

Sermon: How to make plans?

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

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What is the value of your promises? Are you a trustworthy person: you do what you say and you say what you do? It is good to be such people of integrity.

But I like to suggest that sometimes it is not bad to change your mind and not do as you promised. Let me explain.

The apostle Paul's life was one of suffering in many respects. Not only did he suffer from persecution by his own countrymen, the Jews; he also suffered from being under heavy verbal attack from certain Christians.

Paul had founded the church in Corinth around 49 or 50 AD. The Second Letter to the Corinthians was written about 6 years later. And even though he had founded the church, criticism was rife.

In the portion of the letter than we read today, we see how Paul was criticized for changing his travel plans; he had promised to come to Corinth, but he had not come as he changed his plans.

Paul's plan did not work out

A change of travel plans, is that such a big deal? We all change our plans, we cannot always do what we agreed to do, it happens. In itself it should not be a big deal - but there was already much other criticism of Paul, and in that context, this issue of his change of travel plans was magnified out of proportions.

So Paul felt he had to defend himself, and in his defense of his changed itinerary, he give us some precious insight in his motivation, and in his mindset about what it means to be a Christian.

First, the apostle begins with summing up that his conscience is clear: he did nothing wrong. In his heart and mind he is convinced that the Corinthians had no good reasons to be so critical of him.

'In the world (that is, in all our relations) we behave with simplicity and sincerity', Paul says. Some ancient versions of the letter say, we have behaved with holiness and sincerity.

But I think the word 'simplicity' is more relevant in this context: Paul is accused of duplicity, of saying one thing and doing the other; but he is fully assured of his simplicity. He is transparent, we might say nowadays. And he is sincere.

Paul also says that he does not behave by earthly wisdom. This does not mean that he was not a wise man - but it means that he refused to use the formal language of the philosophers of his days.

For many of the philosophical movements in his days, popular in a large Greek city like Corinth, it was less important what your words meant, and more important that you delivered them according to the accepted rules of eloquence.

'I do not use this earthly wisdom,' Paul says, but I write to you what you can read and understand.' He writes with simplicity, not with duplicity, and not hiding his true intentions in eloquent verbal smokescreens.

If this would be all, we could easily think that Paul was here just giving a sort of moralistic lesson. You must be honest. You must be sincere. Duplicity is bad. And we would agree. We like to be such people of integrity.

But here comes the problem:

'Yes but Paul, you had told us here in Corinth that after you were ready with your ministry in Asia, you would come to us, on your way up north to Macedonia, and that from Macedonia you would come once again to us. You promised two visits, but you did not even come once!'

It was easy for the Corinthian church to argue that Paul's nice talk about integrity and no duplicity actually militated against the reality: he promised something and he did not do it.

'You are right,' Paul answers. 'I wanted to come to you. But something happened that made me change my mind.'

The people in Corinth blamed Paul for vacillating, that is, that he wavered between different views; that he was indecisive. 'What an apostle! He does not know what he wants!'

To be indecisive is not a sign of good leadership. Leaders know how to decide, and then follow through on it. Therefore Paul's critics called him weak: 'He does not know what he wants.'

They also called him worldly: 'He lied to us. He says one thing, but he does something else.'

The faithfulness of God

Before Paul explains why he changed his plans, he says something that is very important for us as well. He anchors his words and his behavior in the faithfulness of God.

'As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No.'

'We are servants of the God who is always faithful to his word. He always does what he promises. So our standards cannot be lower.'

Paul and Silas and Timothy proclaimed the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in Corinth, and Jesus is not a person of Yes and No, today this, tomorrow that...

'All the promises of God find their Yes in Him', Paul writes. God made promises, God fulfilled all promises in Jesus Christ. Because God is faithful to his promises, because Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the promises of God, because of that we say our AMEN to God. We trust his word.'

'This is our Gospel, this is what we preach', Paul says. 'So how in the world can you assume that we, as apostles, can live in a world of duplicity, of cheating you, of just saying anything that suits us?'

This is something all Christians must take to heart. God's character is simplicity and faithfulness, not duplicity and wavering. God can be trusted. Hence, we as his children, live in accordance with that.

So Paul anchors his credibility as a Christian, in who God is. As God says what he does, and He does what He says, we make that into our lifestyle as well.

Notice that this is very different from moralistically saying: you must be honest, you must be transparent. Our lifestyle comes out of our relationship with God - not out of a set of rules that we can tick off.

Many psychologists have noted that people become like the gods they serve. If a god is not transparent and if he does not abide by his promises, then his followers have this lack of transparency and this duplicity at the heart of their religion and culture.

If people believe in a God who is transparent and who abides by his word, then this impacts the lifestyle, even the culture of those who obey him. This is an undeniable fact... but it must also be our intention.

In Ephesians 5:1 Paul writes: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children." We must be intentional about living in accordance with the character of our Father.

If we would have to invent an image of God, we might have made God slightly more human, to lay the bar a bit lower. We would have invented a god who makes religion easy for us. A little lie, no problem. A little darkness, ah so what.

But the reality is, the God of the universe is transparent, and he follows up on his promises. He send his Son to our world to fulfill all his promises. And therefore, this is our life. This is how we want to live. As honest and open people who can be trusted.

The idea that Paul could be dishonest to the church in Corinth is therefore ludicrous to him: The faithful God has established Paul, and Silas and Timothy with those Corinthians believers in Christ, who is the fulfillment of all Gods promises.

As Christians we are bound together as God's children, in the God who abides by his word. And on top of this, the Holy Spirit of God has also been given to all of us.

The Holy Spirit has been give to us in accordance with the covenant promises of God in the Old Testament. The fact that we have received the Holy Spirit underlines, again, that God abides by his word.

We as Christians are bound together, as it were, in a bundle, by the Faithful God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So our relationship with each other must be characterized by that same faithfulness of God.

Real question: what moves us in our plans

Yes, we do as we say. We stick to our word. But... Paul *did really* change his travels plans. He told the Corinthians one thing, and he did another.

And you must also sometimes chance your plans, even your promises. You promise something and you change your mind, you do something else from what you said you would do.

Is that so bad? Not necessarily. It is all about intentions. Paul clarifies that his change of mind, was out of love.

'It was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth', says the apostle. 'I did it for your own benefit.'

I quoted earlier from Ephesians 5:1-2, about us having to be imitators of God. That whole verse says:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

God is love and loves all of his children; and therefore, love is also our motivator, or at least, it should be. And love was what made Paul change his plans.

What was the issue? Why did he change his plans?

In order to prepare for his visit to Corinth Paul had written them a letter; he says he wrote it 'out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears'. What letter was this?

This letter, the one that we often refer to as 'the tearful letter', was one he wrote after the letter we now call 1 Corinthians. This is a letter we do not have any longer.

He had written this letter in order to solve some outstanding problems with his critics, so that when he came, all would be solved; but it seemed that this backfired and the problems were not solved.

And that is why Paul had decided to postpone his visit: 'I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit.'

Love was the reason why the apostle decided to postpone his visit and change his plans.

He mentions that he does not want to rule over them, but he wants to increase their joy. But he also expects there to be mutuality: he expects the Corinthian believers to increase his own joy.

A visit would have created more pain, for all people involved, and this Paul did not desire. And the letter he had written was maybe misunderstood, but the apostle underlines: he wrote it 'to let you know the abundant love I have for you.'

So what was the ultimate motivator for Paul, when he made plans and when he changed them? When he wrote his letter? It was his love for the people.

Because being linked to the loving God, makes us love as well.

Conclusion

In our making of plans, in our dealing with people, in our sticking to promises, we must be transparent and honest. This is in line with God's character.

But we must not become wooden as a plank. Our sticking to our plans, or to our word once given, can even become a negative force, as Paul shows.

Surely, our rule in life should be to stick to our promises. We must be careful not to change plans and promises easily. But the overriding, the deepest motivator must always be love for

God and love for others. "On these two commandments, of love, hang all the laws and the prophets."

If the reason is real love, if it is for the benefit of others, then changing your plans and not keeping your promises may sometimes be exactly what God wants you to do. As long as it for the benefit of the other and not to please yourself.

Good leaders, and good Christians, reflect the character of God. This means transparency, honesty, keeping your word. But love is always the defining factor, because God is love.

Amen