

How to Handle Trivial Issues (1:15–2:4); Much Ado About Nothing

William Shakespeare wrote a famous play titled “Much Ado About Nothing.” The play is a romantic comedy; it’s all about couples falling into and out of love. The plot contains lots of misunderstanding and intrigue, but in the end, all chaos is resolved and everyone lives happily ever after.

Trouble in the church can sometimes be described as “much ado about nothing.” We’ve all seen examples of how people make mountains out of mole hills. That is, they focus on trivial issues and expand minor misunderstandings way out of proportion. Something that should be a minor irritant becomes a major issue.

That seems to be what happened in the relationship between Paul and the church at Corinth. In today’s text, Paul is explaining a change in plans that affected the Corinthian church. In 1 Cor 16:5-7, Paul states his plan to visit the Corinthians on his way to Macedonia and to stay there for the winter. But Paul decided what he now wanted to do was stop in Corinth briefly on his way *to* Macedonia and then stop there again on his way back *from* Macedonia as he headed back to Judea. Scholars argue about how things actually worked out—which plan Paul actually followed.

That change in plan left some of the people in the church accusing Paul of unreliability or instability. He changed his plans too often; he was not trustworthy; he was fickle; he said one thing and did something else; he said “Yes” but then also said “No.” And if Paul is unreliable in keeping his promises, then perhaps what he teaches is also unreliable. Maybe Paul is a liar; maybe his character is suspect.

It’s remarkable that this criticism is coming from the church that Paul founded and where he taught for a year and a half. He loved those people, but they seemed not to return the affection. Instead of trusting him and giving him the benefit of the doubt, they were critical and even hostile to him.

2Co 12:15 ... *the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved.*

Churches sometimes make small issues into big problems. They allow minor, trivial misunderstandings to sour their relationships. Church members sometimes get all upset with the pastor or with other church members over minor, trivial, insignificant things. In extreme cases, such conflict can lead to the destruction of the church.

Paul has to defend himself against these criticisms of unreliability and fickleness. He had to respond to these criticisms to show the people that they had misunderstood him. In his response, we see a pattern for responding to trivial issues.

When trivial/insignificant issues arise within the church, how should we deal with them? Let's see what the text tells us.

I. Recognize good intentions. 1:15-17

- A. Notice the words "I intended" (.15) and "I was planning" (.17). This whole misunderstanding is based on a fairly minor issue—Paul had changed his plans about visiting the church, and the people responded to that poorly. They did not appreciate Paul's good intentions.
- B. Plans are normally based on good intentions. People in ministry make plans and change plans for good reasons. They are trying to accomplish reasonable goals. They make good-faith efforts at doing the right things, and that sometimes requires changes in plans.
- C. Even though this was a fairly minor issue, some of the people in the church made a big deal out of it. They seized upon that change of plan as an evidence of Paul's lack of good character. They accused him of being unreliable and fickle; he vacillated between one thing and another.

Quote: The Corinthians ... took advantage of Paul's change of plans to criticize him sharply for vacillation and flippancy. How easy it is to find fault with the preacher! So Paul has to explain his conduct.¹

App: It's easy to find fault with the preacher or other people in the church. But constant fault-finding is a good way to produce all kinds of problems in a church.

In fact, we find out later in 2 Cor that Paul intentionally stayed away from the church because of their hostility toward him.

II. Appreciate potential benefits.

- A. .15b-16 He mentions here a "second benefit." His plan was to visit the church in Corinth twice—once on his way *to* Macedonia and once on his way back *from* Macedonia.

¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 2 Co 1:16.

B. The word translated “benefit” here (χάρις) is actually the same word for “grace” or “gift.” In this context, he’s talking about a blessing, a benefit, or a favor

I think he’s talking about the fact that the church could help him on his way twice. They could help him with his traveling expenses going into Macedonia and then leaving Greece and going back to Judea.

App: People sometimes ignore the benefits or the blessings that would happen if a plan is carried out. All they can see are the problems associated with the plan. We should try to be a bit more optimistic and a little less critical of minor changes in plans.

In our church, once we have an event on the calendar, I am reluctant to change it. But sometimes we have to change our plans. When we change plans, there is usually a good reason for it. And I’m thankful that people around here generally don’t make a big deal out of changed plans.

The point is that minor, trivial changes can lead to major issues if we are not careful. If the issue revolves around a change of plans, we should see it as a trivial thing. Our standard, default position should be that we keep minor things minor and not let them become major. If something is a trivial issue, don’t allow it to blow up and become a big deal.

III. Avoid unwarranted accusations. .17

This verse is Paul’s response to these accusations made against him. Paul had indeed changed his plans, but he had good reason for doing so, and it was not as big of a deal as what the people made it out to be.

Quote: Someone in Corinth seized on his postponed visit and blew it out of proportion ... They recast his failure to come into a breach of promise, giving it the worst possible interpretation.²

We need to guard against interpreting events in the worst possible light. Most of the time, people are operating in good faith, they are doing their best; and we ought to give them the benefit of the doubt. If we become critical of people for trivial reasons, it will have a major destructive effect on our relationships. Instead, we ought to trust that people are acting in good faith for good reasons.

Notice these accusations and how Paul responds to them.

² David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 98.

- A. .17a Accusation #1: the decision was made “lightly.”
1. The word (ἐλαφρία) means “with levity”; to be fickle; vacillating; capricious and unstable.
 2. To be “light” in character meant being selfish and unconcerned with broken promises or with the needs of others. To make a decision lightly was to decide irresponsibly.
 3. Paul asks the question, “Did I make my plans frivolously, casually, without thought?” i.e., was this plan irresponsible or insincere?
 4. The expected answer is “No.” Paul had put a lot of thought and foresight into this plan. He didn’t change his plan because he was instable or inconsiderate. He changed his plans because he thought it would be in the best interests of everyone involved.

Illus.: All of us know what it’s like to have to change plans. E.g., think of all the plans that have changed because of Covid. I’d imagine that all of us have changed our plans many times in the last couple of years.

That happens to us, and it happens to others related to us. We are disappointed when grandparents are not able to make the trip to visit us. Work responsibilities change and that means that vacation plans have to change. We all experience minor irritations like that.

But such changes don’t mean that we are irresponsible or unstable. It’s just part of life.

App: Trivial issues are made much worse when we start throwing accusations around. We don’t know what motivates people to do what they do, and it only makes things worse when we start accusing people of being irresponsible and unreliable.

We can’t look into people’s hearts and see why they are doing things. If you want to make a mountain out of a mole hill, just start claiming that you know why people did certain things. Just claim that you know someone else’s heart motivations. That’s a good way to ramp up all kinds of problems and trouble.

- B. .17b Accusation #2: the decision was made “according to the flesh.”

1. The flesh is the sinful human nature. To do things “according to the flesh” is to do things in a self-centered way, without considering the needs of others. When you operate according to the flesh, you just follow your moods and inclinations irrespective of how your actions affect others.
2. The word “impulsively” describes this idea. When you act impulsively, you are acting according to your own whims and inclinations. That was the accusation against Paul. He made the change of plans without considering how it might impact others.
3. Paul denies here that his plans were motivated by selfish considerations. He was not merely fulfilling his personal appetites, moods, or desires when he made these plans.
4. In fact, we find out later in the book that Paul changed his plans for the benefit of the church at Corinth. His last visit had been severe and harsh, and he didn’t want to repeat that experience. He changed his plans to spare them from another harsh visit.

App: If you want to damage a relationship, just start making accusations about the other person’s character. Just assume that the other person is acting out of selfishness without regard for anyone else. That’s a good way to destroy a relationship.

Instead, our default attitude should be that the person probably has a good reason for his/her behavior. Until proven otherwise, we should assume the best about people and not question their motives and good character.

- C. .17c Accusation #3: the decision was inconsistent/contradictory -- “Yes, Yes and No, No.”
1. Expressions like this make 2 Corinthians one of the more difficult books in the Bible to interpret. What does Paul mean by “Yes, Yes and No, No”?
 2. We should remember that Jesus said “Let your yes be yes and your no be no” (Mt 5:37). James says something very similar in James 5:12. Christian morality demands that we speak honestly, not saying two contradictory things at the same time.

3. Apparently, the people in the church were charging Paul with not following this standard. He was saying both “yes and no,” “yes” at one moment and “no” the next. He was vacillating and fickle, unstable and unreliable. He affirms something and then denies it.
4. In other words, they were accusing him of being a dishonest, unreliable person. He affirms something one moment and denies it the next. He “speaks from both sides of his mouth.”
5. The doubling of the word may be for emphasis—i.e., he’s *always* saying one thing and then doing another; he does that again and again.
6. .18 Paul flatly denies that accusation. He asserts that their preaching to the Corinthians was not “Yes and No.” His message was not contradictory or unreliable. He was not being fickle or irresponsible. Later in the passage, he’s going to tell them exactly why he changed his plans, and it was really for their benefit.

App: Another way of causing conflict is to accuse someone of “always” doing something or “never” doing something. That kind of accusation reveals a critical spirit. Some people are looking for faults and failures that they can highlight. Criticizing others somehow makes them feel better about themselves.

If you want to blow up a trivial issue into a big problem, then do what the people of Corinth were doing. Accusing someone acting in good faith of irresponsibility, immorality, and inconsideration. Accuse people of having bad character. That is exactly the wrong way to handle minor issues.

Trans: If you want to avoid making much ado about nothing, then don’t make rash, unreasonable, or false accusations. Don’t put the worst possible spin on things. Don’t assume that you know why people are doing things. Give others the benefit of the doubt; don’t jump to unwarranted conclusions.

he people of Corinth were offended over a very small, trivial issue. They made outlandish claims/charges against Paul, who was in reality acting in good faith and for their benefit. They were making a mountain out of a mole hill.

When trivial issues become big issues, it’s usually because of a series of misunderstandings, and it usually begins with assumptions about someone’s motivations. We should assume the best about people and not blow things all out of proportion. Let trivial issues remain trivial. If we retain a critical, fault-finding attitude, it will damage our relationships and weaken the church.