

# Glorious Inconsistency

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 20 September 2015

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Let me add my welcome to Jordan's, especially if you're new. My name is Aaron. I would love to say hi to you afterwards. I'm not going to be weird with you. I just want to say hi. I just want to say hi.

So we are in the second week of a new series in 2 Corinthians. And just a reminder. So Paul had planted this church in Corinth, and it was a church that worshipped...

Well, let me say this. It was a city that worshipped looks and sports and money, loved a little bit of upward mobility, and had uncritically taken on some of these values the church had.

Now, when you're reading this here, you've just heard that very well-read passage, and you're reading, and you can tell that, you know, Paul's writing to this church, right? And this little church that he planted.

And you can tell it's not a sort of a, hey guys, just wanted to catch up kind of letter. Just wanted to see how things were going, and here's my, you know, here's my hot tips on Christianity for you.

[ 1 : 12 ] It's not that kind of letter. You can hear he's referencing stuff, and he's talking about stuff, and it's, you can tell... I'll put it like this. Every now and then my mum calls me up, and she goes, Hey, it's mum here.

Everything's okay. And then she just sort of starts chatting away. There's no subtext about the phone call. It's just to really catch up. You can tell there's a subtext here. There is something, something going on.

I mean, look at verse 2 of chapter 2. I made up my mind not to make another painful visit. Verse 4. I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish.

There's a back story here. Something went down that Paul is referencing, and it was ugly. And in order to understand our passage, we need to just work out what happened, get our head around that.

We don't have all the details, but when you read the rest of 2 Corinthians, you can sort of piece it together. So here's basically what the scholars kind of think. Well, mostly people sort of think about what happened. So a little bit of history here.

[ 2 : 15 ] So follow me. All right, so around 50 AD, Paul founds this church, and he sticks around for about 18 months. He writes them a letter. We don't have that letter.

In God's sovereignty, it didn't make it into the canon of Scripture. But the Corinthian church had lots of questions related to that letter, right? And so Paul responded by writing another letter.

What's that letter called? 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians is the second Corinthian letter, okay? That was very unhelpful. Forget I just said that. All right.

At the end of 1 Corinthians, he says this. He goes, I'm going to come and see you after I go to Macedonia. So his plan was to visit them, and his actual plan was to actually visit them twice.

And one of his purposes was to take up an offering. There was lots of poor people in Jerusalem. He was going to take up this big offering and give it out to the poor in Jerusalem.

[ 3 : 13 ] But it all started to go sideways. Before Paul actually got to Corinth, he got Timothy to pop in and see how everything was going, and Timothy reported back that it had all gone sort of pear-shaped in this church.

So Paul changed his travel plans. Instead of going to Macedonia, he went straight to Corinth, and it was a terrible visit. That's what verse 2 is about. That's what he's referring to, the painful visit.

Again, we don't know exactly what happened, but from everything else we read in the book here, we think that basically Paul had this church meeting he was speaking at, and he faced a vitriolic opposition, one person in particular, one person in particular.

And the church, the majority of the church, didn't shut the guy down, didn't discipline him. This is the, let's call him the offender, okay? Didn't shut down the offender, didn't discipline. They stood by silently and just kind of let it happen.

So Paul left. Now remember, he was going to visit them twice, but instead of heading back to Corinth later on after going to Macedonia, he wrote them another letter, the letter he calls his severe letter later on in Corinthians.

What's that letter called? Don't give it a number. It'll confuse you. It's just called the severe letter. We don't have it. Again, in God's providence, it wasn't part of God's plan for that to be part of Scripture.

[ 4 : 32 ] Probably good. We'd probably love to quote it to each other. Anyway, the letter asks the church, the letter says, Church, you need to discipline this guy.

You need to sort this out. You need to discipline this guy. And you guys need to repent. Because you stood by when it was all going sideways. Anyway, this severe letter turned out to be very effective, mostly effective.

And they disciplined this individual, and there was repentance on the part of the majority of the people in the congregation. But there still was this minority of opposition. And remember from last week, there's some dodgy kind of false leaders kind of sniffing around, some stupid stuff, changing the gospel, calling Paul weak and flaky and all of that.

All right. Hold that background just sort of out here somewhere in your mind as we start talking about the text now. Now, if you think about it, based on the sort of background that you know now, you can see that when Paul's writing this letter, he's actually got sort of three people he's writing to, three groups, right?

So he's got the people that have repented of their rebellion. He wants to encourage them. That's good. He's got those, this little group, that is this minority group that is, he wants to win back, that's still questioning him.

[ 5 : 51 ] And then he has to counter the influence of the false prophets. Now, the way he does that, in the section we have anyway, this is not a framework for the sermon, but just sort of a mental framework for you, is he contrasts grace, the works of grace with the works of flesh.

And that comes out of the two topics that he talks about. Now, if you listen closely to the readings, he dealt with two main things here. He dealt with his travel plans, which seems like an odd thing to deal with in a letter, right?

Travel plans. And he deals with the individual, the offender who was opposing him. He talks about these people. Right. That was a lot of information.

You know, you've had those friends that call you up and all they do is talk for half an hour, and you just sort of tune out, and you're like, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I've got, I've got, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. I feel a bit like, I feel like, yeah, you know it, eh?

You know it, man. Those people, man. I feel a bit like that. I've dumped a whole lot of information on you. So, if you tuned out during that intro, now is the time to tune back in, okay?

[ 6 : 58 ] Because we're going to talk about the actual passage of Scripture. So, two big sections. The change in travel plans, Paul talks about, and it's important that he talks about that.

How the church is going to treat this guy that really opposed him. So, let's first talk about the travel plans. You're all tuned back in. Fantastic. Let me read to you 15 to 17. Because of, I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first so that you might have a second chance of grace.

I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me away on my way to Judea. So, he explains what he was going to do. That's, you know. 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? I talked about my love of American politics last week, so forgive me.

Here. Hillary Clinton. You know her opponents have seized upon this email controversy about the server, like she used some dodgy server or something, and they are using that to question her trustworthiness.

[ 8 : 03 ] You've probably read that, right? It's fascinating. It's really interesting stuff. So, she's having a hard time getting out from underneath that, right? This is exactly what's happening with Paul. As we talked about, Paul changed his mind about traveling to Corinth.

He actually changed it twice. The first change he mentions in verse 15 here. Instead of one visit, two. He would take up two offerings for the poor. And then he changed it again after the painful visit. He says, I'm not going back. I'm going to write you a letter instead. That's in verse 2. Well, the prophets, that we'll read about this later on, are like, do you see people?

Do you see? You see that guy, Paul? He just changes his mind willy-nilly. He's a flip-flopper. You can't trust a flip-flopper. They're thinking, this is the stuff that they're saying to the congregation. You can't trust him. He's not hearing from God, is he? He's not in touch with the Spirit. If he was hearing from God, he wouldn't have to change his plans. He would know right from the start what he was going to do.

[ 9 : 04 ] See, that's what the false teachers are saying. This is the accusation that Paul is addressing. So all the stuff about change of plans and my flip-flopper, my yes-yes, all of that is addressing the accusation that he is flaky and he's not hearing from God.

And Paul responds in this amazing way. First he says, look, my initial plan was changed from one visit to two. Why? It says it here. So you might have a second experience of grace.

In verse 15. He's talking about, so I could take up two offerings for the poor, not just one. He was really excited about that. And he knows that giving to God's work is a, that demonstrates that God has done a miraculous work in your heart because you are giving off something that's very precious to you.

And if you can do that joyfully, wow, God has done something in your heart. So he changes his plan, Paul, to give them two opportunities to do that because giving is a privilege and it means God's grace is working in them.

So Paul's motivation was so that they could experience more of God's grace. Now, as you know, Paul changed that plan again after the painful visit.

[ 10 : 15 ] And he explains his second change of plans in verses 23 to 3. Now, I'm going to summarize what I just said before, okay? So we'll come back to that. 23 to 3.

Let me just read a couple of verses here. But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you, S-P-A-R-E, spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we'll work with you for joy, for you stand firm in the faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one who I've pained?

And I wrote as I did so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. Okay, it's slightly, it's not comedically intuitive, but here's what's going on.

So remember, he had this horrible visit and instead of going back, on the way back to Macedonia, he writes them a letter instead. Now, why did he change his plans? Was he weak?

[ 11 : 15 ] Like the false teachers are saying. Was he not hearing from God? Is he just not in touch with the spirit? You know? No.

He reminds us, for the first reason he changed his plan, this wasn't a lack of guidance, but it was a response, it was a response to God's grace. He wanted them to experience God's grace doubly, right? Two chances to give.

What a wonderful thing. It's the same here. If he went back for another painful visit, he's saying here, he would have to punish people. He would have to come to that place. He would have to maybe excommunicate this person.

It would be a joyless occasion. So he changed his plans, verse 23 says, to spare them, to spare them. He writes to them instead. He's not a coward.

It's not that he can't face rejection. It was for their sake that he wrote, instead of visiting, he was extending grace to them. He was extending mercy to them. He wrote, giving them an opportunity to repent of what happened and make things right.

[ 12 : 16 ] Because if he had to go back straight away, he would have to come back. He's the leader of that church. He is like the, kind of like the bishop of the area, right? He would have to come back and bring the hammer. It's the same reason, look, if you want a very big analogy, how this reflects God's grace, it's the same reason that Christ hasn't returned for 2,000 years.

It's not like God is up there just going, oh, I just can't handle, I don't want to deal with the end of the world judgment. It's going to be messy. It's going to be awful. Of course, this is ridiculous, right? That's not Paul.

God is long-suffering. God is patient. The reason there's a gap between Christ's ascension and Christ's return is so that you have an opportunity to repent, so that I have an opportunity to repent, so that your children have an opportunity to know God and your children's children, et cetera, et cetera.

God has given us 2,000 years of long-suffering and patience. So that many people can come to know him. See, the character of God is Paul's guiding principle for making his decisions here. Now, that's a really big line. If you remember nothing, remember this. The character of God is Paul's guiding principle for his decision-making. It's not flaky. He's not unspiritual.

[13:38] He's not in touch with the spirit. He's reflecting the character of God. I hope you see what motivates Paul here. He's accused of being not spiritual enough, not in touch, accused of being weak, we can see.

We could talk about the guidance thing a little bit here, so maybe I will just for like 30 seconds. So we may have this idea that guidance is this, let's say, working at what to do in your life, God sends you puzzles and you've got to solve them.

I see a window, God wants me to be a window. We see all these little puzzles and we're trying to put it all together. What does God want me to do? God can speak to you directly and clearly about something.

You should marry this person. You should take this job. You should go to this country. But you know what? I think the main way we are guided, that God guides us, is you just get to know the character and purposes of God and make that a pattern for your life.

I think this is what verse 18 is about and why the passage seems to go in this direction all of a sudden. Verse 18, As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no.

[14:44] As surely as God is faithful. Do you see what he's doing here? Paul has a God-centered view of life. He knows the character of God and that guides his decisions.

That's why in the middle of the chapter, he goes into this beautiful description about the faithfulness of God because that's the character he's trying to reflect. That's the God that he serves.

Let's have a really quick look at that and this is a slight sort of excursus of the main point, but we'll come back to the other ideas. Here we go. Verse 19, do you see what he says there? For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in him it's always yes.

For all the promises of God find the yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. And these are great lines. Listen to these. It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us and who has put his seal on us and given us his spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

Goodness, what a great passage there. All of the promises of God find the yes in him. What does that mean? Is God faithful? That's the question. Is God faithful? Well, all the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ.

[15:59] That's what it means. So you can probably trust God. 20, 21 there. Do you see these four things that Paul talks about God, about God's faithfulness, about God's character?

He says, God establishes us in Christ. It's God who's made you a Christian. The second thing, you are anointed in verse 21. What does that mean there? It means anointed, something that's set apart for God's purposes.

The third thing it says there, he's put a seal on you. What does that mean? You know, like in, you've seen those people, like a letter and they fold it up and they pour some wax and they put the stamp on it. Well, back in the days, kings used those and it means that this, this thing belongs to the king. It means you belong to God. As God, don't, don't tamper with this, don't mess with this. This envelope, don't mess with it. This is the king's. God's put a seal on you. You are God's.

It's saying, don't mess with this person. This is, this is God's person. You are God's person. You belong to him. Lastly, it's this really interesting line here. It says, has given us his spirit and our hearts is a guarantee.

[17:06] What does that mean? It's borrowing from the language of the marketplace there. It was a commercial term. It's like a deposit, like a lay by. You put, you put money down and it's a guarantee that that thing is yours and it's going to be paid off in full later on.

So this is a down payment on something to be paid off full later on. So God's spirit, the Holy Spirit in you is a promise, is God's promise to you that in the coming age when Christ returns, you will be

with him for eternity.

Isn't that great stuff? Fantastic stuff, right? Wonderful, encouraging stuff. So why is Paul talking about, he's just talking about travel plans. I've changed my travel plans. He's very dense theology. Why? You see what he does? He shifts the focus away from himself to the faithfulness of God because they accuse him of being flaky and spiritual. He says, he says this, my mission, my decisions are grounded on the character of God and let me tell you about God's character and then he does.

He says, all these things that I've done that you think are odd or you accuse me of this and that. They're totally in sync with gospel priorities. Okay, so the first thing he does, he talks about his travel plans.

[18:28] Second thing he does really quickly, much quicker, is he talks about how the church is dealing with the, you know, the great offender that opposed Paul in such a painful way.

That's verses 5 to 8 of chapter 2. Let me remind you of what it says there. Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you for such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough.

So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. Very interesting, right? So this guy that opposed Paul in his last visit, the church has since disciplined him and now what does Paul say they should do?

What's Paul's major concern here? His concern is a gospel concern that reflects the character of God. What does he want for this guy?

He wants reconciliation and forgiveness. Remember that in the severe letter, he rebukes the church for not disciplining this guy and now his concern is like, don't go too far.

[19:42] Don't keep punishing this guy. It says, the punishment's enough. It's enough. He mentions two dangers here. One, the danger for the individual and one, and the other, a danger for the church.

The danger for the individual is the guy's going to be overwhelmed by guilt. In verse 7, he might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. The overwhelmed word in Greek, it is a picture of drowning.

The guy's just drowning in guilt. I mean, of course, this can happen, right? People become so overwhelmed by guilt, sin in their life that they can't get past it. What do they do?

They leave the church, leave the faith. Paul says, this person's repented. The church needs to be called to embrace him. So verse 7, it says, forgive him for discipline's been enough and comfort him.

And he does a remarkable thing. Paul begs the church to comfort him. Come alongside him. Tell him you love him. And Paul says, I forgive him. And again, I'm going to keep coming back to this point.

[20:45] What's Paul's motivation here? Is it a good PR move on his part? No, his life, his decisions, his position on this, it's shaped by the gospel of grace.

This guy who tried to ruin my church, forgive him, love him, and do it intentionally. Come around him. The second danger here is a danger to the whole church.

Verse 10 and 11, anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I've forgiven, if I've forgiven 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. The last bit of the chapter gets really serious. Paul's saying, there's a danger that Satan will use the situation against the church.

Because look, think about it. What's going to keep a church weak? What will keep us as a community weak? Lots of things. But you know one of them?

[21:49] Lack of reconciliation. Lack of forgiveness. An over-eagerness to punish people who have hurt us. A lack of desire to welcome people back in who have made sort of not great decisions.

That lack of reconciliation, that will weaken our community. And Paul mentions it here. And he says, that's a plan from Satan. And we know this.

You know, we know that that's our sort of hearts are slippery. Slippery things. And we actually like to hold grudges, don't we?

Well, I do sometimes. Paul begs them, intentionally love this person. Because reconciliation is something that should characterize us as a community.

Okay, let me finish up here with just a couple of final thoughts, rounding it all out. So Paul, the founder and leader of this church plant in Corinth, he's been accused of being weak, a flip-flopper, a bit flaky.

[ 22 : 59 ] The false teachers are driven by the flesh. And how does Paul respond to them? Well, not the way that our hearts would likely want to respond sometimes.

He responds like someone whose heart and life has been shaped by the gospel of grace. So let me throw out a couple of questions for you to think about. And what are you letting shape your heart?

What is driving your decisions in life? Because there's something shaping your life, right?

Something's doing that. You are letting something tell you the story of your life.

And what are you letting tell the story of your life? Is it the story of a faithful, gracious, merciful God who wants to forgive you and love you and wants to spend eternity with you?

And that message embodied in the person of Christ, is that the story that's shaping your life?

Shaping all your decisions? Or is it something else? Folks, let it be the story of God, would you?

[ 24 : 14 ] Let it be the story of God. Because if you do that, folks, that changes everything. It changes your priorities. It changes your values. It changes how you make decisions.

It changes how you respond to people that have hurt you deeply. It changes how you deal with the very messy relationships that we all have in our lives.

paths. And that will require you to do the work of bringing your slippery heart to the cross. So would you do that?

Amen. Amen.