

A Pastor's Heart

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[0 : 00] The great Jim Packer once wrote a book on 2 Corinthians entitled Weakness is the Way.

! And it's a tremendous little book and it summarizes the message of 2 Corinthians beautifully.! 2 Corinthians chapter 7, we're going to read from verse 2.

Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you're in our hearts to die together and to live together. I'm acting with great boldness toward you.

I have great pride in you. I'm filled with comfort in all our affliction. I'm overflowing with joy. For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus. And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it. For I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. He's talking here about the letter of 1 Corinthians.

[1 : 41] As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For a godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment. At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoice still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

Amen. May God bless his word. The Apostle Paul was a man all in for Christ. He was all in for Christ. His mind was wholly fixed on sounding the length, the height, the breadth, and the depth of the love of Christ. His will was resolutely focused on proclaiming the good news of the gospel. His body was broken by relentless traveling and harsh persecutions. But despite it all, his heart was that of a pastor. It burned brightly for those, burned brightly with the love of God for those God had called him to serve.

If ever an autopsy had been performed on the Apostle Paul, that would have discovered a broken body, but the heart of a shepherd. Of course, who Paul was wouldn't be there. It is with Jesus in heaven even today. The word pastor means shepherd. The church calls and God equips certain men to be shepherds of his flock. They are to pastor God's people as under-shepherds of Christ, the Christ who is variously called in the New Testament the good shepherd, the chief shepherd, and the great shepherd.

[4 : 37] Christ is the great pastor of the universal church, both in heaven and on earth, the Lord who is our Psalm 23 shepherd. There's also a sense in which every Christian is called to be a shepherd.

God calls us to pastor one another, to care for one another, to love one another. In this passage, 2 Corinthians 7, 2 through 16, the Apostle Paul demonstrates for us what it looks like to have the heart of a shepherd. All the way through 2 Corinthians, he's been defending himself against the false teachers who had been infecting the church there. And one of the ways he's done that is to repeatedly express his love for the Corinthian Christians, to show that he, and not the false teachers, have their best spiritual interests at heart. Many years ago, a very famous free church minister called G.N.M. Collins wrote a book called Men of the Burning Heart, where he painted short sketches of some of the great evangelists of the Christian church. In this passage, Paul shows himself as the ultimate man of the burning heart, burning for the glory of God, burning for the good of God's people. Well, in our passage this evening, Paul demonstrates three things. First, a pastor's conduct from verse 2 through 4, then a pastor's comfort from verse 5 through 13, and then a pastor's joy in verse 14 through 16. A pastor's conduct, first of all, from verse 2 through 4, a shepherd's conduct, using those words interchangeably, pastor, shepherd. Judging from the letter of 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth had been in a mess. There were disagreements among them concerning prominent leaders. There were false teachers poisoning the church with their false doctrine. There was public immorality, not only tolerated but even celebrated. The practice of the Lord's Supper was farcical.

Their worship services were disordered and unseemly. Christians were acting in loveless ways toward one another, perhaps worst of them all. Some of them were disputing the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. So, the church in Corinth was less a church and more a battleground. So, it's more than surprising then to find Paul in verse 4 saying about them, I have great pride in you. I have great pride in you. As we'll see, the situation has somewhat changed between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

There have been improvements. The church in Corinth is still far from what it should be, but it's not what it was. And it's that change which has prompted Paul to say, I have great pride in you. From Paul's perspective, one of the hardest elements of the Corinthians' backsliding had been they had harbored unworthy thoughts of him. Because he'd not visited them, they accused him of not caring about them. They had closed their hearts to him. The solemn bond between a pastor and his people was threatened. And in 2 Corinthians, Paul is desperate for that bond to be repaired.

Because from his perspective, his attitude to them has not changed. Verses 2 through 4 read rather like a case for the defense with Paul's honesty and openness shining through. He says, we have wronged no one. We have taken advantage of no one. In other words, he says, I've gained nothing for my relationship with you. I've given you much, but I've got nothing back from you. No money, no status, no peace, no reputation.

[8 : 44] He had not used them in any way. He had not taken advantage of them in any way. Unlike he would seem to be insinuating the false teachers.

This is to be the pastor's standard and his conduct. If he is to model the heart of the Christ who came not to be served, but to serve the Christ who gave himself on the cross, he is to pastor in a way that takes advantage of no one. Rather than asking, what can I get from these people? He must ask himself, what can I sacrifice for these people?

Why was Paul so determined to give and to give more, where the only thing he was getting back in return was abuse? It was because, as he says, I have you in my heart. I have you in my heart.

What motivated his self-giving was his heart love for those God had called him to serve. They've miscalled him. They've attributed false motives to him. They've insulted him, but he loves them from the heart. So he keeps serving them. He's been afflicted by them, literally troubled by them, but he won't stop loving them. To love them costs him dear, but it's a price he's willing to pay because he loves them. It reminds us very much of God's attitude to a rebellious Israel when in Hosea chapter 11, despite all their unfaithfulness, God says, how can I give you up? How can I hand you over? My heart recoils within me.

My compassion grows warm and tender. It reminds us of the prayer of our Lord from the cross over those who were crucifying him when he said, Father, forgive them for they know not what they're due.

[10 : 50] The sheep bite, but the shepherd takes the pain because they're his master's sheep. The pastor's conduct, particularly in this area of self-giving, the giving of himself, is to be entirely shaped by the love of Christ, that love Christ modeled, that love which by the Holy Spirit he has placed in the pastor's heart for the sheep. The mother does not stop loving her child because her child is a mess. The child may steal from his mother, hurt his mother, abandon his mother, but a mother's love knows no limit. The love of Christ for us is even greater, and the pastor must seek, however much it costs him, to mirror that love in his heart.

It's not easy. Sometimes it becomes unbearably difficult, so much so that he must walk away. But even if he does, he walks away unwillingly, and not because he has stopped loving his people.

No human pastor's perfect. Paul certainly wasn't. He admits that. We all mess up. We all allow selfishness to taint our ministries, but surely if we want to be worthy of the title pastor, we want to aspire to this, that we have our people in our hearts, and that all our conduct is shaped by Christ's love. We may accuse our pastors of being poor preachers, of being poor leaders, but we should never be able to accuse them of not loving us. In their case, love should cover over a multitude of sins.

For pastors, it's an incredibly high standard, but there's grace and forgiveness available for them, just as there is for us. His conduct must be shaped by the love of Christ.

Well, second, from verse 5 to verse 13, a pastor's comfort, pastor's comfort. The section begins on a low note, very low note. When we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest. We were afflicted at every turn, fighting without fear within.

[13 : 14] This is hardly the romantic view of mission work that we're so often presented with, fighting without fear within. The former, fighting without, is so much easier to handle than the latter.

Fear within. Within fear can't be seen by others, but it erodes the pastor's heart and strength and motivation. Paul's saying, I'm scared. I'm afraid. What's he afraid of? He's afraid that the Corinthians have done nothing with the first letter he sent them. But rather than listen to his teaching, heed his warnings, and change their behavior, nothing would have changed at all. That's what he's afraid of.

Paul's afraid that nothing he said to them in 1 Corinthians has made any difference to them. He has suffered greatly on their behalf, and now he's afraid that it's all been for nothing.

He has worked his fingers to the bone. He's had his body broken and his mind scarred, and he's afraid that all his hard work is pointless. Over the decades, I've met many pastors who share Paul's fear. That for the lifetime through which they preached God's Word and loved God's people, it's been for nothing. But they've wasted their lives.

There seem to be so few tokens of God's blessing upon their ministries. They've been broken in God's service, but what for? To them and to me, I say, but only eternity, only eternity will tell the ultimate effectiveness of a man's ministry. Well, Paul addressed his fear by sending his young fellow worker Titus to Corinth to assess their reaction to his first letter. And the report Titus brought back largely frames the contents of the whole letter of 2 Corinthians, but by and large, it was a positive report, none more so than what was reported here between verses 5 and 13. There has been a change.

[15 : 32] They have listened, and there has been repentance. The Corinthians received Paul's letter, they heeded his warnings and repented of their wrong beliefs and bad behavior. As Paul says, it had been very painful for the Corinthian Christians. As Paul says in verse 8, I made you grieve with my letter. Perhaps they thought that everything had been going fine in their church, but it hadn't been. And Paul's letter had been like the sharp sting of salt on an open wound. But Titus has returned from Corinth, and he's brought back a good report. What Paul has said made a difference after all. As Paul says in verse 9, they had been grieved into repenting. They felt a godly grief. Now, none of us like to be told that we're wrong. I don't.

It often produces resentment within us. How dare that person presumes to tell me that I'm wrong? It's made it all the more difficult in today's world, where nobody talks anymore about what's right or what's wrong. It's just different lifestyle choices. But I'd like to think that none of us, no matter how mature we are in the Christian faith, are too proud to accept correction.

We became Christians by admitting that we were wrong and God was right. We became Christians by kneeling before the cross and admitting that it's only by the righteousness of Christ and not our own we are saved. We grow as Christians in exactly the same way. I've often repeated what St. Augustine said when asked, what are the three most important virtues in the Christian life? To which he replied, humility, humility, humility, humility. We grow as Christians from a place of humility into a place of deeper humility. So I'd like to think that the more mature we are as Christians, the more humble, not the more proud we become. It is no threat to be corrected by those who love us.

It is to be welcomed. It's an opportunity to grow in our faith, to experience true repentance and resolve toward new obedience. So what Paul had said in 1 Corinthians had grieved those Christians, but it was godly grief and it worked repentance among them. They weren't sorry that they'd been caught.

They were sorry because they'd been wrong. Often we're only sorry because we'd been caught doing something wrong, not because we've done something wrong. And we all know the difference.

[18 : 26] But for the Corinthians, as they model repentance for us in this passage, their sorrow was all about what they had done wrong. Their bad beliefs and their wrong behavior. It was godly repentance because it was directed toward God. It was godly repentance because it was directed toward God. It was god they were sorry to for all their bad beliefs and wrong behavior. Their repentance mirrored that of King David's repentance was directed toward God. It was godly repentance. It was godly repentance. It was godly done what was wrong in your sight. David's repentance was directed toward God. Even though he had sinned against others, even though he had sinned even against himself, he knew that ultimately it was god he had offended.

How was your repentance today? Again, to quote St. Augustine, my life is one of continual repentance.

My life is one of continual repentance. By saying that, he wasn't kind of doing the old soggy bottom boys, I'm a man of constant sorrow. He was saying that through my repentance, I am growing in the joy of knowing Christ. The repentance of the Corinthians was expressed not just evident, not just by the grief they had expressed to Titus, but by a new zeal for righteousness. Paul writes in verse 11, see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal. To use the language of our shorter catechism we learned as kids, when it talks of repentance, they had resolved after new obedience. Rather than being satisfied with their bad behavior and their wrong beliefs, they were now pursuing right beliefs and right behavior. They had replaced their spiritual apathy with spiritual earnestness.

Clearly, from what Paul says here, there was still much repentance to take place, but as Paul says in verse 13, we are comforted. Paul was comforted by their repentance.

It had grieved Paul to have had to write 1 Corinthians in the first place with all its rebukes, and it had grieved the Corinthians to have received 1 Corinthians and to have had to repent.

[21 : 00] But Paul says, I'm comforted. I want to suggest a couple of reasons for Paul's comfort. First of all, their repentance proved to Paul that the Corinthians were genuine Christians.

Their repentance proved to Paul that the Corinthians were genuine Christians. Godly repentance isn't something a non-Christian is capable of. Godly repentance is not something a non-Christian is capable of, because the repentance of non-Christians is not directed toward God.

Simple as that. When Lady Macbeth was trying in vain to get rid of the bloody spots from her hands, her sorrow was not directed toward God, so it was not godly repentance.

Maybe she cried more tears than the Christian does. But because it wasn't directed toward God, it wasn't true repentance.

In verse 10, Paul writes, godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret. So, the repentance of the Corinthians proved to Paul that they were genuine believers in Christ, and as their pastor, that gave him great comfort.

[22 : 25] The second reason that the repentance of the Corinthians brought Paul great comfort was because it proved that the words he had written to them had not been in vain.

It proved that the words he'd written to them had not been in vain. It had grieved to him to have had to write the letter of 1 Corinthians, and he was afraid that they would ignore his warnings, but they hadn't.

They'd taken heed, they'd repented, and they were now showing new eagerness and zeal in their Christian faith. It brought Paul comfort to know that the word he had preached to them had taken effect and was working among them.

I remember many years ago being at a conference where the great Tim Keller was preaching, and afterwards he was asked by a struggling pastor how to effect change in his congregation.

And Keller thought for a moment and then replied, Preach the word and let the word do its work. So, this pastor was struggling because his congregation was struggling.

[23 : 30] He couldn't see how to change things in his congregation, and he asked Keller in a desperate situation, How can things change? And Keller said, Preach the word and let the word do its work.

How wise he was. Preach the word and let the word do its work. Well, the word of God has done its work among the Corinthians, and it brought the apostle Paul great comfort.

Ultimately, therefore, when he sees God has called him to serve, repenting and earnestly pursuing new obedience to Christ, it brought him comfort for these two reasons. It comforted him that God had called, those God had called him to serve were genuine, real believers in Christ, and it comforted him to show that the word he had preached was powerful and effective in producing that change.

You know, sometimes it concerns me that we look for the wrong kind of minister. One who brings with him mountains of management experience and leadership techniques. Who would rather have as our pastor?

A mature man who has spent most of his life in senior management, or a young man straight out of university with no experience at all? Answer, I don't know.

[24 : 51] But this I do know. It won't be a pastor's management experience or strategic skill which will affect change among those God has called him to serve. It will be his preaching of the word of God with his earnest love for his people.

The pastor's greatest comfort is in the spiritual warfare of his sheep and the glory of God among them. Well, finally, a pastor's joy in verse 14 through 16.

These last few verses of chapter 7 are actually bracketed by joy. Verse 13, we rejoiced still more, and in verse 16, I rejoice.

It's a very far cry from what Paul said about himself in verse 5, that at every turn he was afflicted, fightings without, fears within. The fear has been replaced by joy.

Much of what brought Paul joy was Titus' report when he returned from Corinth and was filled with joy at how the Corinthians had repented. Titus must have been very apprehensive when he traveled to Corinth.

[26 : 05] He didn't know what to expect from the church there. Would there be resistance? Would there be rejection? With what perception would he meet? But on returning, he reported to Paul that rather than being rejected by the church, he had been refreshed by them.

Titus' fears had been disappointed and his hopes had been realized. The Corinthians had accepted Paul's warnings and accepted his teaching.

They had responded to his message and repented. From verse 15, we read that they received him with fear and trembling, recognizing that he was a true messenger sent from God.

And throughout his time with them, Titus had observed their obedience, their new obedience. Titus had gone to Corinth fearful and apprehensive, but he returned from Corinth comforted and rejoicing.

Why? Because the Word had done its work. The Word had done its work. God had powerfully spoken to the Corinthians through his word and effected repentance and change.

[27 : 17] Through his word, God was reordering the imperfect church in Corinth into what it should have been all along, an embassy of heaven and earth and the proclaimer of the gospel to the city.

Earlier, I suggested that perhaps one of the reasons Paul was filled with inner fears was because he wasn't sure of the response he would have received from the Corinthians.

But perhaps we should reassess our view in light of these last few verses. From verse 14, it would seem that not only had Paul boasted about Titus to the Corinthians, that Paul had full confidence in his young fellow worker, but it would seem that Paul had actually boasted about the Corinthians to Titus as well, that Paul had full confidence that the Corinthians would respond in the godly way he did.

Earlier, we said that Paul had great pride in the Corinthians, and now he finishes by saying, I've got perfect confidence in you. What a situation for the pastor to be in, that he has full confidence in those he preaches the gospel to week in, week out.

Here then is a pastor's joy, the joy of watching the Word do its work. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit has convicted and convinced the Corinthians and brought them to repentance and new obedience.

[28 : 56] And you know, the shepherd notices these things. Mary Payton calls them breadcrumbs.

I think it's a really great term, breadcrumbs. The pastor notices these things. They are signs that the word the minister preaches is having an impact. They may be very small, but they are very significant.

So someone is convicted of their need to come to the prayer meeting. And they come. It's a small breadcrumb. Someone else is convicted with their need to engage more with other Christians.

Someone who's going through difficult circumstances in their lives is upheld and sustained by their faith in Christ and is a way to the prayers of the church for them. It's a small breadcrumb.

Some, perhaps most of these things are done in secret, but the pastor notices. He rejoices because the word of God is doing its work among the people he loves. But more than anything else, the word does its work when people come into the church and they hear the message of the gospel and they believe it for themselves and become Christians.

[30 : 10] They hear the good news of Jesus dying for sinners. The Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin and need of forgiveness. They hear the message that it's only through faith in Christ a person can be saved.

They believe and are wonderfully changed. But never mind a pastor rejoicing at such a change. We recently admitted someone into membership in this church who had first heard the good news about Jesus Christ at a Christian Union event.

She enjoyed talking to Christians in that Christian Union and slowly she came to see her need of Jesus Christ as her Savior. Through her friends at Christian Union here in Glasgow, she became a Christian and professed her faith in Christ.

In fact, greater than a pastor's joy at himself being the instrument of a person's conversion is his joy that his people are the instruments of the conversions of their family and friends.

Here then we have the heart of the pastor's pastor, the apostle Paul, a man who was all in for Christ, the ultimate man of the burning heart. But as I briefly close, I want to return to this last point about conversion.

[31 : 36] the greatest joy and comfort this pastor could ever have would be of those who have sat under his ministry for decades, and it's now been decades, hearing the message of the gospel of the cross of Christ and receiving countless invitations to believe would come now in faith and trust Jesus.

Will you do that? Thank you.