

# A Painful but Necessary Rebuke

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Morning, my name's Archie. If we haven't met, I'm one of the pastors in training here. If you don't know me, and you might be thinking, I've been here for a couple of months, how have I not met this guy who works for the church yet? It's because I haven't been to a morning service here in at least a month, maybe even a couple of months. Katie, my wife and I, we're on our way out of the door here and on our way down to People's Evangelical Church, as Al prayed for us earlier. And that really is a bittersweet thing for us.

And genuinely, we're going to really miss it here. This has been a brilliant church for us. But we are loving life in Peebles and we do appreciate your prayers. Please ask me more about Peebles. If you want to hear about that, just come and chat to me after the service.

But before we dive into God's word together, why don't I pray for us as we do that? Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we've just sung, we bow our hearts before you now.

We bend our knees and we ask that as we come to your word together, your spirit would make us humble to receive it as we ought. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And so do get the Bible open to 2 Corinthians chapter 7. As Reuben said, that's on page 1163 of the Pew Bibles. It's really my job to get out of the way, to let God do the talking and to speak to us through his word.

[ 1 : 2 6 ] So you'd be crazy not to have it open in front of you. Get it open. And as you do that, let me just tell a kind of story to get us into this text. I used to help on these Christian camps and we did this wonderful thing at these camps.

We would meet together as leaders every day. We'd just spend 15 minutes or so and we'd sit there. And for those 15 minutes, we'd intentionally encourage one another.

It might be really specific things like, hey, Rory, I saw you filling up everyone's cup with water at lunchtime. You're great at serving other people first. You're so selfless. And it might be much more generic than that.

Just like, hey, Lucy, you're a really kind person, something like that. And it was great. Those meetings, they were great. You can imagine leaving those meetings. We were all positively glowing.

And of course we were, because it's great to be encouraged like that, to be affirmed in what you're doing. It feels really good to be encouraged and to be affirmed. It does not feel good to be challenged or corrected or rebuked.

[ 2 : 3 4 ] How do you feel when somebody rebukes you? And when they point something out in you, maybe expose your sin, tell you that you're getting something wrong. It's not a nice feeling that, is it?

But the truth is, we do sometimes need to hear that. We do sometimes need, all of us, rebuke and correction. Certainly I do.

Because as Christians, if you're a Christian in the room, we have been forgiven. If you're here this morning, you're not a Christian. This is right at the heart of what we believe.

This is what Jesus offers, forgiveness. That if we trust in him, our sin has been paid for and it has been dealt with. That there is therefore now no condemnation for us.

But that doesn't mean that we are now perfect, that we now never sin. You probably know that about yourself. You'll be aware of some of your sin.

[ 3 : 3 2 ] You definitely know that about the people that you spend time with, don't you? I mean, if you spent more than five minutes with me, probably less than five minutes, you'd realize very quickly that I am not rid of sin.

I am forgiven. I am not condemned. But I am not perfect. And I do want to make progress in the Christian life. I want to become less sinful.

I want to be more aware of my sins so that I can do something about it and turn away from it. A rebuke, a correction, it's not a nice thing to receive. But it is therefore sometimes necessary. And do you know, it's not just not a nice thing to receive a rebuke. But giving a rebuke is not a nice thing to have to do either, is it? I don't think it's a nice thing to have to correct or challenge someone.

Maybe you do enjoy that. I just don't think it's a very nice thing. But again, sin is horrible. Sin hurts the person doing the sinning.

[ 4 : 30 ] And it hurts the people around them. And of course, it causes offense to God. We do sometimes need to rebuke a sinner. It doesn't feel good. But it is sometimes necessary.

A rebuke. It does not feel good to give or to receive. But in our passage this morning, we would be encouraged that the product of a timely and a well-received rebuke, the product of that, is going to be joy.

Before we dig into some of the details of the text, it's going to be helpful to think about some of the events in the background of this letter that we've been reading together. If you've been here over the last few months, you'll know.

This letter comes as one of a series of letters from Paul to the church in Corinth. We have two of them, two of them in our Bibles, 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. But really, this is at least the fourth letter that Paul has written and sent to the church there in Corinth.

Our 1 Corinthians mentions a previous letter, which means there must have been one before it. Then you get what we call 1 Corinthians. And we know that shortly after writing 1 Corinthians, Paul made a brief and painful visit to that city.

[ 5 : 43 ] And we read about that way back in chapter 2 of this letter, if you can remember. And whatever Paul saw and experienced when he visited Corinth, it fractured their relationship, his relationship with the church there.

So much so that he didn't want to visit them again. Instead, it prompted him to write a third letter. He left Corinth and he wrote again, a letter that he describes here as tearful and severe.

A letter that in our chapter this morning in verse 8, he says grieved the church in Corinth. We don't really know anything about the precise content of that letter. We don't know what he was rebuking them for, but we know that it was a sharp rebuke.

And as rebukes always do, it hurt them. It caused them sorrow. And Paul sends this harsh letter with his friend Titus. He then heads himself to Macedonia.

Again, if you remember, way back in chapter 2, we learned about this. He goes to this place called Troas first. He doesn't stay in Troas very long because Titus isn't there. And he heads then to Macedonia.

[ 6 : 49 ] And he's in Macedonia waiting for Titus to return to him. That's really where we've got to in the narrative of this letter and of Paul's journey. We left off there in chapter 2.

And we haven't actually heard anything about Titus or Macedonia in this letter since chapter 2. But now in verse 5 of our chapter, look at verse 5. We pick up the narrative again.

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. So we hear again, Paul is in Macedonia. He's waiting to hear how the church in Corinth have responded to his severe letter.

Waiting to hear how they've responded to his rebuke. And he's terrified. You see the language there because it had been such a harsh letter. And then you get this wonderful verse 6.

But God, but God who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus. So Titus arrives. And that turns out to be a great comfort to Paul.

[ 7 : 55 ] And before we go any further into our passage, this might just be a word that some of us in the room need to hear this morning. That God comforts the downcast. He does that.

Our God is in the business of stilling the anxious hearts of his people. He delights to comfort those who are suffering. And notice here how he does that.

It's not through some mystical experience. It's not a sort of wonderful feeling during a worship set or a prayer session. God comforts Paul by the coming of Titus.

God uses Paul's friend to bring him comfort. It's God who does the comforting in this verse. But he uses Titus to do it. And just so for us, God's comfort so often comes through a timely word and

encouragement.

Or even just the presence and friendship of a fellow Christian. But it was not the mere fact of Titus' coming that brought Paul comfort.

[ 8 : 56 ] It did do that. But more comfort than that in verse 7. Not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you.

And he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. Paul is happy to see Titus. He's comforted by seeing him.

But even more, he is comforted and rejoicing because of the report that Titus brings. Remember, he sent the church in Corinth this letter. And this is how they've responded to the letter.

We'll see. They've responded really well to Paul's rebuke. So that's what's going on in the kind of background of the letter. The narrative setting, if you like, of what we're reading here.

As we walk through the rest of the text, three things for us to take away. Three things to remember. First of all, to offer a rebuke is painful.

[ 9 : 53 ] Secondly, to receive a rebuke is also painful. And finally, we'll see that a well-received rebuke produces repentance and leads to joy.

So first, to offer a rebuke is painful. If you look at verse 8 with me, it says this. 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. Paul didn't enjoy having to rebuke the church in Corinth.

He even regretted sending the letter for a time. We saw in chapter 2 that he literally wrote this letter with tears. Because to offer a rebuke is a painful thing to have to do.

And there's this brilliant scene in the first Harry Potter film. Harry, Ron and Hermione, the three main characters, they're about to head out of their common room into the middle of the night.

They're on a mission to stop the bad guy.

[ 10 : 53 ] And they've decided it's worth breaking school rules to do that. But just as they're leaving, they bump into Neville. Neville is the kind of bumbling and slightly useless guy in their class.

You know the sort of character. And Neville challenges them. He says this. You're sneaking out again, aren't you? I won't let you. You'll get us into trouble again. Imagine how difficult that must have been for Neville to say.

To challenge his friends like that. And his challenge falls on deaf ears. Harry, Ron and Hermione, they head out anyway. They defeat the bad guy. But at the very end of the film, Dumbledore, the headmaster, he doesn't just honour Harry, Ron and Hermione's victory.

He does do that. But in fact, he gives even more honour to Neville. He says this. It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but a great deal more to stand up to your friends.

And, you know, I think that's exactly right. We don't like it, do we? We don't like to do it. Maybe you do, but most of us probably don't like to offer our friends correction. Maybe that's because you're just very aware of your own sin and you don't want to be a hypocrite or to be accused of hypocrisy.

[ 12 : 06 ] Maybe it's just so much easier for you not to, to avoid the potential conflict. You don't want to offend anyone. To offer a rebuke, it is a painful thing to have to do, but it is sometimes necessary because here's the thing, right?

I sin. I don't want to sin, but I do sin. And there are lots of ways that I sin and I don't even know that I'm sinning. As members of this church together, you should be, very often you will be, better placed than I am to see my sin.

And so if I'm going to make progress in the Christian life, I need you to be prepared to go through the pain of offering me a gentle rebuke. In fact, pointing out my missteps and helping me see where I'm going wrong, casting light on the darkness of my sin, we have to say that's going to be the really loving thing to do.

And Proverbs, that great book of wisdom in the Old Testament, has plenty to say about rebuking and correcting one another like this. Just one example, and in chapter 27, verses 5 and 6 say this. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted. But an enemy multiplies kisses. It is really good to just honestly rebuke a friend.

[ 13 : 22 ] It is painful. It causes wounds. But it is good. Now, of course, there is an unloving way to rebuke or to correct someone. This is not a license to criticize or to bully or to be unnecessarily harsh.

But a loving and gentle rebuke is sometimes going to be necessary. And no matter how gentle you are with it, no matter how loving you are with it, it's still going to be painful to have to do.

Are you prepared to go through that pain for the sake of one another? Do you love them enough to do that? Because to offer a rebuke is painful.

To receive a rebuke is also painful. Maybe this is slightly more obvious, but look again at verse 8.

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. This letter, it caused them sorrow. It hurt them.

And of course it did. Nobody likes to be told that they've got it wrong, that they need to change.

[14:24] Receiving a rebuke is painful. And if you're a parent, you know this, don't you? I'm not a parent. I did used to be a child. I know that's quite difficult to believe, but it is true.

And I have nephews and nieces. And so I've seen this, right? They're clearly doing something wrong. Maybe they just hit one of their siblings or something like that. And so their mum or dad has to tell them off. They have to rebuke them.

And even though the child knows that they were in the wrong, they know that they deserve to be told off. Clearly when they're told off, it still hurts them. Very often when a told off child is told off, they start crying, don't they?

Even though they know they did something wrong. Most of us aren't children anymore. I hope, I'm sure that we don't need to be told off for hitting our siblings. But we do know the feeling of being rebuked.

Don't we? And the truth is, we don't like it. We don't like correction. To be told that we're doing something wrong. I confess, I can be really bad at this, at receiving a rebuke.

[15:25] And when I'm told that I'm getting something wrong, I hate it. It's really painful. Honestly, there are times when that makes me want to cry. But the pain that we feel when we are rebuked, do you know, it isn't actually always the same sort of pain.

Maybe you notice this as Reuben read our passage for us. In our passage, there are two possible sorrows following a rebuke. See how Paul describes them in verse 10. One is godly sorrow, and the other is worldly sorrow.

So big question for us this morning is, what is the difference between those two types of sorrow? And we'll see in just a moment that the really big difference is in what those types of sorrow produce.

We'll come back to that. But it's not just in what they produce. I think they do actually also feel different. It's worth taking a minute just to think about how each of these might feel. What does worldly sorrow feel like?

How? In what ways is it painful? You know, very often when the child is rebuked for hitting their brother or sister, and we see they want to cry, it's not because they're actually sorry for what they've done.

[16:33] It's because they've been caught. And honestly, I think that's the default for most of us when we're rebuked. For me, my immediate instinct is to excuse myself, to play the victim card, to feel sorry for myself.

I might actually regret the thing I needed to be rebuked for in my better moments, but ultimately, I regret it mostly because of the way it's made people think of me. To be rebuked, it's horrible, it's painful, but ultimately, my sorrow is almost always self-absorbed.

It's about me. And that's worldly sorrow. That's how that feels. Sadly, and I think much more rare, certainly more rare for me, is the pain of godly sorrow. When I'm made aware of some sin in my life, when a friend offers a rebuke, and I'm not primarily concerned with my own good reputation, but concerned with the offense that I've caused, the damage that I've done to other people, and ultimately, the offense that I've caused God, that feels very different.

And that is the pain of godly sorrow. We'll come back to those in a bit more detail. But for now, see that either way, whether it's godly sorrow or worldly sorrow, receiving a rebuke is always painful. But it is worth it, because a well-received rebuke produces repentance and leads to joy. And you know, the stakes could not be higher here.

[18:05] I see again in verse 10, godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation, and worldly sorrow brings death. Do you see what's at stake here?

It is eternal life, salvation, or death. And so it is a really important question, isn't it? Godly sorrow, worldly sorrow, we've thought about the difference in how they feel, but the really key difference in

this passage is in what they produce.

Because godly sorrow produces repentance, a turning around, a real change away from sin and towards God. And in verse 11 in the church in Corinth, that's exactly how they respond.

It produces earnestness. That's a speed, a haste, a diligence in that change, an eagerness to clear themselves, to continue having turned around with a clear conscience, to turn from their sin, to not turn back to it.

This is the response of godly sorrow. That's true repentance. And notice back in verse 7, and also a hint of it in verse 13, that part of that good response for the church in Corinth is a return to Paul.

[ 19 : 21 ] And part of their error that he was rebuking them for, I think, must have been a departure from what he was teaching. That was a particular danger in Corinth where we know there were people teaching a gospel that was different to Paul's, so-called super apostles in these letters.

And so Paul is especially concerned by their fractured relationship with him. He's worried about the influence of false teaching in Corinth, and their return to him is therefore a return to the true gospel. And I just want to say that I think that's very current for us. There are lots of individuals, there are many churches, who have walked away from the apostles' teaching, who have denied the inerrancy and the truth of Scripture, who in doing so deny the sort of reality and substance of sin, and who by denying Paul are leading people astray, away from salvation and towards death.

And for Corinth, and for many today, repentance is going to include a return to Paul and his teaching. But of course, that return to Paul, it is just part of a much more important repentance. For Corinth, they'd return to Paul's teaching, but much more importantly, they had turned away from their sin, and they had turned back to God. You know, the gospel is the most incredible good news.

[ 20 : 54 ] That God would offer us forgiveness, that he would die in our place in order to do that, that he would rise again so that we might be able to as well. It's incredible good news.

And it demands a response. Real repentance. That is not to say, and hear this loud and clear, that our salvation and our forgiveness and our eternal life is somehow conditional on our own efforts in turning away from sin.

It is the cross, the blood. It is Jesus' death. It's not your sorrow that cleanses you from sin. It is not your repentance that earns you his forgiveness.

It is him. He has done that for you. And by his grace, the response that he then will lead you in is repentance. Ask yourself, has your sorrow at your sin led you to the foot of the cross?

Has your sorrow at your sin seen you turn to him to cry out, I cannot bear this burden on my own, to ask him to remove it for you?

[ 22 : 03 ] Anything short of that godly sorrow is worldly sorrow that leads to death. It is worldly sorrow, the opposite of godly sorrow.

It is sorrow at having been rebuked, sorrow at having had your sin called out, pointed out to you, sorrow even at the sin itself, but with no repentance, no turning back to God, no forsaking of your sin, and that leads to death.

Sorrow in and of itself doesn't do anything. You know, I had a friend at university. We were in the rugby club together. He was one of those annoying people who was just good at everything.

And he was one of the best players on our team. And he was smashing his degree. He had a lovely girlfriend. But he could be really quite badly behaved. Wednesday night after rugby games, we'd always have a team social.

And he just always seemed to take it a bit too far. Occasionally dabbling with drugs. Occasionally cheating on his girlfriend. And one Thursday, I got a text from him saying that he'd messed up again and asking if we could go for coffee.

[ 23 : 11 ] And we did. And he just explained to me how his life was feeling pretty empty. None of his success on the rugby pitch or in the classroom was really giving him any of the satisfaction that the world had promised him that it would.

And that was an obvious opening for me to share something of this good news about Jesus that I believe in. That he could be forgiven and free and find true satisfaction in him.

And of course, doing that included showing him that he was sinful. Sinful in all sorts of fundamental ways. Right to the core of who he was. But the way that he was living his life, there were some pretty obvious things that I could rebuke him for too.

And as I shared that with him, he was clearly really affected by it. You can picture this big hulking rugby player sitting in the coffee shop. And he started to cry.

He felt genuine remorse and sorrow for how he had been behaving. Actually, over the kind of months that followed that, we were able to read John's gospel together.

[ 24 : 19 ] He continued to be sorrowful over his sin. It was a real sorrow. But it was only ever a worldly sorrow. Do you know, he's still living that same kind of life years later.

I still pray for him, that God would give him real godly sorrow, that he would be led to repentance. To a changed life. You see the difference then between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow, the difference is in what they produce.

Worldly sorrow does not produce a change. It does not lead you to the cross. There's no turn away from sin, no turn towards God. Godly sorrow, on the other hand, produces repentance, a turn away from sin and towards God.

It's worth reflecting for a moment again, just thinking about your own sin, sin that you're aware of. Maybe you've been made aware of it following the gentle rebuke of a friend.

Maybe the Holy Spirit has convicted us of sin in some other way. And I guess that almost always, being made aware of our sin produces some kind of sorrow in us. But as you think about your own sin, just honestly, what sort of sorrow do you feel for it?

[ 25 : 38 ] Are you primarily concerned with yourself? With how your sin makes you look in other people's eyes?

With the negative effects that you know that sin is having in your life? Is yours a worldly sorrow? Or do you have that kind of sorrow? Sorrow at the offense that you have caused God?

Sorrow at the hurt that you've caused others? And you'll know, because if you have that kind of sorrow, it will lead you to repentance, to turning away from your sin.

That is not becoming sinless, but a desire to flee from sin and to return to the cross, to cry out, and you can do this right now, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. You know, for the church in Corinth, there really was a godly sorrow. It produced real repentance, which led in verse 13 to Paul being encouraged.

[ 26 : 53 ] Their response, it refreshed Titus. Paul had, in verse 14, Paul had boasted about this church to Titus, and they were obviously seriously wayward for Paul to write that letter in the first place, and yet Paul loved them.

He boasts about them, but he's worried that his boasting is going to be in vain, that they would embarrass him. But they don't, because they respond really well. And so now in verse 16, at the end of our passage, Paul can have complete confidence in them.

It's been a painful process, the process of rebuke. It's painful for the giver and the receiver, but it has led for them to repentance and therefore to joy. And just so for us, the process of rebuke is going to be painful, but it's so worth it, because a well-received rebuke, it produces repentance, which leads to joy for everyone involved.

Do you know, witnessing someone come to Christ for the first time is one of life's greatest joys. And I think this comes a really close second, and I've had the privilege of being able to walk alongside especially a number of young men here at Brunfield over the last few years, just to meet up occasionally to read the Bible together.

And there have been some difficult moments in that. I haven't had to write any tearful letters. I've never actually had to offer a clear and blunt and sharp rebuke.

[ 28 : 16 ] But as we've read the Bible together, and as the Spirit has been at work, some of them have clearly been convicted of some sin in their lives. And helping them through that has sometimes been painful.

But you know, in all of them, it has been just the most incredible privilege and ultimately led to joy as I've seen the progress that they've made and that they are making, as their godly sorrow leads them in repentance.

Making progress as a Christian, walking away from sin, is not easy. But it is really good. There's real joy in repentance for me to look back at what I was like and to see how God has led me in repentance.

I've got a long way to go, further than you know, further than I know, that I can look back and know that I've come a long way and that is worth celebrating. It is cause for great joy.

And I started by telling you about those affirmation and encouragement sessions at camp. They were great. Honestly, you'd leave feeling so good about yourself. But it didn't take very long. For me, it took no time at all.

[ 29 : 24 ] We'd head to lunch or whatever was next and very quickly, I'd be confronted by some sin or another. Great to encourage one another. It is good to do that and it will produce joy for a time.

But what produces real, lasting joy is lives that are changed. And a rebuke, it might cause pain in the short term, but a well-responded to rebuke leads to repentance and lasting joy.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should start having like rebuke sessions like at camp and rebuking one another instead of it. Imagine that at your next growth group.

You just start calling each other out. I don't think that would be very helpful. But we do need to be prepared to gently correct one another, to walk with one another, to know one another so well that we see the sin in one another, to love and trust one another so well that we can gently point that out.

Can I just say very practically that when you want to do that, when you see a sin that you think needs to be confronted, please don't just go charging in and point it out.

[ 30 : 34 ] The person in front of you, they might already be well aware of that sin. They might not be in a place to hear your rebuke. You might not be the right person to give it.

Hear this loud and clear. Rebuke must come in the context of a loving and trusting relationship. Ask yourself as you approach that situation, is my purpose here that the person in front of me might be led to godly sorrow and repentance?

If it's not, just keep your mouth shut. Is this rebuke for their sake and for God's glory or is it really to make me feel good? We need to be prepared to rebuke one another.

We do. We need to do so gently. And we do also need to be prepared to be corrected. Again, to know and love and trust that when someone does that, when they do that for us, that they desire what is good for us.

This isn't such a nice thing about church life, to be honest. There are lots of good things about church life. We love to spend time together, to be encouraged by God's word, to sing together, to drink coffee together, to share food.

[ 31 : 45 ] But the responsibility to rebuke one another, it just isn't a nice thing. But it is necessary. It will be painful. But when responded to properly, if we're prepared to receive it, it will produce joy for everyone involved.

And it will be painful. Thank you.