

GOOD GRIEF

2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-16

Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one.

I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.

For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears.

Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more.

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while.

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal,

what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you.

Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.

For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I am not ashamed. But as we spoke all things to you in truth, even so our boasting to Titus was found true.

And his affections are greater for you as he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling you received him. Therefore I rejoice that I have confidence in you in everything.

Sorrowful songs... beware of sorrowful songs...

There's a page on the web entitled, "[The 50 Saddest Songs Of All Time](#)." After cruising it a while yesterday it had me in tears. There are some really sad songs...

There's a Glen Campbell's song, "[I'm Not Gonna To Miss You](#)," written after his diagnosis of Alzheimer's. It's admittedly selfish - that the only good thing about his disease was it kept him from missing his wife.

Eric Clapton wrote a song about the death of his son, called "[Tears in Heaven](#)." In the song he mournfully asks if his son would even know his name in heaven.

Then there's REM's gloomy tune, "Everybody hurts sometimes. Everybody cries. Everything's wrong." From someone who knows, those are not peppy lyrics.

These are all gut-wrenching, brutally sad songs.

And at the top of the list, the saddest of all is a Hank Williams classic, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

Hank croons as only Hank can, "I've never seen a night so long when time goes crawling by, the moon just went behind the clouds to hide its face and cry.

The silence of a falling star lights up a purple sky, and as I wonder where you are I'm so lonesome I could cry." All these songs are marinated in sadness.

And it's true, all lives have their share of sadness.

In our text, the Apostle Paul talks about sorrow, but the gloom he sings about is a good kind of sadness.

The expression "*good grief*" isn't just the phrase Charlie Brown made famous - or a clever entry on a list of oxymorons, "*good grief*." Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul teaches us there really is such a thing as "*good grief*."

In northern Chile there's a strip of land between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean where the sun shines virtually all the time. Seldom does a cloud appear over the valley. This produces a brilliant sunrise each morning, and picturesque sunsets every night.

You might think this area to be a paradise on earth. But the Atacama Desert is so sterile, it looks like the terrain on Mars. The constant sunshine has only created a barren wilderness -

nothing grows there.

And this is a lesson for us. Only bright days and perpetual sunshine is not what we need. A life without some clouds and rainy days won't produce the growth and fruitfulness we desire. Sadness comes to us all, and it's our responsibility to transform it into **good grief**.

This is what we learn how to do in today's text...

Chapter 7:2 opens by eaves-dropping in on the running dialogue between Paul and the Corinthian church. Remember, what we call "*a book*" of the Bible was originally *a letter* - a personal correspondence.

And in this letter, Paul has been defending himself before his critics. He's described the motive and methods of his ministry. Mean, unfounded accusations were being hurled at him. He's defending his sincerity.

Which is what he does again in verse 2. He writes, "**Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one.**"

And this is what ever pastor and Christian ministry should be able to say to its community. "***I've wronged no one, I've corrupted no one, I've cheated no one.***"

"I have wronged no one..." I've treated everyone, church member and outsider alike, fairly and lovingly.

It would be like me saying, "*At last year's Hallelujah Fest I gave all the kids the same amount of candy that I gave my grandkids.*" Ooooo... well, maybe not.

Think Paul would've made a grandpa exception?

Actually, I remember once encouraging a friend's ex-wife. He couldn't reason why I was being kind to the person who had inflicted on him such hurt and spite.

People don't always realize God calls a pastor to *"wrong no one"* - even the person who's done wrong.

All Christians need to treat folks the way God treats us, and show them the same magnanimous mercy.

"I have corrupted no one..." This is why I don't sit in the bar section at the Texas Roadhouse - *even though you can see the football game a lot clearer from the bar section.* I don't want someone to see Pastor Sandy in the bar and think it's okay to get hammered.

I've pledged my life to win people to Jesus and help them be holy - *to be set apart and dedicated to God.*

I don't want to shoot my intentions in the foot by cavalier conduct and careless living. A pastor should forfeit his own rights to encourage people in holiness.

My goal is to be able to say, *"I've corrupted no one."*

And **"I have cheated no one."** For me, ministry is a sacred trust. God trusts me with His people - *and you also trust me to be your pastor...* I take that seriously.

Six years ago our church started an extension campus in Winder. Several folks from CCSM went along to launch the new church. I recall thanking one of the men for his involvement, when he said, *"Sandy, the reason we're there is that we believe in you and your vision."* I was shocked by what he said - *taken back!*

Wasn't he there because *God called him?* And I'm sure that

was true, but it reminded me that he trusted me as his pastor - he looked to me for leadership. And this is the realization that sobers me every single day.

I don't want to cheat you... You support me with your hard-earned money, so I can study and rightly divide God's Word. Thus, I labor diligently in my preparations.

You pay your pastors to manage the church funds. Thus, we seek wisdom and make every penny count.

You give so we can disciple your family. That's why we want to be faithful to God, and the people we serve.

James, Ana, Brett, Matt, Stacy, - and everyone who's on our church staff - we want to be able to say, *"I've wronged no one, corrupted no one, cheated no one."*

Verse 3, *"I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together."* In calling on the Corinthians to *"open their hearts to him"* - *be honest - stop accusing him behind his back*, Paul wasn't trying to shame them.

He wanted to renew his relationship with them, and *rebuild trust*. The Corinthians had betrayed Paul. Even after he'd yoked himself to them, *they broke his heart!*

He loved them - so much so, he was willing to *"die together or live together."* He would die with them, sharing in their persecutions - or he would live with them, as they served the Lord. But his bond was permanent. Truly, the Corinthians were *"in his heart."*

And this is true of every faithful pastor - his people, his congregation are *"in his heart."* It's more than a job. A good

pastor has a genuine love for those he serves.

Paul continues, “Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf.”

To prove his love for them, Paul tells the Corinthians how he’d bragged on them to other churches. They were a powerful church - they were filled with the Spirit!

Ask the believers in Philippi, or in Thessalonica, or in Berea if they were tired of hearing Paul gloat over the church at Corinth... Like a doting father’s favorite child the Corinthians were all Paul could talk about. He was on the verge of making the early church jealous.

Paul was proud of the Corinthians, yet all the while they were criticizing and questioning him. He was a pastor who cared for his flock, but his fickle sheep were bleating about their pastor. It was a *baaad* scene!

At the writing of this letter Paul was in the city of Philippi, and he was bummed out over the Corinthians.

Paul tells us, “I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears.” *It’s a bit sobering to hear the fearless Apostle Paul admit to fear and trepidation.*

But at times even the brave apostle was afraid. Paul was human. He was made of clay like the rest of us!

It’s been said, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to trust God in the midst of fear.”

Now, I don’t know if what Paul feared is what I fear...

I doubt if he was afraid of holding a church meeting and nobody showing up... or the offerings dipping so that he couldn't pay his staff... or the government taking away his rights and throwing him in jail... Paul seemed to handle those issues as a matter of course.

Paul is saying, “on a physical level I'm fighting, but it's on an emotional level that I'm fearful...” Paul feared what would happen to the faith of his converts - would they continue to hold fast to the truth... he feared false teachers entering the fold and devouring the sheep...

Paul says when he arrived in Macedonia (or Philippi) there were immediate demands on his time. He kept long hours - “*Our body had no rest.*” He was “*troubled on every side*” - his life was flooded with problems.

And every pastor has had weeks just like that!

I can't overemphasize the stress ministry produces when you consider it *a sacred trust*. When souls are at stake - when the Gospel is on the line - it ups the ante.

It depressed Paul when he first arrived in Philippi!

Depression has been labeled, “the common cold of the soul, for sooner or later most people catch it.” And I think people in ministry are especially vulnerable.

Paul doesn't identify it here, but you can be sure *spiritual warfare* was another reason for his despair.

Seventeenth century English pastor, John Donne, referred to his own frequent feelings of gloom as “the damp of hell.” Or literally, “the dew of hell.” Some days he just woke up “*behind the eight ball*” - in a sad mood.

They say, the great Reformer Martin Luther was subject to fits of depression so great he'd hide for days.

His family would remove all the sharp objects from his reach. Once his wife, Katharina, dressed in the clothes she wore to funerals. Luther asked her *who died?* She said, “**the way you're acting I thought God did.**” Paul too, endured some tough emotional patches.

But notice what God used to deliver Paul, verse 6 tells us, “**Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus...**”

Things changed with the arrival of Paul's assistant. Titus caught up to Paul after delivering his letter of rebuke. He had news of the Corinthians response.

And God used the visit and presence of a friend to lift Paul's spirit. Titus came with a good report, and news of the Corinthians' repentance, that encouraged Paul.

I love the title Paul gives to God in verse 6 - “**God, who comforts the downcast.**” This term “**downcast**” was used by shepherds. Whenever a plump sheep tumbled onto its back, and couldn't right itself on its own, it was called, “**downcast.**” It was a hopeless predicament.

And Paul had become so distressed he couldn't right himself in his own power. He'd dug such a hole he couldn't get out on his own... *so God sent a friend.*

Once a man fell into a hole. The sides were so steep he couldn't get out... A doctor walked by, and the man shouted,

“Hey, can you help me get out of this hole?”

The doctor wrote him a prescription and threw it into the hole. Shortly thereafter, a priest walked by, and the man shouted, “Can you help me get out of this hole?”

The priest wrote down a prayer and threw it into the hole. Finally, a friend walks by. The man shouts, “Hey, Joe, it’s me, can you help me out of this hole?”

Joe jumps into the hole with his friend. The stranded man is stunned, “Why did you do that? Are you stupid? Now we’re both down here.” Joe tells him, “Yea, but I’ve been down here before and I know the way out.”

This is the beauty of a friend, he doesn’t mind joining you in your hole. He’s been in a few holes himself, and knows the way out when you’re not seeing so clearly.

Often, *God washes and bandages our wounds... He restores to us hope and perspective... He gets us back on our feet...* through the help and presence of a friend.

And if you’re that friend... the next time God puts a person on your heart don’t ignore it - make a call, pay a visit, shoot off an email. Who knows if God wants to use you in your friend’s life, like He did Titus in Paul’s.

Paul tells us in verse 7 why he was so encouraged by Titus’ visit, “**And not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more.**”

Remember, 1 Corinthians was a strong rebuke. Paul confronted the Corinthians for their divisiveness and carnality -

and apparently, many of the Corinthians had repented. They'd taken heed to Paul's instructions.

There is some debate as to whether the Corinthians responded here to 1 Corinthians, or to another "severe letter" that Paul mentions in 2:4. I don't think it matters.

The point is the Corinthians had humbled themselves, received Paul's correction, and repented.

He says in verse 8, "For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it."

As a child, whenever I was a naughty, my father would resort to what is today a very politically incorrect form of punishment. He would lay me over the bed, pull off his belt, and whip my rear end until it stung...

By the way, *it didn't injure me*. God prepared me with extra padding... And it didn't stunt my self-esteem. Actually, it showed me I was loved enough to be held accountable... It worked so well, I used it on *my* kids.

But just before dad laid the board of education to the seat of learning, and spanked me - he would always say, "Sandy, this hurts me more than its going to hurt you." And guess what? *I never believed him. Not once!*

That is, until I became a parent! Now I know it's true.

It's an agonizing ordeal to discipline someone you love. This is what Paul felt when he wrote his letter.

Nobody likes it when their sin gets exposed. Nobody relishes a reprimand. A good rebuke, like a spanking, stings. It might even make you angry at first. You try to dodge it with excuses,

or recoil by criticizing the rebuker. I'm sure this is what some of the Corinthians had done. Not everyone received Paul's correction.

And the only thing more excruciating than receiving a rebuke, is to be the one to administer that rebuke.

Paul had taken a risk in writing his letter. *What if the Corinthians turned on him completely, and pushed him further away - what if they shut Paul out of their lives?*

Aren't these the reasons we're reluctant to speak hard truths to the people we love? *If I tell my adult child I don't approve of what he's doing, he might not let me see my grandkids... or if I let my boss know I don't agree, my job might get tougher... or if I tell a friend he's sinning and needs to repent I'll lose that friend.*

Paul had the same concerns before he wrote to the Corinthians, but he sent the letter. *He had the courage to push "send."* He didn't worry about being liked. He didn't allow the truth to be held hostage to a friendship.

True friends aren't afraid of the truth. They speak the truth in love. This was Paul's approach to his friends.

And this is why Christian ministry isn't a popularity contest. Let me repeat, **ministry is a sacred trust**. As ambassadors of Christ our primary interest is the glory of God and the spiritual health of the person we love.

Hebrews 12 teaches us that a parent who refuses to discipline their child doesn't *really* love that child - since they're withholding what will cause the child to mature.

Paul loved the Corinthians enough to hold them accountable

for sin. He was willing to risk his *friendship with them* to help salvage their *fellowship with God*.

Real brothers and sisters love each other that way. Be glad you have pastors willing to do the same.

Paul continues, “For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing.”

This was **good grief!** - a godly sorrow that leads a person to repentance. The Corinthians were sad for a season, but after the sting of the spanking subsided, Paul’s rebuke accomplished it’s intended purpose.

Paul’s truth and love led to their repentance.

Verse 10, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Note, there’re two types of sorrow over sin - *godly sorrow* and *worldly sorrow*.

It reminds me of the Catholic fellow who worked at a lumberyard. He was tormented by a haunting secret. Once he went to confession, and admitted to the priest he'd been stealing lumber. The priest asked *how much*.

The man said, “Well, enough wood to build me a house, my son a house, my two daughters houses, and a cottage up at the lake.” The priest was appalled, “*This is a serious offense, I'll have to think of a severe penance. Have you ever thought of doing a retreat?*”

The fellow got excited, “No, but if you can get the plans, I can

get the lumber!" That's not a *good grief!* That's not *godly sorrow* that's more a *worldly sorrow!*

Worldly sorrow is being sorry you got caught... or regret for getting punished... or embarrassment over your personal failure... or remorse over what could've happened, but didn't... *Worldly sorrow* stops short of real change, and the desire to do life differently.

Worldly sorrow causes crocodile tears - it produces a pout - but no real desire to change. *Bad grief* is self-centered. It's self-pity. It's a "woe is me" kind of sorrow.

In her book, "[The Art Of The Public Grovel](#)," author Susan Bauer evaluates the public confessions of fallen politicians, and sports figures, and business moguls.

She makes a distinction between *an apology* and a *confession*. "[An apology is an expression of regret: I am sorry. A confession is an admission of fault: I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned.](#)" How true this is...

You can regret the outcome of your actions without ever admitting those actions were in any way wrong.

Whereas, *good grief* or "*godly sorrow*" is God-directed and God-honoring. You're sorry you broke God's heart - you thumbed your nose at His authority.

Not only are you willing to concede the outcome of your actions as *harmful*, you go farther and label them as "*sinful*." Godly sorrow feels *guilt*, not just *regret*.

It's goes to prove that despite what our culture says today, **guilt can be good**. Godly sorrow accepts the consequences

of my actions. It doesn't buck or resent the proper punishment. *Good grief* seeks not only forgiveness, but the opportunity and power to change.

In a word, “*godly sorrow*” yields “*repentance*.”

And this is what's missing in today's Christianity. Most churches advance a faith void of repentance.

Prayer is now therapy - a way for *you* to feel better. Faith is needed to overcome obstacles and achieve success. A relationship with Jesus will help *you* obtain *your* goals. But it's all about what Jesus can do for *you*!

That's not repentance! “*Repent*” means “*to turn*.” Do an about face. Stop going in a selfish direction and follow Jesus. Certainly, at times following Jesus makes me feel better, but *my feelings* aren't the ultimate goal.

Christianity is me living under the authority of Jesus, rather than living according to my whims and wisdom.

Paul describes godly sorrow as follows, verse 11, “*For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication!*

In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.” Hear Paul mentions the fruits of repentance.

The great 18th century evangelist, George Whitfield, was careful not to label converts legitimate without waiting to see evidence of their repentance. He put it, “*So many blossoms which March winds blow away, that I cannot believe are converts until I see their fruit.*”

If you ever want to discern if you or another person are truly repentant, you can use Paul's checklist here...

Is there now a diligence to get up and do the right thing, or am I content to sulk in my sorrow and regret?

Am I determined to rebuild my reputation and clear my record, or just start over where no one knows me?

Is there a hatred of sin and the damage it's caused, or just a host of excuses for why I had no other choice?

Is there a fear of God and what he thinks of my sin?

Is there a vehement desire to do whatever it takes to overcome the sin in my life and not be a repeater?

Have I swapped the zeal I once had for my sin, with a new passion for God and the things of God?

And is there a longing to make things right - to vindicate myself - and repair the damage I've done, or is my only concern how I can get all this behind me?

Not all sorrow is created equal. We need good grief!

In 1999 John Jefferson robbed a Krispie Kreme. He was after drug money. *But Jefferson's sin haunted him.*

He moved from Tennessee to Kansas, thinking a change of scenery would help him start fresh, but he couldn't shake his guilty conscience. Finally, Jefferson decided to confess. He called the police in Tennessee.

Later John told a reporter, "I couldn't take it anymore. I was sick and tired of the way I was living. I didn't want to die in a crack house." He served six years in prison.

But John Jefferson still wasn't done with repentance.

When he finally got out of prison, he returned to the Krispie Kreme he robbed, and paid them the money he stole. It was only \$400, but afterwards he said, "I felt like a million bucks when I walked out of that place."

It's a good grief that leads to this kind of repentance.

Once a Sunday School teacher asked the kids, "Who can tell me what you have to do to gain God's forgiveness?" A boy answered, "*First, you have to sin.*"

Sadly, I know some adults with the same attitude.

They sin to be forgiven, and they're forgiven so they can sin. There's no true repentance - no desire to break the cycle. Either they're enjoying their sin, or crying for forgiveness, but there's no "*godly sorrow.*"

Do you really want to overcome what's dragging you down? Don't be content. Seek a genuine repentance.

I read a article that studied the human reaction when a fire alarm rings. Instead of exiting a building most of us stand around, looking for more clues - and we don't trust emergency exits. We opt for the familiar route.

A psychologist responded to these findings. He said, "I can't say it surprises me. We humans resist change. Committing ourselves to a small change, even one that's unmistakably in our best interest, is often more frightening than ignoring a dangerous situation."

And sadly, this is true even when facing the fires of hell. People tend to avoid change - even resist change. Always remember, "The measure of a Christian is not whether they sin,

but whether or not they truly repent.”

Without *real repentance* - that is, a willingness to change - there can be no *real forgiveness*. It's not that we can change ourselves - we can't! We need Jesus to change us, but we have to provide the willingness.

That's what Esau discovered. Esau showed deep regret, but not the willingness to live his life differently.

Hebrews 12:17 says of Esau, "he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears."

A flood of tears is no substitute for a repentant heart.

Remember also Judas Iscariot. He felt condemned and was sorry he betrayed Jesus. He was remorseful. He even returned the thirty pieces of silver. But Judas' sorrow never caused him to face up to what he'd done.

Rather than seek God's forgiveness and restoration, Judas sulked off in his worldly sorrow and tried to duck the consequences of his actions by committing suicide.

Verse 12 tells us, "Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong..."

Paul's primary goal in writing his previous letter and rebuking the Corinthians, wasn't his concern for the perpetrator or the victim - it was for *the church's sake*.

"But that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you." Remember the situation that prompted Paul's rebuke - a man was living in an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. Paul had exhorted the church to call this couple to

repentance. But his greater beef was with the church's tolerance. They were proud that they were being so non-judgmental.

Paul was clear, the tolerance of blatant sin is no virtue. The couple should repent or be given the boot.

A church can no more play host to an unrepentant sinner than the human body can tolerate a cancer. *Ignore sin - be soft on sin* - and it will destroy a church.

Paul confronted the rebellious couple out of love for them. But he also loved the church. Sometimes it takes making people sorrowful to bring them joy in the end.

Good grief can be a really good thing.

Paul wraps up the chapter with remarks about Titus. "Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all."

Titus was not only a blessing to Paul, but after his visit with the Corinthians, they were a blessing to Titus.

For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I am not ashamed. But as we spoke all things to you in truth, even so our boasting to Titus was found true.

And his affections are greater for you as he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling you received him. Therefore I rejoice that I have confidence in you in *everything*." The Corinthians had lived up to Paul's confidence in them. He thanks them for their kindness to Titus, and applauds them for receiving the apostle's rebuke with a "*godly*

sorrow.”

Calvin Miller once wrote, “Crying is common in this world. Laughter is heard here and there, but by and large, weeping predominates. With maturity the sound and reason for our crying changes, but never does it stop. All infants do it everywhere - even in public. By adulthood most crying is done alone and in the dark.

Weeping, for babies, is a sign of health and evidence that they are alive. Isn't that chilling? Not laughter, but tears is the sign of life.” *And this is true of spiritual life.*

Crying over my rebellion against God, feeling the pain of hurts I caused, straining to do the hard things, sadness for my selfishness, the grind of humbling my pride - it's all worth the tears if it transforms a life.

There is a good grief. It's a sorrow that results not only in a change of belief, but in a change of behavior.

It's been said, “If we put off repentance another day, we have a day more to repent of, and a day less to repent in.” **“Good grief”** - give your life to Jesus today!