

GODLY SORROW

By Steve Zeisler

There's a cartoon taped to the scale in the men's locker room at the Palo Alto YMCA. It's Bob Thaves' Frank and Ernest, one of my favorites. The cartoon shows doctor holding a clipboard in his hand, and before him on the scale is his patient. The doctor is saying, "Yes, it's remotely possible that earth's gravity has increased, but I think there's a much simpler explanation"

In 1 Kings chapter 22 we read the end of the story of Ahab, the king of Israel. It bears a certain similarity to the Frank and Ernest cartoon. Ahab was determined to go to war against the Arameans in Ramoth Gilead. He had made an alliance with Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, and they met together to plan their campaign. This is how the story ensues.

So the king of Israel brought together the prophets-about four hundred men-and asked them, "Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?"
"Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there not a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?"

The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, "There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah."

Micaiah was summoned, and he eventually told Ahab that God would not give him victory; in fact, if he continued on this course he would die in battle. Ahab hated hearing that; he wanted to hear what the 400 "yes men" had suggested, that he would be successful in whatever he did. So he went to war disguised, trying to beat the prophecy. A stray arrow struck him, and he died in disgrace, just as Micaiah had predicted.

Receiving hard truth

The point here is the same as in the cartoon of the man on the scale in the doctor's office. We find ways of deflecting news we don't want to hear. So at times it is necessary for a spokesman, someone who cares for the people before him, to describe reality as it is so we may repent and changes may be brought about. We need Micaiah the son of Imlah in our lives at times. We need someone who will challenge our ideas when they are false.

A morning like this when we take communion together is a particularly good time to raise the subject of allowing the truth to prevail in our experience, because the scriptures say we should examine ourselves when we come to the table of the Lord. If we eat the bread or drink the cup in an unworthy way, with impurity or steadfast rebellion in our hearts, we're guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

We've come to a passage, 2 Corinthians 7:2-16, where Paul speaks of his experience of being a Micaiah, of having to say hard things to the people he loves so they might turn from their sins and repent. We'll find we can learn some important lessons from this passage.

I saw a news article from a Southern California newspaper not long ago. It talked about the fall of yet another well-known media minister. He left his ministry because of sexual sin, and a public disgrace to the cause of Christ has come about. I found myself wondering where the brothers of this man were, the people who ought to have known, who could have stepped in and been redemptive, bringing healing and

repentance rather than public disgrace. There's another situation not too far from us in which a pastor is abandoning his responsibility and living in sin, and his church is winking at it. No one is saying anything; the pastor is too important to be challenged by anyone. This man, the people who care for him, and our Lord's name are in jeopardy because no one will speak.

Pride and pleasure

The Corinthians, as we know from our studies, had two propensities for getting into trouble. One of them came from their pride, the other from love of pleasure. Their pride regularly led them to factionalism. They attached themselves to teachers and spokesmen who had impressive credentials, a flamboyant speaking style, esoteric knowledge, or something else that caused them to rise to prominence so that others gathered around them. The Corinthians loved pride, self-promotion, and superiority, and they needed to be corrected in this kind of problem more than once. In fact, that was the subject of 2 Cor. 2:5-11, where Paul recognized that the majority had to bring correction to an individual who had led a minority faction in rebellion against the church. The individual, who had to be publicly corrected, is the one who is again in view here in chapter 7.

We need someone who will challenge our ideas when they are false

Their other characteristic problem was an attraction to sins of physical excess. They got drunk at communion, for instance. Paul had to castigate them for taking the communion meal in gluttony and drunkenness rather than in a way that honored the Lord. Sexual sin was also an easy failure for them. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 it says:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief?

They were unwilling to challenge sins of that sort. So there's a good bit in the life of the Corinthian church that needs someone like Micaiah the son of Imlah to care about them for Christ's sake, to speak for the Lord and raise a word of challenge to repent. Paul ministers in that role, especially the passage we're studying today.

Characteristics of a corrector

Verses 2-4 are a preliminary word where Paul talks about what's going on inside him. What sort of man ought to fill the role of corrector?

Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

Paul makes two important points. First, his motives are right. When he had to say hard things to them, it was not for his own sake. He didn't have an axe to grind, and he didn't come to get riches, prominence, or ego satisfaction from them. I used to play football, and I recall good and bad coaches. One demanded a lot of the team, insisting we go beyond what we thought we could physically do. We ran until we dropped, practiced till it hurt, and call on reserves we didn't know we had. Sometimes the coach's demands on us

succeeded in producing efforts that went beyond our expectations. But he wasn't centered on his own ego. He was demanding, but he wanted to serve his team, to see those in his charge succeed. But other coaches I've known are exactly the opposite. They treat their players like cattle, and if an individual is injured or needs extra help, he is "thrown away" and someone else put in his place because the program exists to promote the coach.

Paul is making that distinction here. He has had to demand hard things of the Corinthians. He has pointed out areas of their lives that they needed to hear about even though they didn't want to, but he didn't do it for his own sake. His motives were pure. That's a very important place to start if we are ever to be Micaiahs ourselves. Remember what Jesus said about logs and splinters in one's eye. Jesus said, first the log needs to be removed from your own eye before you can remove the splinter from another's eye. If we don't deal with our own motives and shortcomings, we shouldn't be in the ministry of shaping up someone else.

Paul alludes to another qualification in saying that the Corinthians are in his heart; he would live or die with them. Whatever happens in this correction process, he is not going to hold himself at a distance. Whatever pain or hardship they have to go through, his shoulder will be under the burden with them. Christian ministry of this sort cannot possibly take place at great distance. When the apostle must come to his church, or when a brother must come to his brother or sister, then he needs to be willing to say, "I know it's going to cost me something if you suffer because you matter so much to me."

Lessons from history

Now Paul goes on in verses 5-16 to give a little history:

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

Let me explain this history of Paul's travel and the regretted letter, and then I'll go back and draw some points from this that have application to us as well. Paul had visited Corinth (for 18 months) once and had written two letters, one (which is lost) before the letter of 1 Corinthians that we now have, and the letter of 1 Corinthians itself. He had then gone on to Ephesus. While he was there he heard of growing problems in the Corinthian church. Two things happened that are not recorded in the book of Acts, that we know about only because of what he says here. First, he paid a visit from Ephesus to Corinth and had a terrible time. In chapter 2 verse 1 of this letter he talks about a visit that was very painful; they didn't listen to him, they argued, and he realized that the more he talked the worse it was getting. So he left with a broken heart, having accomplished nothing but trouble. Second, he went back to Ephesus and wrote a letter (also lost to

us) that he regretted for a time. It was a letter castigating them, facing them with hardship, warning them of tragedies that would result if they didn't change their ways. Then-nothing happened

The role of Titus

So all Paul had to remember of the church he founded, where he ministered for a year and a half, is that the last time he had seen them they got in a fight, and then he wrote them a letter to which they didn't respond. He didn't know if the poison was spreading or if they'd turned around. And he was afraid to go back himself because he didn't want to have another fight. So he sent his friend Titus to find out what was happening, and then Titus' return was delayed. Paul waited anxiously in Ephesus, fervent in his prayers, and finally decided to head back in the direction of Corinth, hoping to meet Titus along the way. He got as far as Macedonia, probably Philippi, where he'd been beaten and jailed once, and then Titus joined him.

There was great joy in Paul's heart because Titus, his brother in the Lord, was back, and Titus had good news. He said Paul's letter had done what he had hoped it would-it turned the people around, and they were able to discipline the man who was leading a rebellion against the people of God (so that now Paul even urges them in chapter 2 to quit being hard on this man, hoping he'd turned around and they could welcome him back). Paul was thrilled to hear from Titus, overjoyed to know that the letter he had regretted writing turned them from foolishness.

Now, let's look at what we should learn from this about the role of the Micaiah in life, of the doctor who has to say, "No, gravity has not increased . . . ! You've put on too much weight." What should we learn about the role of Christians like us who sometimes have to say difficult things, or who need at times to be the recipient of someone's warning?

There are a couple of things I want to say. First, I'm impressed that Paul shows his inner life. He's depressed, afraid, agitated, joyful-he's involved in his world! He can't live as an automaton. When people hurt, he hurts, and when there's good news, he's excited! He's willing to let them see the kind of man he is, and that he cares about them.

I've been following the process of David Souter's attempt to get confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice. Here is someone no one knows anything about, and the only way he can get confirmed to the Supreme Court is to appear to have absolutely no convictions about anything.

But it's exactly the opposite in Christ. Paul talks about being afraid when he's alone in Philippi waiting for Titus, and about being worried that his church might have fallen into disaster. Later he talks about being joyful, and about a range of other emotions he had.

Godly sorrow

There are some other issues I would raise here for us to learn about this process of correction. One of them is in verses 10-11, where the phrase "godly sorrow" appears. This is an important point. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done." First of all, he says there's no benefit to sorrow by itself. Enjoying seeing someone hurt is a terrible thing. But godly sorrow is the experience where someone has to hurt for a time in order to come to their senses, to receive a necessary challenge. Paul is delighted that they have read his severe letter and have been challenged by it. C. S. Lewis, in a letter to Sheldon Van Auken, used the phrase "severe mercy." God had been severely merciful to him in the death of his wife. Van Auken later wrote a book with that title, *A Severe Mercy*. Severe mercy is severe when it has to be in order for the fruits of mercy to be received.

We shouldn't avoid pain and challenge when they are necessary

We shouldn't avoid pain and challenge when they're necessary-I would draw that conclusion from the phrase "godly sorrow." We shouldn't hope for Christian associations that are predictable, or Christian friendships where there's merely shallow, conventional speech and no concern for depth. We shouldn't look for a church or fellowship group that will merely tickle our ears and avoid all difficulty, because difficulty is at times necessary.

The second point I would make from verses 10-11 is that godly sorrow leads to repentance, not to hurt feelings. Paul says they changed, they performed the necessary surgery, they became zealous for righteousness again. There are people who come to the pastors of our church on a chronic basis; each time we talk and pray, a way of turning from their problem is presented, and they agree with gushing tears that the solution is right-and again and again, nothing happens. Eventually, they go on to another church. Their tearfulness is not accompanied by repentance or change. But Paul says godly sorrow leads to repentance, a change of direction.

Verse 12 makes a point that is worth highlighting. Paul says he wrote to them not just to get them to deal with the specific problem of the man who was leading the rebellion, but so they could learn to understand themselves: ". . . but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are." Paul wanted them to do what they had to do, and in doing so, to come to understand themselves. They didn't really want to live in a world of arrogance and phoniness. Paul is saying he didn't want them to just do what they had to do, but to learn in the process. If we're going to be part of the process of helping people turn from things, it's not good enough just to get them to take the actions; we should hope that some insight penetrates their experience as well.

Fellow-soldiers

Lastly, verse 13, and earlier verse 6, highlight the role of Titus in Paul's experience. Titus was Paul's long-time fellow soldier. They had fought wars for Christ's sake in many places, traveled together, spent hard times and good times together, preached and prayed together. There is a depth of friendship between these men that is inescapable in this passage. He says earlier in this chapter that just seeing Titus buoyed his spirits. Titus had been sent on a difficult errand, and Paul found out that those in Corinth had treated him well, and that Titus was excited in turn to get to know them, so that two groups of people that Paul loves now love each other. Titus came back and reported that the Corinthians thought well of Paul. There's an excitement about seeing connectedness in Christ that is very important to me. We ought to have people who matter to us like this, deep friends, who know us well and whom we know well, whose very appearance brings joy to us. It's too easy for us to have a lot of acquaintances but no real brothers and sisters, no real compatriots in Christ. Paul and Titus had become that for each other. This ought to exhort us to ask God to begin to open us up to experience the vulnerability it takes to have a real friend, the willingness to sacrifice yourself, to enter one another's worlds, to soldier with them for a time, so that we have people who care that much for us, and so that we have the opportunity for that kind of intimate friendship.

To conclude, last week we talked about being yoked to non-Christians and why that's such a bad idea-having an unbreakable, inflexible oneness that dilutes our influence, that makes us live in a way that is less and less of the Lord. The exact opposite point is being made here, isn't it? We're not yoked enough to each other! We're not involved enough with those who are our family-we don't get close enough, speak forcefully enough; we're unwilling to do the courageous thing or we're too hardened to receive godly sorrow. We've taken communion today, and the Bible forbids us to take communion in an unworthy manner. It may very well be that we need someone to help us see our unworthiness. I need someone to come to me and tell me when I'm being arrogant, or when greed has infiltrated me, or I've stopped caring for other people. You need people like that to come to you. So it's good to avoid being unequally yoked with unbelievers. But let's be more yoked to each other! Let's be more willing to say the hard thing when it's required, and expect godly sorrow to have its result, that life should abound.

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