

*If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. <sup>6</sup> The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. <sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup> The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, <sup>11</sup> in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)*

## **Forgiveness Has Two Sides**

“There’re two sides to that question.” Since my children hit ages ten or twelve, I’ve found myself saying that. As they’ve formed opinions about life and asked me questions, many times, I’ve found it necessary to help them see both sides of an issue – like a political question, or both parts of a job they have to do, or both views of a rule – the view of the people who made it and of those who have to follow it. It’s striking to me how many things in our lives can be viewed from two perspectives or broken into two parts. Many times, people have had to help me see the other side or the other part or the other view, too. The issue at the heart of all of our lessons for today is like that. It has two parts – two sides if you will. What is that issue? Forgiveness. St. Paul’s words today are not a theoretical discussion. He’s wrestling with how to lead a congregation to practice real forgiveness. As he guides them, we see that **forgiveness has two sides**.

### **I.**

What do I mean by that? Forgiveness works on two different levels. We say there’s a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension to forgiveness. The up and down part of forgiveness is God’s to us. The left to right part of forgiveness is forgiveness between us Christians. **Forgiveness has two sides, but it begins with God’s side.**

That up and down forgiveness is a one way street. God is the judge of all the earth. It’s his job to punish sinners. We don’t get to judge God – a fact that our society really has a problem with. Humanism exalts mankind’s opinions. You hear things like, “If that’s the way your god works, then I don’t need a god like that!” But the truth is, God does judge us. That’s why he can forgive us. The Judge’s forgiveness is the only forgiveness that matters!

But God does choose to offer his forgiveness in this life through his people. He does not come down personally and tell us when we’re wrong and then personally forgive us. He chooses to work through the church to do that. That’s where St. Paul’s letter comes in. He was clearly dealing with a well-known sin in the congregation in Corinth. There’s been a lot of controversy about what the sin actually was. For our purposes this morning, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is that even though Paul was personally involved and feelings were running very strong in the congregation over this sin, Paul’s first concern was to deal with this person as someone whose relationship with the Lord had been broken by sin and who needed that relationship to be restored. His own hurt and the perhaps mixed feelings of the congregation were a secondary concern.

Why? Because sin destroys faith. That doesn’t mean that we stop being believers when we sin. But the longer we wallow in sin, the more we justify and defend sinful words and actions, the more damage we do to our faith. By the same token, once we acknowledge our sin, if we don’t hear that we’re forgiven, we can think our sins are so bad that God will never forgive us. And either way, our faith dies.

Paul clearly had preached the law to this person. And because of his preaching, the congregation had clearly taken action, “the punishment inflicted by the majority.” But Paul wasn’t done when the law was preached. He was deeply concerned that this person who was guilty of well-known sin not fall into despair. So he personally forgave that person and he encouraged the congregation to do the same. Now, he’s not talking about apologies. He’s not talking about getting people together who’ve been fighting and having them shake hands. He had warned that unrepented sin leads to death and hell. Now, he and the congregation needed to assure that sinner that the grace of God applied to him, that Jesus did die for him and that Christ’s blood had indeed washed all that sin away, that Jesus rose to assure these repentant Christians that the very sin they were talking about was forgiven and taken away forever.

The message of forgiveness has no meaning if a person does not realize that his sin has offended God and put him or her in danger of hell. But I have done nothing if I stop without the grace and forgiveness of God. I accomplish nothing if I make a person behave out of fear. The Christian life flows from the forgiveness that Christ has won for us. As a congregation, our first concern is with the vertical, the up and down side of forgiveness. How do we get God's forgiveness to each other? How do we restore sinners who have broken their relationship with God? What do we need to say and do to call those sinners back? What do we need to say and do to lift up crushed and broken sinners?

In the modern world, we have to affirm the need to preach the law. But in this particular portion of God's word, Paul's primary concern is forgiveness after the law has hit someone like a hammer. It's hard for some sinners to accept that they are forgiven. In my experience, they fall into two general categories. People who have overly sensitive consciences and people who realize they have done terrible things. Both kinds of crushed sinner are ripe for despair. Paul talks about not falling into the devil's schemes. He understands that the devil owns us when we don't repent. But the devil also owns us when we don't trust that Jesus has taken our sin away. The devil wins if my faith dies because I'm convinced that the pastor doesn't mean me when he announces forgiveness. So Paul reminds us all of our responsibility to lift each other up.

It's a tough thing to do. It's much easier for us to tell someone to behave and to punish people who do wrong. It's tough to forgive. It's tough because it means dealing with all those messy, uncomfortable emotions. There might be tears, even from men. And it's tough because we lose patience. We don't understand why they keep beating themselves up. But we all have sinful hearts. We're all weak in our faith sometimes. God's answer is Christ. Jesus died for us pastors and teachers who do a better job of preaching the law than we do the gospel. Jesus died for us members who would much rather leave all that to the professionals because it's too uncomfortable for us to do or because we don't get why those people don't just accept it. Jesus died for every member of every congregation whose heart is broken by sin – even if their conscience is just too sensitive, even if they are guilty of great and terrible sins. Jesus' blood washed all that sin away. He rose to tell us all that we are forgiven. We are loved. We are his.

That message is the secret to conquering guilt. That message is the only way to defeat despair, because God built his power into it. So God heals that sinner's heart. That message of forgiveness gives us Christians the strength to preach the law, if that's what someone needs to hear. But above all else, it gives us the strength to come with the sweet gospel of life. My friends, true forgiveness comes from God. But he gives us the power to forgive. We administer God's side of forgiveness. Do it faithfully.

## II.

As hard as that can be, there's an even harder side to this: our side. By that, I mean the way that we personally forgive the wrongs that other people are guilty of. Obviously, when people hurt us personally, it's hard to forgive them. But sometimes we refuse to forgive people even when their sins had nothing to do with us. I once knew a very faithful member of a congregation that had been rocked by a scandal. He was not personally involved in it, but he didn't like what had happened. One day at a fellowship meal, the man that was probably the most guilty in the whole thing tried to sit next to him. That faithful member looked up and said, "Just move along." He wasn't prepared to forgive him. But God calls us to. **Forgiveness has two sides, and it is demonstrated by our side.**

Sometimes we say that we should forgive and forget. But that's not really possible for us. The Bible says that God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west and that he remembers our sin no more. Since God knows everything, that can't mean that he doesn't know our sin happened anymore. It means that he treats us as if we were innocent. That is finally all that we can do. When we forgive, we give up our right to payback or punishment. We give up the right to keep talking about that sin. And we commit ourselves to receiving the sinner back as our brother or sister in the faith.

If our hearts were perfect, we could do that. But sadly, our hearts are not perfect. We have difficulty accepting that someone's repentance is real when we see them commit the same sin again. We forget that we all commit some sins over and over again, even though we did repent of them. It's hard to forgive a sin that really hurts us. It's hard to forgive a sin when it comes from someone we loved and trusted. And there's a voice inside us that says, "He did that to ME!" Holding a grudge is finally just as sinful as the sin that hurt us to begin with. Once again, that's part of the devil's schemes. He plays on our ego and tries to get us to refuse to

forgive that person until they deserve it – which makes a mockery of forgiveness. No one deserves to be forgiven. It's not something you earn. It's a gift of love that we give because of Christ's love for us.

Refusing to give that gift does enormous damage to the faith of the person who has repented and asked for forgiveness. Notice what St. Paul says to us this morning: **“Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”** His primary concern is that someone who is guilty not fall into despair. How often is that our primary concern? How often don't we want our pound of flesh?

Paul tells us to comfort that person and to reaffirm our love for them. Is there a harder thing that God asks us to do? Invite that person to sit next to you at the fellowship meal and tell them that in spite of all that's happened, you still think of him as a brother in Christ. Tell that spouse who bruised your feelings and ignored your needs, that you still love them and still treasure your marriage. Tell that person at school who humiliated you in front of everybody that you forgive them and love them in the Lord. Tell the parent of the kid who did that to your kid that you still regard their family as your Christian family. Can we do those things? Do we care about the effect on their faith if we don't? Or do we think they deserve a little despair?

That's the sin in our own heart talking. Jesus didn't treat us like that. When the Father asked him to come down here and live in our place and suffer all the hurt and sorrow of this life, all the pain of death, all the horror of hell, Jesus could've said, “They don't deserve it!” And he would've been right! God the Father could've said, “You all are just going to hell.” It would've been totally just. The Holy Spirit could've said, “I don't want to enter their sinful hearts and see all that lust and anger and filth.” Who could've blamed him? But God the Father loved us and sent his Son to die for us. God the Son loved us and took on human flesh and lived in our place. Then he died and paid for all our sin. He rose and announced that it's gone forever. The Holy Spirit entered our sinful hearts and made us new. He created faith there and he lives in us every day to give us the strength to change and love and forgive.

God forgave all that sin – even the hard hearted part of us that does not want to forgive. And now, God calls us to forgive, to comfort, to reaffirm our love to people who don't deserve it, but who are repentant. He gives us the strength to do that by forgiving us day in and day out, every day that we live. Every time he does that, he changes us. He renews us. He makes us his.

My friends, forgive. It is the ultimate extension of all that Jesus has done for us. Forgive. It shows that we have the heart of Christ. Forgive. It is the lifelong practice of faith in this world. The promise of God is that in heaven we will do it perfectly. The hardest person for us to forgive here, we will love with a perfect heart there. In heaven, we will truly forget all sins against us just as God does. That gives us hope when we struggle to do it now. It also encourages us to keep practicing here what we will do perfectly there. Forgive, just as Christ has forgiven you. Amen.