

Overcoming Discouragement in the Face of Sin

by Albert N. Martin

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Will you turn with me, please, in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, and I shall read in your hearing verses 5 through 11.

"But if any hath caused sorrow, he hath caused sorrow, not to me, but in part (that I press not too heavily) to you all. Sufficient to such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the many; so that contrariwise ye should rather forgive him and comfort him, lest by any means such a one should be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you to confirm your love toward him. For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye are obedient in all things. But to whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also: for what I also have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, for your sakes have I forgiven it in the presence of Christ; that no advantage may be gained over us by Satan: for we are not ignorant of his devices."

Now there is one great principle that I wish to extract from this portion of the Word of God this morning and then to apply it in some very specific ways. But if we are to see the Biblical taproots of that principle, we must first of all have a feel for the passage in which it comes to. And so as we begin our meditation this morning, I want to begin by giving you a brief description of the larger context of the passage which was read in your hearing. As many of you will remember, one of the problems the Apostle had to address himself to in his first letter is the problem dealt with in 1 Corinthians 5. It was a case incest. A man was living with his own stepmother. And the Apostle had to write in very strong language to the Corinthian church, rebuking them for their laxity in dealing with this sinning brother. He rebukes them sharply; he tells them that he has already in principle exerted an act of excommunication, that they are to gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus and to deliver this one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Well, by the time the Apostle writes the second letter, he has received information from Titus--and this is recorded in chapter 7, verses 5-8--that the Corinthian church did indeed receive the severe rebuke of the Apostle and did indeed excommunicate this brother. Furthermore, the excommunication had accomplished its God-intended end. It had been owned of the Spirit of God to induce in this man genuine repentance. The man was swallowed up with true grief for his sin. He had manifested this repentance before the church so that by the time the Apostle writes the second letter, he not only records something of the repentance of this man, but he must, in the language of the passage read in your hearing, exhort the Corinthian believers to confirm their love to this sinning brother.

So much, then, for this description of the larger context of the passage. Now very briefly, a running commentary upon the passage itself. The Apostle begins by saying, "But if any hath caused sorrow, he hath caused sorrow, not to me, but in part (that I

press not too heavily) to you all." In other words, he is saying now as he stands on the threshold of dealing with this problem,

"Don't be concerned about the grief and pain that this sinning brother caused me, though it did cause me pain. But at this point, we don't want to burden the man down with any unnecessary pressure in the area of feeling guilt for his sin. If there has been true repentance, now is not the time to rub the conscience raw. Now is the time to manifest in your congregational life in your relationship to this man the disposition which God has manifested to a repentant child of God, namely one of forgiveness and acceptance." And so he goes on to say, "Sufficient to such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the many [that is, the act of excommunication]; so that contrariwise ye should rather forgive him and comfort him." So the great burden of this section of the exhortation of the Apostle is, "Forgive this man and comfort this man. Where I had to write you previously and say, cast him out from your midst. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. It is in the best interest of his soul and your congregational life to cut him off." Now he says with language that is equally plain and explicit, "Forgive him and comfort him." And then he goes on to tell them why. He says, "If you do not do this, there is the danger that he will be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow." Verse 8-19a: "Wherefore I beseech you to confirm your love toward him. For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye are obedient in all things. But to whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also." Remember, the act of excommunication was a congregational act with the full sympathy and endorsement of the Apostle. He said, "When you are gathered together by my spirit and in the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, deliver such a one to Satan." Now he says, "[As surely as you as a congregation excommunicated him, he has repented. And you have now restored him in the context of forgiveness. I want you to know that I too extend my forgiveness to this sinning brother.] But to whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also: for what I also have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, for your sakes have I forgiven it in the presence of Christ; that no advantage may be gained over us by Satan: for we are not ignorant of his devices."

And the strange conclusion of this exhortation is the conclusion of verse 11. It's, as it were, the summary statement giving a rationale for this entire directive to the Corinthian church with respect to the repentant brother who had been excommunicated. He says, "[You must follow these direction in order] that no advantage may be gained over us by Satan: for we are not ignorant of his devices." The word devises means his thoughts, his intentions. The Apostle indicates that he knows how Satan seeks to work in congregational life. And one the ways he seeks to work was manifested in the previous condition at Corinth. Satan had brought that congregation under the spell of a sinful of indulgence, which they mistook for Christian forbearance. So a man living in incest was not only among them, but it was know and they were boastful about it. They had no shame. Satan had deceived them into misconstruing for true Christian love a wicked, carnal spirit of sinful indulgence. Now the same deceiver comes along, and after the man repented, there is apparently some reluctance on the part of the Corinthian church to make their love and acceptance as visible and earnest as had been their act of rejection in the act of excommunication. And he says, "Behind this, I see the thoughts of Satan. I am not ignorant of his thoughts, of his devices. And if we do not act in the light of these directives, an advantage will be gained over us by the evil one."

Now then, having given a description of the larger context of the passage, a brief running commentary upon the substance of the passage, now thirdly--and this is the

burden of the message this morning--what is the vital principle contained in this passage? Well, the immediate or specific expression of the principle is obvious. Whenever we as a congregation must engage in the very unpleasant responsibility of church discipline, we should always count it our joy to engage in the congregational act of restoration when it is evident that there has been genuine repentance. That's the obvious application of the principle. But that is rooted in a broader principle, and the Apostle indicates it in verse 11. And it is that broader principle that I wish to open up this morning and apply in your hearing, and it is this: discouragement in the face of sins repented of is a great tool of Satan to hinder the believer's progress in grace.

The Apostle says, "Confirm your love to him. Forgive him and comfort him." Why? "Lest he be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow." You see, the grief of his penitence, as genuine as it is now, can become a crippling, discouraging grief unless this dear brother who has repented of his sin has manifested in the attitude of the congregation the disposition of God Himself, one of forgiveness and of restoration. And the Apostle recognized that if that poor brother was allowed to go on limping under the pressure of discouragement over sins already repented of, Satan would have gained a tremendous advantage in the church at Corinth. And what was true of them in that specific historical context is true of every single believer in any context. The sin may not be so gross and evident a sin as to warrant public rebuke, let alone public excommunication. But any discouragement in the face of any sin towards which a believer has truly repented becomes a great tool of Satan to hinder the believer's progress in grace. And perhaps at no point is the character of the devil more evident than at this point. Jesus said in John 8:44: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father it is your will to do. He was a murderer from the beginning." And then He goes on to say, "He is a liar, and the father thereof." When you were contemplating that particular sin, which this morning holds you, as it were, in the grip of discouragement, what was the lie of the devil to you? "You're a Christian. You believe in Christ whose grace and forgiveness is greater than any sin. That's a little sin. Surely the grace of Christ can forgive you and cleanse you if you indulge that sin." And so by listening to the whisperings of that archdeceiver, that fiend of hell, you became bold to sin with your eyes wide open as a Christian. Your eyes were wide open and you sinned deliberately and willfully because you believed the lie, "O, it is but a little sin. The grace of Christ is greater than that sin. Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound." Ah, but now what's happened? God has uncovered that sin. For some of you, in great measure He's used the ministry of the past weeks that Pastor Nichols has been bringing to us from Ephesians 4:25 and on into chapter 5 to lay bare our sins. And now that God has been pleased to work in you a spirit of penitence, a spirit of true acknowledgement of your sin, and you have turned in the direction of the Lord and His grace, what has that archfiend now whispered in your ear? He's changed his story completely.

"O, wait a minute, you weren't simply surprised by that sin. It wasn't that you were walking along with your face set to Zion and were suddenly surprised by a flank attack of the enemy. You conceived that sin willfully and deliberately and walked into it with your eyes wide open. There's no forgiveness for sins like that in the Gospel. That's the willful sin that can only bring upon you the ultimate judgment of Almighty God. Why even bother to go to the throne of grace. You sinned willfully. You sinned deliberately. You sinned against light. You even sinned against the present promptings of the Spirit of God. You were conscious of that pull of grace away from sin at the very point you indulged your sin. Your sin is too great for the grace of God."

He's a liar, isn't he? He told you a short time before it was a little sin. "Ah, grace can sweep that away in a moment." Now grace has arrested you. The spotlight of truth has burned in upon that sin. And like David, you have to say, "Though I had covered it, and though I had sought to hid it from the living God, I can no longer do that." And you have to cry out as he did, "Have mercy upon me!" But this very morning you are crippled as a Christian. Why? Because though you have to the best of your knowledge truly repented of that sin or those sins, your spirit is bowed down with some doubt as to whether or not that sin is truly forgiven and you are truly cleansed, so that your standing before God this morning in Jesus Christ is a perfect standing. My dear Christian friend, listen this morning, whenever you allow discouragement in the face of sins repented of, you fall prey to the influence of Satan who is seeking to hinder your progress in grace. And I know from pastoral dealings with some of you that this is not a theoretical danger. And it is not merely something that occurs to one or two of the people of God occasionally. If the Apostle was very conscious of the present activity in the church at Corinth, then I would be a fool to be less than conscious of the present activity of that wicked one in this assembly of God's people.

O, do you see the principle? Satan will gain a tremendous advantage if you allow him to hold you in the grip of discouragement, even when your sins have been repented of and confessed to God. You say, "Pastor, how in the world can I come out from underneath that discouragement? When you described the kind of sins you're talking about, you were describing me. How can I be brought out from underneath that?" Well, the Apostle had a specific prescription for these people. And basically for them it was this: manifest in your congregational life to this man in tangible ways that he can read and understand the disposition of the Living God toward him. Let your attitude as congregation be a mirror of the attitude and the disposition of God. And likewise, my brothers and sisters, there are some specific things which you and I can and must do if we ever find ourselves, if some of you find yourselves this morning under that crippling power of discouragement in the face of sins committed but sins truly repented of.

Let me suggest three lines of thought that I trust will be helpful to you. Number one is this: there can be no such discouragement while pleading the infinite worth of the blood of Christ. I read two very familiar portions of the Word of God. 1 John 1:7: "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son [goes on cleansing] us from all sin." Now notice, there are no qualifications. The only condition described is the condition of the believer who's walking in the light. He is not seeking to hide from God or hide anything from God. He's living under the searching exposure of the light of God's countenance, God's law, God's holiness. And in that context, sin is continually discovered. The discovery of sin is no proof that he's not walking in the light. It's an evidence that he is. It's only the man in a pitch black room who has no consciousness as he looks in the mirror that his face is dirty if indeed it is. But the moment the switch is flipped on, if his face is covered with mud and he looks in the mirror, he discovers his true condition. And so John assumes that the one walking in the light stands in need of continual cleansing, and so he gives this gracious promise: the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. And John was not all afraid that he would overstate the virtue, the infinite worth of the blood of Christ. He was not ignorant of the fact that at that very hour in which he wrote this epistle, there in the churches to which the epistle would come would be believers who had sinned willfully, who had sinned grievously, some who had sinned subtly, and others who had sinned in ways that caused shame even to

the congregation. And yet he dared to write, "The blood of Jesus His Son [goes on cleansing] us from all sin."

As surely as sinners dishonor Christ by being indifferent to His blood, indifferent to the overtures of mercy in the Gospel before they are saved, it is an act of insult, highest insult to God, when Almighty God should stoop in grace and mercy and say, "In My Son is a fountain opened for sin and uncleanness for the vilest of sinners. Acknowledge your vileness and plunge and be cleansed." What an insult to walk by that fountain either in the deception of self-righteousness saying, "I need no such fountain" (that was the Pharisee's problem--"I thank Thee that I'm not as other men"), or to believe that our sins are greater than the efficacy of that fountain, to stand by that fountain and say, "O, to think that a fountain is open for sin and uncleanness. What a blessed thing! What a wonderful thing! But the fountain does not have that which is necessary to reach the depths of my sin-stained." O unbelieving sinner, such unbelief in the efficacy of the blood of Christ is an insult to the Lord Jesus and to the Father who sent Him and to the Spirit who attends the preaching of the Gospel. Many of us sitting here this morning, by the grace of God, have found that that initial self-righteous indifference or that unbelieving hesitance have been overcome, and we have plunged initially into that fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. We can sing,

O happy day that fixed my choice on Thee my Savior and my God.
Well may this glowing heart rejoice and sound its music all abroad.

But now what's happened? After the flush of your new found faith in Christ gave tremendous impetus to your early days as a believer, and in a sense, you almost thought you were ever done with sin. God often wonderfully neutralizes much of the power of indwelling sin in a new believer lest he be swallowed up with discouragement. But then He begins to bring you down to the world of reality where the rest of us live, where you're very conscious that "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one to the other; that ye may not do the things that ye would" (Galatians 5:17). And as you began to discover more and more of your potential for sin even as a believer, you have fallen grievously, and in some areas you have fallen repeatedly. Child of God, you do insult to that fountain open to sin and uncleanness if you show any reticence to plunge as quickly and believingly now as you did at the first. That's why John can go on to say in verse 9, "If we confess our sins...." He does not say, "If we do penance, if we rationalize them away...." No, no, if we confess them, if we say the same things about them that God does, He is faithful. You notice, we confess; He is faithful. From our confession, we are taken immediately to something totally objective to us. From our confession, our attention is riveted upon the character of God ("He is faithful and righteous") and then upon the activity of God: to forgive and to cleanse. To forgive what? Our sins. What sins? All the sins that we confess, even the willful sins? Yes! Even the sins against light? Yes! Even the sins against privilege? Yes! "He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Why? Because "the blood of Jesus [God's] Son [goes on cleansing] from all sin. And as surely as unbelievers dishonor God and insult Him by their refusal to plunge initially, child of God, you dishonor God and cripple yourself with discouragement by failing to plead and believe in the infinite worth of the blood of Christ. There can be no discouragement in the face of sins repented of if there is a believing plea with respect to the infinite worth of the blood of Christ.

Then secondly, there can be no discouragement while resting in the prevailing power of the intercession of Christ. 1 John 2:1: "My little children, these things write I unto you that ye may not sin. And if any man sin...." And notice, he does not put a parenthesis. By that, I mean a sin of surprisal. By that, I mean a sin of ignorance. By that, I mean a unpremeditated sin. No such qualification is given. Now I'm fully aware that later on in the epistle, John writes those strange words "There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request." I'm fully aware that that language is used, but I'm also fully aware that I doubt there's anyone who can expound with certainty the significance of those words except John. Whatever the sin unto death is, it has nothing to do with that believer whose heart is broken over his sin, who desires with all of his heart to have restored communion with his heavenly Father. Whatever it is, it is not that. And so we have the word of assurance: "And if any man sin, we have [at the very point of our sin that would cry to God in terms of the rectitude of His law that judgment be meted upon us]...." And in point of time, the intercession of Christ is coincidental. It is there. The time we sin, He does not cease to be our Intercessor. But as our Intercessor and Advocate, He is there at the right hand of the Father. "If any man sin, we have Advocate [we have a lawyer, One who pleads our cause] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins." Thank God for that word "propitiation." It's a big word, but it basically means the turning away of divine wrath by the offering of the sacrifice of Jesus. For God to be propitiated means that His wrath is turned away, and Christ Himself at the right hand of the Father is the embodiment of all the virtue of His death upon the cross. And as our great Intercessor, He pleads our case. How can a Christian be discouraged over sins committed and repented of while there is a resting in the prevailing intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Now let me ask you, do you honor Christ and His work by groveling, shriveling, drawing back, going limping all your days? No, my friend, you honor the Lord Jesus when in the holy reservation that is always present in true repentance--you may have to say with a faltering tongue and with a chastened spirit, "I have grievously sinned. I have dishonored My God and grieved and quenched the Spirit. But I believe that my sin does not take me out of the orbit of the intercession of my Savior, that my sin does not cast me off from the sphere of His pleas on behalf of His own." There can be no discouragement in the face of sins repented of while resting in the prevailing power of the intercession of Christ.

And then finally, there can be no discouragement while rejoicing in the covenant faithfulness of Christ. You remember when our Lord Jesus instituted what we now call the Lord's Supper or the communion service as we sometimes designate it? He said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood." And all that the Lord Jesus was doing in His death and resurrection had reference to that new covenant. And in that covenant, God has promised to do some wonderful things. We find a summary of what He has promised to do in Hebrews 8 and 10, quoting from the Old Testament. The briefer summary is found in chapter 10 of Hebrews, verses 16-20a:

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord: I will put My laws on their heart, and upon their mind also will I write them; then saith He, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin. Having therefore, brethren, boldness...."

You see the boldness, which is the opposite of the discouragement, the shrinking, the drawing back, can only be ours when there is an intelligent, present rejoicing in

the covenant faithfulness of Christ. He died to affect the promised blessings of the new covenant, which are given to us in this language: "Their sins, their iniquities will I remember no more." And you see, part of the problem is we remember. And because we remember, we believe God must still remember in the sense that He has not put the sin away and truly forgiven it. And it is no little part of the Christian's spiritual wisdom to know how to handle the actings of His own memory. What do I do when, in the midst of the day, the thought of that grievous sin comes back to me? Well, I must do one of two things. I must believe what is true about that sin and what is not true-- one or the other. I must believe that somehow that sin fails to come in the category of the promise of the new covenant. Yes, God still remembers that sin, and therefore, because He does, I must keep at a distance. I can have no boldness in prayer. I can have no joyous communion with Him. I must go on in my so-called evangelical penance for a period of time until somehow the walls of my own memory are scrubbed and I can no longer remember before I'll believe God no longer remembers. I will magnify the grace of God in Christ by believing the promise at the point where my own memory calls the sin back and I feel, as it were, the inner shock and the inner horror that I a Christian could do such a thing. It's at that point that I need to rejoice in the covenant faithfulness of Christ and believe that for Christ's sake that sin is remembered against me no more.

Ah, but someone says, "But Pastor Martin, won't people take such a doctrine and use it as an excuse to sin with a high hand?" If they do, that's their problem. And they'll answer to God for their wicked abuse of grace. And if there's anyone here this morning who listening to such teaching would say, "O, in the light of all that, man, I can just go out and sin as I please and then I just ask the Lord's forgiveness." My friend, even to think that way shows you're not a Christian because the Christian does not want to sin with a high hand. He has seen his sin in the light of God's burning holiness. He has seen his sin, above all, in the light of the agonies of the Son of God upon the cross. And even at the point when he sins most grievously, he does not sin with total abandonment. There is within him the principle of divine grace so that he can never, as it were, just utterly throw himself on the crest of any sinful passion and ride it to the shore, and catch the next wave and ride it in again with glee and with delight, and then pick himself up and say, "O well, now I go and get a little cleansing." No, no, anyone who talks that way knows nothing of the grace of God. I'm speaking to those of you who are true believers who do with all your heart long to be rid of all sin. If you could, you would live a life of sinless perfection. And it is that for which you yearn and long and that which makes heaven heaven to you. Above all else, in the language of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, is that you'll love him with an unsinning heart. Now can you say from the depths of your being an amen to that reality?

"O Lord, if I could live but one day free of sin, free from dishonoring you, disobeying you." That's the disposition of the true Christian, but the reality is that such a person sins, and not only sins ignorantly, which he does, and not only sins by surprisals, that is, a sudden temptation (you whack the finger, and before you know it, some of the old language pours out), but even Christians sin willfully and deliberately. They sin as willfully and deliberately as David sinned. When he looked, he lusted, he took, and then covered his sin. They sin as willfully as Peter did when he cursed and denied and cursed and denied and denied again. The Bible does not cover up the reality of the magnitude of the sins of the saints. But it's against that very backdrop that it magnifies the glory of the grace of God, that God's grace is such that the sin of His children does not disinherit them. The sin of His children does not put them outside

the orbit of grace. And I plead with you this morning who are walking with lead feet and with bowed shoulders and with downcast eyes. Thank God you're still plotting on your way to the celestial city. But you're a terrible advertisement for the Gospel because the Gospel can do something more than it's done for you. And the Gospel is that you as a child of God are immediately and fully cleansed and pardoned by the infinite worth of the blood of Christ when you confess your sins. And that resting in the prevailing intercession of Christ and rejoicing in the covenant faithfulness of Christ, you may go on your way rejoicing in the grace of Christ.

But you say, "Pastor, won't that lead us to treat sin lightly?" No, no, there is no more powerful preservative against the repetition of sin than the joyous knowledge of the full pardon of sin, because if you're discouraged and bowed down and you find no joy in Christ, you are vulnerable to sin yet more, for you say, "I find no sweetness in Christ." And with a discouraged spirit, you're more vulnerable to sin. Satan gains an advantage. But it's the man who is so rejoicing in the privileges of grace who realizes when temptation comes, "What? Shall I exchange the joy of my Father's countenance and the ebullience of conscious communion with my Savior for this little trinket of time? Not upon your life!" You see, it was when Christian was looking at his robes, considering the scroll in his hand, it was then that he found himself most preserved against lapses into sin. No, no, my friend, God keeps us in the way of grace, not primarily by legal terrors, but by the terrible pressure of the knowledge of the greatness of His grace in Christ.

And so I have bared my heart to you in a pastoral exhortation this morning. And that exhortation is based upon the principle of 2 Corinthians 2:11 : "that no advantage may be gained over us by Satan: for we are not ignorant of his devices." Discouragement in the face of sins repented of is a great tool of Satan to hinder the believer's progress. And O how the enemy would love to gain an advantage when in past weeks the Lord by the Spirit has taken that Ephesians 4 and 5 passage, shined the light upon many of our hearts. And I know from phone calls I've received, people getting things confessed to me, attitudes and others things that I didn't know were there--thank God! And I know from talking with some of the other elders that others have been dealing with sin and getting matters right with God and one another. But O, how Satan would gain an advantage precisely at this point. That having lost the ground of keeping us in the position of covering our sin, rationalizing, excusing it, now that we're prepared by grace to deal with it, then to tell us the sin is greater than the grace of our Savior. Well, it is not. And we would not allow that wicked one to gain any advantage in our assembly, but by the grace of God, magnify the worth of the blood of Christ, the certainty of the intercession of Christ and the glory of His covenant faithfulness to us His people.

You see, you who are not Christians, we're not a bunch of sad sacks. O, there are times when we're cast down because our greatest burden is the very burden that will press you to hell unless you repent. It's the burden of sin. And because God took it so seriously to send His only Son to die on the cross, we take it seriously. And until you take it seriously, there's no hope for you. But if you begin to take your sin seriously, my friend, there is hope. And don't believe the whisperings of the devil that there's no hope for you. There is hope, and it's found in Christ, but in Christ alone.