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Where There Are People There Will Be Messes

II Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

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When I graduated from seminary I was very naïve. I thought I would plug into a church somewhere and rally the troops and we'd all love Jesus and change the world! But there were some things they forgot to tell me in seminary. The first church I signed up as the youth pastor and educational director. Probably it wasn't more than thirty days and I remember coming home for lunch and saying to Patti, "We are in the middle of a mess." For the next eighteen months I watched this church unravel and many times, through the course of those eighteen months, I found myself thinking, "They didn't mention this in seminary; I didn't take this class." But what I've learned over the last twenty-five years is that ministry is messy—just is. You can be in the most wonderful church—I can't imagine a more wonderful place to be than this place. It has the most wonderful people I've ever known yet there are still messes—lots of messes. As a matter of fact, wherever there are people, there are going to be messes; it's just the way it is.

Many of us this morning could tell our own story of times when, with the best of motives, the best of intentions, we got involved in a situation that turned into a mess and out of that we got wounded; we got unfairly treated, maybe falsely accused. It's easy coming out of an experience like that and say, "I'll never do that again." But we must! To use last week's language, if you're going to be a Traveller and not a Balconeer, you just have to accept the fact that sometimes that means it gets really messy. Broken people reaching a broken world means a mess.

Paul found himself in the middle of a mess with the Corinthians and out of his experience I think we can learn some things that will be helpful to us as we kind of process through the messes of life. If you have a Bible, turn to II Corinthians, Chapter one. If you weren't here last week we started our study through II Corinthians. Last year we went all the way through I Corinthians. We're calling the series *Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards*. This morning we're talking more about the *cost* and there is a significant cost.

The Corinthian church was pretty messed up. There were false teachers; the church was characterized by a spiritual arrogance and there was quite a bit of tension between Paul and at least some members of the church. Apparently the false teachers were seeking to discredit Paul in order to discredit Paul's message. They apparently had accused him of being spiritually arrogant. You know it's interesting over the years, that's kind of a pattern I've found often to be true. If somebody is spiritually arrogant, they accuse you of being arrogant. If someone is controlling, they accuse you of being controlling. If somebody wants all the power, they accuse you of wanting all the power. That's just kind of a pattern that seems to hold true and certainly happened to Paul. They said, "No, you're arrogant." So he's responding to that starting in verse 12:

> **For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.** (*NASB, II Corinthians 1:12)

Paul starts this discussion by examining himself, by examining his own conscience. And he says, "If there's one thing we're proud of—since they're accusing them of being arrogant—it's that when we were with you we operated with honesty and integrity." The word there translated *holiness*—there's some debate about this Greek word, but probably the better translation is *honesty*. He was saying that when he was with them, he conducted himself in an honest manner with godly sincerity. The word *sincerity* is a Greek word that means *singleness of mind*. In other words if you're sincere, you're single-minded; if you're not—if you're a hypocrite—you're double-minded. We would probably say in our world today—playing politics. You're kind of speaking out of both sides of your mouth. "*But,*" Paul says, "*Hey we didn't do that. When we were with you we were honest. We were very sincere with you."*

He says, "We didn't operate according to **...fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God."** Now this is critical to understand because this is the difference. Fleshly wisdom is that which is all about self—which flows out of a performance-based value system. The contrast to that is a grace-based value system that sets us free to genuinely think of others as more important than ourselves. We talked about this a lot when we went through I Corinthians—that if you get your sense of value, if you get your sense of significance on the basis of your performance, then for you life could be defined as *competition* and *comparison*. So when you find yourself in the middle of a mess, it starts to push your buttons. Your insecurities start to flare; you find yourself becoming defensive and, at that point, it's just all about *me, me, me*. The alternative is a grace-based system where you understand that your sense of significance, your sense of value comes from being rightly related to God through Jesus Christ. Then, even in the middle of a mess, there's nothing you can do to get to *my* value. That's off limits to you; it's protected. Therefore I can keep my insecurities in check. Therefore I don't have to get defensive and I am actually set free to think of others as more important than myself. Paul says, "*That's how we conducted ourselves when we were with you."*

Verse 13:

> **For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.** (Vs.13-14)

Apparently Paul's critics were saying, "You have to read between the lines; there's a hidden agenda that Paul's trying to press." So Paul writes back and says, *"Hey wait a minute; there's nothing between the lines; there's no hidden agenda. What I write and you understand; that's what it is."* But then he goes on to say something very interesting. He says, *"I really hope that you'll understand as we once did understand and that we can pull together and you can be as proud of us as we are of you when we stand before Jesus."* Paul was remembering the days when the Corinthians trusted him and he trusted them and he's longing for better days again.

That whole idea of being proud of one another: Can't we understand and celebrate together that even though we were all a big mess—that God, on the basis of His grace, has radically changed us? And can't you be proud of me and I'll be proud of you when we stand before Jesus one day? For whatever reason there always seems to be this thread in Christianity of negativity—this sense in which part of our role is to pick at each other, to judge one another, to criticize one another. And it seems like we have this ability to defend it under the umbrella of: "That's being faithful." Maybe it's not being faithful; maybe it's being used by the enemy to cause a division within The Body.

How different it would be if Christians, by and large, instead of being kind of negative and critical and picky, celebrated one another—actually *cheerleaded* one another, actually felt deep in their hearts, "Hey, I'm for you! You know you were really messed up; so was I; but God's in the process of changing us and making us and when we stand before God the promise is we'll be a masterpiece of His grace and I'll be proud of you and you'll be proud of me—because of what Jesus has done."

There's no question that this world can be pretty hard—more days than not it kind of beats the *stuffins* out of us. But what if there was one place that you could go where you always knew people would be for you. People would cheerlead you; people would celebrate you. There would always be this sense that, even if you messed up, these people love me, are for me and we're in this together. That would be a remarkable place! As a matter of fact, if that was true, you couldn't keep people away because that's what everybody wants; that's what everybody's longing for. Paul goes on in verse 15 and talks about the specific accusation.

> **In this confidence I intended at first to come to you, so that you might twice receive a blessing; that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea.** (Vs.15-16)

So this was the plan: Paul would come from Ephesus, make his way through Corinth and on up to Macedonia. When he finished at Macedonia, he would come back through Corinth and back to Ephesus. So his plan was that he would get to see them twice—a double blessing. But something came up and that didn't work out so now they have become quite critical of him because of that.

Verse 17:

> **Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time?**

Paul obviously had to make a change in plans; he'll tell us in a little bit why that was. Basically he went from Ephesus through Corinth to Macedonia but on the way back he skipped Corinth and went back to Ephesus. And so his critics are saying, "*You know this guy is vacillating; this guy is fickle; this guy can't make up his mind—he's like Brett Favre; he can't decide."* (Laughter) You have to understand that accusation up against the backdrop of the Roman culture. The Romans had very strong feelings about people that vacillated; they had no tolerance for people that were fickle. If you were a leader, you better make a plan and you better stick to the plan. And if for some reason that plan ever changed, you had better have a very good reason why or you would be discredited as a leader. So it's against that backdrop that the Corinthians are saying, "*Hey what's with this guy? He's fickle, can't make up his mind; you can't trust him. And by the way, if you can't trust him about something as simple as just coming to see us, how can we trust anything he says? Maybe the whole message isn't true."* They were seeking to discredit Paul so they could discredit the message.

Paul responds to that:

> **But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.**

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. (Vs. 18-22)

Paul's response to the critics is very interesting and very relevant to our day. In essence, what they were trying to say is, because we have some issues with the messenger, we're thinking maybe the message isn't true. Paul responds to that by saying, "*Oh, wait a minute here! The message stands alone; it's true."* Whether you have a problem with the messenger or not, the message is true because it's true. God is faithful; God doesn't speak out of both sides of His mouth. God doesn't say yes and no at the same time. He reminds them that Jesus was God's "Yes". God had promised for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years that He would send a Savior—that Jesus was the complete fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus was God's "Yes"!

Now this is a big question that people have in our culture today. There are all these different religions, all these different churches. And people say, "You know they all say something different. How are we supposed to know what's true?" Some people say, "You know I've met a *good* Muslim—so that must be true and I've met a *bad* Christian—so that must not be true and I've met a *good* Hindu..." and we kind of go down that path. So it's got to be true! But the fact of the matter is you can find good and bad people in any of these religions; it's a wash. So now where do we go?

Every single world religion that's out there—every single one of them—you can track them back to some sort of a prophet or some sort of a holy person that had some sort of a revelation that now defines the belief system. You can't prove it; you can't validate it; you just take a wild leap of faith and believe it or not—except one. There's only one that is rooted in historical fact. There's only one that can be investigated; it can be validated; it can be proven or disproven—and that's Christianity.

Paul reminded the Corinthians of that in his first letter in chapter 15. The message of the Gospel is rooted in historical fact—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. If you remember when Paul wrote the first letter he said that Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to many witnesses—to over 500 at one time—and if you don't believe me, you can go ask them because they're still alive. II Corinthians is written AD 55-*ish*, so what? ...twenty to twenty-five years from the historical fact of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus? These people were contemporaries with the event itself. Paul encourages them, "*If it isn't true, then go investigate for yourself."* Trying to put forth the idea of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus to the Corinthians would be like me telling you today that Ronald Regan was never President. The time frame would be the same. There'd be an overwhelming majority of people here that would say, "That's not true; he was President because I was alive when he was President." The birth of the church—a matter of days after the resurrection of Jesus—happened in the very same town where the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus took place. How could that message possibly be believable in the very place where it happened unless it was true? Within a matter of just a few months tens of thousands of people in Jerusalem radically changed their thinking and believed in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. How is that possible unless the facts were true?

The Old Testament is a masterful historical document. It's filled with historical information that includes one promise or prophecy after another concerning the promise of a Messiah—of a Savior. It was closed before the First Century and there was widespread belief that this was a very accurate reflection of the history of the Hebrew people, which included these many, many prophecies. When Jesus came on the scene, Jesus fulfilled every single one of them perfectly. That's what Paul is saying here. Jesus was God's "Yes" —a perfect fit; this is The One! Now what are the chances of

that? Some might say, "Jesus was doing that on purpose," but many of these prophecies He had no control over. For example: where He was born, the fact that Herod killed the babies, the fact that there was a census taken. He couldn't control any of those things. Most people estimated—it depends how you factor this—that roughly sixty major Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of a Savior, Jesus fulfilled every single one of them perfectly. What are the options here? Well it was a coincidence. Well let's talk about that.

Over the years mathematicians have tried to factor the possibility of that. One mathematician took just 8 of the 60 prophecies, ran it through a mathematical formula, concluded the odds that Jesus fulfilled just eight of these by chance is 1 to 10^{17} —seventeen zeros after the ten. Now if you want to get a sense of that, if you took 10^{17th} worth of silver dollars and you dropped them on the state of Texas, border to border, North to South, East to West, it would cover the entire state two feet deep. And then you take one of those and you put a red "X" on it and drop it anywhere in the state. Then we're going to put a blindfold on you; we're going to take you in a helicopter over the entire state of Texas and, wherever you choose, they'll drop you. And you reach into the pile and you pull out the one with the "X" on it. That's the odds of 1 to 10^{17}. That's just for 8 prophecies! He factored 48 prophecies and came up with 1 to 10^{157}. I can't even illustrate that![1]

To believe that Jesus did not fulfill these prophesies is a remarkable leap of faith because the historical facts speak for themselves. Now sometimes when we talk about Jesus, we talk about the Gospels and people in our culture will say, "Well that's just the Bible." And I say, "Whoa, whoa, what do you mean by that?" Do you understand that the Gospels are historical documents? And do you understand that they're more reliable than any other documentation we have from the Ancient World by an overwhelming margin? I think the question we need to ask our critics is, "What is the basis by which you dismiss the Gospels as accurate history because the evidence is overwhelmingly on our side?"

This semester at the University of Nebraska history professors will teach about Nero, the Roman Empire, Alexander the Great, Socrates, Plato and well they should. They'll do a fine job and they believe that the historical records they have are accurate. But we must understand the reliability of the documentation they use is vastly inferior to the overwhelming manuscript evidence for the reliability of the Gospels. If we throw out the Gospels, everything has to go. So we have good reason to believe the historical facts of the Gospel. Just because you've had a bad experience with the messenger doesn't mean you should throw out the message; it stands alone as true.

But Paul goes on and says, "Not only that but we—the Corinthians and Paul and his team—we said, 'Amen!'" The word means, *"So be it".* We said, "Hey we agree. The evidence is overwhelming; we believe!" And a result of that, God has saved us; He's called us—that's what anointed means—He's sealed us. In the Ancient World they'd take wax and drip it and then put like a ring signature in it. That was a seal; it was a guarantee—"You belong to me". The imagery is that God has put a seal in our hearts. He said that you belong to Me and God has given us the Spirit as a pledge—we would say a down payment. He has guaranteed our salvation.

Paul is saying that this message is true; it stands alone and we said, "Amen, I believe it!" And as a result of that God has radically changed our lives. He saved us; He called us; He sealed us; He guaranteed us! Those are two of the strongest defenses for the message of Christianity: the historical facts of the Gospel and the truth of radically changed lives.

[1] Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speak.* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979).

It's easy for people in our culture to dismiss the message because they've had a bad experience with the messenger. Let's think about some of those. As a matter of fact let's just write them down here: Sometimes people say:

"All Christians are hypocrites."
"Good, okay, I'll make a note of that: all Christians are hypocrites. What else?"
"Well, the reason I don't go to church is all they ever talk about is money."
"Oh, good, I'll put that down: all they ever talk about is money; that's terrible! What else?"
"Well I think every preacher I've ever known is kind of a conceited, arrogant windbag— a televangelist."
"Oh, yeah, preachers—they're a troublesome bunch— (Laughter) write that down: windbags, televangelists! Okay, good, got the list."

How does that in any way change the historical facts of the message? It is a tremendous mistake to throw out the message because you've had a bad experience with the messenger. Some of you here this morning, you've been wounded by churches; you've been wounded by Christians; you've been wounded by preachers and Christian leaders. And the tendency is to throw out the message because you had a bad experience with the messenger. And Paul said, "*Whoa, wait a minute; the message stands alone; God is faithful. The message is true regardless."* He finally ends this text by talking about why he didn't go back.

But I call God as witness to my soul...
(That's really strong language. "God kill me if this isn't true" is in essence what it says.)
that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. Nor that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm. But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you. (Vs. 23-2:4)

Paul says the reason I didn't come back is because the first time I came, it was a disaster. We all went away wounded and he believed that if he stopped by again, it would only be worse; it would throw gas on the fire. He felt it was best at this time not to stop back again. He talks about, apparently, his critics are saying he's lording it over them; he's a spiritual bully. You remember in I Corinthians there was a situation where Paul said, "Hey you need to deal with it and, if you don't, then I'll deal with it when I get there." And apparently he did; we'll talk about that more next week. And his critics were saying, "You know Paul's a spiritual bully; he's pushing people around; he's a control freak." Paul says, "Well wait a minute; I wasn't lording it over anybody but the only way for you to have joy is if you deal with the cancer, so I was trying to do the right thing." Whether you're a leader in the marketplace, whether you're a leader in the church, whether you're a leader in your home, sometimes we have to deal with difficult stuff and often when we do, people don't treat us fairly. They don't rightly represent what happened. That's just sometimes the consequences of messy situations. That's what happed to Paul.

He went on to say the reason I didn't come is because it would have been just too painful for you and too painful for me; it just going to make it worse. He says, "*You're the very people that should*

make me happy. But instead there's just this tension; there's this sorrow; we just keep fighting." So he skipped going back to Corinth and just went directly to Ephesus. And there he wrote them a very tearful, a very emotional letter. Paul wrote them many letters that we don't have, but apparently he reminded them that he doesn't want this. He doesn't want to fight with them; he doesn't want this kind of relationship; he wants them to love one another. But he felt like he needed to give it some time to cool off or it was just going to make matters worse. I think part of what Paul reminds us—helps us within this section—is that there are times when we are in the middle of a mess, the best thing we can do, at least temporarily, is walk away, just let it cool off, let it settle down. Sometimes the more we try to fix it, the worse it gets. And we just keep pushing and pressing and it's just getting worse and worse and sometimes we just have to back away, take some time to pray and trust that God will give us a better day to bring us back together. Sometimes I think we can get so hung up on the *letter* of the law, we forget the *spirit* of the law. It is true that we're supposed to admonish one another and confront one another, but the spirit of the law is in order that there might be repentance, in order that there might be reconciliation. If you have a sense that this is just making it worse, what's the point of continuing to press that? Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is just back off, give it some time and prayerfully ask God to change the temperature in order that, at a future time, there might be true repentance and reconciliation.

Paul's in the middle of a mess, just like we find ourselves in the middle of a mess. We as the church go out—this isn't just a message for Pastors or Christian leaders—as the church we go out into the marketplace; as the church we go out into our neighborhoods; as the church we go out into the schools. Wherever there are people there are going to be messes—you just have to accept that. So what do we do? Well the place to start is: we examine ourselves. We need to start by looking in the mirror, making sure that we're operating according to honesty, according to sincerity. We're not playing a game; we're not playing politics; we're not working both sides. There's no hidden agenda—that we are actually, by and large, celebrating one another. We're for one another. This isn't about me and my ego; this is genuinely thinking that somebody else is more important than myself and the only way to do that is to operate according to grace and not according to a performance-based system.

There are probably many of us this morning—as you listen to this message—there's someone you have in your mind, you're saying, "I'm wishing *so and so* could hear this." Let's not go there; let's start with *you*. Let's make sure you're not the problem before we move on to somebody else. It's very easy to be self deceived in this area. I know Christians who, everywhere they go, everything they plug into, there's conflict! There's just always conflict, always picking at things, always some issue and somehow they always justify that they're being faithful and it's somebody else's fault. They go from church to church to church. At some point you've got to look in the mirror and say, "Hey maybe it's your fault and maybe there's something you need to deal with." So we start with ourselves and make sure that we're operating with integrity. We have to understand that there are times when the temperature gets so hot, things get to a point that the best thing to do is just back off; give it a little time; let it cool down. Prayerfully ask God to give us another day when we could experience true repentance and reconciliation. Sometimes that's the most spiritual thing you can do.

Some of you here this morning have been deeply wounded by church, by another Christian, by a pastor and, as a result of that, your tendency is to reject the message because you've been wounded by a messenger. No matter what a messenger has done to you, it doesn't make the message untrue. One day you're going to stand before God and give an account for the message which can be investigated; it can be determined to be true. *Each one Reach one.* Is there a cost? Absolutely!

Sometimes it gets really messy; you've just got to accept that. That's part of the cost. But the reward is a life changed forever. It seems to me that reward does make it worth the cost.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that when we were all messed up, you sent Jesus to die for us. Lord, I pray that we would seek to be faithful Travellers representing You in this world. Lord, where there are people, there are going to be messes. Lord, I pray that we would examine ourselves and make sure that we're operating with integrity and honesty and sincerity. Lord, that we would really be for one another, that we would celebrate one another, we would cheerlead one another—that there would really be a genuine sense that we really are for one another. Lord, I pray that you would give us the spiritual wisdom to know when it is best just to back off, to let the temperature drop, to pray for another day when relationships can be reconciled. Lord, finally, I know there are people here today that— along the way —they've been deeply hurt, wounded by messengers of the Gospel. It's made it hard for them to sort out what's true and what's not true. Lord, I pray today for them, that you would bring healing to their wounds and that you would give them eyes to see and a heart to believe the truth of the Gospel: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus our Savior in whose Name we pray. Amen.

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Where There Are People There Will Be Messes

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards
A Study in II Corinthians
II Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Opening Discussion

1. Wherever there are people there will be messes. Why is this?

2. Share a time when you got involved in a situation and sincerely tried to do the right thing and were unfairly criticized. How did that affect you? Did that experience make you want to help again or to stay out of it next time?

3. Do you struggle sometimes to separate out that which is true or untrue from the messes of the people involved? In other words, does the behavior of people sometimes make it difficult to see clearly what is true or untrue?

Bible Study

1. Read I Corinthians 4:9-13 to refresh your memory of the cost to Paul to bring the Gospel to places like Corinth. How could anyone who has paid that price to serve God be so falsely accused and unfairly treated?

2. Read II Corinthians 1:12-14. Paul begins his response to the accusations of the Corinthians by examining his own heart. What do we learn from this? What sometimes prevents us from seeing our own behavior accurately? What can we do about this?

3. Read II Corinthians 1:15-22. The Corinthians, probably led by the false teachers, were accusing Paul of vacillating in his plans, so therefore he could not be trusted. If he can't be trusted then his message can't be trusted. How does Paul defend his message?

4. Have there been times when you've been wounded or disillusioned by a church, church leader or Christian to the extent that it made it hard for you to embrace the truth that church or leader promoted? Is this a problem in our culture today? Does the behavior of the messenger affect people's willingness to believe the message?

5. Read II Corinthians 1:23-2:4. What was Paul's explanation for why he chose not to return to Corinth? What do we learn from this? When is it best to just walk away for now to avoid even more conflict? Can you think of examples of times when you should've walked away or let something go but with good intentions you actually just made the situation worse?

Application

1. In messy circumstances most people find a way to convince themselves that they are right and the others are wrong. How do we genuinely examine ourselves to make sure we are responding with honesty and sincerity?

2. What do we learn from Paul in this text that can help us when we are genuinely trying to do the right thing and are treated unfairly in return? List 3 things.

3. What can you do to avoid being like the Corinthians in this text? How can you make sure you're not the one responding unfairly to someone trying to help you?

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