

“WHEN YOU ARE MISUNDERSTOOD”
(2 Corinthians 1:12-22)

Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians, chapter one. This morning I want to talk to you about something that happens often in churches and our personal interactions with people – and that is misunderstandings. When Sharla and I met with her pastor for premarital counseling, I remember well the time he talked about communication. He took out a sheet of paper – that I still have in my files – and he drew a picture of a tennis court. He said, “Communication is like a tennis match where one person begins the conversation – he or she serves the ball – and the other person responds by hitting it back. As long as the ball keeps getting hit back and forth, you have communication. When one person stops hitting the ball, the match is over.”

Good communication, the pastor said, requires patient listening and clarification in order to understand what each person is saying. We naturally assume that the other person understands what we’re saying because we understand it, but each receives information through their own perceptions and assumptions. Good communication requires good faith by both parties to stay at it – without getting angry or defensive – until there is a clear understanding of what each is saying. After listening to what is said, the listener should say, “This is what I heard you say.” The other person then gets the opportunity to clarify or correct any misperceptions. Then the other person gets their turn, and the process is repeated.

Things go haywire when one person gets angry or frustrated and shuts the conversation down. The pastor said, “The longer the tennis ball keeps getting hit back and forth over the net, the more clarity and understanding is gained. The vast majority of misunderstandings can be cleared up by simply communicating, listening, clarifying, and sorting out what is real and what is assumed.”

Our passage deals with a classic case of misunderstanding between the Apostle Paul and the Corinthian church. A few years earlier Paul planted a church in the city of Corinth, and had since moved on to minister in the city of Ephesus. As their spiritual father he deeply loved the saints in Corinth and kept in close communication with them. As a young church in a pagan city, the Corinthian church was beset with several problems, and among them were some powerful, influential people in the church who opposed Paul and tried to discredit him in the eyes of the congregation. They ridiculed his appearance, the way he talked, and claimed he was not even a real apostle. What stung Paul the most is that they accused him of being dishonest – “Paul says one thing, but does another.” They specifically pointed to the fact that Paul said he would come visit, but changed his travel plans twice. How can you trust a guy like this?

We can all identify with Paul – all of us know what it’s like to be misunderstood and have people assume something about us that is not true. In the same way we’ve all been guilty of misunderstanding others and believing things about them that turned out to not be true. In this case of this misunderstanding, the stakes we’re high. The accusations made against Paul not only threatened his relationship with the church, but the integrity of the gospel message. If Paul was dishonest in his actions, how can you trust his message?

In the latter part of 2 Corinthians 1 Paul addresses these misunderstandings – he communicates his side of the story so that trust can be restored with his people – and from his response we gain valuable insight into dealing with misunderstanding – both from the perspective of the one who is being misunderstood, and the one who misunderstanding.

Before Paul gets into the details of the misunderstanding, he begins by defending his character because the real issue is whether or not Paul can be trusted. In verses 12-14 he writes... “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

Whenever you are accused of something, the first thing you need to do is ask, “Is it true? Are there blind-spots in my life that I’m missing and need to be corrected?” Proverbs 15:31 says, “Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.” Paul did search his heart and was confident that he and his missionary team were above reproach. When he says, “This is our boast,” it’s not a boast of prideful bragging, but a boast of confidence. He says, “I’ve searched my soul and I am confident that I did nothing wrong... I have a clear conscience in the way I have conducted myself towards you.”

Paul talks often about the conscience in his writings. The conscience is the moral self-awareness of right and wrong. In Romans 2 Paul says that even Gentile unbelievers who were not given the moral law of God have the law written on their hearts – they instinctively know in their hearts the difference between right and wrong. Our conscience affirms us when we are doing right and gives us peace – and it accuses us when we’re doing wrong, bringing a feeling of shame and guilt.

The conscience is like the warning light on your car dashboard that starts blinking when something’s wrong. When the light starts flashing, you can choose to ignore it and pretend it’s not there – or if it starts to annoy you too much, you can break the dashboard and make it stop – or you can heed the warning and take care of the problem. It’s important to listen to our conscience because if ignored, it can become seared or calloused to the point where wrongdoing no longer bothers us.

Paul says, “I’ve evaluated my conscience, I’ve examined my motives and actions, and I can go on record in saying that I’ve conducted myself before you with integrity and godly sincerity.” The word for integrity has the idea of simplicity. Paul’s opponents accused him of being slippery, of saying one thing and doing another, but Paul says, “I have dealt with you very simply and straightforwardly – there’s no hidden agenda, no clever words, or impure motives.”

The word sincerity is an interesting word that means “judged by sunlight.” In Paul’s day if you wanted to buy a piece of pottery, you would hold it up to the sunlight to see if it had any cracks or defects. Dishonest potters would cover up any cracks or weak spots with wax, which would melt when hot water was poured in it, and you would have a leaky pot. So before you bought it, you’d hold it up to the sun to make sure of its integrity. Paul says, “I’ve been sun-judged. My life has been held up to the light and there are no visible cracks.” Paul is not saying that he’s perfect, only that he is innocent of the accusations made against him.

Paul goes on to say in verse 12b-13a... “We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand.” False teachers used the methods of the world to woo and trick people but Paul went to great lengths in the book of 1 Corinthians to say that his message and methods relied solely on God’s grace and power, not on clever techniques. He said, “I did not speak to you with eloquent, persuasive words – I spoke simply and plainly about Christ – I did not rely on human manipulation, but on God’s power.”

Paul's critics even said that there were ulterior motives in the way Paul wrote his letters – to really get his meaning you had to read between the lines... “Paul says this, but this is what he really means.” Instead of giving Paul the benefit of the doubt, they made up things in their mind that were not true. We can all relate to that. Paul says, “There's no hidden agenda in my writings – I only write what the Holy Spirit inspires me to write. I'm not trying to deceive you or manipulate you for any selfish gain – my only interest is in your spiritual wellbeing.”

In verses 13b-14 Paul expresses his optimism that their misunderstanding will be cleared up... “And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Paul's great desire is that his relationship with the Corinthian believers will be restored – so that they can have confidence in him as their spiritual father, and he can have confidence in them as his spiritual children.

“I'm hopeful and confident,” he says, “that my words – my explanation – will result in understanding on your part. Even if you don't fully understand now, I rest in the fact that on the day we stand before Christ to be judged, and all my actions and motives are fully revealed – that my integrity and sincerity will be vindicated.” This reminds us that not all misunderstandings will be resolved in this lifetime, despite our sincere efforts. We ultimately must place our hope in the final judgment, where the light of God's truth will make all things known and final vindication will be achieved.

After defending his character, Paul now specifically addresses the accusation that he wasn't truthful about his plans to come visit Corinth. Paul's plans did change more than once, but it was never because of fickleness on his part – it was a matter of God providentially changing circumstances. Paul's plans changed more than once. Paul's original plan was to travel from Ephesus – where he was currently ministering – and go to Macedonia – the region north of Corinth where the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica were – and then keep going south to Corinth.

This plan was laid out in 1 Corinthians 16:5-7... “After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.” Notice the words Paul uses... “perhaps... I hope... if the Lord permits.” Paul did not make any promises – he simply stating his desire to be with them. As it turned out, Paul's was not able to get there before winter.

Paul's second plan to come to Corinth is stated here in verses 16-17... “Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.” Paul's next plan was to actually visit Corinth twice – to come see them first – sailing across the Aegean Sea – then go north to Macedonia, then swing back south again to Corinth before he and his team head off to Judea. But this plan also fell through, and the reason is stated at the end of chapter one and the beginning of chapter two, which we will talk about next week.

The reason Paul did not come see them is because circumstances changed. After hearing about the accusations made against him, he made a quick, unplanned trip to Corinth, and in chapter two he referred to it as the “painful” visit. It didn't go well – it was contentious – and Paul had to say some hard things to them. He wisely wants some time to pass, for them to think about his words and make changes – so that when he does visit them again, it can be a positive, joyful reunion, and not confrontational.

This is very instructional for how we plan. God wants us to plan, but to hold our plans loosely. It's foolish to think that we can map life out because as James says, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or what changes will take place that we didn't see coming. James 4:15 says our mindset should be, "If it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that." It was common for Christians in earlier eras to end their letters with the letters D.V. It stood for "Deo Volente," which means "God willing." It was a way of seeing all of life through the lens of what God wants, and a willingness to hold plans loosely.

Several years ago we decided as a church to remodel our sanctuary. Many of you have no idea what our sanctuary was like, but it's much different now. We hired an architect and started to move on our plans, when out-of-the-blue the house next to the church went up for sale and we were approached about buying it. God redirected our plans – we put the remodel on hold and bought the Hound Dog House. Instead of giving the house a deep, spiritual name we got in the habit of calling it the house on Hound Dog Road, and the name just kind of stuck – and the house has been a tremendous blessing to our church ever since.

Paul never made iron-clad promises, he simply stated his intentions. As a traveling missionary, Paul encountered a variety of circumstances and variables, and relied on the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide him moment by moment. His plans may have changed, but it did not cast doubt on his integrity.

In verse 17 he says, Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? Paul's opponents accused him of saying one thing and doing another – he would say "yes, I'm coming," and then he'd say, "I'm not coming." They claimed he was in violation of Jesus' command in Sermon on the Mount to let your yes be yes, and your no be no – be straight up in the way you talk so people don't have to question your integrity. Paul says, "I did not talk out of both sides of my mouth. When I said I was coming, it meant it – it was my full intention to come see you, but God redirected those plans."

Paul's main concern is that if the Corinthian church loses trust in him, they will lose trust in the gospel that Paul taught them. This leads Paul to take a bit of diversion and highlight the trustworthiness of God and His promises. In verse 18 he says... But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." His argument goes something like this: "Since what you know about Christ you learned from me, it would be strange for you to trust Christ but not trust me. If I'm not trustworthy, how can you be confident I told you the truth about God? It makes no sense for you to reject me but accept my message."

In verses 19-20 he says... For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

This is a bit confusing, but Paul is saying that the gospel message he and his missionary team preached to them is trustworthy because Jesus Christ is trustworthy. You can put Christ's life up the sun and find no cracks or defects. There is no contradiction in Jesus' life – He say one thing and do another – He is the only human being to ever live a perfect life, which qualified Him to represent us on the cross.

Furthermore, all the promises God made in the Old Testament about Jesus – all the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants – are all fulfilled in Jesus. Everything predicted about Jesus has become true. All of God's promises are "Yes" in Christ. Was Jesus born in Bethlehem as predicted? Yes. Was He the spotless lamb of God without blemish? Yes. Did He die that we might be forgiven of our sin? Yes. Did He rise again from the dead on the third day? The answer to all of these is yes, yes, yes. There is no vacillation on God's part – He does not say one thing and do another.

Paul says, “The message we preached to you was Christ and the good news of salvation – and when you heard the good news you said ‘Amen.’” Amen is a word said by God’s people all around the world, and it means “truly” or “so be it.” We end each church service by saying, “And all God’s people said... amen.” It puts a punctuation point on the service by agreeing together on the truth we sang about and heard proclaimed for God’s word. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they said “Amen” to the message of the gospel he proclaimed to them – and that his trustworthiness is directly linked to the trustworthiness of God and His promises... “If you don’t trust me, how can you trust what I preached to you about Christ? We are bound together in truth.”

Paul elaborates on their common bond in truth in verses 21-22... “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” When people say “amen” to the gospel, four amazing things happen.

First, **God unites us**... “God makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. Even in the midst of misunderstandings, we must remember our common bond in Christ – we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Families may squabble, but we work things out. The stability we have in Christ gives us a commonality that sustains us through the rough patches of relationships.”

Second, **God anoints us**. In the Old Testament kings and priests set apart for service to God were anointed with oil. Oil was symbolic of God’s power coming upon them. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Him, anointing Him for service. In the same way, when we come to faith in Christ the Holy Spirit comes upon us, empowering us serve God and be His representatives on earth. Despite our differences in the body of Christ, we are all anointed by the Spirit.

Third, **God seals us**. In Paul’s day a seal was an official mark of identification that bore a unique insignia or emblem. If someone put an important letter or document in the mail, they would seal it by pouring hot wax on the envelope and then pressing their insignia into the wax with a ring. The seal said, “This letter, this document, belongs to so-and-so, and you do not dare mess with it.” In the same way, when we’re saved, the Holy Spirit is the seal authenticating that we belong to God, that we’re protected by God and nothing can break the seal that binds us to Him.

Fourth, **God gives us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee**... “God put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” When life is hard, which it often is, the Spirit of God within us gives us assurance and hope that things will be okay in the end – that no matter what happens to us on earth, we know a better day is coming in glory.

The hope we have in the Holy Spirit is given to us as a “deposit.” The Greek word for “deposit” – *arabon* – was a common word used to describe a down payment in a transaction that guaranteed that the rest of the money would come at a later date. In the same way, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a small down payment of much larger payment to come in the future. The hope and joy we enjoy now through the Holy Spirit is a foretaste of glory divine when we are with the Lord.

Paul digresses to talk about these four amazing truths in order to emphasize the trustworthiness of God – beginning at our initial salvation extending all the way to our complete salvation when Christ returns. He says, “These are the truths I taught you and that we all said ‘amen’ to – we all agreed to these foundational truths.” His main point is that if you believe my message, you have no reason to doubt my character – my character and my message are consistent, and I would not lie or try to deceive you in any way.”

The way that Paul dealt with his misunderstanding with the Corinthians is highly instructive for us – both when we are misunderstood and when we are the ones who misunderstand others. Let's start with when you are the one who is misunderstood. There are four things you should do...

Number one, **accept that misunderstandings are normal in a fallen world**. Don't expect that everyone will understand exactly what you say or do all the time. Remember that every person has a unique way of thinking and processing information, and it is often very different than yours. It's a bit arrogant to think that everyone will understand what I'm saying, that everyone will know my thoughts and motives. This is why communication is so important.

Number two, **check your conscience**. When you're accused of something, ask: Have I done anything wrong? Is there a blind-spot I'm not aware of? Do I need to bounce this off another trusted person who can be objective? Make sure you do some soul-searching before you respond.

Number three, **if you are in the wrong, be humble enough to admit it, say you're sorry and seek reconciliation**. If you have broken someone's trust, realize it takes time to restore. With God's help, do all you can to restore that trust.

Number four, if you've searched your conscience and your conscience is clear, then **deal with the accusation in a straightforward manner**. Don't be defensive, don't lash out, just state your case and leave how people respond in God's hands. Sometimes, regardless of how well you state your case, people will not change their mind. Be patient, show them goodwill, and sometimes they will come around.

Believe it or not, we are sometimes the ones who misunderstand others. In this case, there are four important things to remember...

Number one, **be careful about making assumptions**. The Corinthians were making judgments about Paul without knowing all the facts. Proverbs talks about waiting to hear both sides of the story. You hear one side, and immediately jump to conclusions. But when you hear the other side – like Paul gave in this passage – new facts come to light – facts you didn't know before. Don't read between the lines. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Delay making judgements until you hear both sides.

Number two, **don't look for ulterior or hidden motives in others**. One thing we can never judge is a person's motives – only God knows what's in a person's heart. For that matter, we're not entirely sure of our own motives. It's always best to only evaluate someone's actions and behavior, and leave it at that.

Number three, **avoid idle chatter about people behind their back**. Being hundreds of miles away across the sea, Paul did not have a chance to defend himself against the accusations made against him. As the book of James says, the tongue is like a fire that can quickly rage out of control. When there's a misunderstanding, the Bible exhorts us to go straight to that person and not engage in gossip and rumors.

Number four, **as Christians remember that we are family** – we are all saved and sealed with the Spirit of God – and we should do everything in our power to understand our family members, to listen carefully, to hit the ball back over the net and work through the process of communication.

And when we lovingly seek mutual understanding, God is glorified and unity is fostered in Jesus' name.