

Glorious Inconsistency

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn back to that reading, rather long reading in 2 Corinthians, which begins at chapter 1, verse 12, on page 964, and have one hand there.

And then I want you to turn over to 2 Corinthians, chapter 12, and have one hand there. So everyone who's completely obedient will have their hands like this.

I think if you read the passage that we just heard read to us, on first scan through, it looks like the apostle is trying to defend himself, doesn't it?

I mean, he has been accused of certain things, and it seems that he's defending himself. But I want to promise you he's not. If you look at chapter 12, verse 19, near the end of the book, he says, Have you Corinthians been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you?

Answer, no. It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your building, beloved. So if we go back to chapter 1, to say that Paul is defending himself is like saying ambulance officers drive quickly.

[1 : 21] It's sort of true, but that's not really their purpose. They're out there to save lives. Or it's like saying smugglers like to travel. Well, yeah, they do, but that's not really what they're doing.

The key to understanding this book of 2 Corinthians is one of the words which comes again and again in the book, and it is the word, the grace of God.

This is a central and key word for Christianity, as you know. And at the root of grace, the word comes from happy, joyful.

What makes us joyful? And the New Testament uses this word to describe the extraordinary and extravagant free love, kindness of God, his compassion to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

I love that gospel reading. It's one of my favorites in Luke. Jesus just happens to come by in a town called Nain, a widow who's bearing her only son. There's no faith.

[2 : 22] She doesn't ask him for anything. He just stops, walks over, touches the boy. The boy is raised back to life, and the family rejoices. It's just grace. Grace comes to us not because we deserve it, but because of God's happiness, his delight, his joy.

And it's free because we don't earn it. And what 2 Corinthians does is it shows how grace turns things upside down. If you have your bulletin, underneath the sermon, there's a little chart there. And for those of you who are going to be studying the letter in your small groups, I hope this is helpful to you. Paul visited Corinth three times and wrote four letters. We only have two of them. So the first visit where he established the church, and then he wrote a letter to them which is lost, but he refers to it in 1 Corinthians. Then he wrote 1 Corinthians. And after 1 Corinthians, a group of false teachers came into the church, and they taught a different gospel.

They taught a wealth gospel. Do you know what I mean by that? Jesus can make you healthy and happy in this life, and wealthy probably too. And they won over the church.

[3 : 38] So Paul races over from Ephesus to Corinth and gives them a painful visit. That's how he describes it in verse 50. How was your visit to Corinth? No, it was very painful. He refers to that in chapter 2, verse 1.

And one particular local leader had been the ringleader and had attacked Paul publicly. And you know what the rest of the church had done? Absolutely nothing.

They hadn't stuck up for Paul. They'd passively stood by and allowed the false teachers to win. And he had to leave and go back to Corinth. But rather than go back for a second painful visit, you see in the column there, he wrote a letter, letter C, which we also have lost, and that's called the painful letter.

And you can see it referred to in chapter 2, verse 3, verse 4, verse 9. Okay, we don't have that painful letter.

We don't have it, but it had an amazing effect. And the church basically turns back to Paul. And there is a reconciliation between Paul and the congregation, but it's shallow.

[4 : 51] And so as he then writes this letter to Corinthians, when he's heard about their repentance. So when you read the letter of 2 Corinthians, there are a couple of audiences.

And you know, the majority of the congregation has turned back to him, but there are still false teachers in place. Is that all clear? There'll be a little test on that after church with the dates, if they're true, class.

Now, the reason I'm saying all this is that the more you look at Corinth, I think the more you can see Vancouver. We know quite a lot about Corinth in the first century, when Paul visited.

And the culture of Corinth was fed by a number of streams. One of them was, it's a new city, so it doesn't have a history.

It doesn't have traditions. It doesn't have an aristocracy. Most of the residents were freed men and women, skilled and able to find a new life. And with the decline of the city-state in Greece, there was a new form of individualism in Corinth that we find in the inscriptions.

[5 : 57] And there was a great virtue in self-sufficiency and autonomy. Self-worth, self-appreciation, self-glorification was your reward. Another stream that influenced their culture was their fabulous position.

They were a harbour town. They had two harbours, controlling trade, east and west, and north and south. It was a place you could make money very quickly. It was a boom town when Paul got there, with sports arenas and big theatres and temples and a mainstream sex trade.

And the financial success was the way to gain status in Corinth. And the affluence in the city is evident from the archaeological digs we've had.

Beautiful houses, frescoes, sculptures discovered. Another stream that fed into the Corinthian self-understanding and culture was that self-display was highly valued.

The rich in Corinth flaunted their wealth. In fact, there was a kind of an obligation to flaunt your wealth if you had it. So they built monuments, big monuments and buildings in their own honour.

[7 : 08] And they put inscriptions on the buildings to them. I'm not talking about hospital wings. I'm talking about streets and big statues. There was an open quest for admiration and applause.

Let me read you a couple of inscriptions that we found in Corinth during this time. This is a guy who's built a building to himself. And he says about himself that he is worthy of his own glory and manliness.

There's something to put on your tomb. By the way, can you hear me? Okay. Another one had, you know, Dan Gifford. Great, preeminent above all others.

Another one had, Dan Gifford. Attained every peak of excellence. Et cetera, et cetera. Now, why am I going on about this?

The reason I'm telling you this is that the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians is not dealing with a big doctrinal issue. There's no one big false teaching issue.

[8 : 13] Two Corinthians is dealing with the interconnection between the gospel and culture, the culture of Corinth. If you read Two Corinthians, you'll find that Paul is under suspicion.

There are a number of criticisms that are being made of Paul. And they particularly come from the false teachers. And the reason for the success of the false teachers was because they much better reflected the culture of Corinth than Paul did.

So here are some of the specific criticisms that Paul addresses in this book. These are things he's being criticized for. Number one, he doesn't boast about himself.

That was a cultural value. Number two, he won't take money for salary. And number three, he's weak. And the thing about the criticisms of Paul is they're not really religious.

They have spiritual significance, but they're cultural. They reflect social, cultural prejudices of Corinth. Now, why is this important?

[9 : 23] It's important because as Christians, we believe in the mixed nature of culture. Every culture has good and bad. Every human being is made in the image of God and is fallen away from God.

So every culture and most cultural artifacts are mixed. And I know culture is a notoriously difficult thing to define. Ken Myers has this lovely little phrase.

He says, culture is what humans make of the world. And he means that in two senses. Literally, physically, what we do with the stuff of the world. Technology, science, the artifacts.

And secondly, what we make of the world in terms of what we view, how we view life, what is good and what is true and what is to be valued. So we rearrange the raw material of our world and we try to express meaning through those things.

And you can't avoid this. You live in a culture like a fish living in a pond. And we are then formed by the meanings and by the understandings of the culture around us.

[10:28] That's why if you travel to another culture, you can see the differences and you can see often the faults of other cultures. But because we're so deeply immersed in our own, and this is true for everyone, we're very blind to our own cultural prejudices.

But the Bible sees culture making as a good thing. And 2 Corinthians is unique in the scriptures because it shows us a group of new Christians trying to live out the Christian life in a culture that's been formed by all sorts of different streams.

And some of those streams are hostile to the gospel and some of them are not. And it's fascinating to see what the apostle does. In fact, it's more interesting to see what he doesn't do. He does not tell the Corinthians, get out there and transform culture.

There's no triumphalism in 2 Corinthians. Nor does he say, your culture is wicked. You just need to put up the defenses and pull up the walls and dig in.

There's no defeatism in 2 Corinthians. Nor does he say, look, don't be too different. Just don't rock the boat, fit in. There's no resignation and compromise in 2 Corinthians.

[11:42] It's clear that the apostle Paul has not read all the books on what churches ought to be doing in North America. What he does is something very different. What he does is he applies the gospel of God's grace to himself and to the Corinthians and to the current cultural issues of his day.

And when he does, we find there's this turning upside down. And the result is a brilliant realism. So you take these three things, boasting, power and money.

They are not evil. Christians in the church, we can't hide from these things. We can't just condemn those who do these things or just resign ourselves to them. What God's grace does is it turns these upside down.

What it does is it shows that some forms of boasting are wrong, but there's good boasting as well. It shows that there's a wrong use of power for violence and aggression and manipulation.

But there's also another power that's made perfect in weakness. And we can use money to worship ourselves and just hoard and accumulate. But grace can so change the meaning and the use of money that in chapters 8 and 9, he calls money grace.

[13:08] So last week in our first passage, we saw that the apostle connected God's grace and suffering. And now he begins to show us how God's grace turns cultural attitudes, our social beliefs, our conventions upside down.

And I've got three points in this rather long passage. Number one, how God's grace gives us the only true ground for boasting. And this is just verses 12 to 14 in chapter 1.

If you look at verse 12, this is the first use of the word boast in 2 Corinthians. This was a massive issue. You know, if you read 1 and 2 Corinthians, the word comes some 40 times.

I think it's 39. I say again, boasting was a public virtue in Corinth. And the false teachers were using it freely to boast of what was outward.

You know, how flashy they were and how well they spoke and on the things you couldn't see. And they were deeply critical of the apostle Paul because he just wouldn't boast about himself. He had plenty to boast about, but he refused.

[14:14] Now watch what Paul does here. He doesn't say all boasting is evil, all boasting is wrong. He says there's good boasting and there's bad boasting.

God does not tell us not to boast. He shows us how to boast rightly, upside downly. Not in ourselves, but in him. And the only power in the world that can do that, can turn us upside down so that we boast in God and not ourselves, is his grace.

Now, as Canadians, we don't like public boasting. We don't like show-offs. We don't like big heads. Like Australians, it may be partly because we live in the shadow of a very big country near us.

I mean, I don't... I should be careful how I say this, but I don't know if in Canada Donald Trump would ever be a serious political candidate. We? It wouldn't work in Australia.

And I know as I say that just how proud we are as Canadians of that, how superior and self-righteous we feel about ourselves because of that. We boast about the fact that we don't boast.

[15 : 31] Now, we have very subtle ways of boasting. Do you remember that award-winning Molson's ad a few years ago? I have a prime minister, not a president. I believe in peacekeeping, not policing. Diversity, not assimilation.

The beaver is a truly proud and noble animal. Took is a hat. A Chesterfield is a couch. Canada is the second largest landmass. The best nation...

Sorry, the first nation of hockey. The best part of North America. My name is Joe and I am a Canadian. Remember that? See, boasting is a basic human need. You have to boast.

We all base our lives and our confidence on something. We all have something in our lives where we find our yes, our big yes. We gain a sense of worthiness.

And it's not wrong. The question is what we boast in. When you write your CV, basically you're boasting. Advertising is boasting.

[16 : 28] Most use of social media is boasting. Do not put any more photographs of food on Facebook. I feel much better for saying that. There's actually...

They've done some research on how to boast in Canada. And I shouldn't tell you this, but this is the way we work. What we do is we try and turn the conversation so that the other person raises the issue that we are successful in and then we boast about it.

If you raise the issue, that's boastful. But if the other person raises it, you can say whatever you want. How does grace turn that upside down? What difference does grace make?

Let me read verse 12 very literally. He says, Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and literally transparency that comes from God.

Not godly sincerity. Not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God and overflowing toward you.

There's the overflowing word again from grace. Does it seem like he's defending himself?

[17 : 39] He's not. He's talking about the grace of God and how the grace of God is the basis for boasting. If you don't believe me and you still are with me and you still have your Bible open, keep your finger in 2 Corinthians 1 and turn back to 1 Corinthians 4 for a moment, please.

1 Corinthians 4, verses 9-13. It's very important. Because Paul's been criticized in 1 Corinthians as well.

And he never claims he's sinless. He never claims that he's blameless. He knows that his conscience is clean. Listen. But that doesn't mean that he's actually clean.

There's something more important going on. So in chapter 4, verses 3 and 4, the apostle names four arbitrators, four jurors, four judges on his behavior. Verse 3, he says, With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you.

So for Paul, the opinion and judgment of the Corinthians is not all that important for his behavior. Second, or by any human court.

[18 : 54] The word court is not there. It's by any human court. Who's the third judge? In fact, I do not even judge myself. The problem is we are infinitely good at self-justification.

And he can say, I may have a clean conscience, but that doesn't mean I'm truly clean. Fourthly, I'm not aware, verse 4, of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. So if we go back to 2 Corinthians 1.12, he hasn't changed his mind on this.

He's not suddenly replaced God with his conscience as his ultimate guide. He still knows that it's not enough for our hearts to have our own approval, nor the approval of any other human.

You understand that, don't you? That our self-esteem, my esteem of me, or your esteem of me, is a very insecure basis for my view of myself.

[19 : 59] The only true ground of approval is God and God's happiness. It's God's grace. It's God's full acceptance in Jesus Christ.

It's the only basis for true boasting. And what Paul is saying is that any transparency and any simplicity I had came from me. Sorry, came from God's grace.

Let me say that again. Any transparency and any simplicity I had does not come from me. It comes from God's grace, his overflowing grace.

God's grace is not some impersonal energy that we draw on. It's the wonder of God's love in Christ through us to others. So in verse 12, there's a contrast between two different grounds for boasting.

You see, at the end of the verse, either by earthly wisdom, literally wisdom of the flesh, or by the grace of God, which overflows to you. It overflows. You remember we saw this last week?

[20 : 59] Because that's the way grace works. In Christ, God has accepted me totally, a sinner. It's not based on anything in me. It's based in him. There is no obligation on God to be kind to us, to love us, or to save us.

But he is the God of all grace. That is who he is. He is so rich in mercy, so rich in love, that he sets his greater grace upon us in the person of Jesus Christ.

And by its very nature, his grace multiplies and overflows. And that is completely beyond any of our natural capacities in our flesh. So he says in that little paragraph, I hope you Corinthians understand this, verse 14, that on the day of the Lord Jesus, you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

Because the day of judgment will reveal the truth of the work of God's grace in you and in me. It's going to reveal just how secure God's grace has been. And on that day, brothers and sisters, we will boast in each other, because then we'll really be boasting about God's grace.

That's how God's grace gives us the only true basis for blessing. How many of you ever think about that day when Jesus comes? I mean, we'll be singing and dancing with the pure privilege that we have had.

[22 : 23] And we will know the full acceptance of God. And we'll look at ourselves and say, yes, but we knew it then. We had it then. And that God spread his grace through us to others.

So that's my first point and way the longest point, but it doesn't stop there. We want this grace, but how does it come to us? And in this sermon, there's a long first point and a shorter second point, a very short third point.

So the second point is this, how God's grace comes to us. And this is chapter 1, verse 15 to 22.

There's a particularly venomous accusation against Paul here.

They point out that Paul changed his travel plans. He said he'd immediately come back to them, and he didn't. He wrote the painful letter instead. And the false teachers seize on this inconsistency as something sinister.

And they say, you see, you cannot trust the words that come from the apostle's mouth. He preached a gospel about a suffering, humble Jesus. Our gospel is about a victory, wealth, and health Jesus in this life.

[23 : 37] If you can't trust his travel plans, you can't trust his preaching either. It's an attack on the gospel under the guise of a personal smear. Verse 17.

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? What do you expect him to say next? What would you say next about changed travel plans?

I'd say, look, I never made a firm commitment. It's only reasonable to expect travel plans to change. And then I'd list all the excuses. That's not what Paul does.

Again, he doesn't lift a finger to defend himself. He turns immediately to the real issue, away from himself to God. He says, is the gospel message about Jesus Christ and God's grace in Jesus Christ trustworthy and true?

Verse 18. The first three words are not there in the original. It just starts, God is faithful. Our word to you has not been yes and no.

[24 : 46] Paul doesn't really care what they think of him as a planner. God stands behind the gospel. How does God's grace come to us? Verse 19.

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 him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. There is no deeper yes than we could possibly hear than the yes God says to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

And it's interesting that this passage is full of finance, commerce, measurement words.

It's speaking about evaluation, how we value and esteem things. What we approve and how we get our approval. You know, how we value what's good and true and beautiful.

[25 : 54] Who you want to please. And the Corinthians and their culture had answers to these questions. And it had to do with self-display and self-esteem and the accumulation of wealth. But the apostle is living with a completely different measure.

He's living by grace. And what the gospel of God's grace, his free grace does, is it turns our valuation of what's precious around. Because God relates to us in a way that's completely ridiculous.

Upside down. It's undeserved. It's unearned. It's free, eternal, unlimited. And the fact that grace is free means that you and I operate with a different currency. And it changes the value of everything else. So you see, in the cross of Jesus Christ, we hear God shouting no to his son. So that he can shout yes to you and to me. And every other yes that we hear in our lives is insecure and passing and has limits. And what we need to hear is the eternal voice of God saying his eternal yes to us in our hearts. [27 : 03] Can I hope for anything good? In Jesus, God says yes. Is there any real meaning in my life? In Jesus Christ, God says yes.

Is there someone who really knows me and really accepts me and loves me? In God, in Christ, Jesus, God says yes. And this is such a radical thing that I think the Christian life is a daily growth in the grasp of this one truth. And the lovely thing is that God doesn't just speak to us externally about this. He works internally. If you look down at verse 22. He gives his spirit into our hearts as a guarantee of his yes. We taste the yes of heaven now. And verse 21. Every time we hear the gospel as you're hearing it now. God establishes us. Daily, continually, constantly confirming the yes that he's saying in Jesus Christ. Strengthening in our faith on his faithfulness. I think it's the only... [28 : 10] This is only as we grasp this crazy calculus of grace that we are going to be able to see other things as relative and insecure. And it's only as you start to understand the calculus of God's grace that you begin to give yourselves to God.

If you think God's grace is not quite free or you've got to prove yourself or it might run out somewhere, you'll hold yourself back from him and you'll hold yourself back from each other and from engaging in the city. The more we inwardly digest the gospel and daily understand his grace, he confirms his work in us by his spirit. And we say amen, amen, amen as our lives are turned upside down and we give ourselves to him. That's the second point. But the third point is this. What does that look like? And my third point covers 123 to 211. And it shows how grace works in a community. And he rounds off this section, this passage, by giving us an illustration of how grace works. And as it was read, I hope you noticed how full of pain it was, mostly for Paul. [29 : 22] Because if you are going to live a life of grace and extend grace to others, that's what's going to happen. His determination, he says, is to do what is spiritually beneficial for the Corinthians, even though it opens him to misunderstandings and accusations.

He says, the reason I didn't race back to you with a visit was I wanted to write a letter to give you maximum space for repentance. And look at this letter, verse 4 of chapter 2. I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears. How long is it so you've written something with tears? Not to cause you pain, but to let you know the, here's the overflowing word, the overflowing love that I have for you. It's wonderful. It's the strange calculus of grace again. Paul's love for them is not measured out in milligrams. His overflowing love is the result of God's grace taking hold on his heart. [30 : 25] And in verses 5 to 11, Paul turns to the treatment of the ringleader, the one guy in the Corinth who helped lead the rebellion against him. The church had disciplined this guy and he had come to repentance, but they hadn't lifted the discipline.

And so Paul urges them to comfort him and to restore him, to reaffirm their love for him, because the gospel ultimately is about restoration of fellowship. It's very interesting. As you read this section, Paul never mentions the guy by name, nor what he did. But the key word throughout the section is the word forgive, forgive, forgive, forgive. And it's not the usual word for forgive. It's the word grace gift. Give him grace, Paul says. Verse 10. Anyone you give grace, I also give grace. Indeed, what I have given grace to, I have given grace, if I've given grace in anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we're not ignorant of his designs. [31 : 32] There's this beautiful freedom from self-interest and revenge here, combining the truth and joy. And I think this is, I invite you to reflect on this.

I think this is difficult for us in our West Coast culture. We don't have time to reflect much on this now, but our culture rightly values peace and tolerance.

But it's twisted those things so that no one can really have a moral opinion, particularly if it means saying what someone else has done is wrong. I'm not sure how it works in the marketplace.

But here in the church, the grace of God frees us for true community by recognizing when evil is done, it's evil. When Satan's there, Satan's there. And that forgiveness can be given freely and then cleanly.

And the only way to do that, I think, is to walk in the presence of Christ, who died for us so that we might be forgiven, showing us the limitless grace of Christ. Which means if you are having trouble forgiving someone else or you are struggling with bitterness towards someone else, it means that you're not drawing on the limitless grace, the calculus of grace, the overflowing grace of God to you.

[32 : 46] Because those who are forgiven much love much. When I finished this, when I was in Australia at seminary many, many years ago, there was a set of books that the students my year wanted to order from the United States.

And so I got in contact with a company and I began collecting money. Now, seminary students are poor, wonderfully poor. And I collected the money over a period of months.

And then I made the order and sent the order. And when I sent the order in American money, in those days, the Australian dollar was way stronger than the American dollar, the US dollar.

And I found I had made quite a lot of money on the deal. Hadn't meant to. And so I went back to the guys. I said, I've got all this money. Do you all want it back? And they said, no, no, no.

Give it to... And we chose someone to give it to. And I think that surprise is like the surprise of grace to us. All of a sudden, we discover that God values things that we don't value.

[33 : 52] And in the middle of it, in Jesus Christ, he values me. And that means that his grace can overflow to others. And then we're going to bring that up.

And today we're going to gedaan the to. And Jesus Christ is a greatu salty like that. That means that he will join us in relationships with us. And then if you're not going to make that u campaign, just lograte ■■■■■■. And it's a greatuangan story here.

And so it gives us the forgiveness of people who are left with us. So how we ■ for theset I tube. And that is sweet. And then because ■■■■■■ remains unusual.