

2 CorinthINTHIANS 1:12-22
“YES... OR NO...!”

“I used to dither, but now I just can’t make up my mind!” Is that you? Some people find it really hard to make choices and stick with them. In the snow recently, there was a dilemma - how to travel? To fly? But the airports might be shut! To come by car? But the roads might be treacherous. To come by train? But... Some people find it really hard to make up their mind, and then making up their mind to stick with it. Shopping is the most obvious example of this: what do you buy? What colour of tie? What kind of shoes? Then having bought them, you get them home and are not sure you really like them, so what do you do? There are all kinds of stories from the sales, of people who buy things but when get them home don’t really like them, so the items get stuffed in the back of the wardrobe. Or do you take it back and change it for something else?

What about making promises? Sometimes we make promises very quickly: we say ‘yes’ to something because it seems good and the right thing to do at the time, but we soon realise that there is another side to this and so we change our mind. It might be fine to do that once, but if you keep doing it, people will decide that your word is not to be trusted; ‘he’s says he will do it, but we know that he won’t because every time he promises, he changes his mind!’ There are people who will promise you the earth, but when it comes to it, they never deliver and so when next they promise you the earth you become sceptical and will not take them at their word; it is a sad place to be, but experience teaches us. Sometimes we make promises and then discover that we just can’t do it, it is beyond us; sometimes we make promises and then just forget all about them, we get waylaid or distracted and people who are expecting us to do something are disappointed.

That was the accusation being levelled at Paul in Corinth. Some people were coming to Corinth and accusing him of being fickle; ‘he keeps changing his mind’. They use that accusation as a way of suggesting to the Corinthian Christians that Paul simply can’t be trusted at all. So his change of plans, his change of mind, becomes an excuse to charge him with being fickle in every other way. So ‘he changed his plans; you can’t trust him; you can’t trust his gospel’ and so his opponents were using his change of plans as a way of trying to discredit his whole ministry and the gospel he was preaching. You get the feeling that Paul is reluctant to get involved in this kind of discussion about himself but he needs to defend his ministry. That defence of himself very quickly becomes a defence of God and the gospel; God is reliable; God’s mind doesn’t change; the gospel is firm and secure in the promises that God makes; you can trust God.

Paul first visited Corinth on his first trip to Europe. He stayed there some 18 months preaching the gospel and teaching the Christians. You can read of it in Acts 18. There is a second visit recorded in Acts 20 and a third visit that might well have come between these two. Paul had made a plan to visit Corinth twice on this particular trip: he would arrive in Corinth by sea and then stay there for a time before travelling North to Macedonia; then after spending time inland would travel South again to visit Corinth on his way out of Europe again, so they would have two visits in quick succession. But the first of these was a ‘painful visit’ and we’ll look more at that next week and so he decided that another visit might simply be more painful, so he changes his plan “*in order...*” (1:23) It would be good for them if he didn’t come back quite so soon; so he stays away for their own benefit. Does that make him unreliable? Does that mean he can’t be trusted? Does that mean that his preaching should be ignored? There are some fascinating insights into the kind of people we should be, into our relationships with one another and into the reliability of God.

1. What kind of people are we to be? Has your personality ever come under the microscope? Have you ever done something like the Myers-Briggs personality type test? You discover whether you are an introvert or an extrovert; are you an intuitive kind of person or do you live by common sense? Do you think an issue through or go by your feelings? Do you plan precisely or plan-on-the go? There are other, similar, kinds of tests that will suggest to you what kind of person you are. I did Myers-Briggs once and my score on extrovert/introvert came out precisely equal, so I'm neither one nor the other; either that or I'm a really screwed up person! Paul's personality is coming under the microscope in Corinth because of his change of plan; it seems an over-the-top reaction, but there were people looking for any excuse to attack! So he points to two qualities, that are huge qualities for us to aspire to and he says "these are qualities that have shaped my personality and every decision I've made": "*Our conscience...*" (1:12)

Holiness and sincerity are qualities that Paul sees in himself. All of the decisions he has made have been made for best of reasons and with best of intentions; indeed his change of plan was even for their benefit rather than his! He's not a liar nor a cheat; he's not got two faces to him; he is not fickle, changing his mind just to please his own whims. But he has two motives: first, of all, to be the kind of person God wants him to be – that's what holiness means, amongst other things; secondly, sincerity and honesty, so that what you see is what you get. These are huge qualities and should be qualities to which we aspire; to be this kind of person, aspiring to be the kind of people God wants us to be and that we are honest and sincere with one another. These are life-shaping qualities and are not qualities that we can just pick up and put on; we will be a work in progress, but let holiness and sincerity be our aspiration.

2. What shapes our relationships with one another? How to answer this question quickly? (Each of the three points to the sermon today is worthy of an hour to itself!) There are so many influences on the way in which we relate to one another: selfishness – we just want to get for ourselves from a relationship; power – to control other people and make them dance to our tune and make them feel small; thoughtlessness – we say the first thing that comes into our heads, but we may lack any kind of sensitivity at all; violence – lots of children in our society grow up thinking that the proper way for men to behave towards women is to hit them! What about grace-shaped relationships? "*We have...*" (1:12) Paul has conducted himself in his relations with the Christians in Corinth "*According...*" (1:12) What does that mean? Grace is about God loving us when we don't deserve it, accepting us as we are, loving us when we're not lovable, and keeping on loving us. That is how we are to be with one another. This attitude shaped Paul's relationships with the Corinthians: he kept loving them even when they were a pain in the neck; he was patient, generous, kind, concerned only for their welfare.

There are all kinds of places in the New Testament which show us how we are to love other people. Jesus gives us an example when He washed the disciples' feet and told us to do likewise, to serve one another. The story of the Good Samaritan is all about loving people in need whoever they may be. There are other pieces which show us clearly what love means: patience, kindness, putting other people first, their interests well before our own; caring with compassion for people in need, being sensitive to others needs, and aware of their frailties. We could go on, but relationships of this Christian quality are grace-shaped relationships and we need grace-shaped relationships in Christians and in Churches. We need to avoid selfish, power-based, thoughtless, violent relationships, but find grace-shaped ones. Paul says that one day they will even boast of knowing Paul and the kind of man he was!

3. God and the gospel are completely reliable: the sense of Paul being unreliable became the opportunity for people to cast doubts on the gospel Paul preached. We can see how that happens: there are people in our society who disregard God and the gospel because of the way Christians behave. When I was a student, I took part in a church-based mission in Crieff and we were knocking on doors to try to engage people in conversation. This was the 1970's, and you would not do it so easily now; there was one woman who, when we rang the doorbell, she came and we explained who we were, she began this long tirade about Christian Aid and a donation it had recently made to a group in Zimbabwe and she had family there and they were in danger and if that was Christians for you, she didn't want to know about God and the gospel. It's not uncommon. This became the opportunity to attack Paul and he defends the gospel!

Three words: "*God is faithful*" (1:18) and then he tells us why. I may make a promise and say "Yes" when you ask me and then ten minutes later say "no" because I've changed mind. God makes a promise and never changes His mind; Jesus is the great "Yes" and "Amen" to all the promises of God: Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises; Jesus is the affirmation that the promises of God will be completed and will come to pass, Jesus is the affirmation that God has not changed His mind, but that His promise to bless the world forever stands firm. "*For the...*" (1:19f) We have this great idea that when God sent Jesus into world, He declared an almighty "Yes" to His promises. So the promise to forgive still stands; so the promise to be God with us always and everywhere still stands; so the promise to be the help and strength of our lives still stands; so the promise to save and rescue us from our sins still stands. No seeming fickleness on Paul's part takes anything away from God's reliability; no apparent unreliability on Paul's part should make the Corinthians doubt the promises of God. Equally, we should not judge God in our day and age by the behaviour of Christians; we do allow ourselves to do that, but nothing that we do or that other people do to us makes God unreliable or makes His promises go away. He is totally reliable; He is totally trustworthy as is the gospel! If we need any more, the Spirit is given as a guarantee of the gospel!

Be reliable. Be people with holiness and sincerity – we are a work in progress; we are not as holy as we should be and there are times when we do things with wrong motives; the challenge for us is to be reliable, holy, sincere people. Let our relationships be shaped by grace - accept one another, love, care, be sensitive to one another; this is more than just being friendly, but is about loving one another in way that God has loved us; be reliable. God is faithful! God never dithers; He never takes a promise back because He made it in haste; He never allows a promise to drift because He gets waylaid or forgets. Jesus is the resounding "Yes" to all the promises of God, confirming, affirming. We have a God who is totally reliable all of the time; He is totally trustworthy, dependable. We have a thoroughly reliable God and the challenge for us is to be thoroughly reliable people.