

**Maintaining Integrity during COVID-19**  
**2 Corinthians 1:12–2:4**

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We have now completed 2 months of COVID 19 lockdown. So congratulations for making it this far. We have faced many new challenges – isolation; quarantine; face masks; distancing; job changes; routine changes and many more. One interesting development I have heard about concerns adult children and their senior parents. I have heard from several seniors that their kids have grounded them. Their kids have told them they are not allowed to go out. So to all you grounded seniors, congratulations on serving your time. I hope that your kids will allow you out when it's okay to do so.

The pandemic presents many challenges. Another is found in the area of integrity. Do you know that word integrity? It includes honesty, truth and incorruptibility. One dictionary defines it as “Firm adherence to a code of especially moral or ethical values.” The word is related to integrate. It describes a healthy group or organism or person where the different parts come together for a common purpose. So when someone has integrity, it means all the parts of the life come together for a common good purpose. There's not division or divergence between their outer actions and inner motivations. Their speech, thoughts and actions align. This time presents us with many temptations to compromise our integrity. In somewhat desperate times, we can justify not following the code or the law. We've seen concerns raised by schools about cheating in online education. The government faces questions of fraud in applications to their aid programs. We all face the daily challenge of how much we will or won't abide by government restrictions.

How can we maintain or reestablish integrity through these challenging times and beyond? This question comes to us from the next passage in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians that we come to. The letter's author, the apostle Paul, addresses questions raised about his integrity. They stem from his decision to change his plans and not come and visit the Corinthians when he promised to. In First Corinthians 16:5-6 he wrote, “I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go.”

But he had gone to Macedonia and did not come back to visit them. On top of that, he made an unexpected sorrowful visit to Corinth at some point, which increased the tension between them. In our passage today, we will see several references to some of the accusations made against him. “He's insincere. His written letters contradict his verbal messages. He changes his mind in an instant and doesn't keep his word. He doesn't tell the truth or at least the whole truth.”

Paul cannot let this go. A crack in one's integrity that is not dealt with can end up shattering a person, a ministry, a business or organization. As he writes his defense against these accusations, we will learn 2 key components of establishing, maintaining or regaining integrity in the eyes of others. I hope this will encourage us in areas where we are striving for integrity. I pray this will open our eyes to any areas where we have slipped in our integrity or let down our guard. Most importantly, I pray we will see our need for God's help but also His readiness and power to help us.

So please find 2 Corinthians 1:12 in your Bibles and we will be reading to chapter 2, verse 4.

<sup>12</sup>For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. <sup>13</sup>For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— <sup>14</sup>just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

<sup>15</sup>Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. <sup>16</sup>I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. <sup>17</sup>Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? <sup>18</sup>As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. <sup>19</sup>For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. <sup>20</sup>For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. <sup>21</sup>And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, <sup>22</sup>and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

<sup>23</sup>But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. <sup>24</sup>Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

**2** For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup> For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? <sup>3</sup> And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. <sup>4</sup> For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Now if you had some trouble following that, don't despair. In fact, I would say this is one of the hardest passages I have ever worked on to understand and figure out what he's saying. But let's not allow the difficulty of this passage to keep us from discovering its treasures. Just because something is hard does not mean we should avoid doing it. Persevering at hard things can lead to some of the greatest outcomes. Our best example of that is Jesus going to cross.

So let's try to understanding this. Paul defends his integrity through these verses. Verses 12-14 of chapter 1 are very important for this letter. In fact, some think these verses contain the thesis or main point of the whole letter. So let's start in verse 12 which is really important. "So our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience,

that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely toward you.”

“So our boast is this.” Well you and I don’t like boasting. In our culture, boasting means an obnoxious self-promotion of one’s person or accomplishments. But that’s not what Paul is doing here. In that time, there was good and bad boasting. Bad boasting was the kind we don’t like. Good boasting involved a genuine confidence based upon what God has done and enabled one to do. So he’s saying “here’s our confidence” or “here’s why we have confidence in what we’re doing.”

But then he adds another qualifier before he answers why he can boast – “the testimony of our conscience.” So he not only has reason for confidence. He has listened to his conscience. He didn’t just go ahead and do whatever he felt like ignoring his conscience. Though our conscience is not perfect, it can be a helpful guide to check on something we’re thinking about doing. Through this, he’s laying a foundation to demonstrate how carefully he and his ministry team consider their actions.

Then the next phrase gives the reason for his boasting. “For we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity.” So he claims he and his team acted first with simplicity. Some of your Bible translations say “holiness” in this context. That’s because the Greek words for holiness and simplicity are very close in Greek. At some point it seems the translation went in these different directions. Both possibilities have some strong support. But it seems that simplicity makes the most sense in this context. He argues that he behaved in a straightforward or simple way. He did not act in a way that would cause questions or confusion. His conduct was straightforward.

But notice it was also done with godly sincerity. So this was not just ordinary human sincerity. This sincerity or honesty came from God. Remember the criteria for good boasting in the first part of the verse. Boasting was good if it pointed to God and His action. So he and his team had reason to boast in God’s empowering them to act with straightforwardness and godly sincerity. Remember the charge against him? “Paul doesn’t keep his word. He says one thing in person and another in his letters.” Paul says “No. We acted with a simplicity and godly sincerity towards the world and especially or supremely towards you.

He doesn’t stop there. This straightforwardness and godly sincerity did not come from earthly wisdom. Instead it came by the grace of God. Paul had a spiritual and supernatural empowering from God to behave with this straightforward and sincere approach.

Here we find the first answer to our question. **How can we maintain integrity through COVID 19 and beyond? Through living by God's grace.** When we live by God's grace, it greatly increases the likelihood of us living with integrity. We are sinful. We naturally resist integrity. We naturally want to satisfy our selves no matter the cost or impact on others. So to live straightforward and sincere lives we need God's grace. **So we need to pray and ask for God's grace to live with such integrity.** On my own, I can't produce godly sincerity. I need God to do that in me.

Imagine your life is like driving your car. You fill up your car with gas. You can drive around on the tank of gas for a while. But you cannot keep driving around when that gas is used up. You have keep filling up your car to keep going. So imagine car gas is like God's grace. Now if you're a Christian, you came to Christ on account of God's initial grace to you. "For it is by grace that you have been saved." But we need God's ongoing grace to grow in our Christian lives. We need fresh ongoing grace each day to live a life of integrity. We can't drive our cars on gas that we purchased a year ago. We need new gas. We need a regular filling up of God's ongoing grace in our lives. Otherwise, we will revert to our old ways.

Paul learned to live, minister and speak by the grace of God. 1 Corinthians 15:10 – But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Romans 12:3 – For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned." We need God's grace to minister with integrity, work hard with integrity, speak with integrity and to have a right view of ourselves with integrity. 2 Cor. 12:9 – My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness. With God's grace empowering us, we have a stronger case to make for our integrity.

So Paul starts in verse 12 to lay a strong foundation to his claim of integrity. Then he goes on in verses 13 and 14 to address further concern. In 13 he defends his letter writing. He reassures them that they don't have to wonder if he's writing cryptically or not forthrightly. He claims to write like he lives in a straightforward way. Yet notice, he admits there has been misunderstanding. At the end of the 13 he writes "I hope you will fully understand just as you did partially understand." So some things have to be cleared up. He goes on to do that in the next section.

Starting in verse 15 he directly addresses the question about his change in travel plans. He did intend to come to them. He restates the original plan in verse 16. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia (which is northern Greece) and they lived in southern Greece. So he wanted to visit Corinth, go up to Macedonia and then come back to Corinth. But before explaining why he changed his plans, he answers another accusation in verse 17. “Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Did I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, Yes and No, No” at the same time?” It sounds like he’s addressing an accusation like “Paul vacillates – Paul is a wishy washy character.”

So he answers this charge in verse 18. “As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no.” He again appeals to God as the basis of his integrity. Then he goes on this seeming side bar or tangent about Jesus. He talks about how Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God. Verse 20 – For the all promises of God find their Yes in Jesus.” Verse 21 – “And God establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us and who has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” Now when I first read this, this seemed to be overkill. Why is Paul appealing to God’s faithfulness to His Word in Jesus to back up Paul’s change in travel plans?

Yet to Paul, a perceived lack of integrity in his planning could lead to questioning the integrity of his message – the Gospel. If that got compromised or doubted in some way, this could have very serious consequences for the Corinthians. So Paul felt he must appeal to God’s faithfulness as the basis for his ministry.

In doing this, we find another piece of maintaining our own integrity. Not only do we live by God’s grace. **We must ground our character in God’s faithfulness.** We’ll talk about how we do that in a moment. But with God’s faithfulness taking center stage, all the talk about Jesus and the Holy Spirit in verses 19-22 make more sense. They are all examples of the faithfulness of God. God showed Himself faithful through Jesus coming because all the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus. God shows His faithfulness to His Word by sealing us with the Spirit as a guarantee that we are His children. What do guarantees do? They increase confidence in the person’s word.

So how do we practically ground our character in God’s faithfulness? Well when we keep the faithfulness of God in sight, it will help us say no to compromising our integrity. So say you are tempted to apply for a government funding but you know you don’t qualify. You are making 200\$ more a month than is allowed. So you are tempted to lie about how much you actually bring in so you can get that government money because you

need money for food and such. But then you remember the faithfulness of God who promises to provide you with food and clothing to live. Matthew 6:31-32 – “Therefore, do not be anxious saying, ‘what shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ for the Gentiles seek after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” Then you remember the faithfulness of God to His word. You shut down your computer because instead of trusting yourself to a lie and the government money, you trust God’s faithfulness. In that trust, you have maintained your integrity. Building our lives on our own solutions with no trust in God’s faithfulness weakens our integrity. Grounding our lives on God’s faithfulness strengthens our integrity. So just as we need to fill up on God’s ongoing grace, we need regular reminders of God’s faithfulness. Then we continue to base our lives there.

Paul argues that since he has grounded his life on the incredibly faithful God, his own integrity stands on solid ground. Through verses 12-22, He has made the case of a life dependent and founded on God. So finally in he answers the question. Paul – why did you change your plans and not come back to Corinth? Verse 23 - But I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.” Spare them from what? Chapter 2, verse 1. “For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.” Last week we learned that 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians could actually be Paul’s fourth letter to them. In between 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians Paul made a sorrowful visit and then wrote a sorrowful letter because of the trouble in the church. He had to rebuke and correct. It did not go well. It was painful for them and him. It seems Paul sensed that if he returned to Corinth according to his original plan, it would be like rubbing salt in an open spiritual sore. More damage and pain might happen. So he did not visit out of love and concern for them. But he has started the process of clarifying and getting back to close fellowship with the Corinthians. He will continue this process through the rest of this letter.

For today, to keep or maintain our integrity, we need to ask God for his grace to live with integrity. We need to keep reminding one another of God’s faithfulness. Many of you have lived like this. God honors your quiet integrity though no one else may notice. So well done and keep at it. If God has brought to mind some area where we lack integrity, let’s confess that to God. Then by His grace, make things right and begin to rebuild integrity in that area.

If you have never lived in dependence on God’s grace for integrity, I want you to know that it’s possible to start living like that today. For us to be in such a relationship with God, He sent His Son to die. It is by God’s

grace in the first place that we could even be saved and in a relationship with God. He decided that He would not require of us our own deaths if we would put our faith in the one who died for us – Jesus. That was a gracious act of God. He did not have to do that nor did He owe us that. He graciously offers us that gift. If you receive it today, He will show you grace by immediately forgiving you, adopting you into His family and then filling your life with His grace. So if you would like to receive Christ, you can do so now as we pray.

### **Prayer to receive Christ**

Lord God, I recognize you as completely faithful.

I thank you for sending Jesus to atone for my lapses in integrity.

I put my trust upon You Jesus, and Your work on the cross.

I receive you into my life as Savior and Lord. We all need you continuing grace to live with integrity.