

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Reward of Costly Service**

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 5-7)

#### **Risky (and loving) Relating**

(2 Corinthians 7:2-12)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: Risks worth taking...**

I'm going to take a risk and suggest that the plot line of every story you have ever loved contains an element of risk.

The risk doesn't have to involve the loss of life and limb in an action-packed adventure story or super-hero thriller. The story could track relational risk or emotional risk.

But I'm willing to bet that the main characters in your favorite stories took risks because it is the risk-taking that makes the story compelling.

I might even bet that the seasons of your life you remember most fondly are those seasons when you took a chance and refused to play it safe.

Of course, safe and secure is nice and it has its place. But risk-taking adds spice to life.

Personally, I'm not a big fan of taking risks, just for the thrill of it, although I have friends who do.

One of my friends has sky dived. Knowing him is as close as I'll ever come to skydiving. Things like skydiving, base-jumping, wingsuit flying, and ice-climbing have never been my cups of tea.

I avoid taking a risk that doesn't offer an upside gain. But I am willing to take a risk if there is a potential pay-off at the end that will make the risk worth taking - and I'll bet you are, too.

Today we are going to explore the extreme sport of risky - and extremely loving - relating. The kind of risk we'll see today comes with the potential for tremendous payoffs. Serving as our Exhibit A Risk-Taker is the Apostle Paul.

We are continuing our study in Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, and we'll see that 2 Corinthians was actually the third letter he wrote to them.

Paul had brought the Good News of Jesus to Corinth and then helped establish the church there on his second missionary journey. He grounded the church in God's truth during the year and a half that followed while he lived in Corinth.

After he left, he kept in touch with the church through correspondence, writing letters and sending emails, texts, and tweets.

We have two of his letters in our New Testaments. But there was a third letter - one written between the first two; First and a Half Corinthians - to which we no longer have access.

We learn about that letter in this letter, and it was a severe letter, filled with scathing rebuke. And, yes, we'll get to that part later.

But the fact that Paul sent a severe letter didn't mean that he didn't love them.

He had a very special place in his heart for the Corinthians and that special love is obvious right off the bat this morning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Just like he did earlier (2 Corinthians 6:13), here Paul begged for the Corinthians to make room for him in their hearts.

## **The Need to Affirm Love (vv. 2-4)**

### **When We Yearn for Relational Closeness (v. 2a)**

***[2a] Make room for us in your hearts<sup>2</sup>***

*An ache for intimacy*

During one of my camping trips to the Rockies, the weather deteriorated one evening. Storms can get serious in the mountains, and we found ourselves in quite a blow.

One of the guys on the trip had brought a tarp set-up as a shelter that wasn't quite sufficient for this storm.

So, between lightning strikes he dodged hail, ran to our tent and asked - very politely - if we could make room in our tent for him for the night.

Of course, my son, Zach and I unzipped the tent and let him in. When someone is desperate for shelter from a storm, you let him in. We made room for him.

The Apostle Paul was desperate for relational shelter. He wanted his friends, the Corinthians, to unzip their hearts and let him in.

It seems that their hearts had been closed off to Paul. He boldly, and very vulnerably, expressed his longing that they would open up.

*An action plan for connection*

It takes courage to make that request. There's risk in asking for close relationship. And I love the way Paul makes his request.

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<sup>2</sup> It was not unusual for Paul to express his longings for relationship with the people to whom he wrote. We find pleadings like this one in Romans (1:1-5), Galatians (throughout, his heart for the Galatians is evident), Ephesians (chapters 1 and 6), Philippians (chapter 1), and the Thessalonian epistles.

He didn't make a *demand* that they open up. He didn't seek to *manipulate*. He simply and honestly expressed his hunger for connection.

If you have ever done something like this, you know that it takes courage, because asking risks rejection. It's the ultimate "put yourself out there" move.

But Paul was a courageous guy. My hat's off to him for seeking relationship without resorting to arm-twisting.

Standing outside in the storm, waiting for the tent flap to open, he reminded them of how committed he really was to them.

### **When We Have Given Ourselves to Bless Someone (vv. 2b-3)**

***[2b] we have wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.<sup>3</sup> [3] I do not speak to condemn you; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.***

Paul had a perfectly clear conscience about how he had behaved toward the Corinthians when he had lived with them.

And he still loved them and was behind them all the way - and was proud of them.

### **When We Rejoice Over a Friend's Growth in Jesus (v. 4)**

***[4] My confidence in you is great; my boasting in your behalf is great. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.***

So, the Corinthians were doing well. And that was remarkable because the church at Corinth was not well-known for doing well.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some commentators believe that Paul was contrasting his own apostleship with the work of the false apostles who were opposing him in Corinth.

<sup>4</sup> Something had happened that freed Paul up to write to them in such superlative terms, and we'll see in a couple of minutes what that "something" was.

But...until recently Paul had not been encouraged by how the Corinthians were doing.

### **The Need for Risky, Loving Pursuit (vv. 5-12)**

#### **An Honest Testimony of Internal Pain (vv. 5-7)**

*A fearful apostle (v. 5)*

***[5] For even when we came into Macedonia<sup>5</sup> our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts on the outside, fears inside.***

When Paul left Achaia, where Corinth was, he entered another province, Macedonia. Once there, in addition to the exhaustion and external afflictions he suffered - which I expect - Paul had been afraid. I didn't expect that.

Paul faced beatings, imprisonments, stonings, shipwrecks - and he rarely mentioned fear. Without facing the things Paul faced, I am quite familiar with fear. But I am not used to thinking of Paul as fearful.

So, whatever was going on, it must have been something really scary to prompt Paul to fear.

Then, Paul tells us that he had been fearful + something else.

*A sad, depressed apostle (v. 6a)*

***[6] But God, who comforts the discouraged...***

The word my version translates ***discouraged*** can also be rendered *downcast* or *humiliated*. It essentially means to feel bad. Paul had been feeling blue.

Again, many of us here today can relate. We know sadness.

We're all aware of the dramatic spike in depression in our society as a result of the pandemic and lots of other factors. And some of you here may have experienced full-blown depression.

That is completely understandable. While God is always good, life can be very, very hard. And when life sends us for a loop we may spiral into deep sadness.

One of God's special ministries is to tenderly touch those who have been beaten down by life. He comforts the deeply discouraged.

And God, being God, can be extremely creative in how He comforts those who are down. Here's how He comforted Paul's fearful and sad heart.

#### **A Refreshing Report (vv. 6b-7)**

***[6] But God, who comforts the discouraged, comforted us by the arrival of Titus [7] and not only by his arrival, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted among you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.***

Paul had sent Titus to check out how the Corinthians were doing. Were they spiritually healthy? Were they walking with Jesus?

Titus reported back to Paul that the church at Corinth was doing great! Things were not as bad as they had been. So, we're wondering, "What happened?"

- They had been against Paul and are now anxious to see him?
- They had been lukewarm about God and are now longing for Him?
- They had been stuck in sin and are now mourning over sin?

What happened? Well, they repented. (vv. 9, 10) And their repentance changed everything.

#### **The Effect of Severe Interaction (vv. 8-11)**

<sup>5</sup> Paul takes up the story of his anxious waiting for Titus where he left off at 2:13.

## Repentance

### The meaning of “repent”

The word “repentance” is used throughout the Old and New Testaments - and it is a very rich and important biblical word.

The Greek word that we translate *repentance* combines two words, “mind” and “change.” But that doesn’t mean that the word is best understood as meaning, “*change your mind.*”

While a change of mind can be associated with repentance, the consistent meaning of “repent” in both the Old and New Testaments is simply this: turn from sin.

Now, just a quick comment here so as to not be confusing.

The way anyone receives the gift of eternal life from God is to believe in Jesus.

We read in John’s Gospel, ***[John 3:16] For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.***

And Paul told the Philippian jailer ***[Acts 16:31] “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”***

Jesus talked a lot about turning from sin, but He never linked it to receiving eternal life. Paul spoke and wrote about turning from sin, but he didn’t make turning from sin a condition for receiving eternal life. Turning from sin IS NOT a condition for receiving eternal life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From author Bob Wilkin: The simplest and easiest to understand view (and the one that best fits the hundred-plus faith-alone verses in the Bible) is that faith in Christ is the sole condition of eternal salvation; repentance is turning from sins (e.g., Matt 12:41, referring to Jonah 3:10); and repentance is not a condition for the new birth. There isn’t a single verse in the Bible that teaches that one must repent to have everlasting life or to be justified [before God].

But, for the believer in Jesus who has received the gift of eternal life, to turn from sin is to walk the path of life.

Paul was writing to Corinthians who believed in Jesus and therefore had received the gift of eternal life from God.

They were children of God...AND they had serious sin issues.

They have now repented of these sins. That is, they turned from these sins.

### From what did they repent?

Here, Paul doesn’t tell us from what sins they repented.

But, if First Corinthians gives us any insight, they might have repented of the sins of suing each other, getting drunk at communion, allowing sinful behavior to continue in the church, abusing spiritual gifts, or dividing the church into factions.

We don’t know. Paul’s not specific here.

All we know is that they had walked away from sinful behavior, and that there had been a true and obvious change.

### Fruits from their repentance?

***[11] For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.***

Repentance is a wonderful thing in the life of God’s son or daughter. It is sensitivity to the conviction of God’s Spirit. It is a return to a love of God above all else.

But we’re about to see that the Corinthians’ repentance did not occur in a vacuum.

What prompted their repentance was sorrow. Deep, raw, emotional pain moved them to repent.

And that makes sense. We can see how that works. But let's be careful here. Sorrow can lead in one of two directions.

*The Corinthians' repentance followed sorrow (v. 10)*

### Worldly sorrow

**[10]... the sorrow of the world produces death.**

What Paul calls here the "**sorrow of the world**" is a spiritually unproductive sorrow. This kind of sorrow over sin is not repentance.

The "**sorrow of the world**" may be me, wishing that I hadn't done something. It may be regretting the consequences of my bad action. It may be all about self-pity.

The "**sorrow of the world**" looks backward. It may be bitter sorrow, but the "**sorrow of the world**" doesn't lead to repentance.<sup>7</sup> Paul says that this backwards-looking focus leads to death.

By contrast, there is another direction that sorrow can go that leads to a rich experience of God and to a changed and abundant life.

### Godly sorrow

**[10] For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation...**

**"The sorrow that leads to repentance"** is the pain of me suddenly becoming aware that there is something about ME that is broken. I am not right.

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<sup>7</sup> See Hebrews 12 where the story of Esau (from Genesis 27) is retold. Esau was extremely sorrowful over the loss of his birthright, but that sorrow didn't turn his heart to God. Or we might use the example of Judas Iscariot whose sorrow over his betrayal of Jesus turned him not to God, but self-destruction.

When this painful sorrow over sin strikes any of us, we are to put that pain to good use. We are to turn to God and walk away from the sin that caused the sorrow. That is, we are to repent.<sup>8</sup>

When we turn to God and away from our sin, there is not a constant looking back over our shoulders, or a self-flagellation for past misdeeds. No regrets.

We admit them and we own them. But they don't own us.

The past has passed. Repentance rarely allows us to escape the consequences of our sin; it always frees us to look forward with hope.

Repentance is not just feeling bad. Repentance is the dual act of turning to God and turning from sin after sorrow has caused us to feel bad for what we have done.

As an example, consider King David. He suffered extreme sorrow because of sins he committed. He spent a whole year in sorrow as a result of his sexual assault of Bathsheba (yes, that is how I read the story) and his murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah.

Yet that year was not a year of repentance. It was a year of wasting away, of unproductive bad feelings.

It was when he turned to God and admitted, **[2 Samuel 12:13] "I have sinned against the Lord"** that brought about the repentance that led to his restoration - what Paul calls here "**salvation.**"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis from The Problem of Pain: The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems well. Error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows something is wrong when he is being hurt. Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

<sup>9</sup> Paul wrote, **[7:10] For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces repentance...leading to salvation.** We must note the context to see what type of "**salvation**" (deliverance) is in view. Paul was speaking of a believers' *salvation* from temporal judgment, not of the deliverance of unbelievers from eternal death.

Godly sorrow is an energizing sorrow. And that is the sorrow that prompted the repentance of the Corinthians.

So, the repentance didn't occur in a vacuum. It was prompted by sorrow. But the sorrow didn't appear out of thin air, either. It was prompted by a letter.

*The Corinthians' sorrow followed a "severe" letter (vv. 8-9)*

***[8b]...I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while - [9] I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.***

#### The letter's content

As I mentioned earlier, Paul wrote a letter between the writing of what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Unfortunately, even by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the church had lost this in-between letter. But Paul has already mentioned it in this letter. (2:3-4) He wrote it with ***"anguish of heart and with many tears."***

It was a letter that Paul knew was going to bring pain. It was going to be a severe letter. He had decided to be brutally honest with the Corinthians about their sinful behavior.

It was the kind of letter about which, once sent, a sender will often experience sender's regret.

#### Sender's regret

***[8a] For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it***

Have you ever experienced "sender's regret" after you've sent a letter or an email or even after a hard conversation?

I have sometimes written letters that I know the recipient may find hard to digest. Those letters often take hours to write and to re-write, and they may sit in my Draft folder for days before hitting *send*.<sup>10</sup>

And then after sending it, I may feel like Paul did, *"What did I just do!?"*

#### The tipping point

We second-guess hard letters - and hard conversations - because we don't know how the person we are speaking with or writing to is going to receive the message.

So, we wonder...given the mental and emotional anguish Paul went through to write this letter, why did he send it?

He and the church already had a tenuous, rocky relationship. There had been plenty of stress. Why not just let sleeping dogs lie? Why stir up trouble? Leave the letter on the desk.

Well, there finally came a tipping point that caused Paul to put a stamp on it, seal the envelope, and mail it. The tipping point was love.

He saw these people in trouble because of their sin. They were already suffering spiritual stagnation and taking backwards steps away from Jesus.

Writing a "severe" letter to them might not help their relationship. Finally, though, his love for their welfare trumped his longing for a safe, pleasant relationship.

He took the risk of speaking hard truth. He sent the letter. Genuine love can't remain silent when it sees those it loves in danger.

If you see a neighbor's house on fire, do you kindly wait until morning to ring his doorbell to tell him about it, knowing that if you

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<sup>10</sup> By the way, when it comes to "hard" communication, I've learned - the hard way - the more personal the better. Face to face if at all possible. Then a phone call, only then via letter or email.

ring it at 2 a.m., while the first is raging, your neighbor will have to get out of bed and come to the door? No! When his house is on fire, it is loving to roust him out of bed.

Does a surgeon look at a patient with a cancerous tumor and refuse to cut it out because the surgery will hurt? No! We can't imagine a doctor who would not inflict the pain of removing a tumor or setting a broken bone because it didn't seem to be the "nice" thing to do.

Paul was concerned for his relationship with the Corinthians. He was even concerned for their feelings.

But he didn't let his concern for these things keep him from speaking the truth in love. To have remained silent would have hurt their spiritual well-being.

He loved them enough to be willing to cause them pain. (Let that thought sink in.)

Of course, the sorts of hard communications we have in mind here need to be handled with prayer and care, should be thoroughly thought through, need to be given in the right spirit.

But...we don't show love to someone by withholding truth. *"I love him too much to hurt him."* is the ultimate in self-deception.

Paul told them what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear and not even what he particularly wanted to say to them.

Who doesn't enjoy pleasant more than tense conversations? Paul did the hard thing, and it was the right thing.  
*All's well that trends well...*

That severe letter produced sorrow - just like he knew it would. Then the sorrow morphed into repentance, just like he prayed it would.

When his friends in Corinth received the letter, they felt all of the hurt any of us feel when we are on the receiving end of rebuke. But, after that initial pain settled over them, they turned to God.

And God took their repentance and used it to change their lives and to change their church.

***[11] For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.***

The church at Corinth was fundamentally transformed by the receptive attention they gave to a painful communication that was courageously given.

And then our passage ends with what might look like a head-scratcher.

### **The Goal of Severe Interaction (v. 12)**

***[12a] So although I wrote to you it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended...***

So, fundamentally, Paul hadn't written to either restore a guilty person nor to vindicate a victim.

The real reason Paul wrote to them was not so much to straighten out a problem in the church. It was to remind his friends in Corinth of what was true about them.

***[12b]...but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.***

Expanded, Paul says, *"The reason you let this matter (whatever the matter was) arise in the first place was that you forgot who you are. You forgot that you are sons and daughters of God, bonded to Almighty God, and that the Holy Spirit indwells you."*

Paul's aim wasn't humiliation, as in, *"Shame on you! You should know better than to act like that!"*

No, it was completely different. *“You have been redeemed. Given who you are, it is only reasonable that you would pursue holiness and love.”*<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

So, this morning, let me take a moment to remind you of who you are.

You who have believed in Jesus are forgiven sinners. You are God’s daughters, God’s sons. You are heaven-bound, light and salt.

What a great mindset to keep as we will sometimes have to have hard conversations with each other. Reminding each other of who and what we are in Jesus is a life-giving exercise.

And, since none of your brothers or sisters in Jesus here have “arrived” at perfect spiritual maturity (duh), there may come times when we, like Paul, will become aware that one of our friends here has gone off the rails when it comes to following Jesus.

What will you do when you see a fellow Christ-follower moving in dangerous directions? Maybe he or she is making poor decisions, speaking unwisely, behaving self-destructively.

Well, first, pray. Trust God.

And then, when the time is right, take the risk of courageously / honestly / lovingly say what needs to be said.

Taking that risk may very well be the most loving gift you can give to your friend.

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<sup>11</sup> This reasoning is used throughout the Bible, and especially in the writings of Paul. See Colossians 3:1; 3:12-13, among many others.