

CS Lewis once wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

A little over 14 years ago, on October 2, 2006, an Amish schoolhouse in the community of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, turned into a house of horrors as a gunman took hostages, shooting ten school children and killing five of them. As incomprehensible as this senseless act of violence was, what followed was nearly as incomprehensible to the watching world.

The Amish families from that community refused to allow hatred to enter the scene. While wracked by unspeakable grief, the community embraced the shooter's family. Motivated by their faith, forgiveness was a given, hard as that is to imagine, given the situation. On the day of the killings, members of the community took food to the shooter's home. Six days after the shooting, the families of those who had just buried their children attended the shooter's funeral. Money from funds that had flooded in from around the world was diverted to the killer's family.

They embraced the shooter's mother, Terri, visiting her often in her home in the following days. Their support was not merely congenial, but years later, when Terri Roberts' cancer returned, the Amish community came to her aid.

Historians who have written about the tragedy, detail how the act of forgiveness was not a simple act. It was a communal decision that is rooted in the Mennonite's commitment to nonviolence and the teachings of Jesus. The community came together and defined forgiveness as "giving up the right to revenge and grudges."

The response of the Amish is so radically different from what we are used to in our culture. But it is this type of enemy-love that defines the radical Jesus community. One that is marked as foolish by the world, and stands in contrast to the harsh world. For the Amish, Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was central to their understanding of the world, and what a beautiful example for the church and for us. For we are called to be a community built on forgiveness. The church is a community built on forgiveness.

Turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. To bring us up to speed on what Paul is directly addressing here, we need to do some work to set the stage. If you remember, Paul is writing in response to an increasingly hostile and challenging situation. After a difficult visit with the church, Paul writes a scathing letter confronting them of their failure. We don't have this letter

anymore. The letter was written to correct and rebuke the moral failing of the church and was in the place of a visit. In response to Paul's challenging letter, the majority of the church accepted responsibility for their failure and had begun to take up the changes needed and instructed by Paul.

However, not all were convinced, and some in the congregation held strong opposition to Paul. Having spent the first chapter speaking in general terms about why he had to delay his visit, he now takes up the specific confrontation that most likely led to his decision to cancel his visit. We are not given much detail on the specifics of the incident, Paul doesn't name the offender, but he does communicate how the rest of the congregation is to treat the individual. At some point in time, someone was the specific cause of Paul's grief. It is likely that this person spoke out against Paul in a public way or accused Paul of something, sharply denigrating his ministry and his character.

The impact of individual failure

"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" (2 Cor. 2:5). We can almost certainly surmise that the hurt caused to Paul, in light of this offense, is greater than he is letting on, specifically if we assume that it was a verbal disparaging of Paul's ministry and character. This was likely fueled by the false teachers who are mentioned in chapter 11. False teachers jealous of Paul's ministry fanned the flames against Paul, sought to discredit, demean, and destroy Paul's work

But Paul's concern here is not in regards to the individual's offense, but out of pastoral concern for the community and the individual's spiritual well-being. And his point here is that the entire church suffered because of this man's actions.

Sin has a way of doing that—it does not merely affect the perpetrator alone, but affects all of the people around the sinner. Its effects ripple out. This is especially true of these newly formed Jesus communities. To be a part of the church is to be intertwined into a great whole. We are no longer merely for ourselves but connected to a living body, a community of faith that relies on one another.

The importance for us today is to recognize that our actions and sins divide and disrupt the unity within a church. This is the center of Paul's concern for the church. So what does Paul

prescribe to this church? How is the church to handle this disruption of unity and the sin therein?

Paul's Threefold Counsel for Church Discipline

Community Requires Confrontation

"The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient" (v. 6). The letter Paul originally wrote to the church achieved its desired effect. The members of the church began to take sin seriously, to the point that it appears they decided to carry out some form of church discipline on an individual who was causing grief. They recognized the effect of the one man's sins; they were not able to function fully as the people of God with the problem unaddressed. It is not clear what exactly took place as punishment, but whatever it was, Paul is clear that it was sufficient. The person had repented of their action. Their actions were received by the man. The community had successfully disciplined the wrongful member.

I think it is important to note the basics of what is going on here because I think it is instructive for us as a community of God. Here is the point for us, community requires confrontation. In my experience, we get a little confused about the idea of confrontation. One of the most common refrains I hear within the church and outside the church is, "Only God can judge me." Usually, this is mentioned after someone is confronted for a sin and mistake. The problem is that this is only partially true. When the New Testament speaks about not judging others, it is nearly always in reference to those outside of the church.

But Jesus' teachings for those inside the church are far different. Look at this text from Luke 17.

So watch yourselves. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." Luke 17:3-4

Now, this particular teaching comes as part of a larger teaching of Jesus that is for sin within the community of Jesus and the danger of causing other people to sin in your wake. But notice that Jesus' strong language concerning how we handle fellow brothers and sisters in the faith who have strayed, "rebuke them." But Jesus also follows it up with the immediate, when they repent, "forgive them."

And when done properly, this confrontation is a gift of grace from God, for it is only in loving community that is able to speak truth to our failures, so we find growth. In some ways, this is part and parcel to the existence of the church, the continual refinement of one another out of love for each other and for God.

But we have to be careful because certainly this can and often does go awry. People are flawed, and often in hoping to offer correction, they do so, not from a posture of love and care, but

from a vindictive and prideful posture. There is a significant difference between judgment and judgmentalism.

Judgment in the Christian sense is always aimed toward restoration of the other. It seeks to strengthen the one it's directed at. It is always done from a posture of humility, care, and love. Judgmentalism is self-serving. It is done from a posture of arrogance and doesn't seek restoration but the cutting down of the other.

No doubt, whenever we engage with another to confront them, we must do so with the utmost respect, love, and humility—seeking only to build up the community of God. This is Paul's first step of counsel for the young Corinthians church, confront.

Community Offers Forgiveness and Comfort

"Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (v. 7). Immediately following the confrontation, Paul says we should quickly forgive the offender. This is the second piece of counsel for the young church, forgive. This reminds us of the ultimate purpose of this process—the restoration of a fellow brother or sister.

The Greek word used by Paul for forgive is the word *charisasthai* and comes from the root word, *charis*, which is a derivative of the word grace. This is a different word than the customary word for forgiveness. And Paul chooses it for a purpose. More literally, the word means "to give freely." It is here we find the core of who we are as a people of God. We are a community that is marked by grace; it is the core of our identity, that through the work of Jesus Christ, we experience grace.

But Paul is taking it a step further. We are not only the ones who have experienced grace, but we are called to embody that grace for the sake of others as well. For this particular situation, the punishment from the congregation had been sufficient, and Paul's encouragement is that it was time to move from punishment into forgiveness and comfort. The concern was that the man would be crushed by the weight of punishment as it was getting close to moving beyond an appropriate level of concern.

As a Jesus community, we are not to offer correction alone, but correction is quickly followed by forgiveness and comfort for the offender. In this way, we reflect the posture of Jesus in our own lives and bring that to others as well. This is what sets Kingdom culture apart from our surrounding culture.

Community Seeks Restoration

"I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (v. 8). Paul's third counsel for the young church in the process of church discipline is to restore the individual back into the community through affirming their love for the man. It is certainly not enough to confront someone in sin, it is also not enough to then forgive the one in sin, but the task of the church is one step further; they must reaffirm their love by restoring them back into the community.

Paul combines two interesting words together, “reaffirm your love.” Reaffirm is a legal term that speaks of ratifying, and the word for love is agape—meaning selfless love. The picture is a public display of selfless love. Paul’s emphasis is that Christian church discipline is always to be remedial and not merely punitive, seeking to be restorative every step of the way. The challenge for the church comes when we wrestle with figuring out when it is time to discipline and when it is the time to forgive.

Two Warnings for Unforgiveness

Thus far, Paul has detailed a healthy process of discipline that can take place within a church when needed. But Paul also offers two warnings of what can take place if the church does not offer a way of forgiveness.

Danger to the Individual

The first warning comes to the individual who has committed the sin or failure. *“Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow”* (v. 7). There is an inherent danger looming that the punishment of the individual becomes overbearing. What can start out as godly sorrow over a fellow believer’s sin, unwittingly, can lead to consuming guilt or to an over preoccupation with one’s sin. The warning is that this has the potential to overwhelm the individual with sorrow. Confrontation without forgiveness will crush individuals. This is the importance of understanding our posture and motivation for entering a process of discipline.

Danger to the Community

The second warning is for the health of the community. *“...in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes”* (v. 11). Without a modicum of humility, the perpetrator would likely move from sorrow to resentment toward the community. The act of forgiveness must take place in the community so as to subvert any of Satan’s plans to dismantle this community. This spirit of disunity is strong and easily manipulated to negative ends.

The word Paul uses here for outwit, literally means “to take advantage of.” Satan is lurking, waiting to take advantage of a challenging and tense situation. The imagery is of Satan cheating or exploiting them. The risk of over discipline provides Satan a foothold in the community. The last sentence in this verse has an interesting wordplay that our translations miss. “For we are not unaware of his schemes.” in the Greek it is “we are not unmindful of his mind,” which, in the case of Satan, is a scheming plotting mind looking for ways to disrupt the community.

An Example of Discipline with Grace

Now, what Paul is detailing in these few sentences, focuses on what is commonly known as “Church Discipline.” This is an often difficult and challenging concept for a church to understand because it has been misunderstood and is a practice that can be

abused, creating all sorts of harm for others. But when done properly and in accordance with the scriptures, it is a beautiful process filled with grace, humility, and love.

The clearest teaching on this topic comes from Jesus in Matthew 18. We don’t have time to read through or detail all of the chapter, but I want to give a high-level overview so you can see the posture from which Jesus presents the topic of Church Discipline, and also so you can see how masterful Jesus’ teaching is. It really is a beautiful chapter.

Mt. 18:1-5 - Who is the greatest? - Humility

The chapter opens with a discussion on humility. The disciples come to him and ask, “who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?” Jesus’ response is to completely subvert the world’s understanding of greatness. It is not the strong and the powerful, but it is the humble and the lowly. The example Jesus gives is a child.

Mt. 18:6-9 - Causing others to stumble - Harmony

Jesus then quickly moves from this discussion on humility and warns against anyone that is causing division or others to stumble. The concern is that our actions are intimately intertwined with the unity of the whole. And to not take this seriously is to betray the trust of the community. Living in harmony becomes an important point for Jesus. Jesus takes our sin, and its effects on the community of faith, seriously.

Mt. 18:10-14 - Parable of the Wandering Sheep - Pursuit

Following this discussion, Jesus is realistic about the failures that will come. People will fail the community; people will sin. But the role of the church in taking sin seriously is not to withdraw from the person, but it is to pursue them! He tells a story of a shepherd who loses one of 100 sheep, and the response is to leave the 99 and pursue the one. This is the model for which we are to live. It is to seek out the brother or sister that has gone astray. It is to search them out, not leave them in their own failure.

Mt. 18:15-20 - Church Discipline - Confrontation

It is now, after teaching all of the principles from the above sections—humility, harmony, pursuit—Jesus then gets to the direct teaching on church discipline. If someone sins, you should confront them directly. If this doesn’t work, take a few more people from within the church, and if that doesn’t work, take them before the church leadership, etc.

It is only after the above teaching that Jesus gets to the need to assert discipline because it is only after understanding and embodying these values that we are in a healthy position to enter the process of church discipline.

Mt. 18:21-35 - How many times? - Warning for not forgiving

But Jesus doesn’t end there. After teaching about the process of forgiveness and church discipline, Peter pipes up and asks, “Lord,

how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' Then goes on to tell the parable of the unmerciful servant who, when he was forgiven of an unbearable debt, failed to show mercy and forgive a much smaller debt owed to him.

The beauty of a Community of Forgiveness is that it is rooted in humility that seeks to live in harmony, and confronts out of love and dedication to the other. What a stunning example of how to live in community that takes seriously failures and unity. Something that is difficult and challenging and oftentimes doesn't work but is well worth trying.

A Manner of Obedience and Response to Christ

Another reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 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. 2 Cor. 2:9-10

Paul is reiterating that the reason he wrote them and confronted the community's failure was to test them, seeing if they were willing to "be obedient in everything." The road toward unity in the church is circuitous, it is long and painful, it is challenging and winding, but it is worth it. Forgiveness and restoration are never easy, but they are of value. It requires our obedience; it requires humility, and the slow work of confrontation, forgiveness, and restoration.

Notice, the impetus for Paul's forgiving and instruction in the situation is none other than the work of Christ. Paul is able to freely forgive because it is in "the sight of Christ" that we are forgiven.

The reason we can be community-centered on forgiveness is because at the center of our faith is the work of Christ—taking up our offenses and failures and offering a way forward in forgiveness. This is the gospel message. A message of God working in the world to bring about its ultimate healing and restoration, and the very center-piece of this story is the forgiveness of all that we have done. Forgiveness is constitutive of our very identity. It is the center of how we have been formed, and it becomes one of the central ethics we live out.

Nothing illustrates this more than the practice of communion. For centuries, followers of Jesus have gathered around the table as a way of reminding us of the very reality that the work of Jesus is at the heart of all we do. For when we take communion, we

are reminding ourselves of the gift of God's grace to us. It reminds us of the forgiveness of our sins that has been extended to us. But it also becomes a reminder of how we are to live in a world ripe with a lack of forgiveness.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he detailed an issue the community had with people taking communion in an unholy manner. They were taking it in such a way as to alienate certain peoples. It was an error that was grievous to Paul because he recognized the centrality of communion to the community of believers. And in his correction, he links the gift of communion that he had received from the Lord to what he is giving to them writing:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 1

Corinthians 11:23-25

But Paul's instructions to this church doesn't end there with the elements. Read how he closes the teaching on communion. "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (v. 26).

These elements are not merely ritual acts; they are the very proclamation that the community of faith is a community-centered on forgiveness. It is a proclamation that we are constituted and animated by forgiveness and grace. It is the ethic for which we live in this world, and it is the ethic we seek to emulate in a world desperately in need of this grace.

So may we learn to receive the gift of grace and live from that center.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2020 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1451-4FC