

Having paused to remind/reveal to them the wondrous blessings that are theirs through the Holy Spirit in them, Paul returns to the reasons he deferred his visit to Corinth. In the first letter he had hinted of a reluctance to come to them with a rod, ch 4:18-21, so such a delay maybe should not have been such a great surprise. It was to avoid a head on confrontation which would have been very unpleasant, to say the least. More importantly it may have stumbled them rather than exercised them about their spiritual state. They may have been tempted to rebel at what would have appeared as a domineering presence, no matter how loving he felt toward them.

Sometimes in-person contacts are preferable to writing letters when a difficulty arises. On the other hand, the Lord chose letters as His preferred medium to preserve New Testament ministry. Only the Gospels, Acts and Revelation are not epistles and even Luke and The Acts are addressed to Theophilus and The Revelation has seven letters addressed to local assemblies. Although much ministry to believers was spoken, God chose epistles, thoughtfully composed and edited by the authors, rather than notes from lectures or recalled conversations, which predominate in the Gospels and Acts. Use of letters allowed Paul to carefully instruct and encourage them in the correct procedure. With a letter they didn't have to rely on memory to recall what he had said. They had as much time as they needed to consider, review and act upon his directions. They were not put under the intense pressure they would have experienced had he simply come to them and confronted them directly. Nor would he be tempted to get impatient and impose Apostolic rule. (Note he carefully avoids any assumption of apostolic or clerical authority nor does he address any leaders or elders at all.)

He apparently was unwilling to risk a premature appearance which could have disrupted the repentance he hoped for. So he waits, having written once with tears and anguish of heart. He waits, anxious to know how his letter was received. He waits, regretting in some ways he had sent it. He waits in empathy, regretting the sorrow had brought upon them. He waits, fearful he had somehow failed and they would not enjoy the blessing of the intended result of the letter. But now, at last, he and they had been made glad. He had not lacked confidence in them, but was unsure of his own ability to instruct them without somehow failing to convey what he felt towards them and toward Christ. His every thought is positive towards them. His every motive was for their blessing and joy. His goal was always Christ's glory. Here the Lord displays for us in Paul completely selfless actions arising from a completely selfless attitude, a clear conscience and a pure heart wholly dedicated to the promotion of the well being of the assembly of God.

His sharp rebuke of their harboring immorality

was not simply his own personal reaction of disgust and grief over what was going on. Nor was it meant to overcharge them with grief. Yes, they were to very appropriately grieve upon the realization of what they had allowed. He said in his first letter "(ye) have not rather mourned that..." They were to respond! And they did! He gives more detail in chapter 7 as to their uncompromising response to the realization of the sin in their midst. They completely cleared themselves of complicity. But now he has to "put the brakes on." They were in danger of going too far in their indignation toward their guilty brother. This is a "normal" fleshly reaction. In their zeal to clear themselves a bit of fleshly self becomes involved. They don't know when to quit. So Paul says what they had done was enough. And as a result their brother was broken and repentant. So repentant he was now in danger of being overwhelmed by his feelings of guilt and was becoming despondent. What a wonderful refreshing response to see! No excuses. No self justification. No questioning the decision of the assembly. No accusations that proper procedures weren't followed. No demands to be restored. Rather, we see what love desires to see, a feeling of total unworthiness to be called a brother, much less be included amongst his brethren as a brother. Total misery. Not because he had been exposed or caught, but for his sinfulness and for the dishonor he had brought to his Lord's Name and the assembly. They were to receive him and reassure him of their love. There is no unforgivable sin. If they forgave him, he needed then, so to speak, to forgive himself, cease focusing his thoughts on himself and his sin. Otherwise he was in danger of being swallowed up in a whirlpool of self centered grief, thereby dishonoring the finished work of the Savior who had died for his sins.

Sufficient was the punishment! Sufficient the grief. The comfort, "coming along side," was to be there for him now. What grace! What love! What lowliness! What a transformation of our hearts occurred when we were saved that we could love a sinner this much, this way. They are to confirm their love to him. Genuinely love him in a manner that can leave no doubt of it in his heart. Hate the sin. Love the sinner, especially one who hates his sin. The punishment was not punitive in the sense of retribution for a sinful act. Christ died for our sins. But the Lord clearly and forcefully declared the Assembly is authorized and responsible to censure sin in its midst. The ultimate punishment is ejecting the guilty one from its midst. If a crime has been committed, the government is ordained by God to maintain civil law and order. It has the needed authority and responsibility to step in and charge, indict, try and punish the criminal. If it is a capital crime the death penalty is authorized. Genesis 9:5-6; Romans 13:1-5. Neither the assembly or individual believers are authorized to bring **physical**

restraint or punishment upon any person. Yet “Christendom has violated this repeatedly down through the ages bringing much dishonor upon the name of Christ and much harm to saint and sinner alike. Rather, the local assembly should obey the laws of the land that do not conflict with God’s commands and should promptly report criminal acts it becomes aware of. (Of course, God has ordained parental authority and responsibility for raising their children and they are to be chastened as needed to impart obedience and respect for authority in them.)

The punishment was by the **many** upon the guilty. No single individual is authorized to put another out of the assembly. Years later, in 3John we read of one named Diotrephes who tried doing this. The apostle John personally traveled to bring these deeds before that local assembly. In Matthew 18:15 no disciple that became a victim of another’s misdeed had authority to punish the guilty one. He was to privately seek his brother’s repentance and spiritual restoration. **Only the assembly is authorized to punish by putting away.** Yet, once decided by the assembly, this putting away was to be observed individually as well as to be regarded among assemblies worldwide as bound in heaven. The “many” includes all in the assembly, sisters and brothers. Use of the term “many” does not imply a majority rule. No voting here. Consensus, but only in the Lord. Not a mere agreement among men but a response to **clearly evident facts, applicable scriptures and prayerful dependence** upon the Lord to direct the decision in their midst. Through the Spirit! In the name of the Lord! Nothing more! Nothing less! No “Church law,” Rule Books or Church trial courts.

The preferred outcome of their exercises would be a joint repentance and sorrow for their sin. They had, through their low spiritual state, allowed conditions to exist for sin to erupt in their midst. The assembly, each believer a priest, would appropriately “eat the sin offering,” together, Leviticus 6 & 7, acknowledging their part in it. Of course ideally the repentant brother, convicted in his heart would actually desire to join them in their collective repentance before the Lord. Only their forgiving attitude would make that possible.

Their obedience to this new admonishment from Paul would prove their love and faithfulness, for the Lord and Paul His servant. They were to forgive! But he does not impose forgiveness on them. It must be genuine and from their hearts, not a mere show. He therefore says, “he will forgive as they forgive.” Not “they should forgive as he has forgiven.” He meekly takes the role of an instructor in righteousness instead of acting as a lord over the flock dictating their actions. But he willingly, joyfully forgives in the person of Christ, as they forgive. The assembly’s action is to reflect the forgiveness of Christ who is in their midst.

He warns of greater danger. Satan could gain an advantage over us (Paul and the Corinthians). **We are not**

**ignorant of his devices.** Inter-assembly unity is crucial. If they forgive and Paul doesn’t there is a gap, a disunity opened, for Satan to exploit. He can use it to divide the local assemblies from one another, as he has successfully many times. In addition, if we don’t personally forgive one another this leaves an opening for Satan to insert a wedge between believers within a local assembly. Once **we form the crack** he can develop it and eventually split believers apart.

While in the context he is speaking of their need to forgive the repentant brother, the principle is true wherever there is conflict. If one person will not forgive another but nurses a grudge, that is like a little explosive charge implanted in the assembly, waiting for Satan to set it off when it will do the most damage. Satan uses terrorist tactics, for he a terrorist, and is father of them all. Not only does an unforgiving spirit cause a coolness between two in the assembly, it tends to quench the Spirit’s activity there. It is to be judged daily, but especially when we examine ourselves before we eat of the Lord’s Supper.

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*Ephesians 4:26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 27 Neither give place to the devil.*

*4:32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

If we don’t judge it, Satan sees an opportunity and waits. If a number of these little grudges accumulate within the assembly they lead to many “little hairline cracks” in the unity of the assembly. When he’s ready he pulls the trigger. Some major crisis arises and there is total chaos. The Assembly is unable to deal with it because of the many small pockets of mistrust that have been allowed to fester. Confusion reigns. People take up sides. Accusations are flung about. Often those nursing grudges have leaked them to others, who then pick up the grudge as well. We have a divided camp. We find ourselves “slaying” each other instead of uniting against the common enemy. We see the Lord causing that to happen often in armies threatening Israel in the Old Testament. Why does He let Satan do it to us? He wouldn’t if we didn’t need the chastening involved. If only we would but forgive promptly! See Hebrews 12:5-15.

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*Song 2:15 Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.*

We each have a personal responsibility to the Lord to forgive one another and not harbor grudges. We are to go to one we have offended, to prevent an explosive device from being planted because of our trespass. We should seek to remove the causes of offenses by going to those we’ve harmed. But only **I** can disarm and eliminate a grudge **I** have allowed to fester in my heart. Take it to the Lord before Satan gets an advantage over us and our brethren.

By Ron Canner, April 21, 2004