



A Clear Conscience – Part 5

Serving with Sympathy

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We are often reminded that we are not as Christians to live in isolation. We're supposed to be always assembling together. And we ought to be assembling together as we often remind ourselves, "all the more as you see the Day of Christ drawing near." So we should be getting together, never making it a habit that we don't get together. And that is something we do, like a lot of different groups out there in the world, gather for various things. We're supposed to gather together in the name of Christ. And the thing that Jesus said in John 13:35 that's supposed to make our gatherings distinct from everyone else's gatherings is the kind and quality of love that we have for each other. And that sounds really easy. But if we could really get into your mind and find out what's going on there, I said when you come to church do you really love those people? Do you love the people there who you gather with? They go, well I don't know everybody. Well, I understand that, but everyone you know, everyone you connect with, either at church, in the lobby, the parking lot, in your small groups, in your sub-congregations, do you love them?

It's a word that gets tossed around a lot these days, but it's not as easy as it sounds. To love people is very challenging, actually. Some of us in this room need this sermon this morning to be reminded what love looks like and how it acts. Particularly those of you who have been around the block a few times in the Christian life. It seems like the longer you have walked with Christ, the harder it becomes to love in the way that we ought to love. That's why Paul is such a good example for us. He's done a lot in the Christian life, but he still loves the way he ought to. But for us, it's easy just to go through the motions. There's a lot that happens when we assemble together. We do various things together, and if you're in small groups as you ought to be, and your chairs are facing face to face, and you might pray for each other. You might serve in a ministry post, you might do a lot of things that are appropriate. I mean, that's what people who love each other should do. They should serve, they should love, they should care, they should pray for each other, they should meet needs, and perhaps you're doing all of that.

But as Paul said in First Corinthians 13 verse 3, as he sets up this great list of all the things that love is not and all the things that love is, he makes an interesting statement in verse 3 when he says, even, "If I were to give away all that I have," we would say, well, that's part of love, right? "For God so loved the world that he gave..." We learn this in the Scripture that when we give that's a sign of what it means to love. We give, we serve, we give of our time, our effort, our attention, our prayers. We give. But he says, if I do that and "have not love, it amounts to nothing." God is not impressed with that. Which is really hard to hear because we often think, if I'm doing all the right things isn't that good enough? But when it comes to you gathering and interacting with the people of the church, people who you are sitting next to in this room, the people who you'll bump shoulders within the lobby, people who you'll go to sub-congregations and small groups with, the Bible says no, it's not good enough. There's got to be something underneath it called love, and love is a lot harder if we define it according to God's Word.



We're going to get into Second Corinthians Chapter 1, but before I do, I want to show you in one verse, a very short verse in First Peter Chapter 3, that kind of pulls everything together that we need to think about today. And we want to make sure this is happening in your life because you can be here, and for that, I mean, that's a good thing. You're not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together right now if you're here in the room, that's great. But if love is not motivating this, if love is not active in your heart, God says it's for nothing. It doesn't count as what God is wanting. He wants us to love each other. What does that look like? First Peter Chapter 3 is a great place for us to go, verse 8, as he's beginning the end of this book, he's transitioning here in verse 8, and he says, "Finally, all of you," and that's not just the leaders, it's not the staff members, it's not just the pastor, everyone, right? Here's what he needs. "Have unity of mind," get on the same page, agree with each other, look at this word, "sympathy." Sympathy. You'll notice that in the subtitle of this morning's message, "Serving with Sympathy."

That word may surprise you, this is the only time this Greek word appears in the New Testament, "sympathy." But you know, don't worry, it's a concept that's everywhere. As a matter of fact, it's translating a different Greek word with a different English word, but it means the same thing. Think about the word "sympathy." Sym-pathy, right? This is in Greek, that's a transliterated word because that's the Greek word, in essence. I'm anglicizing the pronunciation. But "sym" means "together," and "pathos," means "to feel," to feel together. Do you feel with these people? You don't just bump into them, you don't share prayer requests, you don't just fulfill your ministry post this weekend, but you feel with them. Now when I say sym-pathy or sympatheō, to feel with others, there's another word that means the same thing, only it doesn't come through Greek. It's not transliterated through Greek, it's transliterated through Latin. And it's the word "compassion." Does that sound familiar? "Com," same thing, "together," and "passion," to have feelings together.

Now, this is everywhere in the Scripture, but the Greek word used for that is a much deeper word, and we'll run into that this morning in our study. But it's important to know that one of the things that shows that you love is that you are working always to be of the same mind and that you have sympathy. You're willing to get into the feelings of the people who are in the aisle of your row right here at church, in your small group, in your sub-congregation. You feel with them. Look at the next words, "brotherly love." And I think the word is chosen here, and there are nuances between the word "Agape," which we're going to see in our passage this morning, and this word, "Phileo." It's the word that really ties all three of these together. You can't have the compound word sym-pathos and then the word unity of mind, the same mind, these are compound words as well, and not enlist a word that's going to remind us that you are brothers or brothers and sisters, sisters, and you're in the same family. Do you see why it's really necessitated? At least it's logical. Peter would choose this word. Because all of them are talking about us being together, bound together. Bound together in the same thinking, bound together in the same feelings, and bound together in the same family. And you ought to act like you're brothers and sisters in the same family, because in fact, as Christians, you are. If you have a right relationship with your creator, if he is your Father, then I'm your brother. That's how this works. And to do those things, which in that triad, unity of mind, unity



of feelings, and a unity of family here, same mind, same feeling, same family, brotherly love then I'm going to need these two things and these are very hard. "A tender heart and a humble mind."

Now I want to preach this sermon this weekend for everyone in Second Corinthians Chapter 1 and 2. But I will say one of the things for you mature believers among us is that this is hard to maintain after 10 years of living as a Christian, 15 years, 20 years, 30 years, 35, 40 years in Christ. It's hard for you to maintain a tender heart and a humble mind because you've become a realist in the Christian life. You know how people are when people come and go and people let you down and I've heard people say that before. You need this sermon, you need this reminder that the Scripture calls you to love, and love, if it's defined biblically, is going to mean more than just I'm doing what I'm supposed to, I'm giving of my time and my attention. As I often say, I am going the extra mile, I am spending the extra dollar, I am staying the extra hour. I am doing it Pastor Mike. That's not what this is about. This is about doing that, not divorced from what biblical love is, because you could give away everything you have. And why would you give? Because someone needs it. You could give it all away. First Corinthians Chapter 13 verse 3, but if you don't have love, it's nothing.

So we've got to get under the surface of your actions to what's motivating and driving that. Now this passage is helpful for us. It's a good little memory verse for you, but it's unpacked because it really helps us in Second Corinthians Chapter 1 to see how this works. Right? How do I flesh this out? How do I live this? What does this look like in circumstances? Well, that's what this morning's all about. And we've got answers here for us that will help, I hope, give you the equipment you need to move out and say, I'm not just going to go through the motions of the Christian life. I'm not just going to spend my time there and my effort there and my service there and do all I'm supposed to do and pray for people and care for people. I need to really have a heart of sympathy, because that's the hardest part, a tender heart and a humble mind. So let's go to Second Corinthians Chapter 1 and learn from this great text because we have finally gotten into a place where Paul's going to give directly the answer to the question and it bleeds right into Chapter 2. So we're going to go from verse 23 all the way to the fourth verse of Chapter 2. I know that's odd, but no one was asking me when they put a chapter division here, but I wouldn't have put it here.

Now, the series title. What's the series title? "A Clear Conscience." This is the fifth of five sermons that I've mapped out for you. And I've carefully chosen where this series ends because we finally got the end of the refrain that has been throughout this text. If you glance back up to verse 12, "For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience." That's the only time we have this word, but it's become the theme for our series because it basically keeps saying, I've got a clear conscience, what's the problem? The problem was that I said I was going to go to you on the way to Macedonia, you Corinthian Christians, and I was going to come and see you again. I didn't do either of those. The critics are taking potshots at me. They're saying I'm a flake. They're saying I don't mean it. They say I don't love you. They're saying all these things about me and you guys are doubting me. I just want to tell you, I have a clear conscience even though I planned this, it's not because I was a flake. It wasn't "yes and no" and "no and yes." It was like I determined to do this, but things changed. And he's



going to explain this. And I keep telling you throughout this series, the first four messages in this series, we never got the answer. We've got a lot about a clear conscience. We've got to lot about a lot of things, but we finally are going to get it here.

And I want to show you in verse 23, look at the first phrase. We're still reiterating the theme of a clear conscious because, or you wouldn't say this, look at it, "But I call God to witness against me." That's what verse 23 starts with. That's the whole point. The whole point of this. And we've seen reprises of this throughout our last four weeks in dealing with this text and that is that it's about my clear conscience. I changed plans and I changed those plans before God and God is my witness. You don't have God on your side critics when you're criticizing me, Paul says, about not coming. I know you think you've got the moral high ground because I planned something and I didn't do it. But I'm telling you, God's on my side on this. God is my witness. I had good reason for changing my plan. Now that's important because that's the theme throughout this whole section that we've been dealing with from verse 12 all the way to verse 4. Actually the reason for it all, it ends up being explained in verse 5 and we'll start a new series, Lord willing, next week as we deal with the "Ups and Downs of the Christian Life" as I called it, as we see back and forth things going on in Paul's life here.

But the excuse is not an excuse, it's a godly reason. Everyone said Paul's making excuses for not doing what he says. But I call God as a witness against me. Why didn't you come, Paul? Here it is, in a phrase, "It was to spare you," that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. All right, well, that didn't tell us much, but we're going to get it as we piece together all the hints in this book, particularly even in the next few verses here, we'll get the sense of what it meant, what it means to say, "I wanted to spare you." "Not that we," verse 24, "lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith." That sounds like a very kind thing. You don't want to be bossy. You don't want to be domineering. You don't want to crack the whip and say, you've got to do what I say. That's nice of you. We'd like to work "with you for your joy" so you'd grow up spiritually, "you'd stand firm in your faith. Verse 1, For "I made up my mind," about this: I would, "not make another painful visit to you." So Paul apparently between his time at Ephesus for three years, the end of his second missionary journey and his third missionary journey, he made a quick trip from Macedonia to Corinth. I mean, he got from Ephesus, rather, across the sea to visit them. And it was painful. And he also talks about a painful letter throughout this text and throughout this book. And he says, I didn't want to show up because if I showed up at the time I was planning to show up, it would have been painful. It would have been a mess. "For if I cause you pain," verse 2, "who is there to make me glad but the one whom I've pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should make me rejoice." We're all on the same page, we're all following Christ.

Now, I shouldn't have to show up while you're processing my painful letter here and I didn't want to write another painful letter and I didn't want to have a painful visit because there were issues here. So I had to put all this off. "I wrote," as I did, "so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of you all," I thought you would do the right thing, "that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you," this painful letter that he wrote, "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears,



not to cause you pain," although admittedly I did, "but to let you know," now here's the theme, "the abundant love that I had for you." See, he caused pain by the letter. He doesn't want to come back and cause pain.

Now keep your finger here and get over to Chapter 13 of the same book. This will help explain again, because this is all one literary work, why he did not go when he said he was going to go. Second Corinthians 13 verse 10, "For this reason I write these things," so he's explaining why he's written what we know of as Second Corinthians, "for this reason I write these things while I'm away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." So Paul is an apostle and he's saying, I'm writing this letter because I heard good news from Titus, right? That's what we've already dealt with that in the series. And so, I'm writing you a letter about what you've done, I'm giving you a little bit more instruction on this. I'm defending my apostleship. I am defending the reasons why a lot of the critics are after me. But I decided to write instead of coming, because if I came it would have been painful. Why? Because I would have to severely use my authority. And I would much rather continue to get things in place so that when I get there, we can have a lot of joy together and it wouldn't be a disciplinary visit. Apostle Paul is concerned about the Church of Corinth. And we saw in First Corinthians, which again, probably is not the letter he's talking about, the painful letter that he wrote with tears. But he wrote a letter in between and that first letter we already saw, there are a lot of problems in Corinth. Well then the issue that he's dealing with, that he is about to get into in the next series in Chapter 2 verse 5 and following, he's saying, you dealt with that, I'm glad. But instead of showing up in the middle of your processing all that I wrote and the severity of what I wrote, I needed time for this to cool down. I needed some time for you to get things in order. I needed time for you to just put a few bits of icing on the cake of finishing your repentance and working this repentance out. He's going to get into that in Chapter 7. And he says, I just want you to know that's why I didn't show up because it would have been rough. But I want to just start with the last line in our passage. Go back to Chapter 2 verse 4, "not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." So I caused pain by the letter, but I only wrote that letter because I abundantly love you. Now the word here is agape. I mean, it's still the word for love, right? I mean it's a different nuance of love, but the idea here is love, I love you. And if you wanted to use a word that was going to focus on our relationship to God together, you might use the word phileo. But you use the word agape here and the point is it's Christian love, and it's abundant Christian love. And I have love for you. And that's very important. And that is why, back up to verse 23, I didn't want to come to you because it would have been painful. Okay.

Let's just start with love at the bottom of the passage and just explain all of what we just did in our minds and say, Paul didn't do what he said he was going to do, not because he's a flake, not because he's being unfaithful, but because he strategically thought about it and said, no, it would not be good right now. And it's because I love you that I didn't come. We need to make sure that though there may be many priorities to do what we do, do why we do what we do, whatever, we need to make sure love is motivating all of it. And love makes the priorities. Right? Not expectations. Let's put it down this way. Number one, you need to "Serve by Fulfilling Love's Priorities," love's priorities. Now, we've got to start at the basics here. When



they ask Jesus, what's the greatest commandment? What does he say? So, well, there are two. But let me give you the first one. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul," strength, "and with all your mind." This is the foremost commandment. "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now, we get the love command in two directions. We love God, we love people, and particularly we love the people of God. It's the test of your Christianity whether or not you love God and love people. Now, how do I love God? First John is very clear on that. You love God if you keep his commandments. The way you love God is by doing what he says. Now, that is first and foremost. Second to that then and grows out of that, subordinate to it, subjugated to it, directed by it is me loving you. I'm supposed to love the people of God just like Christ loved me, as long as I quoted John Chapter 13, that's where he ups the ante that First John constantly says, well, I know I said, you know, love your neighbor as yourself. That was the Old Testament standard. But now in John 13, he says, I'm telling you, "love one another, just as I have loved you." So he ups this a little bit and he "lays down his life" for them. I want you to go all out. Not just love others as you would love yourself, but love others like Christ loved his people. So I'm supposed to love vertically, then I'm supposed to love with you in a relationship within my church and say I've got to love but it's got to be governed by my keeping the commandments of God. So that's the priority ultimately. I've got to see you in light of God and whatever I'm doing for you it's got to be within the boundaries and the commands of what God wants for you and what God wants for me. I can't love outside of that. So everything about how to love can't be defined like the world loves it because the world just looks at the two people who say they love each other, whether it's friendship or marriage or whatever it may be, and that's all they care about. It's a two-dimensional reality. Christian love is a three-dimensional really. It's always thinking about what does God think? What does God think? What does God command? What are God's parameters? What would transgress God's will? Okay.

Now I always quote this, but it's a good one. It's Paul praising Timothy in Philippians Chapter 2. In Philippians Chapter 2, if you want to jot down the verse, verse 20 Philippians Chapter 2. I know where it is in the middle of the chapter. Great Christological truths about Christ. We should love like Christ loves. And then he gives an example with someone who's got skin on. And he says, let me talk about now Timothy. Let me talk to my comrade Timothy. Timothy he loves. And he says, "I've got no one," who loves like he loves, no one else, "like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare." You want five words that describe love for other people in the context of Christianity with God in view, Timothy loves people genuinely, and it's a concern, and it's for their good, for their welfare, as defined by God's truth. So I only want what God wants for you. I only want what God wants for you. And that needs to go back to thinking about how Paul prioritized this trip. He didn't prioritize his reputation because his reputation is taking it on the chin because he didn't come when he said he was going to come. He said he's going to come twice and he didn't come at all. And the critics are saying Paul's a flake. He's just a flake. But here, Paul is saying, you know, what's best for you within the context of God? And here's the thing. I've got to choose to prioritize what is best for you, in light of you growing spiritually, as he says here, and he's going to say it in the context of our passage, I want you to be growing in your faith. I want you to be established in your faith, I



want "you to stand firm in your faith." So he wants the relationship with God, with those people to be just what it ought to be.

Understand love, a genuine concern for the welfare of others is going to get us to feel what they feel, because feelings are a big part, frankly, of how people are going to respond to whatever it is that we're going to say. It's why we put air conditioning in the church. The reality of how you are conditioned and even how you feel has a lot to do with how you're going to receive whatever it is that you need to hear. And setting the context for it. Remember Esther trying to set the context for what she wanted the king to do, what she knew was God's will. And so she wanted the king to do what God's will was. And so, she sets the context and Esther has a banquet. And all I'm saying is, Paul is saying if I were to come right now, it would be wrong because I've already written you and I hear it's a struggle. It's a painful rebuke. And you're basically under the discipline of the Apostle Paul. And if I'm to show up right now, like I said I would, this wouldn't be good. If this is the feeling in the room, it'd be the wrong time.

Do you remember the old proverb, and I quote it from time to time, about if you greet your neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be reckoned to him as a curse, right? If you're leaving at 4:30 in the morning to go to work and you honk your horn outside your neighbor's bedroom and say, hey, good morning. Have a great day. Lord bless you. It will be considered to him a curse, because he doesn't get up as early as you do. And the point is, don't honk your horn and greet your neighbor at 4:30 in the morning. And the point is it's the wrong time. It's not going to be well-received. That's going to be hard to do, especially when we as Christians are called, just to quote the book of Ephesians, to wake up sleepers and let Christ shine on you. So I am supposed to be waking people up. Be careful how you wake people up to the truth of whatever it is that God wants them to do. If you're discipling, if you're serving, if you're just being a friend to someone, you just need to decide a lot of times, what's the right time for all this? Love's priorities are going to dictate that because you're going to take into account their feelings.

Now, in a culture that's gone crazy on this, we understand that if you just make feelings the entirety of what it means to love someone, I just want to make them feel good. We have people in the church like that. They're a "peace at any price" kind of people. I will love you as long as it feels good to you. That's not the Apostle Paul. He is caring about the third party. Christian love is three-dimensional. I care about what God thinks. I want your welfare which is not if you feel good. And I don't want to feel with you if in fact what you're feeling is wrong. I want to make sure that I care about your feelings because communicating truth in this is very important. Jesus is moved, right? And the word is "compassion" in the text, but it's the word "Splagchna." He's moved by compassion. And we've already learned, if you think about this, First John 3 verse 17 says that if someone has a need and you close your heart to them, that's the phrase, it's really the word, splagchna, which means your gut. If you don't feel it in your gut, if you make sure you don't feel it, then you walk away. Well that Pastor Mike I'm not giving if I felt it then I would give. And he says in the context it would be the right thing because Christ lay down his life for us we should lay down our lives for the brother if they have a need and I close my splagchna, close my gut, if I don't feel with them about their need then how can the love of God abide in you, it doesn't.



The reality though is you can give, First Corinthians 13:3, without the splanchna. And all I'm saying is the splanchna, the feeling, is not the dictation of all that's right. Matter of fact, sometimes you're supposed to close your heart toward people. In Exodus, remember we're hearing the laws given to a nation and national leaders about how they're supposed to set up their nation when they get to the Promised Land. And it speaks a lot about what God had already said in the Noahic Covenant back in Genesis Chapter 9, that if someone sits in wait and hatred and kills someone, that you're supposed to kill that person. And that has to happen for the land not to be polluted and the blood of those people who were killed by people who had malice aforethought as they laid in wait for them and killed them. The Bible says God is going the curse the land if there's not justice and that means that people made in the image of God cannot be slain without his murderer or her murderer being executed by the state. And in passages in Exodus, for instance, where the requirements of the civil law are being given, it makes it clear that you're not supposed to open your splanchna to these people, the Old Testament word, you're not to show them pity, your "eye shall not pity them," so that you can do what you've got to do, and that is to expiate, you can get out of the land, cleanse the land from the wickedness, and capital murder should be responded to by the life of the one who laid in wait with hatred in his heart, it says in the text of Scripture, with malice aforethought, as it says, in Deuteronomy, you are to have them executed.

And you can say, well, I'm sitting here, and the context, by the way, is after talking about the Cities of Refuge, there are six cities, three on the east side of the Jordan and three on west side of the Jordan, and you can run to those cities if you accidentally had your millstone fall on a worker and kill him. And if the brother-in-law of the guy who died in your field wants to be the avenger of blood, you could run to the City of Refuge and make your case before the elders of the city. This is what's called the City of Refuge. And if, in fact, there was some kind of negligence that you did or had or they said they ruled that you were negligent, well, then you'd be stuck in the City of Refuge, you'd be imprisoned in the City of Refuge until the death of the high priest. Do you remember all these rules of the Old Testament if you're reading the Daily Bible Reading with us? Well, if it wasn't because of negligence. If it wasn't manslaughter, these words come from Scripture, but it was capital murder, well, then as soon as you got there and the avenger of blood showed up, it says, do not pity the person that murdered the person. Close your heart toward them. Don't feel with them. Don't have compassion. As a matter of fact, turn him over to the avenger of blood after the elders of the city realize, no, this isn't negligence. This isn't manslaughter. This is capital murder. This is malice aforethought. This is lying in wait. This is hatred in the heart. And that kind of criminal needs to be executed. And let it happen. And don't pity.

Well, I may have spent three or four days with this murderer not knowing all the details, I may like the guy, I may look at his bad childhood and say, well, it's really rough for him and I can understand. No, no, no. Once the avenger of blood gets there the Bible's very clear, you are not supposed to pity them. So I'm not supposed to feel with anyone in any situation, right? I need to differentiate situations based on my love for God and my love for God is superior to all my love for other people, but I'm not talking about that here. I'm talking about you coming to church, or you sitting in a small group, or you talking to someone in the patio or in the lobby



today, and caring for them when they say hey, I lost my job, would you pray for me? And you say, oh, I'll pray for you. That could be a First Corinthians 13:3 thing. You give of your time to pray. You even write it down on your phone so that you remember to pray, but you're just checking a box because you don't feel with them. You don't have the sympathy or the compassion. You don't feel the splanchna of what it's like to be without a job or not to know what's coming in the future because you don't have the security of income. Do you see what I'm saying? There has to be for us proper splanchna, proper compassion, proper sympathy in the Christian life. Because I know that love dictates that because there is this compassion that God continually talks about that he has.

Even Jesus, Matthew Chapter 9, he looks at the crowd, he sees they're "like sheep without a shepherd," and he has splanchna, compassion on them. Jesus was going across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples after news of John the Baptist's death came to Jesus and he was grieving. He went across, he saw the crowds and he went out and he taught them because they needed his teaching because he felt compassion for them. He didn't even want to send the people home like the disciples did when there were 5,000 men and their families out there and there was nothing for them to eat. Well, just get them back to their own villages. Let them get a late dinner. And Jesus has compassion for people.

All I'm saying is if you don't have compassion in coming to your ministry post, in going to your Partner's appointment, in coming do whatever it is that you do in your small group to fellowship, to pray for one another, to support one another, to care for one another, if you don't enter into the struggles of those people, then love's not dictating the priorities for you. The reality of how you function, even down to your own reputation needs to be subordinate to the fact that you love people so sincerely with a tender heart, there was the word, First Peter 3:8, "A tender heart, and a humble mind." And some of you have been Christians for 35 years, you've lost that sense of a tender heart and a humble mind. We need that, we need that and we need you to maintain it. For if you're a new Christian, you've got to have this for the totality of your Christian life. Does that speak to anybody this morning? No? Should we just quit the sermon at this point, it's not working? This isn't working. Know that love's priorities aren't going to meet people's expectations sometimes, not even your own.

All right, back to our text. Verse 24. I know we're making slow progress here. But I'm just making sure you get something out of this sermon here this morning. Second Corinthians Chapter 1 verse 24, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you to stand firm in your faith." Now, Paul could have come on scene and been severe with his authority. But he said, I don't want to do that. And at some point, I just think for us not being apostles, right? And in the end, my influence on people, I just need to know at some point, I've got to live in this verse because I really don't have any real authority. You're not my teenage son. I can't do anything really, I can't ground you. So if there's somebody who is doing something like saying, would you pray for me about a job? I need a job. And I say, well, how's it going this week in your interviews and the applications? Well, I didn't do anything, I just went golfing every day. Well, then you should have something to say about that. But here's the deal, your influence on that person to say, well, there should be some diligence and some discipline and you should really work at this because you're asking me to pray for



this and I feel for you, but you've got to do something here. Even that, you need to understand this, there are limits because you can tell someone to do the right thing, you can pray for someone to do right thing and you can want the best for someone as Timothy did for the Philippians, have a genuine concern for their welfare, but you cannot bring it about.

Number two, "Know the Limits of Your Influence," and you've got to live with that for the entirety of your Christian life. You can't make people do what you know is the best thing for them to do. And if you don't catch that, you will become someone who tries to lord it over people's faith, and in reality it won't get you anywhere anyway. And I understand how this works. It's harder for even pastors in this regard. Because we have a little bit of authority, not the apostolic authority, but at least we can say, well, I am your pastor. And even that, I got to realize, what are the limits of my authority in someone's life? I should help to direct, I should counsel and all that, and you should too. All of us should be instructing one another and caring for each other and counseling each other and directing each other and being a godly influence to each other. But there's a limit to that.

Turn over to a passage with me that may be helpful. I think I take you here, Philippians Chapter 1, in your small group questions. I'd have to look that up, but you could flip over the worksheet and confirm it for me. Okay, thank you. Philippians Chapter 1:21. I don't know if I started in 21. Yes. Okay. That's good, I did, right? Did I start in 21? Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Thank you. Let's start there, as long as I'm going to take you there in your small groups. "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." So, the Kool-Aid's in the lobby, let's just go drink it and be done. That's a Georgetown reference, no? Jim Jones, anybody? It makes sense to me. I got mine, you got yours, we're all Christians. Suicide, anyone? Right? No! Why? Well, "If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me." That's why we don't kill ourselves. "Yet, which should I choose I cannot tell? I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ." I had a caller on the show this week if you listen to the Q&A show this week and he was seriously saying, I'm suicidal, I want to depart and be with Christ. I said, I get you. I didn't give him the response that he wanted. Thankfully, he's still alive. He didn't kill himself. But I said I get it. I'm with you. I would rather depart and be with Christ. Mix the Kool-Aid, let's go. But I can't because of the rest of this verse. Right? "It is far better to depart and be with Christ, but to remain on in the flesh is more necessary," for anyone else that you may rub shoulders with.

That's why monasteries, that's why the desert in isolation is not how you live the Christian life. "Convinced of this," that I got more to do here, "I know I will remain on and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith." That's the goal of the Christian life. "So that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again." I'm going to come to Philippi and at my funeral you're going to say Paul was a good guy, look at how he influenced me for Christ. And you'll glory in Christ. You'll thank God for me if I can continue to do something to help your faith progress and give you joy as you continue to grow in the Christian life. So that's the goal. Now, how painful is it for Paul, the last book he ever wrote, the last letter, Second Corinthians, to weep over people like Alexander the coppersmith who's caused me such harm. It was hard. But why didn't you just tell him what to do? Well, I did, but he didn't do it. Why? Because I can't make him do it! What about the people who



deserted him when it was really hard? He said, everybody's deserted me. I can't change that. John Mark, why don't you tell him to suck it up and stay on the mission field with you? I can't. I can't do that.

Now Jesus could do whatever he wanted, but he laid down an example for us in the gospel of Mark when he dealt with a rich young ruler. Do you remember that story? I think this is all written for us here, Mark Chapter 10. And he tells him the commandments, keep the commandments. But he starts in the second tablet of the law because he knows the real problem is in the first tablet of the law. He thinks, if I just get in the Ten Commandments, maybe this guy will realize he doesn't love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He doesn't love God above all others. He has an idol in his heart. But he says, no, I've done all the things on the second tablet of the law, I'm all about it. "I've kept these from my youth," verse 20, if you're with me on this, Mark 10:20. I didn't make you turn there, but here it is. Verse 21, you know the verse, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," I just love that phrase that's in Mark's text to remind us that Jesus loved him, "and said to him, 'One thing you still lack,'" but you're not there yet. And now he's going to point out the problem with the first tablet of the law in particular, the law, "To have no other gods before God." "'Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." And Jesus, verse 23, chased after him, tackled him and said, I love you, you just come in however you want to do it, you don't have to give, just make 10% is fine.

Do you remember that? No. Jesus didn't run after him. Well, he didn't really love him like he loved Peter. No, he loved him. This is a template for us. You and I are going to live this experience for the entirety of our Christian life. Let's just run the clock forward. Let's just say by God's grace we live together in this church for another 15 years. And I'm still preaching and you're still coming and we're still reaching people for Christ. We're still planting churches. I guarantee you, there will be people who sit here with us this morning and will not be with us 15 years from now. We'll invest in them, we'll pray for them, we'll pray for them. They'll get entangled in some cult or some vice or they'll be... whatever they'll be and they'll flame out. They'll become Alexander the coppersmith and cause us great harm. Because we can't stop that. All I'm telling you is you need to know the extent of your influence. Jesus didn't chase after this man, which I think is all there for us. You can only do so much. And what's the "much" you must do? Make sure you have a clear conscience. You remember Paul saying, I have a clear conscience when he's leaving Ephesus, he says to the people, my hands are clean. I didn't stop, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable." The blood is not on my hands. That's a clear conscious.

That parable in Ezekiel, it's like the watchman on the wall. If he sees the army coming and he doesn't blow the trumpet, well then he's responsible for the people who die in the city. But if he does blow the trumpet and the people choose not to listen, well, he's okay. He's done his responsibility. And the point is this, you have a responsibility to tell people, to influence people, to care about their spiritual welfare and have them make progress in the faith. But they may not do it. And at some point, you've got to be like Jesus and let them walk away. And some of us aren't good at that. Sometimes we exacerbate the problem by tackling them



and saying, no, no, no, let me change all this. We can't change anything about the message. We can't change anything about the goals. We can't change the definition of your welfare. Do you follow what I'm saying? So in your ministry, particularly when we get past, you know, whatever service post you may have into the interpersonal workings of you having a life that tries to affect another life for Christ in programs like our discipleship program, our one-on-one Partners program, things like that, or leading a small group, things like that. That's where this will be the hardest because you need to know the limits of your influence and there's only so much you can do.

Back to our passage, four verses left, at least three and a half. "I made up my mind," verse 1, "not to make another painful visit to you. For if I had to cause pain, who is there to make me glad except the one whom I've pained?" I want to come rejoice in the progress of your faith. That's what he says in verse 24, right? I want to "work with you for your joy." And that's kind of even anachronistic because to stand firm in your faith must precede the joy because once you stand firm in your faith then you see the joy of standing firm in faith. It's a product, joy is a product. And he says that's what I want. I want you to do the right thing and I want to come and all of us celebrate the progress of your spiritual growth. So I made up my mind not to come because it would be premature, the wrong time. And if I were to come and cause pain, man, I want to be glad with you. I can't rejoice. You are the one that I pained and that's not it. That's not going to work. "So I wrote as I did, so that when I came I may not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice." I wanted to give you a letter so you could get things in order and do what you should do so that when I get there, we can all rejoice in your progress and your obedience. "For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all." I knew you would do the right thing. And I just couldn't come at that time. "For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears." I had to tell you the right thing to do. I didn't compromise the truth.

But in essence, what are we saying? I didn't want to cause you pain. Well, I did cause you pain. Well, how does this work? He knew that showing up would be unnecessary pain because he'd already said what he needed to say. It's like Jesus. He's not going to chase him down and say, did you hear what I said? I said, give away all you have. You know, give your stuff to the poor and follow me. Did you not hear me? No, he heard him. That's why he walked away. And the Corinthians heard Paul. They knew what to do. If I were going to show up then and just amplify that message and repeat, he said, I was just going to give you time, because I knew you'd come around. Number three, let's just put it this way. You need to "Avoid Causing Unnecessary Pain," in your love and your service for people. And let me talk to you parents. You're parents of teenagers, right? Don't cause unnecessary pain. I need you to be a disciplinarian, absolutely. But be careful how you go about your direction. Small group leaders, pastors, ministry leaders, don't cause unnecessary pain. There's pain that needs to be had. And he says in verse 4, "I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears." Why? Because I knew that the letter caused you pain. I didn't want to cause pain. I loved you, but I knew the message would cause you pain. There was a disciplinary action that needed to happen in your congregation, and I wrote you to do it, and I know you were struggling with it.



Is it the same as the one in First Corinthians? Most scholars think probably not, but even that one, maybe. You've got an incestuous relationship in your church and you're prideful over that. Why would they be prideful? Because we're the church of grace. No, no, no. You need to expel that person from the church until he repents. And they were struggling, something like that as we're going to learn in verse 5 and following next week. But the reality was I'm not going to show up because right now that would cause unnecessary pain. I caused the pain, I got a cause because I'm going to stand up for the truth, but not going to exacerbate that pain.

A of couple things. Paul does not come when he says he's going to come. He's going to up. He wants to come, we see that from Chapter 13. I read that at the outset of this sermon, Second Corinthians 13. But this was the wrong time. Be strategic about your help. And let's think about this first thing. It's about timing, timing. You could harp on something and be a nag, even as a parent, and you don't need to be. You could be a nag as a small group leader. You could be a nag as a ministry leader. You could be a nag in your Partners. Listen, nagging is usually the repetition of something that doesn't need to be repeated. There needs to be consequences, and there would be consequences that Paul would have to bring. But the reality is timing and how or when to reiterate something, that was importantly possible. Remember that passage, it's famous. It was turned into a song in the '60s about, you know, for everything there's a season, right? There's a time for everything. That's Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 verse 7 says there's a time to speak and there's a time to be silent. And Paul said, I'm not going to show up because I've already written a letter and it's time for me to be silent. You're not going to see my face and you're not going to hear me say this. Just like Jesus, I didn't run after this guy and reiterate all this. He heard me.

So, there's a time for everything. It's reiterated as a theme. Most of us can quote Ecclesiastes 3, but not many of us can quote Ecclesiastes 8, where he says something so great. I don't know why this isn't on plaques. This is a great, great phrase. Ecclesiastes 8 verse 5, "Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing." That's a great line. In other words, if you just do what God says the evil of moral sin it's not going to stick to you. Here's how I put it in light of what's coming next. Just accept this for a second and then I'll prove it. It's always the right time to say no to sin. Always the right time. Right? You don't have to say, when should I stop sinning in this problem in my life? Today. Stop sinning today. It's always the right time for that. Now, listen to the next line in the middle of verse 5. "And the wise of heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything." There needs to be, I think, the wisdom in doing the right thing at the right time in the right way. And he says, the wise people are going to figure that out. They'll know the right time for it.

It's always the right time to say no to sin. But what's the right time to do the righteous thing? When's the right time for Paul to show up? It's not now. When's the right time to write another email? Maybe not today. And that's where the righteous have to seek the Lord, to find out what's pleasing to the Lord. And let's just make it strategic. What's strategically useful and effective, as best as we can know as human beings. Avoid causing unnecessary pain. Timing may help you in that regard. Knowing the right time and knowing the right way. I love it. "The proper time and the just way." What's the right way, what's the best way to do this? Is it a letter or is it a visit? Paul says it was a letter and it was hard to write the letter, but the visit is



not what we want right now. You've got to understand how to approach people. You've got to get in their sandals or their shoes, in our case, and figure out what's going to land the best here. How's it going to be the most effective?

And I can't finish this without being clear about the one we're trying to please. We're trying to please the Lord. Galatians 1:10, I could "not be a servant of Christ" if I made it my goal to please just you. I need to please God. So there's a time to speak, but there's also a time not to speak. There's a time to emphasize, there's a time to not emphasize. There has to be strategy, but it cannot be to the irresponsibility before God. And don't just blame your gut telling you to do something on God or your impatience. Don't blame God for you being an impatient person. I see a lot of that. And even in this text, when he says I was anguished, I was crying, many tears writing you the painful letter. What's that about? Well, the point is it did hurt Paul. Paul said he was bearing the burden of all the churches and when he thought about Corinth it caused him pain. When he wrote to Corinth it caused him pain. Talk about unnecessary, well, there is necessary pain. And the pain is not just you causing pain to others, but I don't think how you can cause pain to others and not have pain yourself. And I mean that. You could have a non-Christian family member who rejects Christ and you start talking about the judgment that is to come. That ought to pain you as you are painning them with the truth. You've got to have sympathy, a tender heart, humble of mind, which doesn't keep you from the fortitude of doing what's right. Paul's going to do what's right. Because he ends this with, I just wanted "you to know the abundant love that I have for you now." Love? If you love me, don't tell me that. No, no, no. I have to tell you this.

Here are two verses that are helpful, maybe three. Let's start with this, Psalm 35:13 and 14. When David is trying to vindicate himself when his enemies had turned against him, malicious witnesses had risen up against him. They repaid his good with evil. He says this, "When they were sick -- I wore sackcloth." Sackcloth was clothing of mourning. "I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with my head bowed on my chest." Three things, just because someone in his small group said, I'm sick. Talk about feeling, not just, hey, I'll pray for you, and then throwing up a sentence so that I can tell them next time I see them in the lobby, hey, I prayed for you this week. Here's David saying, "When they were sick -- I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting," I skipped meals, "I prayed with my head bowed on my chest." I didn't just throw one out as I was driving down the road. "I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother." I went out as though I grieved for my friends. In other words, he entered into the struggle of that person. If we just had a little bit more of that in our church, and as it dissipates, it dissipates, I find, in aging Christians. They just don't have a tender heart and a humble mind anymore.

How about this one, Job Chapter 30, much the same, but it's even less provoked. Job says this in defending himself, Job 30 verse 25, "Did I not weep for him whose day was hard? Was my soul not grieved for the needy?" If you have a friend in your small group who texts you and says, I had a hard day, and you go, oh, I'll pray for you. Job says, I wept when someone had a hard day. If someone had a need that wasn't getting met like a job or a car or whatever it might be, insurance they're hunting for, I was grieved in my soul. That's godliness by the way, because God had no complaints about Job. We know that from the first paragraph of the



book, blameless in his generation. What does the blameless person do? They weep for someone whose day is hard. They grieve in their soul for someone who has a need. If that sounds like New Testament truth, this is the third verse I wasn't sure I was going to give you. But First Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 26, you know the context, you don't need to turn there but it talks about us being the body. And because we are brothers or sisters in Christ, we are all a part of the same body, it says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together." That's the hard part. You may want to "Rejoice with those who rejoice," to quote Romans Chapter 12 verse 15, but we need to learn to weep with those who weep. Job did it, David did it and Paul did it. He couldn't correct someone without tears. If your heart's too calloused for that, well then you need "a tender heart and a humble mind." Love's priorities would dictate that.

Someone asked me this week, it often happens that people say the Old Testament God, he was really mean, the New Testament God is really compassionate. Well, I'd start with the book of Revelation. Read that. That's in the New Testament. A lot of judgment there. There are a lot of reasons for this and I have two or three rote answers for that. But one of the things I thought of in Exodus 22, let's start in Chapter 19. Chapter 20 is the Ten Commandments. Chapter 19 is when they're setting up for it. At the end of Chapter 19 the mountain is cordoned off. Like you can't go there. Moses is going to go up the mountain and it's scary and there are clouds and there is lightning and all those rumblings, earthquakes. And he says don't let anyone come and touch this mountain. Don't let anyone do it. Don't let an animal come near this or it will die. How firm and inflexible and unyielding is God in his commandments? I don't care who it is, don't let them near this mountain. If they touch it, they'll die. Only you can come up here. Okay, well that's an unyielding God. That's the scary God that someone called me about. He's just mean.

Two chapters later, after the giving of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 22, he talks about taking as a pledge, surety for a loan. You may take a man's cloak. It says, "If you do take a neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down." Now, what kind of down payment is that? What kind of assurance is that, right? What kind of guarantee on the loan is that if I got to give it back? Well, you got to get it back before the sun goes down, "for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me I will hear, for I am," here's the Old Testament version, "I am compassionate." I feel with those who are cold at night. That'll blow your mind. I don't want someone to be cold in their sleep. I don't know if you can have a more tender statement of the "scary" God with thunderbolts and lightning, threatening to kill people. He turns around and says, you better return that. I know you'll be without that. I mean, you can get it tomorrow, but he's got to sleep in it because he'll be cold. And if he's cold and he cries out to me, I'm going to be mad at you because I want people to be warm and cozy when they sleep. That's the God of the Old Testament.

Paul, of course, knows what it is. Galatians Chapter 2, I was quoting Galatians 1 about pleasing God. Well, in pleasing God, he says, I'm not going to please people if I have to please God and it means I can't please someone and I'll be willing to ruin my reputation to do what's right. Well, Paul goes before Peter, he said in Chapter 2, and confronts him to his face. He says, and I called him out for his hypocrisy and you know the context. And yet he's not



willing to show up at Corinth with a bunch of maturing yet immature Christians at the wrong time because it would be too painful for them. Yes. Every godly person you know, if they're truly godly, is a lot more tender-hearted than you think and feels for people more than you can imagine, or they're really not godly. They don't have a tender heart and they don't have a sympathetic approach to doing what they do. They may be firm and bold. They may call you out, like Paul calls out Peter in Galatians Chapter 2.

Luther is seen as a fiery personality, isn't he? He set out to reform the Church. It's still called the Reformation, but they didn't do much reforming because the Church wouldn't have it. They had this thing called the Council of Trent after the attempt to reform the Church, and they said we're not going to be reformed. Matter of fact, we're doubling down on all this stuff you don't like. That's what happened at the Council of Trent 450 years ago. But 500 years ago, when this all started, people looked at Luther and said he was a bull. Matter fact, at the Diet of Worms, you know the story, he stands there as they say, recant, recant, recant, and he says, I can't. I won't. His ending line, "Here I stand, I can do no other." That's an unyielding, zealous, I got to do what God says kind of man. But read about Luther sometime. He's a lot more tender than you think. He cared about the nuns in the nunnery, cared about guys who couldn't find a wife, he cared about one who couldn't find a husband, he said, I'll marry you. Amazing. You know the story of Luther's marriage? Well, okay, I don't know, maybe she was better looking than history says.

But how about this, he sat down in great care for people who couldn't read the Bible in their language. And he translated the Bible into German. Oh, he knew Hebrew, he knew Greek, he knew Aramaic, but they didn't. You know how long it takes to translate the whole Bible? Some of you haven't even read the whole Bible. He sat there and translated into his native tongue so people could have it. You want to talk about compassion? A man who loved people, and I could go on about that. But real godly people are unyielding and inflexible about doing what God says and yet they probably feel for people a lot more than you think. YOU need to be that kind of person. I need you to be more zealous. We preach about that a lot. Today I want you to feel with people. Let it dictate even how you go about doing what you do. Be "tender-hearted and humble in mind," and unyielding about the truth.

Let's pray. God help us as Christians in the midst of our day, tempted as many are to try and find peace at any price and just care about people's feelings and we feel for people and we don't really think about you God. I know that's not an option for us. We want the welfare of other people and that doesn't mean they get whatever feels good to them. Just like parents don't give their toddlers whatever they feel like they want. We have to have that anchoring, as some are rightly pointing out in these new books, as it's important, we've got to be anchored in the truth. But we don't want to take away the fact that we have to feel with people who are lost and blind and people who are struggling through repentance. God, let us be careful about how we go about pleasing you and even entering in just now as it'll be put to a test when someone says, yeah, can you pray for me? Let us get in the shoes of someone having a hard day and grieve with them, have our soul touched by someone who has a need and do more than prayer. Just even as that text says there in First John 3 verse 17, I don't want to say be warmed and be filled, just go on your way and I hope it all works out. Let's get involved in



people's lives and meet needs, do what we can at the right time and the right way as Ecclesiastes 8 reminds us. Thanks for your Word, thanks that it "is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path." Let it guide us this week to be more sympathetic, serving Christians.

In Jesus' name. Amen.