

27 April 2014

Christ Church

Repentance and Reconciliation (or Good Grief!)

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

1. Apologies or repentance?

Letter sent by the recipient of a parking ticket fine:

*'Nobody is sorrier than me that the police officer had to spend her valuable time writing out a parking ticket on my car. Though from my personal standpoint I know for a certainty that the meter had not yet expired, please accept my expression of deep regret at this unfortunate incident. It is hoped that your dismissal of this ticket will mark both an end and a new beginning for both parties, marked by a mutual resolve to avoid such regrettable situations in future.'*

I'll leave you to sort out whether that was a real apology or not! What I do think is that we can find making apologies and sometimes receiving them very hard and even harder to receive and accept repentance.

It may be that you are wondering if there is a difference and if so what that difference is. That is where our passage this morning helps us. Thank God for the Apostle Paul because he knows what repentance is all about. There is a key verse in the passage, which we find at verse 10: *'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.'* There is already a hint there that being sorry or offering an apology may not be the same as

repenting, but perhaps we are jumping the gun a bit. We need to see first what Paul is talking about. First it has to be said that what Paul is talking about is a practical issue between himself and the Corinthian church. We tend in the church to think of sin as being something between us and God, but there is usually a conflict between people involved which needs to be dealt with. So what Paul writes about here is the human side of when things go wrong within a church. We may draw from it insights about our relationship with God, but here it is primarily about the relationship between Christians.

He is writing here about something that had gone wrong in the relationship between himself and the Corinthian church. We first encountered this way back in chapter 2. We don't know what had gone wrong, but whatever it had been, Paul could not leave it go but had to raise it with the church in Corinth. He had intended to visit but had eventually decided that would just inflame the situation more and wrote a letter instead.

Paul tells how he was full of sorrow as he wrote the letter we believe is now lost: *'That letter I sent to you came out of great distress and anxiety; how many tears I shed as I wrote it!'* 2 Cor 2:4 and it seems that he was troubled for various reasons; firstly because he thought that the church at Corinth might think that he had wronged them by speaking ill of them *'Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one.'* V2; secondly, because he had entrusted the letter to Titus to deliver to the church, and had expected him to return with a reply when Paul reached Troas *'Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there'* 2 Cor 2:12-13; and thirdly because he was so concerned about the welfare of the

church in Corinth if they should react in the wrong way to what he had written *'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death'*. 2 Cor 7:10

## 2. Paul's rebuke

Paul has something to say about why he wrote as he did. He knew that what he had to write would be upsetting, not just for him but also for the Corinthian church. He knew that he risked losing the people in that church for good if what he said were taken the wrong way. That would have been absolutely desperate for him. In Chapter 2 he writes that he wrote the letter *'For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.'* 2 Cor 2:4 But now in chapter 7 he writes, *'Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while - yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.'* 2 Cor 7:8-9

We are not good at rebuking. Most of us try to avoid it because we don't want to upset anyone. There are some of us who rebuke a lot and simply cause upset. But what if there is something that is so serious that simply cannot be left to fester?

Our relationships with other people matter and they have to be put right if our relationship with God is to be right. We can't expect to confess our sins to God and receive forgiveness and leave it at that. We have also to be put right with those we may

have wronged. Jesus said, *'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.'* Matt 5:23-24

So what kind of rebuke is a good rebuke? Paul tells us that it is one that aims for a change in heart. (verse 9). That is the key to this. If we criticise each other, the aim must be to benefit the person being criticised. It should not be because we are irritated and it should not be destructive. Instead it should be because of our concern for the other person and it should be constructive so that they can move on.

### **3. Repentance or remorse?**

Then we come to the key verse of the passage. : *'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.'* v10.

Shall we look at the matter of why worldly sorrow should bring death? It sounds rather drastic doesn't it. And why is it different from Godly sorrow?

The obvious difference is that worldly sorrow brings death but godly sorrow doesn't. God has made humans in his image. God is a God of holiness, justice and love. So whether we like it or not, when humans do the wrong thing, when we sin, when we ignore God and live as if he doesn't exist - our consciences tell us there's a problem, this is how God has wired us up and this is why we crave

forgiveness and feel guilt. But when this guilt doesn't receive forgiveness, it will usually end up in self-pity. Life is so unfair.

On the other hand there are people who are so enslaved by sin that they've suppressed their consciences to the point where any remorse they may have is empty and fleeting. This sorrow is worth nothing and will usually end up as self-vindication and self-righteousness. I have done nothing wrong. If they are sorry at all it is more likely that it is because they have been found out rather than any genuine remorse at what they have done.

Why does this lead to death? Because at the end of the day it is because there is no recognition or acceptance that there has been any sin. We may know that something has gone wrong, but it is seen more that that is the way we have been made, that it seems that life is unfair when we suffer the consequences of what has gone wrong as if it isn't our fault at all, or we secretly quite like doing the wrong thing and it is OK as long as we can get away with it.

Think of the letter about the parking fine. On the face of it, an apology. But no acceptance that there had been any wrongdoing - except perhaps that a ticket had been issued. But the real wrongdoing - most probably - was on the part of the motorist. And if you can ignore your wrongdoing like that, then that is the kind of worldly sorrow that can only lead to death. There is no acceptance of one's sin, any guilt remains unforgiven, there is trust only in one's own wits, not a relationship with God.

Worldly sorrow in fact shows up that God is good and just, right to condemn what is wrong; because there is a kind of guilt, even if only when you are found out. It shows that people are at fault, they have sinned and are guilty, but they refuse to turn to Jesus

and so be saved, they remain dead in their sins. Their worldly sorrow leads to death because ultimately physical and spiritual death are the results of living a life that refuses to accept the forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ.

But now take a look at godly sorrow, or good grief if you prefer. This is the kind of sorrow that Paul now knew that the Corinthian church had shown, because of what they had done and how they had treated his messenger Titus.

This kind of sorrow is a genuine sorrow at your own wrongdoing. Someone has written, *'You can always say sorry, but the real apology is when you hear the sadness in their voice and see the look in their eyes and they realise they have hurt themselves just as much as you.'*

Why is this a godly sorrow? Because it is the kind of sorrow that recognises that you have done something wrong. It also recognises that you are not the brilliant, good person you really want to be but rather that you stand in need of forgiveness and you have a desire to change.

When I was little we were told that repentance was little different from being sorry. That is not the case. Being sorry comes first. It is a sign of your conviction that you need forgiveness. It only then that you can begin to repent. (John Wesley's preaching - first sin, then salvation). So in our relationships with others and with God, repentance is about desiring the changes that need to happen in our lives.

But we don't need to stop at repentance. Paul tells us that *'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation...'* It leads to salvation, because we can be forgiven. It leads to salvation because Jesus died on the Cross to save us from our sin. It does

not lead to death as worldly sorrow does, because Jesus died for us instead. That means too that we need have no regrets as our sins have been dealt with. Just to clarify, of course physically we will all die, but as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, *'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'*

We can see this happening as 2 Corinthians 7 unfolds. See verse 11: *'See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.'*

The Corinthian church had turned a corner. The sorrow it had felt had caused them to want to change what had been happening. They wanted to see justice done and to put things right. And if there had been mutterings before that perhaps Paul was wrong, they had come out solidly behind the gospel Paul had brought to them. This is godly sorrow leading to repentance.

Repentance isn't just feeling sorry, stopping or even changing your mind. Repentance involves a complete turnaround, a complete change and alteration in your life. Repentance makes an impact and involves actual change. Anything less is at best an empty confession based on cheap grace or at worst an empty worldly sorrow that will trap you and lead to death.

So worldly sorrow is like the "Stop" sign. Your sorrow, guilt and remorse bring you to a stop, but after a moment's reflection you just keep going. The sorrow, guilt and remorse remain with you because the sin remains with you. It isn't dealt with nor forgiven. But godly sorrow and repentance is like the "Wrong way, go back" sign. You meet Jesus at the cross and you receive salvation and the forgiveness of your sins as a free gift of God. But God then

calls you to repent and to live for him and true repentance involves turning around, changing your life and direction, to live a life pleasing to God and to become more like Jesus.

#### **4. The reconciliation**

There is one more stage in the process that Paul describes here. That is the reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthian church. Verses 13 to 16 are full of Paul's joy. Joy that none of the concerns he had had when he had first sent the severe letter, as the Corinthians had taken Paul's criticism's to heart and had done something about them; Titus had returned to Paul full of joy which had in turn filled Paul with joy. And Paul is full of joy too that he can place his confidence totally in the Corinthian church. Isn't this so often the reaction we have when a relationship has gone wrong and we long for it to be mended? And when it is clear that it is mended, aren't we also filled with joy? So too is the joy in God's heart when we return to him and place our trust in him once again. Remember Jesus words in Luke 15, when he tells the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son: *'Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.'* Luke 15:6b-7

*"Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'* Luke 15:9b-10



*'But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*" Luke 15:32

## 5. What about us?

So what does this passage from 2 Corinthians 7 have to say to us? I would suggest 2 things:

- Are we accountable for our actions? A practical suggestion - is there any Christian person you know to whom you would be prepared to be accountable to? Someone whose wisdom you respect and who you take notice of? Could you meet up from time to time support each other in your Christian lives - having the things that maybe are going well but also the things that perhaps are not going so well?
- Are we prepared to express godly sorrow? That is the kind of sorrow that Paul says *brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret*. Like it or not as Christians, society expects a lot from us. We're not perfect but we're expected to live godly lives and this is an expectation that we also find in the Bible. Remember repentance requires change. It's not merely a repeated confession, this would be a stop sign that you come to each Sunday but then move on from and forget from Monday to Saturday.

We do make mistakes. We're not perfect. We've been given salvation as a free gift. But if we're really serious about living up to the standards God sets for his people then we need help. We need God's help, the Spirit's help and we also need the help and love and support of our Christian family and friends.

- Commitment to God and to each other - So how will you respond to this message this morning? Are you committed to becoming more like Jesus, to true repentance and change in your life OR are you just going through the motions and relying on cheap grace? Let's commit to being a church that lives for Jesus and desires to see everyone changing and growing in their love for God and for each other.
- Do you know the joy of relationships restored? Do you still have people - family, friends, maybe even others in Christ Church, where in your relationship there is still unfinished business and where you long for the relationship to be restored? Are you prepared to work at those relationships? Hold onto the vision of the joy Paul enjoyed as he knew the conflict with his beloved church in Corinth was resolved. And know that joy can be yours as well.