**Paul’s conscience is clear** 12/9/21 dkm

Read: 2Corinthians 1:8-24, James 1:1-20

Text: 2Corinthians 1:12-22

Psalms: 25:1-7, 1, 15, 134a

When someone gets upset at something you said or did, and decide they don’t like you, they usually find other reasons to support this decision not to like you. Often they dig up little things that were not important until they made this decision. We refer to this as ‘digging up dirt’ on someone. Some people in the church at Corinth did not like Paul condemning the man guilty of incest; he told them to discipline the man by refusing fellowship (1Cor 5:5, 9). A group got together to discredit the apostle Paul in whatever way they could. The apostle was deeply hurt but never thought to walk away from this church. God gave him the grace and the strength to deal with the personal accusations and false teachings.

There were some serious doctrinal issues to deal with but the apostle first deals with a personal attack upon his integrity. They accused him of being fickle and untrustworthy because of a change of plans regarding a visit to Corinth. Paul was not above making mistakes in his ministry, but as he begins this second letter he wants to make perfectly clear why he changed his plans. Paul knew, as every minister of the gospel knows, that any mistake, real or perceived, can carry a heavy price. The accusation that Paul was fickle and could not be trusted was more perceived than real. With a clear conscience before God, he explains his dependence on the grace of God in all things. He also teaches profound truths about God’s faithfulness towards us in Jesus Christ. Our three subheadings are: ‘clear conscience’, ‘change of plans’, and ‘Christ is Yes, and Amen’.

**1. Clear conscience**

Some in the church at Corinth were calling Paul a ‘Yes, Yes and No, No’ man (1:17), a man who kept changing his mind to suit himself. This name-calling started because Paul changed his plan about visiting Corinth. He does not deny that he did so, but declares that he did not do so lightly (1:17), and certainly not for selfish reasons. He can ‘boast’ of having a clear conscience before the Lord (1:12). God of course, is the ultimate judge of the heart or conscience. Blessed is the person whose conscience does not accuse them (Rom 2:15). Paul was not looking for the approval or praise of men but of God, and we should be doing the same (1Cor:4:3-5).

The word ‘conscience’ is interesting. Every human being has a conscience which tells them right from wrong. Every human being makes judgments on the behaviour of other people which makes them inexcusable before God (Rom 2:1-3). A conscience distinguishes human beings from other creatures, despite evolutionists trying to tell us that these other creatures have a conscience- or indeed, that some people do not have a conscience. Sin of course, affected the operation of our conscience; sin cut us off from the light of God. But the Spirit of God, given to all who believe in Jesus, illuminates the conscience (1:22).

Paul has a Spirit-illuminated conscience, and the testimony or witness of his conscience was that he had acted with godly sincerity and simplicity towards the Corinthians (1:12). ‘Simplicity’ means ‘without duplicity’, which matches the word ‘sincerity’; some adopt a very similar Greek word and translate ‘holiness’. ‘Sincere’ translates a Greek word meaning ‘judged by the light of the sun’. ‘Sincere’ is a Latin word meaning ‘without wax’. Stone carvings were sometimes patched with wax but heat would reveal such cover-ups. Paul had nothing to hide with regard to his dealings with the Corinthians.

Paul could ‘boast’ or proudly testify that his conscience was clear of any duplicity or insincerity. He was not a double-minded or two-faced man (James 1:8). What he said and what he wrote was not meant to confuse; no one had to read between the lines. Worldly people, especially those in public office, often use language that is vague, language designed to ‘muddy the waters’ as we say. False teachers do the same thing. When church leaders come together in ecumenical synods, some try to twist the clear meaning of words they have agreed to.

Paul did not speak with ‘fleshly’ or worldly wisdom, or with church politics in mind. He spoke and wrote ‘by the grace of God’ (1:12). He did this at all times, even when defending himself against unfair and false accusations. He did not resort to the tactics of his opponents. He did not ‘fight fire with fire’ but in all his battles fought with the truth and with the grace of God (10:4). Moreover, he fought for the truth and glory of God, not for his own reputation or glory- although he defended his own integrity as ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ (1:1).

Some preachers like to use big words to impress their listeners. I remember a Bible teacher answering a question with some exasperation, ‘Do I have to use words with less than three syllables!’ Sometimes we have to use big words, but the object of preaching and teaching is to make the truth clear. Paul’s preaching was a clear presentation of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The Corinthians listened to him and believed. He later wrote a letter about sexual immorality which they misunderstood, maybe deliberately (1Cor 5:10). He wrote in language they could read and understand. His words were clear and understandable, with no hidden agenda in mind. He wanted them to understand completely, or to the full, what he wrote (1:13).

One thing Paul wanted them to understand was that he was proud of them as his dear children, and they should be proud of him as their father in the faith. He wanted this relationship to continue until the end, until ‘the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1:14). Paul kept this day in focus because on this day God will judge everyone for everything they have done in the body (5:10), even the thoughts and intents of the heart (1Cor 4:5, Heb 4:12).

**2. Change of plans**

The apostle comes to the matter which led to their attack upon his personal integrity, namely his change of travel plans. Did they feel hurt by the change that meant he would not be visiting them on his way to Macedonia? This is doubtful given the animosity expressed in his last ‘painful visit’. More likely they were looking for ‘dirt to throw at him’.

Paul’s original plan was to travel from Ephesus to Macedonia, and on to Corinth on his way back to Judea (1Cor 16:5). After sending the letter called 1Corinthians, matters in this church did not improve so he made a ‘painful visit’; during this visit he must have told them he would change his plans and visit them on his way to Macedonia and again on his way back (1:15,16). He was anxious to help this troubled church. But upon returning to Ephesus he wrote the ‘tearful letter’ and thought it best to delay any further visit. As it happened, Paul had to leave Ephesus in a hurry so reverted to his original plan to go direct to Macedonia. If the Corinthians knew this they should not have been criticizing Paul, but even if they did not know they should have gathered the facts before making any judgment. ‘We do well to avoid such ill-formed and unkind opinions as shown by the Corinthians’ writes Barnett.

It is often said that journalists do not let the truth get in the way of a good story. The same can be said of opinions and accusations we make about others. Paul knew the truth, and he knew his own heart. He assured them that he had intended to make a double visit that they ‘might have a second benefit’, and that they might help him on his way to Judea (1:15,16). But all his plans were made with the condition, ‘If God wills’ (James 4:15). And as he later says, it was to spare them that he ‘came no more to Corinth’ (1:23). He has already mentioned the trouble that came to him in Asia (1:8).

The apostle was not so much concerned with the details of his travel plans as with the accusation that he was fickle and could not be trusted. Again he asserts that he did not make plans lightly or simply to please himself. He rejected their calling him a ‘Yes, Yes, and No, No’ man; he was not a worldly man who thought only of himself.

**3. Christ is Yes and Amen**

The thought of being a ‘Yes, No’ man appalled the apostle Paul. He realised that such a characterisation would undermine his whole presentation of the gospel. When he and Silas and Timothy preached the gospel in Corinth their message was not a ‘yes and no’, not a ‘maybe’ message. They preached the historical person of Jesus Christ; they preached Jesus, the Son of God, Jesus Christ and him crucified (1:19, 1Cor 2:2). The gospel he preached was Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. He preached Jesus as the ‘Yes and Amen’ of all the promises of God.

God by definition is faithful (1:18). God does not change. ‘God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it, or has he spoken and it not come to pass’ (Numb 23:19). So when Paul preached the word given him by God, that word was true and unchanging. Let no one say or even think that he was a ‘Yes and No’ man when he preached to the gospel.

When Paul, an apostle ordained by the risen Jesus, and when faithful servants of the Lord like Silas and Timothy preached the gospel, they preached the fulfilment of the promises of the prophets in Jesus Christ our Lord. All the promises contained in the word of God, as in the OT, are ‘Yes in Him’, in Jesus, the Son of God, ‘to the glory of God through us’ (1:20).

Paul was not preaching a new religion, as some in Athens and in Corinth thought. He was preaching the fulfilment of all God’s promises of old, promises set forth under the old covenant and fulfilled in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. We will later hear Paul’s argument against the teaching of two ways of salvation, the way of the old covenant and the way of the new covenant. There is only one way because the old has given way to the new. The Old Testament cannot be fully understood without the new; it is veiled, and that veil is only taken away in Christ (3:14). It is also true that the New Testament cannot be fully understood without the old.

The God who ‘spoke in time past to the fathers and by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things’ (Heb 1:1,2). God has spoken and revealed all his plans and purposes for his creation in his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that God is the one who ‘anointed us’ or set them apart to serve him. He is the one who ‘established us with you in Christ’ (1:21). They were not saved by Paul- or Apollos or Cephas! (1Cor 1:12). They might remember that when the people in the desert grumbled against Moses they were grumbling against the Lord (Exod 17:2, 1Cor 10:9). Paul was but a humble servant of the Lord, but an anointed servant none the less.

Paul did not take God’s anointing lightly, and neither should they. This anointing was more than water baptism- it was baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paul and others sowed the seed but it is God who makes that seed germinate and grow in the heart- to use the picture Paul used in 1Corinthians 3. God put his seal of ownership on, and gives his Spirit to, all who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We have the Spirit now as a deposit or guarantee (1:22, 5:5, Eph 1:14).

When you put a deposit on a house you are promising to pay the full amount when required. The house is yours but not fully. When you give an engagement ring you are promising the fullness of marriage in due time. When God gives his Spirit he is promising the fullness of a relationship with him in Jesus Christ in heaven and into eternity, even our transformation into the likeness of Christ (3:18, 1John 3:2). Let the critical Corinthians, and let us, not lose sight of the blessings that are ours in Christ here and now, but especially of the blessings promised when Jesus Christ returns in all his glory. Let us remember that all the promises of God are ‘Yes and Amen’ in Jesus Christ our Lord.