

July 27, 2014 Worship Service  
First Presbyterian Church (EPC), Bentleyville, Pa.  
Rev. Andrew Scott, Pastor  
2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 7:2-13  
“Godly Grief and Godly Joy”

Have you ever said something that you almost instantly regretted?

Maybe it was something hurtful and cruel. Maybe – and this happens – it was something *true*, that needed to be said, but you felt terrible for saying it anyway. Maybe – and this is the worst – you put it in *writing*.

So did the apostle Paul. He wrote a letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. It wasn't *intended* to hurt anybody. Nothing in it was untrue. But there was no way to avoid offense – Paul was calling the Corinthians out, condemning false teaching that was rampant there, pointing out gross immorality and sin, and generally naming names.

I should say here that it's not clear whether this letter was what we now have in the Bible as First Corinthians – which is pretty harsh in places – or another, unpreserved letter. In any case, Paul apparently regretted sending it almost as soon as it was out of his hands. Maybe he had been *too harsh*. Maybe he should have written to these individuals privately, rather than in a letter that would be read to the whole church, and probably shared with other churches. He cared about these people. He knew them. He had lived among them, and preached the Gospel to them. He had no real desire to call them on the carpet.

And yet it had to be done. So off the letter went, and he followed it up with a visit – apparently a particularly *unpleasant* visit, a visit during which it was made clear that Paul wasn't welcome in a church that he had planted, that he had nourished, together with Priscilla and Aquila, his two co-workers from Rome, a church that he loved.

Paul went away from that visit thoroughly dejected, so miserable that he says back in chapter two here that finding an “open door” for the preaching of the Gospel in the city of Troas, he left. His heart just wasn't in it. It was still broken for the Corinthians.

But in Macedonia, Paul's friend Titus tracked him down and delivered some surprising – and thoroughly welcome news from Corinth: the Corinthians, for the most part, were *sorry*. They had been convicted, and now they were sorry for the way that they had treated Paul, sorry for their miserable immorality, and most of all sorry that they had fallen so easily for a cheap counterfeit of the Gospel. They were repentant, and their repentance, Titus reported, was verified by their obedience to the Lord, and by their love.

To say that Paul was happy to hear the news would be an understatement. He was ecstatic. All those doubts, about whether he had been too rough on them melted away.

“As it is,” he says in verse 9, “I rejoice, *not because you were grieved*, but “because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a *godly grief*, so that you suffered no loss through us.”

Notice that unlike so many of us, Paul wasn't worried about whether he had upset people. The Gospel upsets sinners. The truth upsets those whose lives are built on lies. There's no getting around it. His joy was that the grief the Corinthians felt was, in his words, *elupathete kata Theon*, a grief or regret or suffering – the root is *pathos* – “according to God” or “from God.” In short, it was a “godly grief.”

And in verse 10 he explains a little of what that means: “For *godly* grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret,” he writes, “whereas *worldly* grief produces death.”

Notice here that the *opposite* of *godly grief* isn't what you think. You'd expect, I think, for the opposite of godly grief to be no grief at all. Which appeals to us, because it suggests that you can either have suffering that leads to salvation, or a cushy life of no cares. Either one sounds all right, though I think most of us would choose the latter.

Paul is under no such illusion, though. And why should he be? There's no expectation anywhere in Scripture that the life of the godly is all kittens and roses. Just the opposite – if you pay attention, you'll find that the cushy lives of the Bible are almost exclusively lived by its *villains*. Read the Psalms – they're scandalously honest about it. Listen to the first verses of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had nearly stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw *the prosperity of the wicked*. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. *They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.*”

Now, of course, when you dig a little deeper, those folks who seem to have no trouble at all, whose lives are one glory after another – you know the ones, whose Facebook feed is a neverending series of exotic vacations with fabulously attractive people – turn out to be much sadder than you think. People without troubles are either just much better than usual at hiding them, or so spiritually calloused that nothing can get to them, good or bad.

So don't get too envious. Even the Psalmist, by the end of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, realizes that those pampered, unperturbed, god-mockers are standing, as he puts it, “in slippery places,” about to fall, to be swept away by the inexorable judgment of God.

You see, the question isn't whether we're going to suffer hardships and losses and pain and grief in this world. We are. Being a Christian doesn't exempt us from that grief. Far from it. To belong to Jesus Christ earns us the enmity of the world and the hatred of the Devil. The Son of God himself – the Word made flesh, through whom all

things were made, to whom belong all things, who sits in judgment over the cosmos – is described by Isaiah as a “man of sorrows” and “acquainted with grief,” and so he was. Why should those who follow him expect to be immune?

The *real* question, faced with grief and suffering – and *especially* with the grief of guilt, is where it *leads*. Is it a godly grief, a godly regret, that leads to repentance and salvation, or is it a worldly grief, that leads only to death?

And the answer to that question is found in where that grief leads you. Worldly grief is focused inward. It's about *us*. It's about how we've been hurt, about our pride, our egos, about what we feel to be the injustices done to *us*. Had the Corinthians taken Paul's rebuke the wrong way, had they hardened themselves, asking what right he has to say such things, and puffed themselves up with pride and selfish indignation, theirs would have turned out, in the end, to be a worldly grief, leading to death.

If a person who has suffered some loss – maybe the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or of a relationship – allows himself to descend into a spiral of bitterness and self-righteousness and despair, it's a worldly grief, leading to death.

If illness or poverty or hardship lead us to descend into ourselves, in hatred and bitterness and self-loathing and finally despair – it's a worldly grief, leading to death, not just death of the body, but to a spiritual death.

But if our suffering, our regret, our guilt, our grief leads us to *God*, to repentance, to grief not at our own humiliation, but that God's name is being dragged into disrepute – to jealousy not for ourselves, but for his glory – then the end result is completely different.

What Paul told those Corinthians hurt. But it also opened their eyes, to what they were doing, to the lies that they had swallowed, and to the mess they had made of their witness with lives of scandalous immorality. The Holy Spirit used that hurt to drive them to a godly sorrow, and a godly repentance. In the end, they were restored to God, and incidentally, to Paul. It was a godly grief, that led to salvation.

If we suffer some loss, and the Holy Spirit uses it in a profitable way – to remind us how short this life is, what comfort there is in the promise of eternity, to drive us to faith not because we feel warm and fuzzy toward the Lord, but because we have nowhere to turn except to Christ, nowhere to stand except on his Word – then our grief is a godly grief, leading to salvation.

If we're plagued by poverty, or illness, or the hatred of other men, and the Holy Spirit uses that to remind us that our citizenship is in heaven, that if this tent in which we live is destroyed, we have another, a dwelling not made by human hands, eternal in the heavens, through Jesus Christ – then as unpleasant as it may be, the end result of that grief is not death and despair, but faith, and life. Eternal life.

You're not somehow going to be exempt from sorrow and grief. The question is how you handle it. Are you willing, if necessary, to accept godly grief, not to bristle in self-defense and recrimination, not to stew in selfish self-righteousness, not to brood over your injuries, but to look to Christ with the eyes of faith, and say, "Lord, I accept this at your hand"? Will you let godly grief move you to repentance and faith and obedience, so that it's an instrument of salvation, and not death?

And there's more: are you willing, as Paul was, to *cause* godly grief? I don't mean to cause your brother or sister to sin. I mean, are you willing to speak the truth, in love, even though you *know* it's going to hurt, because it's for the eternal good of another? It could be that they've wandered from the truth, and you're the one God intends to use to call them back. Godly grief leads to salvation. Amen.