



Good Grief

No. 19
Series: 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

October 11, 2026
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Text

² Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³ I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴ I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

⁵ For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸ For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. ⁹ As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. ¹¹ For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. ¹² So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. ¹³ Therefore we are comforted.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. ¹⁴ For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵ And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶ I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

Introduction

In 1960 C.S. Lewis pointed out that “[t]o the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it.”¹ That observation has only become more obvious since then. In 1960, 13% of American households consisted of only one person living alone. In 2022, it was 29%.² That’s accounted for by a decline in marriage and children, but also friendship and roommates. Americans aren’t just living alone, to borrow from the title of Robert Putnam’s famous book in 2000, they’re bowling alone.³ We’re not hanging out with people as much, we aren’t part of leagues and clubs and civic organizations as much. Between 2003 and 2020 in-person time with friends dropped significantly from an average of 60 minutes per day to 20 minutes a day.⁴ And at the same time we are witnessing what has been called the great de-churching of America.⁵

I could cite similar statistics all day. While we now have “social” media, our actual social engagement and connections are weak. And it’s not healthy. “America is suffering an epidemic of loneliness.”⁶ In fact, research has shown that chronic loneliness is more detrimental to your health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day!⁷ It’s not good for humans to be alone. That’s a Bible verse, isn’t it (Gen. 2:18). Justin Whitmel Earley has a great book with a great title – *Made For People*. We were made for relationships – authentic, involved, soul-sharing relationships. The subtitle of that book is – *Why We Drift into Loneliness and How to Fight for a Life of Friendship*. I recommend it. Maybe read it with someone else this fall.⁸

Who are your favorite fictional friendships? Frodo and Sam? Harry and Ron? Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler, and Ross? Who are some other famous friends? There’s an appeal to reading or watching people having friendships.

But how are you doing at having friendships IRL? Have you connected with people this week in the flesh in a way that engaged your soul? It’s part of why we gather together every Sunday and have Prayer Meetings and Sunday School and Small Groups throughout the week in each other’s homes and Baby Showers and Dinners for 8 and Men’s Retreats and Ladies Soup Nights and Signal chats... to encourage genuine relationships to form and grow. It’s why we talk about membership and aren’t just putting on religious programming that you can attend anonymously.

There’s a lot that we could talk about from 2 Corinthians chapter 7, but I think it’s a good place to get a glimpse of what real relationships look like. This book, unlike any other in the Bible (*I think*) reveals the raw relational dynamics of a Christian. Paul is being very personal here, unfiltered at times. It can even make us feel uncomfortable. Do you know what I mean? But it’s in the Bible (I believe) to show us what genuine, non-superficial, heart-to-heart relationships can look like and encourage us towards that. In short, what we’re going to get from this passage is just this: **Christianity creates relational competency.**

Let’s pray...

What Is Relational Competency?

Let’s look through this passage and make notes about what **relational competency** is, first. Then at the end we’ll try to show how **Christianity creates** that.

I bought a book a few years ago to read with a pastoral apprentice called *Emotional Intelligence Habits: A Powerful New Way to Increase Your Emotional Intelligence* by Dr. Travis Bradberry. The cover says, “More than 3 million emotional intelligence books sold.” I read most of it, but couldn’t finish. It was so BORING. A *text book on relational competency?! C’mon.*

Did you know that just this last year this book [the Bible] sold over 18 million copies in the U.S.? It’s really a collection of 66 different books. What we call 2 Corinthians is one of them. We’ve been looking at this book for 19 weeks now. It’s FASCINATING.

We’ve noted that it really could be called 4 Corinthians. There’s a whole backstory behind the book. Paul planted the church, built deep relationships there, then left to plant more churches. But he kept in touch, stayed interested in them. He wrote them a letter that has been lost. Then he wrote them another letter – what we call 1

Corinthians. Then he visited them and things went really badly – hurt feelings, conflict... Drama is inevitable in relationships that are about anything bigger than sports or shopping. So Paul wrote them a third letter, a deeply emotional letter, a hard letter (cf. 2:4). We don't have that one either. And now he's writing a fourth letter. That's the one we're looking at. Relationships are complicated and involved, aren't they?

Paul says at the outset of today's text, "Make room in your hearts for us." He's picking up on something he said back in 6:11-13 – "[O]ur heart is wide open... widen your hearts also." Paul wanted something more than a business relationship with the Corinthian church. He held them in his heart. And he wanted that to be reciprocated. And he wasn't embarrassed to say that!! **Relational competency** means having people in your heart *and* conversing with them about the state of the relationship, being able to say things like, "I don't feel like you're really caring for me right now." Who do you talk with like this?

Paul continues to express himself freely – "We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one." The "we" remember, is at least him and Timothy, his co-author identified in 1:1, which is important to note because it means that Paul did not do ministry alone. He was almost always with people. He operated in a team. He was highly relational. And here Paul's pointing out that the way he and his team interacted with the Corinthians was not selfish, was not needy, was not taking, but giving. He wasn't a mooch, just using people and moving on. He really cared.

Look at what he says next, "I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together." What a description of love! He's in it with them – to live together and to die together. Actually, he says to die together and to live together, perhaps an allusion to their even deeper and more durable bond in Christ that enjoys resurrection, eternal life together. To die together in Christ and to live together in Christ – these are the grand, sweeping horizons of friendship, not short-sighted goals like someone to go apple-picking with on the weekend. Don't you want fellow believers to die and live forever with?

Think of a friendship like Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley's. This week marks the anniversary of their deaths, burned at the stake on October 16th, 1555, under Bloody Mary, for their commitment to the gospel. As they were being tied to the wood Ridley strengthened his friend, "'Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it.' As the bundle of sticks caught fire beneath them, Latimer had his turn. Raising his voice so Ridley could hear, he cried, 'Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.'"⁹ And it hasn't been. Paul was that same kind of passionate person. And he sought that same kind of relational bond with others – battle tested, mission minded, connected in a cause of utmost significance. We don't just want friends to watch football with; we want fellow soldiers to fight sin with and push back darkness and go to each other's funerals.

Moving on to v. 4 we see Paul saying, "I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you." He's not guarded with them. He's not measured in his encouragement. This is a man who speaks freely. He's not proper and polite. Who can you be bold with? Who have you told lately, "I'm so proud of you!?" On the way to church today we passed some along the Marathon route holding a sign that said – "Hey

stranger! I'm proud of you." If stranger can do it for a marathon, how much more should we be able to do that for each other to encourage along the race of life?

Next, he says, "I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy." Life is just hard (think hurricanes like Isaias that bashed the Gulf coast this week). And sometimes the hardness of life comes from relational storms. There's a book called *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*.¹⁰ That's a great title. Relationships create all kinds of messiness, but they're worth it. Paul experienced all kinds of hardships, but through his relationships he experienced great comfort. Currently his heart is overflowing with joy. More on why that is the case in a second.

But first, Paul gives a little more insight into his inner turmoil. Things had gotten really bad between him and the Corinthians. He didn't know how it would turn out. They had hurt him. He had said hard things to them to confront them. And then he had to wait. He sent one of his close friends, Titus, to check on them. He was supposed to meet Titus in Troas and get an update, but when Paul was there, Titus was nowhere to be found. Paul says that his "spirit was not at rest" in Troas, so Paul went on to Macedonia (cf. 2:13). Here he says, "[E]ven when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest [the spiritual turmoil had spread to physical side-effects; we are psycho-somatic creatures, aren't we?], but we were afflicted at every turn – fighting without and fear within." Here is a man, not only in tune with his body and soul, aware of what's going in with him, but able to express it, willing to share, capable of opening up his inner self to others and admitting that he was a wreck. This is a great **relational competency**. He says in v. 6 that he was downcast. This is a word that means something like 'depressed.' Paul got depressed. Did you know that?

David Murray has a book called *Christians Get Depressed Too*.¹¹ Life, even the Christian life, is not simple and full of constant smiles. Pastors get depressed too! Zack Eswine's book *Spurgeon's Sorrows* tells of how one of the greatest preachers of the 19th century dealt with dark seasons of depression. "On a notable Sunday morning in 1866... C.H. Spurgeon shocked his five thousand listeners when from the pulpit of London's Metropolitan Tabernacle he announced, 'I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to.... John Henry Jowett, the renowned pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City, and later Westminster Chapel in London, wrote to a friend in 1920, 'You seem to imagine I have no ups and downs but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky.'"¹² I can relate to this, for sure.

Paul is saying something similar. He felt depressed. And he talked about it! Openly. He didn't try to hide it, pretend he was okay. **Relational competency** is not being all polished and put together all the time, but knowing how to share that you're not.

"But God." You gotta love those words. "God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us," Paul says. How? Get this: "by the coming of Titus." Titus finally showed up and found Paul! And it buoyed Paul's spirits like nothing else. I can't help but think again of that Bonhoeffer quote from *Life Together* – "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."¹³ Paul was made for people. Just the presence of Titus – the hug, the hearing of his voice, the huge smile on his face brought a huge smile to Paul's face. Can you picture it? Have you experienced it?

But what did Titus tell Paul? Verse 7 – “and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.” Titus had gone to follow up on Paul’s tearful, painful letter to the Corinthians. It was uncertain how it would go, but it went well. The Corinthians reaffirmed their concern for Paul. There’s a whole lot of comfort flowing around here. He had been restlessly wondering what was going on in their hearts and Titus arrives and shares that they had been longing for him, mourning for him, zealous for him. Paul and Titus and the Corinthians didn’t share a shallow relationship, did they? Do you want to be part of something like this?

Now let’s think a little more about this letter that Paul had sent to them. It was not a breezy, easy letter. It wasn’t filled with pleasantries and talk of the weather. It was hard to write, full of hard things to hear, and it was hard for Paul to wait to find out how it was received. It seems that in it Paul was confronting sin. Paul says, “For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted.”

This is how Paul can say that he is filled with comfort in v. 4 and again in v. 13. It’s what comes between. Titus found him and let him know that his painful letter had produced repentance, a change of heart, a restoration of relationship.

This points us to a very important **relational competency**, and that is the ability to say hard things. Paul didn’t prioritize peace to the point of a pathetic superficiality. He wasn’t flippant about sending off scathing rebukes. It did bother him. It tore him up. He struggled with second-guessing. It filled him with grief. But he did it. He said hard things. Because he loved people. He was willing to endure the agony and the relational uncertainty in order to say what needed to be said, to confront, to correct, to call to repentance.

I think most worldly friendships are based on flattery. You find someone like you who likes you or who does something for you and you enjoy this commonality together and keep it fairly light. And if things get too personal, you label them toxic and cut them out of your life. But Paul was committed to people and committed to telling them the truth in love. This is a rare but essential **relational competency** – to be able to say hard things.

As Proverb 27:6 puts it, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” Listen to it in another translation – “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (NIV). Are you willing to wound someone, that they may be healed? This is a real friendship. I know some non-Christian relationships will involve someone speaking his or her mind, but it’s usually to control or manipulate. But what Paul is doing here is not coercive. I know that sometimes non-Christian friend

groups will organize something like an intervention for some major issues. But what about little issues like defensiveness or guardedness or the biggest issues like heaven and hell?

Are you doing this in your relationships? Are you calling people out? Calling them to repent? When's the last time you've written a painful letter that left you sick to your stomach because you didn't know what would happen, but you knew you had to say it. Nowadays we can send emails and texts. We must be careful not to hide behind disembodied forms of communication when we can talk in person. But I'm mostly worried about hiding behind layers of self-protection that doesn't really get down into the deep heart matters. Paul wasn't content with tip-toeing around things that really matter. When's the last time you've warned a brother or sister with tears?

Just look at the relational descriptions in the remaining verses – “And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.” Paul and Timothy, Titus, the Corinthians... they all enjoyed a rich relationship that knew how to work through things, give and receive comfort, bring refreshment; that was full of affection, joyful yet serious, confident.

These people had a high level of **relational competency**. They were open and honest, emotionally vulnerable, in touch with joys and sorrows, verbally expressive... Do you have relationships that get down to this level? When you pray through the membership list do you have the sense that you hold these people in your heart? Do you have brothers or sisters that you talk to regularly about what you're thinking, feeling, fearing, dreaming about, struggling with and that you don't have to pay to listen to you? Cultivating those types of relationships take work, but they are so rewarding.

How Does Christianity Create This?

So that's a look at what constitutes **relational competency** as shown in this passage. But my thesis is that **Christianity creates relational competency**. There's something unique about the Christian message that fosters these kinds of relationships. Nothing else can really do it like this. So how does **Christianity create** this?

Christianity is at its core relational. And not just relationships among people, but ultimately it's about a relationship with God. It's about a God who is Triune – Three in One – in eternal relationship within himself. And he created a world with humans to participate in that eternal relationship of love.

But we have sinned. What is sin? Sin is not just breaking rules, it's breaking a relationship. Sins come from Sin, a deep down, fundamental inclination that isolates oneself from God and others, that orients oneself towards oneself. Sin, before it is behavior, is a dysfunctional desire that centers on self instead of loving God and others.

I've had two experiences recently that illustrated to me something of the sinful human nature, both while I was behind the wheel. This week I was driving down Western coming back from the Chicagoland Baptists office and I heard a siren. Then I saw the lights ahead of me coming toward me. It was an ambulance, whether it had an injured person in it headed for the hospital or whether it was rushing to get someone who

needed help, I don't know. But it was trying to get through traffic and was using its special horn to get people to move out of the way. The cars had eventually parted and it was trying to come down the middle, but couldn't. It kept blaring its alarm, but someone was walking right in front of it, pushing a shopping cart and refusing to step aside. This person wasn't going to move for anyone. *How dare the ambulance assume it can make me move. I have power.* Eventually, the ambulance was able to get around the person and speed on to rescue someone in need. And I was able to get closer and look at that person with disgust and disdain. And then I realized: that's me!

The other instance happened a few days before, right here on Roosevelt. Have you noticed that it can get quite jammed up at certain times? Eastbound traffic trying to get to the highway can back up. I was trying to go north on Morgan across Roosevelt and traffic was backed up. I saw the light turning green ahead, but the line barely moved. Eventually I got close enough to see what was happening. Eastbound drivers on Roosevelt were pushing their way ahead, going out into the middle of the intersection even when the light was yellow in order to get themselves ahead even though it blocked the intersection for drivers trying to cross. I was outraged. I tried to make eye-contact, but driver after driver wouldn't look at me. They were just doing what they thought would serve them. They didn't care about other people.

But then it dawned on me: I have done that before. To get where I wanted to go as fast as I could, I have nosed my car out into an intersection even though it would block off others as my light turned red and theirs green. See what you're capable of doing if you get caught in the snarl after the Marathon today. This is the sinful human heart. And this explains the mess of the world.

God is not just an impersonal authority, like an ambulance siren or traffic light. He's a loving, giving, glorious, kind Being who is the rightful Ruler of the Universe. And we disregard him, try foolishly to make ourselves the center instead of him. And chaos ensues when everyone is trying to get everything to orbit around them. We are sinners.

But God is so patient. He pursues us. He sent the Son to take on flesh and sweat drops of blood before bearing the punishment in the place of sinners so they could be saved; that is, reconciled to God. "[I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (5:19). How? "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21).

God is relational. Sin is relational. Salvation is relational. And it happens through repentance, which is relational. Repentance is relational. Look again at how Paul describes repentance in vv. 9-11. He says there is a kind of worldly grief that doesn't really get you anywhere. It still leads to death. It's just feeling bad or sad. It's upset because of the consequences of sin. Worldly grief laments getting caught, hates the shame. But godly grief regrets the damage done to the relationship. That's real repentance – it's relational. It's truly sorry for the damage done to our relationship with God and wants to see it restored. And it does so by trusting what God did for us in Christ, not by trying to fix it on our own, which is just more self-centered sin and resistance to God.

The classic example of the difference between worldly grief and godly grief is the difference between Judas and his betrayal of Jesus and Peter and his. Judas felt bad about

what he did, but he didn't really repent and put his trust in Jesus. Peter, through a personal encounter where he looked eyes with Jesus, felt genuine remorse and wept for what he had done to him (Lk. 22:61-62).

The Puritan Thomas Watson's book is super helpful on this topic – *The Doctrine of Repentance*. He says that real repentance has six essential ingredients: (1) sight of sin, (2) sorrow for sin, (3) confession of sin, (4) shame for sin, (5) hatred for sin, and (6) turning from sin. On sorrow for sin he says – “It is sorrow for the offence rather than for the punishment. God's law has been infringed, his love abused. This melts the soul in tears. A man may be sorry, yet not repent, as a thief is sorry when he is taken, not because he stole, but because he has to pay the penalty. Hypocrites grieve only for the bitter consequence of sin.... Godly sorrow, however, is chiefly for the trespass against God, so that even if there were no conscience to smite, no devil to accuse, no hell to punish, yet the soul would still be grieved because of the prejudice done to God.”¹⁴

Is that how you're relating to God? Are you repenting and receiving relational comfort from him in the gospel? Do you enjoy forgiveness and fellowship with God? Are you intimate with him? How are your heart affections towards God? If they are cold, repent right now and return to him and you will find his heart is wide open to you. Make room in your heart for him.

Ultimately, this is the one relationship we all need. Ain't nobody know me like Jesus. Nobody else can be that friend who totally gets you and is always there for you. But when you experience his love and repent of your sin before him, then you know how to have relationships with other people. **Christianity creates relational competency.** You can have security in Christ that allows you to be unguarded and open yourself up to others. You've experienced acceptance and grace that allows you to bend it outward to others.

Are you a Christian? If not, you can be right now. Repent of your sin to God. Own it. Don't make excuses for it. Tell him you're sorry for the ways you've trampled on him. And accept his mercy in Christ, who bore the penalty your sins deserve in your place so you could be reconciled to God.

The Lord's Table

If you are a Christian and have been marked out as such by baptism and church membership, then the Lord's Table is a physical means of relational connection. First, with God as we acknowledge our sin and receive his forgiveness. But secondly, with each other as we all come together in Christ and enjoy fellowship. Deal, relationally, with God right now, repent of your sins. And if there is anyone in the body that you are in conflict with right now, commit to reconcile.

God, who comforts the downcast, has comforted us by the coming of Jesus... and he will come again...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, October 11, 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.

End Notes:

- ¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harvest, 1988 [1960]), 57.
- ² www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf, 15.
- ³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- ⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9811250/>
- ⁵ Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023).
- ⁶ Arthur C. Brooks, "How Loneliness Is Tearing American Apart," in *New York Times* (November 23, 2018).
- ⁷ Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review," *PLOS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (2010).
- ⁸ Justin Whitmel Earley, *Made for People: Why We Drift into Loneliness and How to Fight for a Life of Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023).
- ⁹ www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-british-candle
- ¹⁰ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ David P. Murray, *Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People* (Reformation Heritage, 2021).
- ¹² R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 147, citing Warren Wiersbe, *Walking with the Giants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 263-65.
- ¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 19.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2025 [1668]), 19.