



2 Corinthians 2:5-17 **What's That Smell?**

Summary: When there is conflict in our relationships there is often confusion as well, our motives and actions may seem like the fragrance of life or death to people depending on their perspectives.

When someone messes up, I mean, really blows it – how do you typically respond? Are you the kind of person who steps up and speaks up, ready and willing to confront the person and call them out? Or, are you more likely to let things go, hope they realize what they did was wrong, and that they fix it on their own? Are you more likely to remember what they did and allow it to influence your attitude today, or to let things go and try to forget about the past?

The truth of the matter is, there's probably a little bit of both extremes in each of us depending on who messed up and exactly what they did.

Well, this morning we look at how the church in Corinth handled an issue and see what we can learn about being the person who messes up and about being the people who have to respond, because at some point we're going to find ourselves in each category.

We pick up where we left off last week, with the apostle Paul defending his decision not to visit the church in Corinth where there had been some drama recently.

People there had two main theories about why he stayed away. Some figured he just wasn't that reliable; he wasn't a man of his word. We looked at what Paul had to say about that accusation last week. Others thought he stayed away because he was still upset by the whole situation, that he was grieved by what was happening and just didn't want to be around them again.

Well, Paul says that's not the case with him. Read with me:

5 But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe.

Paul says I'm not holding any grudges. I didn't take it personally, it didn't offend me, that's not why I stayed away. If anything, the situation had a negative impact on all of you down in Corinth.

Now, it's not entirely clear who this person is that caused the problems, or what exactly they did to mess up. Some people say it's the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians who was having an intimate relationship with his own stepmom.

Others think it may have been someone who opposed Paul the last time he came to town, someone who resisted him and his leadership and authority and perhaps was trying to split the church to draw people to himself.

Whoever it was, they initially refused to change. They didn't care what other people said. They wanted to keep doing their own thing. And so, Paul had told the church, they needed to exercise church discipline – call out the sin, and call the sinner to repent. And if he wouldn't, the church needed to treat him like someone outside of the church, and not pretend like he was still a committed member and everything was fine.

The good news was, the church had recently dealt with the situation, they took a firm stance against the man. And the *really* good news is: after some amount of time, the man chose to repent. He saw the wrong of his ways and asked for forgiveness.

So what do you do now, after there's been this big drama, this big blow up involving someone at church? Well, Paul says, you need to forgive him, and love him, and welcome him back.

6 This punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority *is* sufficient for such a man, 7 so that, on the contrary, you *ought* rather to forgive and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.
8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love to him.

So let's talk for a few minutes about discipline in general and church discipline specifically because some of you have never heard of it before, while some of you have bad memories of discipline done wrong, and others have kind of heard of it but you're not too familiar with how it's done right.

It all gets back to the question I started with – when someone messes up, really blows it in life, how do you typically respond? Are you likely to step up and call them out on their behavior, or are you likely to avoid conflict and just let things go? Well, here's the thing, churches are filled with, and led by, people so they often respond the same ways – they tend to either quickly call people out, or quietly let things go, neither of which is the perfect response.

I think the best thing we can do is let Jesus speak to the issue. Here's what He said:

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Now, I want to point out something important here – Jesus says *if someone sins against you, you should call him out on it*. It's OK to stand up, rebuke them, and say, "That was wrong and you should not have done it." In fact, sometimes when we say, "oh it was no big deal" and we just let things go, it's actually because it's just easier for us to ignore the issue than to speak up, we're trying to avoid conflict to make life easier for us.

But Jesus says you [if your brother sins against you, rebuke him](#). Of course, notice the very next thing He says: [And if he repents, forgive him](#). Even if it happens again, and again, and again. Because it will.

We're all a work in progress. No one is perfect. I sin against people as a pastor, as a husband, as a father, and a friend. I'm not the perfect image of Jesus, and neither are you. So, we all need room to repent, and fail again, *in the same way*, and then repent *again*. The goal is to fall down forward – a little bit farther down the path than the last time you fell. If you fall down backward, that's a bigger problem, but we're all growing. So, the longer you walk with Jesus the better you should get at seeking forgiveness, and giving it too.

Probably the most famous thing Jesus said about the matter of church discipline is found where? Matthew 18 where He says:

[Matt 18:15](#) “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

Now, there are several principles at work here. First, notice *again* that we should confront sin – [go and tell them their fault](#). But, do it at the lowest possible level – go directly to them. Speak up before things blow up. And if the other person listens and responds well, it's all good. [You've gained your brother](#). If he or she won't respond, then Jesus goes on to give instruction for how to escalate all the way up through the elders and eventually to the entire church and then to put them outside of fellowship.

But notice: *what's the goal?* It's always to gain your brother, or sister, back – to restore fellowship, to restore relationship. That's what we're working toward, that's what we have to keep in sight.

I'll give you one more example:

[Galatians 6:1](#) Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual [restore](#) such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

The purpose of discipline, the purpose of confrontation is always restoration and reconciliation.

This is why you should never discipline when you're angry. When someone does something wrong, says something wrong, sometimes our immediate reaction can be just as sinful as they were. They did something in the flesh, but now we're responding in the flesh as well. And since you have power and positional authority, you're going to use it to teach them a lesson!

OK, but how much of the Jesus in you is evident at that moment? Look this hard, but it's true. Mom and dad, sometimes you sin just as much in your reaction to your child, or more,

than they did when did whatever you're so upset about. Yes, they did something wrong, said something wrong, but your reaction, your decisions, your punishment was entirely emotional, and the emotion wasn't love for the child or a desire to see them grow or be restored, it was "That's it, I've had it!" The kids might need to repent, but mom and dad, you probably need to do it too.

The same thing is true at work if you supervise employees, or coach a team, wherever you find yourself in a position of power and authority – when you use discipline, when you use correction, are you doing it out of frustration or retaliation, or are you doing it out of genuine concern for restoration and growth? Do you want correction or vengeance?

Why is this so important? Because it reflects the gospel! Why does *God* discipline any of *us*? The answer is: because He wants us to stop the wrong things we're doing and come into a relationship with Him.

When we do things that lead us away from Him, things that lead us out of relationship, what does He want ultimately? To hurt us? To make us suffer? No. To help us see, change, and grow, to come back to Him.

So, let's dig into three things that need to happen after sin is confronted and the sinner repents. Speaking of the man in Corinth, Paul says:

*7... you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.
8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him.*

The first thing we see is that when someone repents, they are to be forgiven – again, just like the way God treats us. He doesn't make us earn it or deserve it, He gives it when we ask. This is why you must forgive people as well.

Ephesians 4:32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Around here we like to say that when you repent, you are forgiven fully, freely, and forever. You might have a hard time convincing yourself of it, but it's true and it's one of the best things about the Christian faith.

In fact, John Stott once shared the story of watching a famous British humanist interviewed on television and in a moment of openness and transparency she said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me."

What a horrible place to be. Because, we all feel guilt at times. We feel it deep in our soul, our psyche or conscious if you want to say it that way. But what will you do about it? Can you do anything about it? Yes, you can bring it to Christ and ask for forgiveness. You can be freed from that weight, freed from the sorrow that seems to swallow you up.

Listen to the words of Alan Redpath:

There is nothing that the devil would like to do more than, having exposed the man's sin, to keep on reminding him of it and telling him that he is of no use and never will be of any use, that he is finished for the rest of his life and quite possibly will end in hell. Now I want you to go that man and confirm your love to him by forgiving him and comforting him.¹

Which reminds us, we're on the topic because we're talking about, sin that has been exposed to the church, confronted by the church, but then repented of as well. And the instruction given to the church is to *forgive that person and move on*. As Redpath writes: "to go to that man and confirm your love to him by forgiving him and comforting him."

When someone repents, don't keep piling on the guilt and shame, don't hold a grudge, don't look at them and define them by their past, don't make them stew in it until they've really paid for it. Look at verse 7 again ...[on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive him](#) BECAUSE that's how God treats you – He doesn't make *you* 'pay' for what you've done.

Listen to Redpath again:

There is a kind of forgiveness which is worth literally nothing, in which perhaps the church might welcome the man back into fellowship and then put him on probation for five years or so. His reinstatement is a sort of legalistic welcome which will always remind him that he is a failure, and which will always point a finger of accusation at him, reminding him of what he used to be.²

Friends, don't trap a man or woman, an employee, or a child, in the things they've done – let there be a way for them to come out, a way to change. Don't always remind them of what they used to be.

OK, you say, I know I should do that, but I'm afraid if I forgive them too quickly it will let them off the hook. Well, I understand the impulse, but *they're not getting off the hook* – it's just that their guilt is atoned for – Jesus went to the cross, suffered and died for their sin. *There's nothing else for them to pay for if they repent*, so why are you still holding against them what God has paid for and cleansed?

Here's another reason why it's hard to forgive people – you feel like the pain they caused is being glossed over, whether it's your pain or the pain of someone you love and you think by forgiving that person you're pretending like what happened didn't hurt. Again, I understand that impulse, but *God knows the pain they caused*. God understands the hurt. You have to remember that all sin is ultimately against God.

¹ Redpath, 37.

² Redpath, 38.

This is an important concept you have to get into your head and your heart: it is possible for someone to sin against God and not sin against anyone else. But *it is impossible to sin against someone else and not sin against God*. It's impossible. You have never once been wronged or hurt and it not wrong or hurt God too. So, if He's asking you to forgive it, He's not asking you to do anything He's not doing Himself. And if you have a hard time with it, He says come to Him and walk through it together. He, better than anyone, knows what it's like to be wronged and forgive.

There are still two other things we're called to do for those who repent. Look with me at verse [7... you ought rather to 1\) forgive and 2\) comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.](#)

Now we spoke about this two weeks ago, but there is mind-boggling theological truth here. The word comfort is the word *parakaleo* and it's the exact same root word as *Paraclete* that Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit in John 14. The role of the Holy Spirit is to be our comforter, and now we're called to do the same thing for those who repent.

Christian, it is your job to assist repentant sinners in ways that are necessary for their repentance and growth. It's your job to point them toward the hope of the future when they are overwhelmed by the regrets of the past. It's your job to comfort them and keep them from being swallowed up by sorrow.

And, third,

[8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him.](#)

When someone repents of their sin it is *imperative* that we reaffirm our love for them, that we reinstate them, ratify them, make a conscious and public decision to love them. If we made it clear that they sinned, that they messed up, we need to make it even more clear that they are forgiven and loved. And parents, remember, *obnoxiously obvious love* is the standard we're going for with our kids. Tell those little sinners that they're sinners, and you love them.

They need to know it. We all need to know it.

[9 For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. 10 Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, 11 lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.](#)

Paul wants to be clear – he's not nursing a grudge, there are no loose ends, he has forgiven the sinner and the church needs to as well because Satan is lurking, watching, waiting for his chance.

It is not good to leave someone to sit and stew in sin that has been forgiven. It is a device, a scheme, a tool of Satan. Do not be ignorant of it. Discipline when necessary – confront, call out, but always with an eye toward, and for the purpose of, reconciliation and restoration. When they say I'm sorry, forgive them, and rush back into relationship.

Well, as we come to the end of the chapter, Paul gives one more proof that he's not bothered by the situation in Corinth, but on the contrary, he was been deeply concerned for them and wanted to know how things were going. He says:

12 Furthermore, when I came to Troas to *preach* Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, 13 I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.

We'll learn in chapter 7 that when Paul got to Macedonia, he found Titus who had just returned from Corinth and reported the good news of the sinner's repentance and that all was well.



So now Paul is pumped - he did what he felt God was calling him to do about the situation in Corinth and now he knows it all turned out well so he can't help but go on a divinely inspired rabbit trail about the glories of following and serving God, even in hard times and situations. He bursts out in praise:

14 Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.
15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading to* death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading to* life. And who *is* sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

Paul is excited about the outcome of his ministry. He is excited to know that things have turned out well in Corinth, and he immediately thinks of Christ as a Roman General who has just won the victory in what had been some ugly conflict for a while at the church.

So, he turns to a metaphor based on a Roman triumph, which is actually a technical term for a victory parade through the packed streets of the capital city. It was the highest honor that could be bestowed upon a Roman general – his victory had to meet certain requirements and then be voted on and approved by the Senate. There were only about 300 of these in the history of the Roman Empire. Here's one description:

First came the state officials and the senate. Then came the trumpeters. Then were carried the spoils taken from the conquered land. For instance, when Titus conquered Jerusalem, the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the shew-bread and the golden trumpets were carried through the streets of Rome.



Then came pictures of the conquered land and models of conquered citadels and ships... Then there walked the captive princes, leaders and generals in chains, shortly to be flung into prison and in all probability almost immediately to be



executed. Then came the lictors bearing their rods, followed by the musicians with their lyres; then the priests swinging their censers with the sweet-smelling incense burning in them. After that came the general himself [riding in a chariot]... After him [came] his

family; and finally came the army wearing all their decorations and shouting *Io triumphe!* ... As the procession moved through the streets, all decorated and garlanded, amid the cheering crowds, it made a tremendous day...³

The smell of incense burning as the parade made its way through the city toward the Temple of Jupiter was associated with one of two things depending on your perspective – if you were in front of the general it was the fragrance of your enslavement and impending death, or if you were behind him, it was the fragrance of glory and victory.

Paul says God has made us incense bearers. People should be able to smell us coming, announcing the victory of Christ.

The question is: does that odor represent life and victory and joy to them, or does it represent loss and judgment? Do they love the smell or hate it? The answer depends entirely on how they relate to Christ. Are they following Him, or are they being conquered by Him? Are they marching toward judgment, or have they chosen relationship instead?

We're going to end there this morning, but as we close, there are two things I want you to know: if you are in Christ, you are forgiven, fully, freely, and forever – you need to know that yourself, and make sure you treat others around you the same way. Don't let Satan beat you up, or use you to make others feel beat up after they've confessed their wrongs.

And number two – in the parade of Jesus' triumph, every one of us is on one side of the General or the other – we're either before Him as captives or behind Him as His people.

If you're in front of Him and you can smell your own guilt, shame, and judgement, the good news is, Jesus will still accept your surrender. If you will bow the knee to Him, if you will submit to Him, you can still join Him and come march behind Him. You can find forgiveness fully, freely, and forever, and discover a life that smells that joy and victory, a life built on relationship with Him and the people of His Church – all you have to do is ask.

Let's pray.

³ Barclay, 183-4.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 2:5-17 What's That Smell?

Summary: When there is conflict in our relationships there is often confusion as well, our motives and actions may seem like the fragrance of life or death to people depending on their perspectives.

- When someone messes up or sins, how do you typically respond? Are you more likely to step and confront or, are you more likely to let things go, hope they realize what they did was wrong, and that they fix it on their own?
 - What about that reaction reflects the nature of God? What about it reflects your flesh?
- Paul will later return to the subject of repentance and it's importance. In chapter 7 he writes:
 - *2 Cor 7:10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.*
 - What seven things do you find associated here with godly sorrow?
- Have you ever been swallowed up by sorrow related to sin? How did you recover from it, or have you?
- What is your experience with church discipline? Have you seen it done right, or wrong? Have you seen it at all?
 - What do you learn about church discipline from:
1 Thes 5:14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.
- What should church discipline have in common with any other form of discipline – parents, employers, governments, etc?
- How does discipline reflect the gospel?
- How do you experience God leading you in triumph and diffusing the fragrance of Christ through you? How do you notice people responding to that? How do you notice the fragrance of others?