

Last week, we had a very brief introduction to our new series (2 Corinthians), and I said that we'll have a more fuller introduction this week. But, something I **did** share last week, was that "For us to get a bit of a feel for this letter, we're going to have to, in some way, grasp the deep, personal hurt (that is the broken heart of a pastor)"... Paul loved this church deeply, and they'd broken his heart, and we can see this coming through in this letter...

A second thing I said, is "This is a letter" – we're reading someone else's mail. And because it's a letter, we've only got one side of the conversation... And we need to be careful that we don't make **too** many assumptions, and that we don't try and read **too** much into this letter.... But by the same token, we're going to miss out on a lot of really important stuff, if we **don't** diligently study it...

And even though it **is** a letter (and we only have **one** side of the conversation), we **do** know a bit about the history of the church in Corinth; and Paul's relationship with them. And even from this letter itself, it's pretty obvious to see when Paul is mounting a defence, and the most likely reason that he's mounting a defence, is because he's being accused of something...

Righto: Here's a bit of a refresher, from when we studied 1 Corinthians:

Situated in Southern Greece, Corinth was a **massive** city. It was the third largest city, in the whole Roman empire. With a population of around about 200 000ⁱ people, the only places that were any bigger, were Rome (itself), and

Alexandria (in Northern Egypt). So, Corinth was huge. It was a very important trading city.

If you have a look at this map, there is a very narrow neck of land, separating 2 very important harbours (one on the East and the other on the West). And Corinth, was right on that narrow neck of land – ideally situated, to receive freight on one side, carry it over land a short distance, to the other bay, and therefore ships could avoid a long voyage around the dangerous capes to the south.

And so Corinth was a very big, very important, thriving city. It was originally Greek, and then Rome destroyed it, but finally rebuilt it again, and so the culture was a mixture of Roman **and** Greek..., **and** ... very immoral. *Corinth was the centre for the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, and its temple had 1000 sacred prostitutesⁱⁱ.*

But God did something really good in Corinth. On Paul's missionary trips, he would arrive in a place, and preach the Gospel, but usually the residents would be so offended by what Paul had to say, that within a few days (or weeks), he would get run-out-of-town, and he'd have to move on to the next spot. But that didn't happen in Corinth. They **did** try to bring charges against him, but the authorities declared him "innocent", and I think it was 18 months that Paul ended up staying thereⁱⁱⁱ.

He had plenty of time to plant a church, and to get them started on the road of being disciples of Jesus... And so Paul was quite attached to this Corinthian church. He felt responsible for them. And in 1 Cor, he said to them:

“Look, **1 Cor 4:15** I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

And as we studied 1 Corinthians, we discovered that the church in Corinth:

- were a church who had lost their love
- they had lost their unity;
- Some of them had lost the core of the Gospel, and even some of the most fundamental elements of faith (such as the resurrection)...
- One of their members was in an immoral, incestuous relationship;
- **And** there were some in that church, who celebrated it as an expression of their freedom in Christ...

They were one messed-up church...

How did they get so far off track? Well, false teachers (claiming to be apostles), had infiltrated this church... And 1 Cor & 2 Cor, are letters that Paul needed to write, to deal with these false apostles, and to try and bring that church back on track...

Righto:

As you can see from the Table (on screen):

After Paul wrote 1 Cor, he visited Corinth, and in 2 Corinthians, He refers to that visit, as “The painful visit” – It didn’t go well. He went there to sort them out, but it all went pear-shaped. And from this letter, we can see there was probably a fair bit of ‘argy-bargy’ between Paul and those he sarcastically refers to as the “super-apostles”...

But he couldn't leave it at that, and so he wrote them **another** letter, which (in 2Cor) he refers to as "The severe letter" (we don't have that letter any more)...

Anyway, Paul had plans to visit Corinth, but he changed his itinerary (a couple of times, he changed it). And it seems like his adversaries were using his change of mind, as evidence that Paul was unreliable, and that he couldn't be trusted ...

And in today's Bible reading, we can see Paul mounting his defence, against these accusations:

- "This bloke (Paul) can't be trusted".
- "He's not a man of his word"...
- "He's not an apostle at all.
- if he was an apostle, he wouldn't be 'flip-flopping' and changing his mind like he does...."

....

Have you ever noticed that, when someone has an agenda, or when they've 'got-it-in' for someone else, every slightest little thing, gets used, to build a case against them... I mean, how petty is this???

- In 1 Cor, he told them that he planned to visit them **after** he'd been to Macedonia...
- But as he explains in this letter, he thought, "Actually, I can visit you **twice** – I can visit you on my way **to** Macedonia, and then **again**, on my way from Macedonia to Judea"...
- And so he arrived on his way **to** Macedonia (painful visit)...

- But then circumstances changed, and he didn't get back to them...

And as I'm reading this, I'm going "How petty is this?"... Essentially what happened, is he visited them on the way **to** Macedonia, instead of on his way **from** Macedonia... Who cares???

You see, to make an issue out of something like this, is utter pettiness... But that's what people **can** be like (and sadly, even within the church, some people can be that petty)... When they've got it in for someone, every petty little thing, they store up as evidence against them...

They're grasping for straws here – They're looking for evidence, against Paul... "He's not a man of his word – you can't trust him – he's dishonest..."

But when Paul examined his actions, his conscience was completely clear... He hadn't wronged them. He hadn't taken advantage of them... In all of his letters, he'd **never** tried to deceive them, and in **this** letter he says "I hope you understand this – There's no hidden meaning here – I'm not trying to trick you. What I say, is what I mean..."

Paul and his missionary mates had acted in simplicity and Godly sincerity. And more than this, their actions were a demonstration of the grace of God...

When Paul examined his motives and his actions, his conscience was completely clear...

Now, I can't always say that... Sometimes I've later considered things that I've done. And to my shame, there were ulterior motives.

But just like Paul, there's been times when I've been accused of doing the wrong thing, and similar to Paul, petty bits of evidence have been gathered against me. And in the cold light of day, I've examined my actions and my motivation,,,, and my conscience, has been completely clear... I believe I've done the right thing. I believe I've been obedient to God, and I'd do it again...

They're being petty against Paul, but he's desperate, that he and the Corinthian church, be reconciled... And he says: "On the day of the Lord Jesus, I want you to boast in me, like I'm going to boast in you"...

Now, when Paul's talking about the day of the Lord Jesus, he's talking about the day of judgment... When Jesus returns, the wicked will be judged, and the disciples of Jesus will be received into Glory – **On that day**, Paul wants them to boast about him, just like he's going to be boasting about them...

But what's this 'boasting' thing about? Isn't boasting a bad thing??? Well, it depends on what sort of boasting we're talking about...

You see, there's fleshly boasting (the bad sort of boasting), and then there's Godly boasting...

Jeremiah 9:²³ Thus says YHWH: "Let not the **wise** man boast in his wisdom, let not the **mighty** man boast

in his might, let not the **rich** man boast in his riches,
²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he
understands and knows me, that I am YHWH who
practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness
in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares
YHWH."

We shouldn't be ashamed of the Lord our God. There **is** a
Godly boasting. It's letting the world know "Who God is",
and it's publicly rejoicing in the righteousness of God, that we
now receive through Christ...

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul quoted Jeremiah 9: and he explained
what Godly boasting is: **None** of us can boast in God because
of our own strength or our own wisdom, **or** because we're so
marvellous... It's only through Christ Jesus, that we receive
the wisdom of God, and righteousness and sanctification and
redemption... You see, this is a completely undeserved gift,
given by God...

And so Godly boasting isn't about "I'm Godly and you're not
– na-na-na-na-na-na..."

Godly boasting is acknowledging that God has been so
gracious... I didn't deserve it, but God called me. ...

And the boast that Paul's talking about here, is to be excited
about having a **shared** experience of grace...

Even though there's angst between Paul, and a few of the
people there in Corinth, he was so proud of them – that they'd

experienced the grace of God, and that they were saved... His boast, is about what **Christ** has **done** in them... Paul and they, had a shared experience in the grace of God...

Do you ever boast about your church? Do you ever boast about Bush Disciples???

You know, some churches, “We’re the greatest church – we’ve got”:

- An amazing band with fantastic worship leaders;
- Our pastor is just awesome;
- The seats are so comfy and the greatest atmosphere
- We’ve got the best coffee in town
- And our kids program – they just love it...

That sort of boasting, is **not** Godly boasting – it’s worldly boasting... And I’m confident that you don’t boast about Bush Disciples like that (because it’s not true to start with). There’s nothing grand about us...

Do you know what Godly boasting about your church looks like???

- There’s no one special in our church, but Jesus is so amazing...
- Together, we have a shared experience of Grace, in the Lord Jesus Christ...
- **None** of us are amazing people, but we have an amazing God, who did an amazing work in us – **that’s** our boast...

You see the difference??? A Godly boast is a good thing...

Righto:

Even though the accusation against Paul, was very petty, he didn't just write-it-off, with a correction of facts... What he does, is he takes us to Christ, and he takes us to the example of Christ... Essentially, Paul's change of itinerary, was rooted in the Gospel message that he preaches... In essence, what Paul said, is: "Just as God is faithful, so am I!!!"

Let me explain:

They were accusing him of just flip-flopping, but Paul is saying, "I don't make my plans according to the flesh"... You see, self-interested people change their mind, to suit themselves, but that's not what Paul did. His change of itinerary, wasn't done out of **self-interest** ... It was done out of concern for them... He said: **it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.**

In **all** the letters that Paul wrote to them; and in the painful visit he had with them, he didn't do **any** of these things, to cause them pain... He said: ⁴ **For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.**

Sometimes when people are hurting, or when someone has it in for you (Let's turn it around – let's look at it from the other perspective)... When **we** 'have-it-in' for someone else, we can't see the love... No matter how much love is given, we

only process it as offence... Sometimes – no matter what gets said – it gets misunderstood, or it purposely gets taken the wrong way, and it just causes more offence; more pain; more bitterness... And that's the position Paul was in with the Corinthians. He couldn't come to them again – it would just cause more pain...

He wasn't flip-flopping out of his own self-interest. He did it out of obedience to God. In V19 ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

Let's unpack that:

He's not saying that Jesus always says "Yes" to whatever we desire... What he's saying, is Jesus always says "Yes" to God's grand design... God's plan (God's design for salvation) was fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus got on board with it, and He did God's will (even though it cost Him greatly)... And God was glorified in the obedience of Christ... And guess what: God is also glorified, when we are obedient...

Sometimes, obedience to God, means we need to put our own plans aside...

I've experienced that – I had my plans, and people thought they knew my plans, but then God sent me in a different direction... And some people (to this day) are bitter at me, and some people still use it as evidence that I can't be

trusted... But when God gives His marching orders, what kind of disciple of Jesus would I be, if I don't obey...

And what sort of disciple would Paul be, if he didn't obey??? Paul wasn't just changing his mind for his own benefit. Obedience to God, was more important than sticking to his itinerary.

Let's move on:

So far, it could seem like Paul is motivated by defending his position of authority in the church. But he's building up to something much more important than that. ...

Paul's concern for the Corinthian church, was for them to be an expression of the reconciling community of Christ ...

So, once again, reading someone else's mail, and only having one side of the conversation, we do need to read between the lines a bit...

And it seems:

- the arch-antagonists, are the false teachers, who have moved in from out of town... (false apostles) (Paul sarcastically calls them "super-apostles)^{iv}; and
- then a few people (**and one in particular**) were convinced by them, and also became antagonists against Paul^v... ;

- But it also seems that the majority of the church, remained loyal to Paul^{vi}; and
- following the painful visit and severe letter, most of the congregation (who still loved Paul), took action against the antagonists^{vii}; and
- it seems like the local antagonist repented^{viii},
- but the outsiders (super-apostles), did not^{ix}....

Now, how do you deal with that??? How do you deal with a trouble maker in the church??? The natural human reaction, is to give them the short-shift, and they've done-their-dash... They'll never be trusted again, and don't you think we're ever going to forgive you. ...

And when someone has had a key role of dividing a church, memories can be long (very long) against that person... Can such a person, **ever** be forgiven???

Well, in Christ, the answer **has to be** "Yes"... The church of our Lord Jesus Christ, **has to be**, a reconciling community... If we are a church who don't forgive, then we're not the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, that doesn't mean, that we would just let evil and false teaching go 'unchecked' and co-exist with what is right and proper.... Nor does it mean, that we give them a piece of our mind, and then they stay the same, and we move on, without rooting out evil and false teaching in the church...

When it comes to reconciliation in the church, it's the same as reconciliation between us and Christ...

- confrontation
 - sorrow
 - repentance
 - forgiveness
 - reconciliation and restoration
-
- When I sin, the Holy Spirit in some way, confronts me **over** that sin...; and
 - the confrontation has to be such that, "I'm moved to sorrow." – that I am truly sorrowful that I have done wrong;
 - sorrow then leads to repentance. I acknowledge my sin, and I repent – I turn away from it.
 - At that point, God forgives me completely. I don't have to do acts of penance to earn that forgiveness. I'm forgiven.
 - And in the knowledge of that forgiveness, I am reconciled to God, and restored to a state of righteousness.

And that's the way it's supposed to be in the church... The church, **has** to be God's forgiving, reconciling community.

- When someone has caused trouble in a church, there needs to be confrontation. They need to be confronted with the truth; and
- The confrontation has to be such, that they are truly **sorrowful** for the evil that they've done;
- Their sorrow, leads to repentance. They acknowledge their sin – they acknowledge that the path they've taken

- is false, and that they have been quite wrong, and so they repent of the false teaching they've embraced, and they repent of the division they've wrongly brought about;
- Now, at that point, if they have truly repented, the church **must** forgive them...
 - And in the knowledge of that forgiveness, the church are reconciled to one another, and the relationship is restored

In this process, the church demonstrates the very reconciliation of Christ...

But Paul could see that the Corinthian church, hadn't been that reconciling community... They were carrying a grudge...

Alright, that local antagonist had caused Paul pain, but he'd caused the whole church pain... And when we've been hurt, sometimes we feel we've got the right to retaliate – to give pain back...

And Paul's saying here: "Hey, you've punished him enough... You're **the majority**. He sees he's been wrong. You've punished him enough – he's already repented... "And if you keep punishing him, he's going to **be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.**"

And he begs them, "It's time to show him that you love him." **I've** forgiven him, and you need to forgive him too...

Satan hates Jesus' church... The church, is Jesus' reconciling community of His disciples, in this world – That's the way He's designed it... Satan on the other hand, well his plan, is

to tear God's church apart. He does it with false teaching and division, and then he keeps it apart, with unforgiveness...

And the only way for the church to escape that, is for us to forgive like God forgives...

For the church to be the church of Jesus Christ, we need to be a forgiving community, and a reconciling community... true repentance, must lead to true forgiveness.

Questions:

ⁱ Fernando, A. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1998. P.490

ⁱⁱ Fernando, A. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1998. P.490

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 18:11

^{iv} 2Cor 11:5

^v 2Cor 2:5ff

^{vi} 2Cor 2:5ff

^{vii} 2Cor 2:5ff

^{viii} 2Cor 2:7

^{ix} 2Cor 11:12ff