

Sin, Satan, Christ and the Church

The Great Conman

Last year I developed a kind of strange interest in the world of internet scams. It's equal parts fascinating and depressing. For example, did you know that one of the most profitable schemes in the US over the last decade involves fake locksmiths?

It works like this: imagine you are locked out of your apartment, you've locked your keys inside and you're panicked or distressed. So you google a locksmith and click on the first search item that appears, it looks like it is only a few minutes away from your house. You give them a call, they tell you it will cost around \$100 and they'll send someone around. BUT the problem is this locksmith company is a complete fabrication, and the person they are sending to your house is completely untrained. And when they arrive they tell you that the problem is much worse than you thought, they will need to drill out your lock, and it's going to cost much more. He tells you that he will arrange a replacement lock to be delivered. But it never comes. The number you called is disconnected. In the end, you've paid \$400 bucks for a hole in your door.

It's a dastardly scheme. The Conman capitalises on a crisis, and through lies and deception robs someone, causing further pain. And there are so many like it.

Schemes that exploit recently bereaved widows. Schemes that take advantage of those who are not familiar with technology. Even at the moment we have seen schemes that have preyed upon people's fear of the coronavirus.

And this is the image that we should have in our mind as we read the final verse of our passage today. Paul says that he is writing *in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.* I don't know how much you think about Satan, but the New Testament consistently teaches that there is a real, evil, Spiritual agent at work in the world. Jesus calls Satan, the prince of this world; and here, Paul exposes Satan as the Great Con Man. The original Scam Artist.

Satan, too, capitalises on a crisis, and through lies and deception, robs us and causes us pain. Satan's pattern of deception is to exploit the *crisis of sin*, in order to rob us of the joy of true Christian fellowship, and overwhelm us with grief and pain.

Like last week, the presenting question at the beginning of this passage is "why did Paul fail to return to Corinth?" But the deeper issue that Paul is wrestling with in these verses, is how do we deal with the presence of sin in a Christian community? And how do we stay clear of Satan and his scams?

And when we understand that, we see that this is not just a passage about Paul and the church in 1st century Corinth. Rather it cuts right to the heart of an issue that faces every church, in every time, in every place. So let's read 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11

1:23 I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

2:1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? 3 I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

5 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9 Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10 Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

This is God's Word.

So let's consider each half of this passage in turn, as Paul first speaks of

1. An issue of Sin and the church
2. A relationship between the church and one particular sinner

And we'll come back to consider how we can stay clear of Satan's schemes.

Sin and the Church (1:23-2:4)

So first of all, at the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, the background seems to be some issue of sin within the church in Corinth at the time when Paul was planning visit them. Now we're not told exactly what that issue was, but the big picture is that this sin has left a trail of hurt in its wake.

Listen again to the language that Paul uses: he speaks of a painful visit in verse 1; of grief for himself and others in verse 2; of distress in verse 3; anguish of heart and many tears in verse 4.

The relationships in the Christian family are so intimately connected that there there is really no "private" area of our lives that will not effect our brothers and sisters. NO ONE in the church escapes the presence of sin unscathed.

Like the rest of Australia I've been churning out some sourdough during isolation...

This is an image that Paul, and Jesus himself, use to describe the presence of sin in the church. Just a little sin slowly but inevitably works its way through the whole community. And it doesn't lead to a delicious baked good, but to deep pain and grief.

Paul knows that Satan would love nothing more than for a church to *drift*, to skim the surface in superficial relationship and not address sin in our midst. He knows that true Christian joy is found in the mutual pursuit of holiness. And so it's never an option for him to *ignore the sin in the Corinthian church*.

But isn't it also true that it's possible to confront the reality of sin within the church in a way that causes even more pain and grief? Perhaps you have seen or experienced that yourself in some way, where one or several righteous leaders set themselves over and above everyone else and seem to delight in telling everyone how rotten and sinful they are. In his commentary on this passage the reformer John Calvin says this:

"There are many noisy scolders who display an amazing fervour in denouncing and raging against other people's faults and yet are untouched at heart so that they seem to take pleasure in exercising their throat and lungs."

Have you ever met anyone like that before? I think many people have a caricature of the apostle Paul like this: he is a theological argument on legs, just itching for a fight, always looking for someone to condemn. But this passage shows us Paul's true heart, and the heart of all Christian ministry.

He says in verse 24: *Not that we Lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*

Paul is not a domineering tyrant, nor is he so arrogant to assume the Corinthians' Christian life depends on *him*.

As we read just a few verses before in verse 21, Paul recognises that *it is God himself who makes both Paul and the Corinthians stand firm*, and so he *comes alongside them* and together they strive to take hold of the joy for which God has saved them in Christ.

And so we see *this is why* Paul did not visit Corinth as he had planned. He knew that if he were to visit the Corinthians it would have led to even more pain and grief. He says, *It was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth*, and then at the beginning of chapter 2 *I made up my mind that I would not make another **painful visit to you***.

As he made his travel plans, Paul's number one concern was the true and deep joy of the church. So he takes their sin very seriously, but also *sensitively*. And so instead of coming in person he poured himself out in a "gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, tear-stained, love-saturated letter".¹ Instead of coming in confrontation, he gave them an opportunity to understand, and to repent, so that both he and they together could share in joy rather than pain.

Calvin continues in his commentary: *It belongs to a godly pastor to weep within himself before he makes others weep, to suffer in his secret heart before he gives any open sight of his wrath, and to keep to himself more grief than he causes to others*.

This is the pattern of Paul's ministry. It's Christ-like ministry isn't it? To bear the greater burden of pain, for the joy of those you serve.

¹ Gary Millar, *2 Corinthians For You*

Can I ask, will you pray for me? And for Kath, and Simon and Steph, that this would be the pattern of our ministry too? That we would not Lord it over your faith, but that we work with you for your joy. That we would never delight in rebuke or correction, but grieve over sin for the sake of our mutual joy and fellowship.

And will you pray for our whole church? That, as we considered again last Sunday, our church would be marked by a deep concern for one another's holiness. Let's not fall into a trap of keeping up appearances, keeping our struggles and challenges to ourselves. And let's not shrug our shoulders at sin, nor wag our fingers at others in uncaring self-righteousness. Rather, let us strive together for the joy of honest and holy Christian fellowship.

The Church and a Sinner (2:5-11)

Now we come to the second half of the passage. Paul has spoken about projecting the church from the pain of sin. Now he gives instructions so that a sinner might be protected from the church.

Have a look again from verse 5: *If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. 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.*

Of course, we don't know exactly what this person has done or how the church has responded; but we see again the way that sin causes pain to everyone within the church. Paul, the church, and through some process of discipline, the sinner himself has suffered as a result of his own sin. BUT, that is not the end of the story.

For Paul says this punishment is *sufficient*. Evidently, this individual has turned away from his sin. So now Paul says that his repentance should lead to restoration.

Perhaps the church had withheld their fellowship from this man, but now they are to welcome him with open arms. Perhaps they they had reminded him of God's holiness and judgement, but now they are to affirm for him God's mercy and grace. This is chapter 1 of 2 Corinthians in action: the Corinthian church are to comfort this sinner with the comfort they themselves have received from God. They are to forgive him, and proclaim to him the forgiveness of God.

The first half of the passage shows us the need to take sin seriously. Now here Paul urges the Corinthian church that they also must take forgiveness seriously. For Just as Satan can use sin to overwhelm a church, he can use a harsh and unforgiving church to overwhelm a sinner.

In men's group recently we read this little book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *Life Together*: it's all about Christian community and he has a whole chapter on this issue of confession and forgiveness. He writes this:

Our brother or sister stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name... So in the christian community when the call to confession and forgiveness goes forth it is a call to the great grace of God in the church.

Bonhoeffer is saying that our relationships together in our church are, in some sense, the embodiment of our relationship with God. So

when we confess our sin to each other, we are also confessing to God. And when we forgive and comfort each other, we are acting out the forgiveness and comfort of God in Christ. But what happens if we withhold our forgiveness from each other? Then it will not be the great grace of God that lives in the church, but great guilt. Rather than working together towards greater certainty of God's truth and love, we abandon one another to uncertainty over whether we could ever be loved by God at all.

Just as Satan loves a drifting church, he also loves isolated Christians. He loves complacency and a lack of mercy. So, Paul says to the Corinthians, do not leave this man out on his own. He knows the depths of his sin, will you lead him now to the fountain of God's grace. No doubt Paul has an ardent concern for the truth, but here again we see that his great heart is for sinners to know the grace of God, in and through the joyful fellowship of the church.

Staying Clear Of Satan's Schemes

But how, in the end, are we to avoid the schemes of Satan? How on earth is it possible for any gathering of sinful men, women, and children, to experience this joy for which God has saved us?

- **LOVE**

Did you see throughout this passage the great protection we have against Satan and his schemes?

*For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know **the depth of my love for you.***

*I urge you, therefore, **to reaffirm your love for him.***

It is love. Satan knows nothing of love, and his schemes are powerless in the face of it.

You see, to ignore or cover up sin is not tolerance, it is a failure to love.

To be harsh and self-righteous in the judgement of sin is not a courageous stand for the truth, it is a failure to love.

To withhold forgiveness in response to the repentance of sin is not wise caution; it is a failure to love.

This passage points us to a deeper, and a better love.

And just as a side point, doesn't this passage show us that we can love one another from a distance? There will be great joy when we can gather together again in person. TRUST me, I cannot wait to get church out of our living room, and see your faces, not the lens of a camera. But as we wait for the restrictions to lift, remember there is no restriction on love.

Brothers and sisters, we must love one another. With the sort of robust love that confesses and addresses sin with godly grief and a deep desire for each other's joy. And with the comforting love that welcomes repentant sinners with restoration and forgiveness.

- IN THE SIGHT OF CHRIST

And where is this sort of love going to come from? It will come from Christ. For we must not forget that Satan is not the only one present and working in the life of the church. To me, the most significant five words in this passage are in verse 10:

*Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven **in the sight of Christ** for your sake.*

In the sight of Christ. This passage calls us to take both sin and forgiveness seriously. It calls us to a serious, deep, and joyful love. And we will only be able to live this out, if we take the presence of Christ seriously. For although Satan is a nasty conman, Jesus is a glorious King. And wonderfully, he is with us. He is with us now, and he always will be, until the end of the age.

See, my guess, is that whether you are a Christian or not, you probably tend in one of two directions. Either you tend to think that sin is not that big of a deal, and God will probably accept you for who you are – you're a good person right? Others of us will be all too aware of the gravity and grief of your sin. You might even be tempted to think that God could never accept a sinner like you.

But this passage opens our eyes to see that both of these views are dastardly schemes of Satan! Although Satan is a great conman, as we will sing in our final song Jesus is THE KING / OF GLORY AND OF GRACE. It is his presence that frees us from all delusion and despair. For how could we ever take sin lightly knowing the great cost that Jesus paid for sin on the cross? And how could we think anyone is beyond the reach of God's forgiving hand when Jesus laid down his own life for the salvation of the world?

Jesus didn't come to scold us. He didn't come to excuse us. He came to forgive and redeem us. He is not a wagging finger, or shrugging shoulders, but outstretched arms.

Today, God's word calls us to come to Christ. So whether for the hundredth, or maybe even for the first time, let us all draw near to Jesus our King, for only he will keep us safe from Satan and his schemes.

Bonhoeffer gives a fitting concluding word:

It is the grace of the gospel ... that it confronts us with the truth and says: you are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He wants you alone. 'My child, give me your heart' (Prov. 13.26). God has come to you to save the sinner.