

2 Corinthians 2:5-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/2cor/2cor-2/2-corinthians-25-9/>

Paul addresses how to treat a specific person who has caused problems in the Corinthian church. This troublemaker has been sufficiently punished, and ought to now be forgiven and helped. Otherwise, being in a perpetual state of regret will hurt him. The point of correcting other believers is to bring them back to the truth, not to permanently shame them and ostracize them.

Paul is clearly more interested in the welfare of the Corinthians than in currying their favor for himself. Notwithstanding, he is still human. And it brought Paul great sorrow and “many tears” (2 Corinthians 2:4) to write what was apparently a letter with corrective instruction. Paul must have understood that corrective words might risk their rejection of him. Nevertheless, his love which he has especially for them caused him to put their interests first. So, he wrote the letter because what they needed was to hear the truth.

Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to know the depth of his love for them, and that the letter was motivated by his love for them, and for the will of God to be done in their situation. Even though it might cause “sorrow” in the present context, Paul put their best interest above his own comfort. He is helping them to see that the letter was as hard to write as it would be to read.

Now Paul refers to the main subject of this previous letter: *But if any has caused sorrow he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you* (v 5). Someone from the church in Corinth, perhaps someone who came after Paul’s time as described in Acts 18, was leading the opposition to Paul’s apostleship and leadership.

Some have connected this episode with 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul is calling on the church to expel a member, particularly as it relates to sexual immorality. If this is the case, the reference in verse 6 to the discipline imposed on the offender would refer to the Corinthians putting him out of the church (1 Corinthians 5:13, 2 Corinthians 2:6).

However, while this is possible, it seems a better explanation that this is not the same incident. The charge brought against Paul appears to have been personal against Paul rather than a moral breach. Further, the implied content of the attack on Paul is consistent with other attacks against Paul, as evidenced by his letters to the believers in Rome and Galatia, where Paul’s authority was questioned and his teaching opposed.

For example, in Rome, a group of competing Jewish “authorities” slandered Paul’s gospel, claiming that his teaching of being freely justified by grace meant that Paul taught we ought to sin (“do evil”) in order to cause God’s grace to abound (Romans 3:8). Their intent was to set aside Paul’s apostolic authority and supplant his teaching of grace with a “gospel” that required devotion to religious rules in order to be saved (Acts 15:5).

An additional example of competing authorities contesting with Paul is evident in his letter to the Galatians, where he chastises the believers in Galatia for accepting the false belief that they need

to seek to be justified by works after Jesus has fully justified them through faith (Galatians 2:17, 3:3-4).

Further, we have evidence in Paul's first letter to the believers in Corinth that the same basic attack on Paul was in full motion there as well. The episode referenced in this letter could have stemmed from this root of bitterness. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 9 in large part to defend his apostleship against those who "examine" him (1 Corinthians 9:3). Apparently his detractors claimed he was not a true apostle because he paid his own way rather than being financially supported by others (1 Corinthians 9:3-6).

Given this pattern, it is reasonable to presume the attack on Paul's apostleship in Corinth expanded and become an unpleasant confrontation with one or more persons whom Paul seems to refer to here as *any* who has *caused sorrow*. The *sorrow* might refer to the controversy against Paul.

It is inferred that there was a major fight, and *the majority* sided with Paul and inflicted an undisclosed *punishment* on the loser. We can infer that Paul's supporters won for two reasons: 1) this letter says so, and 2) because these letters Paul wrote were preserved. As is often stated, it is the winners who record history.

It would seem that through Paul's letter of "tears," he helped the church see the accusation against him for what it was. Paul says of the accuser:

But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you (v 5).

The grammar in v 5 is singular, which could indicate that there was only one primary detractor. It could also indicate that Paul's statement applies to each person involved in the campaign against him. Paul here is careful *not to say too much*, apparently not wanting to rehash what has already been decided. The attack was against Paul, which caused him *sorrow*. But the greater *sorrow* was inflicted upon *all of you*, referring to the Corinthian believers.

Paul does not elaborate, but it is reasonable to assume that the attacks on Paul here were in the same vein as the attacks documented in Romans and Galatians. Assuming that to be the case, the big loser in such an instance would be those who succumbed to the false teaching that they were no longer free in Christ, but under the obligation of the law (Galatians 5:11-14).

Paul wants the Corinthian believers to realize that the offense, whatever it was, was not just against Paul, but it was actually a charge against the integrity of the church in Corinth. He wanted them to see that though the accusation was primarily aimed at Paul, it was *in some degree* a charge against the entire ministry in Corinth. He did not want to belabor the point, hoping that they could see the bigger picture.

When any of us face opposition or accusations, it difficult to see beyond the immediate hurt, the "anguish" and "affliction" (2 Corinthians 2:4). Paul here elevates a principle that even though attacks hurt, we should choose to not make or take them personally. This is consistent with Jesus's teaching to "turn the other cheek" rather than reacting to an insult (Matthew 5:39).

We can apply this teaching of Jesus as a principle of “do not react” when encountering hostility, as Paul exemplifies here. Paul is seeing beyond himself, and looking at the welfare of those for whom he has spiritual stewardship. In doing this, he is approaching this entire controversy out of love, for he is seeking the welfare of the Corinthians.

Paul now refers to the accuser(s) saying: *Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority* (v 6).

This infers that after Paul’s letter of “tears” and “sorrow” (2 Corinthians 2:3-4), the Corinthian church exercised some kind of discipline or *punishment* upon the person or persons responsible for the attack against Paul’s authority (and presumably also his gospel message). Whether Paul suggested the *punishment*, we do not know. But part of the relief for both Paul and the congregation was that he was able to support the discipline *which was inflicted by the majority*.

Paul reinforces that the church there is not a one-man show, but that they are colleagues, working in collaboration as a body. This is consistent with his teaching that believers should function with teamwork, as a body, as he has previously taught, and is recorded in 1 Corinthians 12.

Sufficient was a very important word both for Paul and the congregation. Paul did not want them to punish more than they had. Further, he did not stop with just the *punishment*, as necessary as that was. He wanted them to continue further and reach a point of reconciliation:

So that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (v 7).

These might not have been words the Corinthian church was expecting. Once discipline, or *punishment* has taken place, our immediate feeling is usually one of vindication. Now Paul warns that resting in a mode of vindication or *punishment* will be dangerous for both the one disciplined as well as those who *inflicted the punishment*, including him.

If not vindication, then what? *Forgive and comfort him*. This surprising response may initially seem not only contradictory, but also impossible. However, the love of God that Paul has referred to in his motivation to write the letter is always about God and others, never about ourselves. The apostle John writes something similar:

“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”
(1 John 3:16)

Paul is now calling on the church at Corinth to demonstrate this true love of Christ by seeking the best interest of the prior offender(s) who has apparently learned his lesson. Interestingly, Paul’s concern is for the person who was *inflicted through punishment*. Paul’s concern is that the Corinthians forbear, *otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*.

The expressed concern here could be that the person might become exasperated and move beyond restoration. In any event, it seems Paul’s desire has always been both the spiritual health and vitality of the church as well as the spiritual health and vitality of each person in the church.

It seems that now that the church is solid, there is now the capacity to receive back the offender, to *forgive and comfort him*.

It is likely that most of us, if we were in Paul's position, would begin with a review of the reason for the *punishment* with a stern warning of how the offender should act in the future. Paul, however, gives us quite a different direction, *Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him* (v 8).

We can infer a biblical principle from this that when disciplining someone, it is vital to establish benevolent intent. People do not tend to listen to or gain benefit from correction coming from someone they believe has malice or disinterest toward them. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to begin their restoration of the offending party by reaffirming their *love for him*.

Paul had written in his first letter to the church at Corinth, "And I show you a still more excellent way...but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 12:31, 13:13). Now he is exhorting the church at Corinth to live up to this standard and express the "still more excellent way," the way of love, even toward someone who has offended them. *For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things* (v9).

The phrase *to this end* here seems to refer to Paul's urging that the Corinthians *reaffirm* their *love* for the person(s) who offended them, who apparently created a ruckus against Paul and his teaching. Paul is writing to *test* them, to see if they are willing to be *obedient in all things*.

One of those things is to offer restoration to one who had offended. This person(s) had created "sorrow" for the entire church and also for Paul. But he has apparently repented, so Paul desires them to apply his teaching from 1 Corinthians 12 to act as a body, where a diversity of gifts serves in unity under the headship of Christ.

For many of us, when we see the words *obedient in all things*, we might think of seeking righteousness (living according to God's design) through following the Ten Commandments or other rules, regulations, or traditions. However, Paul's letters consistently insist that righteousness does not come through following rules (Romans 3:21, 28). Rather, Paul insists that righteousness comes through walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-17, 22-25).

Further, Paul insists that the Law (rules) are fulfilled when believers walk in the Spirit (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:13-14). His point is that the intent of the law is aimed at a change of heart, to shift from self-seeking to seeking the best for others, which is to *love* them. This is the context for Paul's desire that the Corinthian believers seek to be *obedient in all things*.

Jesus also taught this point, telling His disciples a new command that encapsulates all the others:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."
(John 13:34).

This is a commandment to be obeyed and followed. It is a commandment that focuses upon the heart. It is taking the two greatest commands, to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-39) to

a new level. Now, rather than having a standard to merely love others as we love ourselves, believers are commanded to love others as Christ loved us.

At the end of this letter, Paul will challenge the Corinthian believers to look inward, to do a spiritual inventory, to “test” themselves and see if they are walking in this faith, whether they are *obedient in all things* (2 Corinthians 13:5).

The word translated “test” in Chapter 13 is a different Greek word from the one used in verse 9, where Paul says he wrote to *put you to the test*. This word in verse 9, translated *test*, is often translated “prove” while the word in 2 Corinthians 13:5 is often translated “tempt.” The point here in verse 9 seems to be that Paul sees this as an opportunity for the Corinthian believers to prove their faith through taking appropriate action, an action of *love*.

When he gets to Chapter 13, Paul asks these believers to challenge themselves internally and take a true look as to whether or not they are following Christ in faith. In doing this, Paul is consistent with his own assertion that he is not subject to the judgement of others, but has examined himself and has a good conscience, knowing fully that he will stand before Christ, who knows all and will judge righteously (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

As with the word “joy,” when we look at the current Webster’s dictionary to see a modern definition of “love,” we see an emphasis on emotions: “an attraction, a strong affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests.” The “agape” love that Jesus commanded is a love of action that seeks the best for others. Such action is an expression of spiritual power that comes from Him and goes back to Him as an offering of praise, glorifying the Father (Romans 12:1, John 15:8).

Biblical Text

⁵ But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you. ⁶ Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, ⁷ so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.