

The Apostle Paul is a major player in the New Testament of the Bible. In the book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles which describes the beginning of the Christian Church, it is Paul's ministry and his travels that are covered in half of that book.

There are 27 books in the New Testament and 14 of them bear the name of the Apostle Paul as the author. There is debate about whether or not Paul wrote all of the letters that bear his name but it is clear that Paul is arguably the most important person in the New Testament after a guy named Jesus.

Paul gets so much attention in the New Testament because he had a transformative experience that led him to change his lifestyle. Paul had been the guy who spent his life persecuting Christians but then he was on the road to a place called Damascus when he had some sort of religious experience that caused him to become the guy who felt called to start lots of Christian churches all over Asia Minor.

Paul's story of transformation, his experiences of starting new churches, and his guidance to these churches becomes a central story told throughout the New Testament.

You may have heard something about all of this. But what you may not know is that Paul had some people within the church that did not think too much of Paul. Paul had some people in the church whose actions led Paul to become quite depressed. Paul had at least one visit to a church that did not go well at all. In fact, Paul faced some pretty deep criticism from people inside the church in Corinth and this caused him to even fear for his life.

For several weeks in July we read through the letter we call 1st Corinthians. 1st Corinthians is called that name because it is the first letter that Paul writes to the Corinthians that we still have access to and that made it into the Bible. But when we read all of 1st Corinthians and 2nd Corinthians it is discovered that Paul actually wrote at least 5 letters to the church in the town of Corinth.

Some of these letters we have and some we do not. It is believed that 2nd Corinthians is actually a collection of parts of several letters that Paul wrote to the church. It is actually kind of hard to read 2nd Corinthians because it doesn't fit together real well. It's kinda disjointed. And that is because it is probably parts of several letters that have been put together to form what we call 2nd Corinthians.

What makes 1st and 2nd Corinthians unique is that these letters show a long term relationship between Paul and the people in the church. Sometimes this relationship between Paul and the church went well and sometimes the relationship was quite rocky between Paul and this church that he started.

One of the issues that the Corinthians had with Paul was that they felt he was a poor organizer. The Corinthians felt that Paul was kinda scatter brained and didn't follow through on what he promised to them. We find out from the first chapter of 2nd Corinthians that Paul overscheduled himself and wasn't able to come and see them like he promised. Some in the Corinthian church did not like that.

Sometime after Paul wrote 1st Corinthians he went to Corinth but during this visit some of the Christians in Corinth made a verbal attack against him. And what really upset Paul was that none of the rest of Corinthians came to his defense. And so, because he was disappointed by the way he felt let down by the Christians in Corinth, Paul left town.

This part of the relationship that Paul had with one of the most important churches he started is not what we usually hear about. Usually we have this image of Paul and the Christians in these churches just getting along great with one another. But that is not the case. Some people in the church in Corinth felt very frustrated by Paul and they let him know it. And Paul felt the disappointment of not having people come to his defense in Corinth. So Paul packed up his bags and left.

Something else that was happening within this church in Corinth is a lack of enthusiasm from the Christians in Corinth in regards to their Christian ministry. Paul had been to Macedonia and the Macedonian Christians were all pumped up to do ministry. Paul talked to them about giving money for evangelistic work and the Macedonian Christians responded generously.

The Macedonian Christians were like the church down the road that always gets brought up whenever people want to criticize their own church for not doing enough. Paul was concerned that the Christians in Corinth were not doing their part financially to support the ministry of the wider church. And some in the Corinthian church were upset with Paul because they felt like he was overly focused on money.

Others felt that Paul was too focused on the poor and not on them. And this dissatisfaction with Paul led some to question whether or not Paul was really called into the ministry. So having all of this background, let's read from the early part of what we call 2nd Corinthians.

Before the part we are about to read, Paul tells the Corinthians that he is not going to come and see them. His last visit did not go well and he is scared that if he comes again it will be another bad experience for them all. So he writes them a letter.

In the part that we are going to be reading, Paul is going to address an issue that is going on in the congregation where two people within the congregation are not seeing eye-to-eye on something. We don't know what it is that they are having a conflict over but it appears that the conflict is over one person who supports Paul and one person who does not. And Paul is concerned that this conflict between these two people is spilling over into the rest of the congregation. So let's read from 2nd Corinthians.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-17

So Paul tells the Corinthians that the ones that support Paul need to forgive the people that do not support Paul. Paul believes that where there is lack of forgiveness between people that this leaves room for Satan to intervene. Where there is lack of forgiveness between people then the power of evil has space to claim at least one victim.

Maybe in your life you have someone who has wronged you in some way. Maybe in your life you have some pretty deep hurt from what someone did to you. It may be something that someone did to you recently or it may be something that someone did to you a long time ago. Maybe it is a broken promise or maybe it is a destruction of trust.

This is what I have discovered about not forgiving people who have hurt us. The hurt and pain and brokenness from unforgiven relationships continues to impact how we operate and what we do. For instance, I have a friend who is similar to my age who feels as though his father put pressure on him to always be perfect. He tries over and over again to please his father and prove to his father that he is worthy.

But he never feels as though he can ever prove himself worthy to his father. My friend has never been able to forgive his father for not being the kind of father that he wanted his father to be.

As a result, this friend of mine, who is my age, continues to make life decisions based on a desire to prove himself worthy to his father whom he chooses to not forgive. Paul says that if we cannot forgive someone that it allows space for Satan to operate. Lack of forgiveness gives space for evil to propagate.

There may be someone in your life right now that you feel has wronged you at some point in your life. According to Paul, it is for our own spiritual health we need to find a way to forgive that person. That person may not even be alive anymore. But they can still be forgiven. The word that Paul uses for “forgiveness” also means “to be gracious to.” We are called to forgive and to extend grace and hospitality.

During the prayers of the people, I am going to invite you to do something really risky and scary. I am going to invite you to imagine the person that you may need to forgive. It may be someone who is in this room or church. It may be someone in your family. It may be a friend. It may be a spouse. You may feel as though you need to forgive me for something you feel I have done or not done. The person you need to forgive may not still be alive.

Not being able to forgive this person may be holding you back from growing in your relationship with God. Not being able to forgive gives space for evil to intervene. Today I invite you to allow yourself to forgive this person who may have wronged you in a terrible way. If any of you feel as though you need to forgive me for some reason I hope you will communicate that to me so that I can accept your gift of forgiveness.

Forgiving someone is an invitation to allow God’s healing in your life. I pray that this healing can come to you in the act of forgiving someone in your life. AMEN.

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