

The Pain of Love

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[0 : 00] Almighty God, teach us from your word now, we pray. Write it on our hearts that we may understand it in our minds and be informed, but also that it may be written in our hearts so that our lives may be transformed by your powerful word and powerful spirit.

And we ask this for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Reading other people's mail can be a frustrating enterprise.

Have you ever tried reading other people's mail? I don't mean that you steam open the envelopes, you sort of cross over the road in the quiet hours of the morning, you steam open the envelope to see what's in their mail or something like that.

And I don't mean that you're invading people's privacy or that you're being secretive. But rather, when you read someone's letter, you only, in a sense, get one side of it.

I don't mean to say there's two sides of the argument, although that can be true. But what they refer to, you only, often people in a letter are referring to something or responding to something, and you only see the one half of it, the one side of it.

[1 : 15] And the things that are referred to are known between the writer and the recipient, but not necessarily by you. Early in December, I had a few days' holiday, and I was sitting on a beach a long, long way away in Arabia, and I was reading letters from Tudor history, as you do.

And there were lots of people. We're all in rows, hundreds of people, all reading Tudor history on this beach in Oman. No, not really. I'm sure I was the only person who's ever done it.

And they're the letters of Viscount Lyle, L-I-S-L-E, who happened to be, in effect, what's the governor of Calais, when Calais was British, in the 1530s.

And it's a fascinating period of history, one of the most interesting periods of history, that decade of the 1530s. It's the reign of Henry VIII, who's interesting in himself. During that decade, I think at the beginning, Anne Boleyn was gotten rid of, beheaded.

Then the third wife, Jane Seymour, bore finally a son to Henry VIII. Later, he was Edward VI. But she died soon after childbirth. And then there was the fiasco of Anne of Cleves, the fourth wife, and the rule of Thomas Cromwell, who was, in effect, the Secretary of State during that period of Henry VIII's reign.

[2 : 40] And there's the threat of war with France and Spain, and the severing links between Rome and England, and so on. A fascinating piece of history. And you read all these letters.

But periodically, you're really only reading one half. You don't know what's being responded to. And you don't always know what's being alluded to. Thankfully, the editor fills in a lot of the details for you as you read in this and offers you explanations.

Well, when you read the letters of the New Testament, there's an element of that too. And probably most of all, of all the letters in the New Testament, that occurs probably most in 2 Corinthians.

In this letter, we have probably the most assumptions, allusions, and references to other bits of information, but it's not there spelled out for us.

And so that makes, I think, 2 Corinthians a hard letter to read, because there's information we don't know. We can glean all sorts of information out of 2 Corinthians and out of 1 Corinthians, out of the Acts of the Apostles, in fact, also a little bit out of the letter to the Romans, all about the general situation.

[3 : 49] But there are still gaps. And there's still discrepancies between this commentator, what they think was the situation, and what others think. In the end, we can glean as much as we can.

That's a right process. In the end, we've got to remember that God's caused all of Holy Scripture to be written. What is lost is lost. God was sovereign to keep it if that's what he wanted to do.

He hasn't done that with some bits of other letters. And so we must trust that God has given us sufficient. So though we don't know all the detail of the situation that faces, especially in this passage tonight, we've got enough information to glean what we've got to learn.

It's not actually a history lesson, because the Scripture is there for our building up, our growth into maturity, our wisdom for salvation. So even though we don't know all the details in the background, and though some of us might long to know what's this person, and who was he, and what was going on, and what have they written in response, and so on, well, save your questions for heaven, I guess.

Let me just outline the background as I see it. Paul has established the church in Corinth. Corinth is on the Peloponnese, the big blob of Greece down the bottom on the west side that comes off a very thin piece of land that joins it to the mainland where Athens is and so on.

[5 : 17] Corinth was a significant place, even in Paul's day. It had been destroyed actually a long time before by an earthquake, but rebuilt under Julius Caesar. It was a prominent trading post, port town, lots of travel from the mainland through to the Peloponnese, and travel from the water on the top side to the bottom side.

Today there's a little canal that, in a sense, cuts off the Peloponnese from the mainland. But in those days people would dock in the port of Corinth at the top and carry things overland to Cancra and then sail on from the south.

So it was a very busy port, a very busy place where people would come to and fro, a strategic place for Paul to go and establish a church there. After being there for 18 months, Paul moves on.

After some time later, having now begun his third missionary journey, he spends perhaps two to three years in Ephesus, back in Turkey or Asia Minor as it was then called.

And whilst he's there, he receives news from Corinth and he writes to them. He probably had already written a letter to them, a letter that we don't have. From Ephesus he writes another letter, which is what we call 1 Corinthians, although it may well have been technically 2 Corinthians, but don't get too confused.

[6 : 34] From Ephesus, in that lengthy time he spent there, though it's not in Acts, it seems that he makes another visit, maybe briefly to Corinth, where it's a painful visit, it seems, because of problems in the church and their response to them or lack of response.

He goes back to Ephesus. It seems then he writes another letter at some point, what's often called the severe or the stern letter. Again, that's lost. It would be great if we had it, but we don't, so we have to rest satisfied that we don't.

And it seems that he had earlier said to them, I will visit you both before I go to Macedonia and after. And perhaps that brief visit was that first visit before he went to Macedonia.

But then he decides, as we'll see tonight, not to revisit for the third time to Corinth. But instead he writes what we call 2 Corinthians. And maybe then later he does revisit again.

Now, that chronology is, much of it is certain from what we read in Acts and the letters. There are little bits that we have to glean from references in 1 Corinthians to an earlier letter.

[7 : 43] In this letter, 2 Corinthians, to what seems to be a stern letter that he's already written. There are a few people who think, oh, that must be 1 Corinthians. But I think the majority, and I'm persuaded of this view, it's probably a middle letter that's been lost.

First, in part of that background, Paul has changed his plans. He'd said to them, I will visit you, then go to Macedonia, and then come back to you on my way on.

He's visited them, he's gone to Macedonia, but he's decided not to go back to them. And that change of plan has added fuel to the fire of those many critics of Paul in Corinth, some of whom, it seems, have come into Corinth a little bit later than Paul's initial time there, and persuaded others in Corinth to be critical of Paul.

This Paul, he says one thing to you, but then he does another. I mean, he says he'll visit you, and then he'll come back to visit you, but he hasn't come back. He's changed his mind. So this Paul, you can't really trust what he says.

His word is a little bit doubtful. He's a fickle person, maybe even a bit deceitful. And the fact that he hasn't come back, and that he's written you a stern letter that is highly critical of some things that are going on, shows that he doesn't actually love you.

[9 : 04] He doesn't really care for you. So why should you hold him up to be an apostle? Why should you trust his word? Why should you think highly of him at all?

He doesn't really love you. That seems to be the sort of criticism that is being levelled at Paul, and we glean that in effect from the words that he says in this passage amongst other places.

He's trying to answer those critics. At some level, there's something a little bit embarrassing about reading self-defence. That is, there's part of me that thinks, well, Paul, why bother going to these lengths to defend your actions?

Is it the case that you're so fussed about your reputation? But the reason is that Paul is defending himself because the effect of those criticisms sticking is not really Paul's reputation.

I mean, that may be tarnished. That's not his primary concern. But rather, it's a concern for God and for the gospel. And that's why Paul goes to the length that he does here, and then especially in the last chapters of this letter, to make a very strong defence of himself, his actions, and so on.

[10 : 23] So keep that in mind. And also we keep in mind that in his defence, we're not just understanding one historical situation, but rather that from his defence, we are gathering important priorities, principles, and character for Christians and Christian leaders that apply just as much today as in the past.

Paul begins this section in verse 12, mentioning boasting. And again, we might cringe or recoil a little bit from Paul saying, indeed, this is our boast.

Because boasting seems wrong. Boasting seems associated with pride, which is a sin. We have to understand carefully then what Paul means by boasting.

The word in Greek can have that word, that sense of boast. In our language, boast is more or less always a negative connotation, a statement of pride.

But in the ancient Greek, it's not necessarily a negative connotation. It could have the positive sense of confidence. This is my confidence. So we ought not read in here necessarily a statement of pride, which is therefore sinful, but rather something that is expressing a confidence.

- [11 : 38] But even then, we need to see very carefully what his boast is grounded in. Because actually his boast is ultimately not grounded in his own competence or character.

His boast is grounded in, the foundation for it, is the grace of God. And Paul never shies away from boasting in God, or in Christ, or in the gospel, or in God's grace.

And that's actually what he does here. This is our boast, the testimony of our conscience. We have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God.

That is, Paul has a clear conscience here, and a confidence that he has acted rightly. But it's not an arrogant saying, see, I've done the right thing here, because I'm good, you know, I'm a good person.

He's not boasting in that arrogant way, but rather, the grace of God has enabled me and strengthened me to act in this way with frankness and godly sincerity.

- [12 : 45] He's got a clear conscience. We ought to be careful about conscience. Jiminy Cricket's advice is not always right. Remember Jiminy Cricket in Pinocchio?

Let your conscience be your guide. Well, conscience is an internal moral arbiter, something that is like a barometer within us for something that is right or wrong.

But our conscience is not a perfect guide. Modern times, as well as in ancient Greek times, people often thought the conscience was the voice of God within. But consciences can be trained rightly or wrongly.

And under God's word, hopefully our consciences, as we're growing in Christian faith, are becoming more attuned to the standards of God and they're therefore more akin or attuned to God's arbitration of right and wrong.

But be careful with our conscience, because it's not necessarily, or it isn't the voice of God, it's not necessarily always right. It can, of course, be tainted by sin, as indeed every part of us can be as well.

- [13 : 54] Paul's confidence is that he has behaved in the world with frankness, or the word could also mean simplicity, and godly sincerity.

The word simplicity doesn't mean simple in the sense of naive, but rather like frankness, being clear, straightforward. It's simplicity as an opposite of duplicity.

That is, what is said is single-minded, straightforward. It's not duplicitous. It's not double-minded. It's not saying one thing but meaning another. It's not deceitful in that sense.

There's no double meanings to what Paul says, and so on. His godly sincerity is, again, without deceit. There's no sort of spin on the ball to mislead or trick or beguile anyone.

And it's not with earthly wisdom, that is, human strength. We know how much the Corinthians boasted in wisdom from the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. It's not with earthly wisdom, that is, boasting in one's own strength, but rather, he says, on the grace of God.

- [15 : 03] As a result of that simplicity and godly sincerity, he can say, for we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand.

I hope you will understand until the end, as you've already understood us in part. What I think Paul is saying there is that maybe encountering some criticism, what I say is what I mean.

That is, I don't write one thing and then say a different thing behind your back or to your face when I'm there. So often, of course, we're tempted to fall into that sort of trap.

So often, I know, as a Christian minister and leader, it's very hard to say hard things when they need to be said. And so sometimes it's easier to say one thing to one person than another thing to somebody else.

And I know that I'm guilty of that from time to time. I guess most of us are from time to time. And to our shame, I think. Paul is saying that God has strengthened him to be clear and straightforward so that what he says and what he writes is what he means.

[16 : 11] There's no needing to read between the lines to glean an alternative reading. He's not writing with spin so that we're beguiled by something that's not quite true. Not at all.

This is not empty rhetoric such as the Greek philosophers and speakers would practice so often. But moreover, Paul says, we write you nothing other than what you can read and understand.

I hope you'll understand until the end that on the day of the Lord Jesus, we are your boast, even as you are our boast. Again, the word boasting.

We have to be careful to work out what precisely does Paul mean here? That on the day of the Lord, why will they be his boast and vice versa? I think Paul is saying here that he is hoping that that they will understand that what he says he means, that they won't be accusing him falsely of deceit so that on the final day, they will be in harmony and reconciliation with each other and that they will be his boast in the sense of his fruit of his ministry and he will be their boast in the sense of the one who's guided us not just to faith but towards Christian maturity as well.

Maybe the other concept is that on that final day, there won't be embarrassment when they will suddenly realize that Paul's been, in a sense, right and clear all along. Imagine that, going through all their lives, accusing Paul of all his stuff and then on the final day, being in a sense ashamed to realize that they got it wrong either by their own stupidity, their own blinkeredness or perhaps they've been misled by others who've come into their church.

[18 : 01] Well, there's clear lessons here in these opening verses of Christian integrity. Christian integrity is a high priority, not always given the seriousness that I think it deserves.

It's a high priority for every Christian and especially for Christian leaders. Christian integrity is where our lives back up our words, which back up our written words, which back up what we say to people.

That is, there is a consistency about us so that we're not sort of divided within ourselves as people. That's the sense of integrity, that it's a wholeness or a unity about us so that what is said is what is meant, is what is lived, is what is practiced, is what is believed.

So that not one thing is said to another but a different thing to this person and then none of that actually agrees with how that person lives their life or what they say to yet a third or fourth person.

Sadly, sometimes that's not our practice. This means, integrity means, that we need courage at times, I think, to actually say what is true.

[19 : 15] So the reasons why so often our integrity is compromised is because we shy away from confrontation. We shy away from rebuke. We shy away from saying hard things, even in love.

But as Christians, if our goal is to stand on the final day together in Christ, then that should be what we're aiming for and the hard things help towards that goal.

That's in effect what Paul is intimating about referring to the last day here as well. So we ought to be people who are striving for integrity always.

Not an artificial sincerity, not putting spins on things for flattery and the approval of people, but rather for the glory of God and for the sake of being in his presence on the final day, speaking the truth in love.

Of course, Paul's not saying something new. Jesus said very much the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount when he said these words in Matthew 5.

[20 : 30] Let your word be yes, yes, or no, no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one. The context of Jesus' words there are about oaths, but again, it's pointing to the general issue of integrity.

Paul continues his argument and defence by referring now to his travel plans that have changed. One level, we think travel plans, it's a fairly trivial issue.

We might think, why does Paul go to such lengths to defend all this issue? But we see actually bigger principles at stake here. So he says them from verse 15. Possibly even Paul's original plan was to go to Macedonia then to Corinth, but now he's gone to Corinth first and he said to them, well, I'll come back via you so that I'll be here again.

We'll have double pleasure in being there. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea.

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? And the clear answer of that question, because in ancient Greek questions have got very clear yes, no answers often.

[22 : 08] This is styled very clearly that there's no doubt the answer is no. I was not vacillating when I wanted to do this. Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say yes, yes, and no, no at the same time?

No. Again, the question is phrased with that answer as being the only answer that is possible. No, I haven't set my plans by human standards that are in a sense fickle, yes and no at the same time.

Paul's denying that in countering some of the accusations that are being levelled against him. Why is this issue important? Does it really matter if he changed his plans?

Well, the issue is important partly because they're using it as an issue of criticism, but because the whole issue of integrity is so important for Christian leadership. You see, if Paul cannot be trusted with small things, that is, this is what I plan to do, and now I've changed my mind, doing a different plan, then can you trust him for the big things of the gospel?

See, if you can't trust Paul's word to say I'm going to come and visit you on the way to and from Macedonia, then how could you trust Paul when he tells you about the gospel of Jesus Christ? And it's clear at the end of this letter to Corinthians that there are those who are seeking to change the teaching of the gospels in some way or other, especially to make it more Jewish.

[23 : 33] So part of their argument to sort of sideline Paul is to say you can't trust him. So don't believe what he said to you about Jesus, what he said to you about visiting you, that's clearly untrue, and what he said to you about Jesus is untrue.

Now, of course, we know that's not the case, but that's why Paul is so intent here on defending his change of plan. Now, he goes on then to say, in effect, that integrity is a model based on God.

And because it's based on God and also God's work in Paul, you can trust his integrity. So he says then in verse 18, as surely as God is faithful, and the way he says that, as surely as God is faithful, is virtually claiming an oath in the sense of, I swear to you by God who is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no.

unresolved, you know, I'll say one thing, then I'll say another, it doesn't really matter me changing my mind.

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no. Paul's actually putting himself under an oath here in defending himself.

- [24 : 51] And then he goes on to say about God's faithfulness. for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes.

Now what Paul's saying here is not that Jesus is the great yes man, and so that his only word is ever yes, yes, yes, not at all. What Paul is saying here is that God makes promises, all of which find their yes or their answer or fulfillment in Jesus.

Jesus is not yes and no, but in him it's always yes. What it's saying is about God's faithfulness to his promise, and that every promise God makes, he keeps.

You can be absolutely sure about his word, and the reason we can be sure, Jesus Christ, because every promise of God is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

It's not simply saying that Jesus is yes and agrees with everything, far from it, but rather every promise of God is fulfilled in Jesus. For in verse 24, in Jesus, every one of God's promises is a yes.

- [26 : 11] For this reason it is through him that we say the amen to the glory of God. The amen is let it be, yes, we agree, this promise is sure, that's the sort of sense behind that word.

And so in Jesus, God's promises are fulfilled, and we agree with that. We're beneficiaries of those fulfilled promises. Notice therefore, in passing, Paul's view of the Old Testament is that it can only be read leading to Jesus Christ.

It's not a book entire in itself, but the fulfillment, the yes, of the Old Testament is Jesus. It's the only right way of reading the Old Testament at all.

So what Paul is saying is that God is utterly faithful to his word. Jesus shows that faithfulness by fulfilling the promises. Moreover, God's faithfulness is not just out there in Jesus' fulfilling, but is actually applied within.

So he says in verses 21 and 2, but it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us by putting his seal on us and giving us his spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

- [27 : 29] The language here is language of confirmation or sealing or guaranteeing. So when it says that God establishes us with you, the sense is a legally binding confirmation or guarantee.

he then uses the language in the next verse of putting his seal on you. That is the stamp of identification, identified with the Holy Spirit more clearly also, or here, but also perhaps even more clearly in Ephesians 1.

Same idea and same word. And then finally, giving us his spirit in our hearts as a first installment, the deposit. The same word is used in Ephesians 1 again, and it's a guarantee of the faithfulness of God.

So that the answers are in Jesus to show fulfillment of promise, but in Christ and by the spirit of Christ applied in our hearts to confirm, and because Paul uses three words here, establish, seal, and installment, all of them strong language of confirmation, assurance, guarantee, etc.

etc. So then, Paul therefore, as a result of not only God's work out there fulfilled in Christ, but applied within him by God's spirit, he says, I've acted in integrity.

- [28 : 51] I'm honest. That's the grace of God at work in me. He's not boasting in his own strength to be a person of integrity, but he's saying that God's work in me makes me a person of integrity.

It's a work of the spirit. If God is faithful to his word, then the work of God in me is making me faithful to my word. It's a mark of Christian maturity and godly character.

It ought to be something that we're seeing in our own lives as well. So Paul is saying then, that if you bring my integrity into doubt, I'm not fundamentally worried about me and my reputation, but you bring the gospel's character.

into dispute and doubt as well. That's why this issue of integrity matters so much. Now, sometimes people, they may have criticized Paul here for not saying, well, did you make your plans led by God?

The language isn't here for that, but so often we use or we here use the language, oh, God's led me to do this, this, this, and this. There are true stories of people who will sit in bed waiting for God to lead them to get out of bed.

[30 : 10] Now, that's very extreme. I hope you are not quite like that, but I'm pleased that God's led you to get out of bed today at least and come here. But there is a place for human reason to work, and Paul reflects that here.

not everything is, in a sense, overtly or directly led by the Lord. Now, imagine, though, if Paul had responded to this argument by saying, I was led by the Lord to change my mind.

Well, it's hard to answer against that. And I'm certainly aware of people who've said, I've been led to the Lord to do this, this, and this. Sometimes I think it's a denial of responsibility, like at the extreme, sitting in your bed, waiting for the Lord to get you up.

Well, that's a denial of responsibility. But I think, too, I've heard the language of, I've been led by the Lord to this, this, and this, to be an excuse for immorality. So, at the worst level, I've been led by the Lord to go with this woman and leave my wife.

Well, never will the Lord do that. Now, Paul doesn't use the language of being led by the Lord. He uses the language of, I planned and I resolved. You can see it most clearly at the beginning of chapter 2.

[31 : 20] I made up my mind. So, I'm saying this as a slight digression in a way, but to help us realize that there are times when we need to make decisions. And we may pray about them, but we're not necessarily, you know, in a sort of subjective feeling way, led by the Lord.

We've got to make wise decisions. We've got to act strategically and thoughtfully to do what we think is the right and best thing. There may be times when God's leading is very clear.

There may be times when that's not. God may give us some choice in what color socks we wear, but God also, I think, gives us choice in more important things from time to time as well. And so it seems that Paul didn't sit around waiting and praying for God to lead him to here or here, whether he goes to Corinth first or last or whatever.

He resolved what he thought would be the wise strategy. Of course, in Acts we also read where God very clearly in a vision leads him to Macedonia. But I'm not denying in a sense the Lord's leading, but I am wanting us to veer away from thinking that's the only way of making decisions.

And Paul, it seems, here is using pastoral and strategic criteria by which he makes decisions in particular about whether or not and when to visit Corinth.

[32 : 37] So now he explains the change of plan. And he wants to show that it's not his weakness of keeping his word. It's not his fickleness. And it's certainly not his lack of love, which is the other accusation that seems to be leveled against him.

So he says in verse 23, but I call on God as witness against me, again, placing himself under oath, solemn language. It was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth.

I did not mean to imply that we lorded over your faith. Rather, we are workers with you for your joy because you stand firm in the faith.

So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. Paul had visited a second time, briefly, and it seems it was painful.

It was painful because of whatever the problems were within the Corinthian church that had not been resolved, were not being resolved. In part, it was to do with accusations against Paul or personal slights or offense that was given to him by some people or at least.

[33 : 48] And it was painful for them as well as for him. It's not because it was painful for Paul that he's not going back, but because it was painful for them. So having visited them that time, that second time on his way to Macedonia, he decided, I'm not sure of the wisdom of going back.

Paul is saying he's reflected and thought about this. When he says, I made up my mind, the language is giving it careful consideration. That is, it's not a spontaneous, oh, I'm going to do this, but it's a careful and thoughtful idea of resolution behind the language that's used in verse one.

He's re-evaluated the situation and he's resolved that pastorally and maybe strategically, it would be unwise now to maintain the plan to plan to go back to Corinth from Macedonia immediately.

He doesn't say, I'm led by the Lord, but he's saying in effect why he didn't go back, though initially he'd said he would. Notice that he doesn't hide behind a pious excuse that God led him somewhere else.

That would be an easy way to cop out of it in a way, even if it's true. But he takes full responsibility for his decision, even though it's caused them some hurt and given fuel to the fire of those against him.

[35 : 09] Indeed, Paul is saying now that it's because I love you that I didn't come back. They're saying it's because he doesn't love us that he didn't come back.

But Paul and they're saying that he's fickle and loveless. Now, what is this problem in Corinth? Well, we don't know the detail. It certainly seems from the verses we're about to read that there's at least one man who's acted wrongly in some way.

Some say that it's the person who committed sexual immorality back in 1 Corinthians. There's no real evidence for that. It may or may not be. Certainly, though, the implication is this man has offended or slighted Paul in some way.

But more than that, created some turmoil within the Corinthian church. Paul's first visit, I should say second visit, that brief visit, urged the Corinthians to resolve this problem in a particular way of some form of church discipline.

If Paul returned, he says now in verse 2, If I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?

[36 : 21] The one whom is the man whom. So, what I think Paul is saying there is, it would only be another situation of pain if I came back to you after leaving Macedonia.

Unless, of course, that man has changed. That and that alone will bring me gladness and joy. Paul, after that visit, that pained visit, wrote them a stern letter, it seems.

A letter that was to instruct them to discipline. That's what he's referring to in verse 3. I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice.

But then he says, for I'm confident about all of you that my joy would be the joy of all of you. Paul is saying it's not just me who's been slighted here. There's pain within the church. And there'll be joy within the church and with me when this issue is resolved, but only when it's resolved.

Whatever that issue actually is. Now, they are saying, well, Paul's written us a pretty nasty letter. Clearly, he doesn't love us. Well, some people are saying that. Maybe not the majority.

- [37 : 35] Maybe some are saying it to mislead or drive the Corinthian church away from Paul. Paul says, I wrote you, or wrote to you, out of much distress.

That is, I'm writing to you out of love, not lovelessness. It's a love that distresses me because of the situation you are in and your behavior. That one man, but also the church's reaction to that one man, which seems to be of an undue tolerance or something like that.

Here's love that hurts.

Here's love that is, or has in that earlier letter issued some form of rebuke and urging to church discipline. That perhaps has not been heeded.

They're not easy things to do. They're painful things for a Christian leader. And Paul is making it clear. I've written to you not because I don't love you. That's not why it was a stern letter.

- [38 : 43] I've written to you because I'm abundant in my love for you. And it causes me so much pain. Love hurts. Especially a love that needs to rebuke and to discipline.

That hurts. Like a parent who might hit their child out of discipline and say, this hurts me much more than it hurts you. Or physically it may not.

But emotionally it does. Paul loved the Corinthians. And it caused him pain to love them.

And his sternness to them was because of love. Not because he was callous and loveless. And not because he lorded it over them in their faith. As the language of verse 24 said.

That is, he's not being a sort of dictator, autocrat, unfeeling despot over them. Rather, he's with them and he's agonizing over them. And he wants them to see that and know that.

- [39 : 44] And not be misled by those who would seek to distance Paul from the church of Corinth. Again here I think we're being given deliberately an example of Christian leadership.

Without loving people, Christian leadership is very hollow and shallow. My constant prayer for myself is to love God more, love his gospel more, and love people more.

Because loving God and loving the gospel, which is really part of the same thing, more, is imbalanced. You need to also love people more. I mean they're the two great commandments in a sense put together.

And Paul is demonstrating that. Not just I think for Christian leaders, but for all Christians. Because sometimes we love ourselves so much that we don't love people or God. Sometimes we love our institution or the church or whatever or our role.

And we don't really love other people. And if we really love other people, then we'll be prepared to do the hard things. Acting with the truth in love. Acting in integrity.

- [40 : 48] And that's what Paul is modeling here. Tears, anguish, distress. Remember, not only is the Corinthian situation causing him all this anguish, but as he referred to at the beginning of chapter 1, he in Ephesus has undergone all sorts of things that he even despaired of life itself.

So in a sense, he's being bombarded on both sides. Well, the Corinthians, it seems, appear a bit hurt by Paul. Paul claims that he's just as hurt as they are in effect. And he's hurt because he loves them.

But he also knows that this guilty man has pained the whole church. It's not just Paul who's feeling a bit slighted here. In verse 5, he says, If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it.

Not to me, but to some extent, and not to exaggerate it, to all of you. That is, to every single one in the church, this man has caused pain. He's not exaggerating there.

See, behind Paul's view is a right model of the church. That is, when one suffers, we're all meant to suffer. When one sins, the church suffers.

[41 : 51] We don't often have that high view of the corporate nature of the church because we live in such an individualistic Western age. But we belong together.

And when one member sins, then we all suffer the pain of that. When one member suffers, we all suffer. It's how it's meant to be. And Paul is reflecting here a solidarity with the Corinthian church and an acknowledgement that sin injures the whole church.

Well, it seems, thankfully, that they've exercised some discipline. Verse 6, this punishment by the majority is enough for such a person.

Well, we don't know what the punishment is. It could be a public rebuke. It could be excommunication for a time. It could be some penalty or sanction against the person. We don't know. We don't need to know.

But Paul's saying that punishment is enough. So now, instead, you should forgive and console him. We don't know if this man's even repentant.

[42 : 56] Perhaps he is. But now the sense is that the point of punishment is not humiliation. The point of punishment is restoration. And so now you've got to take measures to ensure that this man is forgiven and consoled and brought back fully into the Christian fellowship.

So that, the end of verse 7 says, he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Sadly, we're not always good at that second step, even if we are good at the first, which is also very rare.

That is, sometimes it's hard to exercise forgiveness that puts it aside with a slate wipe clean and brings somebody back into the fold. And sadly, when church discipline is exercised or somebody feels a bit ostracised because of some mistake or error or sin they've committed, then they actually drift right away from the church and right away from God, embittered.

Paul is very anxious here that that does not happen so that the person is forgiven and consoled and not overwhelmed, drowned or devoured is the use of that word in other contexts by excessive sorrow.

So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. And then he concludes this by saying, I wrote for this reason to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything.

[44 : 23] That is, it seems that in this stern letter, he strongly put to them, they needed to exercise church discipline for this man as a church.

It seems that they've done it, thankfully. And now he's saying it's time now, that's enough. Make sure this man is forgiven and restored. But in part, he's testing them.

It's not an unfair test, I think. It's a real situation that needed this action. But in a sense, he was testing to see if the Corinthian church would be a holy fellowship or a social club.

Would it act in church discipline rightly? Or would it turn a blind eye? Sadly, church history is more the latter than the former, where blind eyes are turned to sin and error in the church, where people pretend it hasn't happened, gloss over it.

And that's sadly been the practice in Christian leadership as well, not least when clergy or ministers fail and are moved on by bishops or others who want to find somewhere else to put them.

[45 : 34] I think that's coming to an end, at least in the Anglican church, for which I'm very thankful. But what Paul is saying here is that, like Jesus had said in Matthew, church discipline is important, something that needs to be exercised from time to time.

In the ways that Jesus outlined, for example, in Matthew 18, and as Paul is insisting on in the letter that's lost and now in this letter as well, would they discipline in love?

Notice how he said to them at the end of, in verse 8, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him, which may actually be a formal thing. The word reaffirm could be like a formal ritual, but reaffirm your love for him.

Wherever there's church discipline or rebuke without love, then I think the mouth needs to be shut. Rebuking and disciplining must be practiced in church fellowship in love, because its goal is restoration and reconciliation, not just the punishment forever of excommunication, for example.

Well, they meet the challenge. Paul's been relieved about that. He says in verse 10, anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I've forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.

[46 : 56] Paul, I think he's there, is saying, you know, if this person is forgiven and restored into fellowship, well, he may have offended me or slighted me in some way. I've forgiven that too. That is for the sake of our unity and harmony, there is forgiveness.

And we do this, he says, so that we may not be outwitted by Satan. That's a very intriguing expression in a way, one that's worth a brief ponder.

Outwitted by Satan because Satan is devious and clever. Satan's plans are to lead us into sin. But here is a man who sinned.

He's been disciplined and Paul is urging that he be welcomed back into the church because if he's not, then Satan's clutches are all the more easy, more easily, easier to keep hold of him.

Even if he's repentant of his sin initially. So to welcome him back will keep him out of the clutches of Satan. Satan loves nothing better than church division and sin that's unchecked in the church.

[48 : 02] And we need always to be on guard against the wiles of the evil one in preserving the unity and the holiness of the church. Well, as I said at the beginning, reading one side of correspondence is not always easy.

There are things here that, you know, we wish probably that, you know, we knew more. I mean, it'd be nice to know a bit more about what this man did, not just for sort of, you know, our poor attitudes of knowing ghoulish things that were done, but just so that we can understand Paul's language a bit more, maybe.

But God hasn't given us that. He's given us, though, what is sufficient for us to understand enough in this passage to apply it to our own lives. We learn here of Christian leadership and Christian life in general of the high priority we must place on integrity of word, both in speech and in written word, in email word, in action and behavior, in what we say to one person and what we say to another person, et cetera.

We realize that honesty and integrity are fundamental characteristics of godly Christian people. We recognize, too, that the holiness within a church fellowship is important, so that where one sins, the church suffers as a result, and sin must be dealt with in love.

And there we see another importance that this is teaching us. Paul is at pains to show that he has abundant love for the Corinthians even if he's hurt and they've been hurt. And he's urging them to have abundant love for the man to bring him back into fellowship.

[49 : 40] How preeminent love is as a mark of Christian life and fellowship in the church. One for each other. One for all. He's also reminding us that being Christian and being in the church is not always easy.

We're like bits of rock with jagged edges. And by ourself, we can cope with the jagged edges. But put a few jagged edges together, invariably, they grate with each other.

That's actually God's deliberate plan for you and me. That in the fellowship of Christian life as a church, together, our jagged edges will grate and become smooth.

So that on the final day, we're in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul shows us here how much love hurts.

And many of us run away from hurting. We don't like to hurt. It ought not surprise us that love hurts. For just as God's faithfulness to his word in Christ undergirds the emphasis on integrity here, though Paul does not refer to it in this passage, the model of God's love is of a hurting love for our sakes on the cross.

[51 : 11] Well, let's pray. God, we thank you that you have caused to be written and preserved for us this letter of 2 Corinthians.

We thank you that we can see here a model of pastoral leadership, of pastoral care and love and truth. And though, no doubt, we have some questions about the background and other things that we're not told in detail, we thank you that there is sufficient here for our own instruction to train us in righteousness, to rebuke and correct us, to teach us so that we may be equipped for every good work in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Well, let's sing about the love of God and we're going to sing from the Blue Hymn books number 217. Love divine, all loves excelling.