

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11

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Smith

### Forgiveness from the Church or from Christ is One and the Same

**<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. <sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.**

**<sup>9</sup> Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.**

Every verse of the Bible can be divided into either law or gospel. These are the Bible's two great teachings: the law that afflicts the comfortable, and the gospel that comforts the afflicted. We don't emphasize sin and grace, confession and repentance—which flow naturally and inevitably from law and gospel—only because we are Lutherans, but because this is what the Bible says. This is God's message everywhere in the Scriptures.

And here is a direct application. Verse 5-8 present a case among the Corinthians: A man has been excommunicated. We don't know why. All we know is that he had sinned, and the congregation had judged him and his unrepentance. Excommunication is the last act of love by the church for a sinner who does not think that what he or she is doing is a sin. They stand obstinately opposed to the church and all of its teachings, and typically they will be unwilling to confront the congregation or its pastors to say, "You are wrong in what you teach," but instead they will either live their sinful lifestyle anyway, or else they will leave. If their sin is public, for the group to see and be offended by, then the church may have no choice but to place them outside the means of grace.

So the person is "punished," to use Paul's word, in this way: He is forbidden the Lord's Supper. The point of this, and the prayer of the church, is that he will be brought to fear his sinful state, and that he will seek forgiveness. A change in his lifestyle is made to show that he agrees that what he was doing before was truly a sin, and now he can be brought back into the communion fellowship of the church. This is the only way we can know that the punishment, the excommunication, was sufficient.

This is what was happening in Corinth. What Paul says makes us think that the sin was so repulsive to the members that they had trouble restoring him—not to the Lord's Table, or to

a seat in the pews, but in their hearts. They looked at him and still thought, “Sinner.” But Paul says, “He’s repented. He’s sorry for what he did. Let him back into your hearts and show him love, so that he knows he is loved by Christ. Otherwise in his despair his soul might be lost.” And isn’t a lost soul worth a change in my attitude about someone? After all, he has been forgiven -- and forgiveness from the church and forgiveness from Christ are **one and the same**. This is what Jesus means when he says in John chapter 20: **“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven.”**

This is summarized by Luther in the Catechism in the two short parts of the Ministry of the Keys. Luther teaches our children and us:

“A Christian congregation with its called servant of Christ uses the keys in accordance with Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend, and by excluding from the congregation those who are plainly impenitent that they may repent. I believe that when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, it’s the task of Christians to first call a sin a sin. The pastor is not called to be policeman for everybody to call when they see someone else sinning. Jesus outlines our procedure in Matthew 18, and which I’m going to recite for you with a little rhyme:

***First you go, then two go. If that leaves you in the lurch, take it to the church.***

So when you tell someone that they’ve sinned, and they repent, you’ve won them over. But if they refuse to repent, take someone along and try again. Then, after all of that, if they still refuse to repent, then bring the case to the church. But to begin with, it isn’t the pastor’s job, or the council’s task, but your role. **“First, you go.”**

Now, in the second part of the passage, Paul comments on forgiveness in more general terms. Notice the progression of verse 10: If you forgive, then I forgive, and if I forgive, then Christ forgives. This isn’t because we tell the Lord what to do, but he has told us to do this. We forgive one another and he promises that we should regard this as if he himself has forgiven, and that way they will know that they are forgiven by Jesus. Forgiveness from the church, therefore, and forgiveness from Christ, are one and the same.

If we didn’t have this assurance from Christ and from the Holy Spirit speaking the will of God through Paul, then the Devil could work all kinds of nasty mischief among us. Paul says that

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<sup>1</sup> The Use of the Keys, Secondly

when we forgive, we all forgive, **“so that Satan might not outwit us.”** By “outwit,” Paul means that the Devil wants to get the better of us, to cheat us.

In most places in the world, unbelief, doubt, and false teaching are everywhere. People act as if they are happy, or people make war on one another-- the devil **doesn't** care. He **doesn't** mind what any of us does, but he wants to snatch away souls from God's kingdom. So in most of the world, he has an easy job.

And we might think, why does he work so hard among Christians? Well, if he **doesn't** work hard to thwart the success of the gospel in our hearts, the gospel of Jesus Christ will spread everywhere. And so he needs to keep at it, to keep chipping at this stone, and sowing weeds in that field, and obscuring our view of the cross, and to get people to focus on the wrong things at the wrong times.

Do you ever get fed up with somebody because of what they do? Do you get annoyed, and does your annoyance or irritation get the better of you, and does it show up with words, or body language, or just avoiding that person?

Will you consider, from time to time, whether that irritation is the devil poking you, pushing your buttons, trying to get the better of you, cheating you of a productive, blessed, Christian friendship or association or family? And would the simple act of telling someone, “This thing you do bothers me,” would that be too much to ask of you?

If it's a sin, then it must be pointed out. But if it isn't a sin, then is it something that the two of you can talk about? Is there, perchance, something about you that bothers other people, but nobody has been brave enough to say anything to you about it?

What if that thing is a sin? A sin that you've been blind to? Shouldn't we pray, that if we have a sinful habit, someone, someone, oh, someone will please tell me, so that I recognize it, consider the wrath of God over that sin in my life, which has been smoldering for who knows how long, and which now at last, knowing it, being shown this unholy thing in my speech, in my actions or reactions, in my habits? I can take it to the cross of Christ and lay it down there.

You, O my Lord Jesus, died to pay for this sin that I didn't even notice. But now a friend has showed me, so that the devil won't get the better of us. Lord God Holy Father, forgive me for Jesus' sake, and not because I'm good, because I'm not, but because he is good, perfect, holy, and sinless.

You are forgiven by the sinless Son of God. Whoever speaks that forgiveness to you – you are forgiven. **Because forgiveness spoken from the Church or from Christ are one and the same. Amen.**