

The Christian's Guide to Self-Defense

2 Corinthians 1:12–13a

© Mike Riccardi

Introduction

There are few things in this world that cause us more pain than being misunderstood and falsely accused by our close friends. Few experiences in this life are more emotionally hurtful than having those we care about most question our sincerity towards them, despite our having the best of intentions. Now, it's one thing if people we don't know all that well are suspicious of us. It's one thing if our enemies assume the worst of us and bring false accusations against us. We'd expect that. But if you've ever been on the receiving end of a false accusation from a friend, or from family—people who you believed were on your team and in your corner—you know how badly that can hurt. You feel almost betrayed. You think, “I can't believe that he doesn't know me better than that! All this time we've spent together, and it's like we don't even know each other!”

And beside the pain of that betrayal, you struggle to know how to respond. It puts you in an awkward position: you don't want to self-righteously defend yourself, because you know that you're more sinful than anyone else knows you to be. But at the same time, there's a sense that justice has been violated, but that justice can be restored if you try to humbly set the record straight. There's this uncomfortable tension between defending yourself, and between letting something that you know to be false go unchallenged.

Well, in 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul found himself facing this very kind of situation in his relationship with the Corinthian church. Though Paul had founded the church of Corinth on his missionary journeys, though he had spent a year and a half with them, teaching the Word of God to them (cf. Ac 18:11), and though he had in a unique way become a spiritual father to them, begetting them as it were through his preaching of the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 4:15)—the Corinthians began to doubt whether Paul was a genuine apostle, whether he was truly sent from Christ at all.

Now how did that happen? What instigated that change of heart? Well, at the time that Paul was writing this letter, the church at Corinth had been infiltrated by false teachers from Jerusalem, claiming to be apostles. And in an effort to discredit the legitimacy of Paul's ministry, in order to make room for their own false teaching, they launched a full-scale assault on his character. They began cooking up every accusation they could think of in order to sow seeds of doubt about Paul in the minds of the Corinthians.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached through 2 Corinthians 1, verses 3 to 11 in our Sunday evening services. In that text, we learned that chief among the accusations that they made against Paul was that he suffered far too much to be a legitimate minister of the Gospel. “God is punishing him for his secret sins,” the false apostles told the Corinthians. And Paul responds to that accusation by demonstrating that his sufferings for Christ’s *authenticate* him as a genuine minister of the Gospel. Because it is in human weakness that God reveals the abundance of His divine power. It is in the endurance of affliction that the servant of God experiences God’s comfort.

But there were other accusations that the false apostles were making against Paul: he was harboring secret sin, he was embezzling money from the offerings, he didn’t attract a large enough following so he couldn’t have been preaching the truth, and on and on. A significant accusation was: he dealing dishonestly with the Corinthians in a number of ways. He was duplicitous, manipulative—he was intentionally ambiguous in his communication to the Corinthians so he could take advantage of them.

You say, “Where did they get that from?” Well, consider the timeline of events that led up to the writing of 2 Corinthians. According to 1 Corinthians 16, Paul’s original plan was to visit Corinth just before Pentecost, as he was on his way to Jerusalem. But when Timothy delivered Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and found out there was a burgeoning rebellion against Paul, Paul decided to change his plans and go to Corinth immediately. This is what he called his “*painful* visit,” or his “*sorrowful* visit,” chapter 2 verse 1, because it was during this visit that Paul discovered the extent of the full-scale mutiny he had on his hands. And it broke his heart! Sure, maybe the enemy false apostles would make these accusations, but not the Corinthians! Not his friends! After he left, instead of visiting again, we learn from chapter 2 verse 4 that he wrote them another letter, sharply reproving them for failing to repudiate the accusations and the teaching of the false apostles. And it was actually through this severe letter that God had brought the majority of the church to repentance.

But the false apostles had a field day with the severe letter. “Look at how harsh he is with you! This is the little man who, when he was here face to face with you, was timid and mousy and weepy! But when he writes his letters, then he’s a tough guy!” Second Corinthians 10:10: they said, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive.” “He talks a big game, but he’s all bark and no bite!” “And what’s with this *letter* anyway? Didn’t he say he was going to come back *in person*? First he changed his plans to visit immediately, now he changes his plans again. How can someone who claims to be receiving divine guidance from Christ Himself be so fickle? He’s *vacillating*,” chapter 1 verse 17. “He’s purposing according to the flesh! Either that, or he’s *playing* you. Sure, he’s nice and docile and tearful when he’s with you, but then in his letters he’s domineering and manipulative! And then he says he’s going to do one thing, and then he winds up doing another! Ridiculous! Don’t trust Paul. Trust us!”

And though the majority had rejected that kind of baseless slander for what it was, there was still a minority in the Corinthian church that was taken in by it! There was still a group of Paul's spiritual children—his dear friends—accusing him of underhandedness and deceit. And with the pain of that personal offense still piercing his heart, Paul puts that offense aside and, out of love and concern for the souls of the Corinthians (because if you reject Paul, you reject Paul's Gospel), he defends himself against these accusations for the sake of the Gospel.

What we have, starting in verse 12, is the beginning of Paul's vindication of his character in response to false accusations. Let's read 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 12: "For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in [simplicity] and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."

Friends, by virtue of uniting us to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith, God our Father has called us to be ministers of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6), to be ambassadors for Christ who minister reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20), to be a kingdom of priests set apart to proclaim God's excellencies (1 Pet 2:9). We are all called to lay down our lives in sacrificial ministry (a) to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, and (b) to our neighbors who are lost and need the Gospel. And as we seek to faithfully carry out the ministry that has been entrusted to each one of us, it is inevitable that we will face the pain of false accusations, misunderstandings, and the questioning of our character and integrity. And responding to those situations in a God-exalting, self-abasing way will always be a challenge. But in our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul shows us how the faithful Christian minister responds to personal attacks by modeling what godly self-defense looks like for a true servant of Christ.

And as we seek to learn the lessons that this text has for us, we'll focus particularly on verse 12, and examine **two elements** of Paul's response, so that, when our ministry for Christ's sake brings us to experience the personal attacks and false accusations that are sure to come, we might be better equipped to respond in a godly manner.

I. The Recourse to a Clear Conscience (v. 12a)

Note, **first**, what I'm calling **the recourse to a clear conscience**. Look with me again at the beginning of verse 12. Paul says, "For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience...." When Paul is being challenged, and unfairly attacked, and falsely accused, he has **recourse to his clear conscience**. He appeals to, he says, the testimony of his conscience.

Now, what is the conscience? If the way that Paul responds to false accusations is to have **recourse to a clear conscience**, we need to be well-acquainted with what precisely the

conscience is, what it means for it to be clear, and what it would be if it was not clear. Well, the Greek word is *suneidēsis*. It's a compound word, made up of the preposition *sun-*, which means “with,” and form of the verb *oida*, which means “to know.” And so the etymology of the word gives us the literal rendering, “I know with myself”—which is to say, “I am conscious” (Harris, 184). The Puritan Richard Sibbes said that the conscience is “the soul itself reflecting upon itself” (*Puritan Theology*, 911). Another commentator called conscience, “the faculty that gives a person the sense of moral self-judgment” (Kistemaker, 54). Taking that idea a bit further and reflecting on the reality of God’s interaction with the function of the human conscience, Puritan William Ames defined the conscience as “a man’s judgment of himself according to the judgment of God on him” (*Puritan Theology*, 911). And perhaps the best, concise definition of the conscience that I’ve come across is: “the faculty within human beings that assesses the moral goodness or blameworthiness of our conduct” (DeYoung).

And Pastor John gives what I think is the best illustration for how the conscience functions. He writes, “The conscience is a built-in warning system that signals us when something we have done is wrong. The conscience is to our souls what pain sensors are to our bodies: it inflicts distress, in the form of guilt, whenever we violate what our hearts tell us is right” (*The Book on Leadership*, 78–79). If we were to put our hands near a hot stove, the tactile sensors in our hand send a signal to our brains: “Hot! Stay away!” And the way that signal gets sent is through pain. I’m not sure if you’ve considered this before, but in a fallen world, pain is a wonderful gift from God. It lets us know that we need to stop what we’re doing—to change our course—otherwise we could be in for some serious consequences. If the pain sensors in our hands didn’t tell us that the stove was hot, we’d have no restraint in touching that stove, and the physical effects on our hands would be disastrous.

In the same way that our nervous system works *physically*, the conscience is a *moral and spiritual* nervous system that lets us know when our hands are getting too close to the fire. Rather than physical pain, the conscience employs *guilt—moral* pain—to get our attention and let us know that we need to stop what we’re doing—to change our course—otherwise we could be in for some serious consequences. If the guilt sensors in our conscience didn’t work properly and didn’t inform us of right and wrong, we would have no restraint in our conduct, and the spiritual effects on our souls would be disastrous.

Now, everyone has a conscience. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a Christian or a non-Christian. It doesn’t matter where you grew up, what your childhood was like, what your influences were, or what culture you were raised in—*everyone* has a conscience. The conscience is woven by God into the very fabric of the human soul. We see this in Romans chapter 2, verses 14 and 15. Paul is explaining that God judges sin impartially—that both Jew and Gentile are accountable to God’s standard of righteousness. And he anticipates the objection that it would be unjust to hold Gentiles accountable since He gave His Law only to the Jews. And so Paul writes, Romans 2:14:

“For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their **conscience** bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else [excusing] them.” And so this text teaches us that conscience is a universal phenomenon; everyone has one.

And it also teaches us the various functions of the conscience. It says that the conscience either *accuses* or *excuses*. When you have a guilty conscience, conscience accuses you, it testifies to your soul that that thought you had, that word you spoke, or that action you performed was wrong. What you just thought, said, or did was morally deficient, and fell short of the standard of God’s perfect righteousness that’s demanded from you as a human being created in His image. Alternatively, when you have a **clear conscience**, conscience excuses you. It testifies to your soul that what you thought, said, or did was good—morally praiseworthy, in keeping with the righteousness that God requires.

Now, a major lesson that we need to keep in mind as we think about the conscience is that *conscience is not infallible*. Listen to this extremely helpful passage from New Testament scholar Colin Kruse. He writes, “The conscience is not to be equated with the voice of God or even the moral law; rather it is a human faculty which adjudicates upon human action by the light of the highest standard a person perceives. . . . It is possible that the conscience may excuse one for that which God will not excuse, and conversely it is equally possible that conscience may condemn a person for that which God allows” (TNTC, 70–71). You see, conscience itself is not moral. Conscience only functions according to what your mind perceives as moral. The conscience can be ill-informed.

That’s why Scripture speaks of a weak conscience. A weak conscience accuses us of things which are not inherently wrong. Paul speaks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. You have a new Christian who has been saved out of pagan idolatry. He goes to a friend’s house for a meal, and as he’s enjoying his food he says, “Oh, this is great meat. Where did you buy it?” And his fellow believer says, “I got it at the temple of Apollo. Great deal too!” And the young believer says, “What?! You mean I’m eating meat that’s been sacrificed to idols?!” And his brother says, “What’s it matter? You’re free in Christ. An idol is nothing. Food sacrificed to an idol is nothing. . . .” 1 Corinthians 10:19. “Enjoy!” But Paul says, you don’t do that to your brother. 1 Corinthians 8:7: “However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.” Because his conscience is improperly informed, his conscience is weak. It’s accusing him of something that God says is permissible.

But it’s so important that we don’t teach each other to violate our conscience, that Paul says it’s better to obey the strictures of a weak conscience than to indulge our liberty and cause our

brother to stumble. Because if conscience is continually violated, it will become *seared*. Scripture also speaks of a seared conscience in 1 Timothy 4:2. This is what happens when you've consistently ignored the accusations of conscience and persist in your sin. Conscience becomes seared, cauterized—the moral sensors are burned away—such that you engage in sin and you don't even have a problem with it. You become morally numb. And when your friends try to reason with you and warn you that you're persisting in unrepentant sin or some serious doctrinal error, you say things like, “Don't be such a legalist! There's nothing wrong with that!” You've been morally desensitized.

But Paul says that he has a clear conscience. In Acts 23, as Paul stands trial before the Sanhedrin, he opens his address in verse 1 by saying, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.” And when he stood before Felix in Acts 24:16, he said, “I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.” You say, “How could that be possible? Is Paul saying he never sinned?” No. Having a good conscience doesn't mean that your conscience never accuses you of wrongdoing because you're perfect. It means that when conscience does accuse you, you deal with what it's telling you. It means you keep short accounts with God. It means you're disciplined about asking God to search your heart and try you and see if there be any hurtful way in you (Ps 139:23–24). And when He shows you things through the ministry of your conscience, it means acknowledging and confessing sin—not denying it; it means repenting of sin—not rationalizing it and justifying it; and it means forsaking sin—not cherishing it and clinging to it.

This was so important to the Apostle Paul. In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul summed up the singular goal of his entire ministry when he said, “The goal of our instruction is love, from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and sincere faith.” This was the goal of all of his teaching. If he couldn't minister with a good conscience, it wasn't worth it. Just a little bit later in that chapter he charged Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:19, to “fight the good fight, keeping the faith *and a good conscience*.” Keeping a good conscience was just as important to the Apostle Paul as maintaining doctrinal purity! Why? Because, he says in that same verse, some have rejected a good conscience and have “suffered shipwreck in regard to the faith.” They ignored their conscience, till eventually it was seared, and they abandoned the faith and so abandoned their souls to hell. How monumentally important it is to keep a good conscience!

When the false apostles hurled all the insults and accusations and attacks that they could think of against Paul and his character—to the point that even Paul's own dear Corinthians, his own spiritual children, were drawn away into doubting his integrity—Paul had **recourse to his clear conscience**. He had endeavored every day to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men. He had not ignored his conscience. He had not trained himself to become desensitized to conscience. And in all of the accusations that these evil men leveled against him, he searched his heart, and he appealed to the highest human court there is—the most important key witness in

the courtroom. And the testimony of his conscience was that he was absolved from wrongdoing. Subject to the light of God's holiness, informed by the Word of God, and guided by the Spirit of God, his conscience exonerated him from all charges.

Now, he knew that that didn't settle absolutely everything. Again, conscience can be mistaken; it can be ill-informed. That's why a key verse in this discussion is 1 Corinthians 4:4. There Paul writes, "For I am conscious of nothing against myself,"—in other words, My conscience is clear—"yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord." You see, anybody can *say* that their conscience is clear before the Lord. But if they say that knowingly with an intent to deceive, appealing to the day of the Lord when Christ will lay all things bare and expose the secrets of men's hearts—if they appeal to that judgment knowing they've sinned—I don't want to be them on that day! But even if their conscience does clear them, they could be wrong. And so Paul says, "I know that it doesn't put the matter beyond a shadow of a doubt, but before God and man, my conscience is clear. The testimony of the highest human court is: not guilty."

And friends, when doubt is cast upon the purity of your motives, oh, how glorious it is to be able to appeal to a good conscience! Paul says it's a reason for glorying! That's what "proud confidence" means at the beginning of verse 12. The Greek word is *kauchēsis*. It means our "boast," our "glorying," our "rejoicing." Now, he's not boasting in some sort of fleshly, moralistic achievement that he's hoping in to gain favor with God. He's boasting in the work that the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished *in* him. He even says later in the verse, "not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God." He is boasting in the Lord, 1 Corinthians 1:31! He is boasting in the cross, Galatians 6:14! He is glorying in Christ Jesus, Philippians 3:3! Paul knows what a natively vile man he is; he calls himself the chief of sinners! And he says my proud confidence—my boast, the ground of my glorying and rejoicing—is that Jesus has taken that black-hearted chief of sinners, washed him in the purity of His cleansing blood, and given him a clear conscience!

And as much as a **clear conscience** is a ground for glorying and rejoicing, an *accusing* conscience is a ground for mourning and weeping. Richard Sibbes said that "conscience is the worst prison." He said, you could be a king, at liberty to go anywhere in the world, but at the same time be entirely imprisoned, because "a wicked man that hath a bad conscience, is imprisoned in his own heart" (3:218). And if, by God's grace, your conscience has not yet been seared, you know what he's talking about. You can have no peace when your conscience is bothering you. Sibbes would go on to say, "An ill conscience is a hell upon earth" (3:216).

But he also said, "a good conscience is a heaven upon earth" (3:216). Another Puritan, William Fenner, said a good conscience "is God's echo of peace to the soul. In life, in death, in judgment, it is unspeakable comfort" (*The Soul's Looking-Glasse*, 113). And Paul was experiencing that

heaven on earth—that echo of God’s peace in his soul, that unspeakable comfort—even in the midst of being maligned by his friends—because he had **recourse to a clear conscience**.

And friends, the lesson that this teaches us is that when *your* integrity is questioned and when *your* character is assaulted, you need to be able to make a successful appeal to the highest human court that there is. We must have **recourse to a clear conscience**! We cannot have recourse merely to the testimony of the men and women in our lives that we’ve managed to impress! We cannot seek our worth and our reward merely in the opinions of other people, so that as long as our spouses or our employers or our pastors approve of us we count ourselves to be godly. No! We’ve got to go higher than that! We’ve got to go to the highest human court—to our **conscience**, laid bare before the searching, omniscient gaze of Almighty God!

Friends, we are so sinful, that we can play the hypocrite well enough to fool *one another* into believing that we’re something that we’re not. But who we are before the Lord is who we are. And if we’re satisfied simply by being well-spoken of by men—if our great reward is getting other people to believe that we’re godly, regardless of our conscience, Jesus says man’s praise is all the reward we’ll get! Matthew 6: Those who practice their righteousness to be honored by men have their reward in full. But those who practice righteousness to please God—who sees what is done in secret—they will have the reward of their Heavenly Father. Jesus says in John 5:44, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?” You can’t *believe*—you can’t be a *Christian*—unless you’re preoccupied with the approval of God and not men! And that means, friends, that we must have **recourse to a clear conscience**! We make it our constant business, as Paul says in Acts 24:16, to always maintain a blameless conscience before God!

II. The Recipe for a Clear Conscience (vv. 12b–13a)

But how do we do that? How can I keep my conscience clear? To learn that lesson, we turn to the **second element** of Paul’s response, namely **the recipe for a clear conscience**. Look again with me at verse 12. And I’m going to give a more accurate rendering than the NAS has here. Paul writes, “For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience, that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, in God-given simplicity and sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God. For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand...” (personal translation).

In these words, Paul says that the testimony of his clear conscience is something more than a retreat to a private and inner sense of the state of his heart that no one can see or verify! It would have been too easy for hypocrites who have been seared in conscience to simply appeal to their conscience in order to get everyone off their backs. But here, Paul says that the foundation of his clear conscience is “the objective work of God in his life as manifest in his outward behavior”

(Hafemann, 82). “For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience, *that we have conducted ourselves*” in this or that way. In appealing to his conscience, Paul’s not only talking the talk; he’s walking the walk. In fact, it is impossible for you who have a good conscience—that is, not a weak or a seared conscience—to also have a clear conscience if your conduct—your life—doesn’t back up who you say you are. In other words, **the recipe for a clear conscience is a life of integrity.**

And Paul characterizes his life of integrity by using four descriptors in verse 12. And he begins the list with the phrase, “God-given.” Your translation may use the adjective form and say, “*godly* sincerity,” or something close to that. And of course, these characteristics *are* godly. But Paul’s emphasis is more on the fact that these virtues have their origin in God and His gracious work *in* Paul, and not in Paul himself. This is another example of Paul “making his boast” *in the Lord* and not in himself. “I’m going to list these virtues that are the foundation of my clear conscience, but I want you to know that I’m not boasting in myself or in my own righteousness. All of them are *God-given*.”

So what are these four God-given characteristics of a life of integrity that form the foundation for a clear conscience? He says he has conducted himself in God-given (1) simplicity and (2) sincerity, (3) not in fleshly wisdom but (4) in the grace of God. First, he says he has conducted himself in simplicity. And this is the Greek word *haplotēs*. It means “singleness,” “undividedness.” It is simplicity as the opposite of *duplicity*, distinguished from *multiplicity*. Paul used this term in Colossians 3:22 to exhort slaves to sincerely obey their earthly masters, and not just to make a good show of things. Colossians 3:22 says, “Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity or simplicity of heart, fearing the Lord.” You see what he’s saying? He’s saying don’t obey your masters in a merely external way; don’t labor in the duplicity of working heartily when your boss sees you, but then slack off when he’s not around. Obey with simplicity of heart—be the same person all the time, knowing that your aim is not merely to please men, but the Lord, before whose presence you always appear.

And so when Paul says he’s conducted himself in simplicity in his ministry to the Corinthians, it means that there were no complex parts to Paul’s character, as if he portrayed himself to be one person on the surface but underneath he was really someone else. There was no artificial exterior to Paul that you had to penetrate to get to the real him. There was no deviousness or underhanded scheming on his part to appear to be something that he wasn’t, so that he could take advantage of the Corinthians. With Paul, what you see is what you get.

Secondly, closely related to simplicity, Paul says he has conducted himself in sincerity. And this is a fascinating Greek word: *eilikrineia*. It’s a compound word, from *helios*, which means “sun,” and *krino*, which means “to judge.” Literally: “judged by the sun.” Now what sense does that

make? Well, one of the largest industries Paul's day was the pottery industry. And, just like anything else, the various kinds of pottery differed in quality. The lowest quality pottery was thick, solid, and easy to make. But the finest pottery was thinner and therefore more fragile. Often, when thin pottery was being fired, it would crack in the oven. Now, rather than discard those vessels that were cracked, dishonest merchants would fill the cracks with a hard, pearly wax that would blend in with the color of the pottery when it was painted. In ordinary light, no one could tell the difference. But when you held a piece of pottery up to the sunlight to test it, you would be able to see the imperfection, because the wax appeared darker than the rest of the vessel. Honest merchants would often stamp their products with the Latin term "sine cera," which means "without wax." And "sine cera," is where we get our English word for "sincere."

And so Paul says, "By God's grace, my conduct is 'sun-tested.' You can hold up my life to the searching sunlight of God's Word, and you'll find no cracks in my character that I've tried to fill in with artificial wax. I'm not deceitfully scheming to appear one way before men while all the while being something different beneath the surface." He even says in chapter 2 verse 17, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from *sincerity*, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God." You see, the man or woman of **integrity** lives their entire life in the searching, blazing light of the presence of God Himself! And, held up to brightness of His light, they are stamped *sine cera*—sincere—without wax.

Next, Paul lists something that does *not* characterize the person of **integrity**. He says that he hasn't conducted himself in fleshly wisdom. Fleshly wisdom is the kind of worldly shrewdness and cunning cleverness that marks those who are selfishly ambitious—those who desire to put themselves forward and seize power, influence, and recognition. Turn with me to James chapter 3. In James 3, verses 13 to 18, James contrasts fleshly wisdom with true, heavenly wisdom. He says, James 3:13, "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing." You see, the man of **integrity** doesn't employ fleshly wisdom, pretending to be something he's not so he can take advantage of people for his own gain. He's not motivated by jealousy, arrogance, and selfish ambition that seeks power and influence.

Instead, he conducts himself, number four, in the grace of God. And I want you to note how sharply fleshly wisdom is contrasted to the grace of God here. They are mutually exclusive. If you are going to operate in fleshly wisdom, conniving and cunning in order to secure positions of influence, you are operating entirely outside of the grace of God. But if you are consciously submitting your life to the holy, energizing power of God's grace, you'll speak like Paul did in 2 Corinthians 4:2, where he says, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We

refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (ESV).

And so Paul says, "I have conducted myself with integrity. My conduct has been marked by God-given simplicity and sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God." And then in the beginning of verse 13 he gives an example of that integrity. He says, "For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand." See, the false apostles accused Paul of vacillating; they said that his yes was sometimes no and his no was sometimes yes; he wrote one thing but meant another; his letters were strong and impressive but he behaved very differently in person. And Paul says, "Not at all!" He writes nothing else than what they can read and understand. There's no need to read between the lines with him. There are no hidden meanings or secret agendas in his speech or in his letters. There was no double entendre that the Corinthians had to decipher to get at his true intent. He wasn't "trying to communicate" something by cloaking his meaning in deceptive platitudes. As Pastor John said, "Paul wrote what he meant, and meant what he wrote. His letters were clear, straightforward, consistent, genuine, transparent, and without ambiguity" (MacArthur, 36).

Friends, this was the life of **integrity** that was the **recipe for a clear conscience**. Now let me ask you: by this standard, are you men and women of integrity? This is where the Word of God needs to search out your own conscience. Are you men and women of integrity? Do you conduct yourself in simplicity? Are you the same person on the inside that you present yourself to be on the outside? Or are you duplicitous? Do you only have a 'Christian' persona that you employ to impress your Christian friends and your pastors? Do you pretend to be something that you're not, because you're so infatuated with the praise of men that you've stopped laboring for the reward that God gives?

And do you conduct yourself in sincerity? If your life was held up to the sunlight of God's Word, would you be stamped *sine cera*, without wax? Or would the blazing light of God's own face reveal cracks in your character—cracks that show that you're pretending to be something you're not? Maybe you're trying to artificially fill those cracks with the wax of outward Christian morality—Church attendance, Bible study, spiritual talk, even ministry. But underneath you know you're something else.

Do you repudiate fleshly wisdom? Do you renounce all disgraceful and underhanded ways? Or are you motivated—whether in the church, in the family, in the workplace, wherever—are you motivated by jealousy and selfish ambition that employs worldly cunning and carnal cleverness to take advantage of people to get what you want?

And when you communicate with people—whether in spoken word or in print—is your meaning always on the surface of your words? Can people get at your true intent and motivation just from

hearing you speak? Or do you *play* people? Do you deceitfully couch your true intentions in double meanings in order to protect yourself, or to gain information, or to manipulate people? Do people have to read between the lines with you? Or is your speech marked “by the open statement of the truth” (2 Cor 4:2)?

You see, friends, this is what the life of ministerial integrity looks like. This is where a clear conscience comes from.

Conclusion

And maybe you’re here this morning, and by the grace of God your conscience is stinging you as it is informed by the perfect standard of the Word of God. As you hear God’s Word preached, and as you see the life of integrity modeled before you in the example of the Apostle Paul, perhaps the Holy Spirit is convicting you that this is not your life—that you remain in bondage to sin, and despite all your church attendance and all your outward Christian activity, you’ve been a hypocrite all this time. Your conscience has been eating away at you, and no matter how many times you say you’re sorry, no matter how many times you try to do better, no matter how many sermons you listen to or passages you memorize or hours you pray, nothing seems to work! If that’s you—if you cry out, “I don’t have a good conscience!”—I want you to turn with me to Hebrews chapter 9, because I’ve got Good News for you.

In Hebrews chapter 9, the author is explaining that there is no amount of good works and no quality of good works that a person can do to cleanse their conscience. And he’s speaking to Jewish Christians here, so he uses the language of temple sacrifice. But as you hear that language in this passage, just substitute: “my own good works,” “my own attempts to cleanse my conscience.” Hebrews 9:9. He says, “Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation. But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

Dear friend, all of your efforts at reforming your life—even if those efforts are directed at the noble goal of keeping a good conscience—all of those efforts are useless apart from vital union to Christ by faith alone! A good conscience and a life of integrity are not earned by the brute force of willpower religion or by external moral reform! They are given as a gift of God’s grace

to all those who repent and turn from their dead works, and put their trust in the perfectly efficacious blood of the spotless Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ—who offered Himself on the altar of God as a substitute for sinners, receiving in His own person the wrath of God that you and I deserved. Salvation has been accomplished! Sin has been paid for! You who have never known Him: own your sin and guilt before Him, trust in His perfect righteousness, and receive the gift of a conscience sprinkled clean by the blood of Christ.

And once again, to those whose consciences have been sprinkled clean, live the life of integrity that has been purchased for you by the Lord Jesus. Do away with duplicity, with hypocrisy, with underhandedness. Put away fleshly wisdom. Submit yourself to suffering on the way of the cross, rather than pursuing exaltation and worldly recognition. Be the same man or woman on the inside that you are on the outside. And when the accusations come, live in the freedom of a clear conscience.