

Discipline and Restoration

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord, we come to you hungry. We come to you confessing our need to be nourished by your word.

We come realizing we haven't been in your word much this last week or month or year. So we're grateful to be here together with all your people, to be nourished together.

So Lord, I ask that you would forgive the sins of the speaker this morning. I ask that you would work through his weakness, that you, Lord, would shine, that we would see Jesus and Jesus alone. And this we ask, Lord, in his name. Amen. So we made it. We made it to the last chapter of 2 Corinthians.

It wasn't guaranteed that we'd finish this sermon series. You know, we did a sermon series on the seven deadly sins once, and we only did six. We also did a sermon series on every verse of Psalm 23 and only made it through verse 5.

[1 : 20] The summer has a thing with our sermon series, but this one survived. We're in chapter 13, and I'm really excited. Before we begin, though, I'd like to take some time to reflect.

Let's take a moment of silence to meditate. In the middle of this chapter of 13 of 2 Corinthians, in verse 5, you heard Caleb read, Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?

So I'd like you to think about that. Ask yourself, or imagine Paul, the Apostle Paul, asking that of you, of the Church of the Advent. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?

So take a moment to reflect on that. Now reflect on this.

If Jesus is in you, how is that evident to those around you? If Jesus is in you, how evident is that to those around you?

[2 : 30] I'm going to come back to address that question and perhaps some of the answers that might be ringing around our minds.

In this final chapter of 2 Corinthians, we see the coming together of a couple different threads in this letter. So before we look at this closing chapter, I'd like to do a review of the whole letter.

I'd like us to walk away with a good understanding of what Paul is saying in this letter to the Corinthians. Now in Acts 18, we read how Paul founded the church in Corinth.

Now after Paul leaves, he gets word that everything in the church in Corinth has gone pear-shaped, which prompts him to write, we believe, two letters, the first of which is lost to us, the second of which is the book of 1 Corinthians.

That letter isn't received well by some in the church, and they reject Paul and his authority. So then Paul returns to Corinth, and later he would call this return to the city of Corinth and to the church there, the painful visit.

[3 : 43] And then he followed up that visit with another letter that's been lost to us. Many but not all in the church respond well to that letter and to his visit.

And so Paul writes a fourth letter, and that's the letter of 2 Corinthians. He writes them that they were grieved into repenting. He writes to affirm his love for them.

In this letter, we learn that one of the reasons that Paul was originally rejected by the church, and why several still reject him, is that he did not match their idea of greatness.

Paul was humble in appearance. He was poor. He made his living through manual labor. He was not a very dynamic public speaker, interestingly.

And the Corinthians were more attracted to some speakers, some Christian speakers that came later. These speakers were wealthier, eloquent. They were more charismatic than Paul.

[4 : 45] And to the minds of the Corinthians, surely this means that the power of God is in these speakers. Well, Paul makes it very clear that status is not indicative of God's power.

Quite the opposite, Paul's job was not to be impressive, but to point to the one who is, and that is King Jesus. So in 2 Corinthians, Paul then several, he spends several chapters unpacking the paradox of the cross.

Christ's glory and his kingship were on display as he suffered and was executed on the cross. The cross provided salvation and revealed God's character and provided the pattern for Christian living, which too is paradoxical.

We live through dying. He then challenges the Corinthian church on another matter. Paul had been raising funds for the church in Jerusalem. There was a famine there which had brought poverty to the Christians in Jerusalem.

But the church in Corinth had failed to save up enough to give to this offering. So Paul cites this as another example of how the Corinthians were not getting the upside-down gospel.

[5 : 58] Now, if the church understood that, then surely they would give of their own wealth to help others in need.

Lastly, in 2 Corinthians, Paul defends himself. Paul says, You want a resume? I'll give you a resume. I'm a theological expert. I'm a Pharisee, as a matter of fact. I've met the risen Jesus. I have actually been in his heavenly throne room. Yet I don't brag about those things. I boast in my weakness and my flaws.

Because when I am weak, then I am strong. For Christ's power is made perfect in my weakness, in my humility, and in my poverty.

Paul tells the Corinthians that his own weakness and humility were demonstrations of his authority. And so we come to chapter 13. Paul has told them that he's coming for a third time.

[7 : 07] He's warning them. We read in chapter 12, I fear that when I come again, I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

And then we read in chapter 13, verse 3, that there may still be some who resist his authority. So some are being immoral. Some are resisting his authority.

And so on this visit, he says he's not going to spare them. He's talking about excommunication. So I thought in looking at chapter 13, that one of our goals like this morning could be to walk away from here with an understanding of what excommunication is.

Because it's not something you hear from the pulpit very often, right? But it's something that we actually do practice at Church of the Advent. I think we should talk about it a bit because some of us grew up in churches where that was practiced.

Some of us grew up in churches where it wasn't practiced. And perhaps the word excommunication sounds like some kind of cultural relic from the medieval church. Some of us didn't grow up in church at all.

[8 : 23] And this is brand new to you. And it sounds actually somewhat intolerant and even hateful. So let's talk through it. And then we're going to observe three things about excommunication as Paul exercises it.

And then we're just going to wrap up our sermon series on 2 Corinthians. Okay? So let's first define excommunication. And this sounds rather, I guess, scholastic.

I don't know. Or heady. But let's pray that God could use this in our lives and in our minds this morning.

One could say that excommunication is the final step of a process of discipline undertaken to correct sin in the life of a church member, ultimately resulting in the barring of a person from receiving communion.

It is not shunning. Excommunication isn't canceling. And the goal of excommunication is repentance and restoration of a person to full fellowship with the church.

[9 : 24] Now, the primary thing to note is that Jesus commanded us to practice this. In chapter 18, he commanded his church to exercise discipline.

In Matthew chapter 18, which we heard Jeff read earlier, he gives his 12 disciples, his church, a series of steps to undertake should one sin against another.

So we're just going to walk through these steps, okay? Okay, the first step, as we read in chapter 18, Adam, there we go. The first step is to point out the offense to the offender, one-on-one.

This is why, for someone to approach me or Tommy, and this happens, or another clergy, and they were to say, hey, such and such person I've noticed is doing this thing or that thing, and I think you

should talk to them.

And our first response will always be, well, have you approached them? And a lot of the time we hear, no, no. But this first step is important because it's not the responsibility of the clergy to monitor and check the behavior of everyone in the congregation, right?

[10 : 38] It's the responsibility of the whole church to encourage one another, to rescue one another, should someone fall into sin. Now, the second step, if the offender refuses to repent, then the offended party is to approach the offender again, this time with one or two witnesses.

It's interesting that both Jesus in Matthew 18 and Paul in 2 Corinthians 13, quote Deuteronomy 19.15, that a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Both Jesus and Paul are invoking a courtroom principle from ancient Israel. Matters in the church, if they are to be handled in love, are to be handled with due process. And they must be handled orderly and fairly.

Now, you may find, if you are in this process and you bring with yourself one or two witnesses, that those witnesses are going to see things that you don't see.

And perhaps blame is to be shared, or perhaps that other person isn't in the wrong after all, and that you're being too critical. But if the witnesses agree with you, and if the offender is still not repenting, then Jesus says the third step would be to bring it to the church.

[12 : 00] In our context, it would mean bringing it before those who are in authority, which would be the rector, Tommy, the other clergy, acting in concert with our parish council, and if necessary, with a parish response team to investigate serious charges.

The job of the parish response team is to take the personal judgment and biases of the clergy out of the equation to do a fair investigation and to present the clergy with a dispassionate assessment of the facts.

Now, the facts indicate that there's still unrepentant sin, and if the offender remains unrepentant, Jesus says to let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, treat him or her as if they weren't a Christian. That is, the person is to be barred from this table. Now, were this to happen at Advent, the person would certainly still be welcome and even encouraged to come every Sunday to sit under the teaching, to participate in the prayers. It also doesn't mean shunning. That's not what we're talking about. We're still called to love this person, which would mean sharing meals, spending time with them, engaging in an honest conversation with them, though that conversation would and probably should look and sound a bit different as before.

[13 : 20] But being barred from the table is a serious thing. Just as baptism and communion are visible signs to us that we are in union with God and members of God's family, barring from the table is also a visible sign that we are outside of God's family and the state of our souls is in jeopardy.

Now, that might feel like a lot of power to be wielded by the church. Yes. Yes, it is. And Jesus commands this. He goes on in chapter 18, Now, many of you are familiar with that last verse, right? But most of us have heard it taken out of context. Jesus doesn't mean that whenever you gather for, like, a Bible study or a prayer group with two or three or more, then I'm going to suddenly appear as if I hadn't been there before.

Jesus is equally there as He was when you were alone. What Jesus is saying here is that when you as a church make decisions in regard to discipline, I have your back.

From my throne in heaven and through the Holy Spirit that I have sent to guide you, I'm going to ratify your decisions when you exercise church discipline in obedience to God's Word.

[15 : 17] This is the first of three things that I'd like to observe about Paul's discussion of discipline in the church in Corinth. is that the means of church discipline is Christ's resurrection power.

So the means of discipline is Christ's power. This resurrection power is on display in acts of discipline and judgment. It's this power that Paul anticipates will be on display when he visits the Corinthians.

He says, you seek proof of my authority. Well, I've already demonstrated it with my own suffering, but now I'm going to come with discipline, which is the very exercise of authority that Jesus gave to His church and is evidence of the risen Jesus acting in power among His people.

The second thing to observe in 2 Corinthians 13 is the motive of church discipline, which is love.

The means of discipline is God's power. The motive of discipline is love. Paul writes in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians, for I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

[16:42] This love for individuals and for the church is what motivates Paul's discipline. Now, the third thing to notice about Paul's discipline is the goal. So the means is Christ's power.

The motive is love. And the goal is restoration. It's not ultimately punishment. It's not the solidifying of our insider status by othering somebody else.

The goal is to win back our brother or sister. Jesus told us to engage in the four steps of church discipline to gain our brother. James chapter 5 says, My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone were to bring him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

And it's why Paul concludes his letter the way he does. He has peace and restoration in mind when he writes at the end of the chapter.

And listen for like the rich tapestry of deep connected relationships. Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration. Comfort one another.

[17:57] Agree with one another. Live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

So that wraps up 2 Corinthians. And I thought we could end our study of the book by meditating on its main theme, which is the paradox of power through weakness.

That paradox of power through weakness is demonstrated on the cross as Christ is glorified in his death and suffering. His resurrection only happens because he had to die first.

And those who follow Jesus experience that resurrection power only through dying. Dying to our sins. Dying to our preferences. Dying to our comforts.

So let's go back to the question I asked at the beginning. If Jesus is in you, then how evident is that to those around you? And I have to confess it was a trick question because I kind of knew what you were going to think or most of us were going to think.

[19:10] And it's the thing that I think. When I think, how is Jesus in me? Is that evident to people around me? I think of either the things that I did. Oh, see, like my excellence is somehow like pointing to Jesus, right, and his goodness.

Or, I think of my failures. Like, ah, people aren't seeing Jesus because of my failures. The way I've messed up. So no, Jesus is not on display in my life.

Both of those outcomes show that I have a long way to go. That we have a long way to go to understanding grace. To understanding the gospel.

If it's true for us, as it was true for Paul, that Christ's power is made perfect in our weakness, then why do we go to such extraordinary lengths to hide our weaknesses?

To put forward the best possible image of ourselves? To point to our resumes? To cover up our flaws? I really don't meet any Christian who says, um, I think the world needs more of me and less of Jesus.

[20:27] I mean, like, we often, like, think and act that way. But, like, when really oppressed, no one really says that. That I've met. So, then, when we try to be excellent, because we think it's our excellence that people, that, let me back up.

Most Christians I know will say, yes, I want the world to see less of me and more of Christ. And then, because of that, we try to be excellent. Because we think that excellence points people to Jesus.

And we think our weaknesses get in the way of that. Now, how do I know that? It's because of the way we talk about it. Like, the language we use. We always say stuff like, God worked in spite of me.

Or, He worked in spite of this part of my life. Or, He worked despite this part of me. As if my weaknesses were something for God to overcome. Right?

That they were some kind of obstacle that God needed to break through. That God had to begrudgingly trudge through the muck of my flaws. And listen, God's omnipotent.

[21:40] The reason He works, quote unquote, in spite of my weaknesses is because He loves it. It's His jam. He's not put off by our flaws.

Our flaws are actually arrows in His quiver. Let me put it this way. And this is something I heard Paul Tripp say earlier. My weakness is the playground for God's grace.

My weakness is the playground for God's grace. So that's so cool. If our weaknesses are the playground for God's grace, then why are we embarrassed about them?

Why do we try to hide them? Or try to minimize them? I mean, it's our weakness and flaws that we should be putting forward, right? If God delights in displaying His power through our weaknesses, shouldn't they then be indirectly a source of our joy?

We should say, God, you're actually drawn to this part of me, and I would like the world to know how this part of me makes me need you, reliant on you. I'd like the world to know that I believe you're crazy about me, despite, or with, all my flaws, despite my besetting sins.

[23 : 06] Now hear me, this is not a technique. I mean, I read almost every day it feels like a blogger who has a self-deprecating sense of humor, blah, blah, blah.

This is not that. This is your flaws being what serves as a doorway to a deeper connection with God, and as a result, others' connection with God, because it's those flaws that God was drawn to in the first place.

Now how exactly do you do that? How do you display your weaknesses? I think that's something that you, with wisdom, need to work out as part of, like, your discipleship.

Perhaps, for now, it's just meeting with a small group of friends, regularly, with whom you can be completely transparent, who will love you and hold you accountable and pray for you.

Perhaps it's making the decision, if you're a leader, that instead of obscuring your need for grace, which only keeps your followers at arm's length and subverts their trust and steals their energy and creativity, perhaps as a leader, you could confess in real time how much you mess up.

[24 : 21] And in doing so, your character is transformed and your followers follow you instead of out of fear, but in creativity and joy and openness and flexibility.

So those are two ways. I'd like to share something a friend of mine did. His name is Ted. And this week, he posted something on CaringBridge.

I don't know if you know CaringBridge. It's a site where you post, like, a very serious medical condition. People can follow along and keep track of your progress, make donations, et cetera.

This is what Ted did. And to me, this is a great example of putting one's weakness forward. He writes, he starts a CaringBridge for himself and he writes, I want to be honest.

I've been closer to death than I've let on. I'm doing really well. I'm not suicidal, but I have been at times over the last three years. Anxiety and depression seem like opposites, but they often mix together to create an empty, nauseous, hollow feeling of freefall.

[25 : 42] Now, if you add to that marital conflict, a sense of failure in parenting, or a perfect storm of stressors, ending it all can seem surprisingly attractive.

The Apostle Paul, this is Ted writing, the Apostle Paul was at times under great pressure, far beyond his ability to endure, and despaired even of life itself.

That's from 2 Corinthians. He endured far worse suffering than I have, including beatings and imprisonment, hunger and thirst in the desert, and shivering cold while shipwrecked on the open seas.

I wonder if it was while clinging to driftwood all night in the Mediterranean that he despaired of life and contemplated just letting go. I wanted to share my health status because it is good for me, and it also may encourage others to know they are not alone.

I wanted to share through Caring Bridge to remind others that mental health struggles are as real as cancer, dementia, or kidney failure. As cancer can come out of remission, so too can the darkness of depression.

[26 : 55] It can overwhelm one's thoughts and blot out any ray of hope. But the main reason I want to share is to testify to God's kindness and loving grace. The very next verse in Paul's letter is one of my favorites.

It's 2 Corinthians 1.9. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

One reason churches are so weak today is because most American Christians simply don't need to rely on God. I know I didn't. We can take care of ourselves just fine through prideful self-reliance, distract through entertainment, cushioned with comfort, only we really can't.

When we rely on ourselves or other gods of this world, if we are honest, we end up eventually with broken dreams, disillusionment, and even despair. But it is surprisingly God's loving kindness that leads us to turn from trusting in ourselves or others and turn to Him desperately for rescue.

That is when God shows up in exciting ways with a refreshing forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

Living for Him is so much more exciting than living for me. Many of my goals for my life were pitiful, but His mission and purpose for me are fulfilling and full of hope.

[28 : 13] My theme of living for eternity is a very real part of that hope and as a result, my health.

So no, mental health is not a traditional disease you will find on Caring Bridge, but it can be equally deadly nonetheless.

Perhaps this may become an acceptable place for others to open up and share similar struggles.

And even if one person does this, my sharing will have been worth it.

Do you hear His weakness pointing to Jesus? Do you hear His flaws and His confession pointing to the greatness of Jesus who brings resurrection life?

So let this question be a question we meditate on for the rest of the summer coming out of this book of 2 Corinthians. Not how does my excellence display Jesus, but how are my weaknesses a playground for God's grace?

How are my weaknesses a playground for God's grace? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, as we contemplate Paul and his example and his admonishment, we confess we need help, we need wisdom on how to live with our weaknesses on display.

[29 : 54] We need courage and ultimately, Lord, inflame our desire, increase our hunger, Jesus, for you to be displayed in our lives through our weakness, Lord.

We would seek many to see you, Jesus, to know you, to follow you, to experience you and your saving grace and your love.

Make us, Lord, as individuals and as a church, that vehicle for displaying your power and grace. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.