



Second Corinthians chapter 1, starting in verse 12:

2Co 1:12 NIV Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.

2Co 1:13 For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that,

2Co 1:14 as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

2Co 1:15 Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice.

2Co 1:16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.

2Co 1:17 Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?

2Co 1:18 But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No."

2Co 1:19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us -- by me and Silas and Timothy -- was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes."

2Co 1:20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

2Co 1:21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,

2Co 1:22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2Co 1:23 I call God as my witness -- and I stake my life on it -- that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.

2Co 1:24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

2Co 2:1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.

2Co 2:2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?

2Co 2:3 I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4
How Should We
Conduct Ourselves?

2Co 2:4 For 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.

This morning, we're going to start at the end of this passage and work our way back. As we have seen already in First Corinthians and in other epistles, Paul cares very deeply for those he ministers to. He loves the Corinthians. This deep love -- that's what he is expressing. It is because he loves them that he instructed them in the way that he did. And it is because he desired their joy, and not grief, that he decided not to visit them twice as he had initially planned.

Remember, we read in First Corinthians -- at the very end of First Corinthians, in chapter 16 -- that he said he would visit them on his way to and on his way back from Macedonia. But when he didn't keep to that itinerary, there were at least some Corinthians who were criticizing him and accusing him of being fickle. Paul says here in verse 23:

2Co 1:23 I call God as my witness -- and I stake my life on it -- that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.

He then appeals to the like precious faith that he shares with the Corinthians when he says: "It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set a seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." He is appealing to that commonality that they have in the Lord -- that's his first recourse in order to address this criticism -- he first appeals to what is common and says, "Look, we are both brought together in Christ. It is God who has brought us together. **It is God, then, who can bring about true repentance and change because the Holy Spirit is at work.**"

Paul's desire was to see the Corinthians standing firm in their faith, versus being judged for their sin.

So he says, "I spared you; I did not come to you because I did not want you to be in grief. But I know that the God who has brought us together in Him, who owns us, is at work in you. My desire is that you would stand firm in the faith."

Now, because God is faithful, and all his promises are fulfilled -- they are 'Yes' in Christ -- Now, because of that, **Paul is able to glorify God by saying, "Amen"** -- "so let it be," "so be it" -- to whatever God ordains. Paul is making clear that he didn't change his mind on a whim. He wasn't saying "Yes" and "No" in the same breath. His desire to not cause them more grief with the second visit, came about because of the grace of God. How do we know that? Because Paul states in verse 12:

2Co 1:12 ... Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.

Because he's relying on God's grace -- because he's not doing things according to his own thinking or the world's wisdom, he made the change of plans. He is motivated by the grace of God to seek the good of the Corinthians. He is led by the grace of God to temper his interactions with them. And so there, he says, "That's why I have done this."

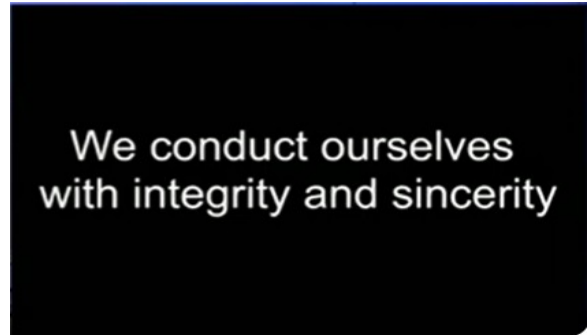
As we desire for our church to be built up -- and for the body of Christ around the world to be built up -- as we desire, and as we labor, for the good of others. As we speak the truth in love to build up, and not tear down, we can pay attention to, and learn from, the way Paul conducted himself. Paul conducted himself with everyone

-- and especially with those who were finding fault with him -- **with integrity, and godly sincerity, that was reliant on the grace of God, and testified to, by a clear conscience.** That's what he says.

So, how should we conduct ourselves?

We must conduct ourselves with integrity and sincerity. Integrity, as the world defines it, is commonly associated with ethics and morality. Biblical integrity, however, is not just about doing the right thing -- not just about behaving ethically or morally. **It's a matter of having the right heart; and living in such a way that the person you are on the inside, matches the person you are on the outside.**

The integrity that the world is seeking and cannot find in all the laws that they would put in place, in all the moral good that they think they can define, in all the ethical practices, and everything else that a company will put in place, and so on -- none of that will get us to true integrity.



It has to be that there is a transformation on the inside so that the behavior that is desired on the outside matches with what's coming from the inside.

Some Bible translations render this word "integrity" as "holiness." And so, right away, you have this difference. This is not just about being true, or being right, or whatever. **The Bible, when it speaks about integrity, is talking about how we would be before the Lord.** It is moral purity; it is the uprightness that we would have before the Lord -- not because of our own goodness, but because of what the Lord has done.

And it is -- Biblical integrity -- has to do with the wholeness that we would have in the Lord. Integrity of the thing -- when we talk about something -- having integrity -- we mean that there's no flaw -- or nothing that would corrupt it. It is pure. It is consecrated. It is holy.

This state of integrated wholeness, or integrity, is possible only if our hearts of stone -- hearts hardened by sin -- Have been replaced with a heart of flesh. A heart that has been cleansed and softened by the blood of Jesus, and is full of the Holy Spirit.

Only that kind of a heart can be having the integrity that the Bible describes. Anything else -- there's the hardness of heart -- **you cannot match what is desired from the outside, with what is not there on the inside.** If there's only hardness of heart, there is no means of being able to live in this way.

In a very similar way, biblical sincerity is similar to biblical integrity, in terms of honesty, and not being hypocritical, and so on. But sincerity is also about being free from double talk, from gossip, from flattery, or from embellishment -- where we would speak too highly of ourselves, or think too highly of ourselves, and boast in a way that would not be right.

The Bible states that **our love must be sincere** -- we saw that in **Romans 12:9**.

The Bible states that **our faith must be sincere** -- we see that in **1 Timothy 1:5**.

The Bible states that **our worship must be sincere** -- and we see that all the way back, right through the Bible, but particularly in **Joshua 24:14**, where he says, "Serve the Lord with sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away all these other gods -- serve the Lord alone."

And so the Bible calls us to be sincere, and to be devoted in that way, giving of ourselves in that way -- to say, "I am true to my word in this regard."

But let me make this point: sincerity, as the world defines it, can be limited to personal intent or desire, but not absolute truth. When we talk about somebody in the world, or when someone speaks about someone else being sincere, they're really referring to their desire -- their intent. They say, "Oh, he's very sincere," but they don't actually mean that that person is being true.

In fact, **we are aware of people who are very sincere but are sincerely wrong.** We're very familiar with that. And the world is familiar with that idea. So, when they speak about somebody else and they say, "Oh, he's a very sincere person," all they mean is that they have some good desire. But they cannot speak to the absolute truth -- that just because of their sincerity, they're actually believing the truth, living the truth, or manifesting the truth. The world can't speak to that. But the Bible, where it says that we are speaking about a sincerity, there is an absolute standard by which outcomes are evaluated.

There's an absolute standard of the Word of God, the person of God, and the truth of God.

So that we would say, when somebody is being sincere -- we're not saying, are they measuring themselves according to themselves? Are they saying, "I think I'm a good person," or are they saying, "I'm sincere in my desire to do this, in my intention, in my caring -- I'm sincerely caring" -- whatever? How are they measuring that? If it's anything other than a measure of the truth of God -- or by the truth of God -- by the standards of God -- they could be sincere but sincerely wrong.

We have an example, actually, even in Acts chapter 18 -- when we were in the book of Acts. We have an example of Apollos, who was sincere in his desire to tell others about God. He was a very knowledgeable person. He was well-learned. He was fervent in his desire. This was not an evil man doing some evil things or coming against the church. **He was sincerely trying to do those things of the Lord. But he had to be corrected by Aquila and Priscilla.** And they brought him in, invited him to their home, it says, and explained the way of God to him more adequately.

Then the Bible says that when he understood, when he grasped the gospel message of Jesus in its fullness, he became even bolder in his outreach. He started to go out and tell the Jewish leaders and everybody else why Jesus was the Messiah. But **there was an opportunity there for him to -- not just be sincere -- but to also be true.** And so similarly, biblical sincerity is based -- by the way, Apollos later on became an aide to Paul. He was a very trusted aide to Paul. He was very effective in reaching the churches and taking the gospel to them. But the point I want to make is this:

Biblical sincerity is based on our seeking, finding, and applying the truth of God in ways that please God.

We're not trying to be sincere so that we can please men. Much of what we do, many times, is that way. "I'm doing something very sincerely." Why? "Because I want you to say, 'Oh, thank you so much.'" And again, I'm not saying don't do things for other people -- do it sincerely. But the point that I want to make to you, is that

biblical sincerity has to do with us seeking, finding, and applying the truth of God, so that God would be pleased in what we do -- even if nobody else knew about it.

Even if no one knew that you have done this act of generosity, this act of kindness, this prayer that you're praying for something -- nobody even knows about it -- but you will do it sincerely, with all that is in you, and allow the Lord to say, "Well done," or the Lord to be pleased in you. **Just as it is for integrity, biblical sincerity is defined by a transformed heart.**

We read in Psalm 51:

Psa 51:16 ESV For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

Psa 51:17 The sacrifices of God (the sincerity that we can express before the Lord,) are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

We would come to the Lord and say, "Lord God, here's my heart, take it. Here's my life, I give it to you." **That's the sincerity that we would give to the Lord,** and say, "Lord, because of that -- your truth coming into me and transforming me allows me to conduct myself in a specific way -- with integrity and sincerity."

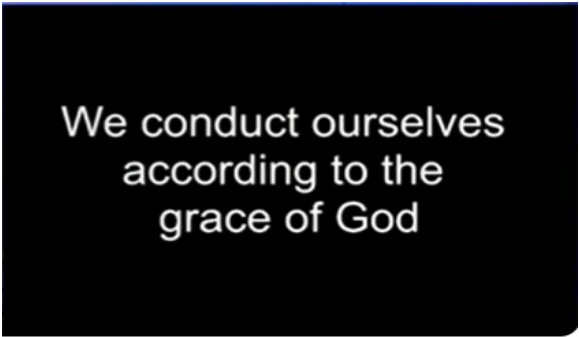
So, how else should we conduct ourselves? Well, we conduct ourselves according to the grace of God.

The mercy of God -- his mercies that are new to us every morning -- means that he withholds our deserved punishment. That's what mercy means. The mercy of God -- the Bible says -- every morning they are new to us! Thank God for that! Because if the mercy of God ran out yesterday, I would not be here today. But because the mercy of God is new to us, his tender mercies are new to us every day, we do not get the punishment we deserve.

In his mercy, God does not mete out that punishment. The grace of God, poured out abundantly for all, is his unmerited favor -- unmerited favor -- which means that in his grace, God is giving us the gift, and the favor, and the blessings that we do not deserve.

- We deserved punishment; **he withholds it.**
- We do not deserve grace; **he gives it abundantly.**
- Isn't that exactly opposite to what the world would do to us?

I mean, every system of law, justice, and punishment -- and every kind of way in which you are rewarded, in whatever context you are -- it's not doing it like that. The system is not saying, "You deserve punishment, but we're not going to give you punishment. You don't deserve blessing, but we'll give you a blessing." The world is not that way. **But God is.** And the grace that God pours out, and the grace that God gives, in that regard, is the grace that Paul is imitating when he says, "Imitate me, as I imitate the Lord." He's imitating the grace of God. He says, "I'm doing these things by the grace of God. I'm making these decisions by the grace of God." Because he knows that the grace of God -- even when God pronounces judgment -- the grace of God, combined with the mercy of God in that union of love for his people, for his children -- **that grace and that mercy is able to cover over the sins of those that repent.**



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You know, the Lord relents, because he desires our joy being restored to him, and not our grief in being separated from him. He's not saying, "You did wrong, I'm going to punish you." His desire is for us to be restored in relation to him, to come back to him -- to live in life with him is greater than His desire to punish -- than the justice of God would deserve -- would demand. He says, "Oh, I love you, and I show you my grace. I pour out my mercy, so that you may come back to me."

Now here's the -- even before I get to this point of application -- I want to pause here for just a few minutes and to just make these points about this:

What does it mean for each one of us? What does it mean for you, individually, to show mercy and grace to somebody else?

Well, it really requires that you would know how to receive mercy and grace from God. **If you don't know how to receive mercy and grace from God, you cannot show mercy and grace to somebody else.**

If you don't know what it means to experience the mercy of God each and every day, you will not be able to show mercy to somebody else. You will deal with people who, in one way or the other, are going to do something to you -- say something -- think about you -- slander you -- do whatever. They're going to do something where you say, "This deserves punishment. This deserves a response from me. This deserves my coming to them and setting them right."

How in the world will you show mercy to someone who actually deserves the full wrath of what you will come to -- what you will bring to bear? They're doing wrong! They're doing wrong. But how will you show mercy to that person? You cannot show mercy to that person if you have not experienced the mercy of God. This morning, again, I want to challenge you:

If you're sitting here and you don't know what the mercy of God means -- Then come to Him. Run to Him. Run to Him and say:

"Lord God, I need to know You. I need to know who You are. Lord Jesus, I need to accept You as the owner of my life so that my faith will be firm -- not because I'm relying on my strength, but my faith will be firm because of who You are. And therefore, because I experience Your mercy, I'm also now in relation with You, in this ongoing, growing relationship with You, experiencing Your grace."

Here's the second part of this:

If you say that you love somebody, if you say you want to show love to somebody, you will be forced to -- **you will be called on -- to show mercy to them.** Somewhere along that relationship, there will come an opportunity where you've got to show mercy. You've got to show mercy. They will do something to hurt you.

But the second part of that is: you also have the opportunity to show grace. And grace is where they are not doing anything that deserves you to be kind to them, to be generous with them, to be loving to them, to be, helping them. They didn't do anything. They didn't even come to you and ask you for help.

But you go out of your way -- you show abundant grace. You reach out to them, and you say, "Let me do this for you." And they go, "Why are you doing this? I don't deserve this. I didn't ask you for it." And it's not that they're hurting you even, but you are doing something above and beyond. **You're going out of your comfort zone to be able to reach out to them and to show grace.**

How will you be able to do that? **Only if you have experienced the grace of God.** Only if you're appropriating the grace of God daily. Only if you're saying,

"Lord God, I thank You for what You have done -- and how You pour out Your grace, and how this abundant, amazing grace -- Oh! -- washes all over me. It cleanses me. It brings me before You, pure and consecrated, holy and right. And it makes me stand before You with strength. Oh, thank you, God, for your grace. Thank you, God, for who you are. Thank you, God, that you lavish your grace on me. "

And again, I tell you this morning,

- **if you don't know what that means,**
- if you have not experienced the grace of God,
- if you're having doubts about it,
- if you have a concern
- "I don't know how to appropriate the grace of God"
- You're not equipped in that regard
- don't wait.
- Find somebody,
- even this morning.
- Come talk to me;
- come talk to others here.
- **But make sure that you're saying:**

"Lord, I understand your mercy and your grace. I receive your mercy and your grace, and because I receive it, I share it with somebody else."

So we conduct ourselves according to the grace of God.

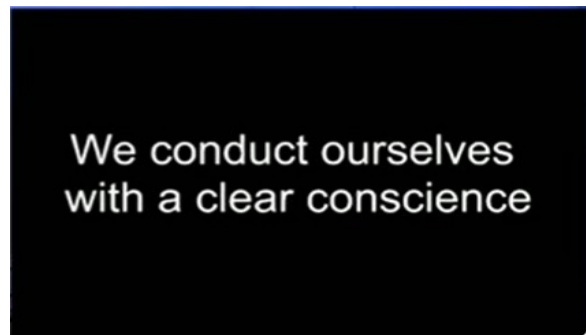
And how else should we conduct ourselves? We conduct ourselves with a clear conscience.

We conduct ourselves with a clear conscience.

Now, last week, as we were going through First Corinthians, I said, **how do we conduct ourselves?**

How do we live our lives?

- We are on our guard;
- we are standing firm in the faith;
- we are courageous;
- we are strong; and
- we do everything in love.



This week, I'm expanding, adding to it, because the Word just keeps adding precept on precept, line on line. It gives us these truths that confound and that gives us greater return on our investment -- compound interest on our investment, right? We conduct ourselves with a clear conscience.

- ◆ When we studied the book of Romans, in **Romans 9:1**, Paul states that **his conscience confirms, it testifies in the Holy Spirit, that he's speaking the truth.**

- ◆ When we studied the book of Acts, in **Acts 24:16**, when standing before Felix, Paul says, **“I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”**
- ◆ In **Acts 23:1** Paul boldly declared to the Sanhedrin, to the Jewish leaders: **“My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.”**

It’s interesting that the Bible tells us that even those who do not know God have a conscience that makes them aware of right and wrong. There is an inherent moral awareness, or moral consciousness, in human beings. But that doesn’t mean that human beings are inherently good, and it doesn’t mean that human beings can live according to their individual moral compass. **That individual, inherent moral compass that the Lord has given to all human beings is meant to get them oriented to God.** It’s meant to point them to the Lord Jesus -- through Him only -- that they can be saved -- through whom only they can be saved. But there is that moral compass in people. It is not complete; it is not sufficient for salvation, but it gets them oriented. They are able to see, they are able to know, when I confront evil in the world -- even though I don’t know God -- I know this is not right, and **it points me to knowing or seeking a God who is true.**

When our consciences prompt self-evaluation and discovery, it leads us -- it can lead us -- to God’s goodness and truth. **When our moral consciousness is then aligned with God’s truth, our consciences bear witness to the integrity and sincerity of our thoughts, our words, and our actions.**

When you’re going around doing anything at all, can you do it with a clear conscience?

- Can you say, “I spoke to my children,
- I dealt with my spouse,
- I dealt with my colleagues at work,
- I dealt with my boss,
- I talked to the stranger on the street,
- I dealt with my neighbor
- -- all of that with a clear conscience”?

How will you do that?

Only if your conscience is aligned with God’s truth,

- is aligned with his standard,
- is aligned in such a way that you say:
 - **“Lord God, in all that is prompting me from within --**
 - to repent,
 - to confess my sins,
 - to turn to you,
 - in all that is prompting me to pay attention to your Holy Spirit that will speak to me --
 - oh Lord God, let me respond.
 - Let me respond.
 - Let me come to you and say,

‘Lord God, I need you. I need you. I need you.’”

You see, when we conduct ourselves in all these ways, we finally respond and apply the Word of God that we have heard by conducting ourselves -- by working with others -- for their joy in the Lord.

Paul says in verse 24,

2Co 1:24 Not that we lord it over your faith, **but we work with you for your joy**, for you stand firm in your faith.

He's coming as an apostle; he's establishing his authority; he's speaking the Word of God. He says, "I'm doing these things; I'll stake my life on it, that I made these decisions as led by the Lord." And he says, "I made these choices because of the grace of God. My conscience is clear."

And after having said all that, he could have said, "So, listen to me. I will work with you for your good -- if you listen to me. I will work with you -- as long as you cooperate with me." But he says, "No. I work with you. I will keep working with you, even if you come against me, even if you criticize me, even if you find fault with me, even if you think that I'm a lesser apostle -- whatever you think and whatever you say, **I will work with you for your joy.**"

We respond and apply by working with others for their joy in the Lord

You've got to understand that when the Bible speaks like this, it's not saying "for your happiness." We think that the purpose of God and the reason that we live on this earth is to be happy. We think that our spouse is there for us -- to make us happy. "Happy wife, happy life," you know? And we think happiness is the goal. **But the joy of the Lord, that is our strength, is not about happiness -- it is about holiness.**

I started out by saying the integrity of God that is translated in many versions just refers to it as holiness. The integrity that the Lord requires of us -- that sincerity that he requires of us -- is not so that we would have joy in any other way than:

That we would have joy in the Lord!

- That we would be holy.
- That we would be set apart for him.
- That we would be saying, "Lord God, I give you everything,
 - willingly,
 - generously,
 - freely,
 - with great joy,
 - cheerfully."
- **And that the Lord would say back to us,**
 - "Oh, I'm so pleased with you. Well done."
 - He smiles.

Wouldn't that be the joy that you want to experience daily?

Not just being happy, but to know the joy of the Lord?

When Paul says, "**We work with you for your joy**," that's what he means. He's not wanting them to be comfortable. He says, "Yeah, you were in grief, and I spared some grief." And, we're going to come into portions where he starts becoming much more direct again, and he comes at them, and he scolds them. But what is his point here? He says, "I am working with you. I have this burden, and I'm laboring like this because I want you to know the joy of the Lord."

We work with you for your joy. In our church and all that we do as a church, I want to challenge you that you would seek the joy of others -- not just that they will understand you or that they will agree with you. I've done that a lot: "How come you don't understand me? How come you don't agree with me?"

But rather, I've got to be saying,

- "What can I do to make this person joyful in the Lord?
- What can I say?
- What can I give?
- How can I show mercy?
- How can I show grace so that this person will be full of joy --
 - full of joy unspeakable,
 - full of glory --
 - full of joy in such a way that nothing in the world can take it away,
 - no matter what the pain and suffering,
 - no matter what the circumstance,
 - no matter what the things that they're going through,

that the joy of the Lord will be their strength?"

Are you finding it difficult to sustain your Christian life? Up and down, up and down? One day you're feeling great, happy, everything is good? The next day, back -- everything is a mess?

What will sustain you? The joy of the Lord -- that will be your strength.

That's what we've got to be praying for one another and committed to serve one another in that way. That we would say, "**Oh Lord God, use me. Use us.**" I must be a church that is sincere in these ways, that is conducting ourselves in these ways, for the benefit, for the glory of the church and the Lord.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that, Lord, your Word is complete for us. And, Lord, your examples are powerful for us. Thank you for the example of Paul, that he conducted himself in a specific way, that, Lord, he gave of himself in a specific way. And we pray, Lord, that we will conduct ourselves with integrity and sincerity, that we will conduct ourselves according to the grace of God, and that we will conduct ourselves, Lord, to bring this joy to people's lives. That, Lord, we would go -- do -- everything for the benefit of others. We would do it all with a clear conscience that is only by the Holy Spirit. **We pray this together in Jesus' precious name, amen.**