

WHEN YOU ARE MISUNDERSTOOD

by Ray C. Stedman

Our subject this morning is how to handle misunderstanding.

I wish we could take time to ask how many of you are going through a time of being misunderstood, of having your motives misjudged and your actions misinterpreted, of experiencing something that you meant to be taken one way being taken in quite a different light.

We have a classic case of a misunderstanding here, in Chapter 1 of Second Corinthians, that will help us in handling such matters. This is the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, but we call it Second Corinthians because two of the letters he wrote are missing. In this section he is sharing certain experiences which come from being a Christian in a pagan world.

Last week we saw how he spoke about the universal tendency toward pressure and stress and the afflictions of life. We saw how God has given us a source of strengthening so we can handle the pressure. Now, today, beginning with Verse 12, we are going to be looking at a misunderstanding that developed between Paul and the church at Corinth, and of his hungering for vindication, his desire to correct and straighten out this matter.

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God. For we write you nothing but what you can read and understand; I hope you will understand fully, as you have understood in part, that you can be proud of us as we can be of you, on the day of the Lord Jesus. {2 Cor 1:12-14 RSV}

Paul has not yet mentioned the problem that caused the misunderstanding (we will look at that in a few moments), but it is interesting that he starts out by making plain to the Corinthians that his conscience is clear in the whole matter. He wants them to understand that this is not merely a defensive reaction on his part, but that his actions, no matter how they may have seen them, are clear before God.

When you are misunderstood about something, when somebody misjudges you, the first thing you have to ask yourself, as a Christian, is, "Is there anything about this that God condemns? Have I really done anything wrong? Does my conscience bother me about any part of this?" If it does, then your first step, of course, has got to be to confess that, to acknowledge it and admit that you have done something wrong. There may be many elements about the situation you are facing that you feel justified in, but there may be parts of it, at least, where you did something wrong. You may have lost your temper, you may have said some cruel or unkind things, you may have retaliated against someone. If that is the case, then that is where you have to start; you have to have a clear conscience before you can go on. Much of the strife between people comes from their unwillingness to clear their consciences at the very beginning.

Notice how Paul does this. He sees no deviation from his normal pattern of behavior. He consistently seeks to be an open, out-front person who is not trying to hide anything, who is not trying to resort to guile or what he calls "fleshly wisdom," manipulating, here. He has done something that has, apparently, offended some of these Corinthians, but he wants them to know that, as far as his standing before God is concerned, his conscience is clear. Then, he hopes to make them understand.

That is what Verse 13 means: "We write you nothing but what you can read and understand." He is going to try to clear this up. He hopes that they will be able to grasp it fully as he explains it to them, because he longs to restore a kind of a mutual sense of pride in one another. This is what believers ought to keep constantly striving for, a clearness of relationship with each other. It is important to notice that Paul makes a real effort to clear up this misunderstanding.

Some people adopt the attitude, "Well, I am just going to forget it and hope the whole thing will disappear." But the trouble with that is that it usually does not disappear. Misunderstanding can lie hidden in the heart; you may think you have dismissed it or forgotten it, but actually it is just festering away, smoldering like a fire that refuses to go out. Sometimes, unexpectedly, it bursts into flames; you are angry at somebody and you hardly realize why; but it is because something has been left unsettled.

Everywhere in the Word of God we are taught that, as Christians, we must not let things lie unsettled. If we are upset about something, or we feel someone is upset at us, then we have to do something about it. That is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift," {Matt 5:23-24 RSV}. Clear relationships are tremendously important. When they are neglected, strife, schism, division, hurt and pain in a church are the results.

Paul explains what the trouble was, Verse 15:

Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double pleasure, I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans like a worldly man, ready to say Yes and No at once? {2 Cor 1:15-17 RSV}

The problem, of course, was that Paul had "Plan A" in mind that he had written to these Corinthians about. That involved leaving Ephesus, where he had been living, and crossing the Aegean Sea, directly to Corinth, and visiting them to help work out the problems they were having in the church. From there he planned to travel by land up through northern Greece into Macedonia, to the cities of Thessalonica and Philippi, where he had planted churches, and return again to Corinth, thus giving them what he calls here the "double pleasure" of his visit. He expected them to help him take ship from Corinth to Jerusalem to bring the gifts of the church to the poor starving saints there. This was his original plan, "Plan A." But he did not do it, as he tells us in Chapter 16 of First Corinthians, Verses 5-9:

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may speed me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. {1 Cor 16:5-9 RSV}

Now, that was "Plan B." It involved Paul's going directly from Ephesus into Macedonia, and working his way down the coast at last to Corinth; then, after one visit there, having them help him on his way to Jerusalem and Judea. Now to us, at this remote date, his changing his plans seems an awfully silly thing to get upset about. After all, transportation was difficult and uncertain in those days. Communication was even more so; there was no way he could let them know of the change of plan. Yet it is very apparent, from Verse 17, that they were upset about this and their accusations were coming strong against him. (Titus had probably brought him word that there were some who had accused him of being fickle and changeable and unreliable. There was a group in Corinth who opposed Paul anyhow, and they were quick to seize on this as good proof of their charges that he behaved just like everyone else, that he was an unreliable individual.)

Paul suggests, too, that some were actually saying that he lived just like a worldly man, a non-Christian, that whatever was convenient, he did, and he did not bother to try to keep his word in any way.

You know, it is always interesting to me how these letters, written in the 1st century, find such a remarkable correspondence to what goes on in our lives today. One of the major problems among Christians, especially younger Christians, is that they have not yet seen that what ought to be characteristic of them is faithfulness to their commitments. If you say you are going to be somewhere, then either be there or let someone know why you cannot be there. It is amazing, and discouraging sometimes, to me to see how many Christians, even older Christians, will say they are going to do something, or be some place, and then never show up, never let

anyone know, and show no sense of responsibility for fulfilling the promise and the commitment they made.

That, of course, as Paul puts it here, is the characteristic of a "worldly man," of a non-Christian. It shows no sense of the faithfulness, the responsibility that a Christian ought to have.

Paul now begins to explain what the true situation was:

You will find it here in Verse 18 of Chapter 1, down through Verse 4 of Chapter 2. (Once again we have one of those unhelpful chapter divisions where someone has put a "2" there to interrupt the thought of the apostle. Ignore the division; it will be very helpful if you do.) Paul's explanation of what is going on falls into two major divisions: 18 through 22, and then 23 through Verse 4.

His first word is a wonderful statement of the divine provision for Spirit-led guidance:

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. {2 Cor 1:18 RSV}

Notice he does not say, "Yes or No." There is nothing wrong with saying "No" sometimes. We have to say "No" to many invitations to make a commitment. But if you say "Yes," then intend to fulfill it; that is what Paul is saying. Or if you say "No," then mean it. Jesus said this, didn't he? "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one," {Matt 5:37 NIV}. As Christians we must learn to keep our word on these matters. What is wrong is saying "Yes" but meaning "No," telling somebody you are going to be some place but really having no intention of being there, going to do something but having no intention of doing so, or saying you will not do something and yet having every intention of doing it.

Paul goes on to explain where he is coming from:

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached 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 we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. {2 Cor 1:18-22 RSV}

Let us look at that for a moment.

That is a great theological statement.

Paul is basically saying that no Christian can give a Yes and No commitment. That is contrary to the nature of a Christian, because it is contrary to the nature of God. God is not like that; he is faithful, Paul says. When God says "Yes," then it is an eternal "Yes." He will never take it back. When God says "No," he means "No." He never says "Yes" and means "No." Paul is saying that God's promises are always positive promises. Have you noticed that in the Scriptures? In Christ, it is always "Yes," Paul says. Whatever God promises, and you come to him in the name of Jesus and ask for, the answer is always "Yes." That is what he is saying, ultimately, "Yes." God's promises are for blessing, not for cursing.

That is very clear in the great word in John 3 where Jesus said, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him," {John 3:17 RSV}. Now there is going to be condemnation, but that is not God's intent or purpose. All the promises do not deal with condemnation; they deal with salvation; they are offered to us to deliver us. Jesus did not come to kill; he came to revive and to give life. "I am come," he said, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly," {John 10:10 KJV}. God does not come to reject, but to restore. I have always loved that great word of the prophet Isaiah, where he is picturing God at work. He says he comes "to give beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness," {Isa 61:3 KJV}. That is the positive activity of God.

Now, according to the statement here, all this is available to us in Christ. And it is made real. We actually begin to experience it when we say "Amen" to God's promise. This passage is rather obscure in the King James Version, where it says, "For all the promises of God in him [Christ] are yea, and in him Amen" -- as though Christ is saying both the "yes" and the "Amen." But the Revised text here makes it very clear that it is God who in Christ says, "Yes," and it is we who are to add the "Amen."

That is why I love to preach in black churches. I get a lot of "Amens." It is very dull preaching to white people because they just sit and look at you. But it is encouraging to get an "Amen" once in a while, which is our way of saying, "I agree. I believe that. I accept that. That is for me."

What the text is saying here is that God gives you a promise in Christ. There are hundreds of them, and he offers you something in every one. When you read one and you say, "That's for me Lord. I want that," and on the basis of that you begin to obey the qualification or the commitment that promise demands, then the promise begins to be real in your life. It is we who say the "Amen." God's positive supply actually appears when we obey from the depths of our being and say a resounding "Amen" to what he has said. The way to find God's blessing, then, is to respond to his promise by stepping out on what he says, taking it to yourself, and saying, "Lord, that is mine. Amen, I believe."

Paul further adds that God has given provision for understanding that promise, and for obeying it by the presence of the Spirit in our lives. As you meditate on the promises of God, the Spirit of God is given to you to teach you what that means, and how it applies to you. That is the work of the Spirit. He is not given to us to give us a good feeling now and then, or to take us to heaven when we die, though he does all those things. He is given to us to open our minds to understand how the promises of God affect us, and what God is saying to us in them. And it is always in line with grammatical rules and interpretative principles. The Spirit never denies that; he understands the rules of language, grammar, etc., and it is helpful to us to know them. But, nevertheless, ultimately it is the Spirit of God who brings a promise home to us and makes it alive to us, and who then offers to empower us to obey it.

Many times when we are faced with a promise of God, because we are sinful creatures, we do not want to obey.

I have many times had this experience of knowing that there was something God wanted me to do (or perhaps not to do), and I did not want to obey him. I knew there would be a promise of relief, or help, or blessing if I would do it, but every fiber of my rebellious being cried out against doing it; and I found it difficult to make myself do it. Well, that is where the Spirit comes in. A non-Christian would simply not do it. Non-Christians live by their feelings: "Whatever feels good, I give myself to. Whatever does not feel good, I do not want any part of." That is the way of the world, but a Christian is not to do that; he is to obey God. If he has difficulty doing so he is to rely upon the fact that the Spirit of God is in him to give him ability to act when he wills to act. When you choose to obey, the power to do so is always given by the Spirit of God. You can do what God wants. This is what Paul is bringing out here.

Let us now link this with the context. Why did Paul change his plan? That is what the Corinthians wanted to know. Why did he say he was going to come directly to Corinth, and would come twice to the city, but instead did not come directly -- he went by way of Macedonia -- and he came only once? Well, Paul has been saying because the Spirit of God opened his eyes to see factors in the situation that made him change his mind. He could see that the great promises of blessing that God had for this church at Corinth would only be fulfilled if he did not come directly to Corinth, but instead went to Macedonia and waited for Titus there. So, convinced of the Spirit, and in obedience to what he saw of the Spirit's teaching in this regard, with a clear conscience, Paul changed his original plan and went instead to Macedonia instead of Corinth.

In Verse 23 of Chapter 1 on through Verse 4 of Chapter 2, he tells us the two things the Spirit showed him that made him change his mind. You are getting a very practical passage here on how the Spirit of God works to help us understand. Here is the first reason that Paul gives, Verse 23:

But I call God to witness against me -- it was to spare you that I refrained from coming to Corinth. {2 Cor 1:23 RSV}

That is reason number one. He did not come because he wanted to spare them.

Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. {2 Cor 1:24 RSV}

What he is saying is, he refrained from coming in order to preserve their freedom to act only as they were convinced the Lord wanted them to act, and not because he said so. Now this is a very important principle, because here the apostle is challenging one of the widespread misunderstandings in the church in our day. Paul says, "Look, I am not your boss. If I had come to Corinth the way I had originally planned, after having already paid you a painful visit, it's very likely that my powerful personality, my strong will, my position as a respected apostle would have put such pressure upon you that you would have obeyed me, but not out of conviction that was what the Lord wanted you to do. So I did not come, in order that you might preserve freedom to do what God wants, not what I want." If he had come he would have given them the impression that he had authority over them. But that is not true, he says, "We are not lords over your faith. We are not your boss. We have no authority to tell you what to do or what to say or how to act, but rather" (in a beautiful phrase he puts it), "we are helpers of your joy." That is wonderful, isn't it?

Paul sees himself as a fellow worker, standing alongside them, helping them to understand what God wants so they would enter into the joy of the Lord. But he is not their boss.

One of the major problems the church is facing in our day is the widespread tendency to misunderstand the nature of authority and leadership within the church, the practice of having somebody who is regarded as the ultimate boss, and everybody has to get directions and permission from him to do anything. I run into this everywhere. I have often said that if we Protestants are right when we say to the Catholics that God never intended to have one man, a pope, over the whole church, it is no improvement to have one in every church.

Leaders in the church are not bosses. This is a common misconception in our day. Many churches look to *the* pastor -- you never see that term in Scripture; there are pastors, but never *the* pastor -- these churches look to *the* pastor for authority, for permission even to exercise their spiritual gifts. More and more now, as I travel around the country, I am telling congregations,

"Look, you do not have to ask your pastor whether you can teach in your home or not. You do not have to go to the pastor to get permission to use your spiritual gift. He did not give it to you. The Lord did, and you are responsible to him for the exercise of that spiritual gift, not to the pastor. Now the pastor is your helper; he is there to encourage you and to help you to understand what these gifts are, how to recognize yours, etc., but you are not responsible to him for exercising it. He is responsible to his Lord to help you put it together with others and to maintain unity within the church, but not to govern what ministry you have. That comes from the Lord himself. He is the Head of the church, the body."

I hardly know any principle or concept in the church that is more missing and misunderstood than that concept today. In First Peter, Chapter 5, Peter says that elders are not to be "lords over God's heritage," {1 Pet 5:3 KJV}. That is what Paul is referring to here. We are not lords, he says, not that we lord it over your faith. The word "heritage" there, in 1 Peter 5, *kleros*, "inheritance," is the word from which we get our English word, "clergy." It is interesting, is it not, that Peter is saying to the men whom we call "clergy" not to lord it over the real clergy, the laity. It is the people who are the ministers of God. It is the people who are to carry on the work of the church, and exercise its ministry out in the world, in every place. It is not up to anybody to be boss in the church. As Jesus himself put it, "one is your Master, and all you are brothers," {cf, Matt 23:8 KJV}. We are to help one another.

Even the mighty Apostle Paul himself clearly acknowledges this here. So he says, "That is why I did not come. I did not want to disturb that relationship. I did not want to preempt authority over you that belonged only to the Lord himself." As he himself put it in Romans 14: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand," {Rom 14:4 RSV}. I love Phillips' rendition of that, "God is well able to transform men into servants that are satisfactory." Paul recognizes this.

His second reason is given in Verses 1-4:

For I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have 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, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote 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 2:1-4 RSV}

To put it briefly, his second reason for not coming was because the Spirit led him to see that he had already caused pain enough by his letters and his painful visit. If that would do the work, then there is no point in adding any more to it.

Paul is like a skillful surgeon. The surgeon has to cut people, but a good surgeon cuts only as much as he has to. He derives no joy out of cutting people's bodies open to remove the tumor, or the cancer, or whatever. As soon as that is done, and thoroughly done, he stops cutting, because he does not like to create pain.

That is what Paul is saying here. "I wrote to you a sharp and painful letter." (Some think it is what we call First Corinthians. Other scholars say, "No, there is another letter here he is referring to that is lost to us." I do not know which is the case; I lean toward the latter view that there is another letter we do not have.) At any rate, Paul says, "I have already caused you much pain by what I wrote. The Spirit has shown me that if I came again I would just cause more pain; that might be quite unnecessary, so that is why I did not come, because," as he puts it so beautifully, "I don't want to cause you pain. When you hurt, I hurt. Who is going to make me glad if I unnecessarily cause you to hurt? I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears."

What a beautiful picture of this great apostle writing, the tears flowing from his eyes. "I want you to see that, behind the writing, and the sharp rebukes, there is not a desire to hurt you, but a great heart of love that is unwilling to let you miss the love and the joy of God. That is why I wrote."

This is a marvelous picture of the spirit in which we ought to handle misunderstandings. Not to hurt in return, not to retaliate, not to try to get even because somebody has misunderstood us, but to explain it as plainly and simply and clearly as we can, always with the intention that if there is anything hurtful to be said that it be as minimal as possible; and that we affirm our love and our concern for the individual involved. That is the way Paul did it.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you that your program is no different in the 20th century than it was in the 1st. Your provision is still the same, you put your mighty Spirit in our hearts to awaken desires within us, to obey and claim the mighty promises that you have given to us, and that you have awakened in our hearts a desire to say a responding, a resounding "Amen" to what you have promised. Grant to us now freedom and an obedient heart to claim these for ourselves. In the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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