

*Forgiveness and comfort are yours, an undeserved gift from Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The first big thing you see God do in the Bible is create the heavens and the earth, with man and woman as the crown of creation (Genesis 1:26-27). The second big thing you see God do in the Bible is seek out the man and the woman when they are lost in sin (Genesis 3:8-9). The third big thing you see God do is seek out their sin, Cain, after he murders his brother and he is lost in sin (Genesis 4:9). And it keeps going on like that, for almost every page of Scripture. God even tells the prophet Hosea to take back his adulterous wife, to be a living object lesson in how God brings back the lost (Hosea 3:1-5).

All of that tells you one thing: God loves the lost. Do you? What do you do when the people you love are so lost in sin that they don't see the danger? If you really love them, there is one thing you cannot do. You cannot do nothing.

Look at what Jesus does in today's Gospel. He gathers the lost. He loves them enough to speak the three most difficult words anybody can ever say: "You are sinning." And with the angels in heaven, Jesus rejoices when sinners repent, and he welcomes them and he eats with them (Luke 15:1-10).

Can we? That's the question behind today's Second Reading. Here's the situation: A man was lost in his sin. But he was confronted with it. He was removed from his congregation as a warning of how serious his sin was. The members of his church loved him enough to tell him, "You are sinning. You cannot continue in this sinful behavior and call yourself a Christian."

Then God worked a miracle. His Word changed the man's heart. He stopped his sin. He repented of his sin. *Repent* means two things: One, you are sorry for your sin, and two, you trust that your sins are forgiven by Jesus.

So what happens now? What do you do with a sinner who repents? That's the background for 2 Corinthians Chapter 2. Now the Corinthians' question – our question – is what do you do with the lost after they're found?

First, **you ought to forgive him (2:7)**. But let's be clear: God does NOT announce forgiveness to someone who is still living in sin (Galatians 5:19-21). If you ignore sin, if you continue in sin, if you have no sorrow over sin, God's message is not forgiveness. No, if you refuse God's forgiveness, your sins are all on you, and you will pay for them in hell (Hebrews 10:26-27). That's unbelief, and unbelief is *the great danger* (Mark 16:16).

That's why the angels rejoice when a sinner repents. The lost is found! After you forgive him, **you ought to comfort him (2:7)**. Do it gently. The Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, and Paul is one fiery dude. He gets angry at sin, he gets furious at false teaching, and he passionately defends the truth. But here, his words radiate comfort.

Paul doesn't even mention the guy's name; why draw unnecessary attention to him? He says things like: **Not to put it too severely (2:5)**. That is, "I'm not going to remind you of what he did; let this all be in the past." **The punishment is sufficient (2:6)**. That is, "Don't you remind him of his sin either." **So that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (2:7)**. That is, "Don't let him stew in sadness!"

The Greek word for *comfort* paints a picture of standing by someone in trouble, going to his side and helping him. Try to imagine his need. You come back to church after being gone, and everyone knows the reason you were gone. Got guilt? Will anyone shake your hand? Will anyone talk to you, sit by you, or invite you to the Pine Street Café after church?

When you think about what to do for them, remember what God did for you. God sent Jesus to your side with the greatest news of all, "You are forgiven." Now God sends you to remind repentant sinners of the same thing. We Christians are God's agents of comfort. **Comfort the lost!**

How? Forgive repentant sinners. Don't ignore the sin. Don't announce forgiveness if they continue living in the sin. But when people confess, absolve them – tell them they're forgiven. Forgive fully. Don't pile on the punishment. Don't keep bringing it up. Comfort them!

Show them grace, the undeserved love they don't deserve. I know that's redundant, but that's forgiveness. The Greek word Paul uses here for *forgiveness* is built on the word for grace. The undeserved love God shows when he forgives us is the undeserved love we show when we forgive others.

We are to show this forgiveness openly: **Reaffirm your love for him (2:8)**. In other words, don't just say, "We forgive you." Show it.

While this man was living in his sin, he was removed from his congregation as the most severe warning they could give (1 Corinthians 5:5). After he repented and left that sin, the congregation was to welcome him back publicly with forgiveness and comfort.

We get to do the same thing. God wants us to warn about sin so that we can restore the sinner. The whole purpose all along should always be restoration (James 5:19-20). It is not about punishment; it's not about revenge. The Corinthians warned this man to win him back to Jesus. Sinners reach out to other sinners to show them the Savior of sinners.

Is that how you do things? Maybe you make sin seem small. You know about it. You ignore it. Don't want to rock the boat. Don't want to cause a scene. "Plus, I'm a sinner too, so I can't say anything." And you say nothing. You let fellow sinners wander away from Jesus. But do you know what's away from Jesus? Hell (John 3:18)!

Or, maybe, you go to the other extreme. You make sin seem big. "Do you know what she did? I don't want to be by people who do that!" "We'll have to see if he's *really* sorry. I could never forgive him for that." Pile on the punishment. Drown them in despair.

But what does God do? "He does not treat us as our sins deserve" (Psalm 103:10), he treated Jesus as our sins deserve. That's what God did. God nailed sin to the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21). Once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). Sin is forgiven. Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried for your sins. He came out of the tomb, but your sins did not.

The cross is your comfort. The empty tomb is your comfort. What does God do with sin? He doesn't ignore it. He forgives it.

Constantly. As long as we live on this sinful earth, sin will never go away. So when you sin, know that you are forgiven. Sins of the past are forgiven. Sins of today are forgiven. Sins thirty years from now are forgiven – fully and freely, for all time.

We need constant forgiveness because we have a constant enemy: **Satan**, and **we are not unaware of his schemes (2:11)**. Satan wants to claim us as his own. But we are not his own. We belong to Jesus (Titus 2:14).

Now, this is how Satan works. Before you sin, he makes sin small: "Everyone does it. It's no big deal." Then, after you sin, Satan makes sin big: "God will never forgive you. He could never love someone who did that! You call yourself a Christian? You better stay away from God's house for a long time until you clean up your act. You are not good enough."

But church is a hospital for sinners. Sinners are welcome here. In fact, the only people at church are sinners. Christians are not perfect. Christians are forgiven.

So ... what do you do when the people you love are destroying their lives with sin? How many of your loved ones think their sins are no big deal? They're lost. Do you love them enough to speak the three most difficult words anybody can ever say, "You are sinning"?

Or, how many of your loved ones think that their sins are too big a deal to be forgiven? They're lost too. Despair is destroying their lives. Do you love them enough to forgive them, to comfort them? **Comfort the lost.**

You come here to find comfort when you sin. Bring them too. Because you come here to find Christ, and that's how God provides comfort. Amen.