

RESPONDING TO THE CRITICS

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-24

For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.

For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end (as also you have understood us in part), that we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

And in this confidence I intended to come to you before, that you might have a second benefit - to pass by way of you to Macedonia, to come again from Macedonia to you, and be helped by you on my way to Judea. Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No? But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us - by me, Silvanus, and Timothy - was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes.

For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us. Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.

The world's #1 sport isn't football, nor baseball, nor basketball. It's what we Americans call *soccer!*

And I think the worldwide appeal of soccer is its simplicity. For all over the globe, *in impoverished countries and in prosperous countries... in desert sands, on city streets, in vacant lots, and on beautiful beaches... from the Tropics to the Arctic... before cows in a pasture and before stadiums packed with people...*

All that's required to play the sport is a soccer ball! No pads, no glove, no helmet, no bat... just a soccer ball.

But here's the problem, not all soccer balls are created equal... In 2002, Adidas, the official World Cup soccer ball supplier created the "[Fevernova](#)." This breakthrough ball was suppose to fly a more predictable pattern. But the World Cup players *complained* that it was **too light**.

So for the 2006 World Cup, Adidas redesigned their ball. They constructed what they called the "[Teamgeist](#)." It was a ball made with a different pattern, but players again *complained* the new design made it roll **too fast**.

So for the 2010 World Cup, Adidas altered their ball again. This time the "[Jubalani](#)" edition had fewer panels, but the players complained again, it flew **too erratically**.

So in 2014, Adidas made the soccer ball to end all soccer balls... the "[Brazuca](#)"... *but guess what?* Can you believe it, the players again complained! They said in cold weather the Brazuca gets **too hard** - loses its feel.

Too light, too fast, too erratic, too hard - it's always *too something*... some people are always complaining...

Adidas can't win. Some folks are never satisfied.

And here's my point, what makes the game of soccer so appealing... *all you need to play is a ball...* actually has sparked controversy, and criticism with its players.

Why can't simple things be allowed to stay simple?

The reason is... humans are complainers at heart.

Man once lived in a perfect world, but sin spoiled those conditions. Our environment is no longer pristine, and rather than take responsibility for the imperfections we've created, we *cast blame - we scrutinize and find fault - we criticize others to make ourselves look good.*

And this tendency even makes its way into church.

Paul was a simple servant... *His motives were pure. His intentions were sincere. His words were honest.*

Yet the Corinthians refused to *appreciate his simplicity or trust in his integrity.* They were cynical Christians. The believers in Corinth were suspicious and hard-hearted.

They assumed, like other *supposed men of God they had encountered,* Paul was a conniver and manipulator.

In the first half of Chapter 1, Paul discusses the role suffering plays in a believer's life, and the corresponding faithfulness of the Father's mercies and comforts.

Now in verse 12 he begins to respond to the complaints his critics in Corinth had leveled against him.

He pens, **"For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you."**

Now ordinarily, Paul hated boasting. For Paul it was always “**God be the glory.**” He knew *all he was, all he had, all he’d done or would do* came from God’s grace!

And I agree wholeheartedly. There’s too much bragging in this world. Someone said, “**No job is complete until the selfie gets posted.**” We like *selfies!*

We forget, “**It’s the empty cart that rattles loudest.**”

Paul would chime in with the Prophet Jeremiah, “**Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD...**”

But here Paul’s boasting has a godly purpose.

When it comes to Christianity the message is always interwoven with the messenger. Thus, to discredit Paul was to cast doubt on the gospel he preached. **In defending himself, he was standing up for the gospel.**

And Paul begins his defense in verse 12, with the testimony of **a clear conscience.** He was utterly truthful!

The other day, I had a hole-in-one. It was a 170 yard, uphill par 3. I hit a 4-hybrid. My ball bounced a few times, rolled a bit, then dropped right into the cup. *And if that’s all I told you; then you saw my clumsy swing you may or may not believe me. You’d have doubts.*

But that’s not how I tell the story. My conscience forces me to be honest and tell you *the whole story...*

For one, I was playing solo. No one else was with me and saw the shot. So I have no witnesses to vouch for me. To believe me you have to take me at my word.

And it was my second shot off the tee. I'd hit my first ball in the water, so it was my second shot. It was a hole-in-one *for par*. But it was a shot from the Tee-box.

I could've just told you I had a hole-in-one, and left it at that. But a clear conscience requires a few more details. **And I hope it's because of my desire for a clear conscience that you'll trust what I'm telling you is true.**

This is the way it was for Paul. Whenever he spoke of spiritual truths he was completely candid. He was as frank about his setbacks, as he was with his triumphs.

Paul would never lie, or embellish the truth, to win a convert or even an argument. His goal wasn't just to convince his readers, it was to do so while maintaining his integrity and a clear conscience before God.

This is what made him believable, and gave him such spiritual authority. Paul boasts that he had always **conducted himself "in simplicity and godly sincerity."**

Yet not every Christian is as committed to personal integrity. People can serve God for tainted reasons...

Some folks serve the Lord to be seen by men, and impress them with their goodness... *others enroll in ministry to gain power or enhance their own perceived importance...* some folks serve to relieve a buried shame, and try to atone for past evils... *or they'll serve to mask over current faults. It's easier*

for a person to talk or teach about Christianity, than it is to really live it.

The one certainty is that when it comes to Christian ministry, **motive matters!** Our motive is everything.

Here Paul discloses his motive. For conscience sake he served God *“in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God...”* Rather than employ *“fleshly wisdom”* in his ministry, Paul focused on three traits: **simplicity, sincerity, and grace.**

The term *“fleshly”* speaks of a life lived apart from God. The word has a sinister, even a sensual sound to it, *“fleeeshhhly” - and sometimes that’s it’s meaning.*

But the term actually has broader implications.

“Flesh” in contrast to *“spirit”* is what we are apart from God. When I die my spirit will live forever, but my *“flesh”* will return to the dust. That includes any genius, or muscle, or desire, or technique, or philosophy, or motive that won’t be found in heaven. It’s *“fleshly”* not *“spiritual.”* *“Fleshly wisdom”* is the wisdom of this world.

For example, the old adage *“sex sales”* is true. Ads that appeal to *fleshly* lusts tend to grab attention, *but it’s not a good thing.* Rather than encouraging us to think spiritually, those ads reinforce sinful perspectives.

But *“fleshly”* isn't just *“fleeeshhhly”* thinking.

I can try to advance biblical obedience, but I can do so through *“fleshy wisdom.”* *A case in point...* every Christian should give financially to God - *that’s true,* but I can encourage you to give in all the wrong ways...

I can appeal to **guilt**... and tell you by not tithing you're picking God's pocket. You're a spiritual crook!

Or I can appeal to **pride**... and tell you God needs your money. If you don't give, His work is going under!

Or I can appeal to **greed**... and tell you if you want to be rich; give to God. Give and He'll give back to you!

And there is some truth to all three appeals.

But if I share it in a way that pushes the buttons of **guilt** or **pride** or **greed** to prompt obedience to God, I am conducting myself according to *"fleshly wisdom."*

"Heavenly wisdom" can share the same truths, but it does so without shaming or pressuring people to obey.

God's wisdom relies on His Spirit to convict and convince. It emphasizes love. He loves us so much we should want to love Him in return, by being a cheerful giver. That's the wisdom Paul uses later in Chapter 9.

The church I attended as a child held annual revival meetings. The idea was to invite your friends so they could hear the Gospel and give their lives to Jesus.

One revival, the pastor promised an autographed Braves' baseball to the person who brought the most people. I wanted that baseball, so I lined up everyone I knew - friends and relatives and strangers even.

I packed a pew or two, but it wasn't because I had a desire to see people saved. I wanted a lousy baseball.

Sure, it was a biblical cause, but the pastor's technique was *"fleshly wisdom"* not *"godly wisdom."*

In verse 12 Paul assures the Corinthians that he's not trying to obtain spiritual goals through fleshy techniques and manipulations. He relies on "*simplicity.*"

Paul's strategy was to present the truths of Scripture as *purely, as simply, as clearly* as possible - then let the power of *God's truth*, coupled with the conviction of *God's Spirit*, produce the results that *God desired*.

Over the years, some Calvary Chapels have adopted the motto, "*Simply teaching the Word of God simply.*"

That doesn't mean we're boring in our presentation, or we steer clear of complexed issues, or we use an 8th grade vocabulary... it just means we explain the Bible as clearly as we can, and let it speak for itself.

Even in our modern age that's drifted so far from God we don't apologize for what the Bible says - or feel we have to embellish it or soften it to make it relevant.

We believe that the Bible is timeless. It has a power and authority all its own, and we teach it "*in simplicity.*"

But Paul also relied on "*godly sincerity.*" His ministry wasn't just about *teaching*, but *living* God's Word.

Before He was a salesman, Paul was a satisfied customer. He didn't peddle, what he hadn't practiced.

And before you become a spokesman for Christ first be His follower... *Often the person who rails against prostitution is the man with the porn problem... The Christian crusading against same-sex marriage may be the married person who's neglecting their heterosexual spouse...* Paul spoke God's

truth with *“simplicity,”* but first and foremost, he insisted on *“godly sincerity.”*

So often in today’s church-world we hear of pastors and leaders making excuses for their ungodliness...

“Well, we’re human just like everybody else” - and I agree we’re human, but we’re also pastors. Whatever happened to leaders raising the bar to maintain their integrity. I need to insist on my own *“godly sincerity.”*

People often ask, *“Pastor Sandy, what’s the key to giving effective sermons?”* The answer is *living it first.*

And this is what makes declaring God’s Word such a challenge. I always preach toward an *“ideal”* that neither I nor anyone listening has totally achieved.

I like to put it, *“I’m always preaching over my head.”*

There’re times when I’ve preached on what the Bible says about a godly marriage, while at the same time I stood guilty of some ungodly attitude in my marriage...

I’ve preach about the faith that moves mountains, even while I was worrying about getting my kids through college... *The pastor has to keep pressing toward the prize, even though he runs with a limp!*

This is why the third ingredient in Paul’s ministry was *“grace!”* Paul *preached simply* and *lived sincerely.* His desire was to be like Jesus, but he knew in many ways he’d failed to measure up. Thus, he relied on *“grace.”*

Grace is a gift. It’s the favor and acceptance God has concluded that on our best day, we’ll never earn.

Everywhere you and I fall short, the grace of Jesus is sufficient to make up the difference. **Grace makes up the distance between *my worst* and *Christ's best*.** All God asks of us is to trust in it... and treat others to it...

Paul's ministry was colored by grace. It motivated him, and was the means by which he motivated others. Paul championed grace! He believed it and lived it...

Sadly, our modern church is weak - we're impotent to make disciples, and alter our society - because we've relied on the latest and greatest of ***"fleshly wisdom."***

We need to return to Paul's style of ministry: preach in ***"simplicity,"*** live with ***"sincerity,"*** and rely on ***"grace."***

Yet despite Paul's integrity, the Corinthians had charged him with just the opposite. They said he was guilty of talking out of both sides of his mouth. He was good at *saying one thing, yet meaning something else.*

They accused Paul of **doublespeak**... And I'm sure you know what I mean by the term ***"double talk"***?

Language is suppose to convey a person's thoughts, but doublespeak abuses language. It's a tool of deceit. It uses words, not to convey truth, but to mask over the speaker's true meaning. *Here're some examples...*

"Downsizing" is a nice way of saying **"You're fired."**

"Reducing costs" really means **"cutting salaries."**

"Senior citizen" is a gentle version of **"old person."**

"Enhanced interrogation" is PC for **"torture."**

“My date tonight was a *unique* man” is a polite way for a girl to say, “Wow, that fellow was really *weird*.”

And in a political season, here are a few more...

“I don’t plan to challenge the incumbent...” actually means “I don’t have enough votes to beat him...”

“I was unaware of...” means “I deleted the email...”

And “No decision has been made” really means “We’ve made a decision, but we’re not going to say...”

The Corinthians had accused Paul of this sort of double talk, but he defends himself in verse 13, “For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand.” Paul had no ulterior motives.

When Paul wrote a letter, they didn’t have to worry about reading between the lines, and deciphering what he really meant. His goal was honesty and clarity.

He said what he meant, and meant what he said.

Paul tells them, “Now I trust you will understand, even to the end (as also you have understood us in part)...” He’s speaking of his first letter to them. For the most part, they had understood and obeyed his words.

Paul continues, “That we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.” In all Paul’s interactions with the Corinthians the goal was for him and them to be proud of each other at Jesus’ return.

Thus, he focused his ministry on *preaching with simplicity, living with sincerity, and relying on God’s grace*. Which are also good goals for every ministry!

In verse 15 Paul begins to answer a major accusation the Corinthians had hurled against him...

“And in this confidence I intended to come to you before, that you might have a second benefit - to pass by way of you to Macedonia, to come again from Macedonia to you, and be helped by you on my way to Judea.” Recall 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus at the beginning of Paul’s third missionary journey.

At the end of that letter he expresses a desire to visit again. He spoke of his plan in 1 Corinthians 16:5, “Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia...”

And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits.” But notice Paul’s big proviso - he was up-front from the outset - He writes, “*if the Lord permits.*”

Obviously, Paul made plans, and there is nothing wrong (*or unspiritual*) with you and I making plans.

Pray then plan... just always leave the door open to God changing your plans. *Inflexibility* is a denial of His providence. God stays sovereign over our situations.

James 4:13 teaches us, “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow.

For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." Plan, but don't be rigid or dogmatic.

The old Methodists had a saying, "Deo Volente" - it meant "God willing." Whenever they wrote a letter, they would end it with the initials, "D.V." or "Deo Volente."

They made it clear that all they'd discussed in their letter was contingent on God's overarching providence.

But that's not how certain Corinthians saw Paul's aborted visit. They concluded he was flighty - wishy-washy - you couldn't trust in what he promised. Some Corinthians were casting doubt on Paul's credibility.

The apostle responds in verse 17, "Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly?" Paul wasn't flippant about decisions. He scripted out his ministry.

He writes, "Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh..." Critics said, Paul wasn't following God's Spirit, *he was just guessing*. He follows **his** agenda.

The complainers were implying Paul can't be trusted. He makes and breaks promises on a whim. They were saying, "*If we can't trust him to keep his appointments; then how can we trust what he tells us about God?*"

Quite frankly, this was a cheap shot. The Corinthians were acting like babies. *Questioning the standing of a man's ministry, because he didn't come to see them?*

It reminds me of a website - teardown.com. There's a group of tekkies who wait for the latest iPhone or iPad or some other popular item to hit the market.

When it does they're the first to grab one and tear it apart. They break it down and map out its inner-workings. You can purchase an analysis of the product for a fee. Over 15 years they've torn down 2000 items.

And sadly, I know churches who've been at it for even longer. Some Christians like to *tear down* pastors, rather than help *build them up*. They're petty, critical.

Generally speaking, this is why pastors need thick skin - "the hide of a rhinoceros." If a pastor doesn't develop a resistance to petty criticisms. If he doesn't learn to let God defend him, and he feels it's his duty to refute every accusation, *then heaven help him!*

Satan will target this fellow for more and more attacks, knowing he'll keep defending himself, and never get around to what God has called him to do.

As someone once said, "You take care of your character and God will take care of your reputation" You can't run around putting out all of the brush fires.

But this attack on Paul was different. By questioning the apostle's integrity they were casting doubt on the credibility of his message - *namely, the Gospel*. And it was for that reason, Paul had to defend his ministry.

He replies in verse 18, "But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No." Paul wasn't the kind of man who said "yes" today, and then "no" tomorrow.

He was being painted as a discombobulated buffoon who couldn't make up his mind about daily decisions.

But he was anything but... Paul's integrity mirrored God's faithfulness. Usually, his "yes" was yes, and "no" was no. You could take Paul's promises to the bank.

Is your "yes" a definitive yes? And is your "no" an emphatic no? *Or do your kids keep whining, knowing they can manipulate you into changing your mind?*

Does your neighbor want a signed statement in order to trust you? Are you known as a person of your word? If you make a promise can folks take it to the bank?

Paul is saying as God is faithful, he also is faithful!

And Paul points to his own preaching as proof!

He writes in verse 19, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us - by me, Silvanus, and Timothy - was not Yes and No..." Paul was never vague. There was never any ambivalence, or uncertainty, or a lack of clarity in his message.

In fact, one of the hallmarks of Paul's ministry was the definitiveness of the truths that he preached!

He says in verse 20, "But in Him was Yes. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us." Here's where Paul got dogmatic - not in his *planning*, but in his *preaching*!

Granted, the meaning of some Bible passages are hard to pin down. Some verses lend themselves to multiple

interpretations and uneasy applications. There are passages where it's wise not to be too adamant.

But those verses are the exception rather than the rule. For Paul declares, *"The promises of God in (Christ) are Yes, and in Him Amen."* When it comes to the claims of Jesus, and the Gospel, there's certainty!

Thus, when we speak of Jesus we should leave no doubt - no ambiguity. There should be a boldness, a confidence, an unequivocalness in what we preach!

Never speak of the Lord Jesus *"as a maybe, or an option, or an I think, or an it might..."* Speak of Jesus with assurance! He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Revelation 3:14 refers to Jesus as, *"the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness..."* The word *"Amen"* is an affirmation. This is how we punctuate *our faith* and *God's truth*. It means *"so be it"* or *"right on."* Amen is a spiritual exclamation point... and Jesus is our *Amen!*

Prior to the coming of Jesus some of God's promises seemed like *pie in the sky* impossibilities. *How could God love the sinner and judge sin at the same time?*

How could Messiah be King and Servant? As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, *"We see in a mirror, dimly..."*

But Jesus was God's solution to these problems. **He's the solution to every problem.** He is the eternal *"Yes"* - the *"Amen"* - the *"so be it"* to all God promises.

Think of it this way, Jesus is *"the Father's Yes Man."* Whatever the Father wills, the Son now accomplishes.

Jesus said in John 5:30, “I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.” Again in John 12, “whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak...” Jesus was always about His Father’s business. He always took His cues from the Father.

Jesus is the One Who gets it done for God! As Paul declares, *“All the promises in Him are Yes and Amen!”*

Once, after a Monday Night Football game, I listened to some reporters interviewing Houston Texans running back, Arian Foster. In addition to being a great athlete, Arian is well-read, and a bit of a thinker, a philosopher.

In the interview, he said he enjoyed learning. Foster commented that he could learn from anybody. And I quote, *“After all, we’re all just out here guessing.”*

Of course, the announcers ooh’ed and ah’ed over his post-modern observation. But as soon as he said it, I shouted at the TV, *“No, no we’re not! With Jesus the guessing is over!”* Jesus is God’s *“Yes”* and *“Amen.”*

Jesus is the exclamation on all God’s promises!

And verse 21 explains God’s *“Yes”* in our lives. Here’s what Jesus does in us through His Holy Spirit...

“Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

He *establishes... anoints... seals... guarantees...*

Here is God’s *“Yes”* in your life. Here is what you know to be His will - what you can count on Him to do. And Jesus carries it out through His Holy Spirit...

He *establishes* us. He connects us to God and His Church. The Spirit puts down spiritual roots in our life.

He *anoints* us. Like pouring oil over the head of the OT priest, the influence of the Holy Spirit comes upon us. A supernatural awareness permeates our lives.

Then the Holy Spirit *seals* us. Corinth was a port city, and on the docks you would find merchandise ready to be shipped to destinations all around the world.

And each shipment was marked by its owner's seal. A seal identified the cargo, and insured its destination.

And this is the Spirit of Christ's "*Yes*" in our lives.

This is His "*Amen*" - what He is absolutely committed to do... The Holy Spirit's power in us is God's proof-of-purchase - His seal. His influence in our lives means we belong to Him and we are headed to heaven.

The Holy Spirit's peace and presence and power is also our *guarantee*. The term means *down-payment*.

Realize, our salvation comes in installments. We get the spiritual blessings now, but so much more awaits.

The Holy Spirit is our taste of heaven here on earth.

The "*Yes*" and "*Amen*" of all that Jesus promises us is made emphatic by the work of His Holy Spirit.

I like the ice cream shops that have the little bite-size spoons. With those spoons you sample various flavors.

I like to just nibble, but the shopkeeper knows nibbling doesn't last long... For when you find a flavor you like, it's

“Yes! Give me more!” And this is another way the Spirit is our *“Yes”* and *“Amen”* - through Him we sample heaven’s blessings long before we arrive.

And Paul has more to say in his defense, verse 23, *“Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.”* Paul changed his scheduled visit to spare the Corinthians a rebuke.

Realize, Paul was ticked off at these believers. They were acting like spoiled brats and ungrateful kids.

Even a godly man like Paul got angry.

He knew that if he’d come to Corinth at that time he would’ve given them a tongue-lashing he’d later regret.

He didn’t want his visit to be unpleasant and end in hard-feelings - so he postpones his trip until the critics in Corinth get their act together and stop complaining.

Paul seeks their fellowship not their dis-fellowship.

Paul knew *the right word, at the right time, and in the right tone of voice* can be a powerful thing, thus he was willing to wait... His strategy is a good example for us when we have hard words to say to a close friend.

As soon as Paul wrote verse 23, he must’ve of thought he sounded bossy - for he ends the chapter writing, *“Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.”*

Paul isn’t ordering the Corinthians into submission. He’s not their Lord. He has no desire to bully these believers or push them around. He refuses to pull rank.

Paul is just a brother, a caring co-laborer who wants to see a joyous church, not a band of complainers.

The Corinthians might've tried to *tear Paul down*, but he wanted *to build them up* by strengthening their faith.

I hope that's our desire for one another. Let's not complain about, or criticize another brother's ministry.

And when someone criticizes us, let's defend ourselves with a clear conscience... *preaching in simplicity, living with sincerity, and relying on grace.*