

Uncomfortable Truth
II Corinthians 7:2-16

Southern culture has many, many positive elements. The central place of the Christian faith. The value of family. The emphasis on hospitality. The music. The food. Our special blend of British and West African traditions continues to be attractive to people from all over the world – just try to find a place where no one’s ever heard of Elvis.

But one of the biggest negatives about Southern culture is our desperation to avoid conflict at all costs. For let’s face it: the elaborate politeness we practice is all too often a veneer intended to mask misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Instead of bringing our disagreements out into the open, instead of being honest when we’ve been hurt, we just say, “Bless your heart,” and pretend everything’s fine. But we also tend to avoid those who have hurt us in the future, don’t we? Oh, we Southerners know how to preserve our congeniality, but only at the cost of true reconciliation.

And it may very well have been the case that the Corinthian church had a similar problem dealing with disagreement – verse 12 mentions a certain someone who had done wrong, and someone else who had been offended by it. It seems that Paul had written a previous letter to the Corinthians to address and correct the way they were handling this issue.

But that’s the most amazing thing for us Southerners. For whatever this problem was, when it came to Paul’s attention, he didn’t ignore it. He didn’t say “Bless your heart,” and pretend everything’s fine. No, Paul actually wrote them a letter about it. He brought the problem out into the open. He confronted the Corinthians with some sort of change they needed to make. As chapter 6 verse 11 says, Paul had spoken to them not with the elaborate doubletalk we so often use, but freely. Openly. Honestly. What was he thinking?

For we are not at all surprised at how the Corinthians responded to this sort of overt criticism – they got their feelings hurt. In chapter 6 verse 12, Paul admits that their affections toward him were restrained. That’s why in verse 2 of today’s passage, Paul has to urge them to receive him, to make room again for him in their hearts. Indeed, that’s a big part of the reason why Paul had to write this letter in the first place, to patch up their relationship.

Now, we could draw the obvious Southern conclusion from this passage, indeed from this whole letter. We could say, “See what happens when you point out problems? See what happens when you try to address difficulties? Just slather on some more politeness and pretend everything’s fine, and you can avoid all these hurt feelings!”

But for many reasons, that wasn’t an option for Paul. After all, he had been the organizing pastor of this church, so it was his responsibility to help them learn how to live in a godly way. Moreover, the love he had for them wouldn’t let him remain silent when they were believing the wrong things or when their behavior was hurting one another.

And however much we may try to avoid conflict, sometimes it’s unavoidable for us too. Some problems just can’t be ignored. An abusive spouse has to be kept away from the children. An addict may need an intervention to get his life back on track. And let’s face it – because sin is so deceptive, sometimes we need a friend to break the code of silence and help us get some perspective on our own actions, thoughts and feelings. Sometimes we need to hear uncomfortable truths, whether we like it or not.

But in order for us to benefit from such constructive criticism, we first have to trust the speaker, don’t we? That’s why Paul begins this passage by reminding the Corinthians of his motives. In verse 2,

he reminds them that he hasn't corrupted or defrauded anyone. He isn't trying to get anything out of them. He's not selling patent medicines or hawking self-help books. And in verse 3 he points out that he's not trying to condemn anyone – he's not the sort of holier-than-thou sort who likes to put other people down. Even though he was an apostle and the organizing pastor of their church, Paul is not trying to lord his authority over the Corinthians. In the same way, if we really want to help our Christian brothers and sisters, we can't come across as self-interested, judgmental jerks.

But let's face it – that's a pretty low bar to clear. So, in addition to our genuine goodwill, we can only hope to speak and hear uncomfortable truths in the context of real relationship, in the context of true love. That's why in verse 3, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are in his heart. Live or die, they are close, they are bound as pastor and people, as brothers and sisters in the faith, as part of one body of Christ. In short, for criticism to be received, it must come from someone who is really close to us, from someone we know is looking out for our best interests.

But if goodwill and love are both necessary for criticism to be effective, respect is no less important. Verse 4 says that Paul was bold in his speech towards them, which also means he had great confidence in them. In fact, he gloried in them – he boasted about them. In other words, when he brought their shortcomings to their attention, he wasn't trying to talk down to them. On the basis of the love and respect he had for them, he was appealing to their common faith in their common Lord, and thus he had good reason to believe they would listen to him. And if we are to speak the truth into one another's lives, we must do so with the same kind of good intentions and love and respect, all of which flow out of real relationship.

Okay, so let's assume that all these factors exist. Let's assume that two Christians really love and trust and respect one another, and that one of them with Bible in hand and tears in his eyes confronts the other about a sin in his life that he just can't see. What happens then? In verse 9, Paul admits that even in these optimal conditions, the result is sorrow. The sad truth is that confronting sin is always painful, and that no amount of love can wish that pain away.

Now, that's not to say that all the sorrow that comes from hearing uncomfortable truths is beneficial. Sometimes when our sin is revealed we are only sorry that we got caught. Sometimes, we are only sorrowful because we're ashamed. But that kind of sorrow doesn't necessarily lead to a changed life. It could lead us instead to bury our conflicts and our sin even deeper, to hide them ever more carefully, to harden our hearts toward God and one another ever more completely. That's why in verse 10 Paul says this sort of worldly, self-centered sorrow leads only to death.

But there's another kind of sorrow, a healthy kind. Just as it is sometimes necessary to reopen a wound in order to clean it out, the sorrow that comes when we face our sin can lead to true healing, can lead to a life that is changed for the better, a life that is drawn closer to God and closer to other people. This is the godly kind of sorrow, as Paul says in verse 9, that leads to repentance.

So, what does this godly sorrow look like? At first glance, it might seem a lot like any other sort of hurt feelings. After all, verse 11 mentions that the Corinthians were filled with indignation, and we all know how easily we can be offended when someone else dares to point out our shortcomings. But the kind of indignation Paul is talking about here is the sort of righteous anger directed, not toward the person who has identified our sin, but toward the sin itself. This is the same sort of reaction we might have if someone were to show us a corner we had failed to sweep – “You're right! Where's my broom and dustpan? I gotta get rid of that icky stuff!”

Yes, such righteous indignation always leads to action, to an attempt to root out the wrong that has come to our attention. This is what seems to lie behind the word “revenge” in verse 11 – because

Paul had pointed out a problem in the Corinthian church, the people were all the more anxious to right the wrong, to mete out proper punishment on the sin that had been revealed in their midst.

Paul also mentions that godly sorrow includes fear, but again, this isn't the fear of being discovered or humiliated, the sort of fear that comes from trying to hide our sin. Instead, this refers to the kind of reverence and awe we have for God or for other Christians whom we respect. This fear is thus a desire to avoid disappointing those we love and respect so much. In short, the indignation and fear that are part of godly sorrow tend to draw us toward God and toward other Christians, instead of hiding from them in anger and shame.

And again, this sort of fear always leads to action. Because we want to remain in a right relationship with God and with others, when we realize we have sinned we should be anxious to demonstrate that we have indeed come back into line with God's will. In the same way, far from being bent out of shape by Paul's calling attention to some sin in their fellowship, the Corinthians took action to clear themselves, to correct whatever the problem was that he pointed out.

So, when you put it all together, we have a picture of what repentance really looks like. Because of our longing, our zealous desire to be in a right relationship with God and with God's people, repentance means being willing to make any change necessary to turn away from sin in our lives. And if being close to God and being close to others is our greatest desire, our highest joy, then of course we shouldn't be offended if someone like Paul were to show us a part of our lives that needs a little straightening out. If we are truly repentant, we would respond the way Paul had hoped the Corinthians would.

So, Southern Presbyterians, how can we get to this point in our spiritual lives? How can we stop pretending that everything's fine, and recover the blessings which come from this sort of spiritual honesty and accountability?

Well, one thing we can do is to take advantage of our system of government. For that's the reason we choose ruling elders. We select men and women because of their love for us, because of their knowledge of the Scriptures, and because of the consistent way they live according to the Word of God. And because we trust them and respect them, we are supposed to let them do what Paul did in this chapter – to speak uncomfortable truth into our lives, to help us see our sin more clearly, and to help us live the Christian life more consistently.

But you don't have to talk to an elder or pastor. You can open up to a member of your Sunday School class or small group, or to a colleague at work or to any good Christian friend. Anyone you respect because of their knowledge of the Scriptures, anyone who loves you and knows you well can help you figure out what's really going on in your heart and mind, and can help you make real progress in the Christian life, turning away from sin and following Jesus more consistently.

So, I suppose we can go on trying to figure all this stuff out for ourselves. We can do the Southern thing and pretend everything's fine. We can avoid the pain and hurt feelings, the godly sorrow that always goes along with the discovery of sin. We can ignore all those spiritual problems until they explode.

But wouldn't it be better to take advantage of the wise counsel of godly leaders like Paul? Wouldn't it be better to be honest with each other about our problems and invite others to speak uncomfortable truths into our lives? What better way could we have to draw closer to one another, to live lives of true love?