



“The Tears of a Loving Minister”

No. 5

2 Corinthians 2:1-4

June 28, 2026

Series: 2 Corinthians

Brennon Cavanagh

Text

2 For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 3 And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4 For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Introduction

Have any of you been watching the World Cup? I guess that’s kind of a rhetorical question, I know that some of you have been watching it. Aside from the matches, I’ve really enjoyed seeing the videos of people from other countries experiencing America. People going to a Walmart or a Costco for the first time, a Nordic man going to Buc-ee’s for the first time and excited to get to yell “fresh brisket on the board,” Europeans saying that food from Golden Corral and Waffle House was the best meal they’ve had in their entire life, seemingly everyone falling in love with ranch dressing, and a Japanese man in shock from getting free chips and salsa from a Tex-Mex restaurant.

It’s heartwarming to see the hospitality that Americans are showing to people trying new foods and visiting new places here. And it’s equally as heartwarming to see how joyful it makes Americans to be a part of these first-time experiences.

In the church, do we work for one another’s joy? As we started to see last week in 1:15-24, that should be the goal. What lengths do you go to for a brother or a sister to experience true delight? Do you see working for someone else’s joy as a burdensome task, but arguing with someone as easy or natural?

In today’s passage, as Paul continues to explain the change of his plans to go again to Corinth, he makes it clear: **genuine Christian ministry should seek the joy of God’s people.** Our study will break into three parts: avoiding unnecessary conflict (v. 1); sharing one another’s joy (vv. 2-3); and having a genuine, affectionate heart for others (v. 4).

Let's pray... Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us together today to worship you. I pray that you work through me this morning, that the words I speak are not rooted in my flesh but are rooted in your flawless, all-sufficient Word. I pray that you open the ears and hearts of everyone here to your Word, and that it produces real change in all of our hearts. I pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

Avoiding Unnecessary Conflict (v. 1)

An easy way to diminish others' joy is by seeking out conflict. Do you know anyone who looks for conflict? Someone at work who always opposes every idea presented to them? Someone who can't stop themselves from picking at every little thing they can find in another person that they don't agree with? Someone who, while scrolling social media, just *has* to leave a comment that they know will start an argument? How joyful are you when someone is striving to start a conflict with you?

Looking at verse 1, Paul writes,

"For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you."

Painful visit? What painful visit? Did Paul go back to his old ways and go to Corinth to persecute the church?? Well, no. The belief among Christian scholars is that this was the second of Paul's visits to the Corinthian church (the first being when the church was established in Acts 18). This visit occurred sometime between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians. During this visit, there had been a challenge to Paul's apostolic authority, and it's believed that an individual who is not named had insulted Paul. Following this, he had elected not to return to Corinth in person, but instead wrote a severe letter to them.¹ This letter is referenced in verse 3 of today's passage.

When Paul visited them to address the dysfunction within the church, he was met with severe hostility. How easy would it have been for him to march right back to Corinth to sharply correct the Corinthians? Paul chose not to. He thought through what was best and decided that he needed to hold off on returning to Corinth in person and write a letter to them instead. But why?

Look with me at 1:23, which says, *"But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth."* He knew that returning to Corinth as planned would cause emotional turmoil, more than what had already occurred. This would have been antithetical to promoting joy in the lives of the Corinthians. Instead, he chose to do what was best for their relationship. Paul writing a letter to them allowed the Corinthians to have time to reflect and repent, and time for the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians to heal. His goal was that when he did return in person, he "might not suffer pain from those who should have made [him] rejoice" (v. 3).

In the church, conflict and tension in our relationships with one another is an easy trap to fall into. We can retaliate against one another, we can begin to groan about what's happening, and even become bitter to the point of leaving the church. Hear this from our church covenant, which all members of IBC have entered into:

“When sinful people are together, they are bound to step on toes or rub each other the wrong way eventually. Therefore, I covenant to not grow bitter or leave (cf. Eph. 4:31-32), but to patiently cultivate genuine love between members (cf. 1Jn. 4:7-12) and proactively work to preserve the unity of the body (cf. Eph. 4:2-3).”

Now, it is essential that, as Christians living life with one another, we speak the truth with one another and lovingly rebuke one another’s sin. That much is still true. However, we shouldn’t be motivated to correct one another because of pride, irritation, or malicious enjoyment. And we definitely should not be motivated by trying to make someone miserable. Instead, be motivated by abundant love for others and a desire for them to live a righteous, holy life. Instead, seek to pursue what makes peace and builds others up (Rom. 14:19), with the desire to increase their joy. In order to do this right, we need relational wisdom that is rooted in Scripture; knowing God, knowing ourselves, and knowing others to best love God and love one another (Mt. 22:36-40).

Sharing One Another’s Joy (vv. 2-3)

But what is this joy that Paul is talking about? Can’t anyone say that they want others to be joyful? Is Paul describing some group of people who are just to make one another feel blissful and happy just for its own sake? Where’s Jesus in all of this?

Friends, joy is not merely a small byproduct of living a holy life. Joy is not just an extra add-on we can have in the Christian life. No, our joy is Christ our Lord and Savior. Joy is *fundamental* in our relationship with Christ! Look above at 1:24, which says, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.” Faith in Christ is not meant to be something we just “do” and move on with, or something that we do begrudgingly to “follow the rules.” No, the goal that Paul lays out is that faith in Christ directly produces abundant, everlasting joy. Joy is not a feeling that is forced upon you by some other person in your life, but by the power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers.

Now, let’s take a look at verse 2 from today’s passage,

“For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?”

Here, Paul explains further why he chose not to visit the Corinthians in person and instead wrote to them. Again, Paul is keeping the Corinthians in mind as he made his decision to write to them, wanting to spare them and prevent a painful experience for them. But he goes even further now to say that inflicting pain on the Corinthians would have diminished his gladness, or joy, since their own joy was diminished. He finds joy in their joy, and they are directly related to one another. He doesn’t want to upset the Corinthians, because then there wouldn’t be anyone in the church to make him glad.²

Though he was humiliated in his last visit, Paul still demonstrates great love for the Corinthians. He is brought down when they are. Do the people that you minister to have this effect on you? As their joy in Christ shifts, does yours as well? Does a person with whom you shared the gospel with eventually finding joy in Christ build your joy? This doesn't mean that you are making their faith and their joy all about you. Feeling as Paul does towards the Corinthians here is demonstrative of true love for that person, and true care for their faith.

Or does the joy of those whom you minister to not have any effect on you? Does it feel like they are just like co-workers, where you "clock in" when you see them and "clock out" afterwards? Allow their joy to be yours as well, as you both share joy in the same thing: Jesus Christ.

Let's now look at verse 3, which says,

"And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all."

Here is where Paul references his "severe letter" that he wrote instead of going back to Corinth. So far, we know that Paul wrote this letter to spare the Corinthians (1:23) and because their joy is his joy (2:2). Now we see that another reason he wrote to them was so that he "might not suffer pain from those who should have made [him] rejoice." Are his feelings self-centered here? It doesn't seem like it, because we read on, "for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all."

We saw that the Corinthians' joy is Paul's joy in the previous verse. Now, we see that his joy is their joy. If he were to go back and suffer a painful visit, it would have negatively impacted their joy. He suggests that the joy that he would experience from reconciliation with the Corinthians would be felt by them as well.

In verses 2 and 3, we see that joy is meant to be shared between the minister and those whom they minister to. Whether between pastor and church member, parent and child, or one friend speaking into the life of another, their joy in Christ is meant to be closely related to one another to the point of having an effect on their counterpart.

But if we share this joy in Christ together, why is it still difficult to be joyful sometimes? I think you could argue that we in America have one of the hardest times consistently finding joy in Christ among Christians worldwide. And it's not because of what we don't have, but because of what we do have. There are Christians in the world who are impoverished and are being persecuted, but still demonstrate overwhelming joy and adoration towards God.

So why here, where we do not face nearly these sorts of conditions, do we lack joy at times? No, it's because we would rather place our joy into our careers and getting that next promotion or raise. We would rather place our joy in the next vacation we're going on. The new car or house we bought. What have you been placing the majority of your joy into? Money? Status? Possessions? Friends? Family? I promise you that there is something infinitely satisfying and far greater than these earthly treasures.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:8, *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”* Let us share our joy most of all in the eternal gift of our Savior Jesus Christ, and not the temporary treasures of this world. It is then with an ultimate, all-satisfying joy in Christ that you can resist temptations to sin.

Because if all that stops us from sinning is “following the rules,” then we have a high probability of failing. We have been breaking rules set for us since we were children, how could that stop us now? No, resisting temptation requires us to find a greater joy than whatever deceitful promise that sin has for us. If we place our joy in Christ over all other things, we can run to Him and choose Him over sin. Share this joy with those whom you minister to, so that you both may be built up in the Lord.

Having a Genuine, Affectionate Heart for Others (v. 4)

So far, we have discussed that genuine Christian ministry should seek the joy of God’s people through avoiding unnecessary conflict (v. 1) and sharing one another’s joy (vv. 2-3). Now, in verse 4, we will see that Christian ministry should be marked by a genuine, affectionate heart for others.

“For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”

It doesn’t appear that it was easy for Paul to write his severe letter to the Corinthians. It doesn’t seem like he wrote filled with rage or seeking revenge, but instead felt affliction, anguish, and shed many tears. Paul was not feigning any emotion in this process; he felt extreme feelings through this.

The original Greek description indicates that when he was writing the letter, he experienced internal turmoil, discomfort, and/or trouble that accompanies a distressing situation. With the entire situation, the original description used indicates a high degree of anxiety, distress, dismay, or anguish. These feelings were strong enough to produce a physical, external response in him to shed many tears.³

Remember, through all of this, he desires for the Corinthians to be joyful in Christ. He is not pretending, because in this verse he proves that what he feels and does for them is *real*. No matter whom you’re ministering to, a mature or young Christian, someone firm in their faith or someone who is doubting their faith, someone who has put their faith in Christ or someone who hasn’t, you must be genuine.

If your aim is for others to experience joy in Christ, you cannot be half-hearted with the words you say or the things you do. Paul was not detached from the Corinthians, even after the prior painful visit that he made to them. While he shares joy with the Corinthians, he also shares struggles with them. Be real with the people whom you minister to.

Paul ends this passage and explanation for his change of plans with assurance to the Corinthians that he did not write the letter to cause them pain, but instead to let them know the abundant love he has for them. To Paul, love for the Corinthians was marked by finding joy in each other's joy. His joy was their joy, and their joy was his joy.

Is the underlying motive in your ministry to love others? Or is it something else? Do you rebuke others purely because you love them? Do you love them to the point of sharing with them their joys and grievances? Are you willing to endure personal pain for the sake of a fellow brother or sister in Christ? It's easy to be harsh to someone without love or be "loving" to someone without ever correcting them. Paul shows us that the true, loving method is to speak the truth even through pain and tears.

Conclusion

Genuine Christian ministry should seek the joy of God's people. From 2 Corinthians 2:1-4, we discussed three ways that happen: avoiding unnecessary conflict (v. 1); sharing one another's joy (vv. 2-3); and having a genuine, affectionate heart for others (v. 4).

Have you been seeking joy in others' lives? Do the things you say to them and the things you do for them set them up to be joyful, in turn supplying you with joy?

Is your joy in Christ? Or is it found in possessions, relationships, or status? Do you prioritize arguing and "being right" over the joy of others? Do you truly love those whom you minister to, or are you just faking it in hopes that people respect you and hold you in high regard?

Paul's love for the Corinthians was this: he found his joy in the people of God at Corinth. When they are joyful in Christ, he is joyful. Though the Corinthians had failed to support him and make him rejoice, he forgave them and expressed immense love towards them, and he wrote so that as they received his letter, they would respond in a way that would make him joyful.

Does this sound familiar? We failed to honor God, and Christ experienced immense pain during his crucifixion. However, in His immense love for us, He died for our sins and then rose again, with the intent for us to respond in a way that brings Him joy. While Paul is a great example of love to those who have hurt you, there is no clearer, greater, or more beautiful image of this than what Christ did for us on the cross. And not that we are to now begrudgingly follow his commandments, but that we should be brimming with joy that we have the free gift of eternal life, undeservingly given to us by God!

Let's pray... Father, we thank you for allowing us to make one another joyful. To love one another and encourage one another. And we thank you for giving us the greatest source of joy, your son Jesus Christ, who paid for our sins on the cross. I pray that if anyone here has not yet put their faith in you, they do so and can be blown away by the immense joy and love that you bring. I pray that as we go from this place, we continue to desire joy in one another. And in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastoral Apprentice Brennon Cavanagh on Sunday morning, June 28, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

¹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 52.

² George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 124

³ Guthrie, 126.