

March 7, 2021

LIVING IN LIGHT OF THE NATURE AND WORK OF GOD

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

(2 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

Before going to be with the Lord a few years ago, R. C. Sproul had a consistent answer to the question, “What is the essence of the Christian life?” He would speak about living *coram Deo*, which is a Latin phrase meaning, “before God” or “before the face of God.” Sproul wrote, “*Coram Deo* captures the essence of the Christian life. . . . To live *coram Deo* is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God. . . . To live all of life *coram Deo* is to live a life of integrity. . . . The big idea is that all of life is religious.”¹ In Sproul’s mind, it should be unfathomable for the believer to think, say, or do anything without regard to the reality that we do all things in the presence of God, under his authority, and to his glory. We can never think of our devotion to the Lord as merely one compartment of life. And if you wanted to know what a life lived like that looks like, you can get a good picture of it by looking at Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:12-22.

After his introductory section, in which he considered God’s purposes in our suffering and comfort, Paul uses the next section of the letter to fend off a particular accusation that some of his opponents were making against him. You see, it seems that Paul had planned to visit the Corinthians twice as he traveled to and from Macedonia. He makes reference to this in verse 16, saying, “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.” Apparently, however, that didn’t happen. And the reason it didn’t happen is because that first visit was painful. Paul will note in the next section that he “refrained from coming again” to “spare” them (1:23), making up his mind after that first visit “not to make another painful visit” (2:1) to them. But instead of seeing Paul’s gentleness and mercy in his change of plans, Paul’s opponents used this as an opportunity to pounce with criticism. Their claim was that Paul doesn’t speak truthfully. He says “yes” when he knows he has no intention of doing what he says. He just says what he thinks people want to hear and isn’t sincere or trustworthy when he speaks. And if anyone were to ask, “Why would you say that?” Paul’s opponents would answer, “Just look at what he told you he would do (visit twice) and what he actually did (visit once). He is not honest and trustworthy.” Therefore, Paul utilizes the verses we’re looking at this morning as his response to that accusation.

Now, my guess is that this description doesn’t necessarily draw you in. You probably weren’t thinking amidst your struggles yesterday, “If only I knew how Paul defended himself after he changed his travel plans then I feel like all of life would go so much better.” No doubt my description of this text could leave you wondering why this text is beneficial to us. However, as I noted at the start, when we read of Paul’s defense, he provides for us a picture of what it looks like to live all of one’s life before, under the authority of, and to the glory of God. That is, as we

¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-coram-deo-mean/>. Accessed on March 2, 2021.

see Paul's defense, my guess is that each of us will find ourselves challenged by Paul's example, convicted by his claims, and driven to want our lives to look more like the picture provided for us here by the apostle. What then does Paul give us in his defense? Let me note four things. First, Paul acts in godly sincerity.

Paul acts in godly sincerity

Paul starts out saying, "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" (v. 12). We noted as we began this book two weeks ago that Paul's opponents—these so-called "super-apostles"—had attempted to sideline Paul by noting his weakness apparent in his sufferings. Therefore, Paul had spoken of the glorious ways God works through our suffering in 1:1-11. But this attack is different. To say that Paul says one thing and means another is an assassination of his character. And so Paul's defense in our text is very personal for him. And so right off the bat Paul affirms that he can boast that his conscience is clear. No matter what others may judge of him, he knows that he had acted sincerely, truthfully, and according to the grace of God. And that's no small affirmation on Paul's part. He would later write to Timothy, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim 1:5). In other words, if you were to ask Paul, "What do you want believers to look like? What should characterize them?" It seems he would answer, "I want them to pursue love, being driven by a heart that is pure, a faith that is genuine, and a good conscience," and my guess is that even if we could have anticipated Paul noting love as the chief goal, and purity of heart and genuine faith as the foundation of that love, not many of us would have used the description of a "good conscience" as what should certainly characterize a believer. Yet there it is, and here it is in our text.

Paul went to bed at night knowing that he behaved with godly sincerity in all that he did, with a clear conscience. It doesn't mean he couldn't make mistakes or be wrong. Obviously he'd thought at one point that visiting the Corinthians twice would be ideal, told them that, but then later changed his mind. But nothing about what he said was insincere or dishonest. Nothing was done that would taint his conscience.

And so let me briefly—before moving on to the next note—ask us if this characterizes us. Can we say of ourselves that we act in godly sincerity? Do we say things to make us look better than we are or speak only those things we think others want to hear? May we strive each day to conclude with a clear conscience, knowing—like Paul—that we acted in godly sincerity and grace. But we also see another element with Paul that requires some deeper engagement: Paul lives in hope of mutual boasting.

Paul lives in hope of mutual boasting

I know that when I say this, what I mean isn't obviously clear, but I hope it will be after we think through Paul's words a bit more. First, he notes that he is not changing his message. He writes in verse 13, "For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand

and I hope you will fully understand—just as you did partially understand us.” Paul isn’t changing messages or truths or strategies. He’s been about the same thing the whole time he’s interacted with them. Anything he’s written contains a consistent theme. He wants them to understand that faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is the only means of salvation, and he wants them to live their lives in loving obedience to him and with love for one another. He’s fleshed that out in a number of specific ways, but Paul is never really saying anything at any moment that doesn’t fit under that description. So, you may charge him with not having enough variety if you want—he is singularly focused on Christ and his glory—but you can’t charge him with being fickle, hypocritical, or untruthful. Paul thought they basically understood that in all his interactions with him. But there’s one thing that they apparently didn’t understand fully. The truth they haven’t fully grasped is, as Paul says, “that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you” (v. 14).

Now, what does Paul mean here? I think if we think through it for a second, it’ll make sense. God called Paul to himself on the Damascus road and made him the apostle to the Gentiles. Then, in his love for the Corinthians, God sent Paul to the Corinthians. If all goes well, the Corinthians will receive Paul, see him as one of the richest gifts they could be given, listen to what he says, and on the day of judgment boast of the rich gift they were given in the apostle Paul. Likewise, if the Corinthians allow Paul to teach them and lead them and be shaped by his teaching, then on the day of judgment, if the Lord asks Paul to give an account for what he’s done as an apostle, he’ll be able to point to the Corinthians and say, “Look at this glorious people in whom I invested.” In other words, they’ll boast of him, and he’ll boast of them. That’s what the Corinthians should understand, and yet they’re risking the loss of all of this as they’re tempted to dismiss Paul and sideline his voice in their lives. That’s why Paul is holding up this vision of what they should understand—that each of them should aim to boast of the other on the day of judgment.

But there’s something else interesting here. If you read through this letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes clear that he’s making it a regular habit of boasting of them *now*. Consider the following examples:

“For whatever boasts I made to [Titus] about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true” (7:14).

“So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men” (8:24).

“For I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year” (9:2).

And Paul hopes the Corinthians will act the same way, so he writes in 5:12, “We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.”

Now, as much as we see Paul in his letters instructing us to live now in light of what is coming at the resurrection, it shouldn't be surprising to us to see Paul noting that if we'll boast of each other on the day of judgment, then we should seek to do that now. But I don't want us to skip past this without pausing to recognize how powerful this is. Let's think of it with regard to us as a church. As members of this local church, we have covenanted together to walk with one another as we head toward eternity. The imagery I often use in the new members' class is that we're a group of people linking arms together as we walk toward the celestial city. If one falls, we seek to lift him up. If another wanders off, we seek to run after her. In other words, I want to hold up the picture that we're responsible for one another. We receive members noting that they are needed gifts from Christ to us for our holiness, for it is only when each joint with which the body is supplied is working properly that the whole is built up in love (Eph 4:16). And if that's true, then it is reasonable for us to assume that on the day of judgment we will boast of one another, won't we? We'll thank God for the good gifts he's given us in our brothers and sisters who loved us, prayed for us, taught us, corrected us, encouraged us, and on and on. And if that's true, then shouldn't we follow Paul's model and make it our aim to boast of one another now? And if we make that our aim, then can you see how powerful of a weapon that is? It's hard to gossip about someone in whom you're seeking to boast. It's easy to see reason to love and invest in someone about whom you are seeking to boast. Let's follow Paul's example here and become a church body that makes it our aim to boast in each other—those whom Christ has graciously united us with for our growth and holiness.

Now, after noting his godly sincerity and holding up the glorious vision of boasting in one another, Paul dives right back into defending his character, and in verses 15-20 we see that Paul roots his integrity in God's faithfulness.

Paul roots his integrity in God's faithfulness

In verses 15-17, Paul reveals to the Corinthians that he knows exactly what's been said about him to discredit him—that he isn't trustworthy, saying one thing and meaning another. Therefore, Paul brings up the issue in these verses, writing, "Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 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. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes,' and 'No, no' at the same time?"

Now, of course we anticipate him answering this, "No," but we might not anticipate the strength with which he declares that this isn't the case. He writes in verse 18, "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No." Do we see what Paul is saying here? He's putting his trustworthiness—his integrity—on the level of God's faithfulness. *As surely as God is faithful, so I am trustworthy*, he is saying. This doesn't mean Paul can't later change his mind—as he did, judging something else to be better after the fact—but his heart is always sincere, and he means what he says, just as God is faithful.

But perhaps you and I are a bit taken back, not at understanding Paul's claim to be trustworthy, but his seeming audacity in elevating his sincere and trustworthy words to the level of God's faithfulness. So let's explore this for a bit. First, we shouldn't be taken back by it if we've read Paul's other letters. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul writes, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Paul isn't shy in saying that his aim is to picture Christ in his life, and if Christ is faithful, then Paul too will be faithful. Second, Paul has brought to the Corinthians the most important message in the world. He writes in verses 19-20, "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. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through them that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."

Paul and the others have preached to them—even as they were commissioned to do so by God—that Jesus Christ has come to live, die, and be raised so that sinners might be justified and have eternal life through faith in him. Jesus is God's "Yes" to sinners. All of God's promises find their "Yes" in him. Does God really forgive us? Can we really become children of God? Does the Spirit really come to dwell within us? Do we really have one who loves us and deals gently with us in our weakness? Jesus comes as God's "Yes" to all these and more. Every promise that God has made finds its "Yes" in him. Jesus is God's "Yes" in telling us that we can come to him and find forgiveness, mercy, love, and rest for our souls. And Paul is saying that if the faithful God has sent him to preach that glorious message, which he has faithfully delivered to the Corinthians so that their entire lives—both now and in eternally are utterly altered for the better—do we really think he'd not be truthful when talking to them about his travel plans?

Paul's whole life is wrapped up in obeying his God and declaring the glorious truth of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is no exaggeration for Paul to say that he seeks to be as full of integrity as God is faithful. And so must we. Part of living our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God, and to the glory of God means that we seek to imitate God's righteous character in our own lives. As God is faithful, so we should be trustworthy, people of integrity.

And finally, Paul anchors his security in the work of the Triune God.

Paul anchors his security in the work of the Triune God

As you read the last words of this section, it almost feels like Paul can't contain himself. Having rooted his own integrity in the faithfulness of God, he's caused himself to reflect on God's redeeming work, and he can't resist saying more and more about this topic. He's noted that God has made promises that he has affirmed in the sending of his Son. As we've noted, Jesus is the "Yes" to all of God's promises. But in this last verse, he notes that God's utter faithfulness has led to our security in him. He writes, "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (v. 21).

This verse reflects the security that Paul (and any one of us who trusts in Christ) has in the Lord. Paul notes that God has established himself and the Corinthians (and us) in Christ. Our union

with Christ by faith means that all that is true of Christ is true of us as well. In him we're deemed righteous. And he has anointed us, which carries the idea of consecrating us or setting us apart as his own. Similarly, he put his seal on us, Paul tells us. In Revelation 7 the Lord is about to bring suffering on the earth, but he first has the angel go forth and put his seal on believers so that no matter what they suffer, they won't face the wrath of God but will be preserved. So it is with us. And, finally, God has put his Spirit in our hearts to guarantee that we are his.

So, let's put this all together, if your faith is in Christ alone for your salvation, then your Father has united you with Christ so that what is true of him is true of you. He's set you apart in this world as his own special child. He's put his seal on you, marking you off so that as his judgment is poured out you will not face his wrath. And he's put his Spirit in you so that you are guaranteed life. That is the work of our faithful God, and it's why we can have security.

So when the Corinthians accuse Paul of not being a man of integrity, not only does he note that he lives in godly sincerity, but plumbs the depths of the foundation on which his sincerity rests. He is sincere because he aims to boast of the Corinthians on the day of judgment. He is truthful because he aims to imitate the faithfulness of God, and the reason God's faithfulness is so important to him is because it anchors the glorious gift of assurance we have in Christ.

What does it mean to live our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God, and to the glory of God? It means that we walk in godly sincerity with a clear conscience, that we seek to boast of those with whom the Lord has bound us, that we aim to imitate God's faithfulness in how we speak and live, and that we live all of our lives in the restful security we have because of the work of our Triune God. May we give him thanks and ask for his grace as we now come to the table. Amen.