

SERIES: Power through Weakness
 SERMON: **When Your Integrity Is Impugned**
 SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 1:12-2:4
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 DATE: September 18, 2005

Introduction: One of the most painful experiences we can endure is to have our integrity attacked, especially when we have gone out of our way to do what is right. Has that happened to you lately? It has to me; I guess it just comes with the territory when you're a church leader. But I have plenty of friends in the corporate world and education who face the same thing regularly. Even the Apostle Paul endured such attacks from those who should have been loyal friends and supporters.

In our opening message in this new series on the book of Second Corinthians, we mentioned that this is a very personal and emotional letter in which Paul is struggling to defend himself against the persistent attacks of antagonistic leaders of the church in Corinth. Paul had planted the church while on his second missionary journey. He had spent 18 months there evangelizing and then discipling the new converts, but when he left to continue his church-planting mission elsewhere, new leaders came into positions of influence in the church.

Perhaps these leaders were insecure, or maybe they heard Paul's name being praised once too often and got jealous, but for whatever reason they soon began to undermine his credibility and put him down whenever possible. I don't think Paul would have reacted to some of this pettiness except that he knew well that when a messenger's integrity is suspect, his message also becomes suspect. And because the message of the Gospel was at stake, he went to considerable lengths to defend his integrity.

In our Scripture text for today we discover the first of many specific attacks on Paul. This one seems to be over a relatively trivial matter—Paul changed his travel plans. That is, didn't keep his promise to make a return visit to the church at Corinth when he said he would. Doesn't sound like a huge deal, does it? But it became a huge deal as his opponents extrapolated from it that Paul was the kind of person who can't be trusted because he speaks out of both sides of his mouth. I want us to read this passage, but I'm going to read it from *The Message*, because I think Eugene Peterson does a masterful job with what is a very difficult text. I'll preach from the NIV, but I want us to read from *The Message*. In the previous passage he has just mentioned his personal suffering for the first time; he continues . . .

Now that the worst is over, we're pleased we can report that we've come out of this with conscience and faith intact, and can face the world—and even more importantly, face you with our heads held high. But it wasn't by any fancy footwork on our part. It was God who kept us focused on him, uncompromised. Don't try to read between the lines or look for hidden meanings in this letter. We're writing plain, unembellished truth, hoping that you'll now see the whole picture as well as you've seen some of the details. We want you to be as proud of us as we are of you when we stand together before our Master Jesus.

Confident of your welcome, I had originally planned two great visits with you—coming by on my way to Macedonia province, and then again on my return trip. Then we could have had a bon-voyage party as you sent me off to Judea. That was the plan.

Are you now going to accuse me of being flip with my promises because it didn't work out? Do you think I talk out of both sides of my mouth—a glib yes one moment, a

glib no the next? Well, you're wrong. I try to be as true to my word as God is to his. Our word to you wasn't a careless yes canceled by an indifferent no. How could it be? When Silas and Timothy and I proclaimed the Son of God among you, did you pick up on any yes-and-no, on-again, off-again waffling? Wasn't it a clean, strong Yes?

Whatever God has promised gets stamped with the Yes of Jesus. In him, this is what we preach and pray, the great Amen, God's Yes and our Yes together, gloriously evident. God affirms us, making us a sure thing in Christ, putting his Yes within us. By his Spirit he has stamped us with his eternal pledge—a sure beginning of what he is destined to complete.

Now, are you ready for the real reason I didn't visit you in Corinth? As God is my witness, the only reason I didn't come was to spare you pain. I was being considerate of you, not indifferent, not manipulative.

We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours.

That's why I decided not to make another visit that could only be painful to both of us. If by merely showing up I would put you in an embarrassingly painful position, how would you then be free to cheer and refresh me?

That was my reason for writing a letter instead of coming—so I wouldn't have to spend a miserable time disappointing the very friends I had looked forward to cheering me up. I was convinced at the time I wrote it that what was best for me was also best for you. As it turned out, there was pain enough just in writing that letter, more tears than ink on the parchment. But I didn't write it to cause pain; I wrote it so you would know how much I care—oh, more than care—love you!

Now I want to begin with a rather obvious fact that we may tend to overlook:

Our integrity cannot be damaged unless we have it in the first place. (12-14)

If someone calls you a fool because you did something stupid, they're not challenging your integrity—they're telling the truth. I want to ask two questions here and hope that each of us will take personal inventory:

Do we have a clear conscience before the world and the church? (12) Paul did. He opens by saying, "I can state this confidently: My conscience is clear that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God." That's a pretty bold statement to make, but Paul doesn't hesitate—his conduct had been without reproach both within the church and out in the world. Some Christians have a fine reputation among their brothers and sisters in the church, but they are much more careless in their relationships with those out in the business world. In fact, I have known some situations in which an unchurched person was describing a member of my congregation (without knowing I was their pastor), and I couldn't even recognize the person.

Instead of the kind, reasonable, generous person I knew, he was describing a greedy, hard-

driving person anxious to get ahead no matter what the cost. I readily acknowledge that the person who was talking to me may have misjudged the church member, or maybe I have, but either way it's a problem. Young people, I would ask you, does your reputation at youth group match the one you have at school? How about the college students? Young executives, is your character the same at work as at church? Paul had a clear conscience in respect to the world *and* the church.

Furthermore, the standards Paul measures himself by are not worldly standards, like success, popularity, good looks—rather they are God's standards of holiness and sincerity. If we want to measure ourselves by the ethics of the world, we may come out smelling pretty good. But what about when we are measured by the holiness of God? Peter urges us, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15). I think a lot of people have given up on that verse because of the translation in the KJV and several other versions: "Be holy *as* I am holy." We know instinctively we cannot measure up fully to God's holiness, but we can strive to be holy *because* our God is holy.

Sincerity is another standard Paul uses. It means "without hypocrisy." I recently shared with our Sunday at Six Bible study that the English word "sincerity" comes from two Latin words, *cine cere*, meaning "without wax." Ancient potters sometimes discovered that a bowl was cracked after being fired. The honest potter would throw the bowl away and start over, but the dishonest one would fill the crack with wax and paint over it. It looked just like new, at least until one put hot soup in it. Honest potters would advertise their wares as *cine cere*, "without wax." That's how our lives should be—what you see is what you get. That's what Paul claimed for himself.

Still further, Paul's claim was not that he measured up to godly standards of holiness and sincerity because he tried harder or knew more than the next person. On the contrary, he says at the end of verse 12: "We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace." Even the ability to meet God's standards is ultimately a result of His grace in our lives. You can read all the ethics books in the world but it won't make you an ethical person; it takes the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. It takes divine power.

The second question I want us to ask ourselves is this:

Are we clear and transparent in our speech? (13, 14) In verses 13 and 14 Paul makes another claim—that when he communicated with the Corinthian believers, it was always clear and understandable. "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand." Some religious books are very erudite and seemingly profound, but when you get through reading them, you are tempted to say, "Huh?" I once had a professor who never used a simple word if he could find a difficult one to take its place.

Perhaps you have heard preachers who can't get through a sermon without sprinkling in a half dozen Greek or Hebrew words. "The original Greek word here is such-and-such which means so-and-so." Or, "The tense of the Greek verb here is an aorist passive subjunctive." So what? Just tell the people what the Word says, don't try to impress them with your knowledge of the

original languages! Frankly, I think the ultimate result of such a habit is that the audience begins to say to themselves, “I can’t really study the Bible unless I’ve been to seminary,” and that’s tragic, and poppycock besides! Now sure, there are occasions when knowing a Greek word is significant and can add insight.

Paul says in effect, “I’ve put the cookies on the lower shelf for you. My words are simple and my meaning is plain. You don’t have to be a scholar to know what *I’m* telling you.” And why is this his goal?—so that they will trust him and love him the way he trusts and loves them. “And I hope that, (verse 14) as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Trust is a two-way street. Unfortunately, some roadblocks have been set up by these disloyal teachers that are interfering with their trust and love of Paul.

So far we have discussed what should be obvious—that one’s integrity cannot be damaged unless he has integrity to begin with. Paul had it. Yet even if we have integrity, we are not immune to being falsely accused. Paul was. How and why does this happen so often? What is the source of so much conflict in relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ?

Attacks most often come from the misreading of motives and actions. (15-17)

In verses 15-17 Paul reveals the issue that his antagonists have seized upon—the fact that he changed his travel plans. He says in effect, “I had planned to visit you first on my last trip to Macedonia because that would allow me to visit you twice—one going and again coming.” Macedonia is the name for the territory that comprised the upper half of Greece. Paul had churches there he needed to visit—like Philippi and Thessalonica. By going through Corinth on the way to Macedonia, he could visit the church at Corinth first, and then on his way back he could visit them again before continuing his trip to Jerusalem. This was a wonderful plan, but it didn’t happen. However, the reason Paul didn’t carry through with these plans was not because he was fickle or two-faced or a liar—rather it was because other needs and priorities arose.

I can’t help but think of our President at this point. President Bush has been relentlessly attacked by his enemies for going into Iraq. There are legitimate differences of opinion on that topic, and I will keep mine to myself. But what troubles me are the constant allegations from certain quarters that he lied to the American people about the weapons of mass destruction. Apparently the President was wrong about these weapons, but to accuse him of purposely lying about them in order to justify going to war stretches credulity to the maximum. The CIA was apparently wrong in its analysis, as were the intelligence services of Britain and Russia, but to say the President lied is a far cry from saying he based his decision on faulty intelligence. But that’s where political discourse in the United States has devolved.

Paul’s detractors also made false assumptions about his motives in changing his travel plans. They assumed his motives were sinister. A friend of mine in St. Louis introduced me to a term that you won’t find in any dictionary, but it ought to be there: assumicide. People commit assumicide all the time. Let me define it for you by telling you what it does.

Assumicide leads to the death of relationships through the assumption of less-than-honorable motives. We are so prone to be suspicious. When we become offended or hurt, we immediately begin to look for evidence that someone did us wrong. I can't tell you how many times I have done that in my marriage or in my parenting. But I can tell you how many times it's been done to *me*; I keep track of those things. I'm being a bit facetious, but not much. It's really amazing to me how often I am quick to assume that someone has it in for me. Let me ask us a question:

Question: How many times have we purposely hurt someone else? If the answer is "never" or "almost never," then why do we so readily assume that someone else is purposely trying to hurt us? I believe there are very few people who actually set out to intentionally hurt other people. Oh, there are some thoroughly evil people in this world, and there are some mean people. But most of the rotten things that are done are the result of insensitivity, self-absorption, and ignorance. In my marriage counseling over the years I have come to the conclusion that the major defect of most men in marriage is not selfishness or abusiveness; it's cluelessness. Men are naturally pretty clueless about what a woman needs and how to meet those needs.

Well, if it's true that we never, or almost never, set out to hurt other people, why do we immediately assume that someone is doing that to us? It makes no sense. Why don't we first ask, "I wonder what is going on in that person's life that could cause them to behave that way?" Or, "I wonder what I don't know that might explain that decision?" Or, "I wonder how I come across that would generate that sort of reaction?" The fact is we are all sinners who would rather blame than understand. At the same time we desperately seek self-justification and rationalization for our own feelings and actions.

Paul opens his heart to his friends in verse 17 and states specifically that when he made his original travel plans, he didn't do it lightly and he didn't do it in a worldly manner. He protests that is not the kind of person who speaks out of both sides of his mouth, saying "yes" and meaning "no."

And that brings us to Paul's defense of his actions. There is so much we can learn from him here. There are times, of course, when we should not defend ourselves. One of the principles of Christian reconciliation is that minor offences should just be abandoned. Proverbs 19:11 reads, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." Proverbs 17:14 adds, "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out." And the NT agrees: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

So we need to be aware that at times we should not defend ourselves. But if accusations are affecting our message or our ability to carry out God's call on our lives, then we may need to make a defense. If it comes to that, here is a model of how to do it.

An effective defense appeals to:

Faithfulness (18). In verse 18 he appeals to the very character of God as faithful, and claims that he imitates God in his own ministry. “But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not ‘yes’ and ‘no’.” What keeps Paul from being two-faced is that God is not two-faced and he wants to be like God.

Reliability (19, 20). Verses 19 and 20 are difficult, but let me do my best to explain what Paul is getting at. He refers to his preaching (as well as that of his partners Silas and Timothy) and claims that it was absolutely reliable. I quote Peterson again: “When Silas and Timothy and I proclaimed the Son of God among you, did you pick up on any yes-and-no, on-again, off-again waffling? Wasn’t it a clean strong Yes?” How ridiculous to trust Paul’s Gospel message but not trust him on mundane things like travel plans!

Authenticity (validation by God) (21, 22). Nothing is more important for a servant of God than authenticity. There are a great many pseudo-preachers and pseudo-teachers in the church today. They are preaching themselves and their own ideas. They are gathering huge followings but taking them nowhere good. But Paul claims validation by God Himself, and that same validation is available to his listeners. Verse 21: “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.” I think his basic point is that the accusations against him do not stand up when one takes into consideration the fact that Paul is God’s man doing God’s work in God’s way and in God’s time.

Furthermore, the phrase “with you” and the fourfold repetition of “us” indicates Paul’s confidence that the Corinthian believers also experience these same divine validations, as do all believers. Therefore, they shouldn’t be treating one another as enemies. Let’s look at the elements of this validation one at a time:

1. God makes us stand firm. This is a reference to the saving grace that puts believers into union with Christ and with each other. Because they are fellow members of the Body of Christ, when these leaders of the Corinthian church attack Paul’s authenticity, they are ripping apart the fabric of the unity of the church.

2. He anoints us. To anoint someone is to commission them for service. Paul was commissioned to serve, but so were the saints in the church there. If they’re all anointed by the same Father, they ought to be working together, not at cross-purposes.

3. He sets His seal of ownership on us. God sets his people apart and identifies them as His own true and eternal possession, whom He will protect. Again the first person pronoun is plural—“us.” If we all belong to him then we also belong to one another. I’ve often wondered how difficult it’s going to be for some Christians to adjust to heaven when they find all kinds of people there for whom they had nothing but contempt here.

4. He puts His Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is given to us at salvation. He is the down payment or guarantee of our eternal inheritance, the first installment of future glory. And the Spirit is given to all believers.

How foolish it is, in light of these glorious truths, for the leaders of the church at Corinth to question Paul's legitimacy as an apostle just because of a minor change in his travel plans!

Sensitivity (23-2:1). In verse 23 Paul finally gets around to explaining what really happened with his travel plans. "I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth." In other words, "I changed my plans for *your* sakes, because of my sensitivity to your situation." He didn't want to make another painful visit (his last visit to Corinth had been just that!), but that is exactly what he would have had to do if he had come when planned. He would have had to rebuke the congregation and confront them, and he would much rather wait until his visit could be a joyful one.

The last thing he wants is to be seen as a dictator over them. Verse 24: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm," not by Paul's presence or approval. Again Peterson grasps the point so well: "We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours."

Common sense (2:2-3). Common sense is not often something we find the Scriptures appealing to, maybe because it is so *uncommon*. But it seems to me that is what Paul is doing in verses 2 and 3. "For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?" In other words, if a visit at this time would require him to be stern and to come down hard on them, why would he want to do that if by waiting he might find that things improved? Paul is a normal person with normal feelings, he likes to be happy, and he likes to have fun and good fellowship with his friends. If that's going to be impossible at this time, doesn't it make sense to wait for a better time?

Ultimately, however, the most basic reason why Paul changed his travel plans is out of . . .

Love (4). "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." He wrote, rather than visited at this time because sometimes a letter is a better way to express love than a confrontation. But it also takes real love, not sentimentalism. Nothing is more painful than confronting sin in someone you love. But it's necessary at times. Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

Now are these qualities we see in Paul ones that we see in our own hearts when our integrity is under attack? Or do we find instead anger, vengeance, self-pity, insecurity, rationalization, manipulation, insensitivity, hate? I have to admit that my own reactions to having my integrity impugned are often closer to the latter.

Conclusion: I want you to think this morning about the last time your integrity was challenged.

Maybe it's happening right now at work, or at home, or at school. If the challenge is legitimate, then the proper response is to admit it, make confession, and ask for forgiveness. If the challenge to your integrity is not legitimate, ask yourself if it's really that important. My wife frequently has great advice for me: "Let it go." I tend to have a heightened sense of unfairness, and I'm a good arguer (I was a defense attorney in a previous life). She, on the other hand, would rather be wronged than to confront. There are times when each of these tendencies is a strength and other times when each is a weakness. But her tendency is generally more Christ-like.

However, if the challenge to your integrity is not something that can be dismissed, if it's affecting your ability to serve God, or if it's damaging other people, then it may be necessary to defend yourself. If so, first go through Paul's list and see how you measure up in respect to: faithfulness, reliability, authenticity, sensitivity, common sense, and most of all, love. "Love," another passage tells us, "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). It also resolves a multitude of conflicts.

God wants peace in His church. Instead of believers committing assuicide, He would like to see us giving one another the benefit of the doubt instead of impugning one another's integrity.