

3. Facing the challenges

2/24/2005

It has been said, the world needs men ...

- who cannot be bought;
- whose word is their bond;
- who put character above wealth;
- who possess opinions and a will;
- who are larger than their vocations;
- who do not hesitate to take chances;
- who will not lose their individuality in a crowd;
- who will be as honest in small things as in great things;
- who will make no compromise with wrong;
- whose ambitions are not confined to their own selfish desires;
- who will not say they do it "because everybody else does it";
- who are true to their friends through good report and evil report, in adversity as well as in prosperity;
- who do not believe that shrewdness, cunning, and hardheadedness are the best qualities for winning success;
- who are not ashamed or afraid to stand for the truth when it is unpopular;
- who can say "no" with emphasis, although all the rest of the world says "yes."

If we can find a man in these qualifications, that would have been apostle Paul. Determined, yet gentle in his heart. Full of the Holy Spirit, yet so human.

His integrity and authority as an apostle has been challenged by the ornery group of Corinth. Instead of bringing down a curse from heaven, true to his Master's Word, Paul gives an explanation, guidance and encouragement to the Corinthians.

A. DEFENDING HIS INTEGRITY

2 Corinthians 1:12-14 For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.

13 For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end 14 (as also you have understood us in part), that we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Why were the Corinthians accusing Paul of deception and carelessness? Because he had been forced to change his plans. He had originally promised to spend the winter in Corinth "if the Lord permit" in 1 Cor. 16:2-8.

The Corinthian Christians were so used to dealing with ministers who were calculating and manipulative, they figured Paul must be the same way. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know he had no "hidden meanings" in his letters. His meaning was right out on top, for all to see.

Misunderstandings among God's people are often very difficult to untangle, because one misunderstanding often leads to another. Once we start to question the integrity of others or distrust their words, the door is opened to all kinds of problems. But, no matter what his accusers might say, Paul stood firm because he had a clear conscience.

2 Corinthians 1:15-17 And in this confidence I intended to come to you before, that you might have a second benefit-- 16 to pass by way of you to Macedonia, to come again from Macedonia to you, and be helped by you on my way to Judea. 17 Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No?

Much to Paul's regret and embarrassment, he had to change those plans. Paul now planned to make two visits to Corinth, one on his way into Macedonia, and the other on his way from Macedonia. He would then add the Corinthian collection to that of the Macedonian churches and go on his way to Jerusalem. But even Plan B had to be scrapped. Paul had informed the church about his change in plans, but even this did not silence the opposition.

The Corinthian Christians were not wrong in being disappointed that Paul didn't come and visit them. But they were wrong in trying to blame Paul for the disappointment. They needed to see Paul's heart and God's hand in the circumstances.

2 Corinthians 1:18-20 But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us-- by me, Silvanus, and Timothy--was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. 20 For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

God the Father will always say, 'Yes' to the Son, and will always affirm what the Son says with 'Amen'. He is God's 'eternal yes' to those who trust Him. However, this doesn't mean that our God says 'Yes' to everything we ask Him. When our requests are according to His will, everything we ask is 'Yes.'

1 John 5:14-15 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

When we have a clear conscience, we glorify Jesus Christ. We cannot glorify Christ and practice deception at the same time. If we do, we will violate our conscience and erode our character. And eventually the truth will come out.

2 Corinthians 1:21-24 Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, 22 who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. 23 Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. 24 Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.

The word 'established' is a business term and refers to the 'guarantee' of the fulfilling of a contract. It was the assurance that the seller gave to the buyer that the product was as advertised, or that the service would be rendered as promised.

The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee that He is dependable and will accomplish all that He has promised.

1) All Christians have been anointed by the Spirit.

As we yield to the Spirit, He enables us to serve God and to live godly lives. He gives us the special spiritual gifts that we need to serve God acceptably.

2) The Spirit has sealed us, so that we belong to Christ and are claimed by Him.

The Holy Spirit within our hearts guarantees as a God's witness that we are authentic children of God and not counterfeit. The Spirit also assures us that He will protect us, because we are His property.

Ephesians 1:13 In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise,

3) The Holy Spirit enables us to serve others, not as 'spiritual dictators' who tell others what to do, but as servants who seek to help others grow.

The false teachers who invaded the Corinthian church were guilty of being dictators, and this had turned the hearts of the people away from Paul, who had sacrificed so much for them.

B. FORGIVENESS, NOT PROBATION

2 Corinthians 2:1-4 But I determined this within myself, that I would not come again to you in sorrow. 2 For if I make you sorrowful, then who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me? 3 And I wrote this very thing to you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow over those from whom I ought to have joy, having confidence in you all that my joy is the joy of you all. 4 For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you.

Paul's most recent visit to Corinth was full of conflict and unpleasantness. So, he determined that he would not have another 'sorrowful' visit with the Corinthians.

Where is this letter that Paul mentions in v3-4? Some good scholars see the 'sorrowful letter' as 1 Corinthians, but it seems better to think of it as another letter that we don't have. Is there something missing from our Bibles? Not at all. Not every letter that Paul wrote was inspired Scripture for all God's people in all ages. We can trust that what Paul wrote was perfect for the Corinthian Christians at that time, but not perfect for us – or else God would have preserved it in the Bible.

2 Corinthians 2:5-7 But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent--not to be too severe. 6 This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, 7 so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.

Who is this man? He is probably the same one that Paul told the Corinthian Christians to confront in 1 Corinthians 5. The phrase 'such a man' is the same phrase used in both books to describe the man sinning in an incestuous affair. He was living immorally with his stepmother.

True discipline is an evidence of love. Some young parents with 'modern views' of how to raise children refuse to discipline their disobedient children, because these parents claim they love their children too much or they might hurt children's self-esteem. But if they really loved their children, they would chasten them.

Church discipline is not a popular subject or a widespread practice. Too many churches sweep such things 'under the rug' instead of obeying the Scriptures and confronting the situation boldly by 'speaking the truth in love'. 'Peace at any price' is not a biblical

principle, because there cannot be true spiritual peace without purity. Problems that are 'swept under the rug' have a way of multiplying and creating even worse problems later on.

Apparently, the man was put under the church's discipline, as Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 5. He received this punishment which was inflicted by the majority. After receiving the punishment, the man apparently repented. But the Corinthian Christians would not receive him back! Therefore, Paul has to tell them to not be too severe, to consider their punishment sufficient, and to forgive and comfort the man.

Sometimes people say, "I forgive you" when what they really mean is, "You're on probation." Webster's says that probation is "the subjection of an individual to a period of testing and trial to ascertain fitness." It's 'freedom under supervision'. Instead of leaving you feeling liberated, it makes you feel unsettled, watched and distrusted.

When the genuine repentance is revealed by the one who committed sin, there should be a complete, no holds barred, no grudge held forgiveness must be administered. But as I said before, restoration is depend on the circumstance the Holy Spirit leads.

2 Corinthians 2:8-11 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. 9 For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. 10 Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, 11 lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

When genuine repentance is up, our forgiveness should be as swift as our discipline.

To withhold forgiveness from the repentant is to play into the hands of satan. Satan's strategy against mankind is first of lust, pride and selfishness. After sins are committed, satan taunts us with hopelessness and despair from a load of guilt. Satan's strategy against the church is first the toleration of evil within the rank of fellowship or severity in punishment.

C. A CONQUERING FAITH

2 Corinthians 2:12-13 Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, 13 I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.

Just because the door was opened, it doesn't necessarily means that it is God's will for us to go in. That is when we need the gift of discernment from the Holy Spirit.

Even though there was an open door, Paul felt he could not do all that he needed to if he did not have Titus there. Paul did not regard himself as a one-man show, he knew he needed other people with him and beside him.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. 15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?

The picture here is that of the 'Roman Triumph,' the special tribute that Rome gave to their conquering generals. It was their equivalent of the American 'ticker-tape parade.'

If a commander-in-chief won a complete victory over the enemy on foreign soil, and if he killed at least 5,000 enemy soldiers and gained new territory for the Emperor, then that commander-in-chief was entitled to a Roman Triumph. The processional would include the commander riding in a golden chariot, surrounded by his officers. The parade would also include a display of the spoils of battle, as well as the captive enemy soldiers. The Roman priests would also be in the parade, carrying burning incense to pay tribute to the victorious army.

The procession would follow a special route through the city and would end at the Circus Maximus where the helpless captives would entertain the people by fighting wild beasts. It was a very special day in Rome when the citizens were treated to a full-scale 'Roman Triumph.'

As the Roman priests burned the incense in the parade, that odor affected different people in different ways. To the triumphant soldiers, it meant life and victory. But to the conquered enemy, it meant defeat and death. They were on their way to be killed by the beasts.

Using this image of the incense, Paul pictured the Christian ministry. He saw believers as incense, giving forth the fragrance of Jesus Christ in their lives and labors. To God, believers are the very fragrance of Jesus Christ. To other believers, we are the fragrance of life. But to unbelievers, we are the fragrance of death. In other words, the Christian life and ministry are matters of life and death. The way we live and work can mean life or death to a lost world around us. It is no wonder why they hate us.

2 Corinthians 2:17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

Peddling the word of God. The image is one of street salesmen hawking their wares, interested only in making the sale – not in serving the customer. Just as there were money changers in the temple courtyard, there will always be street salesmen in the church peddling 'prophetic pills,' 'cure-all tonics,' 'positive thinking,' 'health and wealth,' 'legalism and negativism'. In short, peddling whatever the public is gullible enough to purchase.

Paul assured the Corinthians that he was no salesman. He represented the Lord, not himself. His adequacy was not in his persuasive words but in the authority of the One who sent him and the content of his message – Christ.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) If we live to please people, misunderstandings will depress us. But if we live to please God, we can face misunderstandings with faith and courage.

2) True repentance calls for immediate and full forgiveness.

To hold back a complete forgiveness invites trouble from the devil.

3) Authenticity of Christian living is coming from knowing who we are in Christ and being transparent in our lives to others.

It is painful to be real, but that's the way we can impact others most deeply and win their hearts to Christ.