

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 – A Gospel-Shaped Church

Christians love to use buzzwords. And I'm sure you know what I mean. They're those words that seem totally normal to us. But totally weird to just about anybody outside the church.

Think about this. As Christians, we love to "share our testimony" and we love to "witness" to our non-Christian friends. But for most people, being a witness, or sharing a testimony, is something that happens in a courtroom.

They're strange words. But as Christians, we love to use our buzzwords.

And one Christian buzzword that's been very popular is the phrase "gospel-shaped". Let me show you what I mean.

We want to be "gospel-shaped women", and "gospel-shaped" men, living in "gospel-shaped" marriages. We want to live "gospel-shaped" lives, and do "gospel-shaped" work". And we want to have "gospel-shaped" churches, with "gospel-shaped" leaders, and "gospel-shaped" worship.

You may have even done those courses, or read those books. We want everything about us, as Christians, to be "gospel-shaped". And of course, we do. As Christians, we want the message of the gospel to shape all of who we are. And it's been clear to me, over my last year here at Bundy, that this is what many of you want for yourselves.

But it does raise the question: What does it actually mean for something to be "gospel-shaped"?

That is a question, I think, that lies at the heart of the Letter of 2 Corinthians.

As we've heard over the past few weeks, Paul writes this letter in the face of opposition. There's a group in the Corinthian church called the "super-apostles" somewhat ironically (11:5), or the "false-apostles" perhaps more accurately (11:13). And these people have come to the Corinthian church with a bold and impressive vision of the Christian life, of Christian ministry, and of the Christian church.

And in 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his own view of these things as an Apostle of Christ. And he does that by showing that his way of doing things, unlike theirs, is shaped by the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul said that the Christian life is to be gospel-shaped. It follows that pattern of death and life. Of "affliction" and "comfort". Like the life of Jesus himself.

And, last week, we saw that Paul's ministry, as a Christian leader, was shaped by the gospel too. He conducts himself "not by human wisdom but by God's grace" (1:12). His ministry wasn't "Yes" and then "No", but always "Yes". Just like God's promises in the gospel (1:17-18).

The Christian life, and Christian ministry, are to be gospel-shaped.

And, in our passage this morning, in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul turns his attention to the Corinthian church. In these verses, he gives the church instructions - difficult instructions - so that their life together as a church will take on this same gospel shape. And that's what we're going to be thinking about together this morning. In our passage we'll see the "what?" and the "why?" of being a church shaped by the gospel.

1. A Gospel-Shaped Church...Takes Sin Seriously (vv. 5-6)

Well, let's start with the "what?" of a gospel-shaped church. In verses 5 and 6 of our passage, Paul tells us that the first step in being a church shaped by the gospel is taking sin seriously. And we see that as Paul addresses a situation that's happening in the Corinthian church.

You might remember that at the end of our passage last week, Paul mentioned a letter - a "painful" or a "sorrowful" letter - that he'd written to this church out of his "abundant love" for them (2:4). As Andy said, that's not a letter that we have in our New Testament. And so, we can't know for sure what it said. But it seems like Paul's referring to the situation that lay behind this letter in our passage today.

And he starts, in verse 5, with what sounds like a broad and hypothetical statement. He says:
"If anyone has caused pain..."

Now, that seems broad and hypothetical. But as we read on, it becomes clear that it's really not. Paul's speaking, in verse 5, about a particular person in the church who's been causing pain to others.

Who is this person? And what have they done? Well, we can't know for sure. But we get some clues in these verses.

First, it seems like whatever this person's done has been targeted towards Paul. Now, Paul's careful to correct that. He says in verse 5 that this person *"has caused pain not so much to me but to some degree - not to exaggerate - to all of you"*. What this person's done hasn't just caused pain to Paul. It's caused everybody pain. But the fact that Paul has to point this out makes it seem like he was the target of this person's actions.

There's a second clue about this person in verse 6. There, Paul says that whatever this person's done has resulted in them being punished. And so, what they've done must have been serious. They've not taken too many biscuits at morning tea. And they've not accidentally parked in the Lollipops parking spots. Their actions were serious. And they resulted in punishment. That might've meant exclusion from the Lord's Supper. Or more likely, it probably meant exclusion from the church altogether. But whatever this person had done was serious.

And we get a third and final clue about this situation in the way that Paul talks about this person. Instead of naming them and shaming them, Paul speaks about this person in a very indirect way. I wonder if you noticed that. He refers to them as "anyone", or "that person", or even just "him". And Paul does that, actually, whenever he addresses his opponents in 2 Corinthians. It's

an example of his gentleness. But because Paul refers to this person in this way it could mean that they're connected with Paul's opponents who we'll meet later in 2 Corinthians.

So, who's this person? And what have they done? Well, again, we can't know for sure.

Some people have thought that this is the same person that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 5. The one excluded from the church because they were sleeping with their father's wife. But that's not a sin against Paul. And so, I'm not sure that fits the evidence we've just seen. I think that our best guess is that this person is someone who is connected with the "super-apostles" or "false-apostles". And it's likely that this person has publicly opposed Paul and his ministry, probably whilst he's been away from the city of Corinth.

Now, why does all of that matter? Well, it matters because, regardless of who this person is, and regardless of what this person's done, the Corinthian church has taken their sin seriously. And in doing that, they show us what it means to be a gospel-shaped church. Whatever this person's done, they've ignored God. They've ignored his word. They've decided that they know what's best. And in doing so, they've caused pain to the entire church. And instead of just ignoring that sin, or sweeping that sin under the rug - which would have been easy to do - the Corinthian church has taken action. They've confronted this person. And they've sought to punish this person in order to help them to realize what they'd done, to repent, and to change.

Now, my guess is that some of us might read these verses and think that this is all a bit extreme. You know, aren't we all sinners? Aren't we saved by grace and not by what we do? Why would we need to punish someone by excluding them from church? How is that gospel-shaped?

But taking sin seriously is where the gospel starts. The gospel doesn't ignore sin. It doesn't say that our sin doesn't matter. The message of the gospel actually confronts us in our sin. It shows us that our sin is so serious that it cost the life of God's own Son to forgive.

And so, if we want to be a church that's shaped by that gospel, then we need to follow the Corinthians lead. We can't overlook sin. We can't ignore sin. But in love, and for the person's good, we need to call it out and to address it.

Now, in the life of a church like Bundy, that can happen in a lot of different ways.

It will happen at the level of Session. And so, if someone is sinning and they refuse to repent, like our passage here, our elders might ask them not to take the Lord's Supper. And if that person continues, our elders might ask them not to come to church. And they'll do that in love. But they'll take sin seriously. And when they do that, they help us, as a church, to take sin seriously. They help us to be a church shaped by the gospel.

But in Matthew 18, Jesus tells us that this is something that all of us should be doing. It's not just the elders who are to be serious about sin, but each and every one of us. Jesus says that *"if*

your brother [or sister] sins against you, [then you're to] go tell him his fault". Taking sin seriously is something that Jesus calls all of us to do.

And so, if you're chatting with someone after church, and they start gossiping, why not talk about it? You could ask them: "Do you think that we should be talking like this?" "What would the other person think?" "Do you think this is loving?"

Or if you're chatting with someone after church, and they start speaking in anger about a Growth Group leader, or another church leader, why not talk about it? If someone has wronged you, then Jesus says you're to talk to that person directly. And if they haven't wronged you, and you're angry with them, then that's sin.

Now, those conversations might feel weird. It might feel like bad manners. Especially in a world where we would rather avoid people, or ghost people, or block people, rather than confront them. I know that those conversations feel weird. But they shouldn't be.

If we want to be a church that's shaped by the gospel, then we need to start where the gospel starts. We need to be serious about sin. And in love and gentleness, we need to be willing to address it.

2. A Gospel-Shaped Church...Takes Forgiveness Seriously (vv. 7-8)

Well, being a gospel-shaped church begins with taking sin seriously. But it doesn't end there. In verses 7 and 8, Paul shows us the second step in being a gospel-shaped church.

You see, whilst this person had caused pain to the church, and had been punished by the church, it appears that they'd repented. And that's always the goal of this kind of punishment. It's never to punish someone in a cruel way. It's to help them see their sin, to repent of their sin, and to change. And it seems like this person has.

And so now Paul gives the Corinthian church instructions about what to do with this person. And he says that, just as they were serious about sin, now they're to be serious about forgiveness.

In verse 6, Paul says the punishment given is "*sufficient*". It's worked. And in verse 7, he says that the church now needs "*[to] forgive and [to] comfort*" this person. They're to welcome them back. And, in verse 8, Paul says that the church is to deliberately and publicly "*reaffirm their love*" for this repentant person.

Now, if 2 Corinthians were a Disney movie, this would be the happy ending. The person's forgiven. They're welcomed back to church. And the credits start to roll. Happy days! But if you've had to forgive someone for something serious like this, then you'll know just how hard this can be.

Tim Keller, in his book *Forgive*, defines forgiveness like this. And I think it's really helpful. He says that forgiveness is:

Firstly, a commitment not to bring up the sin with the person who's done wrong. If you've forgiven them, then you can't punish them by bringing it up again and again.

Secondly, he says it's a commitment not to bring up the sin with other people. Not to hurt someone's reputation, or their relationship with others, by sharing what has already been forgiven.

And thirdly, he says it's a commitment not to bring up the sin with yourself. If you've forgiven someone, then you can't replay what happened over and over in order to stay angry or bitter towards them.

And if that's what forgiveness is, then it's massively costly. And it's incredibly hard. But again, Paul is showing us that if we're to be a church shaped by the gospel, then we need to be serious about forgiveness. And of course, we should be. If God forgives us when we repent, no matter who we are, and no matter what we've done, how can we not forgive others? If we want to be people shaped by the gospel, we need to be serious about forgiveness.

And so, I want to ask you this morning: How are you going with this? Are you forgiving others when they repent? Or are you not?

Are there people at church you avoid? Maybe, because of something that they've done in the past?

Are there people in the church that you'll sit on the other side of the room from?

How are you going with forgiveness?

And I ask that, because things like that happen in churches all the time. Especially big churches like Bundy.

Something happens. And then instead of putting forgiveness into practice, you move seats, or you move Growth Groups, or you move services. And you continue to hold on to the bitterness and anger.

So, are there things that you keep bringing up with others? Or keep bringing up with yourself? Or even keep bringing up with the person who wronged you?

Are there things that you need to forgive?

It's not easy. So, don't hear me say that it is. But if God's forgiven us, and if we want to be a church shaped by that forgiveness, then we need to be serious about forgiving others.

3. Why Be A Gospel-Shaped Church? (vv. 7-11)

A church shaped by the gospel will take sin seriously. And it will take forgiveness seriously. That's the "what?" of being a gospel-shaped church. But neither of those things are easy. And so, as we finish this morning, we're going to quickly look at three motivations that Paul gives us. Three "why's?" that will show us why being a gospel-shaped church is so important.

a. It's Good for us as Individuals (v. 7)

The first is in verse 7. Paul says that being a church shaped by the gospel is good for us as individuals. The Corinthian church was serious about sin. They punished the person for it. And because of that, the person realized that what they were doing was wrong. And the Corinthian church was serious about forgiveness. And so, this person avoided being "*overwhelmed by excessive grief*". When this person repented, they were forgiven and not crushed.

And because the church has done this, because it's taken on this gospel shape, it actually allowed that person - whoever they were - to grow, and to change, and to become more like Jesus. And that would not have happened if sin was ignored, or if forgiveness was withheld.

And, brothers and sisters, if our church takes this shape - being serious about sin and serious about forgiveness - then that will be true of us as well. Church will be a place where I grow and you grow, because we're confronted with our sin, and we're offered grace and forgiveness. And if that happens, then you and I will change to become more like Jesus.

Being a church shaped by the gospel is good for us as individuals.

b. It's an expression of our obedience to God (v. 9)

The second reason that being a gospel-shaped church is good is there in verse 9. There, Paul says that he's given these commands "*to test [their] character and to see if [they] are obedient in everything*". Being a church shaped by the gospel is an expression of our love and obedience to God.

Remember, there's a group in Corinth that doesn't want the church to be shaped this way. They want an impressive church full of impressive people. They want people to be able to do whatever they'd like. They don't want people to pull them up. And they don't want to forgive. But Paul writes, as an Apostle of God, to tell us that this is how church should be. And he expects the church in Corinth, and to the church today, to obey him in obedience to God.

And this is what God wants the church to be. Jesus himself says:

"Be on your guard. If your brother [or sister] sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Lk. 17:3)

This is how God wants the church to be. And so if you pull someone up for something they've done wrong, you're just doing what God wants you to do. It's an expression of your love and obedience to him. Or if you forgive someone who's hurt you, even if it was hard, you're just

doing what God wants you to do. Again, it's an opportunity for you to express your love and your obedience to him.

Being a church shaped by the gospel is good, because it's what God wants for us.

c. It's Good for the Health of the Church (vv. 10-11)

And thirdly, being a gospel-shaped church is good for the health of the church as a whole. Look at what Paul writes in verse 10. He says *"for what I have forgiven - if I have forgiven anything - it is for your benefit in the presence of Christ"*. Paul forgives this person who's wronged him for the benefit of everyone. Part of our own forgiveness is working for the good of the church as a whole.

And that's because we have an enemy. An enemy who, Paul says, who is ready to take advantage of any ignored sin. And an enemy who's ready to take advantage of our lack of forgiveness.

Now, this is something that most of us don't really think about. And that's because in our modern, sophisticated, Western world we often are ignorant of Satan and his schemes.

We think of the world in terms of cause and effect. Of actions and results. But the Bible is clear that the church has a spiritual enemy. In fact, the Apostle Peter describes Satan as an enemy who is *"prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour"* (1 Pet. 5:8).

And what Paul reminds us here is that divisions, fractures, and a lack of forgiveness can be opportunities for Satan to attack the health of the church. And as we think about sin and forgiveness in the church, we need to remember that.

And we do. Because I know of churches, real churches, that have split over things like the colour of the carpet, or the colour of the paint on the walls. And it sounds silly, doesn't it? It sounds like something that could never happen in your church. But all it takes is for a few harsh words to be spoken. With no repentance offered. And no forgiveness given. And a church can fall apart. And when that happens, the enemy wins.

Being a church shaped by the gospel is good, because in taking sin seriously, and in taking forgiveness seriously, we protect the health of the church as a whole.

Well, brothers and sisters, being "gospel-shaped" can be a buzzword. A phrase that we throw around because it sounds right. Or, like Paul shows us here, it can be a profound reality that shapes the life of our church.