



11500 West 20th Avenue Lakewood,
Colorado 80215
303-238-2482 (Fax 303 238 2337)

www.soth.net

contact us at mail@soth.net

9:00 a.m. Christian Education

10:00 a.m. Worship

Children's Sunday School during Worship



"From the Heart: Love Reaffirmed"

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Rev. Ron Holmes

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Today is the second in our series of sermons from 2 Corinthians. Last week we saw that 2 Corinthians is a very personal letter from Paul, arguably his most personal letter. Today's passage deals with the very personal matter of forgiveness and reaffirming, through forgiveness, our love for someone. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. Listen to the word of God.

I stand before you today as a sinner in need of forgiveness. As I say that, it occurs to me I need to provide a little more context. This is not a Jimmy Swaggart moment. You'll recall the televangelist's infamous moment in the late '80's, confessing his sin before his congregation and television audience. This is not such a moment! I am reminded, however, of a moment at a high school reunion...a setting where the need for forgiveness is pervasively present. At the dinner for our 20th reunion, I sat next to a woman who had been a pom-pom girl. Now, in the memory book it was clear that I was now a pastor and she was clearly a Christian. During dinner, she began to ask me if I remembered this one particular occasion which involved a restaurant several of us went to and the use of bad language—which is all I'm going to tell you about that moment—it was high school for crying out loud! But, I knew instantly what moment she was referring to. I hung my head and cringingly said, "Yes, yes! All I can say is forgive me!" What I wanted to do was to get up, go to the microphone set up for the program, and say, "Hey everyone! We all have moments from high school for which we need forgiveness. How about we just cover it all right now? First, let's all say, 'Please forgive me!' and then let's all say, 'I forgive you!' and then we can get back to our dinner."

We all have such moments, don't we? Lapses in judgment and actions for which we need forgiveness. And, the truth of the matter is (without going into a lot of details!), since high school I've still had many such moments. Since that reunion I've still had many such moments. In fact, since this morning I've had such moments. The point is, I, like you, am a person who is prone to sin and in need of confession. That's why we have a moment in every worship service for confession. We need it! In fact, while I was on

vacation a couple of weeks ago Kim and I visited another church for Sunday morning worship. And this church did not have such a moment during its worship. I missed it. I need that. We need that. A time to confess our sins—sins of commission and of omission, sins of words said and not said, and even the sins of our thoughts—and, more importantly, receive God's forgiveness.

That is the topic of our Scripture passage for today. Again, it is very personal for Paul. There are two theories about what the situation is Paul is addressing in this passage. One thought is that Paul is referring to a situation from his first letter to Corinth. In the fifth chapter of that letter, Paul addresses an issue of immorality in the church and encourages the church to impose discipline on the offender. It could be that situation and the church's response that Paul is referring to when he speaks of the punishment inflicted on the offender and the need for the church to now forgive and restore. Or, it could be that Paul is referring to a personal affront he faced when visiting Corinth. In either case, what matters is not the specifics of the wrong committed but the follow up action taken. The bottom line, Paul instructs, is that the purpose of any discipline or punishment inflicted is to restore a person and forgiveness is an essential part of that restoration. Paul says that the *"punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him."* It's done its purpose—it's apparently brought repentance from the person punished. *"Now instead,"* says Paul, *"you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."* But more than just that, Paul says, *"I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him."* The purpose of any punishment or discipline is to restore the offender and, hopefully, the relationship. Forgiveness is a key element in that purpose. And forgiveness is a reaffirmation of love for someone. Don't punish more than is necessary. Stop the punishment and, instead, forgive the offender, comforting him or her through your forgiveness which is a reaffirmation of your love for that person. The goal is to restore them.

I wonder where you are on the subject of forgiveness. Are there unresolved areas of offense in your life that need resolution? Are there, first of all, areas where you've been unable to forgive yourself? Do you continually beat yourself up over some prior offense? Perhaps you've punished yourself enough. It's time to forgive yourself...and receive God's forgiveness. "But Ron," you say, "you don't know what I've done!" Doesn't matter. I do know this—there's not one thing you've done that Jesus Christ didn't already die for. And He stands ready to forgive you, has already forgiven you, in fact, and wants you to be freed of the burden you're carrying. Are your standards higher than His? Forgive yourself...and receive the freedom offered through Christ's forgiveness. Or, perhaps there are unresolved areas of offense between you and another person where you need to ask for forgiveness, or you need to give forgiveness. This can be a bit complicated because your need to ask for forgiveness might be based on an incident from long ago, or one that the offended party is not even aware of—or, vice versa, perhaps the offending party is not aware of the hurt they've caused you...or is showing no remorse and not even asking for forgiveness. The best thing I can tell you is to work toward restoration—restoration of the person and restoration of the individual involved. Some long ago offense might be best left between you and God. "God, I did [such and such] and I'm really sorry. Please forgive me." Then listen for God's prompting, first of all, in His forgiveness for you and then toward any other action to be taken. Perhaps, like my long ago offense in high school, the issue will re-surface in some way and you'll have the opportunity to seek forgiveness from the offended. Or, perhaps it will just be left between you and God. In any case, the goal is restoration of the individual and the relationship. As to an offender who perhaps doesn't know of his offense, or is aware but not remorseful and not asking for forgiveness, the best thing I can tell you is to follow Paul's lead in Romans, chapter 12, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18). Remember, the goal is for restoration—of the individual and the relationship. Sometimes the one, the restoration of the individual, must come first before the other can be affected. As far as it depends on you, work towards the restoration of others.

Then there are those difficult issues of forgiveness where the offense is particularly egregious. You find it difficult to forgive even though the offender is sincerely asking for your forgiveness. You don't want to

forgive. You've been deeply hurt. And I don't take that lightly. But the earlier question also applies to this situation, Are your standards higher than God's? Just as there's not one thing you've done Christ didn't already die for, so also is it true that there's not one thing someone else has done to you that Christ didn't already die for. He desires restoration of the offender, and restoration of the offended...that you might be freed from the anger and bitterness that bears no positive result but only weighs you down. Don't let someone's offense committed against you hurt you any more than it already has. Work toward restoration. Offer your forgiveness.

There are numerous examples of incredible acts of forgiveness that brought amazing healing and restoration, taking a very bad, difficult situation and turning it into something redeemable, something positive. Some of the more dramatic involved the nation of South Africa. During apartheid, many acts of violence were committed, some atrocities for which granting forgiveness would be difficult for the most exemplary of Christians. When Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa, he knew that the country needed to be healed through forgiveness. He formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which sought to bring to light the truth beyond such atrocities, but also, as the name implies, reconciliation. And there are hundreds of stories from that process—stories of police torture and killings, yet forgiveness offered by their victims and by family members of their victims—stories that are told in Bishop Desmond Tutu's book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Now South Africa is not a country without its challenges, like all countries. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are not without their flaws...like all of us human beings. But, sometimes I think we let those things get in the way of celebrating and learning from the amazing stories of forgiveness coming out of that period of South Africa's history. They are living examples of the power of restoration through forgiveness. "No Future Without Forgiveness."

There are lots of such examples where amazing, dare I say it—courageous, acts of forgiveness brought amazing restoration. Unfortunately, there are also lots of examples where revenge, anger and bitterness destroy.

I don't understand a lot about our judicial system...or psychology for that matter. But, one of the things that drives me crazy are those scenes we see on the news from some courtroom somewhere where the family of the victim—usually a murder case of some kind—is given a moment to address the offender. I hate that! Why do they do that? Maybe there's something cathartic about that, but I don't think so. Usually those moments are filled with harsh words toward the offender, the victim's family venting their anger and bitterness toward this person that has taken the life of a loved one. Yes, it is a very difficult situation. But I always wonder what benefit such a moment has. I think it benefits neither party—neither the offender nor the family member. It just piles on more guilt for the offender and adds to the burden of bitterness for the offended, benefiting no one. I don't recall ever seeing played out in a courtroom scene on the nightly news an act of forgiveness, seeking to restore the other person. It's all anger and revenge.

What is it you seek today? Revenge? Or restoration? Do you carry anger and bitterness for some long ago offense—or perhaps even some recent offense—committed against you? Or do you seek to be freed from that burden by offering forgiveness and reaffirming love? Paul's words for today are for you:

"Now, instead [of revenge, or excessive punishment] you ought to forgive and comfort him [or her]...I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him [or her]...through the restorative powers of forgiveness.

Let's take a moment for silent reflection.