

2 Corinthians 7: 2-16: How to repent

Sunday 23 February 2014

We are going to look this morning at a passage in which Paul grapples with a vital area of Christian life which, on any view, does not get very much attention in 21st century public or private life.

As I walked through the City on tube strike day, I had the chance to look up at the billboards which are dotted along Bethnal Green and around the Old Street roundabout. Most billboards advertised products to make us look good on the outside, either because of what we should drive, wear, or spray on. Indeed 99% of the advertising was directed towards our outward appearance. There are, as you would expect in these days of uber-fitness, gym membership adverts everywhere. If I took them all seriously, I could look like Kate Moss in about six weeks; alright, perhaps not. But anyway, the closest any advert came to encouraging me to improve my inner self was one which said '*Be beautiful on the inside*'. But that, as it turned out, was an advert for yoghurt.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, nowhere was I encouraged to 'Repent' as a means of self improvement. In fairness to our friends in the advertising industry, the word 'repent', if shouted from the billboards of Shoreditch, would produce mental images for my generation at least of the Revd Ian Paisley bellowing into a BBC microphone in around 1980.

'Get', 'grasp', 'run', 'lose weight', 'be beautiful' and 'be smelly (in a nice way)' are the commands of February 2014. It is, I think we can all agree, deeply unfashionable to encourage or even talk about repentance. It sounds like looking back rather than forwards. It sounds like guilt. And to a lot of people looking at Christianity from the outside, that says it all: Christianity is all about rules and guilt. But, as I aim to argue this morning, repentance is vital for two reasons: it restores and nourishes our relationship with God. And it restores and nourishes our relationship with each other. In summary, it is vital for personal and corporate Christian life.

How is it done? More specifically, how is it done to full effect? What is its purpose? What is the mechanism? And how does God see repentance?

[Read 2 Cor 7: 2-16]

A bit of background: Paul had been trying to sort out a problem in the church at Corinth. We don't have the precise details of what the problem was, but it seems to have related to an issue of church discipline. It was obviously quite serious. Piecing together the evidence from other passages in 2 Corinthians, Paul had been challenged while he was at Corinth to give proof that Christ was speaking through him, and that he was truly an 'apostle'. [ch 13:3]. He gave a strong word of warning and returned to Ephesus. Instead of later going back to Corinth to sort out the problem, he wrote the letter which we read about just now.

Most Bible writers agree that that is a letter we no longer have; in other words, it is not part of 1 Corinthians or 2 Corinthians. It is known by Bible writers as the 'harsh letter', because of its content and tone, indeed as told to us by Paul in this passage. In the letter he challenged the church for not backing him and demanded that the person who challenged his authority should be punished [ch2: 5-12].

Paul had in due course sent Titus to follow up the letter. It is plain that no news came for some time. Eventually, Paul tracked Titus down in Macedonia (in modern day Greece), and equally plainly, Paul was relieved at what he heard: In today's passage as a whole, you can hear and feel the relief as Paul writes about what Titus told him.

The Corinthian Christians had reacted well to the harsh letter. I can't remember the last time I wrote a real letter; you know: stamp, envelope, post box, the whole bit. It's all email and texts and other new fangled things like WhatsApp (worth \$19bn? Do me a favour). You always run a risk in writing a letter rather than saying things face to face, because things can be misinterpreted and take longer to sort out. But Paul had no choice: if he wasn't able to go in person, the possibilities for a Facetime or Skype chat with the church in Corinth to quickly clear things up, or an email perhaps, were limited. I think we can safely say that he had a lot to lose by writing a hard letter to a church many days if not weeks travel away.

But that's the important first step. Before the guilty plea and the remorse and the mending of ways must come the charge. The really spiky thing about the word repentance and the idea of repentance is this: deep down, we all have this sense that God will stop loving us if we don't repent: it sounds grey, cold and damp and threatening. After all, if someone points out something to me that needs dealing with, it does rather suggest that there is a barrier between me and God. But, of course, God will never stop loving us. We are made in his image and we are his for ever. But when Paul draws out is the sharp difference between *worldly sorrow* and *Godly sorrow*, he is telling us to take great care of our

relationship with God, in case we allow it to grow cold. Worldly sorrow brings death. Godly sorry leads to life. Death or life: it all comes down to how we react to challenge.

In the *Peanuts* comic strip, there was a famous cartoon of Charlie Brown practising his place kicking, with Lucy holding the football in position for him to kick. Every time Lucy held the ball for Charlie the same thing would happen: Charlie Brown would run up to the ball and, with all his might, was ready to kick the ball out of the ground. But at that exact moment, the point of no return, Lucy would pick up the ball. Charlie would swing at fresh air and his unchecked momentum would cause him to fall flat on his back.

One strip opened with Lucy holding the ball, but Charlie Brown wouldn't kick it. Lucy begged. But Charlie Brown wouldn't budge. Charlie Brown said, *"Every time I try to kick the ball you remove it and I fall on my back."* Finally Lucy broke down in tears and confessed, *"Charlie Brown, I have been so terrible to you over the years, picking up the football like I have. I've been wrong, so wrong. Won't you give a poor penitent girl another chance?"*

Characteristically, Charlie Brown was touched by her apparent sincerity and moved by her display of sorrow. *"Of course,"* said Charlie Brown, *"I'll give you another chance"*. So Charlie stepped back. Lucy held the ball. And Charlie ran, ready to kick with all his might. Once again, like every time before, at the last possible moment, Lucy picked up the ball and Charlie Brown fell flat on his back. And in the final frame, Lucy says, *"Recognising your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things, Charlie Brown!"*



Before we look at separating out worldly sorrow from Godly sorrow, let's do the best we can to piece together how the Christians at Corinth reacted to the letter. First, I think we can assume that it hit them pretty hard. We can work that out from the fact that Paul himself wondered if he had overdone it. He says [verse 8], *'Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while....'*

We don't have the minutes of their church meeting, but a number of immediate reactions are possible and indeed likely: they were initially very offended; a great corporate crossing of arms and pouting of lips; cries of *'Who does he think he is?'*, or *'Why doesn't he come here and tell us himself? Pah!!'* On a scale of one to ten, are we not very likely to do the same? Human nature hasn't changed one bit in two thousand years.

So if that's how they started off by reacting, what was it that had Titus skipping down the road when he left Corinth and what was it that encouraged Paul so much? After all, Paul says [verse 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'.*

The answer is the way the Christians searched themselves for the right reaction, and were obedient. Back to our contrasting sorrows: worldly sorrow and Godly sorrow. Paul writes [verse 10], '*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death*'.

So how do we recognise the difference between the two? Let me attempt some definitions: Worldly sorrow is getting caught and feeling ashamed, and stewing about it; perhaps being cross with yourself or others that you got caught. Worldly sorrow is being offended or prickly when someone points something out to me, and me being grumpy in response, and thinking '*Well, I may have a plank in my eye, but that speck in yours looks pretty big to me!*' Worldly sorrow is a guilty plea and a hope for a light sentence. It is, if you like, a 50/50 reaction. As Lucy said, '*Recognising your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things, Charlie Brown*'. It's a grudging acknowledgment. It's neither one thing nor the other. And as we know from other passages in scripture, God is no fan of 50/50 reactions. And it's very hard for God to penetrate that sort of reaction: '*What do you say?*' says God. '*Grrrr!!*', says I.

It is a great way to get stuck, going round and round in circles, because mostly reactions like that involve self-pity. Paul puts it very pithily: '*Worldly sorrow brings death*'. Perhaps the slow, suffocating death that results from getting stuck. I know what that feels like.

Godly sorrow, by contrast, brings life because, as Paul tells us, it brings repentance *which leads to salvation and leaves no regret* [verse 10]: and that brings life to individuals and it brings life to churches and it restores our relationship with God. It means, and is measured in, changed actions. What evidence of repentance did the Corinthian Christians show? The list is there: '*earnestness, eagerness to clear yourselves, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, readiness to see justice done*'.

Some of those are, if you like, wholesome responses: *concern, longing, readiness to see justice done*. But wait a minute: '*Indignation*': isn't that when you go '*Harumph*' and pout? And '*zeal*': isn't that where you go a bit over the top and wear your tie a little bit too tight and have slightly too firm a handshake, and have slightly too shiny shoes? No one will thank you for calling them a zealot these days, and neither of those sound very attractive – what's Godly about those? Well, maybe: but here's what's important: They are strong, vigorous, mixed and very human responses which, when taken together, show that they wanted to get it right.

The Corinthian Christians did something about it, they changed their actions, and that is the essence of real repentance: a change of heart, and a change of actions. When they got Paul's letter, they didn't just fold their arms and mutter and grumble and scuff their feet; they plainly recognised that something in their church in Corinth needed to change. And they did it.

And what is the best evidence of that? The answer is Titus himself [verse 13]: *'In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit had been refreshed by all of you'*, says Paul. The Corinthian arms had become uncrossed, the pout had gone, and Titus had been embraced, uplifted, invigorated and sent on his way. He was the best evidence of the Corinthians' repentance: not some letter back saying, *'Yep, thanks Paul, got all those points, rest assured we'll take care of it, Yours sincerely...'*.

But please note: they had not suddenly become superhuman by repenting. Paul is very careful to record that the Corinthians' sorrow was sorrow *'as God intended'* [verse 9]. Their repentance was not achieved by looking in some self-help book. You can be sure that after any arm-folding and pouting, they had emptied themselves. They must have felt very low. This was a serious rebuke from Paul. They knew that only God could produce the right response: and critically, it is *'God who comforts the downcast'* [verse 6].

That it the big encouragement for me – this pricking of the conscience is too much for me, Lord; this rebuke is overwhelming me, Lord; my sin is too great, and I am in danger of getting stuck. Well, it is *God who comforts the downcast*. And comforts means just that: comforts: in the same way that you might comfort a small child, just that: comforts; no words, no speeches, just comfort. Comfort is a very good word for troubled hearts. And it is God who provides it.

So after the Godly sorrow, and the repentance, they were able to minister to Titus. And what a relief to Paul he came across Titus in Macedonia and Titus had good news: had he come and said *"to be honest, they're really offended by your letter and when I left they were muttering very darkly about you"*, that would have been a perfect example of worldly sorrow: a refusal to repent, and a clinging on to the accusation.

And what would have happened if they had got stuck at worldly sorrow and not repented? Well, I'm anxious not to drift into speculation, but Corinth was a hugely important centre of early Christian life, and a hub of early Christian presence. Of course we cannot say for sure, but I have an instinct that, as a

church, they would have got stuck – stuck in grumbling about Paul, his wish to discipline them and how unfair it all was. And where might we be then, if the Corinthian church had got stuck and not added to their number, and not sent people out ... ?

But as it is, this passage ends really well. Look at verse 16: *I am glad I can have complete confidence in you*. Confrontation ends with confidence. Confrontation is never easy, but it had borne fruit. And here's why: to get them to that point of godly sorrow which led to repentance, Paul had gone about it in the right way.

Now, to illustrate that point, I wish to announce that there is one Winter Olympic sport I would excel at:



But anything involving balance I would be hopeless at: take for example that ridiculous ski jump thing.... It's all about balance: the bit where you slide down the slope of doom looks straightforward enough, but after you take off it's all about balance... that and the slalom, the skeleton, the bobsleigh, the downhill skiing – it's all about balance.

This passage is a model of balance, and gives us some valuable guidance on how to create the best conditions for Godly sorrow and repentance. Paul obviously hadn't messed around in the letter. But whatever he said had to be said: whatever the issue was, Paul couldn't just leave it or overlook it. To get them to the point of repentance, Paul had to confront them and lay it all out.

But they having responded, he deals with it brilliantly [verse 4]: *'I have great confidence in you. I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds'*. That shows great balance: confront what needs confronting, but receive repentance with grace and sensitivity.

If you say to me, Malcolm, you need to deal with this, here's the sequence, if we've been following what Paul has been writing: I am initially taken aback; I cross my arms and pout a bit, and mutter. But if you've hit the spot, I gradually unfold my arms, I remember that *God comforts the downcast*, I stop pouting, and I deal with what needs to be sorted. Then the good bit: I positively thank you for sorting me out. My relationship with God is stronger, my relationship with you is stronger, and the church is blessed by that whole process.

And perhaps next time Lucy will let Charlie Brown kick the ball out of the ground....

