

2 Cor 1:15–2:4 Much Ado About Nothing, part 2

Last time we met, I noted that the title to a Shakespeare play, “Much Ado About Nothing,” is often true in the church. 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*.

In today’s text, Paul addresses a minor irritant that had become a major issue, and in doing so, he gives us an example of how to deal with trivial issues in the church.

Last time, we looked at the first three of these points. In dealing with trivial issues, we should...

I. Recognize good intentions. 1:15-17

Notice the words “I intended” (.15) and “I was planning” (.17). Paul had changed his plans for good reasons; he had good intentions. He was dealing with the people in good faith.

If we want to avoid making much ado about nothing, we should give people the benefit of the doubt; assume that people are making decisions for good reasons.

II. Appreciate potential benefits. .15b-16

He mentions here a “second benefit.” His plan was to visit the church in Corinth twice. Those two visits would give the people in Corinth two opportunities to partner with Paul in spreading the Gospel.

To avoid making much ado about nothing, we should try to be optimistic and see things in a positive light. We must avoid a critical spirit that puts a negative spin on everything.

III. Avoid unwarranted accusations. .17

A. Accusation #1: the decision was made “lightly,” i.e., irresponsibly, without considering the needs of others.

B. Accusation #2: the decision was made “according to the flesh,” i.e., according to his own mood and inclination; casually, flippantly.

C. Accusation #3: the decision was inconsistent/contradictory -- “Yes, Yes and No, No.” I.e., Paul was unstable and irresponsible.

If we want to avoid making much ado about nothing, we must avoid judging people's motives and heart attitudes. We usually do not know why people do what they do, and we must avoid assuming that people have evil motives.

Let's go on in the passage and see what else Paul tells us about dealing with trivial issues in the church.

IV. Focus on the important things, not the trivial. 1:18-22

Paul now transitions from the accusations the church made against him to the unchangeable nature of God and his Word. Human plans sometimes change, but God and his word remain the same.

A. Focus on God's faithfulness. God is faithful. .18a

One of God's primary attributes is his reliability; we can trust in God to do what he said he'd do. Cf. Titus 1:2 "the God who cannot lie"

App: Even when we are at church for the purpose of worshiping God, it's easy to lose our focus. The focus of the church is on God and his Word—things that eternal and reliable. Instead of looking for the errors and faults of other people, our focus at church should be on God and his Word.

B. Focus on the consistency of the Gospel. The Gospel is consistent, "not Yes and No." .18b-19

1. The message that Paul and his companions had preached ("our word [λόγος] to you") was not fickle or unstable.
2. That was true of Paul and his companions in ministry.
 - a) Silvanus is just another name for Silas, one of Paul's colleagues.
 - b) Timothy is of course the same person Paul wrote the books of 1 & 2 Timothy to. He was another co-worker, in fact, his son in the faith.
 - c) So we have the testimony here of three witnesses. If they are going to charge Paul with being unreliable, then they'd have to say the same thing about these other men.
 - d) They all proclaimed the same message faithfully—the message about Jesus Christ the Son of God. That message was dependable and stable, and those proclaiming it were preaching the truth.

3. .19 Jesus himself, whom Paul and the others had proclaimed to them, was not “Yes and No.” Jesus is reliable; the message about Jesus is stable and trustworthy. The AH tells us that Jesus is the same “yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). Thus, if Paul and his companions are preaching Jesus, their message is trustworthy.

.19 Notice also the characters mentioned here: God, his Son, Paul and his colleagues, and the Corinthian people (“among you”)—they all should be united in the truth. The church should focus on what unites them all in the same great work. They should not allow minor, trivial issues to divert them from pursuing the glory of God.

App: Unfortunately, trivial matters upset the life of the church all too frequently. A few people in the church get all up in arms about a fairly minor issue and they enlarge it all out of proportion. The fact that some people can’t just ignore a trivial issue leads to all sorts of upset and chaos in the church. What a shame to lose the unity and fellowship of the body over trivial, insignificant issues that are best ignored!

But that’s what happens when we get our eyes off of the Lord and start focusing on the faults and failures of others.

We ought to be focusing on God and on the Gospel. What else?

C. .20 Focus on the promises of God. All the promises of God are trustworthy/true—Yes and Amen

1. God is faithful, and so are his promises. We can rely on the person and the promises of God.

2. The word “amen” means “true” or “right.” “Amen” means “Yes, I agree.” We affirm God’s promises when we say “amen.”

Occasionally, it’s nice to hear someone say “Amen” while I’m speaking. That means, “I agree; yes, that’s true,” I affirm what you are saying.

3. .20 “in Him”—probably points back to vs. 19a—Jesus, the Son of God. We believe that all the promises of God have been fulfilled or will be fulfilled through Christ. Jesus said that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets (Mt 5:17-18). Jesus is the key to receiving all the blessings that God has promised to those who trust in him.

App: I wonder if you have trusted in Jesus to receive those promises? All the promises of God to the believer ultimately come through Christ—the only mediator between God and man. Jesus has promised to save all those who come to him in repentance and faith. If you don’t believe in Jesus, you can’t receive the promises of God; they are not for you.

Actually, God has made promises to unbelievers—e.g., John 3:36.

4. .20end And notice that these promises came to the people in Corinth “through us” (cf. “by us” in vs. 19). The message about Jesus is trustworthy, and so are the spokesmen to told you this message.

App: We live in an unstable world full of unstable people. Many things in our experience will fail and disappoint us.

But God and his Word will not fail us. The Word of God is clear, direct, and true. God has communicated to us in his Word, and it’s our responsibility to believe the promises of God and act on them.

Likewise, when God’s messengers teach God’s Word accurately and faithfully, it is our responsibility to listen and to heed their instruction. Christians are expected to affirm God’s Word—to say “Yes” and “Amen” to the Word of God.

D. Focus on the security of salvation. .21-22

Here's something else to focus on rather than on trivial, minor misunderstandings. Paul uses several important words to verify the security of believers.

Each of these words is a tremendous promise.

1. .21 Believers are *established*. God has established “us with you in Christ.”

- a) The word “establishes” (βεβαιόω) means “to make firm, to secure, to verify, to prove to be certain.” We have a sure foundation in our common faith in Christ. We have deep roots; we are well-grounded in the faith; our standing with God is firm/certain through Christ.
- b) This firm footing comes from being “in Christ,” that is, in union with Christ through faith in him. This union of believers with Christ is certain, secure, and firm.
- c) Our security in Christ is not a feeling; it's a position or status of every believer—we are “in Christ,” united with him by faith in his life, death, and resurrection. Cf. Gal 2:20.
- d) This, of course, implies that we cannot lose salvation. God secures our union with Christ; it can never be broken. Salvation is firmly established on the promises of God in Christ, and they cannot be shaken; they are well-established. Our status is firm, reliable, and certain.

Song: “More secure is no one ever than the loved ones of the Savior...”

2. Believers are *anointed*.

- a) In the OT, anointing was only for a select group of people—prophets, priests, and kings.
- b) But in the NT, all believers are saints; we are all in the household of God; we are all God’s children. And we all receive an anointing, symbolizing the work of the Spirit in our lives.
- c) We are anointed by the Spirit to serve. Anointing was done for specific offices or tasks of service. The HSp gives believers spiritual gifts that they are to use for the benefit of others. We all ought to be serving in the area of our gifting.

3. Believers are *sealed*.

- a) In the ancient world, a king or high official would have a signet ring, and he’d use that ring to make an impression in wax or in clay to seal a document. That seal was a sign of ownership or validity, almost like a signature. A seal guaranteed an item’s authenticity and proclaimed its ownership.

Quote: Associated with the idea of sealing are the ideas of ownership, authentication, and security; the believer is “branded” as God’s property, the reality of his faith is attested, and his status is guaranteed ...¹

- b) This sealing by the HSp guarantees eternal life for the believer.

(1) The “guarantee” in view here (ἀρραβών) is the earnest money paid up front to guarantee that the rest of the money would eventually be paid.

¹ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 325.

Ephesians 1:13–14 ... *having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.*

- (2) The Spirit himself is that pledge or deposit that guarantees that God will finish the transaction.

Philippians 1:6 ... *He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;*

- (3) This is another guarantee of salvation; it's another indication what we cannot lose salvation once we have it. Salvation is guaranteed by the Spirit. If salvation can be lost, then God's promises are unreliable.

Notice also the Trinitarian reference here: God establishes and anoints the believer "in Christ," and the Spirit seals us and guarantees our salvation. The work of salvation is Trinitarian; each Person of the Trinity is active in guaranteeing the salvation of believers. What a great set of truths for us to unify around!

Instead of focusing on trivial issues, we should focus on things that are not trivial; things that we can unify around—God himself, Jesus and salvation through him, the promises of God, and the security we have in Christ.

We should not be obsessed with other people and their weaknesses and failures. We should be obsessed with the greatness of God, salvation through Christ, and the reliability of God's Word. We should unify around agreement with these great truths, not divide over our disappointments with each other.

V. Consider others. 1:23-2:4

A. .23 Consider them by displaying compassion. “Spare” people if possible.

1. Here we see why Paul changed his plans: he wanted to spare the people at Corinth another severe/harsh experience. He was saving them from unnecessary sorrow, so it was really in their best interests that he did not show up as planned.
2. To call God as a witness against yourself (“my soul”) was a solemn oath, recognizing God as the judge, that invites God’s condemnation if you are telling a lie. In fact, the oath calls upon God to destroy the oath-taker if he’s lying. He’s calling down a curse upon himself if he’s not telling the truth.

App: Compassion and godly love should motivate us to avoid harshness and severity whenever possible. That would be true in all our relationships, and especially our relationships within the church. Compassion goes a long way toward avoiding conflict.

B. .24 Consider them by being humble.

1. .24a Humble people do not seek dominion/rule over others.
 - a) This again shows us another criticism that the church was directing at Paul, namely, that he was acting like a tyrant or a dictator, dominating over them and intimidating them. That was their accusation.
 - b) Paul was an authorized spokesman for Jesus, which meant that he had apostolic authority. He had the right to tell the church how to operate. He had the right to impose church discipline on the congregation. If he needed to be severe/harsh with them, he had the right to do so.
 - c) And besides that, Paul was their spiritual father; he was the one who brought the Gospel to them; they had converted to Christ under his ministry.

1Co 4:15 *For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.*

- d) But in spite of his rightful authority over the church, he didn't want to impose that authority upon them harshly. He didn't want to be severe with them. He had no interest in ruling over them. He wanted to serve them, not exercise ruling authority over them. Cf. Mt 20:25-28

App: Ministers of the Gospel at times need to use their authority to impose church discipline. But at the same time, they are not dictators or tyrants. Most pastors are reluctant to exercise harsh discipline; they'd rather spare the flock. Most pastors see themselves as servants, not as rulers. They are not trying to dominate anyone.

2. .24b Humble people see themselves as co-workers.

- a) Paul wanted to think of the people in Corinth as fellow-workers, not as subjects of his authority. He wanted the people to see him as a colleague, not a dictator. They should have all been working together to advance the spiritual health of the church.

- b) Cf. 2:2 "who is he who makes me glad" -- Paul would rather visit a happy congregation than a sad one. He changed his plans because he didn't want to be harsh and severe with them. He was hoping that his ministry among them would be the source of joy, not sorrow.

If he caused them pain, it would cause pain for himself. So that's why he wrote a letter to them instead of visiting them personally.

App: No pastor wants to be the source of pain and sorrow. Pastors want to serve with a happy congregation. If people will follow biblical guidelines, then there's no need for the sorrow of church discipline.

C. Don't cause needless sorrow. 2:1

Note the repeated words in 2:1-4—vs. 1 "sorrow," vs. 2 "sorrowful" twice, vs. 3 "sorrow," vs 4 "anguish, tears, grieved." So you can tell that Paul was deeply concerned about the welfare of the church. He wanted to avoid causing more upset within the church. He wanted the church to be joyful (vs. 3 end).

Paul knew that if he showed up at the church again, he'd have to discipline some of the people. He wanted to avoid that.

App: Imposing church discipline is almost always painful experience. Pastors and congregations occasionally have to do that, but it is not a happy or joyous process.

What makes us happy is unity and cooperation; warm and friendly relationships within the church make us happy. Unity around the fundamental doctrines of the faith makes us happy. Proper biblical behavior makes us happy. When people make much ado about nothing, it makes everyone sad. Don't do it; don't blow up minor irritants into big issues.

D. Display love. 2:4

1. Paul refers here to a letter that he had previously sent to them, probably the one he sent when he decided not to visit there himself.

BTW, we do not have a copy of this letter; this is not 1 Cor.

2. He wrote the letter in affliction, anguish of heart, and many tears. That was a very hard letter to write, and he shed a lot of tears in writing it. It caused him anguish and inner pain to have to be so severe with them.
3. But his purpose in that severe letter was to cause his readers to repent of their sin. The letter was in their best interests. That's what love is—doing what's in the best interests of someone else. Paul wrote that letter from a heart of love, a heart that was breaking because of their sin. Sometimes love must be tough; love urges sinners to repent and to be reconciled with God.
4. Instead of a heavy hand of discipline, Paul had hoped that things would change in the church so that his next visit would be a pleasant one.
5. The intent of sending a letter instead of visiting was to show how much he cared for them.

App: The Bible tells us that love covers a multitude of sins. Our highest motivation and desire for all our relationships ought to be love—the desire to do what is best for the other person.

Obviously, love motivates us to disregard trivial issues. Instead of making mountains out of mole hills, love motivates us to level out those mole hills so they don't become mountains. Keep what is trivial trivial; don't make much ado about nothing.

I wonder as you examine your life, are you guilty of making “much ado about nothing”? Occasionally, we do have to make “much ado” about important things. But when possible, our normal attitude should be that we give people the benefit of the doubt, assume that they are acting out of good faith, and believe that their actions are the result of good intentions. We refuse to be critical and skeptical of others' motivations.

Sometimes we will be disappointed in other people, and sometimes they'll be disappointed with us. But our focus is not on other people; our focus is on God, salvation in Christ, the Word of God, and our unity around those ideas. Refuse to focus on minor irritants—ignore them, let them go.

Relationships with other people are far more joyful and positive when we assume the best and avoid making unreasonable accusations.

If we want to avoid the sorrow and the grief that's so common in so many churches, we'll focus on God's faithfulness, salvation through Christ, and the reliability of the Word of God, not on our disappointment with other people.

And if we love one another, that's what we'll do. Abundant love (vs. 4) will cause us to overlook trivial matters and strive for unity in Christ and around the unchanging promises of God's Word.