

Sorrow that brings repentance

Date: 25 October 2020, 20th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: 2 Corinthians 7:2-16; Ezekiel 18:21-32; Luke 19:1-10

How do you handle criticism? Maybe you're graced to have a perfect character, or at least to have such pleasant friends and acquaintances that they never challenge you over anything. My guess is that like me you will have moments where people tell you just what they think of something you've said or done that they don't like. How do you respond to criticism? One of my favourite ways of handling criticism is to shift the blame. I say to myself, "It's not me, it's them". Now sometimes this may be true, but it's certainly convenient because it means that I'm always right. Some other strategies I find myself using are the, "Yes, maybe, But". That's where I try to justify myself. There's the outright lie - "It wasn't me!" "It wasn't like that!" There's the fight back option - "But you always!" There's the run and hide option. That's where you do everything you can to distract yourself from the fact your conscience has been pricked - work, TV, computer games, sex, anything just so you don't have to face it. And when all else fails you can say sorry, but then not make any changes and hope everyone forgets about the whole thing.

Sometimes the criticism we receive is unjustified. But what happens when it's not? None of us like being found out and having our misdeeds exposed. It's painful and we shy away from pain. All those strategies are about trying to cover shame and avoid taking responsibility. But if we take that path, then we miss out on two things: the chance to repair a relationship and the opportunity for personal growth. That's what we want isn't it? Personal growth and a way to heal relationships. There's a word we used to use for this. I think it's dropped out of fashion because it has a painful edge to it. Not least because it reminds us that there is a spiritual dimension to our relationships and character. The word is Repentance. Growth and healing are painful and hard. We need spiritual resources to help. So how can we step into the pain of owning our mistakes? Where can we find the motivation to change?

Our text for today, 2 Corinthians 7, speaks directly to the pain of repentance. The key verse for today is verse 10, and we would do well to meditate on it till it sinks into our bones: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*

What on earth is godly sorrow and worldly sorrow? And what might that mean for us? To help us come to that question let's look at the context for Paul's extraordinary statement.

Context

The context for Paul's words is a relationship of deep affection.

After a couple of months break we've picked up our series in 2 Corinthians. I know this may be a strange place to enter Paul's letter, especially if you're new to St George's. So let's find our bearings. It's a highly personal letter where Paul defends his ministry to a church he had a rocky relationship with. In that intimacy we see how deeply Jesus can shape our lives and teach us how to face suffering and discouragement, especially in the great theme that runs through the letter - God's power in our weakness.

There were two issues that provoked Paul to write this letter to the church in Corinth, that appears in our Bibles as 2 Corinthians. First, some leaders in the church there were trying to discredit his ministry and turn the church against him. Later in the letter he calls them the ‘super-apostles’.¹ Paul responds to them in verse 2 by reminding the Corinthians of his deep affection for them and inviting them to respond to him in kind.

Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. 3 I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. 4 I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

The second issue was a particular issue between 2 members of the congregation where one had wronged another. 1 Corinthians gives us some possible options for this issue: Gross sexual immorality, where a man was carrying on a relationship with his father’s wife; another issue was that other members of church were suing each other. But we don’t know what the particular issue was. The fact that we don’t know means that this text gives us a blueprint for how repentance works that we can then apply to our own lives. Whatever it was, Paul felt it necessary to send the Corinthians a letter of sharp rebuke. It doesn’t survive, but Paul says in verse 8 that it caused them sorrow. And that’s our focus today.

Paul’s deep affection for the Corinthians was the context for and indeed drove him to write this rebuke. Back in chapter 2 Paul had said,

I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.²

Now he returns to that letter and their response to it.

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – 9 yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. 10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

With these words, Paul takes us to the heart of repentance. So what can we learn from his words to the Corinthians about how we might do that hard and painful work of acknowledging our mistakes and changing and repairing relationships we’ve broken?

Godly sorrow

At the heart of repentance is godly sorrow. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.* Before we come to godly sorrow, what is worldly sorrow and how does it lead to death? Worldly sorrow comes from having done the wrong thing and then been found out. It’s all those strategies we use to avoid taking responsibility for what we’ve done. It’s motivated by fear of suffering the consequences of what we’ve done, or wounded pride from being exposed. At the heart of worldly sorrow is the self. Left to itself this kind of sorrow can turn to self pity, self-disgust and bitterness. That self disgust can fester, eating away at you, poisoning your mind and heart. This is the death of the self. The self pity and bitterness can spill out to take its revenge

¹ 2 Corinthians 11:5

² 2 Corinthians 2:4

upon the world, or at least those close to hand. That is the death of relationship and community. In the end worldly sorrow leads to spiritual death because it doesn't seek God's forgiveness in repentance.

I've seen this play out for people. They have been deeply upset over the wrong they've done. But if you drill down they are more upset at being found out, or at what they're now suffering as a result. The self is still at the centre.

How is godly sorrow different? If worldly sorrow has its eyes fixed on yourself, godly sorrow has its eyes fixed on God. Calvin writes,

“Sorrow according to God is when [someone] looks up to God, counts it their only misery to be cut off from his grace and in fear of his judgment mourn their sins.”

I find it helpful to think about this in the context of a relationship. There have been times when I've wounded Claire deeply. I'm ashamed. I'm full of thoughts that would justify or excuse what I've done. It's hard to come to her to apologise. But when I lift my eyes to see her and the pain I have caused her, then I begin to truly grieve over what I've done - not for my sake but for hers. It's then that my sorrow becomes a motivation not just to say sorry and try and patch things up but to actually change my behaviour - to truly repent.

What is true for personal relationships is also true for our relationship with God. The younger son in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son says, “Father I've sinned against heaven and against you.” Sin opens a breach in relationship that needs to be healed. And grief, or 'godly sorrow' is the motivation that drives us to confess and repent when we're in the wrong.

There are 4 steps to full and deep confession and repentance.

1. First is the Confession itself. That is the naming specifically of the wrong done, in thought, word and deed and in what we have failed to do.
2. Second is Contrition. That is the godly sorrow this text speaks of, where I am grieved, not over the consequences for me of what I've done, but over how I have wounded God and my neighbour. This is something we can pray for more of.
3. The third step is Restitution. That is, the making things right with others.
4. The fourth step is a Commitment to Change - the repentance proper.

Zacchaeus, in our reading from Luke 19, gives us a beautiful example of what restitution and repentance look like. As a tax collector Zacchaeus would have been given Roman soldiers to help him make sure people paid their taxes. As you can imagine that set up was a recipe for extortion. No wonder the disgust of the crowd when Jesus says to Zacchaeus - *I must stay at your house today!* But did you see Zacchaeus' response to Jesus? Both restitution and repentance. *Look Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.*

Here is a man who has been freed from the need for self-preservation. He has been freed from the idol of wealth which led him to exploit others. He was transformed from greed to generosity through that encounter with Jesus. And how does Jesus respond to him? *Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*

Notice that that salvation is not only the hope of glory, it is also transformation in the present: the radical healing of relationships and growth in character. So too in Paul's words to the Corinthians - godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation without regret.

I find it interesting that this text in 2 Corinthians 7 can be applied so personally to each of us. But the text is written not to an individual but a community. And so there can be a corporate sorrow and corporate repentance. This is perhaps harder for us to grasp, but we don't have to look far to see it. Things like climate change, racial injustice, the sexualisation of children in our culture, all need to be met with corporate sorrow and corporate repentance.

Why is it so hard to hear just criticism? It's not just our pride that gets in the way. We're also terrified that all we'll find is judgment and rejection and no mercy.

Nick Cave, one of Australia's great musicians, has a blog where he answers questions fans send in. One recent post caught headlines worldwide. Cave writes,

Without mercy a society loses its soul, and devours itself.

... As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy's antithesis. Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. Its once honourable attempt to reimagine our society in a more equitable way now embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer (and none of the beauty) — moral certainty and self-righteousness shorn even of the capacity for redemption.³

Cave points to the fact that only when mercy exists is sorrow that leads to change possible. Mercy creates the space for real contrition and repentance. Mercy says there is in fact a deeper love that means our failures are not the last word. Did you notice the context for Paul's letter of rebuke? His deep affection and abiding commitment to the Corinthians. It's true in marriage too. The vows a couple make to each other of faithfulness and commitment are meant to create the safety where you can own up to when you've hurt your partner because your contrition will be met with forgiveness. We know that sometimes the hurt is too deep and marriages fail.

But at their best they give us a picture of the one who is utterly committed to us and unfailingly faithful, whose arms are always open to us with forgiveness - Jesus. On the cross he hung in our place. He was forsaken that we might never be rejected. He bore our judgment that we might not be condemned. And God welcomes you not because you get everything right, but because in Jesus his forgiveness stretches from east to west and his mercy from heaven to earth His love for us is stronger than death. God's mercy flowing from Jesus' veins opens the space for repentance. His desire is our good. His purpose is to transform us from one degree of glory to another. So you can trust him when confronts you with where you need to change. His word may cut you to the core, but it's to heal you. That sorrow is a gift of the Holy Spirit to lead you to repentance. And in that you are renewed and freed from the bondage of sin. And you know what? As you let godly sorrow do its work, God is pleased with you. Just like a father is proud when his son fesses up to putting the ball through the kitchen window and asks "I'm sorry Dad. How can I make it right?"

³ <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-mercy-for-you/>

Are you open to the pain of rebuke so that you can change? Maybe you know that rebuke from Scripture or a friend or the prick of your conscience, but your sorrow is more about self pity and less about the harm to your neighbour and the offense to God. Pray that God would cut you deeper to heal you. Maybe you're in anguish and your sin weighs heavily on you. Good! Now come to the Father. He is rich in mercy and full of compassion. Look to Jesus for forgiveness. Ask the Holy Spirit to free you from the power of sin, that your godly sorrow may leave no regret, because the old has gone and the new has come!

You know the hardest thing about this passage for me? It's not that I might receive a rebuke that grieves me. That's hard, but I know I need it. It's that I might need to give you a painful rebuke. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to leave St George's or walk away from God for that matter because of something I've said. I'm terrified that you'll respond with worldly sorrow and stay stuck in bitterness, anger, self pity, or self loathing, with your life unravelling towards death. But you know what's worse than that? Robbing you of the chance to repent. Pulling a punch when you don't feel the weight of your sin. That's not doing the heart surgery because I'm afraid to draw blood. Proverbs 27:6 says,

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

I can tell you I've been there where I didn't wound when I needed to. I pray in fear and trembling that in God's mercy the Holy Spirit would give me the wisdom and courage to know when to make that call.