

Faithfulness II Corinthians 1:12-2:3

How do we feel about someone when he or she breaks a promise to us? The answer depends a lot on your history with that person, doesn't it? Let's say Joe is one of those guys who always says, "I'll take care of it," but then never does. He's the one who returns the RSVP card, but then doesn't make the party. He's always got some excuse, and it's never a good one. So, if he breaks a golf date with you, you just chalk it up to his basic unreliability – you wouldn't bother calling him to see if he's ok.

On the other hand, let's say Mary is one of those dependable people, someone who says she'll do a job and always gets it done ahead of schedule and under budget. And if she says she'll show up somewhere, you can count on her being there at least 15 minutes early. Okay, so if Mary is a member of a committee and isn't on time for a regularly scheduled meeting, chances are you're on the phone to her, and if she doesn't answer, you might even head to the emergency room. I mean, something really bad must have happened to her, right?

What do you do when someone breaks a promise? That's the question that arose among the Corinthian Christians. Given Paul's comments in verses 15 and 16, he had apparently said he would visit them twice – first to pass through on his way from Ephesus, which is in what we now call Western Turkey, to Macedonia, the part of Greece north of Corinth. Then, he intended to come back to Corinth before setting sail for Jerusalem, where he planned to deliver an offering to the church to help its needy members. In short, Paul had promised to come to Corinth, but then apparently hadn't shown up.

So, why does Paul bother to rehearse these travel plans that had had to be changed? Because the Corinthians were apparently treating him like your unreliable golf buddy Joe instead of your super-dependable friend Mary. Even though Paul had been the organizing pastor of the church at Corinth, their opinion of him had obviously deteriorated so significantly that they were willing to assume the worst of him when he had to change his plans.

We'll find out more about why Paul and the Corinthians had gotten so crossed up later in the letter. But for today, let's focus on the relationship between this pastor and his people, and what it can teach us about how we should treat our fellow Christians. What should we do when others disappoint us in one way or another? And how should our relationship with Christ affect the way we see our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Well, just as in the case of Joe and Mary, we should always consider current behavior in the context of someone's personal history. This is exactly what Paul tries to get the Corinthians to do in verse 12. He reminds the Corinthians of what they have long known about him – that he was a man of good conscience and of godly sincerity, someone who tried to live a holy life, relying on the grace of God. In verse 13, he reminds them of his honest, straightforward communication style – that instead of trying to read between the lines, they should take what he writes at face value. In verse 14, he goes so far as to say that instead of criticizing him for unreliability, their prior knowledge of Paul should make them as proud of him as he is of them.

So, if someone lets you down, it's just not wise to treat any one incident as a general indicator of his or her character. Instead, we all need to take a step back and look at the whole picture, trying to focus on a person's good qualities, which in Paul's case were numerous. Even unreliable Joe might be a

lot of fun to be around because of his easygoing nature. In fact, he might be better at getting along with people than super-reliable Mary. In other words, Joe's obvious weakness might, in another context, be a source of strength.

But in addition to putting whatever failures someone might have into the context of his whole life story, we should also consider his intentions for disappointing us. Paul certainly wanted the Corinthians to do that. In verse 15, he insists that the only reason he had planned to make his trip to see them was so that they might receive a blessing – perhaps of the sort of healing miracles that were characterizing his ministry in Ephesus at that time, but certainly from his immense Biblical learning. Moreover, Paul wanted to give them the blessing of helping the needy in Jerusalem, not only by making a contribution themselves, but in helping him get to Jerusalem, perhaps by assisting him with travel expenses. In short, he had planned to come to see them for their sake.

Moreover, the first few verses of chapter 2 tell us that Paul changed his plans for exactly the same reason. Again, we'll look at the details as we get further into the letter, but Paul had become aware that many of the Corinthian Christians had developed hard feelings toward him. Paul thus knew that a visit from him at that particular time might not have the uplifting, encouraging, beneficial effect for which he had hoped. So, just as he had planned to visit them for their sake, he changed his plans for their sake as well, wanting to avoid causing them any increase of sorrow.

This is a good thing for all of us to keep in mind when others let us down, for we don't always see the big picture. For example, if I were to see a bunch of cars at my neighbor's house at supper time, I might get sore, because he invited a bunch of friends over to eat and left me out. But what if he was frying chicken or grilling sausages and knows I can't eat greasy food? Maybe he didn't invite me for my own good. Maybe he was trying to do what's best for me after all.

And we certainly need to keep these sorts of intentions in mind when we feel that God has let us down. Many times, God doesn't give us what we want because what we want is not what is best for us. So, whatever plans we make, whatever we intend to do, we must not only look out for the best interests of others. We must also seek to do God's will, and not our own. And we must always be willing to change our plans if God changes our circumstances, even if that means that we, or others, end up disappointed.

And Paul indicates this sort of God-centered motivation in verse 17. He insists that he is neither making plans nor changing his plans according to the flesh, that is, just because of what feels good to him, or what makes sense to him. Far from being selfish, he insists that he was only seeking to do what was best for the Corinthians, and what was therefore in accordance with God's will.

And why was Paul so willing to be flexible? You may have known some people who stick to their guns no matter what, because they don't want anyone to think they made a mistake, or perhaps because they think that changing course is somehow a sign of weakness. But even though Paul wanted the Corinthians to remember how good a life he had tried to live and even though he wanted them to know that his intentions were to bring good to them and glory to God, Paul's main concern here is not to burnish his own image, to make himself look good. And that's because Paul knew that it wasn't his own faithfulness that was really most important. Instead, he points to God's grace, to God's faithfulness. Ultimately, Paul cared a lot less about what people thought of him than he cared about what they thought of God.

For isn't God's faithfulness central to the gospel? God's people had been hearing His promises for years and years through the prophets. God had promised Eve that one of her descendants would crush the head of the serpent someday, destroying the power of evil over humanity. God had promised Abraham that one of his descendants would bring blessing to all the nations of the world. God had promised David that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever and ever.

Moreover, through the whole system of animal sacrifices, which had been offered every day for hundreds and hundreds of years, God was promising that a fuller, a more complete sacrifice would be made for sin someday. When the High Priest went into the Tabernacle and then the Temple once a year to purify it with blood, God was promising that a greater High Priest would come, offering His own blood to atone for the sins of the world.

And now, as Paul reminds us in verse 20, in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, God has kept every single one of these promises. That is precisely the good news that Paul and Silas and Timothy had been preaching in Corinth, the good news that we find throughout the Scriptures – that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world, whose blood shed on the cross is sufficient to wash away all our sins; that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, by whose resurrection and ascension into Heaven has destroyed the power of sin and death; that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who deserves the love, the devotion, and the allegiance of all the nations on earth.

And if we keep the gospel in mind, if we keep Jesus Christ first and foremost in our hearts, we won't get so upset with other Christians when they let us down. For in the light of the cross, aren't we all sinners in need of a Savior? So if someone else's flaws and shortcomings get under my skin, that means I have plenty of my own as well. And if Jesus Christ is the One Who rules over all of us, why do I need to sit in judgment on someone else's actions and motivations? Isn't it more important for all of us to cling to the promise of salvation, a promise He has kept for all who trust in Him?

But Jesus didn't just come to fulfill the promises God made about Him. He also made some promises of His own, some of which we read responsively this morning. And one of the most important of those promises was to give the Holy Spirit to all those who love Him and trust Him and bow the knee to Him. It is the Holy Spirit Who helps us understand the things God says to us in His Word. It is the Holy Spirit Who, as Paul says in verses 21 and 22, anoints us and seals us, assuring us that we belong to God and that He belongs to us. It is He Who, as Jesus says, brings peace not only between us and God but between us and others.

And it is this unity with God that is the best reason we should seek to make all our plans in accordance with God's will. And it is this unity with other Christians that should encourage us to assume the best of them and their intentions, that should make us willing and able to forgive them when they disappoint us, and that should lead us, whatever plans we make, to try to bless them and encourage them. And it is the indwelling power and truth of the Holy Spirit that convinces us of God's faithfulness, regardless of any disappointments that come our way.

So let's be patient with one another, even in the midst of our disappointments. And let's celebrate the God Who has been faithful to keep His promises, Who has been gracious to save even sinners like us.