



GRACE CHURCH

A Formula For Joy

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

Grace Church | 2.2.19

Morning church, so good to be with you. In our passage today we will be exploring the joys of communal comfort, or how we bring comfort to one another in Christ. And before we dive in I just wanted to say that there is no other body of Christ I would rather be with than you this morning. God is good in that when he gives us his Son, he also gives us one another.

Let me go right out and say it: our sermon this morning is for all those who feel joy slipping through their fingers. Our sermon is for all those who have perhaps feel a great burden trying to work their way out of despair or depression. It's for all those who feel lonely. I think it's fair to say that in the great scope of Christian history we have numerous examples of great men and women of God who have felt dark dark nights. Call it depression or despair, but it's not foreign to Christianity. Many of you know that the Christian I have studied the most is Charles Spurgeon, who was a famous Victorian Preacher. Spurgeon was very enigmatic: he had a large sense of humor to match his large, rather jolly sized frame. He never took himself too serious, he never seemed timid, definitely not in his preaching. Anyone who has read his sermons or studied his legacy knows just how impactful his ministry was. But Spurgeon had dark night, and he often felt as if he was the only one, that his darkness was the darkest. Once, when preaching to the largest gathered crowd in London on any given Sunday, Spurgeon told his congregation from the pulpit: "I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extreme wretchedness as I go to."¹ *Extreme wretchedness*. That's quite the descriptor, is it not? In describing his depression, the poet-theologian Gerard Manley Hopkins said of most his mornings: "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day",² and of most relationships: "to seem the stranger lies my lot".³ In other words, often we are so joyless that we wake in the morning and instead of seeing the light of a new day, we feel as if the sun never rose to push back the dark.

I have no doubt that all of you have been in this place for one reason or the other. And even if you do not feel it so dramatically, I know we feel so often the loss of joy. The title of our sermon series in 2 Corinthians, as you know, is "Paradox of Weakness". And we've done a great job really exploring that theme so far, and we've talked often about the reality of our weakness both in body and in mind. And in speaking so openly about our weakness, I think it can be easy for sinful people like us to teeter on the edge of despair. Instead of being "sorrowful and always rejoicing" as Paul

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12.

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, "I Wake and Feel"

³ Hopkins, "To Seem the Stranger".



describes it, we are just sorrowful, full-stop. Instead of “unknown, yet well known”, we just feel “unknown”. We confront our weakness, sure, but that leads us to despair and darkness and joylessness.

And so we live as people constantly in need of comfort. Burdened by sin, burdened by responsibility, burdened by failure. And so whether it’s depression or really just normal life, we, like the Corinthians in our text, could use some comfort, some good news. A warm hug, if you will. And this is exactly where Paul goes in our text this morning. He does not want the Corinthians to feel overly burdened. He has made his case to them, and now he only wants their encouragement and comfort. Notice what Paul says in **verse 6**. God, who comforts the *downcast*. That word downcast shows us the state of Paul in Macedonia. Downcast, depressed, dark, lonely. He’s been to the valley of deep darkness, but as we will see, it’s actually the Corinthians that helped pull him out! And he can’t let them forget that: his aim is their comfort and joy. And that is our aim this morning. For the lonely, the depressed, the disenchanting, we see in our text a formula for joy.

And here it is, for all you math nerds: (Honest Community + Godly Grief) x Comfort = Joy.

In our text today, we have three actors playing out this formula: Paul, Titus, and the Corinthians. So what we want to do this morning is walk through our text, taking note of where we see the elements of our formula through our actors, and then we will close with some pastoral charges.

Honest Community

Let’s look first at Paul’s confession in **verses 2-3**. If you remember back from two weeks ago when pastor Buck preached, after Paul describes the paradox of his ministry: all the afflictions and sorrow he faced, and yet the joy and power he lives with, he asks the Corinthians to “widen their hearts” to him in **6:13**. Here in verse 2 we see a repetition of that request: “make room in your hearts for us”, Paul says. What does he mean by that here? Well, if you remember, a large portion of the letter of 2 Corinthians consists of Paul working to repair his relationship with the Corinthians that was previously strained by his “severe letter” which called out sin in their midst and also by the false teachers that some were believing which spoke out against Paul and caused a rift between him and the Corinthians. And in many ways, the letter of 2 Corinthians is both Paul’s defense of his ministry and the gospel of Christ, but also an olive branch to his brothers and sisters in Corinth. He wants them to know his true heart, straight from his mouth. This is why he says in **verse 2**: “we have wronged no one, corrupted no one, taken advantage of no one”. And he is not saying this to condemn them, as if the Corinthians were the ones still under condemnation. No, Paul clarifies that in **verse 3**. Just as the Corinthians should hold nothing against Paul, Paul holds nothing against the Corinthians. He doesn’t condemn them, rather he desires more than anything else that the gospel which reconciles men to God would also reconcile them to each other. The Corinthians are very dear to him, in his heart: he knows that they both will share the same death and in the resurrection to come, they will share in new life. Paul makes his intentions clear: he loves the Corinthians. Look in **verse 4** again: he says he has *great pride* in them.



So what does Paul mean by his request? With honesty and boldness, he is pleading with the Corinthians not only to be reconciled to God, but with wide open hearts to be reconciled to him as well. And remember, this comes right after an admonition to unyoke themselves from the unbelieving world. Paul is saying: get rid of all the idols of you heart, and make room for us there. You are unequally yoked to the world, but you are equally yoked to me! Come and be reconciled. Here Paul is making a strong argument for one of the elements of our formula: *honest community*.

Honest community takes the example of Paul and hides nothing. No weakness, no sorrow, no sadness. Honest community is a community of wide open hearts, of free flowing love. Once we have cleared out the idols of our heart, it's not as if we are left alone with no partnership in the world. No, we are given over to the church: the community who is unafraid to be honest with one another, to open our hearts to one another, who is unafraid of our weakness and our failures. Honest community comes from a pure heart, like Paul: no desiring to take advantage of anyone or trick anyone or make yourself look better than you are. So here we have a wonderful question to ask ourselves: are we an honest community of faith? Think of your brothers and sisters in this church, your fellow members. Do you trust one another? Is there room in your heart to be inconvenienced, to be honest, to bear one another's burdens?

I like how fitting it is that this month for our discipleship plan we read Ray Ortlund's little green book "the Gospel", because this is exactly what the book is about. In his book, Ortlund gives us another little formula: ***gospel + safety + time = a healthy church community***. This is spot on, and the same kind of culture that Paul is modeling and arguing for here. He has spilt plenty of ink defending the gospel, a gospel that strips away pride and preaches good news for bad people by the perfect life and work of Jesus. Image after image he has given them in his letter of how the gospel seeps into their expectations and reveals the glory of God. And now he is reminding them of the kind of safety the gospel brings. Safety to be weak and not self-glorious. Safety to have wide open hearts, free of fear of condemnation as all condemnation is heaped on Christ and not on one another. No manipulation or accusation or mistrust. And time: how terrible we are at this. You must remember that Paul's letter to the Corinthians are not sent by Amazon Prime. These things take time. He has been laboring with the Corinthians for *years* of gradual growth in godliness. So it is with us: we are patient with one another, because God is patient. Are we cultivating or deterring a culture of gospel, safety, and time? Are we widening our hearts to one another? If we aren't, we will never receive the comfort and joy of God, because as we will see next, the way that comfort travels from God to his people is *through* his people.

Comfort

Look what this honest community accomplishes in Paul's life. Read again **verses 4-5**. Notice first Paul's affliction. In Macedonia, he is waiting to hear from Titus news of the Corinthians. Remember, he has sent them a letter that he is afraid has hurt the Corinthians, and he is eager to hear how they have responded. But Titus is delayed, and so Paul is left with his anxieties. Not only



is he fighting fear without from his enemies and accusers, he is fighting fear from within. His own mind betrays him and his own heart pulls him towards doubt. Everyday that he waits for Titus to arrive is like torture! His body and his mind are spent. No doubt he spent many nights in urgent prayer for God to give him comfort.

And so we find in **verses 6-7**, God answers his prayers in two ways. First, God sent him Titus. Paul had been waiting for Titus for quite a while, and must have been overjoyed to see him, truly regardless of whether the news of the Corinthians was good or bad. Titus was like a son in the faith to Paul, and the community they had together was incredibly close. When Paul was downcast, God didn't send him a motivational speech. He sent him a brother in Christ. That should have meaning for us. Paul needed a hug, we might say, and he received the embrace of God *through* the embrace of a member of the body of Christ.

Secondly, Paul receives comfort through the Corinthians. Notice the sequence of the language in verse 7: Paul receives comfort by the comfort that Titus has when Titus was with the Corinthians. Remember, this is the first news Paul has of Corinth in quite a while. And it's good news: the Corinthians have already begun to repair their relationship with Paul: they long for him, mourn for him, are full of zeal for him. All this serves to give Paul joy, so he "rejoices" all the more. All this adds up to an understanding of Christian comfort that is reciprocal to the core. It's kind of like when Samuel, our church partner from Sheffield, came to visit us last Summer. I'd never met him, but his heart was really wide open to us and community was built quickly. And Samuel brought with him news of Ross, who we do know. As Samuel relayed the comfort that Ross had been to him, I was comforted it. It was as if Ross was there with me too. That's like what Paul is experiencing. He receives comfort through the conduit of the honest community of Christ comforting one another.

Take a good look around, church. The solution to our joy is found in one another. We cannot get the comfort and joy we need and crave unless we widen our hearts to make room for the body of Christ, because the body of Christ is the conduit, the highway, the vessel, for the comfort and joy of God. We are all little conductors of God's grace to one another. The electric shock of joy comes from the glory of God in the face of Christ, but it travels through us. This is why we need each other so desperately. To isolate ourselves from the community of faith is to unhitch ourselves from the primary source of spiritual comfort and rejoicing.

Skip down to **verses 13-14** and you will see the culmination of this comfort. Everyone gets some: Paul, Titus, and even the Corinthians. Titus has great joy, because his spirit was refreshed by the Corinthians. He learned to love them while he was with them. And so Paul ends this section by praising Titus, look at his love for him! All our boasting about him is proven true, he says. This due is the real deal. But for however much Paul loves Titus, Titus loves the Corinthians even more, **verse 15**. The time that Titus has spent with the Corinthians, even though they are far from perfect, has grown his heart for them immensely, creating a culture of safety and love. All of this culminates in Paul's utmost rejoicing, because through Titus' joyful report, he now has "complete confidence" in the Corinthians. What more can be said? The ministry of reconciliation that



reconciles God to man has done its work. Through the honesty of community, comfort has come to all and relationships have been strengthened and restored. Joy is the marker for all three of our parties, not despair.

But we are still missing one piece of the puzzle. We know that Paul has himself already said that he has not been hiding anything or ashamed of anything. His heart is wide open. But what about the Corinthians? What was it about the Corinthians that comforted and overjoyed Titus so much, and in turn Paul? We see it in **verse 15**. They received Titus with “fear and trembling.” This is what was so comforting to Titus, the way they received him. In other words, they received him with humility and repentance. They received him with fear of God, with trembling hearts ready to admit their fault and seek reconciliation. Paul calls this kind of heart posture “Godly Grief” and it is an essential part of our formula.

Godly Grief

So let’s jump back to **verse 8-9**. Here we find the true source of Paul’s comfort through Titus. Paul was terribly worried that his harsh letter had broken his relationship with the Corinthians. He says at one point, he even regretted sending it. He knows it made them grieve: it was painful to hear about their sin and their failure. No one likes to hear about their deficiencies, and oftentimes the way they respond to sin addressed even in love is to put up their defences. In fact, a primary breaker of worldly relationships is just that: one party insults the other by pointing out a flaw in love. And this is Paul’s fear: I have wounded them too much, and in their immaturity they will reject me and therefore reject the gospel. This is what kept him up at night. Paul knew that if they responded with apathy or with anger to his needed rebuke, it would be a sign that the gospel had not taken root in their lives.

But Paul no longer regrets sending his letter, because the news he has received from Titus is good news. He knows his letter grieved the Corinthians, but now he knows that what they experienced was godly grief, not worldly grief. They suffered no loss through his letter, but in fact only benefited. Not because of their grief, but because of what their grief *produced*. And what does their grief produce?

Verse 10. Repentance leading to salvation! It would be silly for Paul to regret his necessary rebuke, because the way the Corinthians responded shows that it was effective to its end: it produced godly grief, they repented of their sin, and showcased that they were true believers.

Here is the dichotomy in view: worldly grief and godly grief. One produces repentance, one produces death. And the kind of grief that we experience acts as a test case for the genuineness of our salvation. Remember last week, when we talked about how many Corinthians were linking themselves to idolatrous relationships? They wanted to maintain the name of Christian, and yet show no remorse for the way they lived their lives. This is exactly what we see in our world today, especially in our region. We have created an oxymoron: the nominal Christian. We have thousands



of people in our city and our state and in our nation who claim the name of Christ and yet never experience any sort of godly grief over their sin. The result is that they never repent. They have grief, yes, but their grief is worldly grief. They grieve over the effects of sin: that they lose status when they offend others, or they feel guilty. This kind of grief is rampant in our world. Instead of lamenting sin as an offense against God, worldly grief laments sin as a sin against self. Sin is only to be condemned and grieved if it stops me from getting what I really want.

And the reason Paul is so comforted and so overjoyed is because by showing repentance, Paul sees that the Corinthians are not nominal Christians. They have within their heart the Spirit-wrought grief that leads to life. Church, we are in desperate need of men and women who take their sin seriously. Honest community leads to exposure of sin. It's going to happen. And when sin is exposed, it hurts. It's not fun. But we are in desperate need of men and women who realize, like David in Psalm 51, that it is against a holy God that they have sinned. We need men and women who, with fear and trembling, let their grief over sin lead to real repentance.

You see, it is possible to be sorry and not repent. Repentance means a full scale rejection of sin, a desire to war against it, to turn your back on it. You are so grieved and hurt that you would do anything to kill your sin. Look further at the posture of the Corinthians in **verse 11**. The Corinthians are earnest in repentance, not apathetic or indifferent. They are eager to clear themselves. Before, they didn't care about Paul. Now, they seek with eager hearts to prove themselves innocent before. They have holy indignation, anger that they were so foolish as to approve the one sinning against Paul and participating in his sin. They are full of fear, aware of their offense before a holy God, and full of longing to make things right. They have hearts of zeal, nothing can stop them from making right what was wronged, and they are full of punishment, meaning they are no longer letting their sin slide but want to see it dealt with once and for all.

Here is a surefire way to test if your grief over sin is godly or worldly. Are you earnest in exposing it, or reluctant? Are you eager to be right before God, or only sad because you didn't get your way? Are you full of indignation and disgust over your sin, or do you see it as not a big deal, just a little slip up? Are you full of fear of God, or simply fear of being found out by man? Are you full of zeal to see your sin killed, or full of zeal to seem more upright and religious? Are you ready to put your sin to death and face any punishment, or do you seek to avoid the effects of your sinfulness? When was the last time you wept over your sin? And not wept because it caused you harm, but because it offended God and hurt your brothers and sisters in Christ? My prayer is that we might be a *weeping* people, a people of fear and trembling and godly grief.

Notice too Paul's words to the Corinthians in **verse 12**. Take note of what Paul is saying. He is telling the Corinthians that he called out their sin for a very specific purpose. The Corinthians sin was that they sat back and supported a man who mocked and slandered Paul and the gospel. Paul writes to call them out, but he doesn't do it for the sake of the man slandering him. And Paul doesn't write for his own sake, so that he can feel better about himself. No, he writes for the sake of the Corinthians. He writes so that they would repent, just as they have, and that they would rejoice in light of their repentance. He writes, look again at verse 12, so that their earnest



repentance would be revealed to *them*. So they could look back and say: I am so glad we turned from our sin.

You see, church, how all of this is coming together? We are a people in need of comfort and joy. And yet we are also a people who want to shy away from confrontation in love. We are afraid to hold each other accountable, afraid to confess our sin in public, afraid to come out of the darkness. But we've forgotten that it's through the everyday "severe letters" like Paul's that life springs. The church that confesses and repents together is the church that loves and lives together. The church that is unafraid to live openly and honestly is the church that receives comfort and joy in every circumstance.

Let me now move to some pastoral reflections for you.

1. Do not hide from the honesty of community, for it is your conduit to comfort and companionship.

Simply put: so many of us need to come out of hiding. We are looking for comfort in all the wrong places, and in the providence of God he has made it so that we receive it through our brothers and sisters in Christ. IN all of this we remember Christ, who became closer than a brother. He is the God of all comfort, and it's precisely because he died in our place and unified us to him that we are closest to Christ when we are closest to one another.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Boenhoffer talks about how so often we fail to confess our sins to one another because we just think: "I'll just confess to God." But when we say that, we are forgetting that God has given us our brothers and sisters as representatives of himself. And so oftentimes we end up not confessing our sins to God, but just to ourselves. The only way to make sure we are truly confessing, says Boenhoffer, is to go to our brothers with our sin:

Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person.⁴

Brothers and sisters, we have a great opportunity with one another. As we are all in Christ, we have the privilege and responsibility to act as conduits of Grace. Not to stand in place of Christ, but to represent him for one another. Be looking for opportunities where you can do the most loving thing you could ever do for another Christian: to lead them to repentance and to offer them the forgiveness of the gospel given freely in Jesus.

⁴ Dietrich Boenhoffer, *Life Together*



2. Do not reject the grief of loving rebuke when it comes, for it is your door to repentance and life.

In Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus makes one of the most striking comments in the New Testament. It upsets our sensibilities, takes us off guard. Here is what he says:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

What does Jesus mean by this? Many things for sure, but at least this: the gospel is offensive. It requires the grief of loving rebuke. Before “Christ came into the world to save sinners” is ever good news, we must believe that we are the foremost of all sinners. And this kind of news is like a sword. The call to repentance will divide, as some respond and some do not. It's divisions go as deep as father and son, mother and daughter. But for all those in Christ, we love the sound of the sword of Christ, because it means that Jesus has come to put our sin to death. It will be painful, it will be full of grief, but Jesus did not go up to Calvary to bleed and die so that you can coddle your sin. He went up to the cross so that he might kill your sin. The people of God are those then that welcome loving rebuke, that are so quick to repent, because they know that what is best for them is the death of sin in their lives. With death comes life in Christ, and Christ is best of all.

3. Do not forget the grief-bearer is Christ, for he is your fountain of joy.

Let's remember our formula again, a formula for joy.

(Honest Community + Godly Grief) x Comfort = Joy.

In other words, honest community can't help but bring godly grief. All of this brings an abundance of reciprocal comfort, overflowing and multiplying until it produces joy. This is all well and good, but here is my last reminder and one final fear I have. We are so prone to be fixers and doers. We see something like this, and we think “great! I can do this. I'll really invest in my community group, I'll really start thinking about my sin, and I'll start receiving and giving comfort.” AND so we get to work, but we forget where our strength comes from. I know I've given you a formula, I've put it on the screen. But there is no “formula” for joy apart from Jesus. He is the goal, he is the aim. We are not aiming for community for community's sake. We aim for community that shows JESUS. We aren't here to kill sin just so we can feel good about how holy we look. We repent so that we might receive intimacy and communion with Jesus. He is the goal. We don't comfort one another just so we can sleep better at night. We comfort one another because we are so enamored with the embrace of Christ that we must embrace one another too.



So many in your life need comfort. You might need it. But we are not the solution to our need of comfort, and neither is our nifty formula. Jesus is. Isaiah 53 reminds us who he is: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" it says.

Friends, it is my joy to close with a retelling of that age old story, the one you've hopefully heard again and again. The gospel of Jesus is good news, good news that says that although you were in darkness and everlasting sorrow, full of worldly grief that leads to death and chained to sin, God loved you and sent the God-man Jesus Christ to take your burdens and your sorrows and your grief up to a hill to be nailed to Roman cross and into a Jewish grave to be buried, never to be seen of or heard of again. All this he did for your freedom, that by united you to him and giving you his Spirit you might receive joy for your sorrow and joy for your grief.

Are you lonely? Depressed? Broken down? Christ bore it. He is your formula, your solution. As we come for communion, we participate in his heavenly comfort. And look how it comes to you: by means of your brothers and sisters in Christ. What a beautiful picture, church, As we move to communion, keep your eyes wide open. Through the means of your church family, take your grief over sin and put it on Jesus and receive comfort and joy instead.

