

Painful Discipline  
II Corinthians 2:4-11

I'm going to be honest with y'all - I did everything I could to put off writing this sermon. No distraction was too insignificant – laundry got done, the floor got swept, I made progress on the Presbytery Directory, and, of course, the internet got browsed. I don't want to preach this message about Church discipline any more than y'all probably want to hear it.

And that's, at least in part, because we are all Americans. We are certified liberty junkies, dedicated to autonomy and choice. And even though in recent years, we've become accustomed to the idea of government paying for things like education and health insurance, we still hate the idea of the high taxes and onerous regulations that inevitably accompany such programs. The bottom line is that we Americans don't want anyone telling us what to do.

Of course, this past week has given us two rather sobering reminders of where too much autonomy and choice can lead us. Last Tuesday was the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, which overturned all state laws regulating abortion in the United States. Since that time over 60 million Americans have been killed before having the chance to be born – oh, and that's more than all the people who died in the European Theater during World War II, and well more than the 11 million people the Nazis exterminated in their death camps.

And the bloodletting continues. Also on Tuesday, the governor of New York signed a new law which widened his citizens' opportunity to kill their unborn children, allowing abortions even after the time a baby is considered viable. And this week, a bill has been introduced into the Virginia legislature that would allow abortion even when a woman is in the very act of giving birth.

No, we Americans don't want to be told what to do. But I think we can all agree that sometimes what we want is not the best thing for us and for our children. Sometimes, whether we like it or not, someone needs to speak truth into our lives, however uncomfortable for us it might be. Sometimes we need to be confronted with our sin. And that is exactly what Paul was trying to do with the Christians in Corinth. And according to today's passage, they didn't like it either.

Last week, we saw Paul explaining why he had changed his plans to visit Corinth, and now we see why: a letter he had written to them had brought them a lot of grief and sorrow. And although this letter has not been preserved, from today's passage we get the idea that he had told them to rebuke one of their members about some sin in his life. In short, Paul had told them to conduct some Church discipline, and they got so upset about it, he thought it best to change his travel plans to let the situation cool down.

But it wasn't just the Corinthians who were upset by this confrontation – Paul was too. The last thing he wanted to was to create grief and sorrow among the Christians in Corinth – that's why verse 4 says he wrote that letter to them with many tears. He didn't want to upset them, not least because that would upset him too.

But Paul wasn't just being a wimp. No, in verse 4 he tells us the heart of the reason that discipline has always been so difficult for the church – it's hard to say hurtful things to those we love, even if they really need to hear them.

And such love is one of the big reasons that the Church, at least in the United States, has largely abandoned the notion of discipline. Oh, we have the mechanisms in place to do it. We Presbyterians have the blessing and privilege of electing and installing our own ruling elders, and in the Greek, the word elder means bishop or overseer. We choose men and women to be our overseers because we recognize their Biblical knowledge and respect their judgement, because we look up to them as examples for how we should live the Christian life. We choose them because we love them and we know they love us. And we choose more than one, so that, as a group, they can hold each other as well as the rest of us accountable for our faith and practice.

So, why don't our ruling elders speak truth into our lives more often? Why don't they confront us with our sin? In part it's for the same reason that Paul had such difficulty even writing to the Corinthians about a matter of Church discipline – because of their love for us. Who wants to say something that will cause a loved one pain? Who wants to risk a friendship by being honest, even when such honesty is necessary?

And so, we all just tend to go on being Southern, don't we? We all just pretend that everything's fine. We all just ignore one another's shortcomings and slather a veneer of politeness on top of every irritation. Instead of confronting someone about a problem that arises between us, we just say, "Well, bless your heart," and move on. And, of course, all too often we just avoid these problematic people in the future. The price of our politeness, all too often, is estrangement.

So of course, such tactics don't work with the people we love the most, with people we can't just write out of our lives. Moreover, "Bless your heart," just isn't enough when those we really love are doing something really harmful to themselves or others. I mean, would it be the loving thing to let someone drive down the road toward a bridge that has collapsed? Wouldn't the loving thing be to tell them to stop and turn around?

And don't even we Southerners tend to admonish those we love about some things that we think are important? I remember fussing at my Daddy to try to get him to stop smoking. I remember fussing at the girls in my high school classes about the dangers of skin cancer when they roasted themselves over Spring break. Perhaps you've urged a loved one to go to the doctor or to lose weight or to eat more or to drink less. And yet, somehow, where it comes to spiritual matters, we all grow silent.

But according to verse 11, letting our elders admonish us about our sin is even more important than preserving our physical health. And that isn't just because sin has eternal consequences. No, it's because of the deceptive nature of sin. It's because of Satan's devices, his schemes, the way that all sin blinds us to its own existence.

And this is not least because we are all so good at self-deception – we call it "rationalization," but it's really just lying to ourselves, isn't it? Let's say you made a commitment to quit smoking. But then you get a phone call about something really upsetting, and before you know it, you've lit up. You know you need to quit, but you tell yourself that you just need to get through this especially stressful situation. Or maybe you made a New Year's resolution to lose weight because none of your clothes fit anymore. But you come to a covered dish supper and you pass by the dessert table, and you tell yourself you really don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, and you're only going to have one, and you end up having one ... of each item!

So, can we be honest? These kinds of rationalizations, this tendency to deceive ourselves often makes it easier for others to see our sin than we can see it ourselves. And this is not least because, at root, all sin is a lie – the lie that we don't need God to tell us what to do, the lie that we don't need other people in our lives. Sin thus clouds our judgment at the same time that it hardens our hearts. And sometimes, just as when someone is addicted to a drug, we need help to see just how bad it is. Sometimes, we need an intervention – and that can only come from someone who loves us, no matter how hard it may be for them to do.

But just as it is easy to let our love for others keep us from speaking truth into their lives, it is just as easy, once we've made the leap to get involved, to let our words go too far. You know the typical pattern, where it comes to personal problems: deny, deny, deny, deny – explode! This is especially easy to do when the sins involved are embarrassing, or things we consider to be socially unacceptable. I mean, haven't we all heard stories about the girl who finds herself pregnant, only to be pressured by her parents and her boyfriend to get an abortion so they don't have to help take care of the child? Or what about those who confess to same-sex attractions, only to find themselves completely ostracized by their church, or even their own families? And so instead of getting help, support and encouragement, those who have been broken find themselves cut off not only from the source of truth, but from the healthy sort of love they really need.

And the Corinthians seem to have been guilty of this sort of over-reaction. Again, we're not exactly sure what this individual's sin was that Paul mentions in verses 5 and 6. And we're not sure exactly what kind of punishment they meted out, although it was likely some form of public rebuke. But whatever they had done, Paul has to remind them in verses 7 and 8 that the whole purpose of church discipline isn't to hurt or harm the sinner, to ostracize him permanently from the Church. Instead, discipline is supposed to be a demonstration of our love, however tough this love might have to be. Such an honest confrontation is supposed to restore sight to one who has become blind to his own sin, leading her to repentance and forgiveness, and thus to a full restoration to the Body of Christ.

So, how can we modern American Presbyterians recover Church discipline? How can we let it help all of us see our sin more clearly? How can we use it as a sometimes necessary tool to encourage one another in holiness, and to break down whatever barriers might have arisen between us?

In the first place, we can all cultivate a humble spirit. After all, when every single one of us joined the church, we all confessed that we were nothing more than sinners in need of a Savior. And we would all do well to remember that. We should thus be willing to admit that we might indeed have sins that we have become blind to. And so, if one of our elders were to come to us with Bible in hand and tears in his eyes, pointing out an area of our lives that has fallen out of accord with our profession of faith, we should accept her words with an open mind and a humble heart. We might even want to take a sin problem that we've managed to keep a secret to one of our elders for prayer and advice.

And what about us elders? We can pray for our church members regularly, and try to get to know what's really going on in their lives. We can try to earn their trust, encouraging them to greater holiness by setting a good example for them in our words and deeds. And if one were to have a sin problem so serious and stubborn as to require an intervention, we can seek the counsel of other elders, and pray that God would soften his heart and open her eyes. And then, and only then, we must speak the truth, but always in the context of love.

No, none of this will be easy – nothing that brings true growth ever is. But if we really want to grow in our love for God and our love for one another, we need to encourage each other to repent, to see ourselves as we really are, and then to bring more and more of our lives into accord with God's Word. So, will we give up trying to be in charge of our lives? Will we surrender to God's plan for us?