

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 21 November 2004 6:30pm

John Martin

2 Corinthians 2 vv 5-17

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. [6] The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. [7] Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. [8] I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. [9] The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. [10] 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, [11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. [12] Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, [13] I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia. [14] But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. [15] For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. [16] To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? [17] Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

So, last week with Richard, you looked at why Paul decided against a personal visit to the church at Corinth. Paul tells us that he had intended to visit the Corinthians - a fellowship whom he loved most dearly - but his visit would have been to have given some words of correction to a certain member of that fellowship. Clearly, Paul was troubled by this. He was certainly man enough, and Godly enough, to have given that ticking-off without undue harshness or unkindness, but it would have troubled him .. and troubled the rest of the fellowship to the point where the visit would have caused some initial unhappiness - to the person concerned, to the fellowship at large and to himself. As the visit would have only been a brief one, as Paul was on his way to Macedonia, there wouldn't have been time for the dust to settle, and he would have been on his way with everyone still licking their wounds.

The very people who Paul should have been making happy by his presence would have been made unhappy. And Paul himself, who should have been made happy by being with his beloved fellowship, would also have been made unhappy. So, instead of a visit, Paul decided to write a letter about this issue which needed correction and then to visit the Corinthians at some later time when the dust had settled, the wounds had healed and everyone would have been happy again.

Cop out? when I first read this, I really wondered if Paul was just being a bit cowardly. Surely an apostle of Paul's standing ought to be able to confront a wrong-doer face-to-face and sort the issue out personally. Not doing so, surely, would show weakness and maybe even that the issue - whatever it was - could not have been that important after all.

Unfortunately, we don't have the letter that Paul wrote, so we don't know the issue or the individual concerned. As Andrew P. would have pointed out in his introduction to this book, what we know as 2 Corinthians is really 3 Corinthians - or maybe even 4 or 5 Corinthians! What a shame we don't have the letter to which Paul refers in this passage - so we can't really judge the severity of the error that needed correcting, nor the extent to which the individual concerned needed chastising.

But I wonder if you've ever found yourselves in a similar situation? There's been some niggling issue - maybe a family matter - that's been causing ill-will between you and someone else .. someone who, normally, you would be very happy to see and get on with. These things happen. Even the closest of families have disputes and can hurt each other. You want nothing more than to get things back to normal, back to the way that things were so you can put it all behind you and get on being a happy family again.

You feel you owe it to that person to speak about it with them face-to-face ... but you can foresee the pain it would cause. You know for sure that they would be upset, that you would be upset and that the rest of the family would be upset too.

So you consider the option of writing a letter instead. Then you feel guilty because it looks like a cop-out and because it makes you look as if you don't have the courage of your convictions or that you don't regard the issue that was causing the upset to be important enough to warrant a face-to-face meeting.

In practice, of course, we get so bogged down in the conflict of whether to speak in person or whether to write a letter, that we end up doing neither - and the ill-will sits there and festers to the point where everyone's forgotten what the argument was about in the first place, who started it - but still no-one's talking to each other. It happens at home, at work, in church, amongst friends and anywhere that's got people in it.

What St Paul shows us is that the problem needs fixing! If you don't want the potential anguish of a face-to-face meeting, then write a letter! It's not the coward's way out and it's better than leaving things to fester and get worse. With Christmas coming up, how about putting someone back onto your Christmas Card list that you took off ages ago when things went sour?

As I said earlier, we don't know who the individual at Corinth was or the nature of why he had caused grief - in a sense it isn't important.

In verses 5 to 11, Paul spells out just what effect these grievances can have on all concerned and all around them:

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. [6] The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. [7] Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. [8] I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. [9] The reason I wrote you was to see if you

would stand the test and be obedient in everything. [10] 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, [11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes

Someone who causes grief to someone else in a fellowship effectively - even if to a small extent - causes grief to everyone in the fellowship. It's human nature - people take sides. I trust it will never happen, but if our elders here were ever to fall out amongst themselves, some of you would naturally want to support one more than the others - because of family ties, friendships or whatever. Eventually everyone gets drawn-in, the normal life of the fellowship goes on hold. People sit on opposite sides of the church and don't talk to one another and so on. Believe me - it happens.

From what we can gather, this individual at Corinth had upset most of the rest of the fellowship. The fellowship had, in effect sent him to Coventry - or wherever the Middle-East equivalent of Coventry is ..Athens, probably. They had blanked him. And now Paul is saying that his punishment is enough. It's time to forgive and welcome him back into the fellowship. Evidently, the guy had repented - otherwise he wouldn't be in danger of being overcome with excessive sorrow. And forgiveness always follows repentance - that is what the gospel is all about. Paul says it's time to put the gospel into action and reaffirm the love that the fellowship has for this person.

If ever we needed a pattern of family or church reconciliation - here it is. If you forgive someone, says Paul, then so do I. These are powerful words. How often have you known a row between people who have since made-up, but their friends and family haven't? A married couple might have a fall-out and go back to their respective families to seek comfort and support. So the two families break off diplomatic relations and stop speaking to each other. The hostilities and blame escalate. Meanwhile, the married couple, realising that they love each other really, get back together, kiss and make up. But the families continue not to speak to each other. That happens too.

Paul says: stop! If the couple can forgive and make-up, then so can you. If you can forgive someone, then so can I. And if I forgive someone, then I expect you to as well. When in doubt: forgive! And why? Well, obviously that is Jesus' way - not only by his example but by his nature, by his actions and by his death on the cross.

But Paul gives us another reason. He says in verse 11: in order that Satan might not outwit us.

What does this mean? A number of things, I think.

Firstly, Satan can use an unrestored relationship in the church to obstruct the ministry of the church. It was important that fellowship between Paul, the Corinthians, and the repentant offender be restored so that the incident not become an opportunity for Satan to drive a wedge between the church and Paul. This was one of Satan's schemes which Paul had worked so strenuously to defeat.

But it goes deeper than that - it actually goes contrary to the gospel itself.

You've all heard of RSI - Repetitive Strain Injury - it's the condition which affects the use of a limb through overuse - for example tennis-elbow. Or it can affect people who spend too much time typing on computer keyboards.

When we become Christians, we become susceptible to a condition known as RIS - Righteous Indignation Syndrome. The syndrome has many symptoms but one of the worst is the inability to forgive someone on the technical grounds that they haven't said sorry. After all - God doesn't forgive us until we repent, so why should we forgive someone before they repent?

Righteous Indignation Syndrome has been studied by scientists and it seems that it is caused by the action of two viruses to which Christians in particular are susceptible.

The first of these two viruses is the HTT Virus - the Holier Than Thou Virus. An interesting little virus this one because it only ever affects other people - never yourself... that's why it's so successful. Thank Heavens I don't suffer from it! If you want a biblical example of someone suffering from an infection of the Holier Than Thou Virus - think of the Pharisee praying in the temple: Luke 18:11 - *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.*

The second virus is the ICBW Virus - the I Can't Be Wrong Virus. Now this is also a very interesting virus because it works in the opposite way from the HTT virus in so far as it never infects other people, only yourself. And the older and wiser a Christian you are - the more susceptible you are to it. I can prove that quite easily: I'm in your pulpit, at your invitation, preaching God's Word ... therefore I must be right. I can't be wrong. And so everything I say or do, whether it's in the pulpit or in daily life must be right too - I simply can't be wrong - on anything - ever! And anyone who disagrees with me must automatically be wrong. [For the benefit of the tape, and those reading this later, I do have my tongue in my cheek!] Isn't that the attitude of Judas? One of the 12 disciples, no less - how could he possibly do wrong?

So these two viruses - the Holier Than Thou Virus and the I Can't Be Wrong Virus work together to produce Righteous Indignation Syndrome. And RIS convinces us that we are not simply *angry* with someone, we are "justifiably offended." RIS stops us from forgiving someone because they haven't said sorry. And, as I said earlier, as God himself does not forgive us until we repent, we, therefore, surely, are justified in not forgiving someone until they apologise. It's up to them to make the first move, isn't it?

Is that the truth? Does God not forgive us until we repent of our sins? Well the answer, strictly, is no, but let me ask you these questions

- Did God send Jesus to be born as man because we repented?
- Did Jesus humble himself to become a man because we repented?
- Did he allow himself to be humiliated and tortured because we repented?
- Did Jesus allow himself to suffer that agonising death on the cross because we had repented our sins?
- Did Jesus enter into the hell of separation from God His father because we had repented?

The answer to all those questions is “no”. Jesus came and died for us while we were still sinners and long before we repented.

All the hard work, the toil, the humiliation the suffering, and the crucifixion needed to secure our forgiveness came before we repented. What does that tell us? It tells us that God, in his love and mercy, stretched out his arm to us sinners and built the bridge through the death of his own Son BEFORE we had repented of our sins. In fact, isn't it more true to say that we repented because God offered us forgiveness through Christ? Wasn't it in response to that love and that offer of forgiveness that we then decided to say sorry to God?

How marvellous is this? *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us!* [Rom 5:8]

So what can we say about how we treat others? Doesn't this knock Righteous Indignation Syndrome on the head? It may very well be that someone who has wronged us hasn't said sorry and, technically, can't be forgiven. But the way of Christ is to extend that hand and offer forgiveness. It means making the first move, it means swallowing pride, it takes effort and humility and maybe pain. But it is our responsibility as we follow Christ.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” says the prayer that Jesus taught us.

When we do that, we are fulfilling the gospel. If we cannot do that, we are hindering the gospel. And that is why St Paul was so insistent upon it with the Corinthians:

[10] 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, [11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

A sense of Righteous Indignation and even of Justice can be twisted by Satan to effectively prevent the out-working of the very gospel itself. When in doubt - forgive!

If any of you are interested in thinking further about how Satan can twist what seem to be very correct principles and turn them into sins, then I can recommend no better book than the *Screwtape Letters* by some chap called Lewis! There you will find some very cutting examples of what Paul means by being outwitted by Satan.

The weight of this problem at Corinth had obviously worn Paul out. Then (in vv12 and 13) we hear that Titus was not around to meet Paul in Troas as expected. Paul was again worried - he did not know what had happened to Titus ... perhaps he had been attacked or imprisoned or killed. So despite the fact that God had opened a door for him to preach in Troas, Paul didn't feel up to it and left to go to Macedonia instead. That narrative is continued in chapter 7.

But from verse 14 of tonight's passage right through till chapter 7, Paul breaks off the narrative of his journeys to do some reflecting - as many of us do when we are tired and depressed and things don't seem to be working too well for us. So to set the scene for Andrew next week, let's just look at the start of Paul's reflection in the last few verses of chapter 2:

[14] But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. [15] For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

Typical of Paul - the moment he starts reflecting, no matter how weary he is, no matter what problems he has to contend with, he always starts *But thanks be to God!*

Romans 6:17

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.

Romans 7:25

Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law.

1 Cor. 15:57

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

and most recently in tonight's passage: 2 Cor. 2:14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

Immediately Paul turns from despair to joy as the knowledge of the gospel of Christ floods back into his mind. William Barclay paints this picture for us...

In Paul's mind is the picture of a Roman Triumph and of Christ as a universal conqueror. The highest honour which could be given to a victorious Roman General was a Triumph. To attain it he must satisfy certain conditions. He must have been the actual commander-in-chief in the field. The campaign must have been completely finished, the region pacified and the victorious troops brought home. Five thousand of the enemy at least must have fallen in one engagement. A positive extension of

territory must have been gained, and not merely a disaster retrieved or an attack repelled. And the victory must have been won over a foreign foe and not in a civil war.

The General was clad in a purple tunic embroidered with golden palm leaves, and over it a purple toga marked out with golden stars. In his hand he held an ivory sceptre with the Roman eagle at its top, and over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter. After him rode his family; and finally came the army wearing all their decorations and shouting cries of triumph. As the procession moved through the streets, all decorated and garlanded, amid the cheering crowds, it made a tremendous day which might happen only once in a lifetime.

That is the picture that is in Paul's mind. He sees Christ marching in triumph throughout the world, and himself in that conquering train. It is a triumph which, Paul is certain, nothing can stop. Of one thing Paul was certain--not all the world could defeat Christ. He lived not in pessimistic fear, but in the glorious optimism which knew the unconquerable majesty of Christ.

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