

Text: 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4

Title: Change of Plans

Truth: Paul's change of plans did not undermine the gospel. Rather, it demonstrated his love for the Corinthians.

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Introduction

Some Corinthians had leveled the charges that Paul writes equivocal letters, whimsically changes travel plans, has a domineering attitude, and perhaps lacks integrity in the handling of finances. He defends himself that he has done none of that—not because he is selfishly concerned, but because if his credibility is undermined, the gospel itself would be undermined.

I. Paul's sincere intention in planning to visit Corinth mirrored the gospel's sure promises (1:15-22)

A. Paul's plan was to come to edify the Corinthians (15-16).

1. "In this confidence..." Paul is not boastfully self-assured, but level-headedly confident that he is conducting himself properly and that the Corinthians and he have a mutual respect at the foundation of their relationship. At least some of the Corinthians did not, so he has to explain what happened.
2. His plan *was* to travel through Corinth (in the region of Achaia) on his way to Macedonia to the north. Then he would return south again from Macedonia and make a second visit to Corinth. Then they would be able to assist him on his way to Judea. This would be a double benefit for them, and for him. More visits = better. Instead, the circumstances caused Paul to reconsider that it might become a double grief instead of blessing. Notice how he was planning to be a blessing to the people.

B. Paul made his plan with integrity (17-18).

1. He asks if they *really* think he planned in a flippant manner. Based on his history among them, they knew what kind of person he was. He was *not* an unreliable guy. Did he plan according to the flesh, with hidden motive or intention? He is

asking these rhetorical questions in such a way that he expects a “no” answer from his audience. I suppose he could ask, “do you have any proof that I was deceptive?” The answer, based on the evidence, would be a resounding “No.”

2. “Yes, Yes, and No, No” refers to speech that is equivocal, or “speaking out of both sides of his mouth,” “having it both ways.” Did he speak ambiguously? No. He was clear, and his plans were sound, not open to multiple interpretations. What simply happened was that his clear initial plans had to change because of a change in circumstances. *No big deal*. The Corinthians were saying he was using “lightness” in his words and was “a yes-yes-no-no” man, that is, they could not rely upon what he was saying. That extends to his message of the gospel. Many people in the church evidently thought this way.

Application: Paul was facing some people who did not like him. They had malicious feelings toward him which biased them against everything he said. Had they been of goodwill, they would have seen the travel plan change as inconsequential. Watch your own heart that you do not get locked into a mindset like that. You want to be a person of goodwill toward others, withholding judgment and finding out true facts, not jumping to conclusions, and quickly becoming upset.

C. Paul followed the model of God’s sound promises in Christ (19-22).

1. If he spoke equivocally to them, what might they think about his important message of the gospel? Was it as unsure as his travel plans? This potential problem calls for a bit of further explanation.
2. He calls God to witness in verse 18. As God is faithful, so also Paul has been faithful. He did not give with one hand to take back with the other (Yes, No). He strives to be like God, whose promises are not equivocal or breakable or unclear. Rather, the promises of Christ, the promises of God, are all sure and certain, unwavering. Paul preached these promises, and his other words were in a similar way dependable and without deception.

3. We could pause and take some profit in thinking of the promises of God throughout Scripture, because they are all true. God has given some of those promises to Israel, and some to the church, and some specific individuals. All the promises of God ultimately find their foundation in Jesus Christ, whose work enables the full scope of God's grace to be bestowed upon humanity, particularly believing humanity.

We can say *Amen* to that! Amen is a response to the reading of a Bible passage or at the conclusion of a prayer—or a response to a promise of God—to indicate agreement with it.

Application: Here is a question for you. Have you said “Amen” to the promises of God in Jesus Christ? In other words, have you agreed with God that indeed the gospel is right, and you embrace it for your own rescue from sin and eternal security?

4. To strengthen the faith of the Corinthian church, Paul reminds them about the promises of the gospel. Just as sure as these promises are, Paul's word was sound too. He speaks about the work of the Triune God in saving us from sin to new life.
 - 4.1. God **establishes** us together in Christ. Contrast *established* with the ideas of unstable, lacking foundation, bouncing around, unsettled. When you believe in Jesus, He immediately establishes you on the rock-solid foundation of the gospel. You suddenly know who you are, and why you are here on this earth, and you have guidance in His word about how to live.
 - 4.2. God has **anointed** us. Anointing is from Old Testament ritual where a priest or king would be set apart for God's service. The ritual might include pouring oil on the head, washings, prayers, or a meal. We do not have such external rituals for new Christians (we do for ordination or missionary commissioning), but it is no less the case that a Christian is chosen by God, marked off for special service, set apart for Him, and *anointed* by God's Spirit. Lack of ritual does not mean lack of reality. If you are a Christian, you are sanctified and commissioned for His service. You are on His team, in His

army, a member of His church, in His family. The Spirit of God is Himself the anointing.

4.3. God has **sealed** us. The seal was a wax seal on a folded or rolled up document that kept it shut. The seal would be imprinted with the ring or signet of the person from whom it was. This indicated its authorship and authenticity and ownership, something like a signature today or a password or passkey. The seal is the Spirit of God Himself (Eph. 1:13, 4:30). Every believer is sealed and thus marked off as belonging to God.

4.4. God has given us the Spirit in our hearts as a **guarantee**. This is a pledge, a down payment. Indeed, Christians have the Spirit of God in our hearts. We often have heard the vague and incomplete appeal to “ask Jesus into your heart,” but it is really the Spirit of God who dwells in our hearts. If He is not there, you are not His. See 2 Cor. 5:5, Eph. 1:14).

Application: Our word should be as good as Paul’s and as much as possible, as good as God’s word. We mean what we say and say what we mean. We keep our commitments as much as humanly possible and apologize and explain when we cannot. The underlying reason for this is that the One we represent is faithful to His word and promises. He lives in us. And we are called to be like Him. A pattern of failure in this area undermines our testimony and may be used to slander the gospel (Rom. 2:23-24, Titus 2:5, 1 Tim. 6:1, 1 Peter 2:12).

What should other implications of God’s promises be in your life?

II. Paul reconsidered his initial plan so he could better show his love to the Corinthians (1:23-2:4)

A. Paul changed his plan to spare them grief (23-24).

1. He explains that his change of plans was so he could “spare” them. So not only did he speak to them with integrity when he made his initial plans, but it was loving care—not fickleness or yes/no equivocation—that pressed him to change those plans.

2. Calling God as witness (similar to 1:18) is a serious matter. This is not to be done often, nor at all lightly so as to cheapen it.
3. The idea is that he desired to spare them from apostolic discipline. What might such discipline look like? Since Paul was able to work miraculous signs in support of the gospel and the authentication of his ministry, he did some very strange things: inflicted temporary blindness (Acts 13:5-11), cast out a demon (Acts 16:16-18), healed the sick (Acts 19:11-12), resurrected a young man (Acts 20:9-12), and shook off a venomous snake (Acts 28:3-6). Now it was not simply Paul who did this, but Christ working through Paul. Nonetheless, if there were gospel-damaging problems in Corinth, he had the power to rectify them with, if necessary, drastic measures. Even without dramatic discipline, he did not want that. It is always better if someone learns voluntarily, with self-reflection, instead of by force.
4. The qualifier in 1:24 is that he does not dominate their faith, i.e., he is not lord over them (1 Peter 5:3). The very idea that he would “spare” them would immediately raise the specter that he is domineering. And that could produce compliance, but not faithful obedience. Instead, he wants to work alongside the Corinthians, trying to promote their joy in the Christian life. You cannot experience Christian joy if you are at loggerheads with your spiritual leaders such as Paul.

Opposing the idea that one needs a human intercessor besides the Lord Jesus Christ in order to “stand” in the Christian faith and be firm and strong in it, Paul says that the believers there stand in their own faith before God. They have a standing before God on their own—they do not need Paul to tell them every little move to make or to make them complete in Christ. This is opposite the Catholic idea that the “Church” is really the mediator because it provides the Bible, or that Mary herself is the mediatrix. Jesus, and *only* Jesus, has the role of redeemer, or mediator, with no assistance from anyone else. ■

- B. Paul determined to avoid a second sorrowful confrontation (2:1-2).
1. Paul wanted to avoid coming to them in sorrow again, a second time. He had been to Corinth once (Acts 18), but there was no

evidence that it was a particularly difficult time. And since later in 2 Corinthians he said he is planning to come a *third* time, we understand that there was a second visit between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians—and *that one* was a painful visit. Some problem developed between Paul and one or more members of the church. It was unpleasant. Things were not straightened out or at peace between them all. The air was thick.

2. Having to do discipline is not a fun thing. He had already come once in sorrow (the painful visit), and he did not want his third visit to be that way. So, he made a judgment call as to what would be best for all involved, and that meant to defer his visit.
 3. Had he gone, then his joy would be dried up, because the source of his joy (the Corinthian church) would be made full of sorrow. The point is he does not want to undertake another visit that would be a sorrow to him and a sorrow to them! There has been enough of sorrow already.
 4. In short, he decided that to continue with two more visits at this time would not have the edification value that he wanted. There was no need to get to Corinth for a visit of questionable value at that time, especially if it could compromise his safety.
- C. Paul wrote in sorrow so he would not have to come in sorrow and so they could see that he loved them (2:3-4).
1. Paul *wrote* to Corinth instead of going there. It was in a great turmoil of emotion that Paul wrote a letter to Corinth. Given the depth of emotion attached to that letter (note much affliction and anguish of heart, with tears), it seems that he is talking about the severe letter, not 1 Corinthians and not 2 Corinthians. We do not have that letter today: obviously, God did not intend for us to have it because it was perhaps too anguishing or too specific of a circumstance. That we have 1 and 2 Corinthians is sufficient.
 2. He wrote to ensure that he would not have to come again in sorrow. What he wants is improvement, and his not coming is a mercy to them and to him which provides an opportunity for them to repent on their own. The Bible tells us that a corrective

did happen (7:8-13). The purpose of Paul was not to cause them grief, although it did cause temporary grief, but that grief had a healthy effect. This is what Christian love does. The Corinthians now knew that Paul loved them because he addressed a very difficult topic to help them grow closer to God.

3. Paul derives joy from obedience of his converts. This will in turn give the believers joy, and it makes him happy to see them happy. The minister has this kind of connection to people: when they are upset, it makes him feel upset, even if they have a bad reason to be upset!
4. Paul's point is not to speak about emotions as an isolated topic, but rather to express that having to deal with sin in the church is a sorrowful matter (Hebrews 13:17b). What would make him the happiest is if they would repent over whatever it was that they were doing out of line from God's word. In other words, Paul's joy would come if they repented.

He trusts that they feel the same way—that my joy is the joy of you all. That is, that they would be joyful because everything between them and Paul and the Lord is straightened out.

5. Later in 2 Corinthians we find other reasons for the writing of the severe letter. In 2:9, for instance, he says he wrote in order to assess their obedience. In 7:9, he wrote to elicit godly sorrow and repentance over their sin. In 7:12, he said that he wrote in order that they would see how much he cared for them.
6. Note the danger of writing: misunderstanding. They had done this before (See 1 Cor. 5). But it is all too common in writing *and* in direct speech. Please make every effort to carefully understand what your conversation partner is saying!

Application: It requires great wisdom to know when you need to change the course of corrective efforts—with a church member, in the home with a child or spouse, or at work. If there is no edification value, or the sorrow created may be more than the edification gained, Paul's example indicates it is a good time to step back and take another approach.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul made his ministry plans with Christian integrity but changed those plans when a better way to build up the Corinthians came into view.

Frankly, this section is difficult to think about. It is all about conflict and false accusations and people who are unhappy with someone and a minister who is trying to help people repent and be right with God and one another. But some are unwilling to be corrected. Paul had to write to them in anguish and tears. Sometimes I have had to write in fear and trembling, nerves, and prayers, in hopes that something might change. But very often when there are big emotions or ingrained habits or vested interests or bad feelings against another person, *nothing* changes. People dig in. It is remarkable when a person's heart changes. God is at work!

Let us resolve right now that if there we encounter some conflict, that we will work hard to resolve it, instead of going into virtual lockdown and letting the relational cement harden to the point it cannot be repaired.

But for Paul, it is even more serious because the gospel is ultimately at stake, for if his word as an apostle is not dependable, then what he says about God and the gospel may be suspect as well. If *Paul* were unreliable, much of the New Testament could be called into question! Paul's explanation makes clear that his change of plans does *not* actually undermine the gospel, and in fact it was driven by a desire to spare them further grief. It was love and edification which drove Paul's decisions, not fickleness or unreliability. The gospel stands, dependable as all of God's promises, as the only way to be established with God, anointed by His Spirit, sealed for redemption, and guaranteed for eternity.

If a minister or Christian today is unreliable in word, that does not mean the gospel is undermined in a universal way. But as we said above, it may give people who know of your unreliability an excuse to slander the gospel. Make sure you are not doing that!

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