

2 Corinthians so far has so far been a letter about criticism – negative criticism and Paul's defence against those from outside the church to discredit him through their judgmentalism and lies. We have seen the doubt, the destruction and the upset caused by the effect of false teachers and lies of a minority on the life of the church. They had sowed doubt. There is so much of this we can see in the contemporary church when we reflect on what Paul says. There really is nothing new when it comes to sin!

The problem I found last week is that I found it quite difficult to do a sermon on judgmentalism and criticism without feeling that I was being critical myself about the contemporary examples I used! And that's the issue. We all have a responsibility to be discerning about life and people, because we need to know what's right or wrong, or what's God's will and way us and what's not. In fact we are called on to test all things: 1 Thess 5:21-22 *Put all things to the test: keep what is good 22 and avoid every kind of evil.* The Bereans were commended their discernment in Acts 17:11 *The people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica. They listened to the message with great eagerness, and every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true.*

Discernment is a fundamental part of our lives as God's people. We have to be discerning of right and wrong, true and false, healthy or unhealthy. Sometimes it seems to me that there's a very fine line between discernment and testing all things, and judgmentalism and negative criticism. There's negative, destructive criticism and positive, constructive criticism and the main difference is the intent behind it. Does it build up the person and/or strengthen their relationship with you – or is the aim to question or challenge their reputation or integrity?

Paul's critics sought to destroy and discredit so we know where they were going. Their aim was to destroy Paul's reputation and damage his relationship with the Corinthians. They did this by telling lies about him and causing the weaker people amongst them to be troubled.

This evening we are going to see how Paul now shows how *positive* criticism can affirm people and build relationships. So what do we learn about affirming others and building them up from this passage?

1. **Be honest about your intentions.**

So there was bad feeling towards Paul by some in Corinth because of lies and false teaching. As we come to the later part of chapter 6 and into chapter 7 Paul now addresses the Corinthians personally and directly, assuring them that his feelings for them have not changed. It comes twice in our reading tonight.

6:12 It is not we who have closed our hearts to you; it is you who have closed your hearts to us. 13 I speak now as though you were my children: show us the same feelings that we have for you. Open your hearts wide! 7:2 Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one; we have ruined no one, nor tried to take advantage of anyone.

Paul appeals to them as one whose heart is open to the Corinthians and one who has already challenged them to remember what his dealings with them have been in the past. It's a challenge to the fickle. We've all come across people with whom we have had long friendships and then they seem to turn inexplicably against us. It was rather like this with Paul and the Corinthians. Paul has sought to be honest with them about his motives and the motives of those criticizing him. However he has come to the point where he is at his most firm against those who have chosen to try to destroy his reputation.

He comes straight out with it. Don't yoke yourselves to unbelievers. Who were the unbelievers? We heard the other week how this passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways, even with regard to the Corinthians. But it's obvious here – Paul is talking about these Jewish evangelists, who he later calls the “super apostles”, in terms of unbelievers. The Corinthians have yoked themselves to them – these unbelievers.

So some in Corinth had become unequally yoked with people they thought were spiritual but are in fact darkness - *How can right and wrong be partners? How can light and darkness live together? 15 How can Christ and the Devil agree? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?*

This is where discernment is such an important skill – because the church or at least some in it, had been fooled by these people. We need to know what is of God and what isn't. That's why like the Bereans we need to search the scriptures when people come with answers we are not familiar with and condemnation of

those who we, and many others of God's people have regarded faithful leaders and teachers. By search the scriptures I mean - just that, look at the scriptures and see what God says and beware that we are interpreting it faithfully.

2. **Commend the positive**

Chapter 7 comes in many ways as a welcome break from Paul defending his integrity to Paul affirming them and showing them how positive they in fact were.

3 I do not say this to condemn you; for, as I have said before, you are so dear to us that we are always together, whether we live or die. 4 I am so sure of you; I take such pride in you! In all our troubles I am still full of courage; I am running over with joy.

It's a pity we don't read 2 Corinthians more often. Most people's impression of the Corinthians is from the first letter or the first few chapters of the second. If that's it, then our view of them is unbalanced. This chapter encourages us to be more balanced. Paul might have had harsh words to say to them, but he took pride in them – there was much to commend them. Here's a measure of his confidence in them. Paul affirms them – he takes pride in them. Despite the hassle brought by some of them, he is joyful of them. *I am so sure of you; I take such pride in you! In all our troubles I am still full of courage; I am running over with joy.*

Perhaps what we learn most from healthy criticism here is that it comes out of a genuine intent to build them up – we can see a measure of Paul's respect for them – he was proud of them.

5 Even after we arrived in Macedonia, we did not have any rest. There were troubles everywhere, quarrels with others, fears in our hearts. 6 But God, who encourages the downhearted, encouraged us with the coming of Titus. 7 It was not only his coming that cheered us, but also his report of how you encouraged him. He told us how much you want to see me, how sorry you are, how ready you are to defend me; and so I am even happier now.

As I said earlier, we tend to have a negative view of the church at Corinth but Paul was actually thrilled to hear from Titus - Paul was in the middle of lots of hassle and good news from Corinth had warmed him. Trouble was kicking off in Macedonia and Paul was so pleased to hear that this church at Corinth which had been so much of a headache for him, was responding well to what he had already written to them.

What is he commending in them?

- **a positive approach to Titus**

Rather than them being annoyed at the rather harsh things he said about them, they had understood that the words were said to encourage them to turn away from what was wrong and build good relationships in the church. What's more they had clearly encouraged Titus. Titus was there as Paul's representative. We know from the letter to Titus we studied last year that he was an able troubleshooter and he had been encouraged by them. Their welcome was a warm one. How warm are we when people speak to us with the best of intentions and we now they are right. We know from the relationships that grow out of it – they improve for openness.

- **a positive approach to his first letter**

Their second commendable action was that they diligently dealt with the criticisms Paul had made of them. They knew he was right and that hurt them. But rather than trying to defend the indefensible they showed their remorse for their actions and endeavoured to put them right.

Pride can be such a killer when we deal with positive criticism. I say this as an older person who sometimes has taken warranted criticism from others. As a Pastor, people with the best intentions question what I may have said or suggested. Do I stand there and get offended, or do I consider whether these words are warranted. I have known many Christian leaders to have dismissed people because they thought that they were too young or beneath them only to find out to their same that they were right. The danger to hide behind title or authority is something we gain from the world – we were all reminded in the last few years how MPs hid behind their privileges in response to criticism because the criticisms that some were on the take were true.

We will know we are getting somewhere as a church, where we can be open to one another in a loving way,

so we can be honest with one another. Some of the most destructive behaviour in churches is of the world where people can't or won't speak to another when offence has been caused. And if festers and ultimately causes the most immense damage – or they just leave with matters unresolved. Yet the command of Jesus in Matthew 18 is quite clear about openness in dealing with one another and what we should do when that doesn't work.

– ***a positive attitude to him***

After all the aggro, the majority of the Corinthians still firmly defended him. They knew who was right and who was wrong. They had taken on board what God was saying to them through Paul. They had recognised what God was doing and responded to Him.

I've spoken much about truth and error in the past few sermons on 2 Corinthians. The ultimate conclusion is that whether we get our teaching from the front, from books, from sermons we hear elsewhere or from radio or TV or magazines, we need to discern God's mind in these things.

3. **Commend Progress**

There is a third reason why Paul wished to affirm them and that as to affirm their progress. Paul was the apostle that established this church and was responsible for its early growth. It was he that taught them that the church was a living thing: a body (1 Cor 12) and a healthy body is one that grows and matures. Paul didn't just commend them for the positive support that they had brought him, but that they had responded to the criticisms that he had made about them. We saw last week that they had not succumbed to pride and felt insulted or self-defensive. They knew what he said was right and they did something about it. What did they do? Here it is again in the NIV which uses some terms that we should be quite familiar with: 8 *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-- 9 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.*

They accepted the letter and it led to repentance. The word for repentance used here is *metanoia* which means to turn around. People often confuse repentance with saying sorry, but repentance means to turn around and go the other way. Paul gives us the difference here: I *am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance.* They were sorry by what they had done. The Greek verb here is *lupeo* which is quite an intense verb, more like grieving rather than just being sorry. The theologians have a word for this and it's penitence – a state of deep regret: They read that letter and it was the source of tears and it resulted them changing their ways, repenting.

Maybe there were those that criticised Paul for what was a crushingly critical letter. How could he do such a thing? But verse 9 justifies why Paul used such harsh words: *That sadness was used by God, and so we caused you no harm.* The purposes of God was that they learned the truth about themselves which led to repentance. As a result, the repentance rescued them. Paul understated a bit here when he says *and so we caused you no harm* – by pulling them up short, he averted a disastrous situation in the church.

So they were sorry for what they did. Paul has a little more to say of their sorrow and repentance and again I'll give it from the NIV: 10 *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 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.*

This tells us a little more about sorrow and a lot more about what repentance meant for their lives. First of all, Paul talks about godly sorrow. It's a particular type of sorrow. It's not the sorrow of the cheating husband, the corrupt politician or the dodgy newspaper magnate: sorry they got caught. It's not the sorrow of crocodile tears designed to earn brownie points – what I call primary school sorrow. It's not the sorrow of hopelessness that so many feel when they lose a loved one or a disaster happens and they lose all.

Paul contrasts godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. The consequence of worldly sorrow is death because in the end, all this worldly sorrow is focussed on self and not towards God or for His sake. That's what makes it so hopeless.

For the Corinthians there was godly sorrow; an understanding that what was happening was not God's way and the offence was against God and that the Holy Spirit was had directed them to the problems that they might repent. And it's the godly sorrow that led them to repent. The end of all godly sorrow is repentance. You can already see the relevance for us. We get sorrowful for many things as we go through life: for

ourselves when something goes wrong or we suffer loss, for others when we see them get into difficulties, for the loss of a loved one. The problem is that if in our sorrow we leave God out of the equation, then there is something hopeless, deathly about our sorrow.

Godly sorrow, the sort where we recognise that we have a God who wants to minister into our sorrows is life-changing because that sorrow will always lead us to want to see change. Whether that is recognising our problems and weaknesses and doing something about it or whether it is marking a life-change such as a bereavement, we need God to be there.

Repentance is not just a once for all thing when we trust Christ, its something we come back to as the natural cycles and rhythms of life show up our shortcomings or demand change from us, or if the Holy Spirit calls "foul" on us. It's part of our growing process – the need to change and grow. Godly sorrow and repentance are parts of our life and growth as believers. We expect it and ask God to change us through it. And there will be no regret in what we've done. When people grieve a lot, if it is worldly sorrow it can lead to bad decisions. How often have people made rapid decisions after the death of a loved one and lived to regret it. Or maybe, that sorrow leads to sorrow upon sorrow – years of grieving. Or maybe after bad events like the riots a couple of weeks ago, knee-jerk reactions to it will hurt lives and politicians and others will live to regret hasty decisions.

What does repentance mean practically? Let's see how it applied to the Corinthians. *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.*

It means we're going to do something. Something that will change us.

We've got quite a few on the list here that covers a multitude of situations:

Repentance brings salvation

Repentance brings earnestness

Repentance brings a clear conscience – clear, indignation

Repentance brings urgency – alarm, longing

Repentance brings sensitivity to others - concern of others, readiness to see the right thing done.

As we come to communion, what causes sorrow in our life? Let's bring it before Jesus. Let's make sure our sorrow is a godly sorrow?

What repentance is required. What needs to change?

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 14 & 21/8/11
(c) Mark Reid 2011*