change the color. He will recover. Forgive him and get on with it.”

Closing Prayer

Our gracious Father, we thank You for the ways that You have spoken to our hearts today. First, Lord, You’ve spoken to us about Your character because You are tough and tender. Your law represents that tough side of You. That side which makes requirements and demands. Your grace represents that tender side of You which receives “whosoever will.” Which gives forgiveness when there is repentance. We thank You. We know more about Your character as a result of this

TOUGH AND TENDER

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11

message. There may be some here whose focus on You is distorted. They see You as all-tough or all-tender. All-tough and there's no hope for them because they've erred too many times. Lord, correct them. Let them see You as the God who stands ready to encircle with Your love and forgiveness whoever gives grace. There may be some here who have a very cheap view of Your grace. Who see You as having no rules and just do whatever You want and it's ok with God. Help them to see that side of You, Lord, which brings discipline and order and requirements and holiness. There are relationships also, Lord, that You talk to us about at this time. Relationships with people. People we've had arguments with. People we've disagreed with. People whom we have animosity in our heart toward. Search us, Lord. Help us to realize that the person who is the source of grief to us can be, with Your grace, a source of joy to us. Help me, O God, and help us, to be ready to change the tags we put upon others. We thank You for this communion time. We ask that, as we worship You now, there will be a real time of healing that occurs in our worship and we'll sense Your nearness to us. So visit us with Your glory to reveal Your presence to us in precious ways. We thank You that we know You, that you seek fellowship with us, that You love us. In the Lord's name, we ask. Amen.