

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11
(2 Chronicles 33:9-13; Matthew 18:21-35)
“To Let You Know How Much I Love You”

Introduction

In the verses before us this morning, we see a wise and loving leader wrestling his way through a situation of moral ambiguity. What are we to do when presented with a choice between making ourselves look strong and decisive, but in the process making a bad situation worse, or choosing instead to risk looking weak and indecisive – perhaps even cowardly – but enabling a volatile situation to cool down?

Paul promised to visit the church in Corinth, in fact he promised to visit them twice, on his way to and from Macedonia. But then a crisis arose: Paul’s reputation was attacked, and the church was encouraged to break its relationship with him. What was Paul to do? He knew that if he visited Corinth under these circumstances, he would be thrown into a confrontation with his opponents. If he changed plans, he would be accused of cowardice and his opponents would use that as one more reason that Paul should not be considered a leader.

We know that Paul ordinarily confronted such situations head on (as we see him do several times in the book of Acts and in such letters as Galatians), but in this case he decided, uncharacteristically, that it was best for everyone that he change his travel plans to avoid precipitating a crisis. He then urged the church in Corinth to deal with the situation themselves. Surely enough, the accusations of cowardice have now come, and Paul writes to explain his reasoning, to tell the Corinthians why it seemed to him the better part of wisdom to change plans, to take the criticism and deal with the crisis from a distance.

What has this to do with us? There is both a general and a more specific application. Generally, in Paul’s explanation, we see an illustration of a wise and godly leader choosing what he believes is the path of wisdom, and then taking the time to try to explain his reasoning to those who do not understand. This is, of course, invaluable for those of us in any kind of leadership, who are called to make what may seem risky and even morally ambiguous decisions. We will not always arrive at the same decision as Paul does in this particular case, nor did Paul always arrive at the same decision as he does here. *But we see in these verses a model of wisdom at work in the messiness and pain of life, when there is no clean way through a crisis.*

But there is also a more specific application to a certain kind of issue that we all face from time to time: namely, how are we to confront those who are involved in disruptive and rebellious behavior that threatens to break relationships? We see this in the home, the classroom, the workplace, and the church. When it occurs, how are we to deal with the situation itself and with those involved?

Body

1. We should remember that God is our true audience (1:23).

This is foundational. If it were not for this, Paul would never have chosen this particular course of action. When we remember that we live our lives in the sight of God and that he is the only final witness to our actions, we find it easier to choose what we believe is most pleasing to him rather than to us or to those who are so quick to judge us.

But when we forget that God's eyes are on us, we tend to be more concerned about our own reputations, about the judgment of others, and about what will position us most powerfully for our next move.

2. We should neither fear controversy nor rush into it, but first ask certain key questions (1:23-2:4).

It is obvious from his explanation that Paul has considered these three:

How can I best love those involved in this situation (1:23&2:4)?

How can I empower them to solve their own problems (1:24a)?

How can I help bring this to a joyful conclusion – joyful for all of us involved (1:24b-2:3)?

3. We should always seek to bring about repentance and restoration (2:5-7).

When people sin against family or friends, when they act unfaithfully or dishonorably, what are we to do? How are we to defend the one who has been wronged, and yet still speak a life-giving word to the one who has sinned? Or what of those involved in unethical business practices? Or those who are always contentious? How do we protect the reputation of Jesus Christ and the health of the congregation, and still seek to heal and restore the offender?

The key must be found in the aim: namely, to bring to repentance and restoration. We do not always know what that will look like, but the ultimate concern must be that God is finally glorified through the salvation of sinners.

4. We should be quick to forgive and restore those who repent (2:7-10).

We too often permit breeches in relationship to remain. We have been wounded, and may forgive, but not forget. The church over the centuries has too often denied the example of Jesus and of Paul by using church discipline

to punish punitively those who have fallen. It is frequently said that the church is an army that shoots its wounded.

The approach of Jesus dealing with Peter, and of Paul in dealing here with this offender, was completely different. They were quick to forgive and restore. Jesus even restored immediately to leadership Peter who had fallen so terribly through his multiple denials. How different we tend to be in dealing with those who have fallen.

5. We should remember that division and pain are not God's will, but Satan's scheme (2:11).

Just as we must remember first that God's eyes are always on us, so too we must remember that we have an enemy who schemes to divide us, to get us to deny the gospel in broken relationships, to get us so busy defending ourselves that we will forget the One who is our only true and final audience, our true defender and judge. He is happy if we do not deal with sin, and he is happy if we deal with sin so harshly that the sinner runs away from God's grace and from God's people. In either case, his schemes are successful.

Conclusion

What are you facing today? Where are you in conflict and eager to assert your rights? In what ways might you come unconfessed and unforgiven to the Lord's Table this morning, unless you take the time now to seek the Lord for wisdom, and to ask yourself what is the most loving way to handle those who cause you pain? It may be to confront; it may be to wait; it may be to write a letter from your heart as Paul does here. *But ask yourself what is most loving, most empowering and most likely to end in joy.*

Let the gospel of Jesus Christ have its way in your heart as you come to take and eat, and remember the Lord's death until he comes again to restore what is broken, to wipe away our tears and make all things new.

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