

“Servants of Mercy when Life is Messy”

2 Corinthians 1:12—2:11

May 2, 2021

Twenty-four years ago when I first got my feet wet in pastoral ministry, I was young and ‘green’ and had a lot to learn. Today I feel as though I have no less to learn. But if there is one thing I have discovered, it’s that while ministry can be messy, God is always faithful. Ministry gets messy because life is messy in this fallen world of sin. But God is faithful to those who trust Him in the mess of life and so often His faithfulness is conveyed through a faithful church and faithful shepherding. We cannot be a faithful church or faithful leaders, however, without being willing to walk with people through the messy seasons of life.

And this is precisely where we find Paul in 2 Corinthians 1-2, clinging to the faithfulness of God as he endures the painful experience of ministering to the Corinthians. The church of Corinth was certainly the most messy of any New Testament church. They struggled with factions and division. They struggled to forsake worldly attitudes and values. And they fell prey to self-appointed, false apostles who led them to rebel against Paul—the very one who brought the gospel to Corinth and planted the church there. And this made them susceptible to the possibility of losing their grip on the true gospel.

It would have been easy for Paul to take offense at the insults and slander from those who sought to undermine his ministry and apostolic authority. It would have been easy for Paul to ‘give up’ on the Corinthians and invest his time and energy in a ‘more fruitful’ ministry somewhere else. But he didn’t because He knew that God is faithful and therefore His apostle must be faithful to do whatever he can by God’s grace to help the church be faithful.

Here’s the situation Paul finds himself in. He had told the church in I Cor 16, that he would perhaps spend the winter in Corinth if the Lord willed. But when Paul heard reports of a self-made, false apostle attacking his character and authority to undermine his ministry of the gospel, Paul modified his travel plans to make a crisis visit to Corinth. That visit, however, was cut short by a painful confrontation in which the church failed to refute the personal attacks levied against Paul. So Paul left Corinth to defuse an

explosive situation and instead wrote a letter of rebuke, apparently calling the church to take action against Paul’s slanderer. Paul’s opponent used his multiple changes in travel plans against him, accusing him of not having integrity, of having ill motives, and being cowardly in leaving Corinth in the midst of conflict. Yet, Paul’s letter proved to be affective. Most of the church repented and took action against Paul’s opponent who also repented. But you know that when suspicion has been cast on someone’s character, it doesn’t easily dissipate for everyone. So Paul writes to defend his character by clarifying his intentions and calling for restoration. What Paul exemplifies for us here is that...

A life rooted in the grace of God will display transparent integrity and even endure personal insults to warn a sinning brother of judgment and forgive the repentant brother from a heart of love. Paul demonstrates faithful leadership amidst a personally painful situation for the sake of true reconciliation and restoration through the gospel.

Today’s passage demonstrates four ways Paul’s life serves as an example:

- 1. The evidence of God’s grace in one’s life is manifested through a transparent life of godly integrity, devoid of worldliness (1:12-14).**

[1:12-14] Paul’s intent in vs. 12-14 is to affirm the integrity of his character and conduct as God-honoring because it is the fruit of God’s grace. Paul is not just trying to recover his personal reputation. He understands that if the messenger is discredited, then the message of the gospel that he preaches will also appear discredited.

Paul is saying in vs. 12, I have a clear conscience because I have conducted myself in “holiness and godly sincerity.” Paul is assuring them that his motives have been pure before God. The sense here is that he has nothing to hide. His conscience is clear because his conduct is pure. His life is one of transparency. What you see is what you get. He is the real deal, because his life is no longer guided by “fleshly wisdom” or worldly thinking.

David Wells describes worldliness as a mindset that makes fallen human beings the center of their values, beliefs, and behaviors while relegating

thought of God to the periphery. The result is a culture in which “sin looks normal” and “righteousness seems odd”—or even wrong.¹

So if Paul has rejected such worldliness, why then does He speak of his godly character with an air of boasting? Paul says this is his proud confidence or his boast—his grounds for boasting. But notice in vs. 12, Paul’s clear conscience, his conduct in holiness and godly sincerity were not attributed to himself but to “the grace of God.” In a sense Paul is acknowledging that the depravity of sin in one’s life is so pervasive, that the only possible means by which a person could walk in purity and holiness is by the grace of God.

So Paul writes to the Corinthians who have been so prone to boasting in themselves, to their own demise (1Cor 1:12; 3:21; 4:7), and models a life of true godliness and transparency that can only boast in the grace of God.

Just as Paul’s life has been transparent, so his letters in vs. 13 have been straightforward. No politics. No hidden agenda. And all of this so that at the final day of judgment the Corinthians can boast in Paul as their true apostle and in turn Paul can boast in the Corinthians as true believers because they have indeed embraced the grace of God.

So what does this have to do with us? The Corinthians had to develop an eye for godly character birthed out of God’s grace rather than being impressed by the external performance of false teachers. In a similar way, we need to ask ourselves, does my life reflect the purity and transparency that bears evidence of God’s grace in my life? Or do I sense the need to present myself publicly in a way that veils the true desires and motivations of my heart?² In other words, is my life an open book because the grace of God is producing humility and purity in me, or do I have something to hide because I still live according to the flesh?

2. **The conduct of a believer’s life should be based not merely on circumstances but on the character of God and the truths of the gospel (1:15-22).**

[1:15-22] In vs. 15-22, Paul addresses his change in travel plans that have cast suspicions on his sincerity. Paul is confident that he made his original

plans with the sincerity of a clear conscience just discussed in vs. 12 (cf. vs. 15). His original plan was to pass through Corinth twice on his way to and from Macedonia. This was motivated by his desire for the Corinthians to receive a double blessing (literally, a second grace or benefit). It was for their benefit. The sense here is that in providing for Paul’s journey as he passed through, they would not only be giving to Paul but also receiving the blessing of grace in their ministry to him. Here as in 8:1, a believer’s generosity is evidence of God’s grace. He wanted them to benefit from the grace of giving—twice.

In Vs. 17, Paul asks rhetorically, was I being indecisive or did I have questionable motivation? Paul was not the kind of guy who had to use an oath to convince you that he was speaking truthfully.

Notice now in vs. 18, that Paul does not give a circumstantial ‘excuse’ for changing his plans, but rather cites the standard by which he conducts his character: “But *as God is faithful*, our word to you is not yes and no.” Well, now can they be assured that Paul’s character aligns with God’s faithfulness. He reminds them of how he faithfully preached the gospel to them: **[vs. 19-20]**. In essence Paul is saying:

- his character of integrity is based on God’s character of faithfulness
- God’s faithfulness is confirmed by the gospel (in which Christ confirms/fulfills every promise of God)
- The Corinthians themselves affirmed that the Gospel was true (“Amen”) and that God was faithful (“to the glory of God”).
- The Gospel (that the Corinthians affirmed) was faithfully proclaimed to the Corinthians by Paul.

[Paul’s character→God’s character→Gospel→Corinthians→Paul]

Paul is using a greater-to-lesser argument here. If I have been faithful in what’s most important (preaching the gospel to you), then you can expect that my motivations in lesser things (like changing travel plans) are also sincere.

But Paul doesn’t stop here. He goes on to remind them in vss. 21-22 that through the gospel they belong to each other in Christ and they have

¹ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, pg. 29 (Quoted by Scott Hayfemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 96).

² Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 91).

received the Spirit's 3-fold ministry. 1) They have been "anointed" (set apart by the Spirit; marked with His presence in their lives). 2) They have been "sealed" (the Spirit is God's mark of ownership on them). 3) They have been given the Spirit as their pledge (their deposit or down payment to guarantee that God will fulfill His promised work in them). Now we can see why Paul didn't give up on the Corinthians in their messy situation. His confidence was in God's faithfulness to those whom He had given His Spirit.

So what should we learn from Paul here? The guiding principle for Paul was not self-serving circumstances but God-imitating character. Paul imitated God's character by seeking to give the Corinthians the opportunity for double-blessing, and He imitated God's character of faithfulness to the Corinthians by his integrity in preaching the gospel and by his motivations in daily affairs.

There are many matters of God's will that the Bible speaks directly to. But when we need to discern God's will in ambiguous matters (like travel plans), perhaps the best thing we can do is ask two questions:

- "What does God's word say about the God of this situation?"³ In other words, **what does God's word say about God's character that I should imitate in this situation?** "Paul's perspective calls us to worry less about finding God's will for my circumstances and more about discovering God's character as the pattern for my life."⁴
- **How can I best put gospel truths into action in this situation?**⁵ For example, how can I extend mercy or blessing in this situation. How can I express love through sacrifice, or grace through generosity?

3. **Love warns of the judgment of sin and calls for repentance for the sake of restoration** (1:23—2:4).

[1:23-2:4] Here Paul addresses his 2nd change in travel plans and clarifies his motivation for not returning to Corinth the second time.

Paul's reason for not returning to Corinth in person after leaving in the midst of conflict, was not because he was a coward (as he was so accused) or even because he was excessively angry. Rather he was motivated by

mercy. He did it "to spare" them (23). It seems that the situation was so severe, that a personal confrontation could have only ended in judgment. That is, Paul would have been forced to exercise forceful discipline in the situation. But it is not Paul's desire to be forceful or to lord his authority over their faith, as he says in vs. 24. Paul would rather prefer to win them over, working with them for their joy so that they will be established in their faith.

So instead of returning to Corinth in person, Paul wrote a severe letter of rebuke (2:4), believing it would be a more effective way of winning them to repentance.

Paul's approach to sinning believers is instructive on several levels:

- **Paul's behavior and attitude were an act of mercy.** He did it to "spare them" (23).
- **Paul's heart was characterized by grief rather than sinful anger.** In 2:4, Paul says he wrote to them with "anguish of heart" and "many tears."
- **Paul's goal was to restore their mutual joy** of fellowship by restoring their faithfulness to God (1:24; 2:2-3).
- **Paul's motive was love.** In 2:4, Paul says he did this so that might know the love that he has especially for them.

Paul was willing to get into the mess of people's lives, even when it involved conflict, because he understood that believers become instruments in the hand of God when they love those caught in sin by warning them of God's judgment and calling them to repent. In a sense Paul is imitating the pattern of the gospel. "The gap between Christ's coming to die on the cross and his coming again to judge the world demonstrates that God's purpose is to extend" mercy through the gospel.⁶ *While we must be courageous enough to address sin, we must also be patient enough to extend mercy.*

4. **Love forgives and restores the repentant brother as protection against Satan's schemes** (2:5-11).

³ Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 97).

⁴ Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 97).

⁵ Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 93).

⁶ Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 93).

[2:5-11] Again in vs. 5 we see that Paul took up this issue with the Corinthians, not for personal reasons, but because the church was endangered by his opponent's self-serving leadership.

It appears from what Paul writes here that the church heeded Paul's call to discipline the rebellious leader and the man himself responded to the discipline with repentance. So now Paul calls the church to reaffirm their love for him by extending forgiveness that restores him to their fellowship.

Take note of the essential purpose Paul gives as to why they must not withhold forgiveness from their repentant brother: *"so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes"* (11).

Withholding forgiveness will make you susceptible to the poison of bitterness. Withholding forgiveness will destroy unity in your family and church. Withholding forgiveness will alienate you from the encouragement and accountability you need to stand firm in your faith and flourish in the favor of God. This is why Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, *and do not give the devil an opportunity*" (Eph 4:26-27). Clinging to anger and bitterness subjects you to satanic bondage. *Satan's agenda* for you is bitterness, disunity, no accountability, and no spiritual power. *God's agenda* is purity, humility, unity, speaking the truth in love, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration.

Stop avoiding the mess. Speak the truth in love, put on a heart of mercy and walk the difficult road toward reconciliation and restoration, with this confidence: *God is faithful.*

Communion

As we prepare for the Lord's supper, let me encourage you to ask four questions of your heart before the Lord:

- Is there an unwillingness to forgive someone that has made me vulnerable to Satan's schemes?
- Am I resisting accountability for sinful patterns in my life or have I been defensive toward those who have addressed sin in my life?
- Is my life transparent, or am I carrying around a hidden bondage to sin? You may need to not only confess your sin to God but also to a trusted brother or sister.
- Will I take a step of active faith, trusting that God's grace has the power to overcome my bitterness, my rebellious independence, and my strongholds of sin?

[Prayerful meditation]

1John 2:1-2: *"My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."* **[Bread]**

Hebrews 2:14: *"Since then the children share in flesh and **blood**, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil."* **[Cup]**