

The Integrity and Sincerity of God

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

Will you turn to 2 Corinthians 1 please? God gave us Paul as an example. It has become much clearer to me, in the last year or two, that the NT gives us one main example of a follower of Christ. Our first example is Jesus himself, of course. There is no competition in the NT there.

And we have many NT examples: Peter, and John, and Mary Jesus's mother, and Stephen, and so on. What I now see is that we have much more about Paul's life than about anyone else.

I don't mean Paul wrote more. Luke wrote the Third Gospel and Acts, and those two are about as many pages of Scripture as all Paul's letters together. What I mean is that we know a lot more about Paul than about Luke. Even Luke, writing Acts, tells us a lot more about Paul than about Peter, his other main character. Luke thinks Paul is our most important example.

Paul says in 1 Cor 11, "imitate me as I imitate Christ." Paul was an exceptional follower of Christ. He knew that, and he knew it was ONLY because God had given him special grace, special help, to imitate Christ in a remarkable way. "By the grace of God I am what I am, and by the grace of God I worked harder than the other apostles, yet not I but the grace of God in me."

Entirely apart from those lines, the NT, as a whole, gives us one particular follower of Christ, and tells us more about him, and how he thought and lived and acted, than about any other follower. The other important NT examples all believed while Christ was here; only Paul was as we are, believing after Christ ascended. Which means: the Lord Jesus urges us to imitate Paul.

This whole series is about "what is it like to be Christ's servant?" Paul speaks about his life in 2 Corinthians so we can see that from the inside. In this way we learn to imitate Christ.

Background to 2 Corinthians. Paul goes after three problems in 2 Corinthians. The first one is that he changed his plans about visiting them. Paul has enemies in the Corinthian church, and when he changed his plans, they apparently said that "Paul does not mean what he says, he cannot be trusted, and he does not care about us believers in Corinth." (Other 2 problems later.)

Paul made a quick visit to Corinth, and planned to go north to Macedonia, and visit those churches there, the Thessalonians and Philippians, and then come back to Corinth again.

But that first quick visit was rough, painful for Paul, the Corinthian church treated him badly, at least some of them did, and the rest did not support Paul. So after Paul left, he delayed his return, he decided to send them a stern letter first, and see how they responded to that before he returned. That change of plans got him even more trouble in Corinth. Now to 2 Cor 1:12.

1:12-14 – Paul’s Basic Claim: With God’s help, we use the integrity and sincerity of God.

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with the integrity and sincerity of God. 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.

Paul makes his main point first: we’ve been honest with everyone, and certainly with you. “With integrity and godly sincerity” is how it reads, and I think all the translations do that, but in Greek it says “with the integrity and sincerity of God.” “Godly” should have uppercase “G.”

Worldly wisdom says that sometimes, for things to go smoothly, we need to mislead people a little bit, not too much, but a little. Just saying what we actually mean is awkward, and it probably won’t work well, so we will twist the truth a bit. That’s worldly wisdom.

No, says Paul, we have not acted like that. We have used the integrity and sincerity that come from God himself, and we have depended on his help instead of on worldly wisdom. This is for us in this church too. We don’t say what’s easier, rather with God’s help we tell the truth.

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.

“Boasting” sounds too much like bragging, and we know bragging is bad, so we don’t easily understand how we will all be bragging about each other on the day of the Lord Jesus.

The day of the Lord Jesus is not necessarily just one day. When Jesus comes back to get us, and we are all together with him, all kinds of good things will happen. Believers will be evaluated by the Lord, but that’s only one part of it, and Paul sees the day of the Lord Jesus as the time when we meet the Lord, a very good time, and everything finally makes sense.

The Corinthians have not understood Paul completely. He hopes that he can help them understand him better, why he did what he did, so they can boast in each other something like this:

Paul will say to the Lord, “Lord Jesus, I spoke about you in Corinth, just like you said I should, and look at these believers. They believed your words, obeyed the gospel, and they trust you and follow you. Isn’t it great?” And the Lord will say, “Right on, Paul, that’s true, that’s excellent!”

And the Corinthians will say to the Lord, “Lord Jesus, Paul came to Corinth and spoke about you, and he taught us, and we believed in you because of him, and we obeyed you, we have followed you as Paul your messenger showed us.” And the Lord will say, “Right on, Corinthians, that’s true, that’s great, that’s excellent!” That’s boasting in each other in the day of the Lord.

Who guided you toward the Lord? Who have you guided toward the Lord? That's how the conversation will go when we're all together in the day of the Lord Jesus.

1:15-17 Paul's Plans BEFORE he changed them. *Because I was confident of this, 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"?*

Paul's first plan was to visit Corinth twice. He was in Ephesus when he made that plan. From Ephesus he would sail across to Corinth, which was on the coast, not a long trip, then go by land up Greece to Macedonia and visit those churches, and then come back down Greece to see the Corinthians a second time.

He gives a reason, and it is important. He made this plan so the Corinthians would benefit twice. He wanted to teach and encourage them twice. He wanted to do this because he was confident that he and the Corinthians would boast in each other in the day of the Lord, and Paul very much wanted that, so he wanted to encourage and teach them.

In v23, the beginning of the next section, Paul says, *"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."*

Why was the first plan to visit Corinth twice? It was better for the Corinthians. They would benefit twice. Why did Paul change his mind and not make the second visit? Because the situation changed, now Paul staying away was better for the Corinthians, it turned out that the first plan would not be good for them. For their good, to spare them, he changed plans.

Both happen because he loves them and wants what's best for them. That's acting with the integrity and sincerity of God.

Notice what he does NOT say. He does NOT say he got a word from the Lord that he should change plans, he does NOT say he prayed about changing plans and had peace about it, he did NOT find a random Scripture that said "don't return the way you came" or some such thing. None of that. Those do happen sometimes in the NT, but they are not normal, and not how Paul normally explains his choices.

God gave Paul great love for the Corinthian church, Paul wants what is good for them, he wants them to do well. He changed plans because what was best for them changed. He did not change plans lightly. He will say later that this happened "in great distress, and anguish of heart, and many tears, so they would know the depth of his love for them." It was very hard on Paul.

This is about more than honesty. We are learning how to treat people, and how relationships work in the kingdom of God. Paul says what he means, and he wants what's best for them.

Now Paul moves to the integrity and sincerity of God himself. Paul seems concerned that some will say that since Paul cannot be trusted when he makes plans, perhaps we cannot trust his gospel either.

1:18-22 The God who Keeps his Promises. *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.*

Our Scripture abruptly switches to the gospel, the message Paul preached. So he reminds the Corinthians of the first time he was in Corinth, when he came with Silas and Timothy. He reminds them that he preached about a person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

God is faithful, that’s how v18 began. God is faithful, God acts with sincerity and integrity, *so in Christ the message has always been “yes.” No matter how many promises God has made, they are all “yes” in Christ.*

This is actually a pretty good summary of the gospel Paul preached. Jesus Christ is the big “yes.” *No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.* What God has given us, above all, is a person, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and Son of God.

So we put our trust in this person, and we follow this person, and ALL the promises that God has on the table become ours. All of them. The gospel is about a person, Jesus Christ the Lord. Jesus will save his people from their sins, the angel told Joseph. Our goal is to be one of his people.

Verses 19-20 again: *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.* What’s our part? “Amen! To God be the glory!”

Paul’s faithfulness flows from God’s own faithfulness. Paul’s logic here is remarkable, hard to believe. But from Paul’s side, his life is devoted to proclaiming Christ, which is the most faithful reliable message ever spoken on earth. The gospel is about guaranteed promises.

As far as Paul is concerned, it is impossible that his life would be devoted to this gospel and to God’s promises in Christ, and at the same time his speech would be unreliable.

Some of you are thinking, “God promised things that I am not experiencing.” But remember Paul’s opening thanksgiving in 2 Cor 1, which we read last week.

Christ's servants experience many *troubles*, and share in many *sufferings* of Christ, and we also experience God's *compassion*, and his *comforts*. And we trust above all in *the God who raises the dead*.

1:20-22 God Means what he Says *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.*

God does four things to show us he means what he says, that when we turn to Christ, all the promises God has made become ours. One: *God makes both us and you stand firm in Christ*. So, all God's promises become ours because we have come to Christ. But what if we let go of Christ?

Letting go of Christ is a big problem, make no mistake. But God works to keep us. *God makes both us and you stand firm in Christ*. Paul and Silas and Timothy need God to do this for them, and the Corinthians need God to do this for them, and we in this room need God to do this for us. But he does it! God makes us stand firm in Christ.

Scripture tells us not to let go of Christ. But while we hang on, God puts big ropes around Christ and us, binding us to Christ, so God can give us all he promised. *God makes both us and you stand firm in Christ*.

Two, God *anoints* us. This probably means the Holy Spirit. The next two, the seal and the deposit, are the Holy Spirit, and anointing is used of the Holy Spirit a few times. "Anoint" in the OT means set apart by God for a certain work. Kings and priests were anointed. God put his Spirit on us so we could serve him. We've been set apart to serve God.

Three, *God set his seal of ownership on us*. In Ephesians 1 Paul is clear that this seal is the Holy Spirit himself. God marked us as his. Imagine a label that is impossible to get off. I don't like to advertise for stores. I got a label on a steel coffee pot that I tried to scrape and scour off, but I gave up in frustration, it would not come off, there was no way.

That's the Holy Spirit on us. The Spirit himself marks us as belonging to God. When God says he will give all his promises to whoever has Christ, God means it, and guarantees it for us in the four ways that Paul lists here. And the last three of the four are different workings of the Spirit.

Four, *he put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*. First of all, the biggest promise of God to us that Christ is his "YES" is the promise of the Holy Spirit. If we receive Christ, we receive the promised Holy Spirit. That is probably the first and biggest promise that God fulfills for us when we turn to Christ.

But the Spirit as a deposit clearly means that most of what God promised is delayed. We do not get it yet. We get a deposit, a down payment, guaranteeing that God meant what he said, but we don't receive it now, it was never the plan that we would receive it all now. If the plan was to receive it now, the Spirit as a seal and deposit would be meaningless.

But they are not meaningless. Most of what God has promised us is delayed. In 2Cor 1:9, we read that God took Paul through a terrible experience, so that Paul would learn to trust in the God who raises the dead. That's the God we trust. He raises the dead.

We look forward to boasting in each other ... when? In the day of the Lord Jesus. The Spirit seals and labels us as belonging to God, and the Spirit is the first payment of the indescribable future we have with the Lord. That is not just comfort for dying believers. It is mostly wisdom for living believers.

God means what he says, he speaks to us with integrity and sincerity. *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.* I love that line. To make sure he gets to keep his promises, God does four things: 1, he makes us firm in in Christ; 2, he anoints us; 3, he seals and labels us as his own; and 4, he gives the Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, a down payment, guaranteeing all his future kindnesses.

In God's kingdom, as followers of Christ, we always act with the integrity and sincerity of God himself. Worldly wisdom regularly advises us against it, but we depend on God's grace. We do not say everything we know and think. But when we speak, we mean it.

Sometimes plans change. We plan to do something, and say so, but the situation changes. But remember two things: one, Paul in this letter explained himself carefully, the reasons for his first plan and the reasons for the change. Open and honest relationship and conversation is crucial.

And two, Paul was guided in this by what was best for the Corinthian believers, whom he loved. That's why he made the first plan, and that's why he changed plans. Nothing selfish.

And our other example here is God himself, who not only means what he says, but he gives us assurances, and evidence, that he means what he says. God does say "trust me," but he does not only say "trust me," he also gives us the Holy Spirit, and we can see many things the Spirit does among us, in this church, and that evidence of the Spirit among us, is God's way of telling us that his great future kindnesses are on the way to us!

Amen.