

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Introduction

1. As we learned in our introduction a couple weeks ago, chapters 1-7 of this letter is one long defense by the Apostle Paul
 - a. We don't know a lot of specifics, but some false teachers (Paul calls them super- or hyper-apostles) had come into the church and began to poison the minds of the Corinthians against Paul
 - b. It appears they challenged his credibility, integrity, authority and even his teaching
 - c. Paul had attempted to deal with this by making an unexpected visit which apparently didn't go well
 - d. He then followed up with a frank letter, one what apparently led to a mix of sorrow, repentance and possibly some other accusations
2. Today, he defends himself against two specific accusations: his general conduct among the Corinthians and his decision to postpone a visit

A. Paul defends his general conduct among the Corinthians (1:12-14)

1. These three verses set the theme and purpose for the letter
 - a. Some in Corinth were apparently questioning Paul's motives and sincerity (especially since he had changed his plans to visit them)
 - b. It appears some were suggesting that Paul didn't mean what he wrote in his letters
 - c. There's internal evidence that some considered his sufferings and misfortune as a sign that he was—at best—less qualified than the "super apostles" that had infiltrated the church
 - d. It also sounds like some were questioning his refusal to accept payment for his ministry, and at the same time suggesting that he was really using the collection taken by Titus for his own enrichment
 - e. It's fairly obvious by the last few chapters of this letter that some were questioning his authority as an apostle
2. Such charges against Paul moved him to defend himself and his ministry (12-14):
 - a. Paul's conscience was clear (12): **"For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."**
 - 1) Having a clear conscience refers to not being aware of any wrong doing in one's conduct or behavior
 - 2) Paul referred often to maintaining a clear conscience:
 - a) When he was accused of wrong doing by the Jews, his response to the Council in Acts 23:1 was, **"Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."**
 - b) Again, in Acts 24:16 he said, **"In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men."**
 - c) When he wrote to Timothy, he referred to serving God **"with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did..."** (2 Timothy 1:3)

- d) It's no surprise then that he would challenge Timothy to do the same thing and fight the good fight by **"keeping faith and a good conscience"** because some had **"rejected [these two things] and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith"** (1 Timothy 1:19)
- 3) But Paul wasn't referring to having a clear conscience in his own eyes, or even the eyes of men, but rather God:
- a) In a number of the passages just cited he refers to his conscience being clear **"before God"**
- b) When addressing his behavior before the Corinthians he uses similar language:
- He refers to his conduct being done **"in holiness"**: there's a Greek variant here so it's unclear if the original word was holiness (hagiotēs) or another word, **haplotēs**, which can express a number of different concepts like generosity, sincerity, simplicity, or even single-minded devotion. The NASB goes with holiness because it has the bulk of the manuscript evidence, but most other English translations go with **haplotēs** for other reasons such as internal evidence and the surrounding context (so render it with words like **"pure motives"**, **"simplicity"**, **integrity"**)
 - He conducted himself with **"godly sincerity"**—lit. "the sincerity of God"; refers to having pure motives
 - His conduct was **"not in fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God"**—refers to motivation; not being motivated by human, fleshly wisdom but being motivated by the grace of God
 - This was in striking contrast to the motives and lack of integrity displayed by false teachers and possibly the "hyper-apostles" that Paul refers to at Corinth
- b. Paul hoped that they would come to "fully understand" (ESV) this and find that they could boast in him, just as he could boast in them, at the return of Christ (13-14): **"For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; 14 just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus."**
3. So, what can we learn from this?
- a. One is the value and importance of maintaining a clear conscience:
- 1) Paul was able to defend his behavior because his conscience was clear before God
 - 2) If you remember, when David cut off the bottom of Saul's robe the text says that it was his conscience that bothered him because he had dishonored the Lord's Anointed, King Saul, and led to confessing the sin
 - 3) Paul wrote to Timothy that a pure heart, sincere faith and a good conscience all go hand in hand and that when such things are rejected they can lead to shipwreck in one's faith (1 Timothy 1:5)
 - 4) Likewise, Peter called on his readers to **"Keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame"** (1 Peter 3:16)
- b. A second thing we can learn is that a clear conscience is one that is right before God:
- 1) We've already seen that in Paul

- 2) Likewise, in the 1 Peter 3 passage, Peter ties a clear conscience to things like being zealous for what is morally good, sanctifying (setting apart) Christ in our hearts, suffering for doing right rather than wrong, and living for the will of God rather than our flesh

B. Paul defends his change of plans (1:15-2:4)
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1. The Corinthians were upset with Paul because he failed to visit them as he had planned:
 - a. In 1st Corinthians 16:5-7 Paul shared his plans to visit Corinth for an extended stay after leaving Macedonia
 - b. However, something happened which required Paul to make a shorter, emergency visit to Corinth ahead of schedule to deal with some serious issues (referred to as the Painful Visit)
 - c. Apparently, this visit didn't go too well and instead of making another longer visit as originally planned, Paul followed up with a letter (referred to as the Severe Letter)

2. Originally, Paul planned to visit the Corinthians twice and was confident these visits would be a double-blessing for the Corinthians (15-16): **"In this confidence I intended at first to come to you, so that you might twice receive a blessing; 16 that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea."**
 - a. He intended to visit them twice, once on the way to Macedonia and then a second, longer visit on the way back (possibly through the winter)
 - b. However, as we know, the unexpected emergency visit didn't go well, and led to Paul changing his plans
 - c. When he changed his plans, some apparently made accusations against him (17):
 - 1) Some accused him of fickleness or not being a man of his word: **"Therefore, I was not vacillating (lit. taking things lightly, being fickle) when I intended to do this, was I?"**
 - 2) Other apparently accused him of making decisions based on his flesh (in other words, whatever he felt at the time): **"Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh"**
 - 3) In their mind, this made Paul's word meaningless and untrustworthy: **"so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time?":**
 - a) Paul is referencing a principle taught by Jesus, that of meaning what we say
 - b) The Jews had a habit of swearing an oath to prove that what they said was what they meant (e.g. "I swear to God that I'm telling the truth")
 - c) Jesus said oath-taking wasn't necessary, but rather **"...let your 'yes' mean 'yes,' and your 'no' mean 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one"** (HCSB Matthew 5:37)
 - 4) Paul's answer to each of these rhetorical questions was obviously "No":
 - a) He was not fickle
 - b) His plans were driven by his flesh
 - c) His words were trustworthy because he spoke clearly and always meant what he said
 - d. It appears that some questioned not only his change of plans, but his word in general, and may have questioned Paul's teaching about the LORD (READ 18-22):
 - 1) That they were questioning more than just his change of plans is evidenced by the phrase **"our word to you"** which Paul defines in vs. 19 and 20 as his **"preaching"** and the **"promises of God"**

- 2) Paul's defense is essentially this:
 - a) God is faithful
 - b) We preached Jesus, God's son, among you
 - c) All of God's promises are realized in Jesus
 - d) God has been glorified through He, Silvanus and Timothy
 - e) The same God has established them (the Corinthians) and Paul, Silvanus and Timothy together in Christ
 - f) Therefore, his "word" to them was not yes and no, but reliable and trustworthy

3. Unfortunately, Paul's emergency visit didn't go as planned so he decided against making another visit to Corinth (1:23-2:4):
 - a. Paul states two motives for his change in plans and both have to do with sorrow:
 - 1) The first was that he wanted to spare them: **"But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth."**
 - a) He doesn't state exactly what he wants to spare them from, but it is likely additional chastisement (like during the painful visit and severe letter) and sorrow:
 - Chastisement as evidence by his frank warnings in the last few chapters that he would not spare the rod if necessary on his future visit
 - Sorrow as evidence by vs. 2:1-4
 - b) Paul's desire was not to control their faith, but rather to work with them in their faith to bring about joy (rather than sorrow): **"Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm"** (24; NIV is better: **"because it is by faith that you stand firm."**)
 - 2) The second motive was that he wanted to spare himself further sorrow (2:1-2): **"But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. 2 For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful?"**
 - a) Discipline generally causes sorrow, does it not?
 - b) Think of a parent disciplining a child and the tears it produces, usually for the child but often for the parent as well
 - c) Spiritual, or church discipline, is no different causing grief and sorrow on both sides

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- b. Paul's change in plans were actually an act of love for the Corinthians (2:3-4):
 - 1) He wrote to them (severe letter) so that a future visit would bring joy, not sorrow (3): **"This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all."**
 - 2) He likely felt that another visit so quickly would end like the last one (painful visit)
 - 3) So, he wrote to them instead, hoping that a letter would bring about repentance before another visit and therefore result in joy, rather than more sorrow:
 - a) In 2 Corinthians 13:10 Paul wrote, **"For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down."**

- b) Paul also believed the letter would reveal something about their commitment to obedience (2 Corinthians 2:9): **“For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.”**

- 4) Ultimately, Paul hoped such a letter would reveal his deep love and affection for them (4): **“For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”**

- 4. What can we take away from this (there are so many small tid-bits here)?
 - a. One is that our words should be trustworthy
 - b. A second is that we should be careful when accusing others of not keeping their word or not meaning what they said:
 - 1) Sometimes circumstances change—this doesn’t mean that what the other person said or promised was insincere
 - 2) It’s important to understand what’s behind the change
 - c. A third is that our interactions—words and behavior—can sometimes come with a bit of grief and sorrow, but that’s when love toward one another becomes so important

Conclusion
