

2 Corinthians 7:1

Perfecting Holiness in the Fear of God

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 7:1–16

“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Receive us; we have wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man. I speak not this to condemn you; for I have said before, that ye are in our hearts to die and live with you.

Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my glorying of you; I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation. For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless, God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but by the consolation wherewith he was comforted in you, when he told us your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me, so that I rejoiced the more.

For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent; for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you! Yea, what clearing of yourselves! Yea, what indignation! Yea, what fear! Yea, what vehement desire! Yea, what

zeal! Yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter. Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you. Therefore we were comforted in your comfort; yea, and exceedingly the more joyed we for the joy of Titus, because his spirit was refreshed by you all. For if I have boasted anything to him of you, I am not ashamed; but as we spake all things to you in truth, even so our boasting, which I made before Titus, is found a truth. And his inward affection is more abundant toward you, whilst he remembereth the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him. I rejoyce therefore that I have confidence in you in all things.”

These Promises — A Relationship with God

The promises referred to in verse 1 have to do with the relationship to God into which we have been brought — which we could not have known apart from him. The citations from chapter 6 run: God has said, “I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” And: “Come out from among them and be ye separate” — and “I will receive you, and will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters.” The therefore of verse 1 is in view of the relationship to which we have been brought with God.

It is striking to link this chapter with 1 Corinthians 5, where the apostle had to write to them that they should put away from among themselves that wicked person. We learn in 2 Corinthians 2 that they did so. Now, in chapter 7, he could have written something like: you did very well, you had this problem touching holiness, you took care of it — a kind of pat on the back. But that is not the flavor of this chapter at all. The flavor is: perfecting holiness in the fear of God. There is a task, an endeavor, a process; and he encourages them in it not to rest on their laurels, not even to pause. Holiness is not something one can say: well, we took care of that case, now we can stop thinking about it.

Ecclesiastical and Personal Purity Together

The whole matter taken together shows us that ecclesiastical purity and personal purity go together. There is no resting satisfied with the thought that ecclesiastical purity has been maintained while personal purity is left to take care of itself, nor is it right to say that we are seeking to perfect holiness in the fear of God and therefore the corporate side does not matter so much. They go together, not one at the expense of the other. And the Corinthians needed that — and the reason it is in Scripture in a general way is that we all need it. At the end of 2 Corinthians 12, he writes that there were some who had not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness they had committed. They needed to hear these words.

Here we have the flesh and the spirit — two things. There are pollutions of the spirit as well as pollutions of the flesh. The spirit of the man is that part which has to do with God most directly; it is the candle of the Lord, searching the inward parts of the belly. It is the knowing faculty; it is that by which man is God-conscious. The soul is the seat of the affections in the broad sense. So there are sins of the spirit and sins of the mind as well as sins of the flesh. Darby's footnote notes that the word for holiness here is *hagios* — the nature and quality itself, distinct from *hagiasmos*, which is the practical effect produced. So this is holiness as a nature and quality, not merely as a practical outward thing, though of course that would have its outward expression also.

In the fear of God — not in the manner of monkery and beating of oneself to drive out evil, which addresses only the outward expression of things and not the inward nature and quality. A lawgiver addresses outward actions: thou shalt not do this or that. But the nature and quality of holiness that resides within the soul is a more difficult matter, not directly observable, yet capable of being addressed and capable of growing and becoming full-grown. It is not something a mere professor can do — he has no nature to give to this. Only an actual Christian can

perfect holiness in the fear of God.

The Time Between the Two Epistles

It is beautiful to see the apostle Paul taking up matters of the inward nature of holiness with the Corinthians here, when in 1 Corinthians he had to deal with a notorious case of unjudged immorality. He did not take up the question of the nature and quality of holiness unseen within their souls in 1 Corinthians; the issue before them had first to be settled. Once it was settled, as he learns through Titus, he has liberty and is free to address the matters within their hearts. How much time elapsed between the two epistles? It was at least long enough for 1 Corinthians to arrive, work upon the consciences of the assembly, for a response to be made, and for the apostle Paul to become anxious that he had not yet heard from Titus — so that when he did hear, he was greatly relieved. The unreliable dates published in Bible margins suggest about a year, which in round numbers means a little more or less. The apostle's anxiety is perhaps a better measure of how long it was.

Receive Us — We Have Wronged No Man

There is likely a connection between the exhortation to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit and what immediately follows: “Receive us, we have wronged no man.” The Corinthians had been slandering the apostle. That was an awful thing, all things considered. And therein may lie the connection: the slander of the apostle was itself one of those pollutions of the flesh mentioned in verse 1. He has exhorted them about their inward state, and now he comes to a practical point. Would this kind of thing be corrected in them? That would be a practical outworking of the perfecting of holiness — to repent of the attitude they had shown toward the great apostle who was their father in the faith.

We have wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man — Darby translates the second as “we have ruined no one.” Did Paul ruin the man in 1 Corinthians 5 by writing so strongly that he should be put away? No. It was his own sin that ruined him. And in fact, had they not dealt with him, the assembly would have fallen short in its responsibility, both to the holiness of the Lord and to the cleanliness of the assembly — and to the man himself. The action they took ultimately led to his restoration. To hold a grudge against the apostle Paul for 1 Corinthians 5 would show something wrong in the soul as to the judgment of the difference between good and evil.

Receive us — at bottom, the action of reception is the practical giving expression to the truth that there is one body. Someone is received because the assembly recognises them as a member of that one body. And it would not be possible to exist in full conformity with the truth of the one body while refusing to receive the apostle Paul himself.

In Our Hearts to Die and Live Together

I speak not this to condemn you, for I have said before that ye are in our hearts to die and live with you. Darby renders it beautifully: “to die together and live together.” That is one of the shortest phrases in the Scriptures, and it uses the word together twice. For where two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is in the midst of them. His affections were not narrowed toward them at all. The Corinthians, on the other hand, were narrowed in their affections — 6:12 says, “You are not straitened in us, but you are straitened in your own bowels.” Laxity and narrowness of heart go together. There is a common observation that those who claim to love humanity in the abstract often show very little love for individuals in particular. The Corinthians were showing that character: lax in their toleration of evil, yet narrow in heart toward the very apostle who loved them. His heart was enlarged; he looked for their hearts to be enlarged too.

To die together — to live together. Both are extremes, the furthest apart from one another that could be named. He passes over all the lukewarm middle ground and names the two extremes. And he was in the good of that word together, in both directions. Which of those is more difficult? It is not always apparent. But both of them are stated with all the weight of the apostle's affection behind them.

Exceeding Joyful in All Our Tribulation

Verse 4: I am filled with comfort; I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. In chapter 1:3–4, he says that the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those in any trouble with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. That is exactly what the apostle is doing in chapter 7 — he was comforted and encouraged by a certain kind of encouragement, and he writes to the Corinthians to encourage them with the very same comfort. That implies two souls walking together on the same path, so close that what encourages one will encourage the other. If my soul is on the same path, turned in the same direction, focused on the same object — the glory of Christ — what encourages me will encourage you. But if one of us is focused on the things of this world, it will not work that way.

He was encouraged by the recovery of a sense of what the presence of the Lord required. That was what everything hung on. There had been no sense of it in evidence at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5; but something had happened, and that recovery was the basis for expecting further things. He expresses great joy here — exceedingly joyful in all his tribulation — because a recovered sense of what was due to the Lord in the midst of his gathered saints meant everything. If that is not there, the thing is hopeless. This showed a marked change, and gave him the expectation that there would be further work done amongst them.

Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.