

2 Corinthians 7 Discussion Questions

Read all of 2 Corinthians 7. Pause in silence. Read again (it is only 15 verses; you can do it!). Now, pray that the Holy Spirit leads the discussion and would even convict you and the group with real godly sorrow of any and all self-righteousness, self-reliance, irreverence, or pride that would remain unconfessed and keep you from realizing and hearing the truth of his word in this challenging passage. Pause again. Now you are ready for a heart-felt and spirit-led discussion infused with humility and prayer!

- What do we learn about Paul and the Corinthians' relationship in verses 2-7? What are words you would use to describe it? What binds their relationship?
- How does Paul explain his own process of rebuking them? When do you think this occurred? How was their relationship affected by this rebuke?
- What is the role of community in repentance? What is the role of the Holy Spirit? Give examples from the text.
- How would you describe godly sorrow? What are the hallmarks? How does it differ from the grief of loss or "worldly grief?"
- How would you summarize the main takeaway from this pericope in one sentence? Try using the terms "rebuke," "godly sorrow," "repentance" and "restoration."
- Has the Spirit convicted you with a godly sorrow? How did you know it was from God? Tell the story.
- Have everyone give their three-word takeaway and offer it back to God in prayer!

Other resources on the Tearful Letter and godly sorrow that leads to repentance

The "Severe Letter"

Paul left Corinth for Ephesus while the Corinthians revolted against his apostolic authority (1:23–2:5; 7:12). He chose not to retaliate, but instead extended mercy to the Corinthians (1:23–24). This left him open to criticism (1:16–17). Paul decided to send Titus back to Corinth with his next letter. This letter is known as the "severe letter" since it was written "out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2:4 NIV). It has also been called the "letter of tears," the "tearful letter," the "sorrowful letter," or the "painful letter."

The aim of the severe letter was to embolden the Corinthians to discipline the ones who did wrong, and thus vindicate Paul, the one who suffered the wrong (2:6, 9; 7:12). Another purpose of the letter was to spare the Corinthians and himself from another painful visit (1:23–2:4). The letter also displayed his care for the Corinthians and was designed to test the Corinthians' obedience to his apostolic ministry (2:4; 2:9). It also was a reminder that Paul was their spiritual father (7:12). After the Corinthians received it, most were repentant (2:5–11; 7:5–16).

There have been six identifications of the severe letter. Three unlikely possibilities include: a letter written before 1 Corinthians and the letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9–13; the "previous

letter” mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9, 11; 2 Corinthians (Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, 55–56). Other possibilities that demand more attention are: the severe letter is 1 Corinthians, a letter incorporating 2 Cor 10–13, or a lost intermediate letter following the sending of 2 Cor 1–9.

Those who support 1 Corinthians as the “severe letter” do so for three reasons. With all of the great problems within 1 Corinthians, namely, division, immorality, litigation, profaning of the Lord’s Supper, and challenges to Paul’s ministry, it is possible that it caused him much distress. Additionally, the pain expressed in 2 Cor 2:5–11 could be seen from Paul’s discipline of the man caught in incest (1 Cor 5:1–8). Further, the identity of the “one who did wrong” in 2 Cor 7:12 could be connected with the man caught in incest in 1 Cor 5:1 (Meyer, *Epistles to the Corinthians*; Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*; Hughes, *Second Corinthians*; Hyldahl, *Einheit des Zweiten Korintherbriefes*).

However, passages such as 2 Cor 2:6 and 7:12 suggest that the “severe letter” dealt specifically with the punishment of the wrong-doer instead of questions surrounding the entire Corinthian church, which is the concern of 1 Corinthians. Further, 1 Corinthians does not seem to be written in place of another painful visit (compare 1 Cor 4:18–19; 11:34; 16:2–7) as 2 Cor 1:23; 2:1–3 demands. Additionally, in 2 Cor 2:10 Paul offers his personal forgiveness to the individual whom the Corinthians are to forgive, but it is highly doubtful that he would have seen this as a personal injury. Moreover, the passages in 2 Corinthians show no rebuking of sexual immorality but rather a direct confrontation with Paul’s authority (2 Cor 7:12).

Rather than seeing 1 Corinthians as the severe letter, others divide 2 Corinthians into two parts—chapters 1–9 and chapters 10–13. In this scenario, 2 Cor 10–13 is called the severe letter, and was written before 2 Cor 1–9 (Hausrath, *Der Vier-Capitelbrief*; Plummer, *Second Corinthians*, Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric*). Some believe that 1–9 intentionally allude to portions of 10–13. However, it is just as likely that 10–13 passage are alluding to 1–9. Furthermore, it is unlikely that 2 Cor 10–13 is the severe letter since there is nothing within these chapters about the punishment of the troublemaker—a key aspect of the severe letter (compare 2 Cor 2:5–9). Finally, the contents of 10–13 do not seem to fit the description of the severe letter, which stemmed from many tears. On the whole, 2 Cor 10–13 is a vigorous self-defense, filled with irony and warnings. Thus, this popular suggestion is unlikely (Harris, *Second Corinthians*).

It is best to see the severe letter as a lost letter; there are other letters from Paul that we do not have (compare 1 Cor 5:9, 11; Col 4:16). If this is the case, the severe letter was written after 1 Corinthians and Paul’s painful visit but before the writing of 2 Corinthians (Semler, *Paraphrasis*; Harris, *Second Corinthians*; Barnett, *Second Corinthians*; Barrett, *Second Corinthians*; Martin, *2 Corinthians*; Murphy-O’Connor, *Second Corinthians*; deSilva, “Measuring Penultimate and Ultimate Reality”; Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*; Thrall, *Second Corinthians*).¹

Godly Sorrow

But we should note several contrasts between Paul’s remarks and this piece of ancient advice. (1) Paul is not fawning over them with a feigned apology. (2) He fully knew that his letter might

¹ Drake Williams, [“Corinthians, Second Letter to the,”](#) ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

cause a severe reaction. (3) He would do it again if necessary. He disciplined them for their own good. (4) He is an apostle responsible for preaching the gospel and effecting moral reform in others. That may sometimes cause pain, but he is not in the business of making everyone feel good.

Paul had no intention of venting his wrath on the disobedient in Corinth. His advice to fathers in Col 3:21 not to embitter their children so that they become discouraged shows that he knows that disciplining others means that one always walks a fine line. Heartless chastisement can reap harmful results as much as laxity and indifference. He confesses that he had misgivings that perhaps he did the wrong thing. But he has already told them his purpose in writing: so that his next visit would bring joy instead of pain (2:3), to show his love (2:4), and to test their obedience (2:9). Now he makes clear that he also wrote so boldly out of great confidence. Their obedience would reveal to them their real earnestness for Paul (7:11–12).

The reason that he is not really sorry for the anguish that his candidness caused them is that their grief only lasted a little while (compared to his, we might add), that it evoked godly sorrow, and that it resulted in their repentance and made them want to redress the wrong. Consequently, they were not harmed in any way (“suffered no loss,” 7:9).²

² David E. Garland, [2 Corinthians](#), vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 354.