

## “Good Grief”

2 Samuel 11:26-12:9, 13 • 2 Corinthians 7:2-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • November 14, 2021

How many of you like to be told you're wrong? Nobody. Of course not. Nobody wants to be told that what you think is wrong, what you're doing is wrong, where you're going is wrong. The only thing worse is to have someone publicly show that you're wrong in front of others. It's embarrassing. Sometimes we respond in anger or violence, sadness or isolation and often it just results in a greater commitment to our way of thinking or doing. We think, "I'll show you," and we double down on our position. But maybe there's another way.

In his book *Run With Horses*, Eugene Peterson tells a story about changing the blade on his lawnmower. He writes, "A few years ago I was in my backyard with my lawnmower tipped on its side. I was trying to get the blade off so I could sharpen it. I had my biggest wrench attached to the nut but couldn't budge it. I got a four-foot length of pipe and slipped it over the wrench handle to give me leverage, and I leaned on that—still unsuccessfully. Next I took a large rock and banged on the pipe. By this time I was beginning to get emotionally involved with my lawnmower. Then my neighbor walked over and said that he had a lawnmower like mine once and that, if he remembered correctly, the threads on the bolt went the other way. I reversed my exertions and, sure enough, the nut turned easily. I was glad to find out I was wrong. I was saved from frustration and failure. I would never have gotten the job done, no matter how hard I tried, doing it my way."

Sometimes we are just wrong. And in those situations we should welcome someone pointing it out. The Apostle Paul had to "correct" the Corinthians Christians. At the beginning of 2 Corinthians he tells about the visit he made to the church that went poorly. There was a sinful situation going on that had

to be dealt with. We don't know exactly what it was, probably because God knows that if we knew what was happening then we wouldn't see how this applies to our lives today. The situation was made worse when the false teachers showed up and started sowing distrust of Paul among the church members.

Paul didn't want another visit like that so instead he wrote them the painful letter. Back in chapter 2 he said, "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 I have for you." The letter was painful to the Corinthians but it was just as painful for Paul to write. The truth is that when someone you love is going in the wrong direction, the loving thing to do is help them see the problem so they can correct it. But we can only do this within a close, loving, sacrificial relationship. Sometimes love means saying the hard things and also hearing the hard things.

So Paul sent one of his assistants, Titus, to deliver the letter to Corinth and then they were to meet a few months later in Troas. The time came but Titus never showed up. Paul was very distraught. He says in 2:12, "When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went to Macedonia," which was apparently the backup plan.

Often times not knowing is worse than receiving bad news. Your mind begins to imagine the worst possible scenarios. Paul was worried about Titus. He was worried about how his letter had been received. He was worried about the church in Corinth. His worry was so bad it affected his ministry. He was so stressed that he couldn't preach in Troas, even though some great opportunities

opened up. He says, “even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.”

Then everything changed. Titus showed up and he shared how the Corinthians had responded. They were eager to clear themselves. They were filled with longing and zeal for the gospel and for Paul, their apostle. What a relief. He says he’s “filled with comfort” and “overflowing with joy.”

Paul knew that his painful letter was difficult for the Corinthians to hear. For a while he regretted the pain it would cause. But now that Titus has reported that the Corinthians repented as a result, Paul says in verse 8, “even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.”

This passage shows us that there are two kinds of grief or sorrow: worldly grief and godly grief. Worldly grief leads to regret; godly grief leads to repentance. Worldly grief or sorrow is like those celebrity apologies that we see so often these days. They seem kind of shallow. Like when your mom makes you apologize to your brother, even though he actually deserved it. These kinds of apologies are basically, “I’m sorry I got caught.” Kevin DeYoung writes that worldly grief is “an expression of regret over opportunities lost, painful present circumstances, or personal embarrassment.” In other words, worldly grief has to do with pride and ego and humiliation, which only leads to despair, bitterness, and depression. That’s because worldly grief is focused on the past and you can’t change the past. Worldly grief is all about the self.

Godly grief, on the other hand, focuses you on God—first on how you have wronged God

by your sin, which next moves you to repent, which as Paul says in verse 10, “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.” Then in verse 11 he says that godly grief produces earnestness and fear and longing and zeal.

There’s a great example of the two kinds of grief in the gospels in the difference between the way Peter responded to denying Jesus and the way Judas responded to betraying him. One came to repentance and was forgiven and restored. The other came to grief and ended up taking his own life.

In our Old Testament reading we have a great demonstration of godly grief. King David had sinned greatly. While his army was off at war, David had an affair with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed to cover it up. That’s bad. God sent the prophet Nathan to David who told him a parable of a wealthy farmer who took the only lamb of a poor farmer. David was outraged about the injustice and demanded to know who did this. Nathan said, “You are the man.” David was filled with godly grief. He recognized that he had sinned against God and he repented. You and I need to do the same thing. When we find out that we are wrong, when we realize our own sin, we must go to God and confess and repent. We must change. Godly grief moves us to action and that puts us on the road toward God.

The surprising result of godly grief is comfort and joy. Paul said, “I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.” Are you overflowing with joy? Why not? Could it be that your worldly grief is getting in the way of godly grief?

Paul shows us the secret to this kind of comfort and joy. Verse 6 says, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us.” Now God can certainly come and comfort you directly. But that’s now He usually does it. Usually God’s comfort comes to us the way it does in this passage: through other believers.

That's why He instituted the church. We are to be a close family of followers of Jesus who covenant together to help one another on the journey of faith and life. God comforted Paul and his companions through the Corinthian Christians. He comforted the Corinthians through Paul.

You can have complete comfort and joy in Christ as well through the fellowship of other believers, through your church, as messy as it

can be sometimes. But that also means you have a part to play in that fellowship. As one commentator put it, "For our part we must ensure that we are loving, concerned and Christ-like people whom the 'God of all comfort' will employ in the comforting of those who are in distress." How are you doing with that?

*Amen.*