

Simplicity, sincerity, grace \* 2 Corinthians 1:12  
April 23, 2020 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

I want you to think for a moment about 'church.'

What do you picture when you think of 'church?'

A lot of people I think would probably picture a group of nicely dressed people gathering on a Sunday morning sometime between ten and eleven and taking part in a service of worship led by the pastor whom they pay to lead their church. That's more or less 'church' in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, isn't it?

But that's not what 'church' looked like in the NT. When Paul was writing to the church at Corinth, their gathering would probably have been early in the morning – before the work day began – because Sunday was a work day in the ancient Roman world. There's no pastor at Corinth – it was a group of elders who led and taught the church and their teaching would have been supplemented by itinerant preachers – like Paul.

You see those realities reflected in many of Paul's letters and there are actually first century church documents that talk about how to handle these wandering preachers. One of them, the Didache or 'The teaching of the apostles' – says (and I'm paraphrasing):

Receive anyone who comes to you teaching the truths of the Gospel. If they turn away and teach another doctrine which is contrary to the truth, do not listen to him, but if he teaches so that the justice and knowledge of the Lord increase, receive him as from God... He shall stay one or two days, but if he stays three, he is a false prophet. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet. If he doesn't practice what he preaches, he is a false prophet (this is my paraphrase of Kurt Niederwimmer's translation in *The Didache* (Hermenia), 171-178).

If someone like Paul came to town, then you were in good stead.

But there were people out there who were trying to use the Gospel to make themselves rich or famous. (Believe it or not, you could do it back then). And some of the Corinthians were taken in by these preachers. They were flashy and fancy and appealing and their gospel sounded better than the deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus message that Paul was preaching and so Paul found himself struggling to keep connected with the church that he had founded at Corinth.

That reality lies just beneath the surface of a lot of 2 Corinthians and if you read the whole of 2 Corinthians yourself (which I recommend you do), you're going to see Paul working to get the Corinthians' attention so that he can protect them against false teachers.

And in 2 Corinthians 1, verse 12, Paul gives them a standard that they can use to evaluate them.

ESV 2 Corinthians 1:12 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 (2Co 1:12 ESV).

He's setting himself up in direct contrast to the people that preach the Gospel to make a buck. I don't know that the length of time a teacher stays with you is a good judge of character, but this certainly is – do they behave in the world with simplicity, sincerity and grace?

That's something to look for in pastors – I hope you see that in me – and I would argue that it's something that we should look for in all of our lives as Christians. Do we behave in the world with simplicity, sincerity and grace? Or are we just blending in with the culture around us?

Let's take a minute and think about simplicity, sincerity and grace so that we can apply them in our lives.

Paul says 'we have behaved in the world with simplicity' – the NIV translates it 'holiness,' but it's really more like 'singlemindedness' or 'simplicity' as the ESV puts it. When people look at you, do they see a life cluttered with all sorts of stuff, or a person with a single-minded mission to pursue the will of God? Our culture really values being busy and dipping your hand in all sorts of pots, but Christ calls us to a single-minded simplicity, focused on Him. Our lives should be marked by simplicity.

Paul says 'we have behaved in the world with sincerity' – with pure motives, not for what we can get out of it, but out of gratitude to God for all He's done for us. There are lots of people in the world who will scratch your back if you scratch theirs – God calls us to serve others simply because Jesus served us first – with sincerity and a genuine interest in the other's well-being, not for what we get out of it, but because it's what Christ did for us. Our lives should be marked by sincerity.

And Paul says 'we have behaved in the world with the grace of God, not with worldly wisdom.' The world's wisdom says 'trust in your own strength,' 'do things only if they benefit you,' and 'you're only worth what you make;' God's grace turns that on its head and says 'trust in the LORD with all your heart,' 'serve others as Christ served you,' and 'everyone is valuable because they are loved by God.' Which perspective characterizes you?

Sometimes the world's wisdom lines up with God's and that's great! That's God's common grace and the image of God at work in every human being. But when it diverges from the grace of God, then we follow the undeserved, unconditional grace of God and extend that by faith to others. Our lives should be marked by grace.

So here's the question for us today. How do we behave towards the world? Think about your life for a minute. Are you so accommodated to the world's values that you fit in without really thinking about it? Or do you behave in the world with simplicity, sincerity and grace? Off the top of my head, as I think about Langford, I think it's the latter – simplicity, sincerity and grace – and I love that about you. Keep it up. And I'll keep trying to behave in the world with simplicity, sincerity and grace too.