

Transformation in Others

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:5

Do you ever wish you could change something about someone? All of us have situations where we see things in other people's lives that need to change. Things that might lead to problems in their life or cause problems for the people around them. It's things that don't align with God's Word and the character and behavior that honors him. It's things that might directly affect us and our relationship with them. We see the need for transformation in other people, and we're concerned about them and want change to happen, but what are we supposed to do?

What are you supposed to do when you see a Christian friend doing something you know is sinful? What about an unbeliever that you work with that needs to repent and turn to Christ for salvation? What should you do when you see something in your spouse that's having a negative effect on you or other people? Or what about bad habits or behavior patterns you see in your kids? What are you supposed to do?

Our natural responses will probably lead us in one of two directions – kind of like fight or flight. I've seen some people who seem really comfortable with confrontation and they just kind of jump right in and push for change. (Picture) They push their spouse or their kids or their friends. They put on their Holy Spirit uniform and go to work. And they might get someone to change their behavior for a little while, but it usually isn't deep and doesn't last. And they often just push people away. I've also seen people who won't do anything. (Picture) They'll just keep quiet because it's too uncomfortable to bring up the subject. And they just mind their own business or maybe pray for the person, but they never step in. Should we just mind our own business? Should we be bold and push for change?

We are going to see an interesting excerpt from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and see what he did in one of these situations. What he did, I think flows out of his understanding of God's role and our role when it comes to transformation in others. And I think it's important for us to have that same basis of understanding so we know what we're supposed to do when we come to those situations.

Paul was an Apostle – kind of like a missionary, only with more authority. He planted churches and those churches were full of people who needed to change. No one who became a Christian was spiritually mature overnight. They all had to go through a process of growth and transformation that took many years. That means their churches needed to go through the same process. So there were times when Paul saw things in churches that really concerned him – things that needed to change.

Today we're going to see that in the church of Corinth and we're going to see how Paul responded and it will help us know how to respond when we're aware of the need for transformation in others.

Now there are a whole bunch of things going on behind the scenes that I brought up a couple weeks ago and one of those things that provides the context for what we'll be studying today, is that Paul was being criticized by some of his opponents in Corinth for not following through on his plan to visit them earlier before he went to do ministry in Macedonia. His opponents were using his change of plans to try to discredit him, and what we're going to read today is Paul's answer to this criticism. This is how he begins...

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-14.

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. ¹³ For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— ¹⁴ 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.

Honestly this sounds really confusing. But after spending time in it I could see that what Paul is doing is telling them about a principle that was foundational in his ministry because he's going to use this principle to explain why he originally planned to visit them again, even though those plans changed. It's important for us to understand this principle because it explains why Paul did what he did in ministry and especially when it came to seeking transformation in other people.

He writes that he and his team purposely behaved with simplicity and godly sincerity in their ministry. They didn't behave by earthly wisdom or manipulative methods to spread the gospel but by the grace of God. In other words, they kept it simple and straightforward, and relied on the grace of God to transform people, not their own persuasive abilities. That was their boast (vs. 12). And he says they especially paid attention to this when they were in Corinth because in Corinth people liked to glorify gifted speakers and Paul didn't want them to do that. He says in verse 13 that he was keeping things simple and understandable so that on the day of Christ they would boast of him as he would boast of them, which ironically meant they wouldn't boast of him at all, but only in the grace and power of God they experienced through his ministry.

Paul knew that Christ was everything. He was just the messenger, but all glory belonged to Jesus, all attention should be on the grace of God. It was the grace of God that changed people and that's why he and his team did what they did. They were conduits of God's grace. And that's why Paul was originally planning to visit them again and we see that as we get to verse 15...

Read 2 Corinthians 1:15-16.

Because I was sure of this, (that they would boast in God's grace shown to them through Paul's ministry) I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶I 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.

So that's what his original plan was – to go to them first and then go through Macedonia. He wanted them to experience God's grace again through his ministry, like they did the first time he was there. Then he would go through Macedonia to encourage those churches before returning to them again, a third time, so they could send him off on his way to Judea.

That was his plan, but that's not what he ended up doing, because as we saw a couple weeks ago, he found out some alarming news about them that prompted him to make an emergency trip to them which didn't go well and resulted in him going back to Ephesus and sending them a severe letter and then making a loop through Macedonia before getting back to them. Basically,

his plans changed because of the circumstances, and he didn't end up doing what he originally planned on and said he would do, and it appears that some of his opponents were using that to try to discredit him – to say: “He says one thing and then doesn't follow through and can't be trusted.”

So this is Paul's explanation for why his plans changed, and it continues in the next several verses...

Read 2 Corinthians 1:17-24.

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? ¹⁸ As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

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

So first he denies the accusations his opponents were making about him. They were apparently saying: “Paul doesn't know what he's doing. He goes back and forth. He's obviously not being led by the Spirit but making plans according to the flesh.” Paul denies that and argues that the one who chose them, anointed them, and put his Spirit in them is always truthful, always faithful, and always fulfills his promises. So being led by the flesh is not why his plans changed.

Rather, Paul says in vs. 23, they changed because he wanted to spare them from immediate rebuke and discipline which would have happened if he went right back to them. He had just made an emergency visit that didn't go well and if he went right back to them like he originally intended to do, before going to Macedonia, he would have had to bring rebuke and discipline. So he wrote them a letter instead. He was sparing them – showing mercy, and giving them time to receive his letter and for the grace of God to work in their hearts and

bring about repentance while he went up to Macedonia first. We see this more clearly at the beginning of chapter 2.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-4.

For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ²For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³And 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. ⁴For 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.

So that explains the letter he sent and why he sent it rather than visiting them right away. He wanted the Holy Spirit to work through the letter to bring about repentance so by the time he visited them again, they would bring him joy. He didn't want to just jump right in as the disciplinary Apostle and cause them pain.

This is a unique passage that we've looked at because it's so specific and personal, but it allows us to see what Paul believed about transformation in people's lives and how that affected the way he did ministry. Paul believed that transformation happened because of the grace and power of God. It was the work of the Holy Spirit that brought about faith and repentance and transformation. It wasn't manipulation, coercion, or persuasion by a dynamic preacher, pushy evangelist, or scary Apostle. Yeah, that could bring about change on the surface, but not the kind of change Paul was looking for which was deep, spiritual change in the heart that would endure.

So when Paul went into a city to preach the gospel, he used simplicity and sincerity. He wrote in 1 Cor. 2:1-5: *"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."* In 2 Cor. 4:2 he writes: *"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to*

practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

And as we saw in our passage today, when Paul saw a problem in a church that needed to be corrected, he didn't pounce on them with immediate rebuke and discipline to try to force something to happen. In this case he spoke the truth in the letter that he sent them and gave room for the grace of God to work and the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and repentance. It was neither fight nor flight; it was faith in God and an understanding of how God uses us to bring about transformation in people's lives.

We are conduits of God's grace. We are not to take on the role of the Holy Spirit, nor are we to put up our hands and do nothing. We can speak the truth with simplicity and godly sincerity. We can pray earnestly. And then we need to give room for the Holy Spirit to work and for God's grace to bring about transformation before going back and checking in again.

Do you have a child who needs to change their behavior? Do you have a spouse you're concerned about, or a Christian friend who's veering off the path in some way? I hope Paul's words and example will bring clarity in what your role is and where to put your trust for that change to occur.