

Godly Discernment

2 Corinthians 1:12–2:4

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Introduction

Something I believe every single one of us has struggled to do is to discern God's will in the context of difficult life situations. Life is difficult and complex, and knowing what the right thing to do is not always clear. Our passage today is a wonderful glimpse into the godly discernment of the apostle Paul during a very difficult and complex time in his life and ministry. My goal is to walk through 2 Corinthians 1:12–2:4, seeing Paul as an example of what godly discernment looks like.

This is our second week in our study of 2 Corinthians. It is a book written by Paul, an apostle who had planted a church in Corinth roughly six years earlier. About four years after the church at Corinth was started, Paul was living and preaching in Ephesus, three hundred miles in a direct line across the Aegean Sea. While in Ephesus, he received word that things were not going well in Corinth. He was told of competing factions, sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, confusion about marriage, idolatry, disorder in worship, and even theological confusion about the resurrection. In response to these problems, Paul wrote a couple of letters — one of which we have, 1 Corinthians — and then he went and visited them in person.

The visit was a complete disaster. While there, Paul was publicly wronged and humiliated. His authority was challenged, his physical appearance was mocked, his speech dismissed as unimpressive, and everything he did or did not do was twisted around as proof that he did not love them. And on top of all of this, the congregation at Corinth did not defend him. So Paul left, returning to Ephesus, deeply hurt and wounded.

To make matters worse, based on our passage today, it appears that Paul had promised to visit the church at Corinth immediately upon leaving Ephesus — but he did not. He went instead to Macedonia, in northern Greece. Why would Paul do this? Why would he say one thing and do another? It is not hard to imagine that his detractors were pointing to his change of plans as further evidence that he was not a true apostle.

And so, at the front end of 2 Corinthians, Paul explains why he changed his mind. This is our passage today. Because Paul is explaining his decision-making process, it is of great value to us as an example of godly discernment.

Many people mistakenly think that God leads His people in daily life through various spiritual promptings, something like the directions function on Apple Maps: “Turn right, take this exit, go straight for the next two hundred miles.” That is not how God leads us in the everydayness of life. Rather, through the power and presence of His Spirit in us, there is an ongoing regeneration and renewal of the mind and heart so that we live in this world in a Christ-like way — with the mind of Christ, making everyday decisions as people transformed by God from within. What does it look like to be transformed in that way? Today, we get a glimpse by watching Paul work through a very difficult decision.

Let us look at Paul as an example of this important capacity that all of us are called to develop. Our passage begins in 2 Corinthians 1:12, where Paul says:

“For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.”

Right here in verse 12, Paul sets up two paradigms of behaving in this world. There is what he calls earthly wisdom, and there is what he calls godly sincerity. For the purpose of our passage, godly sincerity, godly wisdom, and godly discernment are describing the same thing: how one lives and behaves in this world. So what does it look like? Looking at Paul’s example, I want to trace four marks of godly discernment through our passage.

1. Godly Discernment Begins with Seeking to Do What Pleases God

Let me read again verse 12, along with verses 13 and 14:

“For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand — just as you did partially understand us — that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.”

Clearly, an important part of godly discernment is listening to one’s conscience. What is your heart telling you? But there is a problem. A person’s conscience may not be speaking truly. The conscience can be shaped by pride, by fear, by the approval of others, or by what we want to be true. And so Paul does something important. He calibrates his conscience against something outside himself. Notice what that something is: *“that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.”* Paul’s conscience is not clear because he has convinced himself of his own rightness. His conscience is clear because he is looking toward

that future day when every living soul will stand before the Lord. *In the eyes of God, are these actions of mine right? Is what I am doing pleasing to Him?* That is the question Paul is asking. And that is the question he is putting to the Corinthians: “One day you will see the answer — in the day of the Lord Jesus, you will boast of us. You will see that what I have done was pleasing to God.”

Do you ever ask yourself the question, “Is God pleased with what I am doing?” This matters enormously, because we all know that if the goal is to make other people happy, we will never succeed — the happiness of people is always fleeting. But notice what Paul says when he talks about seeking to please God. How does he do it? By God’s grace. It is by God’s grace that we can live in this world in such a way that our lives glorify and please Him. The pleasure of God is not out of reach. It is the very thing His grace equips us to seek and do.

Now let us press this a little further. How do I know what pleases God? Earthly wisdom says, “Do what feels right,” or “Do what seems to work.” Godly discernment says, “Do what pleases God.” Thankfully, we are not left to guess what pleases or displeases Him. By His grace, He has given us His word. Through the whole counsel of Scripture, God tells His people what pleases Him and what does not.

This means that godly discernment is not a mystical exercise. It is not waiting for a feeling. It is a life immersed in Scripture, shaped by Scripture, corrected by Scripture, so that when the hard decisions come, you are not starting from zero. You are already a person whose conscience has been calibrated by the word of God, looking toward the day of the Lord. This is where godly discernment begins: with seeking to please God, knowing what pleases Him through His word, and standing in His grace to do it.

2. Godly Discernment Is Anchored In and Flows from God’s Faithfulness

The next section, verses 15 through 22, is the heart of the passage, and it is beautiful. Remember, Paul has changed his plans. But before he defends himself, or gives any reason for the change, he first holds up the faithfulness of God. I love this.

“Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say ‘Yes, yes’ and ‘No, no’ at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

Before Paul gives his reason for the change, he anchors his answer in the character of God. “As surely as God is faithful.” That is the ground he stands on. Not his own consistency, not his own track record of keeping appointments — but the faithfulness of the God who has never once broken His word.

And then Paul does something wonderful. He tells us where we see that faithfulness most clearly. He points to Christ. Verse 19: *“For the Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes.”* Verse 20: *“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.”* Think about what Paul is saying. Every promise God ever made — the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed; the promise to David that his throne would be established forever; the promise through Isaiah that a servant would come and bear our sorrows; the promise through Jeremiah of a new covenant written on the heart; the promise through Ezekiel of a new heart and God’s own Spirit given — every single one of those promises, Paul says, finds its Yes in Jesus Christ. He is God’s Yes to everything God ever said He would do. There are no unfulfilled promises left hanging. In Christ, God has said Yes.

And when we come into Christ, when we are joined to Him by faith, we get to say the Amen. *“It is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”*

But Paul is not finished. He piles up three more images in verses 21 and 22 that are worth looking at closely.

First, he says God “establishes us with you in Christ.” That word — *βεβαιόω, bebaioō* — is a legal and commercial term in Greek. It means to guarantee a transaction, to make something firm, to certify that a deal will hold up in court. God has signed the contract. The relationship between Him and you is not a handshake that may or may not be honored; it is a guaranteed transaction in Christ.

Second, Paul says God “has put his seal on us.” In the ancient world, a seal was a mark of ownership and authentication. When a letter was sealed, it could not be opened except by the one to whom it was addressed. When a jar of wine or oil was sealed, the seal declared who

owned it and vouched that its contents were genuine. God has put His seal on you. You are His, and you are authenticated as His. There is no breaking that seal.

Third, and I think most beautiful, Paul says God has “given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” This Greek word — *ῥαβών*, *arrabōn* — is another commercial term. It means a down payment, earnest money that guarantees the full purchase will be completed. In modern Greek, this same word is used for an engagement ring. The ring is not the marriage, but it is the pledge of the marriage to come. The Holy Spirit in your heart is God’s down payment — His pledge that everything He has promised you, the resurrection, glory, a new heavens and new earth, life in the presence of Christ, all of it is coming. The Spirit is the first installment on an inheritance you have not yet received.

Do you see what Paul has done in these verses? He has built his defense on the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. God the Father is faithful. Christ the Son is the Yes of every promise. The Spirit in our hearts is the guarantee. This is the foundation of his defense. God is faithful, and because He is faithful, so am I. Look back at verse 18: “*our word to you has not been Yes and No.*” People of Corinth, I have never stopped being faithful to you. Just as God is faithful, through His Spirit in us, that faithfulness of God continues through us.

This raises the obvious question: if faithfulness is so important, why did Paul change his plans? He said he would come when he left Ephesus, but he did not. Why? Now, having established the faithfulness of God, Paul explains what his faithfulness to the Corinthians actually demanded of him. And this brings us to the third mark of godly discernment.

3. Godly Discernment Seeks the Good of Others, Even If It Means Getting Out of the Way

We see this in 2 Corinthians 1:23–2:4:

“But I call God to witness against me — it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”

This is so beautiful and wise. Paul is saying, “I was planning to come to you, but I realized that my coming would cause you pain. Therefore, I am not sure that my coming would be the best thing for you — and if it is not the best thing for you, it is not the best thing for me either.”

Paul changes his plans not because he is wishy-washy, flippant, or because the trip seemed too inconvenient. He changes them because of a higher faithfulness he owes the people of Corinth. That higher faithfulness is their spiritual well-being — their faith and joy in the Lord. It is this well-being that he is committed to above all else. His promise to visit them when he left Ephesus is a lesser priority than his promise to seek their good. Thus, his faithfulness to them has never actually changed; only the form it takes has.

Wrapped inside this, do you see Paul’s humility? He recognized that the best thing he could do for them — the most faithful thing — was not to go to them. What they needed was for him to stay away. That must have been very hard for Paul. I am sure he wanted to go there and solve all the problems. I cannot speak for Paul, but I know that for me, I do not want to be the person who is not needed.

We human beings need to be needed, and sometimes that need becomes more important than the good actually being done. Have you ever worked at a job where the person in charge should have retired long ago? Have you ever been part of a church where the pastor would serve the congregation best by stepping aside? Have you ever gone on a mission trip and come home realizing you got more out of it than the people you went to serve? These are hard questions. But they are questions we need to be asking ourselves. Why am I doing what I am doing? Who am I doing it for? Am I doing it for me, or am I doing it because I want genuine good for that person — even if that good may not include me?

Godly discernment gets the self out of the way of God. And getting the self out of the way requires trusting God to do the good that I cannot. Which brings us to the fourth and final mark.

4. Godly Discernment Requires Trusting God

This principle is not stated explicitly in our passage, but it is implied throughout. The whole reason Paul can step back, not go to Corinth, and genuinely believe it is for their good — their faith and joy — is because he trusts God to do what he himself cannot do. Here is a remarkable man, perhaps the greatest missionary who ever lived, and even he arrives at a point where he recognizes there are things only God can do. *God, that is your job, not mine.* And he trusts God to do it.

The same is true for you and me. Godly discernment is about following God’s will and wisdom, by His grace. One of the sharpest differences between earthly wisdom and godly

discernment is precisely here: earthly wisdom says you can depend on no one but yourself. Godly discernment says you behave in this world by depending upon a Lord who is always faithful.

And that one difference opens up into several others. Godly discernment says “seek what pleases God”; earthly wisdom says “seek what pleases you.” Godly discernment says “practice faithfulness because God is faithful”; earthly wisdom says “always do what is most convenient and advantageous for you.” Godly discernment says “seek the good of others, and when necessary, get out of God’s way”; earthly wisdom says “seek the good of self through power and control.”

But notice something: the difference between godly discernment and earthly wisdom is not a technique. It is not a better decision-making process. The difference is where the center is. In earthly wisdom, the center is the self. In godly discernment, the center is God.

And here is an important spiritual truth. You cannot move yourself from earthly wisdom to godly discernment by trying harder. You cannot work your way into a God-centered life. The reason Paul could make the decision he made — the reason he could change his plans for the good of a church that had wounded him and trust God with the outcome — is because Paul knew where he stood. He stood on the faithfulness of a God who had said Yes to him in Christ and sealed that Yes by the Spirit. He stood on a guarantee that had already been deposited in his heart.

Conclusion

If you are in Christ this morning, that is where you stand too. You stand not on your ability to discern, not on your track record of wise decisions, not on four principles you are trying to remember come Tuesday. You stand on the Yes that God spoke in His Son, and on the Spirit He has given you as the down payment of everything still to come.

So go this week and make your decisions from that ground. The God who kept His word to you in Christ is the God who will be faithful to you in every decision you face. Trust Him.