

Good Grief

2 Corinthians 7:8-16

Unless there is something wrong with us, we would all like to avoid pain of any kind. But although physical and emotional pain are a negative consequence of living in a fallen world, it's sometimes necessary to endure pain to come to a positive place of deeper healing. This is true of both emotional and physical pain.

Avoiding the dentist, for example, can delay some physical pain, but it can also make things worse in the long run. Likewise, if you suffer a loss, you must allow yourself to properly grieve the loss so that you can get to a healthier place.

We must resist any tendency to deny our emotional pain or to find ways to numb our pain. That will only lead to harm. Don't believe the false notion that to get through a loss you have to "be strong" as if grief is a sign of weakness.

Pastor and author Frederick Buechner, who recognized that denying his father's suicide was an obstacle to healing, observed: "While steeling yourself against the harsh realities of life may protect you from some pain, that same steel can become bars that keep you from being transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from."

In Psalm 23, David reveals that there's a pathway for those facing great loss which leads to higher ground. When we look to the good Shepherd in time of grief we can find divine grace that will not only comfort us but can make us vessels of comfort in a broken world.

Now there is another way that we avoid pain that is necessary for healing and restoration in our relationships with others. The pain I'm speaking of is the pain of reproof or correction. To fully mature in our faith we must have relationships with other believers where we can give and receive accountability to live the life of faith.

To be wise we must be open to giving and receiving reproof motivated by love and aimed at restoration. The same applies to maintaining a healthy marital relationship and to healthy parenting.

A healthy marriage is not one that doesn't have any conflicts. Rather, in a healthy marriage conflicts will arise. But when they do, offenses are confronted and resolved with truth, love, and forgiveness.

When we avoid difficult conversations because they are sometimes painful, we allow walls to be built that destroys intimacy and transparency in marriage. When we fail to provide corrective discipline to our children because it's painful to us or to them, we set them up for failure.

As God's word reveals in Proverbs 15:31-32: *"The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence."*

Beloved, when we are open to receive the reproof of the Lord and respond with a broken and contrite heart, God will draw near to bring healing and restoration to our lives.

Today's message is titled, good grief. To vocalize their frustration, sometimes people use the common expression, good grief. It's really an odd expression. When people use it, they're usually feeling the opposite of what the expression is stating. But there is a godly grief that, although it may not feel good in the moment, can lead to great good.

Main idea: God is drawn to brokenness and He restores the contrite in heart.

This morning we are going to examine how godly grief can bring spiritual healing and restoration to our lives and relationships.

1. Reproof is the seed that sows godly grief

Notice first of all that reproof is the seed that sows godly grief. After testifying to the comfort that he received from Titus about the church's godly response to his letter of reproof, Paul continues: "*For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while*" (2 Corinthians 7:8).

Remember that Paul had written other letters to the Corinthians in which he addressed a variety of concerns about their spiritual condition. In a previous letter, for example, he rebuked the church for allowing gross sexual immorality to go unchecked.

Additionally, he reprovved them because, rather than being united based on their identity in Christ, the church was divided by factions that identified with their favorite leader.

Moreover, they were allowing false apostles, who opposed Paul, to negatively influence them. All these things, and more, Paul addressed in his previous letters to the Corinthian church.

Now, knowing that spiritually immature believers do not always receive correction well, and that the smooth-talking false apostles were also negatively influencing them, Paul had been anxiously awaiting an update from Titus.

According to 2 Corinthians 2, Titus appears to have been the letter carrier and Paul, because of his big heart for the Corinthians, restlessly anticipated hearing his report. After finally meeting up with Titus, we learned in verses 6-7 that Titus reported that the Corinthians responded well to Paul's letter.

This comforted Paul a great deal at a time when he was weary from all his ministry travels. According to verse 7, Titus reported their longing to see Paul, their mourning for their sins, and their zeal to realign themselves with their father in the faith (7:7).

So, knowing of their godly response, Paul writes, "*For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it...*" (v.8). When Paul says

that he did not regret the fact that they were grieved by his previous letter, he's not saying that he took joy in their pain. In fact, he goes on to say that at one point he did regret sending the letter.

To clarify, when Paul says he didn't regret sending the letter and then follows that up with, "though I did regret it," he's not being double minded. Rather, he's expressing that he didn't get satisfaction out of the grief that they felt from his reproofs.

What does it mean to give a reproof? To give a reproof is to pointedly identify a wrong that has been committed.

Now, if you look back at 2 Corinthians 2:4, you'll find that Paul wrote his previous letter of reproof with a broken heart and with many tears. He further explains in 2 Corinthians 2:4 that he wanted them to know that it was his love that motivated him to write such a severe letter.

Have you ever sent a letter, email or text message to someone that was corrective in nature and regretted it? Several years ago, I wrote an email to someone who wronged me. After writing it, I was a little uneasy about it. So I had my brother read it before sending it.

After reading it, he shared with me that, although I clearly identified the wrong that was committed, the letter did not appear to be aimed at restoration. All truth, but no grace. And do you know why that was? I wrote the letter with anger rooted in resentment not with anguish rooted in love.

But my brother's reproof rooted in love caused me to grieve over my resentful heart. And that grief led me to get right with the Lord, which in turn changed my heart. I no longer felt resentment. Instead, I wanted the brother to see his error so that he could be restored to a right relationship with God and for us to be reconciled to each other. In fact, I had no desire anymore to send him the email. I planned instead to wait for an opportune time to speak to him heart to heart. We later met and were reconciled.

In Paul's case, sending the letter of reproof, motivated by love and aimed at restoration was what God led him to do. And although he knew that it could cause them pain, that was not his ultimate goal. But all the while, he also knew that grieving over the wrongs that he pointed out they committed, would be a godly response. He knew that grief was the right response, especially if their brokenness over sin led them to repent, which in fact it did.

This is a good segue into our second point:

2. Repentance is the root that springs from godly grief

Having explained that he was comforted by their godly response to his letter, even though it made them grieve, Paul continues in verse 9-10, *"As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. ¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.* (2 Corinthians 7:9-10).

Again, Paul didn't rejoice over the fact that his letter of reproof made the Corinthians grieve over their sin. Rather, he rejoiced because their godly grief produced a repentance that leads to salvation.

But Paul was also pained over the fact that he knew that his severe letter could cause the Corinthians pain. He felt pain over their pain because he loved them.

But although his love caused him to feel their pain, his love for them also gave him the ability to endure the pain so that the reproofs of God's word could be sowed in their hearts and bring godly grief that produces repentance.

How many of you know, we are not truly loving others if we are not willing to speak truth with grace into their lives, even if it hurts? We are not loving our children if we make excuses for their bad behavior and fail to discipline them because it's too painful.

When we avoid those hard conversations or neglect to discipline because it's too uncomfortable or painful, we are loving ourselves more than the person in need of correction.

Notice again that in verse 10 Paul contrast godly grief with worldly grief: He writes: *"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death"* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Even though Paul's letter of reproof caused pain, he rejoiced because the sorrow, shame and guilt that sprang from it, led to a change of heart. And that, Paul explains, is the difference between godly grief and worldly grief.

Godly grief that produces repentance, which is a turning to God, leads to salvation. Worldly grief, on the other hand, produces death. When Paul speaks of the salvation that comes from godly grief which produces repentance, he's not, in this context, talking about our eternal destiny. Rather, he's talking about spiritual renewal and restoration. He's speaking about the life-giving grace that comes from walking in the light of truth and in close communion with God.

In contrast, worldly grief or regret over, for example, losing money gambling, doesn't lead to salvation, but to death. The things the world grieves over, like the loss or absence of worldly comforts, doesn't lead to spiritual renewal, but to spiritual ruin.

There's another word in scripture that describes what godly grief that produces repentance looks like. That word is brokenness. Sometime after king David was confronted by Nathan the prophet for his grave sin, he wrote Psalm 51.

There he expressed his godly grief over sin and his repentance before God. While doing so, he wrote in Psalm 51:17, *"a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

With a broken and contrite heart over his sin against God, David also prayed, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit*

within me. Cast me not away from your presence..." (Psalm 51:10). David was not just filled with regret. He was broken over having sinned against God and his desire was to be forgiven so that he could know the nearness of God in His life.

The prophet Isaiah also shows us the kind of heart that God revives and renews. He wrote: *"For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite"* (Isaiah 57:15).

Commenting on this passage, Nancy Leigh Demoss writes: "God has two addresses. The first one comes as no surprise. We are told the high and exalted God of the universe lives in "eternity, in the high and holy place." Yet, the Scripture says, God has another address, and I find this one astounding. He lives with those who have a "humble and contrite spirit." Generally, we would think of kings as being comfortable with the high and mighty, with the wealthy and the successful. But this King chooses to dwell with those who are contrite and humble."

Brothers and sisters, the salvation that Paul is speaking of is God drawing near to the broken and contrite of heart. You see, when God draws near, His presence and power changes us from the inside out.

Notice that Paul goes on to describe specific ways that the godly grief that produces repentance changed the Corinthians: *"For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter"* (2 Corinthians 7:11).

To summarize, Paul explains that their godly grief produced an earnestness and an eagerness to clear themselves. This doesn't mean that they earnestly were trying to defend themselves. Rather, they desired to be open and honest about matters that Paul may not have been aware of. This demonstrated their continual respect for Paul's apostolic authority.

Additionally, Paul highlights that their godly grief produced indignation or righteous anger at the wrong being committed, and fear, which likely speaks of a revived awe and reverence for God. Furthermore, he speaks of their renewed longing and zeal to do the right thing which seems to have resulted in punishment or the exercising of church discipline. All of this, Paul explains, demonstrated that they had proved themselves innocent in the matter or no longer guilty of sin.

It's importance to note here that godly grief, which produced repentance, doesn't just lead to a restored relationship to God, but also to a restored relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We come now to our final point:

3. Restoration is the harvest that is reaped from godly grief

After describing the fruit of their genuine repentance, Paul continues: *“So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. ¹³ Therefore we are comforted.”* (2 Corinthians 7:12-13).

In a previous letter, Paul rebuked the Corinthians for allowing the sin of a sexually immoral man to go unchecked. When Paul makes reference in verse 12 to a person who wronged someone else in the church, some commentators believe Paul was speaking of the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5. Other commentators believe he was speaking of another incident recorded in a subsequent letter of which we do not know the details.

But whoever Paul is speaking of, Paul explains that his primary aim in writing the previous letter was not merely about a person who wronged someone else, but about his relationship with the church being fully restored. He wanted their earnestness for him that he previously saw in them to match the earnestness that he had for them.

Remember, Paul received reports that some in the church were calling his fitness for ministry into question. For this and other reasons, some in his ministry team, like Titus, were also concerned about how the Corinthians would respond to Paul's severe letter. Would they receive Paul's instructions as coming for their father in the faith, or as someone who is sticking their nose where it doesn't belong?

Beloved, a heart of true repentance before God, will be seen in that we will have a great zeal and love for those whom God has placed over us to care for our souls. This zeal and respect for those who minister God's word to us and are over us in the Lord is a key mark of spiritual maturity.

In the case of the church of Corinth, their humble and godly response to Paul's letter had demonstrated their loving loyalty to Paul, just as he had hoped it would.

Notice that the Apostle John also explained in his letter that the depth of our relationship with God is vitally connected to the depth of our relationship with other believers. He wrote: *"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7).

"Brokenness in the life of a believer, Demoss explains, has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension—it goes two ways. First, a broken man or woman walks in transparent honesty and humility before God. However, it is not enough that we be humble and broken before God. Invariably, our relationship with God is reflected in our relationships with others. A person who has been broken before God will also be humble and broken before others. One writer has likened our lives to a house with a roof and walls. For our hearts to be revived, the roof must come off (brokenness toward God), and the walls must come down (brokenness toward man)."

Now after explaining that his goal for writing his letter was more than correction, but also for their restoration, which brought him great comfort, Paul continues: *"And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by*

you all. ¹⁴ For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵ And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶ I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you” (2 Corinthians 7:13-16).

Although Paul learned of serious problems in the church of Corinth which included opposition to his apostolic authority, he never gave up on them. Instead, in verse four and again in verse 14, Paul boasted about them.

Although they wavered in their faith and devotion, Paul knew first hand of the grace of God at work in their lives. Moreover, he knew what the grace and love of God in Christ did in his own life and continued to do. Therefore, he remained spiritually optimistic and confident in the faith of the Corinthians.

Likewise, when, like Paul, you have a heart full of God’s love and grace, you will not only be patient with the faults of others, God will use you to bring out the best in them.

When, like Paul, you do not lose sight of the grace of Christ in your life, you will not be like the son in the parable of the prodigal. He resented that his father restored his wayward son who came home with a heart of repentance.

Rather, you will rejoice and be comforted when others are restored to a right relationship with God, even if they have wronged you in the past. When you know the grace of God, you will be ready to step up to be an instrument of God’s restoring grace.

Notice that in verse 13, Paul explains that he was not only comforted by their godly response to his letter, but also because Titus’ spirit was refreshed by the Corinthians.

Concerning Titus, he further writes in verse 14: *“For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame.”*

It's very possible that Titus, knowing the problems in the church of Corinth, had some serious reservations about going there, not to mention that he was also delivering Paul's letter of reproof. But with Paul's grace filled encouragement, Titus sets off to fulfill his assignment and as a result became a two-way channel of God's refreshing and restoring grace.

As Paul explained in verses 15-16, whatever reservations Titus had, was turned into rejoicing. While he experienced the grace of God at work as he shared the letter and saw their response, Titus' love for the Corinthians increased.

Moreover a "mutually deep friendship developed between Titus and the Corinthians. They came to revere him, treating him "with fear and trembling" as a messenger of God himself" (Kent Hughes). And in turn, when Titus returned to Paul with news of God's work of grace among the Corinthians, Paul was greatly comforted.

Discouragement can sometimes come to faithful believers who are willing to speak truth in love and put themselves in a position to be instruments God's reconciling and restoring grace. They can easily get the blues when their labor in the Lord doesn't appear to be making a difference or is rejected.

But they are comforted when they see the fruits of repentance. Those faithful believers who often seek to give encouragement are often in most need of encouragement themselves.

Conclusion

Jesus, who though He was rich, yet for our sake became poor so that we through His poverty might become rich, draws near to the broken and heals the crushed in spirit. And not only does He restore those who give Him their broken hearts, He does His best grace work through those who are recipients of His restoring and reconciling grace.

Is there someone in your life that God wants you to reach out to, even someone who may have wronged you, so that He might use you as an instrument of His comfort? Don't avoid the hard conversations. Trust the grace of God to use you to minister His grace to others for their healing and to the honor and glory of Jesus.

Discussion Guide

Good Grief

2 Corinthians 7:8-16

Main idea: God is drawn to brokenness and He restores the one who is contrite in heart.

Review

What does the expression “good grief” imply and how is it commonly used? How does this differ from the “godly grief” Paul writes about (2 Corinthians 7:8-9)?

Frederick Buechner was quoted in the sermon, “While steeling yourself against the harsh realities of life may protect you from some pain, that same steel can become bars that keep you from being transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.” What was he suggesting and how does it relate to the “godly grief” Paul writes about?

Assess

Paul wrote, “For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while” (2 Corinthians 7:8). Did Paul regret writing his last letter to Corinth or not? Why or why not?

What motivated Paul to write the letter that caused grief and what was the Apostles aim (or goal) for writing it?

What did the godly grief produce in the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 7:10-11) and how does it differ from worldly grief?

Although Paul was led to write the Corinthians a previous letter that caused them grief, how did he feel towards those he wrote to and how did he express it? (See 2 Corinthians 7:12-16) Why?

Apply

When experiencing the type of grief that the Corinthians were subject to, do you view it as “good grief” or “godly grief”? How do you respond? Why?

When it is necessary, do you have the hard conversations with those who need to hear it or do you tend to avoid them because it’s too uncomfortable or painful?

If you have had these types of hard conversations, was your intention simply to point out the faults of that person, or was your aim to lead them towards repentance and restoration? How is this done?

Pray

Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based prayer