

SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 1/29/17

MOVEMENT

Our sermon series, **MOVEMENT**, is an exploration of 2 Corinthians. The focus of the series is on the church. The church is not a building. The church is not even a conglomeration of people. The church is a movement, a group of people 'called out' (ekklesia) to meet and glorify God, and to represent His Kingdom to a broken world. The church doesn't sit still; it moves and grows. To be a Christian is to be on the move! Throughout this series we will explore what it means to be a part of this **Movement** of God.

FORGIVENESS TO THE ASHAMED • 2 Corinthians 2:1-11 • Tim McConnell • January 29, 2017

I spent the first part of this month in Egypt with our mission team. Let me tell you, the word “forgiveness” means a little more over there. I wound up preaching five times to five different churches, many of them meeting in areas known for strong Islamic extremism. Risking their lives to gather. And I talked about having the courage to forgive. At least I think that’s what I preached about. Eddie Yassa was my translator, so who knows what he said! But I spoke about the courage to forgive. I was scared to do it, honestly. You remember in December a bomb went off in the women and children’s section of St Mark’s Cathedral, a Coptic church downtown in Cairo. Twenty-five were killed. Imagine that happening in our city—God forbid. And you want to talk about forgiveness? But in Egypt, every time the Christian minority is attacked the leaders talk of forgiveness. And when they do, they put Jesus on display in a way that shines so brightly all can see. People can’t believe it. It doesn’t make any sense. How can you talk about forgiveness? There’s something about Christian forgiveness that gives veracity to the Bible, to the Gospel. It’s believable because it is such a foreign power. It intersects vertically from above. It’s alien. So it helps people see God. I wanted to encourage them. The church in Egypt is on the world stage right now, and they are demonstrating the very nature of Jesus Christ for all to see.

But that’s not just overseas on the borderlands of Christianity and Islamic terrorism. It’s here too. Remember the Amish schoolhouse shooting some years back, or the attack on Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015. The family members shared their grief, but then they spoke of forgiveness. But even in our day-to-day lives, we find power to forgive—otherworldly power to love and forgive those who have wronged us in our lives; and every time we do we become a sign, a cipher, disclosing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

We re-enter the story in Corinth this morning at a critical junction. What we read here is actually the resolution of a long and tumultuous episode. We are not totally certain, but over the history of the church it is commonly assumed that this passage is the end of the story of the man read about in 1 Corinthians 5-6, which you can read when you get home. To summarize, there was a man in the church who took up with his own stepmother in a romantic way. Not only is this outside of God’s plan for healthy family and marriage between husband and wife, but it would even be offensive to Corinthian culture—which frankly was hard to offend. This was a libertine city. Most everything

goes, but not this. So this was upsetting to Paul, but even more upsetting was that the leadership seemed to be boasting about it. They were proud of it. They were teaching the church, “Here is a perfect example of the freedoms of Christ. You can do anything now. Everything is permitted. And in the end you will still be forgiven and come into the Kingdom.” This is an easy gospel to preach to Corinth. “Good news, you can do whatever you like!”

It was a ticklish situation to be sure. Of course, there is no sin beyond the forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ. Of course, we are all sinners and all in need of grace. Of course, any who call on the Lord in true faith and repentance of sin will be redeemed. There is no need to behave our way into the presence of Christ. There is no need to walk in shame and embarrassment before the Lord. But can you see how the Good News was getting twisted? All of a sudden the leaders were encouraging the people to actually strive for the wrong path, to revel in the disobedient way, to celebrate deviance from God’s law. Paul has to explain, this is not what was meant by the gospel of grace. All things are forgiven, sure. But not all things will benefit you. Not all things will lead to life. Some things you do will wind up hurting you and hurting others. God’s Word, God’s way, God’s truth—they are not to be left behind in the new life with Christ. Grace and truth walk hand in hand.

Now, Paul did not want the church to begin walking around Corinth passing judgment on all their decisions. This is such a critical point to understand. Ultimately, Paul said, we have nothing to say about what Corinthians do. 1 Corinthians 5:12, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?” But in here, in the Body of Christ, we are going to understand holiness, we are going to repent of sin, we are going to confess where we go wrong, we are going to be saved by grace, and we are going to encourage one another to live God’s best and find the fullness of life. That meant the man had to be corrected, not celebrated, for sleeping with his father’s wife. Hard business. And Paul took a lot of heat over it. But it was done.

Now we fast forward two years or so. Apparently the corrected man has come to a healthy mindset about it all again. He has turned in some way or other, and is ready to feel at home again in the church. Praise God for that! How long and painful these peregrinations can be away from God. How hard it can be for parents to watch as their children run away from

God, and the parents are forced to watch and wait with anxious prayers. How hard when our friends run from God. But this man has returned, and now there's another problem. The church doesn't know what to do. The source of all these problems and leadership scrambles and fights and angry parking lot conversations and sleepless nights with tear-filled pillows—the one who caused it all is back. What are we to do?

Here we learn, or we are reminded, of the purpose of the whole thing. This whole episode was never about punishment or retribution; it was about making things better. Making his life better, and making the church better. And the only way to finish the process is to close the loop, and restore this man to full fellowship, love and acceptance, in the church body. Should we keep this guy out? Send him packing forever for all the trouble he caused? Paul writes, "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now, instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him." (2 Corinthians 2:6-8) It's over. It's time to come home. That's the first point. No matter how far you've wandered, you can always come home. This house is a house of forgiveness.

But it wasn't just for him, the restored one. This forgiveness and restoration was not only for his benefit. It had to be done for the benefit of the whole church. Unless the circle is closed and the corrected Christian man comes home to the love and fellowship of the church, and the church restores his position and forgives and comforts, and never looks back again at his missteps, unless all that happens the church itself is in jeopardy. See, this man is not an outsider. He is not another man of the city, another Corinthian. This man is a believer, a child of God saved by faith in Jesus Christ. This man is a brother in the household of faith, no matter his mistakes. And so long as he is suffering, the body is suffering. So long as he is separated off, the body is missing a part of the body. Here's what pastor Kent Hughes writes, "For Paul, the church was not a club offering trial memberships, and the *Body of Christ* was not a churchy slogan. They were a community of brothers and sisters with radical interconnected relationships...For Paul, the church was central to Christian existence. He never conceived of Christians living apart from the visible church. Rather, Christians lived in such profound relationship that the pain of one was truly felt by all." (R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, p. 49) This is what Paul said the first time he wrote to Corinth: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part

rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:26-27) Now here's the test. Just what kind of body is the church? Just how far does the forgiveness of Jesus go in this body of Christ? See, I want you to get this now. It wasn't "forgive and restore this fallen brother, you might be in a similar situation one day." It was, "forgive and restore this repentant brother; the pain he feels is *your* pain; if he hurts *you* hurt; you are one body. Forgive and restore this fallen brother, because that is what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. It means standing for truth and dispensing grace."

Linger any longer in the position of judgment, and the church runs the risk of relishing the position of "holier than thou." And that sort of thing, that sort of spiritual pride, is exactly what Satan can use to absolutely destroy the church and its witness in the world—and, as it says, "We are not unaware of his schemes." (2 Corinthians 1:11) Part of the body is hurting. We all hurt until it is healed. But when the circle closes and the man is restored, what a beautiful story it all becomes. The worst chapter becomes the most profound moment. The great trial becomes a great triumph; the great test becomes a great testimony. The church, the little church in Corinth once threatened to come apart at the seams, is now again the body of Christ disclosing the character of Christ, whom we have seen full of grace and truth.

Forgiveness is always possible. Forgiveness characterizes the church. This is a house of worship, a house in awe of the holiness of God. This is a house of grace and restoration, where sinners are redeemed again and again and again. Do you see? This is not a place to whitewash error, to encourage ungodliness, to celebrate or bless patterns of life that fly in the face of God's Word. But this is a place of honest and true forgiveness, grace that never ceases to flow down from the cross and restore and redeem. Eugene Peterson says, "The word 'forgiveness' has been watered down in our society. It frequently means no more than 'I'll let it go this time. I won't let it bother me, but don't do it again.' It's often the verbal equivalent of a shoulder shrug. But in reality, it's a word that brims with vitality. Condemning is simply a reactionary response to an offense. Condoning is simply laziness, avoiding the difficulties in dealing with what's wrong. But forgiving is an immensely creative act, shaping both the person who forgives and the one who is forgiven." (Eugene Peterson, *Message Study Bible*) The church, the Body of Christ, is characterized by forgiveness.

So, what if I told you the church is a movement to

bring the message of God's forgiveness to the world? The risen Lord Jesus said in Luke 24, "and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47) We are told the world is disinterested in the Gospel because they have no need to be forgiven. I'm not sure that's true. John Stott once wrote, "Forgiveness is an essential ingredient of the salvation offered in the gospel... However unpopular this message may be today, forgiveness remains man's chief need and an indispensable part of the good news." (John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, p. 79) *But people don't want forgiveness. They don't feel they need forgiveness. This is not a felt need in my neighbor. Well, they don't need to be forgiven by First Pres! The Presbyterians downtown want to forgive me!* That's not a great offer. But the prospect of peace with God, the prospect of knowing forgiveness by God—not living a life built up like a house of cards propped up by the false congratulations and false assurances of people around me, but living a life built on the solid rock of true forgiveness found in Jesus Christ. This remains the chief need of any human soul.

Christians, we are messengers of hope, of peace, of forgiveness. Don't give up. Penetrate those places of shame. People think we are saying, "I'll look away from your faults and give you chance to act right and join my successful community." UGH! That's an awful message and a terrible offer! We say to someone, "There is forgiveness in Jesus Christ," and Satan whispers in their ear, "Here's a self-righteous one. She wants you to behave so she can get you sucked into her church. Then you'll have to be a goody-goody all the time, and one slip and you are in deeper shame than ever." No! Guard the message. Guard the apostolic deposit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Correct and clarify and boldly declare the truth of the gospel. It is not the forgiveness of the church we offer, but the church offers the forgiveness of God—we are sinners, but in Christ we are forgiven. This is good news for all.

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STUDY GUIDE

"Forgiveness to the Ashamed"

2 Corinthians 2:1-11

Start It

- Shortly after I received my direct commission and became an officer in the Army Reserve, I took Abigail to a base overlooking Washington, DC. I was in uniform and eager to collect a few salutes, hopefully with Abigail noticing. We walked out on the grass of a hilltop overlooking the city lights. I was excited to see an MP walking toward us because I knew he would have to salute me. He did. I returned proudly. Then he said, "Sir, I need you to step off of this grass. This is the General's grass. We walk on it once a year!" I apologized and slinked off embarrassed and ashamed. My prideful hopes got me nowhere. This is our sinful condition. We need to apologize. We need forgiveness. But we are so blind to our wrongs and errors we don't even know where we truly stand.

Study It

- Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-11. Most (not all, but most) scholars over the years tie this passage to the man in 1 Corinthians 5-6 who was admonished by church leadership. Our passage is the resolution of that tumultuous episode.
- Why does Paul say the man should be forgiven (in verses 7-8)? Can you imagine what the man was feeling? Take some time to fill out the story with the facts you can find.
- It seems the Corinthians now felt an apology and acceptance must be made to Paul directly by the man if he is to be restored. What does Paul say is necessary?
- If the man is not restored and forgiven, he may succumb to "excessive sorrow" (v. 7). Paul ties this to the schemes of Satan in verse 11. How would the lack of forgiveness be a victory for Satan?

Pray It

Lord, please grant us the ability to forgive, as we have been forgiven by You. Amen.

Live It

Forgiveness may just be one of the most distinctive supernatural gifts God gives His church. Think of stories of remarkable forgiveness you know and the effect they produced.