**PAUL’S JOY IN RECONCILIATION**

February 22, 2015

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:16

Key Verse 7:7b “He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.”

Today’s passage is a continuation of the ministry of reconciliation. We are Christ’s ambassadors who carry the message, “Be reconciled to God.” That is really beautiful to hear. However, it is not easy to reconcile with anyone. To break a relationship is easy. But to reconcile can be very costly. Paul had to make a great effort to reconcile with the Corinthians. In doing so, Paul revealed his great shepherd’s heart. Today let’s learn from Paul and reconcile with one another in Christ.

I. Paul appeals for reconciliation (6:3-7:1)

**First**, for reconciliation, we need to open our hearts. Paul was very honest to share his sufferings and his struggles. Look at verse 3. “We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.” As ministers of reconciliation, we should avoid doing anything that would discredit our ministry. People not only listen to our message of reconciliation, but they also watch our practical lives very closely. Paul knew that there are always people who are looking for an excuse not to listen to the message of salvation. If they find that excuse in the inconsistent life of a pastor, it is better. They make it a big deal out of proportion. So Paul says that he did not give any excuse so that his ministry may not be blamed. He always behaved in a manner worthy of Christ. Our family lives must be wholesome and exemplary. As students, we must study hard and get good grades, and also help fellow students who are struggling. Professionals and employees must work hard and achieve success, and be a blessing to others. We are Christ’s ambassadors at home, at school, and at work. If we are lazy, selfish and rebellious, we put a stumbling block in others’ way; our ministry is discredited. So Paul was very sensitive about being a good influence as a minister of reconciliation.

Look at verse 4. “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses....” Paul first mentioned “great endurance.” Endurance is a crucial quality for God’s servant. The dictionary defines endurance as “the ability or power to bear prolonged pain or hardship.” God’s servants must have ability and power to go through pain and hardship. We need great endurance, not just ordinary endurance, in order to be ministers of reconciliation. Paul had a lot of distress in serving the Corinthian believers, who criticized him in ignorance. Sometimes it was unbearable, but he endured. Paul also endured physical pain and trauma from beatings, imprisonment and riots. For example, when Paul was in Philippi, he was beaten and imprisoned unjustly. But he endured with joy and sang hymns of praise to God. Then a miracle happened. God’s power moved a jailer to repentance; a new house church was born (Ac 16:25-26).

Though Paul lived an exemplary life as a man of God, he was not always honored. There were times of dishonor as well as glory; times of bad reports, perhaps through anti-Paul websites, as well as good reports (8). Regardless of the response, Paul followed Jesus with great endurance. Paul’s life of faith was paradoxical in nature (9-10). Even though Paul was a great man of God, he was ignored; sometimes people despised him. Yet he was known to God. Paul often experienced heartbreaking sorrow while serving God’s flock. Still, he was always joyful in the Lord. He rejoiced in trials and even in prison. Outwardly, Paul looked poor as a self-supporting lay missionary. However, inwardly he was rich in the knowledge of Christ, and he made many people rich by sharing the good news of eternal life with them. Paul could sacrifice his life to make others rich in Christ.

In times of hardship and distress, Paul did not react according to his emotions. He did not become frustrated or angry, and he did not give up. He endured patiently, defending himself with wisdom, loving the Corinthians to the end. How could he do so? Paul fixed his eyes on Jesus who endured the cross, scorning it shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2). Here we learn that the trademark of a servant of God is endurance through trials with a Christ-like character. It is not eloquent speech, superior education or popularity among men.

Look at verse 11. “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.” It is hard for anyone to open their hearts to those who have been critical and harsh. Yet Paul spoke freely of what was on his heart to the Corinthians. He took the initiative in this. There are some Bible teachers who have been hurt by critical comments or disappointed by their Bible students. It is natural to close our hearts, hold a kind of grudge, and become very superficial. However, for the sake of reconciliation, we must learn to open our hearts first. Our Father God, who created the heavens and the earth, was deeply grieved over the terrible sin of mankind. Yet, God came to us first in Jesus Christ. Jesus reached out to those who offended him. Though Peter had denied him three times on the night of his arrest, the Risen Christ visited him at the seashore of Galilee and cooked a delicious breakfast for him (Jn 21). In the same way, let’s open our hearts to God’s dear children under our care.

In verse 12 Paul pointed out the Corinthians’ problem. He said, “We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.” We can understand the Corinthians. There are some who have been loved one-sidedly by their Bible teachers for many years. But because of a rumor, a misunderstanding, or a problem, they have closed their hearts. No matter how much they are loved, they never respond. Withholding affection from our shepherds is not right. In verse 13 Paul pleaded, “As a fair exchange--I speak as to my children--open wide your hearts also.” Only when the Corinthians opened their hearts to Paul could there be true reconciliation and a heart to heart relationship. This is what Paul wanted. He would not settle for less. In truth, opening their hearts to Paul was welcoming Christ’s love through him (Mt 10:40). Christ’s love could fill their hearts with new life, joy, and peace. They could have deep fellowship with Christ and one another and experience the kingdom of God as a community.

**Second**, for reconciliation, we need to separate from influence of unbelievers. Look at verse 14a. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” In ancient times, two oxen were yoked together to move in the same direction, working together to pull a load. For human beings, it means two people working together to accomplish a common goal. It implies a shared value system and direction. Paul strongly warns believers not to be yoked together with unbelievers. Look at verse 15. “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” Here “Belial” is a name for Satan. The same Hebrew word is used in Deuteronomy 13:12 as “wicked.” It says “…that wicked men have risen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods.’” Paul characterizes the false teachers in Corinth who tried to put a wedge between him and Corinthians as wicked men and unbelievers. In order to have reconciliation, we need to separate from wicked people who try to plant doubt and cause disharmony. Suppose you want to reconcile with your spouse. If your friend is whispering in your ear, saying a bad thing about your spouse, or you are getting advice from your facebook friends to divorce your spouse, then you need to shut the facebook or stop listening to your friend. Verse 17 says, “Therefore come out from them and be separate. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you.” Verse 7:1 says, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Look at verse 14a again. “Do you be yoked together with unbelievers.” We can apply this in our daily lives. Believers and unbelievers have opposing value systems. While believers are characterized by righteousness, light, Christ, and God's temple, unbelievers are characterized by wickedness, darkness, Belial (Satan), and idolatry. There is no harmony or agreement between the two. There is no way for them to cowork together. Rather, they will tear each other apart. This is especially true in marriage. Believers must marry other believers. The first question to ask about a possible marriage candidate is “Do they believe in Jesus?” Dating unbelievers is an invitation to spiritual destruction. Paul challenged the Corinthians not to enter ungodly relationships. It was a necessary step to make a heart to heart relationship with God and his people.

II. Paul rejoices over the church’s repentance (7:2-16)

In chapter 7, Paul expresses his joy of reconciliation with the Corinthians. When Paul’s company came into Macedonia, they had a hard time. They were weary and tired. They had conflicts on the outside and fears within. At this moment, God comforted Paul through Titus. Titus brought good news that the Corinthians had repented and were longing for him: “Oh, our shepherd Paul. We have grieved God and him by our sins. We long to be restored to our shepherd Paul!” This was the fruit of Paul’s great endurance in reconciliation and he was full of joy. Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

We learn further how reconciliation was possible in verses 8-13. Paul had written a severe letter to the Corinthians, rebuking their sin. After that, he was very anxious, not knowing how they would respond. At first they were sorry because their pride was hurt. Yet, when they read Paul’s letter carefully, they discovered Paul’s holy love for them. He challenged them with the word of God to repent of their sins. This was for their good. They experienced deep sorrow, but it was godly sorrow. Look at verse 10. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” Godly sorrow is produced by the Holy Spirit over sin. This is sin sorrow. This kind of sorrow pleases God because it leads to repentance and will produce repentance without regret. Paul is not talking about some human kind of repentance, some kind of human moral change. He is not talking about changing what you do in order to somehow tweak to the circumstances and produce a better effect. He is talking about a repentance that involves a real sorrow over sin that has God at the very heart of it and leads to salvation. What does the godly sorrow look like? Verse 11 says, “See what godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.” If you have earnestness, a desperate need to vindicate yourself to change, to get back where you need to be, indignation over your sin, fear of the consequence, a longing for what is right, and a passion for what is pure, then you have godly sorrow and godly sorrow produces repentance and repentance leads to salvation.

But worldly sorrow brings death. Worldly sorrow is wounded pride, self-pity, unfulfilled hopes. I see a lot of sorry people, don’t you? I see them on the news all the time...sad people, sorry about all kinds of things. And their sorrow is a killer. You know what it produces? Guilt, shame, despair, depression, self-pity, hopelessness, anguish, resentment. You know what that does? That kills people. People die because of sorrow. All human sorrow without God, all unsanctified remorse has no healing power, no transforming power, no saving power, no redemptive capability. It is the sorrow of selfish sympathy, poor me, self-pity. It is the sorrow of despair. It is the sorrow of bitterness. Judas Iscariot was so remorseful for betraying Jesus that he killed himself. On the other hand, Peter failed greatly. He denied Jesus. But his sorrow was not the worldly sorrow that made him hang himself. His was the godly sorrow that makes you weep and ask forgiveness.

In today’s passage we learn how Paul made a great effort in order to reconcile with the Corinthian believers. He opened his heart to them and shared how much he struggled, how much he loved them, and how he had been anxious over them. Then he appealed to them to open their hearts to him as a fair exchange. Paul endured to the end for reconciliation. When they were reconciled, Paul was full of joy. Let’s learn from Paul how to reconcile the strained or broken relationships in our Christian community. May God bless us to have many heart to heart relationships in Christ and overflowing joy.