

2 Corinthians 7

What you get here is Paul giving us a window into the heart of his ministry or rather into his heart for ministry. He knows it's important that the Corinthians see his heart. And this is a great pattern for our ministry heart and how to communicate about our ministry heart to those we're seeking to lead.

To try to get it in a nutshell – what we get here is:

Emotionally engaged leadership: emotionally open, emotionally aware, emotionally careful, emotionally right leadership

Let's walk through this and follow the logic. Verse 1 gives us the goal for ministry:

1. Our goal – perfect holiness (v1)

Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

It's connected back to the great gospel promises of chapter 6 – from the Old Testament – “I will be their God and they will be my people... I will be a Father to you”.

And the Bible logic is since we have promises we purify ourselves. Very similar to 1 John 3 – all who have this hope purify themselves.

Because that is the goal of our salvation – that is the end for which Christ died – that God might have a holy people.

It's the opposite of the antinomian logic which says – if God has unilaterally promised me salvation then I can do whatever I want. No – since we have these promises – these promises – to be God's special people, to be children of God - we purify ourselves from everything in our thought life and in our behaviour that is not fitting for children of God.

So the goal is perfect holiness motivated by a reverence for God.

Which is another way of saying Colossians 1:28 – we want to present everyone fully mature in Christ. And it's the same goal for them as he expressed earlier in this letter - 2 Corinthians 1:24 – we're working for your joy.

Perfect holiness out of reverence for God is the same thing as life driven by joy in Christ.

That's what Paul's desire is for the Corinthians, that's what all his efforts are towards – so when he sees that he's going to be very excited and when he doesn't see that he's going to be gutted.

And even in that first verse you see the way in which he's communicating his goal:

- Dear friends – literally 'beloved'
- We have these promises, Let us – together – we're working alongside you for your progress and joy – and we are forgiven sinners too who need to be purifying ourselves with you

Then the rest of this chapter is expanding on the fact that they really are 'dear friends' and they are in this together.

Paul knows it's not enough to give them an exposition of Isaiah or Ezekiel and urge them to respond. There is some relational work to be done. There needs to be a right relationship between the gospel minister and those he's ministering to and particularly they need to know the heart from which this ministry is coming.

² Make room for us in your hearts.

2. Paul is Appealing (again) for openness – he did it in chapter 6 – and he says it again – “Receive us well. Open up to us and to our message. Receive what we’re saying in the spirit it’s intended.”

And he backs up that appeal with clarifications of what is not the case and what is the case.

Which is always a good way of speaking – especially in a conflict resolution situation – be really careful to say what is not your intention as well as what is your intention.

- a. What we have not done to you:

2: We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one.

Paul is doing what he did with the Ephesian elders – I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold.

He’s doing what Samuel did – Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed?

That has a lot of sharpness in the light of recent abuse revelations.

- a) Wronged – treating people unrighteously, unjustly, unfairly – could be by being hurting them physically or emotionally – being harsh. It can be inadvertent. I’ve been learning recently that there is stuff about employment law that you need to be aware of when you’re employing someone or letting someone go – need to know so not treating them unfairly. Or good management practices – like giving people an annual review, making sure you’re not over working or under working them. So it can be harshness, can be neglect. Often when we’re trying to push something through quickly – we can wrong people.
- b) Corrupted – spoil, ruin – like a corrupted hard disk – also the sense of lead astray, seduce – can have a sexual connotation or a false teaching connotation – and as we know in Scripture those things often go together. ‘Wronging’ is about unfair treatment but it doesn’t necessarily corrupt someone – corruption is where the person themselves is changed, spoiled, ruined. Scary thing is that we want people to change – but instead of being an instrument of God to change people to become more like Christ we can be an instrument of Satan to change them to become – well maybe more like us.
- c) Exploited = con man pulling a fast one, it’s about manipulation, playing someone – maybe for financial gain or for narcissistic ends. Often it’s taking advantage of someone’s ignorance – so it’s particularly easy to do with someone who’s younger or younger in the faith – or taking advantage of a power difference – which, as a pastor, you have more than you think. The question is – am I serving people or am I using people?

Paul can say to all that – I haven’t done that.

And he continues in the negative –

V3: I do not say this to condemn you;

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world

Paul’s rebukes to the Corinthians are not the judge pronouncing the verdict and the sentence. He is not trying to crush them.

Rather – and here he goes to the positive – what is the heart behind what he’s saying?

I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.

That is incredibly strong! The word order is actually – that we would die with you and live with you. In gospel logic there is dying and then living. And Paul says we are with you in that – we're like conjoined twins sharing a heart – nothing can separate us from you.

And then he gives four things he feels strongly towards them:

- Feels very free to be frank with them
- Feels very proud of them
- Feels very encouraged by them
- Feels very joyful about them

You can sense in all this the fatherly love. He is the proud dad. And it's important that he shares that with them explicitly.

But he doesn't just leave it at a general level – in the next section, from verse 5 he goes into the detail of their relationship and what has actually happened between them. That gives him the opportunity to clarify what has happened and it provides the evidence for the place these Corinthians have in his heart.

3. Evidence of the place you have in our hearts:

- a. Comforted in the midst of great affliction by news of your heart (v5-7)

⁵ For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn— conflicts on the outside, fears within.

Paul was going through a particularly hard time – no sleep, no let-up of outside conflict, opposition and problems and internal fears, concerns for people, unanswered questions, emotional distress. He's telling them this not to get their sympathy or make it all about him but to make the next bit all the more remarkable. If you're really really down it's going to take something really special to encourage you. And the Corinthians were that really special thing.

⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

The God of all comfort comforted Paul in all his affliction *through a person* - Titus - *who had been comforted by the Corinthians*. And what Titus and Paul were comforted by was the positive change in their heart – their affections – longing, sorrow, concern.

Then he goes into more detail of what specifically it was about their heart change that was so encouraging to him:

- b. Specifically encouraged by news of your godly repentance (v8-13a)

⁸ 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.

Repentance is what he's so encouraged about: God-intended repentance.

Paul is fixed on that goal of perfecting holiness out of reverence for God and repentance is that perfecting holiness – that's how we become more holy – by repenting.

He's fixed on the goal – but that doesn't mean he's unconcerned about how painful that process is for them.

Paul's shares his sadness at making them sad – he didn't like having to do that. He felt like a father giving his child a medicine they hate or disciplining them in a way that makes them hate him but he knows it's necessary for them.

And he carries on to make a more general point:

¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

This is the complexity of dealing with hearts. There is sorrow and there is sorrow. There are tears about what I've lost from the world – the honour of the world that I've lost – where the heart is still all about longing for the world – and that leads to death. And there is another sort of sorrow that is terrified about how I have dishonoured God and longs to be right with him and see him honoured.

That second sort of sorrow is rare.

So when Paul sees that in the Corinthians, he is massively encouraged.

c. And also delighted by how encouraged Titus was by you (v13b-16)

¹³ By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.

Love this final addition.

He's already said that he was encouraged by the report from Titus about how they were doing. But he also wants them to know encouraged he was just by their impact on Titus. The brightness in Titus' face.

Paul says – you refreshed Titus. I'd bigged you Corinthians up to him and he found that you really are going really well and he loved his time with you. He loves you – he has great affection for you.

Notice how Paul loves to see others doing well.

He's said a lot about himself in this chapter but he doesn't make it all about himself. He makes it about the Corinthians – you are the encouragers, you are the refreshers. And he's genuinely delighted by Titus' ministry among them – Titus' relationship with them is growing, perhaps their relationship is now stronger than Paul's with them but he doesn't feel threatened by that. He's delighted.

A few concluding observations about leadership.

- A. Emotional openness – Big thing here. Mustn't miss this– Paul wants the Corinthians to see his heart. Jesus was emotionally open with his disciples – they saw him weep, saw him moved with compassion, saw him angry.¹ There is a time for emotional openness.
- B. Emotional awareness – that is Paul is noticing what is driving himself and driving others – he is not being emotionally open in an uncontrolled, spontaneous way so much as reflecting on how he felt – and he is also reflecting on how other people are feeling. Some of us might be naturally pretty emotionally aware. Others of us might struggle to know how we're feeling and why or to notice how other people are feeling and why – It's something I've had to work on.
- C. Emotional carefulness – Emotionally-engaged leadership is very tricky. We're in the business of dealing with hearts – our job is to work with people for their joy in Christ and their fear of the Lord – and that is really complicated. It's the godly sorrow / worldly sorrow thing. It's not just about feelings – it's having the right affections going in the right direction to the right extent for the right length of time. So it's finally about:
- D. Emotional rightness – Not just emotions for the sake of it. It's all about people being perfected in holiness, increasing joy in Christ, increasing fear of the Lord so that there would be increasing glory to God.

¹ Julyan Lidstone, [*Give Up the Purple: A call for servant leadership in hierarchical cultures*](#), p. 75.