

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Godly Leadership Under Attack

Recently someone asked me what I do for hobbies
And as I had only just met him for the first time
I didn't know how to explain that my latest hobby is listening to true crime podcasts
This is where some pretty sinister crimes, almost always murders
Are explained in detail, including the investigations and arrests
Now please if you share a household with me
I just want to reassure you that I am not getting ideas
But honestly some of the worst cases to listen to are when preachers or pastors commit terrible crimes
In these cases it is terrible because of the gross hypocrisy
Of someone in leadership saying one thing and doing the very opposite
And there is no defense for indefensible sin like this
You cannot justify such evil
In fact in the gospels, Jesus condemned such hypocrisy from religious leaders

But what about situations where godly leadership comes under attack
What happens when leaders are doing their best to imitate Jesus
And yet still come under unfair criticism
That's the situation that we're looking at in the bible passage today
We're going to look at Paul's response to this
And we're going to see three things that are essential to godly leadership
And because these traits reflect the nature of Jesus
They should be imitated by all followers of Jesus

Here are the three things

Godly Leadership under attack is:
Sincere, Faithful and Loving

We might look at the full screen for these slides
Let me first give you some understanding of the context of this passage
The Corinthians are attacking Paul for not keeping his word
Paul shared his plan that he would visit them
He was to leave the province of Asia
And to come directly to Corinth to visit the believers there
And then he was to make his way to Macedonia
And then he would come back to visit the Corinthians a second time
On his way through to Judea
And so it would mean a double visit for the Corinthians
The idea behind this being that Paul could bless them twice
By having fellowship with them and spending more time teaching them God's word
But as it turned out
Paul decided not to travel this route

Instead, Paul changed his plans and he decides to go straight to Macedonia
And then only he would head to Corinth after that for a single visit

This change of plans offended the Corinthians
They accuse Paul of being double minded
Saying “yes” to them when he really meant “no”
You can imagine them saying
“He doesn’t really care about us”
“If he did, then he would keep his promise instead of breaking it”

Let’s look now at how Paul responds to this attack

So let’s look at our first point

Godly leadership under attack is sincere

Verse 12

¹² Indeed, this is our boast: The testimony of our conscience is that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with godly sincerity and purity, not by human wisdom but by God’s grace.

The first word to note is the word “boast”
Normally boasting is a bad thing
Something that is done to puff up self at the expense of others
And Paul is using this word very deliberately.
Because he knows that boasting is something the Corinthians love doing.
In fact the word appears some 25 times in the letter.
The Corinthians love to boast like the world around them.

Paul says later in chapter verse 11:17

¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

The Corinthians loved impressive outward displays
They loved human wisdom
Impressive public speakers that would travel from city to city
For which people would pay money to for their entertaining speeches
Later in the letter we are going to meet some false teachers Paul calls the “super-apostles”
Who appear to be outwardly impressive in their speaking
The Corinthian Christians loved to boast in strength
But in contrast Paul draws the Corinthians back the source of *his* boast
God’s grace in verse 12.

“By God’s grace” – I am what you see

That is what Paul is saying in these verses
Paul knows that he is the worst of all sinners saved by the grace of God
That is why Paul boasts in the cross of Christ
No human effort or achievement can ever satisfy God
No impressive religious activity can atone for sin
Paul knows that his ministry is built only on the grace of God
He knows he is nothing without God
So he is not living to please and impress people with his own power
There is no hidden motivation before God, before the Corinthians or even the world

What you see about Paul is what you get.
Godly, sincere and pure
He is fully transparent before them

Verse 13

¹³For we are writing nothing to you other than what you can read and also understand. I hope you will understand completely— ¹⁴just as you have partially understood us—that we are your reason for pride, just as you also are ours in the day of our Lord Jesus.

Paul's sincere motivations are there for all to see
And he wants the Corinthians to understand not only his motivation but his goal
He wants to boast *in* them and *with* them on the day of Christ's return.
His sincere purpose is to stand proudly with them in the glory of Christ on that last day

Transparent sincerity is what we long for from our leaders.
I wonder how many of us read the policies of our political leaders at the recent federal election
And wondered, how sincere are these candidates?
Is what you see, what you get?

The comedian George Burns is attributed with this quote.
The key to success is sincerity, if you can fake that, you've got it made.
That is prevailing human wisdom
Not just for leaders but I'm sure you've heard or even used this saying
"Fake it til you make it"

But that's not the apostle Paul.
He is not insecure.
There is no need to fake it.
Because he knows who he is by God's grace and not his own efforts.
A saved sinner
Redeemed for God's purpose
Commissioned to be an apostle for Jesus.

Now notice what godly leaders don't do
Godly leaders don't go on the attack.
Insecure people who have something to hide and something to lose go on the attack
Too afraid to be open and honest
And so they would rather tear down their opponents.
But like Paul, godly leaders can be straightforward and honest with those criticizing him

Notice too that Paul doesn't apologise when it's not his fault.
Some of us do that as though we need to avoid conflict all the time
And keep people happy that way
"I'm sorry this is all my fault"
But what happens when it's not your fault like in this situation
It's not loving, to ignore something the other person is doing wrong.
And if you apologise all the time

It can lead to this false pretense of smiles on the outside
Concealing a bitter resentment on the inside
And that's not what God wants.

But that's not Paul.
He genuinely loves the Corinthians and wants to boast in them
And he's willing to bring the problem graciously but firmly to the Corinthians

Look at verse 14, just as you have partially understood us
In other words, this is *your* problem
You have come to the wrong conclusion about us because you haven't understood us.

Godly leadership is sincere

But sincerity matters for all followers of Jesus
Of course, the person who is sincerity in its purest form is Jesus
Jesus says what he means, he means what he says and he doesn't say it meanly.
I wonder if people would say that about you
By God's grace, Clinton is a sincere and honest person.
By God's grace, Helen is straightforward and without pretense.
By God's grace what you see is what you get with Andy.
It's challenging isn't to measure up to that
But remember what Paul said, By God's grace.
Sincerity comes by God's grace
So if we want to be sincere, we need to ask for God's grace.

Godly leadership under attack is faithful

In verses 15-16, Paul explains his original intention to visit the Corinthians twice.
And you can see Paul's heart for the Corinthians here.
He wants to benefit them.
His visit is not driven by obligation and polite lip service.
Which can be very easy to do
I'm guilty of doing that
Making an empty promise of catching up with no intention of keeping it
"We must catch up some time for coffee, Bye Bye"
But not Paul, he fully intended to keep his promise
But when plans changed and he didn't make his second visit
You can see their accusation in verse 17
Paul, you're double minded,
You're a promise breaker
Your "yes" means "no"
You're flaky and so we can't rely on you

And now Paul defends his ministry in verse 18
But you'll notice that his defence is not mainly about him
It's actually centred around the gospel and the character of God.

¹⁸ As God is faithful, our message to you is not “Yes and no.” ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you—Silvanus, Timothy, and I—did not become “Yes and no.” On the contrary, in him it is always “Yes.” ²⁰ For every one of God’s promises is “Yes” in him. Therefore, through him we also say “Amen” to the glory of God.

Paul is saying - As God is faithful, so we are faithful
And what does God’s faithfulness look like – it looks like “yes” in Jesus Christ
Verse 20 is one of those small but stunning verses in the Bible
It reminds you how significant Jesus is
“For every one of God’s promises is yes in him”
God is a promise maker and a promise keeper
In the Old Testament we can see the covenant making God of the Old Testament
God promised many things to His people
But all the hundreds of prophecies and promises of the Old Testament
Find their eventual fulfilment in the New Testament
In the coming of God’s Son Jesus Christ.
Therefore through Christ we say “Amen” – it is true
God is faithful and true to His word.
But God’s faithfulness is then applied directly to every believer in verse 21

²¹ Now it is God who strengthens us together with you in Christ, and who has anointed us. ²² He has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment.

Paul is not saying he is better than the Corinthians here
But rather both he and them share in the same privilege
They have been anointed or marked by God as belonging to Him
God has sealed them, referring to the wax seals that would signify authentic ownership
God’s gift of the Holy Spirit is like that seal - a down payment for believers in Christ
Like a modern-day engagement ring – God has made a pledge of what is still to come
We are His and he will make good on all His promises.
Do you know the depths of God’s faithfulness to you in Jesus?
Your experience of life may have been one broken promise after another
By those in your life
But God offers something different to you in His Son Jesus
Here is someone who is not only sincere in making His promises
He is faithful in keeping them
From this life into the next.

I really like what Paul is doing here with those criticising him
They are attacking Paul but in defending his ministry
Paul takes the Corinthians back to God and His gospel
He points them to Jesus first.
Look at God’s faithfulness to you first.
And then judge our faithfulness according to God’s
It takes incredible self-control when you are being attacked
Not to immediately defend and justify your own actions
But what would be the point of that?

A godly leader wants to leave people thinking more about Jesus than themselves
Paul wants them to emerge from this with a deeper, bigger view of Christ
Godly leaders care more about the gospel than themselves
Even when they are being criticised.
Yet Paul is still saying that godly leaders should be faithful as God is faithful

Something else you notice about Paul's tone to the Corinthians is that it's not harsh and aggressive
It's firm but gentle

Proverbs 15:11 says

A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.
A gentle answer is open handed
But a harsh word is closed fist
One builds relationship and one destroys
Paul's firm but gentle words keep open the door of relationship with the Corinthians
If he responded with anger then they would be closed towards him and to God

That's a picture of me and a guy called Ken
Taken almost 20 years ago
Yes back then men used to wear these things called $\frac{3}{4}$ length cargo pants
Anyway Ken was one of the original elders of Bundy before he and his family moved to Sydney
Emma and I joined Ken's growth group after I graduated from uni
I had spent six years at the Christian Union at uni
Having led bible study groups for four of those years
And I thought I was pretty good at teaching the bible
Imagine having me in your growth group - young and full of arrogance
And Ken could tell during a bible study series that he was leading
That I was not respecting his choice of studies or his style of leading
He had done absolutely nothing wrong, I was the problem
And one evening he asked politely if he and I could talk privately
And then he firmly but gently told me to pull my head in
That my attitude was discouraging and distracting to him and more importantly to the group
And I realised I had done the wrong thing
So I apologised and took on his rebuke
And from that point on, when I was able to humble myself
I realised that I had much to learn from Ken's gospel conviction and his godly example
That he was pointing me to Jesus in a firm but faithful and gentle way

If you know the faithfulness of God in Jesus
Are you faithful like God?
Whether you are in Christian leadership or not
Look at God who has kept his promises to you in Christ
And strive to be a promise keeper too
Be faithful to those whom God has placed in your life.

Thirdly, Godly leadership under attack is loving

If we jump down to chapter 2 verse 4

We can see the driving motivation behind Paul's leadership is love for those attacking him

⁴ For I wrote to you with many tears out of an extremely troubled and anguished heart—not to cause you pain, but that you should know the abundant love I have for you.

This is not an arms-length professional relationship between Paul and the Corinthians

This is open hearted, tear stained love

He is at pains not to cause them pain

Any good servant of the gospel cares deeply for those he or she ministers to

Any good servant of the gospel is driven by love of others and not of self

But some will be thinking, sure Paul

Nice words but the road to hell is paved with good intentions

If you love them, then why didn't you keep your word to them

Here's a clue in verse 4 it says "For I wrote to you"

What is this letter that Paul is referring to.

Let me give you some background to the letters to the Corinthian church

We know of at least four letters that Paul wrote

The first letter is one that we don't have and is mentioned in 1 Cor chapter 5

Where Paul says, "I wrote to you in my letter".

For whatever reason, God didn't need us to have this letter in our bible so this letter has not survived

Then the second letter is 1 Corinthians which we have in our bibles.

Then there was a third letter that Paul wrote

Which is referred to as the sorrowful letter because of what we see in verse 4

Paul wrote this with tears and deep anguish in his heart

Paul had to address things in the church which were difficult for the Corinthians to hear

Things that would cut them to the heart

Things that Paul needed to say out of tough love for them

Because he wanted them to be repentant before God

Like the first letter, we don't have a copy of this letter.

And then finally we have the fourth letter following it up

Which in our bibles we call 2 Corinthians which is what we are reading right now

And now we're going to see why Paul changed his plans not to visit them twice.

After he wrote the hard-hitting sorrowful letter

He changed his plans

Look at chapter 2 verse 1

2 In fact, I made up my mind about this: I would not come to you on another painful visit. ² For if I cause you pain, then who will cheer me other than the one being hurt by me? ³ I wrote this very thing so that when I came I wouldn't have pain from those who ought to give me joy, because I am confident about all of you that my joy will also be yours.

The apostle Paul decided not to come in order to spare them more pain.

In Paul's mind it was too soon to visit after the sorrowful letter

They needed time to process and accept what Paul said

And him going there so soon after the letter would not have helped them or him

Instead of his visit bringing mutual joy

It would have ended up being even more painful for both Paul and the Corinthians
So instead he decided to give them more time so that his eventual visit
Would be a joyful one for both parties
So can you see how differently the Corinthians perceived Paul's reason for not visiting.
Paul - you hurt us, you let us down, you rejected us
But from Paul's perspective
Corinthians - I love you even more if I delay visiting you
My desire is for your good
I want you to stand firm in your faith
My being there so soon will not help you to do that
It's easy isn't it – to question someone's motives when you don't see the whole picture
To start running through our mind
All the negative reasons why they haven't responded to us
What it is we've done wrong
When they haven't responded
What they have against us
We run a hundred scenarios in our heads that all end with the same conclusion
We feel ignored, neglected and unloved.

A similar incident happened to Jesus
He delayed a visit to people he loved and he was misunderstood

The siblings Mary and Martha in John 11
Dear, dear friends of Jesus
He heard that Lazarus their brother was sick and in fact Jesus knew he would die
And rather than rushing to their home to heal Lazarus
Jesus deliberately delayed his visit and actually allowed Lazarus to die
It seems unloving at first
But can you imagine how hard that must have been for Jesus to delay that visit?
To know the pain and grief that Mary and Martha would go through watching their brother die
And when both sisters saw Jesus they both said to him
Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died

Let me read between the lines
If you really loved us you would have gotten here sooner and healed our brother
That's probably what I would have said to Jesus
But Jesus' love for these sisters was even greater than they imagined.

Can you see what it says in John 11 verse 5
Jesus delayed his visit *because* he loved Mary and Martha
So that Jesus could show Mary and Martha something even more stunning than healing their brother
He's going to raise Lazarus from death and show himself to be the resurrection and the life.
Jesus did not love them the way they wanted
He loved them the way they needed
A greater and deeper love than they could ever imagine

And that's what Paul is trying to do with the Corinthians

He's loving them even more deeply by delaying his visit.

It's so hard to love when you are misunderstood and when you are judged harshly,
So how does Paul do it?

Look at verse 23

²³ I call on God as a witness, on my life, that it was to spare you that I did not come to Corinth. ²⁴ I do not mean that we lord it over your faith, but we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in your faith.

God is Paul's audience of one.

He is not living to please the Corinthians

He's living to please God his witness, his good and merciful judge

And this frees him up then to love the Corinthians.

I love these verses from 1 Corinthians 4

³ It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me.

When you fear the judgement of people, you love and protect yourself

When you fear God, who gives us His judgement in Christ Jesus

We are freed to love people, even difficult people like the Corinthians

As God is my witness, I lovingly work for your joy.

Loving people is very different to trying to make them happy

And you can only do that when you are freed by God the good and merciful judge.

I want to bring you back to Proverbs quickly before we finish

Because I want to say a quick word to you if you are someone prone to criticising quickly

And you know what at one some point or another

That's all of us in the room

This is what Proverbs 3:30 says

Don't accuse anyone without cause, when he has done you no harm

That is exactly what the Corinthians have done to Paul

They have accused him of doing harm

When all he has done, is tried his best to love them

Did you see those words, "without cause"

Before you rush to judgment

Try to understand their situation

Give them the benefit of the doubt

Don't assume their worst intentions.

Don't speak before you hear and understand

Here's another one – Proverbs 19:11

A person's insight gives him patience, and his virtue is to overlook an offense

Paul's conduct has been exemplary

He has been sincere, faithful and loving
In fact, the Corinthians are the ones in the wrong.
They are the ones who have committed the offence in rushing to judge Paul
And yet, Paul overlooks their offense against him
Instead of rejecting them, he opens his heart even more to them.
If you are someone quick to criticize
Then seek insight and patience from God first
Nothing good comes from a text sent at midnight
Nothing good comes from an email longer than one page.
Better first to turn to God in prayer when your emotions are raging
Ask for patience and wisdom before you write anything
Wait for 24 hours before you write or hit send.
Then follow up what is important and loving to follow up.
Overlook or forbear what you can.
Most offenses can be overlooked.
Ask God to give you the discernment to know the difference
Between what you can let go of and what needs to be followed up.

Well we all know ungodly examples of leadership
Fake, full of broken promises and love of self
Everyday, we see examples of this type of leadership
And then at times
We see shining examples of godly leadership
I had the privilege of working for 23 years with such an example of godly leadership
Examples that point us to the very character of Jesus himself
As you go into the week ahead,
By God's grace be sincere in all your dealings
As God is faithful be faithful to the promises you make
With God as your witness be loving even to those who attack you