

Authenticity in Christ

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[0 : 00] Good morning folks, great to see you today. Please do have those verses in 2 Corinthians open in front of you. We are really excited to get into this series together, we've got so much to learn this morning.

But here's maybe a joke, an age-old joke, to kick us off and maybe just to kind of point us in the right direction. Here's the joke, how many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb?

Three. So one to climb the ladder, one to shake the ladder, and another one to work out how they're going to sue the ladder company.

Now just in case you think I'm singling out lawyers, used to be one. But if you go on Google you'll find similar jokes all over the place about estate agents, car mechanics, football players, traffic wardens, trades people, builders, bankers, people in investments, people in telesales, and owners of budget airlines.

In fact it was really hard today to try and think of a list of people who maybe aren't represented in this room. And it's interesting isn't it, what those jokes kind of convey to us is that there's certain people in our lives, everyday lives, who we instinctively have a really hard time taking them at their words.

[1 : 17] And my question to you to think about is who would you add to that list? Because many of us will know the pain of being burnt by broken and empty words.

There'll be others of us in this room who will know the shame, the crushing shame, of being those who didn't follow through on our words. And so into our lives and into our world where we're all desperate for someone and something that we can be all in on, the good news of this passage is that it shows us the one person in this life whose words is absolutely rock solid.

And today we're going to take in one of the most famous and the most cherished verses in all of the Bible. So maybe if you're new to the Bible today, maybe you're new to church, you have picked a cracking Sunday to come and be with us because this really is, this passage contains one of the most loved verses in all of the Bible and it's utterly wonderful.

But all of this comes in the context of changed travel plans. Now we all know that feeling, don't we, of tangible disappointment when somebody cancels on you.

And those thoughts that run through our heads when we get that text, when we get that call, did they get a better offer? Do they really care? Maybe there's something I've done wrong. Do they really want to spend time with me?

[2 : 54] Do you know those kind of feelings when somebody cancels on you? Do you know those kind of feelings when somebody cancels on you? Those are the precise feelings and emotions that are hanging in the air in the backdrop of this passage to this church in Corinth.

Track with me, we've got to get the backstory here for to understand both the depth and the glory of this passage. So Paul has spent time with these Christians in Corinth and they've developed this real loving bond between them.

Paul had originally told them, when he was with them, that his plan, his travel plans, his plan was to spend time, you see it on the map there, in Ephesus, travel through and round Macedonia and end up back in Corinth to spend the winter with them.

That was plan A. And everybody was really excited about plan A. We get to spend Christmas with Paul. What a great deal. But Paul rejigged his plans a bit, meaning that he would visit Corinth not once but twice.

You see him refer to that in these verses and that's what he's rehearsing from verse 15 onwards, if you want to look at it there in the text. It's what's making sense of this, right? However, when Paul heard how things had got really tough in Corinth, what he did is he changed his travel plans once again and he just makes a beeline to go back to Corinth.

[4 : 18] And that is what he's referring to at verse 1 of chapter 2 when he talks about, do you see it there, that painful visit. So that's the visit he's talking about.

He's gone to Ephesus and he's changed his plans and gone back to Corinth to deal with the situation there. Probably likely that he's challenging some really bad behaviour, some confused thinking.

But whatever's going on in that painful visit, do you hear it in his voice? Everybody's left that encounter really bruised. And so what Paul has done is that instead, he's left Corinth, but instead of going back again in person, what he's done is he's wrote them a letter, pouring out his heart to them, telling them how he feels.

That's likely what he's referring to at verse 3 of chapter 2. It's a letter that we don't have, but we trust that if God wanted us to have it, in our Bibles we would have it.

But that visit, whatever happened there, has caused quite the stir. Now why would you write a letter instead of going in person?

[5 : 30] You ever faced this conundrum before? Answer, to give people time and space to process what you're trying to say to them. I do that all the time with my friends and my family when I don't want them to put them on the spot about a particular question I've got.

What I'll do is I'll text it in advance rather than just putting it to them on the spot in person. And the reason is just to give them time to think about the answer so I don't put them awkwardly on the spot.

Yeah? So we do this kind of thing. We text ahead before we see them in person. That's the kind of thing Paul's doing here. He's written a letter to give them time to process and to pray and to think on the things that he's saying.

But what has happened in the rawness of this situation is that Paul's critics have got the rumour mill started about Paul.

This guy says he's going to show up in person always lets you down. This guy's a flip-flop. This guy's flaky. This guy's undependable. This guy's emotionally unstable.

[6 : 35] This guy, and I think this is crucial here, he's only in it for himself. He doesn't care about you because if he loved you, he would show his face. And what they say is that this guy is just a hypocrite.

You know, I love that that's the words that we get from the Greek word hypocrites, which means an actor on a stage during a play. It is an actor who's one thing behind a mask, one thing with the mask, and a totally other thing behind the mask.

That's where we get the word hypocrite from. One thing on the mask, another thing behind the mask. And that's what these folks are saying about Paul in his absence. He's a hypocrite.

And that's our world, isn't it? Full of hypocrisy. Here's a question that we're rightly asking ourselves all the time. In our world of, and this has been the last few years, even the last few months, even the last few days, in our world of hashtag me too, in our world of fake news, in our world of AI, in our world of fact checking, in our world where just a few weeks ago, did you see the guy from Abercrombie and Fitch exposed as somebody who was just abusing their power?

Does it not seem day after day, we get another allegation about Mohammed Al-Fayed, people who were just one thing in public, but were a completely different thing in private. And we rightly ask the question, who can we trust?

[8 : 04] And they're saying you can add Paul to this whole list of people who in life that you can't trust. What's up for grabs in these verses is Paul's authenticity. Right?

Is he a fake? Is he a fraud? Because what they're trying to do, if you discredit Paul, then you can totally write off both his message and his pattern of ministry.

Do you remember we saw this last week when we thought about weakness as the way? And that's the thing, the false teachers in Corinth because of the city in which they live are trying to undermine. You don't want to go that way.

You don't want to follow Paul. You want to follow us. Life shouldn't look unimpressive. Life shouldn't be about suffering. Life shouldn't be full of questions and hardship. You undermine Paul.

You undermine his message and his pattern of life. So what's up for grabs here is Paul's integrity. And he defends his integrity. We'll see this by making two appeals.

[9 : 01] Here's the first one. It is an appeal to his track record of godly character. Now, do you see it? If you tap in there at verse 12 of chapter 1, Paul talks about how his what is clear?

His conscience is clear. We don't talk much about our consciences these days, do we? But Paul's all up for talking about his conscience. And he's talking about how my aim is to do the right thing, not in the eyes of man.

My aim is to do the right thing in the eyes of God. Now, we've got to be right here. A clear conscience doesn't mean sinless. A clear conscience means that we're living in the light.

We're living in the light of Jesus. It means that we live a life where we're constantly asking God by his spirit to be constantly checking our hearts and our motives.

I take it a clear conscience means being able to put your hands up when you got something wrong and saying, I own it. I'm sorry. It's what Christians in the past used to refer to as Coram Deo, right?

[10 : 10] Coram, the Latin meaning face, Deo meaning God. It just means living our lives always before the face of God. There's nothing off bounds. There's no areas of our lives that he doesn't see.

Living our lives in light of the all-seeing, all-loving, and all-knowing God. And that means that in life, Jesus is the one who we always aim to please.

And this is all wrapped up in how Paul says that he, Silas, and Timothy, how they lived when they were in Corinth. I want you to see these two phrases. And I want you to think about just how counter-cultural these are.

How did they live among them? Do you see these two phrases? Simplicity, or maybe you've got holiness, and godly sincerity. Do you not love that?

Simplicity and godly sincerity. You know, when I was young, we used to cut out photos of football players and put them on my wall.

[11 : 13] Players that I wanted to be like. You ever do that? People that you wanted to be like when you grew up? I want to be like this guy. See, when I get to the end of my life and they put my gravestone there, do you know the words I want to be written on it?

Simplicity and godly sincerity. The more I go on in life, the word I want for my life is contentment in Christ. Do you see what he's saying here?

No hidden agendas. No putting it on for the cameras. We were just genuine. You saw right through us. We lived our lives in front of you. You know that we are the real deal.

I guess this is what we would say in our culture today. Our lives were an open book. And so here's some quick fire questions for you just at this point in this passage. Friends, I know many of us are facing situations right now, perhaps at work, perhaps with our family and friends where there's conflict.

Where there's tension. Can I plead with all of us when we go through times like this in light of this passage, above all else to strive to maintain our godly integrity.

[12 : 25] Where is God calling you and I to repent? Is there hidden shame and is there hidden sin in our lives that because of his love for us and because of the forgiveness that's available in Jesus, he's calling us out of the darkness to live our lives in the light.

What part of your character and my character is he moulding right now? You know, in our world of imposter syndrome, Jesus frees us to live a life of both radical and liberating simplicity.

Do you know, they've got that phrase, don't they, that culture eats strategy for breakfast? You heard that? It's so true. Culture eats strategy for breakfast. Can I give you another one? Character eats gifting for dinner.

It really does. Character eats gifting for dinner. And just to encourage us this morning, if we feel like we're living our lives in the world and no one notices, just from my short time in the workplace, remember, as a young lawyer, friends, people notice way more than they, you think they do.

When you live a life that's godly in front of people, they really do notice. It will come out on a work night out, it will come out on a drinks evening. People notice when we live our lives as walk-in question marks.

[13 : 47] What is it that makes them tick? Why are they not behaving like us? What's going on? In a world where we so often chase, and I'm so guilty of this, the next big thing, right?

The next big holiday, the next big house move, the next big job promotion. Do you see Paul refer there at verse 14 about what the next big thing is on his radar? And this is why he acts like he does.

The next big thing on the mind of the Christian is the day of the Lord. Do you see how in our world of short-term gains and short-term goals, Jesus woos us to him and calls us to a life of long-term patient plodding.

In the words of Martin Luther, he said this, there are two days in my calendar, this day and that day. Love it. This day, that day.

So he appeals to a track record of godly character. Secondly, he appeals to a diary driven by gospel motives. And he does what he does because he's following the Lord.

[14 : 53] Get that right? He does what he does because he loves them so dearly. Do you see the affectionate language that Paul uses to describe how he feels about these believers?

As he says, Dear Corinthians, you are never, ever far from my heart. Verse 4 of chapter 2. Do you see what he's saying? When I picked up my pen, probably wasn't a pen, probably with a quill, to write, I did so with tears in my eyes.

Yeah? I did so with much anguish in my heart. Such is, right at the end there, such is the depth of the love that I have for you.

He is pouring out his heart on this page. You can feel the tears smudging the ink as he writes. Such is the depth of his love for them.

Even in the conflict, even in the chaos, he's still clinging to the fact that he wants these guys to progress in their love for Jesus. Now, here's what I've been asking myself all week.

[15 : 57] What would I have done in this situation? I reckon if I was in a situation like this, with conflict like this, I think I probably would have been tapping out.

Probably would have called it a date. Probably this were us in our world. We would have cancelled each other. Yeah? In our world that too easily walks away when a relationship gets messy or costly, I've been so profoundly affected by the fact that the love of Christ by the indwelling spirit in Paul causes him not to withdraw.

It causes him to press all the more in to this relationship, persevering in prayer and affection. He doesn't cancel and run.

Paul pours his heart out towards them. Do you see it? Friends, I just wonder if there's a strained relationship that the Lord might be putting on your heart right now to fight to see right.

And with that we get a fascinating little insight into what makes Paul tick and I find this hugely challenging. What does he want? He wants their joy in the Lord.

[17 : 14] Do you see that? He wants their joy in the Lord. That's why he lives. That's why he does what he does. Not for him. He does it for them. We make decisions all the time, don't we?

When we make decisions because of the world that we've grown up in and the air that we're breathing every day, we are used to making decisions where we're looking after number one first. Everything and everyone else falls in behind that.

And I wonder if some of us are facing a big decision right now. Can I ask you to think about what are the top three factors in that decision making process? Here's the challenge of this passage as we see Paul's heart for them.

Where does following Jesus and loving and serving his people fit into our decision making? The decisions that we make, do we think about the impact that they will have on our fellow brothers and sisters?

See, if the Lord is moving you on to a different season of your life, have you thought about how you can finish as well as you can? Does finding a good local church where you can grow and be a blessing to other brothers and sisters is that feature in our decision making?

[18 : 32] You know, one thing I think that God has taught me through his word over the years through the things that I've experienced is that he's concerned, yes, about what we decide to do in our lives, but equally, and you could argue probably more so, he's interested in the thought process that we went through to get there.

What if instead of asking ourselves what should we do, we asked ourselves first and foremost who should we be? And as we do that, we pray that God would shape our character so that we will come to reflect more of his priorities as we see them in Jesus.

And I think that's the thing that takes us beyond this being just a set of good morals. Because it would be the easiest thing to do to cut ties of this passage here and say let's go and do it.

But I know my own heart, I don't think I'll last ten minutes for that thing. Okay? Paul tells us how he came to be this kind of person. And what follows is the most wonderful description of the Bible story that exists anywhere in Scripture.

And the point is Paul is saying that I've come to be this kind of person only because God is this kind of God. If you're new to the Bible here, what Paul writes at verse 20, it's on the screen, I'd love you to look at it in the text.

[19 : 59] What he writes here is the cheat code for understanding the Bible. Right? It is the key that unlocks the whole thing. And here it is, he writes it there, that Jesus is the yes to all of God's promises.

I think so often we're familiar perhaps as Christians with the stories of the Bible, perhaps to the neglect of understanding the story of the Bible.

Friends, to read the Old Testament without Jesus is like watching a box set all the way through and then realizing the last one isn't uploaded yet. You ever heard that experience? reading the Old Testament without Jesus is like persevering with a jigsaw puzzle before getting to the end and realizing that there's a piece missing.

Every type, every pattern, every promise, every loose ended question, every longing, all roads lead to Jesus.

Jesus is the promised Genesis 3 serpent crusher who will reverse the effects of sin and death.

[21 : 17] He is the one who will crush Satan's head. Jesus is the one through whom God will bless the nations as God promised Abraham way back in Genesis 12. Jesus is the end to the sacrificial system that we see in Leviticus.

He is the perfect priest. Jesus is the greater Joshua who will fully and finally lead his people into the promised land where they will have rest. He is the promised Davidic king who will defeat his enemies and win rest for his people.

He is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He is the promised mighty king from Bethlehem that Micah spoke about and on and on and on we could go.

Here's the point. God is not like a jazz musician who's taken a notion to improvise. Evil doesn't have him on the back foot.

God is not responding to world events as they happen thinking I didn't see that coming. No, Jesus is the glorious climax to God's plan, get this, hatched before the foundation of the world to rescue guilty, sinful, clueless and weary human beings like us.

[22 : 38] I think so often we come to this book and we think it's about us. Friends, can I say that's precisely where you and I go wrong with our Bible reading?

Because we come to this and we go looking for us. Can I tell you what's the way more satisfying experience? The way more eye-opening experience is to come to this and go looking for him.

The great lover and the great pursuer of souls. Jesus Christ is God's yes to all his promises. Christianity is a yes religion.

Right? There's tons of stuff that we say no to that the world says yes to but that only happens because we've been captivated by the life-transforming message of Jesus who is the most significant yes that you and I can ever hope to know.

It's all about him. You know, there's an old pub down in Oxford called the Eagle and Child and it's got a plaque inside that commemorates it.

[23 : 51] It's the place where C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and a few others used to meet to talk about life, God and everything. You know the whole, if you could go back in time in a time machine to any point in history, where would you go?

See for me, this is up there as one of them. Imagine eavesdropping in on those conversations. That's where I'd go in my time machine. That and 1924 when Adrian won the Scottish Cup because believe me that ain't happening again anytime soon.

But one of those conversations that happens between Lewis and Tolkien apparently goes, the two of them are talking about stories. And one turns to the other, I can't remember who to who, but he says, do you know why we love stories so much?

Because we're in one. We're in one. This is what Paul is saying here. His life is caught up in God's wonderful story about his faithfulness and his love.

And I think, friends, we need to feel the pressure off us trying to be the hero of our own stories.

[24 : 58] We need to feel the pressure off trying to always be winning at life. Right? We need to feel the pressure off of smashing it at parenting.

to feel the pressure off of acing your studies. Feel the pressure off of trying to make every decision perfectly. Having it all together with your mental health.

Feel the pressure off. Or entertaining that paralyzing pressure to find your passion and your goal in life. Feel the pressure off.

love. Because this tells us by grace that we have been caught up in God's wonderful story. We're participating in it.

Where Jesus is the glorious yes. And the only thing left to happen, and this was the kids talk, wasn't it? I'd love to tell you Pete and I plan that stuff, but we don't.

[26 : 02] Not one of God's good promises has ever failed. The only one yet to happen in the story is for Jesus to come back and decisively conquer evil, justly judge those who haven't accepted him, and make all things new.

And that's why he must refer here to the spirit as the guarantee. As if to say the spirit living inside of every single believer testifies to us that that is true.

Friends, my question to you as we draw to a close is, do you know the story? Where are your gaps in your thinking?

You know, we're doing this men's breakfast again on the 23rd, and it's free for anybody to come. We'll spend some time eating together. We're going to interview a man called Martin about his life and his faith and his work and how he does all that stuff.

But part of it, we're going to read this book called Enjoying God by Tim Chester. You can pick them up at the back. We've got a few still to sell, but we're going to just spend 10, 15, 20 minutes talking about this book together.

[27 : 12] If what I'm saying here is connecting with you, this is a great place to go. Knowing God by Tim Chester. Let me ask you, when was the last time you saw a glimpse of Jesus in the scriptures that caused your heart to sing?

You know, my favorite story last year was hearing a story about an older saint in this church who will remain nameless, although if you come and badger me afterwards, I might let it squeak, who in one of the many Bible studies in this church, when they saw something about Jesus that they hadn't seen before, they let out a little sigh of delight.

We never stop learning. Never stop learning. There's more of Jesus here to know than I think we will ever get to the bottom of. We never stop learning.

He is God's glorious yes to all of his promises. And you say, hang on a minute, I thought we were talking about travel plans. And I think this is Paul's point.

I'm faithful. I'm only faithful because the story of God's grace and his faithfulness, I've been caught up into that story. Do you see how it is Jesus Christ who produces in us this transparency and this radical simplicity?

[28 : 25] A life that's not trying to impress people. A life that's not trying to be two-faced. A life where we don't talk ourselves up. A life where we don't flatter others. A life where we don't live for the pleasure of other people.

A life where we don't exaggerate our importance. A life where we don't hide our weakness. This is what God's story of grace does when it burrows its way down into our lives and into our hearts.

So friends, would our friends say and families say that we are people marked by simplicity and godly sincerity. You know, just to bring us back to the big thing, I want just to close by telling you, and you can turn around and look at them if you want, about the glass doors in this foyer.

Every single one of us walked in here today. Do you see how there's two glass doors that you walked in? So on Monday we had Michael's funeral. Something I learned at this funeral is that Michael was the central, one of the central drivers of the team that designed that glass foyer.

Now previously, before my time, but Pete tells me this, there were two brown partition doors, two brown partition doors that went all the way along that people had to pass through to get into this hall.

[29 : 42] And a generation before us sensed that our neighbours and people who walked past this building thought of this church as a mysterious place where no one could see what happened inside. So what they did is they raised the money wanting to change that perception and they drew up plans, they put in the graph to take out those brown partition walls and put in all that glass.

And what they wanted to show outsiders, passers-by, you can see straight in here. Now of course it's to let light in, isn't it, as well? It's another reason. But you can see straight in here.

There's nothing to hide and there's everything to see. You see, authentic lives of simplicity and godly sincerity, that is how we will make the real Jesus non-ignorable in Edinburgh and beyond.

Simplicity and godly sincerity. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

[31 : 03] And so Father, we thank you so much this morning for each other. And we thank you for the relationships of love that exist between us. And Lord, I pray that you would be helping us this morning. Lord, in all the different things that are going on in our lives, I pray that your spirit would help, Lord, both comfort and challenge and just convince us of your wonderful, heartfelt love towards us and your faithfulness in Jesus.

So Lord, I thank you for this morning and I pray you'd be with us now, Lord, particularly as we move to a time of communion and as we remember who Jesus is, that glorious yes. Father, that you would fill our hearts with greater affection towards him.

And it's in his wonderful name that we pray. Amen.