Still Imperfect Church; Still Perfect Saviour

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[0:00] Every Christian church is either moving forward into the holiness and the love of Christ,! or it's going backward. It's either moving forward toward perfection or backward toward imperfection.

! What is the direction of our travel here in Crow Road? Or to use a phrase which is commonly used these days, what is our trajectory? Is it toward Christ-likeness or is it toward worldliness?
Now, I'm sure we'd love it to be the former, that although progress may be slow and sometimes imperceptible, we are becoming more loving. We are becoming more gracious. We are becoming more forgiving. We are becoming more holy. We are becoming more like Jesus. This church in Corinth was moving in the right direction. Having been exposed as a total mess in Paul's first letter to them, in his second letter to them, 2 Corinthians, we can clearly see progress. In these verses, 2 Corinthians 2 verses 5 through 17, we detect forward movement, a church which has bottomed out but is now on its way up again. And we see this in two great movements. First, gospel forgiveness from verses 5 through 11, and then gospel triumph, verses 12 through 17. There's good instruction for us here, good teaching for us here. The basics of the gospel of Jesus Christ applied in the life of the church in Corinth and in Crow Road, and may I extend that after speaking to Theo this morning. This maybe just as equally applies to university Christian unions. First of all then, gospel forgiveness in verses 5 through 11. Gospel forgiveness. When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, it was clear that the church in Corinth was a mess. There were divisions and factions, there were heresies and false teachers.
But standing above them all was one particular scandal. In 1 Corinthians 5, we read these words, It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among the pagans. For a man has his father's wife. It's almost unbelievable, were it not written in black and white, that such immorality was not only tolerated in the church, it was being celebrated. So Paul goes on, When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, and my spirit is present, with the power of the Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Such blatant and public sin ought to receive a harsh and public judgment. Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. Now, we don't precisely know what Paul meant by the destruction of his flesh. Flesh in this context, sarx, probably means sinful desire. But whatever it means, the Corinthian church is to act in such a way that it leaves this man, who has his father's wife as a lover, in no doubt that what he's doing is utterly wrong and cannot be tolerated. But you'll notice what comes next there back in 1 Corinthians 5.
[3:47] Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. So that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. The discipline of the church is with a view to the salvation of this man. It is restorative discipline designed to bring this man to his senses, to repentance, and to recommitment to Jesus and his church. This man has committed an ugly sin, one which has brought the church into disrepute because even the pagans would not have tolerated such a thing as marrying one's or having a lover of one's mother-in-law. What this man had done was utterly wrong. Now we skip forward to our passage here in 2 Corinthians 5. In verse 7, Paul is writing of this man, you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him. You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him. What this man had done was wrong, but it was not unforgivable. Let me say that again. What this man had done was wrong, but it was not unforgivable. And Paul now urges that this man, having been punished and disciplined by the church, should be forgiven and restored.

What's implied here is that this man has repented and recommitted himself to Christ. Having acknowledged that what he had done was wrong and repented of his sin, this man should now be received back into the full fellowship of the church. The discipline of the church had worked. This

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man's sinful desires had been destroyed so that his spirit would be saved. The restorative discipline of the church was successful, which is what we pray for every kind of discipline. We pray that every kind of discipline would end this way. The man had done what the church had called him to do. He had repented of his sin, recommitted himself to Christ and the church. Now the church must do what it has been called to do, to forgive and to restore. Radical sin followed by radical repentance must be met with radical forgiveness. Radical sin followed by radical repentance must be met with radical forgiveness. The church's capacity for forgiveness is to be far greater than the world around it. This rather shames us, does it not? In the eyes of the world, the church is often regarded as judgmental and harsh, unforgiving, not comforting and forgiving. Yet in our passage, the measure of the church's obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ is measured in its capacity to forgive and to restore the ugliest of sinners. Think of the cancel culture in which we now live. So a celebrity falls foul of the media. Think of the MasterChef guys. And they're accused and exposed as having said things done, done things which were wrong. They're immediately cancelled, forever to be condemned. He or she becomes a salutary tale of a life gone wrong. Our media are self-righteous, unforgiving and vicious. And we may read of that celebrities' misdemeanors and say to ourselves, isn't that terrible that they did that?

But we, as gospel Christians, while we no less outraged by the sin, are to have a far greater capacity to forgive than the world is. We are to be quicker, in fact, to forgive than we are to judge. Let me highlight a few reasons from the text why we are to practice gospel forgiveness in our church. Let me remind you that Paul, as an apostle, is standing as the representative, the ambassador of Christ. He is saying the words of Christ here. First reason, forgiveness is good for the sake of the repentant brother. It's good for the sake of the repentant brother. In verse 7, Paul says, you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

We don't stop loving someone because they've sinned. In Paul's view, this man suffered enough. He has learned his lesson. There's a difference between disciplining someone and torturing someone.

[8:54] For some time now, this man has been excluded from the church, and they can see that he's in pain. Surely there comes a point at which this man's sorrow becomes excessive. He has already shed bitter tears of repentance. The church loved him enough to discipline him. It now must love him enough to restore him.

We see this pattern in our families. One of our children does something wrong. We punish them. But when they say sorry, we do not continue to punish them. We love them too much to torture them and to hold what they did wrong against them forever. Rather, we quickly forgive and restore them.

And in the same way, if our church is a family, we do not want to torture those who have done wrong. It's not good for them. Although we damage them permanently. If we love the repentant brother, we must look out for his good, which is always forgiveness.

Second reason. Forgiveness is good for the church. It's good for the church. In verse 5 and 6, Paul writes, Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure not to put it too severely to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough.

What he seems to be saying here is this discipline and punishment of the brother is an open sore, an open wound in the church. The Christians are pained by what they've had to do. Any parent here will tell you that it's entirely as painful to discipline one of your children as it is for them to be disciplined. It's not good to have an open sore in the church. The way to heal that sore is to forgive and restore. The famous author A. Anonymous once wrote these words, To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. The way to heal the pain in the church in Corinth caused by this man's sin was to forgive him and restore him. In that way, the whole church, and not just the repentant brother, can experience the healing only the gospel can provide. Third reason we should be quick to forgive. As Paul writes in verse 11, not to forgive is to be outwitted by Satan. Not to forgive is to be outwitted by Satan. This man may have been doing the works of Satan by committing immorality with his father's wife, but it's just as much the work of Satan to refuse to forgive him. It is just as much the work of Satan to refuse to forgive him.

[12:00] You know there's no forgiveness in hell. Satan is the master of unforgiveness. Think of the parable of the prodigal son where the father in the story is a picture of God.

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What amazes us about this parable is the father's capacity to forgive his repentant son. That's to be our image of God. In those famous words in Psalm 130, remember we read these wonderful words, Lord if you should mark iniquity, who could stand? Yet with you there is forgiveness that you are to be feared. Satan outwits us when he tempts us to self-righteous unforgiveness. He tempts us to say, I would never have committed such an ugly sin. Therefore, I'm unwilling to forgive one who would.
By contrast, we remember the words, of course, to err is human, to forgive is divine. For a church, to fail to forgive a repentant brother is a work of Satan. An entire sinful, that's what that sinful brother did in the first place.
And lastly, as Paul writes in verse 10, the last reason, our forgiveness is offered in the presence of Christ. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake, in the presence of Christ. Christ has forgiven us all our sins. How then can we deny forgiveness to someone who has sinned against us? Remember that again, the parable Jesus talked about a man who would has mastered a vast amount of money, but was forgiven his debt. But this man was owed a tiny amount by a debtor. He refused to forgive that debt. And this master, when he heard what his servant had done, was furious and revoked his forgiveness. We are the servants. God has forgiven much.
How then can we deny him in his presence forgiveness to those who have pained us so little? The repentant man in Corinthians had committed a great sin, but no greater than the sins Christ had forgiven the Corinthian Christians. How then can they deny him forgiveness and restoration? [14:36] For the church, to fail to forgive a repentant Christian is to fall short of the name Christian and to deny the very basics of our salvation. So these are four very powerful reasons the Corinthian church is to forgive that man. So let's apply this. Are there those who desperately need our forgiveness?

Are there those who desperately need our forgiveness? Are we holding back our forgiveness? Don't we realize that by doing so, we are damaging them? We are damaging ourselves? We are letting Satan win, and we are denying the very gospel of salvation by cancelling them. If there is one place in the world where forgiveness should be the norm, and not the exception, it should be the church. How then briefly do we practice this forgiveness and restoration? How do we practice forgiveness and restoration? Let me suggest three very brief things. First, proclaim forgiveness. Proclaim forgiveness.
In verse 7, Paul commands them to turn and forgive him. Just as the sin was public, so, and the judgment was public, so the forgiveness should be public. The sin was public, the judgment was public, the forgiveness should be public. It must not be swept under the carpet, hidden somewhere, but announced freely to the whole church, this man is forgiven and restored. This man must be publicly proclaimed as forgiven.
Then secondly, this man is to be comforted. The church is to be comforted. The word in verse 7, comfort, can also mean to encourage or even to stand at the man's side. Perhaps one reason this man fell into sin in the first place was because he had isolated himself from the rest of the church. [16:39] That must not happen again. Rather, he should be fully restored and incorporated more fully into the life of the church. And he must be encouraged and comforted by the word of the gospel. He needs to hear the comforts of the gospel, as do we all. And then thirdly, the third thing we should do, the church must reaffirm its love for him. The church must reaffirm its love for him. So I beg you, verse 8, to reaffirm your love for him. Given how much he hurt them, it might be a very difficult thing to do. But Paul makes a special plea that they should publicly declare their love for him. But not just any kind of love, but that self-sacrificial agape love of Christ, consciously, intentionally, publicly reaffirm that that repentant sinner is restored and loved as dearly as any other member of the church. The gospel triumphs when the church lives according to the forgiveness it teaches.

We have been forgiven much and restored to the favor of the God we crucified. However much it pains us, can we forgive and restore those who have hurt us? A number of years ago, a famous minister, I hope I'm not misspeaking here, a famous minister committed suicide. He was just about to be exposed for sins he had committed. How tragic it was that he felt that his only way out was to take his own life.
How tragic that he didn't know the church would forgive him if he depended. We do not take sin lightly, hence Paul's teaching on discipline, but are we as serious about forgiveness and

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restoration?
The gospel triumphs when the church lives according to the forgiveness it teaches. We are not to be like the world in forever cancelling those who have fallen short of its standards.
We are to be different, like Christ whose first instinct was forgiveness, not judgment. So, gospel forgiveness.
[19:09] Well, secondly this evening, and more briefly, from verse 12 to 17, gospel triumph. Gospel triumph. Paul was an apostle, but he wasn't exempt from the same feelings we have.

In verse 13, he talks about his spirit not being at rest. You ever feel that? Your spirit's not at rest? He'd been in Troas, modern-day western Turkey.
He'd have the opportunity to preach the gospel. God had opened the door for him. There was some success, but he wasn't at rest because he couldn't find Titus there. Now, Titus was one of Paul's evangelists, and Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to find out what kind of impact the letter of 1 Corinthians had had upon the Corinthian church.
He was so desperate to find out that when he didn't find Titus in Troas, he couldn't be at rest, so he traveled to Macedonia, modern-day Greece, to find Titus just so he could find out how the Corinthian church was doing.
See how passionate Paul was for the spiritual health of the Christians in Corinth? He could have stayed in Troas and had a successful ministry there for years, but he was desperate to find out whether there had been any repentance and reformation in the Corinthian church.
[20:35] The Corinthians could rest assured their beloved apostle had not given up on them. He loved them too much for that. His anxiety for them drove him to travel long distances for their good.

However, for all of Paul's anxiety, he remained upbeat and he remained positive. Thanks be to God, he says, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.
In the Roman world 2,000 years ago, a victorious general would parade his army through the streets of Rome, and two things would accompany his triumphal procession.
The first were his captives. They were chained and displayed as trophies of victory. But the second were altars lined up along the road where the fragrance of spices being burned were spread out over the watching crowds.
Now, the captives Paul led in his triumphal procession weren't prisoners. They're new Christians, those who had come to believe in Christ through the gospel Paul was preaching.
[21:48] Whenever Paul preached the gospel, there was fruit. In Troas and Corinth or Macedonia, wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached today, there will always be some who will believe and be saved.

And they too will join the triumphal procession of the gospel. Notice in verse 14, the word always, always. It may not be a large number, but there will always be some who will respond positively to faithful gospel preaching by believing and being saved.
Why is this? It's not down to the charisma of the preacher or his oratorical power. It is because the message of the gospel is, to quote, in Christ.
Christ owns the message, and this is the important thing for the CUs. Christ owns the message. Christ is the message. And Christ grants the harvest.
As the gospel is preached, the living Christ through his spirit opens its hearers to respond in faith and trust in him. And that's a great encouragement to us here in Crow Road, as it is to the CUs and universities.
[23:08] It is not the charisma and the power of the preacher which determines the triumph of the gospel. It is not. It is the fact that Christ owns the message.

Christ is the message. And Christ grants the harvest. Our task is to remain faithful to Christ. And we're assured that God will always lead us in triumphal procession in him.
Our task, as Paul says in verse 17, is to be men of sincerity, commissioned by God, speaking in Christ in the sight of God.
The much-beloved 17th century Scottish preacher and pastor of a tiny church in Galloway in a tiny wee hamlet called Anwath.
There's virtually nothing there now except a few stones in this church. Samuel Rutherford once said, Paul could have said the same thing about Corinth.

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[24:19] But here he assures us that wherever the gospel is preached, there will be conversions. Hearers will be saved and join their preachers at God's right hand in heaven.

But, so there were captives in a triumphal procession. But the second thing about a triumphal procession of a Roman general, there were altars from which the fragrance of spices being burned would abound.
The enemies of that victorious general would despair when they smelt the fragrance of these victory spices because for them it meant defeat. But the general's loyal subjects would rejoice because for them it meant victory.
In the same way, when the gospel of Christ is preached, there will always be two responses. Always. For those who are being saved, those who believe in the message of the gospel, the gospel will be sweet news.
They won't be able to get enough. They'll want to meet with Paul personally to ask him questions. They want to understand the depths and the heights of their new life in Christ because the gospel is for them life to life.
[25:34] But for those who are perishing, those who refuse to believe the message of the gospel, those who are willfully ignorant as we saw this morning, the gospel will be the smell of death. They've already made their decision to reject Jesus.

They can't stand the gospel. They can't stand the messengers of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is for them death to death. And there will always be those two reactions to the preaching of the word of Christ.
Life and death, faith and rejection, salvation and perishing. And that's how serious the task of gospel preaching is.
Shining the gospel. It is literally life and death, which is why Paul exclaims in verse 16, who is sufficient for these things? This is not a game.
The preaching of the gospel and our response to it fastens one's eternal destiny. Nevertheless, ultimately, the preaching of the everlasting good news of Christ's cross and resurrection is triumph and victory.
[26:47] It is not defeat. gospel triumph, according to Paul, means this. There will always be a harvest, be it small or be it large, be it private or be it public.

Because it's in Christ and about Christ, it is promised a harvest from Christ. what confidence this brings us in church and in Christian union.
But though we may expect that there will be many who will reject the message we preach, there will always be some who hear and believe.
And at the last day, there will be triumph as both preacher and hearer find themselves at God's right hand in Emmanuel's land, as Sam Rutherford said.
Now, as we close, both of these points may seem separate and unconnected. Gospel forgiveness and gospel triumph. But in reality, we can't have the one without the other.
[27:52] We cannot have forgiveness in the church unless the gospel of Jesus Christ is believed and being lived out. And the demonstration of the church's forgiveness is in and of itself a powerful proclamation of the impact of the gospel as when it is believed.

The gospel triumphs not just in faith. The gospel triumphs in forgiveness. we want to be a church growing upward into Christlikeness.
We want to move forward and upward into the love and the grace and the holiness of Jesus. Do we not? By the very grace of Christ which we are then to demonstrate, let's take these two movements, gospel forgiveness!
forgiveness and gospel triumph and work them together in our life as a church. And in so doing, you know, the world around us will see the difference Jesus makes.
And in God's good time, they too will be drawn to the gospel we preach and the gospel we live. And in God's good

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