

In this message, we come to 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4. It is all about how to handle misunderstandings. If you've ever been misunderstood, if you've ever had your motives misjudged and your actions misinterpreted, and if you've ever had your reputation tarnished as a result, you're in good company. The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Corinthians, was the victim of such a thing. And Paul wasn't immune to the hurt and sense of betrayal that resulted from having people he cared deeply about turn on him.

Have you noticed it? Misunderstandings happen. Relational conflict happens. We don't always get along! It happens in families, businesses, neighborhoods, and it happens where it can hurt the most—in churches. There are times when your fellow believers will act in ways that befuddle you, frustrate you, and even anger you. They may act in ways that make you wonder if they can be trusted at all. Right now, for example, the church is very divided over politics. We don't all agree on how we should vote. How do you handle that? Do you write those people off who disagree with you? Do you leave the church? Do you just ignore them? Don't forget the Bible calls the church the "bride of Christ." Jesus loves the church lavishly. He shed his blood for the church. And yet, at the same time, we have to understand the church is made up of broken, sinful people. For that reason, church can be hard.

In his first book, *Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien describes the camaraderie of a diverse group, banded together by a common cause. Their quest is to destroy the power of the Dark Lord lodged in this one ring. Though those in the Fellowship of the Ring differ in many ways, they're united in their opposition of the Dark Lord. In one scene, a heated conflict breaks out among the Fellowship. Axes are drawn. Bows are bent. Harsh words are spoken. Disaster nearly strikes the small band. When peace at last prevails, a wise counselor observes, "Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him."

In this passage, Paul is dealing with the "estrangement that divides" the body of Christ—all of us who oppose our common enemy, the devil himself. The issue centered around Paul's integrity. The Corinthians were accusing Paul of not being true to his word of making a promise without any intention of following through. It all had to do with his travel plans. Paul had a plan A, which he'd written to the Corinthians about from Ephesus. He told them he'd visit them twice before going to Jerusalem with

a relief fund he'd been collecting for the believers in Jerusalem. Plan A was to come to Corinth first, go up to Macedonia, and then return to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. This would be the first time Paul had visited them since he started the church three years earlier. But the first of these two visits was so painful that Paul canceled the second one and returned to Ephesus. He wrote a painful letter to them instead. This was plan B." The news of Paul's canceled visit wasn't received well by the Corinthians. They accused him of being fickle; of not being a man of his word; he couldn't be trusted; he'd say one thing but do another if it was more convenient for him.

So Paul addresses this. In doing so, he teaches us a lot about how to handle conflicts and misunderstandings in our relationships, especially with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Clear Conscience

The first thing he teaches us is to examine our hearts to see whether our conscience is clear.

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus. vv. 12-14

He says, "My conscience is clear. My conduct has been above reproach. You of all people should know that!" He'd spent a lot of time in Corinth. They'd seen the kind of man he was—up close and personal. He says he and his companions operated out of "integrity and godly sincerity." That word integrity can also mean simplicity. The word translated sincerity describes something that passes inspection for defects when held up to the light. Paul's conscience was clear because he had nothing to hide. He was transparent. He was open. He was what he appeared to be. He was on the same on the outside as he was on the inside.

He also says he didn't rely on "*worldly wisdom but on God's grace.*" No games; no charades; just simple reliance on God who, by grace, would work through him. Paul says he didn't "*write anything you cannot read or understand.*" In other words, "You don't have to read between the lines with me. You don't have to try to comb through a lot of big words no one understands. I speak

clearly and plainly.” He even points them to the future when all things will be brought to light. He says, “I trust in the end when we all stand before God, you’ll have reason to be as proud of me, and as I am of you.”

Paul’s conscience is clear. When you’re misunderstood about something, when somebody judges you, the first thing you should do is examine yourself and ask, “Is my conscience clear or not?” So often, we’re blind to our contribution to the conflict, and we get caught in a vicious cycle of self-justification. Examine yourself. If your conscience is clean, that’s good. If it’s not, your first step is to confess that, acknowledge it, and admit you’re wrong. Sometimes it’s not either-or. There may be things you did that we’re right, but other things that were wrong.

We all have blind spots, and we need others to help us see what we can’t. I had someone point something out to me recently that happened years ago, and I realized I was wrong. I’d misjudged a situation and caused pain as a result. My conscience was not clear. And so I had to acknowledge that before God and that person. That’s where you have to start. You must have a clear conscience before you can go on. Much of the strife between people comes from their unwillingness to examine themselves and clear their consciences before they do anything.

My Word is Trustworthy

The second thing Paul wants them to know is that his word is trustworthy; he’s not fickle. Look what he says about his travel plans.

Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both “Yes, yes” and “No, no”? vv. 15-17

After reiterating his original plans, he confronts their accusations head-on: “*Was I fickle when I intended to do this?*” This was a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is, “No! I didn’t communicate my plans to you but deep down kept my options open to do something else.” They were accusing him of saying yes but meaning no.

This is a serious attack on Paul’s integrity. That had to hurt. I mean, integrity is everything. People can ruin your reputation, destroy your physical health, empty your bank account, even wreak havoc in your family, but no one can take away your integrity. But when you say you’ll do something, mean it. That doesn’t mean you can never say no. We have to say no to a lot of things. But if you say, “Yes, Yes” and “No, No,” at the same time, something is wrong. Jesus once spoke about this. He said, “*All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one*” (Matt 5:37).

Again, it comes down to integrity—mean what you say, and say what you mean. Let’s be honest; that’s not always easy. It’s like the joke about a graduating university student who asked one of his professors to write a letter of reference to a company interviewing him. The professor didn’t have a lot of confidence in the student, but he didn’t want to ruin his chances of getting a job. Not wanting to lie to the company, he wrote, “If you knew him the way I know him, then you would feel about him the way I do.” Paul says that he never talks that way to the Corinthians.

For Paul, meaning what you say and saying what you mean was everything because the credibility of the Gospel was at stake. Look what he says next.

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not “Yes” and “No.” For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. vv. 18-22

Paul moves for a moment from talking about himself to talking about God. God is faithful! The message of the Gospel we preached to you is “Yes!” His disposition towards you is one of positive affirmation. That’s the Gospel, right? When he looks at you, he doesn’t shake his head and says, “No.” He nods his head and says, “Yes.”

We ask, “Will you forgive me?”

He says, “Yes.”

We ask, “Will you really change me?”

He says, “Yes.”

We ask, “Will you really provide for all my needs?”

He says, “Yes.”

We ask, “Will you really give me eternal life with you?”

He says, “Yes.”

All these promises are true in Christ and only in Him. The only condition is that we are in Him (Christ) through faith. That’s why we have to say “Amen” to his promises. That’s simply saying, “Yes! Amen! I believe he’ll deliver on his promises.” Paul is saying, “Just as God’s promises are yes, so are mine. Just as God means what he says, so do I.”

Paul even goes one step further: He talks about what God has done in each of their lives. He says God has made “*both us and you stand firm in Christ.*” He uses a term that was used in business to confirm a sale. It’s like God shook on it, and his word is good. Then he says, “*He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on*

us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." How could God deposit something and then renege? When we put our faith in Jesus, God gives us his Spirit, who's like a down payment on our future inheritance in heaven.

Again, the point here is, just as God's promises are good to us, so my promise to you is good. We want people to know beyond a shadow of a doubt; God is faithful; He keeps his promises. But how will they ever believe that if we who proclaim the Gospel don't keep our promises? Notice how we preach the Gospel with not just our words but our actions. If we fail to live with integrity, that reflects on the Gospel. It's good for all of us to ask ourselves: Where am I slipping? Sometimes it's the small things. It's the little compromises. But those compromises matter. It's like a tiny crack in a windshield; the more you ignore the small things, the worse the problem will get.

A Motive of Love

This raises the question: Well, then, why did Paul change his mind? How could he justify that? How can we ever justify that? Look what Paul says next.

I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. vv. 1:23-2:4

Paul says he changed his mind to spare them. He was thinking about what was best for them. His motive was love. He was trying to find the most tactful way to deal with the conflict without inflaming tensions more than necessary. He wanted to spare them the pain of another ugly confrontation. So instead of making that second visit, he wrote them a letter, a painful letter. He sent it with *"great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears."* Despite their mistrust of him, he says he sent it to let them know of *"the depth of my love for you."* It's a letter we don't have today, but Paul sent it in the hope they'd see how much he cared for them.

He was being vulnerable. He hoped it would turn them around, and the result would be joy. Paul didn't like making people unhappy. He didn't want to lord over anyone's faith; he loved these people; he believed their faith was real. He wanted to work with them for their joy. All this was true even though they seemed to believe the worst in him. This reminds me of what Alfred Lord

Tennyson said of Archbishop Cranmer: "To do him a hurt was to beget a kindness from him. His heart was made of such fine soil that if you planted in it the seeds of hate they blossomed love."

We can learn a couple of things from this when we reflect on Paul's motive of love. First, there's more to integrity than just keeping your word. There are times when integrity means NOT doing what you initially intended and even said you'd do. As with Paul, love might require you to change your plans and even renege on a commitment. Don't do it lightly, but when love requires it, do it. For Paul, that meant avoiding an unnecessary confrontation. He's not avoiding the issue, but he's dealing with it tactfully. There are times when marching into a situation we know will create great pain on both sides isn't the best choice. There are times when emotions are running so high, and heels are dug in so deep, nothing fruitful will come from a confrontation. Maybe more time is needed. Honestly, some of my biggest mistakes have resulted from moving too fast in confronting situations.

Stephen Carter is a professor of law at Yale. He wrote a book titled *Integrity*, and one of the things he talks about is that integrity requires more than just honesty; it requires moral reflection, discernment, and sometimes even restraint. In other words, integrity is nuanced. You might have every intention of doing something, but integrity might mean you change your plan.

A couple of years ago, Lynn and I felt it was the right time for me to transition out of CPC. We had a plan. We talked to the elders and staff, and we were about to tell the church. But a number of things happened, and I began having doubts about our plan. I recall reluctantly sharing with Lynn how I felt, and lo and behold; she felt the same way. And then I shared that with the elders, and they were also feeling the same way. And in a matter of just a few days, God made it clear to all of us that it wasn't the right time. So we changed our plan. It was hard. We felt like we were fickle. But now, as we look back, we see how right that decision was. We took a sabbatical, and when we returned, we were reenergized. These past two years have been some of the most challenging and rewarding years in ministry. So, again, the point is that integrity can mean more than just keeping your word. Sometimes God changes your plan.

Another thing we learn from this is relationships are messy. They bring both joy and pain; laughter and tears. When you chose to love someone, you always make yourself vulnerable. When you give yourself to imperfect people like the Corinthians, you make a choice for both sorrow and joy.

This is especially true when it comes to marriage. Think about the choice to marry someone. You say those words, "For better or for worse, For richer or for poorer, In sickness and in health." The choice to marry is a choice for joy; there's great joy in a good marriage. But there can be sorrow too. When your husband of

30 years suddenly dies, you know the sorrow of love. When your wife walks through a season of deep depression, and she can't get out of bed in the morning, and you don't know what to do, you know the sorrow of love.

It's also true of the choice to be a parent. There's so much joy in watching your child grow up, but there can be pain too. There's pain in watching your child get picked on, struggle to keep up in school, question your authority, or grow up and make some poor choices with devastating consequences.

Relationships are messy, but with love, they're a mess worth making. One of the most basic things we learn from Paul here is when those inevitable misunderstandings and messes happen, do everything you can to make it right. That's what love does. It pursues. It seeks reconciliation. Go to that person, but as you go, check your heart. What's your motive? To prove you were right?

Go in love. You can't control what others do or feel, but you can control what you do and what's in your heart. Some people adopt the attitude, "Well, I'm just going to forget it and hope the whole thing disappears." But it usually doesn't disappear. Misunderstanding will fester in your heart; you may think you've dismissed it or forgotten it, but actually, it's smoldering like a fire that refuses to go out. Sometimes, unexpectedly, it will burst into flames. You blow up at someone because you've never dealt with your resentment.

Jesus talked about this. He warned us against letting things lie unsettled. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said this:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matt. 5:23-24

You see, that's love. Loving that person even takes precedence over worship. Relationships are messy, but with love, they're a mess worth making.

And there may be times when you do everything you can, but you still can't make it right. When that happens, you just have to leave it with God. I recall an old friend who passed away about two years ago. He was an elementary school teacher. He loved what he did, and he did it incredibly well for 30 years. And then someone began a vicious rumor about him that was completely false. No matter what he did to clear his name, the damage was done. He retired early and moved out of the area.

In times like that, the only thing you can do is go to God and leave it with him. Let him fight for you. It may not be on your timetable, but whether here or in eternity, He will come through. Think about Jesus. Jesus was the victim of the greatest smear campaign in history. Here's a man with perfect integrity. Was he misunderstood? Yes! Was he lied about? Yes! Was he wrongly condemned? Absolutely! And in the end, all he could do was say, "Father, forgive them. Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit."

Maybe that's where you are at today. Whatever your situation, ask yourself, Have I examined myself and is my conscience clear? Is my word trustworthy? Is my motive one of love?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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