

Important note before we begin...

Before we jump into this morning's message, I want to take one minute to cue you up on an important Assembly Bill that will directly affect those of you with young children & grandchildren. I alluded to it in our prayer time last Sunday.

You know we don't often bring these things up in our gatherings unless they're blatantly against our Christ-centered, biblical worldview. That's the case with AB 495. This bill "...would let almost any adult, like a neighbor, teacher, or family friend to be a care giver of a child by handing a signed form to a school. No court order, no parent signature, and no background check are required. This opens the door to fraud, abuse, and even child trafficking.

The person who becomes a care giver could also make medical decisions for the child, like approving vaccines or physical exams, without the parent's knowledge. The bill claims to help children of undocumented parents, but instead, it puts all children at risk by giving too much power to unrelated adults. AB 495 is unsafe and takes away the rights of parents to protect and care for their own children."

I encourage you to read a summary about AB495, then email/phone your State Senator.¹

Introduction

Last week we jumped into part two of our Corinthians series and Dillon talked with us about comfort through suffering. God comforts us and we have the opportunity to comfort others. No one likes suffering, but it's

¹ Go to <https://tinyurl.com/AB495Info> for details

part of the human experience in this broken world. For Paul, the suffering he endured opened him to criticism from those who opposed him as a leader—because, clearly, if Paul was *really* God's man, he wouldn't suffer. As we'll see today, those against Paul used every chance they could to refute his calling, leadership and authority.

We'll be looking at 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4. I'll be reading from the NIV, so find that version on your bible app and you can follow along with me.

Backstory

Dillon explained the complexity of the situation in Corinth, but I want to touch again briefly on parts of it because some of what we're going to talk about today isn't *explicit* in the text, but *implicit* from what Paul writes. A good grasp of what led to the writing of 2 Corinthians helps us better understand the whole letter.

Near the end of 1 Corinthians (16:5-9), Paul says that he wants to come stay with them on his way back from Macedonia—maybe spend the winter with them. He doesn't want to rush his visit, but soak in the time with them.

So, in the interim, he sends Timothy to see how they're doing. And Tim's report back to Paul was *not good*. The church was in turmoil. Like Dillon said, part of it may have related sexual sin in the church, we're not entirely sure. But it was definitely related to some men who had arrived from elsewhere and they were calling into question everything about Paul: his apostleship, leadership, credentials and motives. He's inconsistent, unreliable and undependable. He's a fraud.

So Paul headed from Ephesus to Corinth right away. He figured he'd get things straightened out, then head up to Macedonia and make a return trip to Corinth afterward. But when he got there, things went sideways in a bad way. Many in the church were openly rebelling against Paul and everything the church was founded upon. It was so *bad*, that Paul decided it was best to suffer humiliation and leave, without fighting back,

so he could extend mercy to the Corinthians. So he left and returned to Ephesus. This was Paul's painful or sorrowful visit.

From Ephesus, he wrote what he called his tearful/severe/painful letter, warning the church of God's judgment if they didn't repent.

Unfortunately, we don't have that letter. But Paul gave it to Titus and he delivered it to the church. And, to Paul's great joy, he learned from Titus that most of the Corinthians had repented (2 Corinthians 7:5-16), but there were still a handful, who were under the control of Paul's opponents, that continued to reject Paul and his gospel message.

So, with a merciful heart, Paul sends another letter: 2 Corinthians. He wrote it while he was in Macedonia, as he anticipated his next visit to Corinth, to encourage the repentant, to draw the wavering ones back into the fold, and to refute his opposers. As we study the text, Paul's emotions are palpable—perhaps more in 2 Corinthians than any other letter.

Paul's Boast (v 12-14)

So, with that in mind, let's look at 2 Corinthians 1:12-14. [READ]

"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. ¹³ For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, ¹⁴ 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."

I don't know about you, but I always wince when people start bragging. And, if they introduce the idea, 'I just gotta brag a little...' that makes it even weirder. But Paul's not bragging about himself. He's bragging about God. He's talking about being morally pure (that's the integrity, honesty or uprightness.) He's a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of guy. There's no duplicity. There's no posturing or positioning for selfish gain. Regardless of what his opponents may say, he's got a clear conscience

about his conduct because what's seen in him isn't from his own strength or effort. The good seen in his life is from the transforming work of God's Spirit. The same Spirit that lives in them! So, what Paul's really saying is, 'Let me testify to what God has done! Let me brag about God's goodness to me!' Paul's conduct, his lifestyle, confirms the gracious call of God in his life.

That's the joy of a testimony! When you share what God's done and is doing in your life, it inspires us because we're reminded of His grace and mercy. So, feel free to brag about God. Boast of His goodness and remember that it's not about you; it's about Him. The goodness you're experiencing is because of Him. The victory you're enjoying is because of Him. We cannot produce fruit on our own—the Spirit does that in us as we're consistently connected with Him.

I think a large part of the accusation coming from Paul's opponents revolved around whether Paul was really dependable, if he was truly consistent inside and out; in public and in private. If the critics can undermine Paul's character, then they can challenge what he has to say. That's what Paul's pointing at in verses 13-14. He knows that if you can't trust the messenger; you can't trust the message. So he's reminding them that he's got nothing to hide; he's an open book. They don't need to read between the lines in his letters because what he writes is consistent with how he lives. There aren't any double meanings. The message is consistent and so is the messenger.

If the Corinthians will fully embrace that Paul is who God has called him to be then, when Jesus returns, they'll be thanking the Lord for giving this Apostle to them and Paul will be thanking Him for these faithful believers that he loves like his own children.

Consistency is key: In how we live. In our message. Publicly and privately. In our marriages and families. At work and at school. On the team and behind the wheel. Filing taxes and paying bills. Does your life consistently reflect the Spirit's presence and leadership? That's what God is calling us

to. That's what His Spirit wants to develop in us. That's what will make our message about Christ believable to a world that desperately needs to know Jesus.

'Yes' in Jesus (v 15-22)

Paul continues. Take a look at verses 15-22. [READ]

"Because I was confident of this [*that you'd understand and trust me again, and that we'd be able to celebrate together when Jesus returns*], I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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"?

¹⁸ But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

You can hear the whispers, the accusations, coming from Paul's opponents. They're questioning his consistency, his character: You can hear them, 'First he says he's coming to spend the winter, then he shows up unannounced and takes off again. Then he says he'll make two stops one on the way *to* and one on way *from* Macedonia. And each time he plans to take a collection that he says will be used for the church in Judea. He just wants your money. Can you really trust this guy?' "After all, if Paul were a true, Spirit-filled apostle and not merely after their money, he should be able to rely on the guidance of God, rather than changing his mind...[and] his itinerary not only once, but even two and three times!"² They're trying to build a case that Paul is inconsistent which

² Hafemann, Scott J. *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000), 83.

makes him unreliable. But Paul explains that his changes are actually consistent with the mercy that God wants to display in the lives of the Corinthians.

As you can tell, the super-apostles who are against Paul, they're lobbying everything they can at him, hoping something's going to stick. He's a thief. He doesn't follow through because he's winging it. He doesn't know what he's doing. He tells one guy one thing and another guy something different. He's unreliable, undependable, and inconsistent. He can't possibly be an apostle.

In Jewish tradition, repeating, 'Yes, yes' meant that it truly was going to happen. 'No, no' meant that it truly was *not* going to happen. It reminds me of being in junior high or high school, 'Do you like her or do you *like-like* her?' The repetition revealed the truth. But Paul says that's not how a Christ-follower functions. People who belong to God let their 'yes' mean 'yes' and their 'no' mean 'no.' The message given to the Corinthians wasn't a confusing 'Yes' and 'No.' What Paul and his boys consistently preached was the Good News of Jesus Christ. And the good news was that God's grace and mercy were put on display for the whole world to see when He let His one and only Son die on the cross to pay for their sins, and to rescue them and to return as the righteous judge. All of God's promises are fulfilled, find their 'Yes,' in Jesus Christ. Without exception, every time, no matter the promises of God, Jesus is their 'Yes.' Likewise, Paul's message is consistently aimed at the source and fulfillment of the Gospel: Jesus Christ. His message never wavered.

When we say, 'Amen!' we're declaring our agreement. Our 'Amen!' is like saying, 'Yes!' Paul's affirming his agreement with God's good plan in Christ, and God's good work in him, not only as he *preaches* Christ, but as he *acts* like Christ toward the Corinthians. He changed his plans, not because of inconsistency, but to better minister to them so they could experience more of God's grace.³ The itinerary change highlighted God's

³ Ibid. 85.

faithfulness and Paul's consistent desire to love and serve well. When we say 'Yes' to God, we bless Him and we bless others!

Paul wanted to visit them twice so they might benefit twice. The grace or benefit that Paul is talking about is tied to the collections to which the Corinthians would contribute. The ability to extend grace to others by giving to their needs, is evidence of God's grace because He's met your needs. Their giving benefitted them because each time it reminded them of God's gracious provision.

All of this is possible because God's amazing 'Yeses' are anchored in Jesus who is our foundation. He set us apart, placed His seal on us (meaning we belong to Him), and indwelt us by His Spirit to empower and encourage us in our new life in Christ. The Spirit is the guarantee that God will fulfill the redemption of His people and that *this* is just a sample of the good stuff that's yet to come.

Bit by bit, Paul is endeavoring to help the Corinthians understand that he hasn't changed and his mission hasn't changed because God hasn't changed and He never will. His promises aren't 'yes' and 'no.' They're always, 'Yes!' in Christ Jesus.

Application

None of us are in a circumstance like Paul. But there is plenty to consider. For example, does your 'yes' mean 'yes' and your 'no' mean 'no'? Do you make & break promises lightly? Are your lifestyle and message consistent –both pointing to Jesus? If someone came against you with allegations of inconsistency, unreliability, and ungodliness, would they have enough evidence to prove it? Or would they have to grasp at straws, saying things like, 'You didn't show up that one time'?

There's something to be said about living in consistent communion with Lord and how that overflows into every area of your life. Your work, your marriage, your family, your friendships, your attitude, what you watch, what you buy, what you focus on and what you say is influenced by your constant communion. Paul's consistent connection with Jesus saturated

every part of him so that his words and way of life consistently pointed people to Jesus. I want to be like that: Consistent in my connection and what it communicates because of it.

Merciful Change (1:23-2:4)

In the last section, Paul explains why he didn't return to Corinth as expected. Check out 1:23-2:4. [READ]

"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. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. **2** ¹ So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ² For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³ 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. ⁴ 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."

Last time Paul went to Corinth, it was very bad. So bad that Paul went back to Ephesus. That's when he wrote his painful letter. Look again at verse 4, "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." Paul changed his plan to visit Corinth again because, not only did he *not* want a repeat of last time, but he wanted to extend mercy to the Corinthians. Originally, he wanted to visit them twice and give them two opportunities to extend grace and be reminded of God's grace in their lives. "[T]his time Paul acts to extend mercy to the Corinthians *themselves*."⁴ Paul's detractors were probably spreading the rumor that he was afraid to show up and stand before his accusers. Presumably because he didn't have a leg to stand on. 'Paul doesn't want to come to Corinth because he knows that his true colors will show and his fraudulent activity and lack of authority will be obvious to everyone.'

⁴ Hafeman, 86.

In chapter 13 (don't worry, I'm not giving anything away), Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is willing and able to exercise his authority to judge those who say they follow Christ but live in sin (13:1-10). Paul is hoping, that with a little more time, hopefully through what comes in the letter of 2 Corinthians, that the remaining unrepentant will repent and return to living for and cooperating with Jesus and those Jesus has placed under Paul's authority. He doesn't want the judgment of God to fall on them. Instead, like God in His patience with us, he gives the Corinthians time; time to examine themselves, time to hear from the Spirit, time to repent. It wasn't "his fear of rejection that kept him from returning to Corinth, but his wish to 'spare them' the judgment of God."⁵

The magnitude of what Paul is telling them is underscored by his willingness to call down God's judgment upon himself if he's lying (23a). The original language shows this more clearly where Paul is basically saying, "I call God as my witness against my life."⁶

So Paul cancelled his trip because he wanted to be merciful to them and because he knew that his own happiness as an apostle was tied to the Corinthians' growth and maturity in their faith—not being their source of judgment and grief. Paul wanted to experience the joy of their renewed faith and he was confident that his choice to be merciful would produce the fruit he longed for: that they would repent and together they would enjoy all the promises of Christ.

Application

Parents and grandparents in the room, do you remember the ache as you watched your kids or grandkids go through it and how you longed for them to be free? That's kind of what Paul's describing. If you've ever had a friend who wrestled and fought and battled, you know feeling. We want to see our loved ones thrive and live fully and freely. And when they

⁵ Ibid. 87.

⁶ Ibid.

aren't, we ache. Sometimes, when someone we love is out in the weeds, we can't just ache for them, we need to speak some hard truth.

But let's make it simpler than that. If you really love someone, you'll call them on their junk. If the house is burning down and they're asleep, you don't gently whisper, "I think you should get up. The house is on fire." You yell!

If your child is in the road, you don't give them the *option* of getting to the sidewalk, you demand it as you run toward them to pull them out of traffic.

On a lesser note, but still vitally important, if you have a friend who's just eaten something and has a piece of green stuck in their teeth, you don't just ignore it if you love them...you speak up. This time a leaned-in whisper will suffice, maybe with a little gesture.

Love will say the hard thing. Love will do the hard thing. Love will move you to be uncomfortable, willing to risk for the sake of another. Love will take you to that difficult place. If you truly love someone, you have to speak up. Don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about venting anger, being brutal, self-righteous or unloving. I *am* saying that if you truly love someone, you'll figure out how to tell them their house is on fire, even if it hurts their feelings.

You get the point: if you love someone you don't let them hang out there to be humiliated or worse: much, much worse!

If you find yourself saying things like, 'I don't want to judge, I don't want to embarrass, I don't want to get involved,' then you don't really care about them. You care more about your comfort or convenience. Or maybe you're afraid that someone will do that to *you*. Friend, if I'm living or behaving in a way that's inconsistent with what it means to know and love Jesus, please tell me. I may not like it and I may be embarrassed, but your gentle, loving willingness to say something could be the difference

between a long dark road and experiencing the joy of Jesus in my life. We've got to love each other. Galatians 6 talks about restoring one another gently. You're not throwing rocks. You're coming alongside.

I know it's not identical, but Paul spoke hard truth in his letter to the Corinthians because he loved them. He wanted to see them experience the fullness of Christ. Paul's lifestyle and his message were consistent—constantly pointing to Jesus—so there was no risk that he was going to undermine what he was hoping to achieve. We have to hold onto that same idea. When a brother or sister is in the weeds—speak up!

Wrap

We've been called to be consistent: publicly and privately, at home and at work, with our spouses and our friends, in our attitudes and our actions. Our words and our conduct need to line up. And, like Paul, that can only happen if we stay intimately connected with Jesus. Your consistency, your reliability, your dependability as you stay close to Jesus makes it possible for you to proclaim the Gospel and to glorify Christ—in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled.

Please don't stress about this because no amount of hype or grunting will accomplish this in you. This is what the Holy Spirit does as you stay close to Jesus. So, [When] you stay close to Jesus, the Holy Spirit will grow and mature you, and your consistent life and message will constantly point people back to Jesus. Their lives will be changed and He will be glorified. And together we'll enjoy all that Jesus has for us.