

“Personal Integrity for Gospel Credibility”

2Corinthians 8:16-24

July 25, 2021

Scripture Reading: 2Cor 8:16-24

One of the questions that our Associate Pastor search team is asking when we interview candidates is quite relevant to today’s passage. Here’s the question. *Spiritual leaders seem to be tempted in 4 areas: money, sex, power, and pride. What have you learned about yourself in these areas and how do you handle temptation?*

Of course, these are not only temptations that leaders have to combat, but all of us at some level. Tragically, the church has been scandalized in all four of these areas far too many times. For example, the temptation that accompanies money and its potential influence has impacted church history since Ananias and Sapphira lied about their contribution in Acts 5. And it wasn’t even about greed as much as it was about status—trying to posture an inflated reputation.

Paul was not naïve to the multitude of temptations that surround money—and there are many: greed, stealing, lying, power, status, control, love of the world and luxury, idolatry, not to mention the things we can easily forfeit like faith, stewardship, and meeting the needs of ministry and the poor. Listen to Paul’s warning and counsel in [1Tim 6:8-11].

In 2 Cor 8, It’s important to see that when Paul established guidelines to ensure integrity in the handling of ministry funds, it was not just to protect *the money*. It was also to protect *the people* handling the money, knowing that no one is exempt from temptation. And by the way, Satan doesn’t merely wield temptation at the ‘weak.’ He loves to take down the strong. And if he cannot do it by enticing a person to compromise his integrity, he will use suspicion, false accusations, or the appearance of evil to damage a person’s witness.

I know a dear brother who had a faithful ministry as a pastor for decades. At one point in his ministry, he tried to lead his church to adopt some better financial practices. He never compromised his integrity. His intent was to apply proper IRS guidelines and allowances to

alleviate some of the burden he was experiencing in a small church where he was underpaid. But some were suspicious of ill-motives and their unfounded accusations damaged his ministry credibility irreparably in the eyes of many.

I’m so thankful Trinity not only has multiple lines of accountability regarding ministry funds but also that our leadership team has protected me from direct involvement in church finances or any awareness of who gives what so that my ministry to you will not be encumbered by matters of money.

Yet of course, the temptations that surround money are not isolated to the church. They are a part of everyone’s everyday life.

I hope to help us see from 2Cor 8 that for the Christian, financial integrity is much deeper than the balance line of your spreadsheet. *Gospel credibility calls for integrity in all daily affairs.*

Big Idea: *Because money is either a means of temptation or a tool to advance God’s purposes, we must exercise integrity in all daily affairs for the sake of gospel credibility.*

Paul’s approach to handling the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem can be captured in 4 words:

1. Accountability

Even though Paul was the primary leader (the guy in charge, humanly speaking) he distanced himself from the actual administration and handling of the funds. Instead, Paul sets up a delegation of three other trusted men who were charged with the responsibility. All three of these men, as we will see in a moment, are men of proven character and therefore good reputation.

So, Paul takes a step back and, in his place, has a team a team of three step forward. That’s accountability. And the reason for this accountability is clearly stated in vs. 20-21: *“taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”*

Notice that Paul is not only concerned about doing what is right in the sight of God but also doing it in a way that can be verified by other people. Why? Because Paul doesn't want any appearance of evil to be a stumbling block to the very people He is seeking to reach with Gospel or the churches he is attempting to lead. The *fear of God* causes him to carefully ensure that he is acting with integrity before the Lord, while the *love of Christ* compels him to not be a stumbling block to those his ministry is intended to reach.

You'll recall back in chapter 5 that Paul testified to acting in the *fear of God* and being controlled by the *love of Christ* precisely because "*we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be recompensed for our deeds...*" (5:10, 11, 14). So, Paul's primary accountability is to God. Yet true accountability to God includes a willingness to be accountable to other people. If we are unwilling to be accountable to another person, we may only be pretending to be accountable to God and merely delaying the accounting He will hold us to on a future day.

Given the specific context of 2Corinthians, Paul is careful to be accountable because he's already had to defend his ministry against false accusations in Corinth. Furthermore, he is aware that accountability ensures not only integrity in *administering* the funds but also integrity in the *collection* of funds. Later in chapter 9:5, Paul tells them to collect the funds ahead of time before he arrives so that their gifts will be "bountiful" (lit. a blessing) rather than impacted by "covetousness" (or better translated in this context, coercing). Here's the point: if they only take a collection when Paul shows up with representatives from Macedonia, it will appear as though they are giving out of obligation and it will undermine the whole point of the collection to demonstrate love and unity within the church. Thus, Paul says in 8:24, "show them the proof of your love."

So Paul chooses a road of accountability. He steps back from the money and entrusts it to 3 others who will be accountable to each other as well as to Paul and the churches who have contributed so graciously.

2. Integrity

No amount of accountability can make up for a lack of integrity.

Accountability is meant to reinforce a character of integrity, not replace it.

It becomes quickly apparent that each of the 3 appointed to oversee the collection were men of reputable character. Paul points to this in various ways.

- **Titus [16-17]:** Paul had not only appealed to Titus to return to Corinth where he had previously done the challenging work of peacemaking, but Titus himself went willingly out love and care for the Corinthians. And this very spirit of earnestness or sincerity, Paul recognizes as God's work in Titus. Hence Paul's praise to God in vs. 16.

Later in vs. 23, Paul references Titus as his ministry partner and his fellow worker. Given all their ministry together, Paul has full confidence in Titus's integrity to entrust this crucial ministry to him.

- **The Famous Brother [18-19]:** This may be the most anonymous famous person in the Bible. He was so known among the churches that Paul has no need to mention his name. All speculation aside, we have no idea who he is. But everyone in Paul's day knew who he was talking about. Obviously, he had a good reputation as a result of his integrity.
- **The Other Brother [22]:** "Often tested and found diligent in many things." That's integrity—proven character!

3. Credibility

What's the difference between integrity and credibility? *Integrity* is the personal quality of sound character (honesty, without hypocrisy, faithful, doing what's right when no one is looking, doing what's right regardless of the circumstances). *Credibility* is the trustworthy confidence we gain with people as a result of our integrity. Integrity is what I am (character). Credibility is what people can trust (reputation).

Titus had credibility with Paul as his trusted ministry partner (23) as well as credibility with the Corinthians due to his sincere and proven ministry among them (16-17). His credibility had been earned with his integrity.

The *Famous brother* had obvious credibility among all the churches not only based on his reputation but based on the fact that he was “appointed” by the churches in vs. 19 (lit. chosen by a raising of hands).¹ This brother had credibility. By the way, another aspect of accountability is that Paul was not the only one to hand-select the team. He had the churches weigh in on the choice.

The *other brother’s credibility* in vs. 22 comes from the same source as is proven integrity: he was “often tested and found diligent in many things.” Like Titus, His credibility was earned by his proven integrity.

4. **Loyalty to God and the Gospel**

It is not a coincidence that these men were devoted to gospel ministry. Titus was Paul’s ministry partner and in vs. 23 the other two are referred to as “messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ.” Here’s the point I’m driving at. These 3 men had much deeper interests than just financial integrity. These are men who recognize that a breach of integrity in financial affairs would cost them the credibility of the gospel in their ministry. They understood the purpose of the mission they had been assigned to in vs. 20: “*taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift.*” They understood that the purpose of their mission, financially, was to not only serve the poor, not only to build love and unity among Jewish and Gentile believers, but also to preserve the credible witness of the gospel.

This passage is about more than mere financial procedures. It’s about character—living above reproach. Even the world recognizes the value of integrity, credibility, and accountability to a degree. But as believers, we have so much more at stake. Our integrity in daily affairs will either strengthen the credibility of our gospel message or it will tear it down. In

the world’s eyes, the credibility of the gospel is carried on our shoulders in the daily grind of life.

We must take to heart a simple but profound truth: ***There is no distinction between the sacred and secular in the believer’s life.*** All of life is lived in the presence of God, all of life is to be lived in the fear of the Lord. All of life is to the glory of God. All of life is sacred for the Christian. Everything we put our hand to is sacred because in everything Christ is with us, the Spirit is in us, and nothing we have, do, or experience is outside the realm of God’s providence.

This is why the Puritans were known to excel in the trades. For Example, they believed that if they made furniture, it should be made to the very best of their ability because they viewed their work as a means of worship to their Creator. My point is not that we should strive for perfection and be driven to ‘perform’ in all that we do. My point is that all of life (work, mowing the lawn, recreation) can be done in a spirit of worship to our gracious, ever-present God.

So 2Cor 8 is really about living a God-pleasing life. Back in chapter 5, Paul said, “we make it our ambition...to be pleasing to Him for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (5:9-10). Notice how that singular, over-arching ambition to please God (above all else, in all things) presses in to practical, daily affairs like finances in chapter 8 when Paul says, “we have regard for what is honorable...in the sight of the Lord [and] in the sight of men” (21).

When we live a God-pleasing life of worship and gratitude in the fear of the Lord, we *will* uphold the gospel with credibility. And so...

- Financial integrity matters.
- Paying our bills on time, matters.
- How we deal with the IRS matters
- How we do our work matters
- How we conduct business matters
- How we drive matters
- How we keep our word matters

¹ Scott Hafemann, NIV Application Commentary: 2Corinthians, pg. 360.

- How we treat people matters
- How we entertain ourselves matters

Let's live as though all of life is sacred and as though our primary calling in life is to represent Jesus.