Relational Joy, Relational Pain and the Forgiveness of Christ
2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11

We're looking at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. So imagine you're in the Slack household. And you and I are sat there, trying not to listen as Su is on the phone to one of our daughters. But it's difficult, because you hear her say things like, 'You did what?!' and 'No!! I don't believe it!'' And the more you hear, the more you think, 'what is going on?' And finally Su hangs up, and you and I look at her and go, 'what was all that about?' Because you only got to hear one side of the conversation.

And that's what it's like reading this letter. You get to hear Paul's side of the conversation, and what you hear leaves you thinking, 'what was going on?' And the answer is, a whole load of relational baggage and breakdown was going on.

But if that's the case, listen to Proverbs 26:17: 'Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.' And if you've ever grabbed a passing dog by the ears you've probably learnt never to do it again. So why get involved in an ancient quarrel? What has Paul's relational problem with people in Corinth 2000 years ago got to do with you?

Well, did you notice the two words that kept getting repeated in this passage? Joy and pain. That Paul's relationship with the Christians in Corinth, relationships which should have brought joy, were bringing a whole load of pain. But think about it, isn't that so often the case with relationships and friendships? In other words, Paul's experience has a whole load to teach us in ours.

So we're going to look at three things: the Pursuit of Joy, the Problem of Sin and the Power of Forgiveness.

The Pursuit of Joy
Blaise Pascal wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of *every* action of *every* man, even of those who hang themselves."

In other words, what we're all looking for is happiness, it's joy. And every decision we make, we make because we think it will make us happier, either now, or in the future. As Pascal says, it's why some go to war, and some don't. It's why some people follow one course of action and others avoid it.

But it's also that desire for joy and happiness that lies behind our relationships, isn't it? I mean, I doubt anyone ever entered a friendship, or started going out with someone, or got married because they thought 'this will make me more miserable, I must do this'! We want our relationships to be a source of joy for us. That's why we pursue them.

So look what Paul says in v23, 'I call God to witness against me - it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.' So Paul feels like he's being accused in court - in the court of public opinion of the church in Corinth. Because on his last visit he'd told them he would visit again soon. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd written a letter, a letter that's been lost to history. And at least some in the church were using that failure to return as a weapon against him. And so Paul's in

the dock, accused of having neither the moral character nor the decisiveness to be a leader, of not valuing, or loving these Christians enough.

And when a witness is called to the witness stand in a court of law, a Bible may be passed to them, and putting their hand on it they swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But here, Paul goes one better. He calls God to the witness stand. The God who knows every heart and every motive. And Paul says, God can testify, the reason I didn't come back was 'to spare you'. To spare you from me having to be even more firm with you. To spare you even more relational pain. Chapter 2:1, 'For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.'

But back in Corinth, they could read that as, 'Oh, so Paul thinks he can come here and beat us with some kind of emotional stick, does he? And play the strong leader.' Which is why he says in v24, 'Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy.'

Now, at the moment, it feels like every day there's some new scandal in the media about abusive church leadership. And it seems like every pastor or priest is just in it to fleece the flock, sexually, financially, or for their own glory. But Paul's vision of leadership is very different, isn't it? His relationship with them, he says, is not to lord it over them.

Now, have you ever been 'lorded over' by someone? Maybe you've had a boss or a co-worker, and they're not just bossy, they dominate and restrict and slowly crush the autonomy out of you. Or maybe you've been in a relationship like that, and it's been suffocating or manipulating or it's felt like your individuality has been undermined at every turn.

And Paul says, that's not what Christian ministry should be like, it's not what I'm like, and it's not what our relationships between us as Christians should be like. We don't lord it over others, Paul says, because there's only one Lord, and it's Christ.

Rather, he says, 'we work with you for your joy.' So the thing that motivated Paul in all his relationships with the church there in Corinth was to partner with them, and partner with them to bring them joy. C.S. Lewis wrote, "It is a Christian duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can."[1] And Paul would add, yes and it's the duty of Christian leaders and every Christian to help each other be as joyful as we can.

And Paul knows that joy does not come by him imposing himself on others, v24, 'For you stand firm *in your faith*.' You Corinthians stand strong by trusting Jesus, for yourselves. Your joy grows by your ever deepening relationship with him, not by me, or any other leader, trying to coerce you, or motivate you with fear.

And for Paul, this was never a one way street. Look at v2-3: 'For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice.'

Now, in the world of counselling and psychology, co-dependency is a bad thing, isn't it? You have a couple where one has needs and takes from the other. But the other has this need to be needed, so keeps on giving. And it becomes this vicious circle of needing and the need to be needed. And yet,

[1]A Severe Mercy, 189

here, Paul acknowledges the right side of being co-dependent. Because he's not an independent maverick, but just as these Corinthians need him, he needs them. And if their relationship with him is broken, it doesn't just cause them pain, it causes him pain.

And relational conflict can be deeply painful, can't it? I mean, whether it's friends, or family, or marriage, or church, relationships can be a serious source of joy for you, and they just fill you up. And you spend time with someone and you feel better, and leave them feeling better for having spent time with you. As Paul says in v3, 'For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all.' That what makes you joyful is what makes me joyful. It's just basic relational stuff isn't it? We want to relate to each other in ways that bring each other joy, not pain.

And yet, if relational joy fills you up, relational conflict can be incredibly draining, can't it? So there's no way, Paul is saying, that I would have made the decision *not* to visit you, and instead write to you - just to hurt you. He did it, v4, because he loves them: '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.'

And yet, the letter he wrote, that's now been lost, clearly *did* cause them pain and emotional distress. *So what was Paul thinking?* Why send it in the first place?

Well, he was thinking what any good parent, or friend, or spouse sometimes has to think: that sometimes, if you really love someone, and if you really want them to experience true joy, sometimes there's a place for confrontation. Because sometimes someone we love can run after things that promise happiness in the short term, but in the long term leave them more empty, and more washed up, and more lost than before.

You see, when Paul says, v3, 'I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all.' He's probably being deliberately ambiguous. Because, he could mean, as we've seen, 'guys, what makes you happy is what makes me happy, so why would I seek to hurt you?' But he could also be meaning, 'guys, the basis of our relationship is that we get joy from the same thing: that what gives me joy is what gives you joy.'

And there lies the problem, doesn't it? Because what do you do when one side of a relationship - between friends, or husband and wife, or within churches, is seeking joy and happiness in the wrong place?

The Problem of Sin

Now, one of the features of our current culture is this idea of hate speech. That you can be harmed by what people say. And so we have universities that have or are 'safe spaces' where students know they won't be exposed to anything they might disagree with. And we have 'micro-aggressions', and 'trigger warnings' where people are warned up front that something might be said or shown that could cause upset. I read last week that a recent production of Shakespeare even came with its own set of trigger warnings.

The problem is, sometimes someone who loves you *will* disagree with you, and say hard things to you, and confront you, not because they *don't* love you, but because they *do*; because they know that there is more, greater, deeper joy to be had elsewhere than where you're currently looking for it.

And Paul's relational problems in Corinth were for just this reason. You see, on his previous, painful visit, Paul had been willing to confront one person in particular who was pursuing happiness in the wrong places. And we don't know who it was or what it was precisely he was pursuing. Was he the same man Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians, engaged in sexual immorality - and he's seeking joy from sex outside of marriage? Or was he someone opposing Paul's leadership in the church and he was seeking joy from power and position?

We don't know. But what we *can* guess is that when Paul confronted him, a majority in the church sided with Paul. But did nothing else about it. And so, as so often happens, the sin of this man was now dragging others in with him, because the majority it seems were compromising, while the minority were openly siding with this man and against Paul.

And so Paul withdrew. And realising that another visit would just inflame things further he wrote to them. And if you've ever had to do this to someone you love, but who you know doesn't want to hear it, you'll understand Paul's emotions, because he agonised over this. Verse 4 again, 'I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears.' As one commentator says, for Paul this was gut-wrenching and heart-breaking and he could barely see what he was writing through the tears.[2]

But here's the thing: Paul wrote that letter because he knew it wasn't for him alone to deal with this. That this wasn't a pastor versus the person sort of thing. This was for the church to come together and deal with. And so he wrote to them, telling them plainly, you can't just turn a blind eye, your love for this man demands you try and turn him back.

And it seems the letter did the trick. Verses 5-6, '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*.'

So they probably withdrew Christian fellowship from this man. That in some way they communicated to him, 'you can't, and we can't, pretend you're one with us, or even one of us, if you carry on like this.'

Now, you and I live in a consumer culture. So, if I don't want to come to church, I won't. And if I don't like the worship, or the preaching, I can go elsewhere. And if people criticise me, or question my beliefs or behaviour, I'll go to the church down the road - they'll have me. But for these guys, there was only one church and if you were out of relationship with these Christians you were out of Christian relationship. And under the weight of that punishment, this man listened. And repented.

But the problem of sin confronted is followed by another problem, isn't it? Verse 7, 'You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, *or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*.' You see, when like this man you have been caught in some sin, and those you love and who love you have confronted you over it, and you see it, and you realise how much your actions have pained others, and you're genuinely sorry and repentant for it, it can be a crushing load to bear, can't it. Because you see yourself, and your sin, as you really are, and you know everyone else sees it too, and you can feel exposed and naked and drowning in guilt.

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[2] Guthrie

But those who do the confronting also face a problem. Verse 11, they need to restore this man 'So that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.' You see, if you've had to confront someone because of their sin, two temptations lie before you. You can see the damage this person has done, and the pain they've caused you or others, and you can hold it against them, maybe even become bitter. Because the whole point of your relationship with them was that you were to bring each other joy, but they've brought you pain, deep pain. And that can be a potent cause of resentment.

Or you can become proud and look down on them. You feel better about yourself because they look worse. And both bitterness and self-righteousness open the door to satan, Paul says. And through that door he will bring further division. And we're not unaware of that, Paul says. We know how he uses relational pain to divide friends and families and churches.

So, what's the answer?

The Power of Forgiveness

Look at v6-8, 'This punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him… So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.' So sin should be confronted, but when repented of it must also be forgiven. And having turned away from him in sorrow at his sin, the church must now turn towards him in love. Because the aim was never simply to discipline him, it was to see him restored. It was to see him start again. To stand firm in Christ. To pursue joy in all the right places. And only forgiveness has the power to do that. Only forgiveness has the power to rescue from the crushing burden of guilt. Only forgiveness has the power to clothe our nakedness. And only forgiveness has the power to rescue from the prison of bitterness or self-righteousness. Because forgiveness decides it will not pay back evil with evil, or pain with pain, or relational hurt with ever more relational hurt.

But what's interesting here, is that the verb Paul uses for forgiveness is not the usual one. He uses the verb that means to show grace to someone, free grace. Because that's what this man needs - to be treated in a way he doesn't deserve to be treated. It's what we all need.

But how do you do that? Albert Einstein is credited as saying, 'Weak people revenge. Strong people forgive. *Intelligent people ignore*.' Really? You're supposed to just ignore the pain and grief someone's inflicted on you, as if it never happened? And brush it under the carpet. But how does that do justice to the wrongness of sin? The wife whose husband has committed adultery; the person whose friend has trashed their reputation; the parent whose child has lied and stolen from them, you're supposed to just ignore these things?

That's intelligent? No it's not intelligent. It's unjust. Because sin matters. Relational hurt matters. The fact that we should seek each other's joy, and not pain, matters. So how can you forgive rather than ignore? How can you show grace and not seek revenge? And how can you do that without sweeping sin under the carpet?

Well, look what Paul says in v10, 'Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake *in the presence of Christ*.' You know, when you're in the presence of Christ, you know he bears in his body the wounds of the cross, the wounds that say he died for you, that he paid the ultimate price for you. Why? To secure your

forgiveness. To pay for your sin. And so when you're in the presence of Christ, you begin to realise the measure of your own sin, and all the times you've sought joy in all the wrong places, and the price he had to pay to rescue you from guilt.

And that kills self-righteousness, because you realise again - apart from him, you're not righteous.

But in the presence of Christ, and those wounds now glorified, you also see how he has paid, not just for your sin, but for the repentant person's sin. That God has not swept this under the carpet. Jesus had to die for it - that's how much sin matters.

But being in the presence of Christ, you also know you're in the presence of the Judge of all the world. And if the person has not repented you know that one day he will have to pay for this sin himself. It's the position we'd all be in if it weren't for the grace of Christ to us. And knowing that can begin to fill our hearts with compassion.

And so when you're in the presence of Christ, you begin to realise the true cost of sin, but also the depth of Christ's love for you, and the grace that he's shown you that you could never deserve, and you begin to find the power to forgive and show grace to the one who's hurt you.

But there's another thing recognising you're in the presence of Christ will give you. In Psalm 16 David writes, 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' (Ps 16:11). Our relationships are meant to bring us joy and when they don't the pain is great. But when you know that God and your relationship with him, is your ultimate joy and the source of all your other joys, and when you're in the presence of Christ at his right hand, it will give you the joy and the courage to face the pain of confronting sin and the cost of forgiving sin when you must.