

To understand what this passage is about, we need to know what had previously taken place. Sometime between the first and second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had made a surprise visit to the church of Corinth. The church had not dealt with the blatant sin that he had asked them to deal with. Clues in this letter indicate that during the visit there was friction between Paul and some members within the church that was so intense that he left Corinth and wrote a letter to them instead of making another visit.

²³ But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. 2 Corinthians 1:23-24 This is a declaration of the heart of true pastors. They do have God given authority, but Jesus is the head of the church and the only Lord of it (Colossians 1:18ⁱ). As an apostle, Paul had the right to discipline them, but he has a Lord over him and serves at His leading (Matthew 20:25-27ⁱⁱ). Godly leaders are not dictators. They are not CEOs. They are humble servants who seek the good of those they minister, sometimes with warnings, but always with a heart for the flock they serve (1 Peter 5:1-3ⁱⁱⁱ). Their goal is to see each person find their calling and use it to serve one another in love (Ephesians 4:15,16)^{iv}.

Paul expressed the sentiment of working with them for their joy. When we learn of who we are in Christ and the joy of letting Him work through us to build one another up, we experience the joy of the Lord. Unshakable inner joy comes from knowing the love of God for us and letting the Holy Spirit direct our lives.

Instead of arguing with the sinner and those who were on his side, he wrote the painful letter which is lost to history. It apparently explained the theological basis for why the sin had to be dealt with. *¹ For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?* 2 Corinthians 2:1,2 Paul trusted the letter would be more likely to be heard rather than to return in person and face arguments and criticism. Sometimes just laying out the facts in writing avoids the back and forth of a face to face which would have been more painful for all involved.

³ And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴ For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. 2 Corinthians 2:3,4 The letter would prepare the way for a later visit that would not be contentious but joyful. Paul desires to share the joy of the Lord with them. But to experience the joy and unity, sin had to be dealt with. And so, with many tears Paul wrote the painful letter, not out of a desire to win an argument, but to get the church to see God's heart in the situation. Sometimes discipline and firm words can be an expression of great love. Paul writes that the letter was written out of abundant love for them. I am sure it was also bathed in prayer. Refusing to speak the truth because you just want to get along can indicate your love for the person is shallow. As the proverb says, *⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.* Proverbs 27:6

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. 2 Corinthians 2:5 Paul tactfully does not name the person or the offense. Once the issue was resolved there is no need to bring

it up again. But this leaves us wondering what he is referring to, and if we do not know, it is hard for us to apply it to situations in the church today. Before I began reading commentaries, I always assumed this was the immoral man who had relations with his stepmother mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. But modern commentators suggest that because Paul forgives the person, whatever the situation was had to be a personal offense toward Paul. We cannot forgive people for sins against God.

However, there is a scenario that we can imagine where there may have been multiple offenses from this person. If Paul's surprise visit found the church had done nothing about the immoral man because of his standing in the church as a benefactor, or perhaps the church even met in his house, he may have confronted the man himself. If that were the case, and it seems the results of the visit were quite contentious. It may be that the man stood up to Paul in an offensive way, insulting him, and speaking against his authority. The fact that Paul had to write the now missing letter that was quite harsh seems to point toward the congregation shrinking into silence and not acting during that confrontation. Paul's letter avoided the tension of a face to face and must have laid out the theological reasons for the need to "*deliver the man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved*" (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Some people suggest that that was a once and for all excommunication. But Paul argues that it is for the eventual restoration and salvation of the man (2 Corinthians 13:11^v). The concept is that the church body has a protective umbrella that limits the attacks of the world that is under the influence of Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4^{vi}). Being cast out into the world means that he will be out from under that protection and the consequences will drive him to repentance. Paul is assuming the man is born-again despite his compromises and insults and that he will be miserable in the world.

Verse five tells us that Paul did not take it personally but knew the pain the church experienced both in not standing up for Paul and in the effects this man's behavior had on the reputation of the church in the community (1 Corinthians 12:26^{vii}). He had done something not even the pagans would consider doing (1 Corinthians 5:1^{viii}). This sin was a sin against God, but also against his fellow believers. We all affect one another. None of us is an island unto ourselves. **We elevate the holiness of the body of believers that we worship with, or we sully it with our compromises.** Brazen sin in the church community that is not dealt with can be like a spiritual contagion. We should consider how we affect those we worship with when we entertain compromising with sin. It is not only a serious matter for one's self, but for the whole church. When the Israelites came into the Promised Land, Achan's sin was the reason for the army being defeated at the battle of Ai (Joshua 7:5^{ix}, 25^x).

⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 2 Corinthians 2:6 Paul's heart is for reconciliation, not retribution. This reveals Paul's refusal to be offended and the grace he has even for those who opposed him. We all need to refuse to be offended. Sometimes offenses come from misunderstanding. In that case we just need to ask the person to clarify what they said and why they said it. Sometimes it is intentional, which requires us to take it to the Lord and see if we have done something to cause the offensive words. But even when it is from no fault of our own, clinging to an offense is our old nature refusing to forgive after we have been forgiven so much. I know it is not easy. It can come to mind again and again, but if we are walking in the Spirit, we can choose to declare we have forgiven the person and choose to love them by the power

of the Holy Spirit in us who loves them. The world calls that defeat, but really it is walking in victory.

When he says “this punishment by the majority” we can assume there was a minority who did not agree with the punishment. But in 2:3 he told them he is sure that all of them will share his joy (1:23). Paul chose to forgive all who were against him, and we should too.

Some people paint Paul as a hard and unbending man, always ready to argue and win. But here we see his concern is for the entire church, even a wayward individual and those who sided with him who had probably made personal attacks on Paul’s authority. Isolating this man from fellowship seems to have brought him to repentance and helped him acknowledge authority in the church. Your church elders are tasked with protecting the flock as shepherds (1 Peter 5:1,2^{xi}). That means they must make some decisions for the good of the whole (Hebrews 13:17^{xii}). It is a difficult balance to tolerate the slow progress and stumbling of new believers while protecting the flock. There are times when confidentiality will help the young believer to continue in the faith, and there are times when the congregation must know of rebellion that may lead others astray. *Brethren, pray for us!* 1 Thessalonians 5:25

⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 2 Corinthians 2:7,8 Paul instructs them not only to forgive the man for the damage he had done to the church, but also to comfort him and reaffirm their love for him (Luke 17:3,4^{xiii}; 2 Corinthians 5:18^{xiv}; Colossians 3:12-14^{xv}). Paul knows the difference between conviction and condemnation (Romans 8:1^{xvi}). As he writes in verse eleven, we are not ignorant of Satan’s designs. Satan is the accuser of the brothers (Revelation 13:10^{xvii}). He wants us to feel so condemned that we become depressed and useless to the cause of Christ. Remember the grief that drove Judas to suicide. Therefore, we must reaffirm our love to the repentant person. This is the grace the church should always have towards repentant sinners, for it is the grace God has for us (Ephesians 4:32^{xviii}). Paul is asking us to act toward others like Jesus does toward us.

At the same time, we should be aware of the man or woman’s weakness for the same reason. We are not ignorant of the enemy’s designs. There was a time in Sedona when a prominent pastor had an affair with a woman whom he had been counseling. After the pastor was removed, the woman came back to church repentant. The congregation welcomed her repentance and did as Paul instructs here. So far so good. But they did not set any boundaries on her relationship with the new pastor to avoid the same problem. The offense was repeated. Then she moved on and brought down another ministry leader. All that damage was done to the church and the ministry and the families involved because grace was extended without boundaries. Forgive, comfort, and confirm your love for those who repent from blatant sin, but do not give Satan an opportunity to repeat the damage. A truly repentant heart will appreciate the boundaries.

Most churches in the USA do not practice church discipline. The balance between being overly harsh or that of being too gracious without seeing repentance is difficult. There is also the fear in our culture of litigation. Public discipline of this extreme is only necessary when the sin is blatant and there is no repentance. If it is not dealt with some congregants may assume it is not serious.

Elders must prayerfully deal with the situation by approaching the one caught in sin first. In most cases it is resolved there. Either the person will repent or leave so they do not have to face the congregation. Unfortunately, they can just move on to a church that does not condemn sin. On a rare occasion, an unrepentant sinner will go on the attack like this person we are reading about seems to have done.

⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 2 Corinthians 2:9 The reason Paul wrote instead of coming in person was to lay out for them what God requires of us and see if they would be obedient to God. He is not asking them to be obedient to himself (2 Corinthians 1:24^{xix}). It was a test to see if they were willing to submit to God's directions. Every time we read Scripture, we have a similar test. We see areas in our lives that need to change, attitudes that need to be corrected, and patterns that need to be redirected. Will we be obedient in everything?

Paul gives several criteria in this letter for confirming Christian character. It reveals itself when they discipline wrongdoers and forgive them after they repent (2:6-9^{xx}); when they maintain the joy of Christian faith in the midst of affliction (8:2^{xxi}); when they demonstrate love (8:8^{xxii}) and respond with generosity to those in need (9:13^{xxiii}); and when they do what is right (13:5-7^{xxiv}). But the primary characteristic is being "obedient in everything." Paul does not say to whom they are to be obedient, but in 10:5-6^{xxv} he makes it clear that they must be obedient to Christ.^{xxvi}

¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, 2 Corinthians 2:10 The word "if" is not in the Greek text and makes the clause conditional which it very well may not be. Paul forgives whoever the body of Christ in Corinth forgives. They forgive the man for misrepresenting them in the city, for the pain he caused them, and the division he created. This forgiveness from the community would be the response to true repentance which brings the forgiveness of God. When God has forgiven someone, we have no right to hold the sin against them (Matthew 6:14^{xxvii}).

Should we accept the ESV translation using "if" then we should know that the phrase, "If I have forgiven anything" can also be translated as "if there was anything to forgive." Should that be the case, Paul cannot be referring to incest, as the need for forgiveness would be certain. He must be referring to the disrespect shown him by the offending person who was trying to justify his sin. By writing it this way, Paul shows that he does not hold a grudge and is always ready to forgive. He does not lord his position as an apostle over people and demand they apologize to him. His goal is for the church to grow up spiritually and deal with sin without his involvement, while at the same time being ready to restore the repentant person (2 Corinthians 7:11,12^{xxviii}).

"In the presence of Christ" literally means "in the face of Christ." In other words, Christ is looking on in approval when we confront sin, see repentance, and then restoration. Paul's desire is that he and the offender's relationship be restored, the offender and the church be restored to one another, and the church have a renewed relationship with himself.

¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. 2 Corinthians 2:11 Paul gives us the reason for forgiving the repentant sinner. It is to keep Satan from outwitting us. That word also means to rob, exploit, or gain an advantage. Jesus high priestly prayer was that we might be one, as He and the Father are one (John 17:20,21^{xxix}). He was praying for our unity because that demonstrates love and

peace to the world. But if we are unloving, unforgiving, and speaking behind one another's backs, the world sees nothing different in us. We close ourselves off to the blessings of God. Our old nature reigns, and we exhibit the fruits of the flesh rather than the fruits of the Spirit. Satan wins. Mankind loses. That is the design of Satan.

Paul has presented a balance of how to deal with blatant sin in the church. The person who is being rebellious is firmly dealt with. The congregation knows that behavior will not be tolerated. If there is no repentance, the person is put out of fellowship. As he or she experiences what it is like in the world without the love and encouragement of God's family and the Word, they start to realize what they left behind. The consequences of sin confront them. Sin is never as wonderful or fulfilling as our imagination makes it out to be. It is always temporary and leaving you wanting more. The goal should be to bring them to repentance and restoration. Satan loses. The church wins. God's will is done as the person is restored and matured.

But if there is no forgiveness and the church is unloving towards the repentant sinner, if they keep reminding him of his past sin, he or she will eventually find they are no better off in the church. The person lives in condemnation and whether in the church or the world, they become fruitless and hopeless. Satan wins. The church loses. That is the goal of Satan.

I brought up another scenario where grace is too readily given and the person does more damage in the church, drawing more people into sin. That too is Satan's design. Perhaps that is his most favorable outcome. Satan rejoices and the people of God are grieved. We should not put people in situations that will tempt them in areas where they have fallen in the past. It is not because we do not have faith in their repentance, but because we are not ignorant of Satan's designs. Past weaknesses can tempt us again.

But there is something else here that we need to be reminded of in the American church. If we do not have the love and unity that feels like family, putting a person out of the church will mean nothing to them. There will be no longing to return. There is nothing for them to miss. They can hear a good sermon on the web if that is all they want.

Let us not only be aware of Satan's devices but let us also be aware of how Christ wants us to be one in Him. That is where we find the balance of protecting one another, but also eager to restore those who fall, while guarding against the areas in which the enemy attacks them.

We find that oneness in smaller groups or taking time to fellowship with people in the church outside of our regular times together. Some of you employ those who need work and are getting to know them that way. Share your testimony with someone you do not know well and ask to hear their journey to faith. Share it with the whole church in a call to worship. I have found that hearing the journey God has guided others through unites my heart with them. We are all unique, but we all share the most important thing in our lives, our relationship with Jesus. One Lord, one faith, one baptism are the issues that make us one (Ephesians 4:5^{xxx}). Our oneness in the love of Christ will help us defeat the enemy's schemes. That love and unity for which Christ prayed for us will keep Satan from robbing us of our peace and joy. It will keep him from exploiting us to sideline fellow believers. It will keep him from taking advantage of us in our weak moments to derail the work of God in our midst.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7

Questions:

- 1 What situation is Paul addressing?
- 2 What was the pain mentioned in verse 5?
- 3 How do we affect the rest of the church body?
- 4 How do we refuse to be offended?
- 5 Was Paul an unbending tyrant over his flock?
- 6 What was Paul's heart?
- 7 To what were they to be obedient?
- 8 What are other translations for verse 10?
- 9 How can Satan outwit us?
- 10 What are his designs?

ⁱ **Colossians 1:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

ⁱⁱ **Matthew 20:25-27 (ESV)**

²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 Peter 5:1-3 (ESV)**

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

^{iv} **Ephesians 4:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

^v **2 Corinthians 13:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

^{vi} **2 Corinthians 4:4 (ESV)**

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

^{vii} **1 Corinthians 12:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

^{viii} **1 Corinthians 5:1 (ESV)**

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

^{ix} **Joshua 7:5 (ESV)**

⁵ and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six of their men and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

^x **Joshua 7:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ And Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones.

^{xi} **1 Peter 5:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

^{xii} **Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

^{xiii} **Luke 17:3-4 (ESV)**

³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

^{xiv} **2 Corinthians 5:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

^{xv} **Colossians 3:12-14 (ESV)**

¹² Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

^{xvi} **Romans 8:1 (ESV)**

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

^{xvii} **Revelation 12:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

^{xviii} **Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)**

³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

^{xix} **2 Corinthians 1:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

^{xx} **2 Corinthians 2:6-9 (ESV)**

⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.

^{xxi} **2 Corinthians 8:2 (ESV)**

² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

^{xxii} **2 Corinthians 8:8 (ESV)**

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

^{xxiii} **2 Corinthians 9:13 (ESV)**

¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,

^{xxiv} **2 Corinthians 13:5-7 (ESV)**

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.

^{xxv} **2 Corinthians 10:5-6 (ESV)**

⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

^{xxvi} David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* vol. 29, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 129

^{xxvii} **Matthew 6:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

^{xxviii} **2 Corinthians 7:11-12 (ESV)**

¹¹ For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. ¹² So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

^{xxix} **John 17:20-21 (ESV)**

²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

^{xxx} **Ephesians 4:5 (ESV)**

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,