

Motives, Mindset, and Ministry in the Middle of Relational Mess

Let's turn in our Bibles to 2 Cor. 1 starting in verse 23 as we continue our series Messy Grace.

Someone once said that ministry would be so much easier if there weren't any people in the church. It's kinda true! Where two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, there Jesus is. But where two or more are gathered, there mess is also. There's grace, and there's mess. Messy grace. Because the gospel isn't "get your life all cleaned up and God will accept you", the gospel message is, come as you are, with all your sin, your flaws, your brokenness, and by the finished work of Christ God will forgive you and clean you up.

There is a lot of relational mess going on between Paul and the believers in Corinth. Seeing that there were serious issues in the church, Paul went to Corinth hoping to fix things but things actually seemed to get worse. So Paul wrote them a letter, a brutally honest and severe letter, to say what was left unsaid in his visit. And as soon as he hit "send" he second guessed himself and regretted writing it. How will the Corinthians respond? Did he just make a bad situation even worse?

So there is relational mess. And to make matters worse there are people in Corinth who want to promote themselves as true and apostles and want to use this relational mess to drive a wedge between the believers in Corinth and Paul. So they have jumped on the fact that Paul told the Corinthians he would return after he spent some time in Macedonia, but then he didn't return. And those who hated Paul said, "see? He broke his promise. He is unreliable. He says one thing and does another. You can't trust him."

Last week we saw the beginning of Paul's defense. As we continue reading we find that beginning in verse 23 Paul explains his reasons for not returning to Corinth.

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. **2** For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³ And 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. ⁴ For 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. *2 Cor. 1:23-2:4*

Paul defends himself, not by closing off his heart but by opening his heart to the Corinthian church. He shares with them his reasons for not returning but Paul isn't about justifications, he's about motivations. What motivated his decision not to return? What motivated him to write that hard letter? And most importantly, in light of the self-proclaimed apostles trying to promote their own ministry and undermine Paul's apostolic ministry, Paul opens his heart what motivates his ministry.

Verse 2 says *I made up my mind* – the Greek carries the sense that Paul thought things through carefully before making a decision about what the best next action would be. Paul didn't say, "I'm just going to follow my heart", he thought carefully. He wanted to make a wise judgment about what would be best for the Corinthian church.

When we are in a tense situation, when there's conflict in the air, we need to examine both our motives (*why* we do something) and our decisions (*how* we do something). Good motives can't make up for bad judgment.

it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth...For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you... (vv. 1:23, 2:2)

It was to spare you...not make another painful visit to you. Paul thought hard about it and realized enough had been said, more would be too much. They needed time to process. Time to heal from the brutally honest truth that had been spoken to them. So Paul stepped back to give room for the Holy Spirit to work.

When we feel strongly about something (as Paul clearly did), we can want to hammer the point again and again. I know from painful experience the futility of trying to press someone to agree with me, or admit they were wrong, or see the error of their ways by talking, talking, talking. Maybe if I say it this way...

When I was in Bible school and living in a dorm, one day I walked by a room and I saw two of our students in a very unusual position. One of them was lying on his back on the floor, and the other was sitting on top of him, holding him down. You need to know these weren't two young Bible students. They were both like me in their mid-to-late 20's, and they were big men. What made the scene even more strange was that in the

background, there was music playing. It was a song called “The Statue of Liberty”. As I walked by, the guy on the bottom, CJ, looked at me and said, “help”.

I almost didn’t want to know what was happening, but I was an RA and in charge of the dorms so I asked what was going on.

Turns out the guy on top, Preston, had mentioned to CJ that the song Statue of Liberty was the greatest song ever written. CJ responded, “I hate that song!” Preston said, that’s only because you’ve never really listened to it. CJ (who was a musician) said, no, I’ve listened to it, I don’t like it. Preston said, if you listen to it carefully you’ll love it. CJ said, “no I won’t”. So Preston wrestled CJ to the ground and held him down, hit play on the tape deck, and was forcing CJ to listen to the song so that he would like it.

OK, so that’s an extreme example, but sometimes we want to metaphorically wrestle someone to the ground until they agree with us. We keep at them, pounding our perspective, pounding our opinion, pounding how wrong they were. “I’m going to hold you down till you agree with me!” That rarely goes well.

A lot of times, after we’ve shared – hopefully out of love and care – and listened! The best thing we can do is give some room for the Holy Spirit to work. Let them process, let them think. And what I’ve found is that often the person the Spirit needs most to work on is me. I’m like, “of all the stubborn, pig-headed, obtruse, ignorant people!” And the Spirit says, “very true, but I love you anyway.”

I want to jump down to Paul’s explanation of what motivated his strong letter, found in verse 4:

For 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. **Vs. 2:4)**

Paul really opens his heart about the letter and, with God as his witness, tells them what motivated his strong words was love. The words he uses here, affliction, anguish, tears, describes a deeply distressed state of emotions. Paul’s writing that letter was an intensely gut-wrenching experience. He was sad, anxious, agonizing and that came out in a curtain of tears – he could barely see as he wrote those words.

In the hot mess of conflict and strong emotions, sometimes things can be said that hurt. We know that was the case with Paul's recent visit cause he says I didn't want to make *another* painful visit. That implies the last visit *was* a painful visit.

Sometimes hard things need to be said. Sometimes in the heat of the moment things are said more harshly than needed. Either way they can leave us feeling raw and hurt. It can be painful.

You know what's more important than saying the right thing all the time? Love is more important. I can take hearing tougher stuff from someone I know loves me than people who don't. Motive is so essential – why are they saying this? Why am I saying this? Is it motivated by love?

Whether we are on the giving end or the receiving end, emotions can flare up and get pretty heated. But if I'm honest, my heart tends more easily towards being angered, or bothered, or offended, or my pride is hurt and I want to set the record straight. What can be conspicuously absent in all that emotion is love.

Before we "set the record straight" it's wise to spend some time with God to let the Holy Spirit set our hearts straight. We can speak the truth in love, but to do that, we need to emphasize the love as much as we do the truth.

Paul really loved them and he wrote out of the emotional overflow of that love.

At the center of these verses, and with the backdrop of false apostles promoting themselves and their authority in the Corinthian church, Paul shares the motivation and the goal of his apostolic ministry. And it gives us excellent insight into what the goal of all ministry should be. Let's read beginning in 2 Cor. 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. (vs. 24)

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

Paul says, we don't lord it over, or dominate, your faith. There will always be leaders, even in Christian ministry, whose goal is control and to lord it over others. The Apostle John wrote in his third epistle about a dude named Diotrephes who "loved to be first".

He didn't love to serve, he didn't love people. He loved to be first. He was a control freak whose goal was to lord it over the faith of those in his church.

Paul was an apostle, he had serious authority given him by God. But Paul doesn't see that authority as a pass to lord it over them, he sees it as a mandate to work alongside of them for their faith. He says, we are fellow-servants laboring side by side with you.

Notice something strange here: Paul says we don't lord it over your faith but we work *with you for your...* and we expect him to say faith, don't we? He comes back to faith at the end of the verse: We don't lord it over your faith...for you stand firm in your faith. But in the middle he switches out the word "faith" for "joy".

The goal he is working with them for is joy. Not giddiness or chirpy-ness or a state of constant happiness, but gladness. Joy.

We work for a faith that is so strong, so centered in the hope of Christ, that so treasures the surpassing worth of Christ, that we have a deep current of joy running through our heart even in the hardest of circumstances. Even in the hottest of furnaces. Even when our hearts grieve the greatest of losses.

When God gave us His Son, He gave us the greatest treasure heaven has to offer. Every other good thing in life flows from Christ. We have the kingdom because we have Christ. We have the love of God because we have Christ. We have eternal life because we have Christ. We have a home where we belong because we belong to Christ. We have joy because we have Christ, and we have Christ by faith.

If I were honest, I don't always feel this joy. Even as I was writing this I was examining my own heart. I settle far too easily for lesser joys. So I find it encouraging that Paul says we work with you for your joy. We are working towards an ever greater, ever deeper experience of joy flowing from faith.

Paul was an apostle so he had a unique ministry, but I don't think this part of it is unique. We can all work with one another for our joy. Helping each other see the vast, eternal, and unshakable treasure we have in Christ.

I think sometimes it's the hard times that help us get this better than the good times. I came to Christ as a teenager, and I remember feeling at times a deep sense of joy in my faith. But those years weren't incredibly happy years. There were struggles and some

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hard feelings like loneliness and sadness and emptiness that wanted to darken my perspective, so when Jesus came into my life, the joy he brought was an amazing contrast to the darkness.

Christ is greater than words can express. Faith in Christ shouldn't leave us miserable, it should lead us to joy! And ministry, whether it be the ministry of a pastor, or a worship leader, or a children's ministry worker, or a parent, or the ministry of a friend to a friend, or the ministry of a stranger sharing a word of hope to another stranger – the goal is joy, build on the immeasurable worth of Christ.

Paul's motivation, mindset, and ministry was love, and that love was always working to bring people to Jesus Christ. And it should be that way in us too. For the glory of God and the good of people. Let's pray.