Questions on 2 Corinthians 1v12-2v11

**Getting started**

1. Have you got friends who are unreliable – who say (eg) that they’ll come and stay with you, and then pull out at the last minute, when you’ve already bought food and prepared a room for them? How do people like this make you **feel**? How easy do you find it to **trust** them?

*Today, we are going to see how the apostle Paul replied to people who felt let down by his decision not to visit them, as he’d said he would*….

1. Can you see why it’s important for Paul to **reassure** the Church at Corinth of his integrity?
2. Can you see how this passage might still be important for us?

**Into the text**

*Paul responds to 2 complaints, namely that he is a* ***flake*** *(1v12 -22) and he is* ***cruel*** *(1v23-2v11):-*

1. ‘I’m no flake’
2. How does Paul start to answer the charge that he is fickle, unreliable, a bit of a flake? (1v12-17)
3. How does Paul’s argument develop in 1v18 -22? Why is **God’s** faithfulness important for him to stress?

*Take time to consider how God has made promises, and then kept those promises in Jesus, such that he can say of all Christians v21/22*

1. How can reflecting on vv21/22 help you to stop wobbling in your Christian faith, and to ‘stand firm’? What can help remind you of these wonderful privileges?
2. ‘I’m not cruel’

*In response to some serious sin by a member in Corinth, and the unwillingness of the Church to take appropriate disciplinary action against that member, Paul has made a ‘painful visit’ to them (2v1), then written a blunt letter to them (2v3) and has now refrained from making another personal visit, but has written to them again. Paul’s enemies in Corinth have portrayed* ***each*** *of these as evidence of Paul’s harshness and cruel nature, that he has no genuine love for them…*

1. What does Paul want the Corinthians about the motivation for his actions throughout this tense period? (1v23- 2v4)?
2. What has ‘love’ led Paul be prepared to do in this sad situation, and what has it cost him? (2v4)?
3. Paul’s ‘tough love’ seems to have worked (2v5-10) – how does he now urge the Corinthian Church to treat the person who has caused all the chaos?

*Can you think of any situations when* ***love*** *has prompted you to say things you know will be painful to a fellow Christian? Can you think of times when a fellow Christian has had to say painful things to you?*

1. How does Paul’s example help us practically in the way we treat fellow Christians?

**Pray for one another***… That we would love one another so much that we are prepared to help each other in the Christian life, both with encouragements and grace-saturated warnings, so that together we might all mature in Christ, and look forward to being together on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ…*

**Changed travel plans**

Sermon

~ I wonder whether you know people like my friend Richard (image of man)

If you arrange to meet up with him, he will either forget what’s been agreed OR pull out of it on the same day, because his plans have changed.

He makes promises (words ‘I promise’) but doesn’t keep to them.

Do you know people like that? People who are lovely, but irritating. People whose words are very difficult to rely upon?

Well, keep Richard in mind as we think about our bible passage this morning. The Apostle Paul was writing to the Church in Corinth, a Church he’d planted a few years earlier, a Church he loved, and yet who were in danger of rejecting him as their spiritual father and leader.

The immediate reason for this estrangement between Paul and them was that they viewed Paul as a bit of a Richard!!

He’d SAID that he would visit them on his way to Macedonia, and he DIDN’T follow through with this plan.

Paul’s failure to do what he said he’d do made the Church at Corinth very grumpy indeed (Group of grumpy faces looking in at a man)

They viewed him as a bit of a **‘**Flake**’**….. fickle, unreliable, someone whose words could not be trusted…

What’s more, some viewed him as a rather **‘**Cruel**’** person- harsh and critical in the way they behaved.

Paul realised that he needed to address **both** these criticisms- to show that they were unfair – if warm relations were to be restored between himself and this Church. He realised that this was an **urgent** matter, since there was a real risk that this Church- egged on by some impressive-looking leaders that had emerged at Corinth- would turn its back on Paul, his message and ultimately on the Jesus whose messenger Paul was.

So, the stakes are high in this passage! The future of the gospel at Corinth hung in the balance as Paul picks up his pen. And as we study what he says, it will help us to stand firm in the true gospel, with a renewed confidence in God and his purposes for us, his people...

So do turn up our passage – 2 Corinthians 1v12 (p1159) and let’s see how Paul answers these criticisms

First he says : (1) **‘**I’m no flake’

Paul has examined his conscience in the light of Corinthian’s criticisms and can say (v12) that he has conducted himself in his relations with them with **Integrity and godly sincerity.**

He has **NOT** been like a politician who says one thing to get your vote, and then does the polar opposite when elected.

Rather his dealings with them have been marked by truth and sincerity.

That’s Paul’s claim, and he hopes that when the Corinthians pause and consider the facts they will come to realise that this is true, and rather than retreat from him, they will come to boast in him on the day Jesus Christ returns as Lord and Judge of all

Paul wants them to come to realise that Paul has been **faithful** to them, just as **God** has always been **faithful** to them….

See how Paul links God’s faithfulness to Paul’s own faithfulness in v18:-

‘But as surely as God is faithful,

our message to you is not ‘Yes’ and ‘No’

‘Think!’ he’s saying ‘Think how incredibly trustworthy God has shown himself to his people. He made promises to his people for around 2000 years – from Adam and Eve through to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to King David to the many promises made through God’s spokesmen, the prophets.

Promises that have been wonderfully kept in the arrival and saving ministry of Jesus Christ, God’s Son

Promises that apply to all who’ve entered God’s kingdom through Jesus, including the Church at Corinth

‘*Think what God has promised* , *think what you’ve received*…’ Paul is reminding them *‘from the God who is able to make his people stand firm in Christ…’*

*Glimpse down at vv21 and 22 to see what our faithful God has done for us..*

* He has **anointed** us. At her Coronation the Queen was anointed with oil *(*Oil anointing forehead of the Queen) to symbolise God’s choice of her for this role, and this is a picture of what God does for ALL his people, anointing and equipping us for our roles as his servants.
* He sets his seal of ownership upon us. We bear the invisible mark of the Holy Spirit of God on our bodies with the word ‘Mine!’ showing that we now belong to God .
* More than simply branding us externally on our bodies, God’s Spirit enters and indwells our hearts (Image of a heart), giving us the power to live for God
* And God’s Spirit acts as a deposit from God, guaranteeing all that is to come. Think of what happens when we buy a house, we put down a deposit, and that deposit guarantees that we will pay the rest in due course. Well, that’s what God’s Spirit does in the life of his people, assuring us of all that God will one day certainly give us in glory.

Pause there for a moment, and see what Paul is doing for these Corinthian Christians who’d become a bit grumpy with him. See what he’s doing for all God’s people , us included

He wants to remind us, to thrill us, of the faithfulness of God, who has made promises and KEPT them, so that we stand anointed, sealed, indwelt and assured by the Spirit of God, such that we can stand firm now and for all eternity

*‘I – God’s apostle – am no flake’*, Paul assures us *‘since I follow the true God who is no flake’*

*‘Trust God, and me God’s faithful servant for your sakes…’*

Grounding his ministry upon the faithfulness of God means it is on strong ground, but Paul still has to show why he changed his plans, and address the criticisms that he was a harsh, unbending, rather cruel Church leader, so let’s go on to see how he does that from 1:23 onwards…

1. **‘I’m not cruel’ (**Paul insists**)**

**‘**For my actions **(*Paul’s actions*) have been motivated by LOVE, not cruelty.....’**

‘Let’s look together at what has happened’ says Paul ‘so that I can assure that love was my prime motivation and your spiritual good my overall goal…’

* First there was a visit by Paul to Corinth (Passport with word stamped ‘**Corinth’),** one which Paul acknowledges in 2v1 was a painful visit. This was made necessary because there had arisen in Corinth a serious sin that was not being dealt with by the Church. It MAY have been the case of a man sleeping with his stepmother referred to in P’s first letter to the Church or something else- we can’t be sure. All we know is that it was serious, and not being dealt with. Paul arrives in person to warn them of the serious impact upon their community of sin that is not turned from by the individual or addressed by the church family. Paul confronts them with this situation NOT because he’s a bruiser who enjoys a good punch up. He comes because he loves them and wants them to turn from sin that will spoil, spread and ultimately separate them from a Holy God. This visit did not go well, and Paul left the City , sad and worried for them. But he didn’t stop worrying about them, praying for them, so next up
* He wrote a letter to them (Image of a scroll with writing on it) – urging them not to sit on their hands, saying ‘Yes it’s serious, but no we shouldn’t do anything about it!!’ Paul wrote bluntly, to get them to take action. But his blunt words came at a considerable emotional cost to himself. He wrote (2v4) out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears. His bluntness came not out of a sadist’s desire to humiliate and inflict pain , but out of a pastor’s deep love for his spiritual children.
* And then of course Paul needs to explain his current decision NOT to return to Corinth (Passport with word stamped ‘**Corinth**’ but with big red cross over it). This seems to have been the icing on the cake for his enemies at Corinth. ‘Doesn’t this just prove everything we’ve ever said about Paul- he writes strongly and then can’t even be bothered to pitch up to be with those who’ve been hurt by his letters! Typical!’

‘But’, says Paul, ‘that is NOT the right way to interpret my decision not to visit you again now. My decision was made in order to spare you the pain of another visit pretty soon on the heels of that difficult earlier visit.

‘My decision NOT to visit you came from love’, Paul assures them- ‘a love that doesn’t want to put you through another painful visit, but rather leaves you to think and pray about the issue rather than having me coming and laying down the law to you again, face to face’

As a pastor, I can readily understand Paul’s logic here. Very occasionally one does have to have frank discussions with people you are worried for – people you fear may be going off track in their Christian life. But I don’t think it’s wise to have a difficult discussion and then return the next week, and then the next week. It’s better to give people time and space to think and pray over the issues rather than try to head butt them to adopt your position. Indeed that sort of repeated in person confrontations can so easily become controlling behaviour.

Paul (image of the apostle) wants to assure the Corinthians that all his dealings with them have been prompted NOT by cruelty but by an **Ardent LOVE** for them, that wants to see them protected from harm, and standing firm in their faith in Jesus

And the deep love of Paul is surely seen in his attitude to the person at Corinth whose blatant sin has caused such problems. It seems from 2vv5-8 that this man has now been punished by the majority of the Church family, and this punishment has brought him to his senses and made him repent of his sins. That of course is ALWAYS the goal of ANY discipline, whether it’s a parent correcting their child, or a church leader correcting a member who has gone astray.

See now what Paul says they should do to this individual (v7- 8)

‘Now instead you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him.’

**FORGIVENESS and COMFORT** is what Paul encourages the community to show towards the person who has caused such turmoil in Corinth, and has put the relationship between Paul and the church under such strain

Isn’t Paul gracious, as he calls upon this community of faith to forgive , as he himself is prepared to forgive.

Paul wants that community to be saturated with the grace of God, one that is prepared to forgive, and move forward, rather than to remain full of hurts and grudges and bitterness..

As they hear Paul’s defence – that he really isn’t a flake and isn’t cruel, Paul prays that they will take pride in him, indeed be able to boast in him

‘You CAN boast of me,

Just as we will boast of you

In the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Paul prays that they will hold fast to him, as he proclaims the true gospel of Jesus Christ and ministers faithfully in Jesus’ name.

Well, we’re almost there. 3 quick take homes for us, as we reflect upon this passage:-

* **(1) We can –** and indeed **SHOULD - have confidence in the message and ministry of Paul.....**

This needs to be said because you will sometimes today here people dismissing Paul’s teaching, in a way they wouldn’t do to Jesus’ teaching. We mustn’t do that – for Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ and if we distance himself from Paul, what he taught and the pattern of power through weakness he displays, we will end up rejecting Jesus.

* **(2) We are to rejoice in God’s faithfulness, and let that faithfulness influence all we do and say.....**

In quite a difficult passage, where Paul is on the defensive, this point struck me as one of the jewels that shines the most brightly. Spend some time this week reflecting on the wonderful faithfulness of God – that he has made and kept promise after promise, all being answered ‘Yes’ in Jesus Christ through whom we are anointed, sealed, indwelt and assured by the very Spirit of God. How wonderful is that?!

* **(3) We are to act with love and grace towards others, encouraging, warning and seeking restoration and healing.**

What a marvellous model Paul has shown himself to be of love towards this group of Christians in Corinth. He loved them enough to visit them on no fewer than 3 occasions, to write to them at last 4 times, to care for their spiritual good that they would turn from sin and embrace the path of holy living, and yet at the same time being eager to bring forgiveness and comfort even to one who’d caused such pain, and yet who was now willing to return to the fold. May we be willing to love others enough to encourage, warn, restore and assure others, with hearts marinated by the grace of God

[Prayer]