

We're entering the last major section of 2 Corinthians, chapters 10-13. These chapters have befuddled scholars for years because they reflect an abrupt change of tone for Paul. In the first nine chapters, he's encouraged by the news he received from Titus that the Corinthians affirm his leadership. He writes to them with warmth and affection. But, starting in chapter 10, Paul's tone takes a sharp turn. He's on the defensive. He writes like a man who's been attacked. He uses strong, sharp language. Paul may have received some additional news about the Corinthian church as he wrote this letter; disturbing news about a remnant of false teachers in Corinth who opposed Paul. It's to this new development that Paul responds in chapters 10-13.

There are several clues in this letter as to what Paul's critics found lacking in him. The biggest thing was Paul just wasn't very impressive. He lacked the power, charisma, and ability to take over a room and capture an audience. Back then, people in the Greek speaking world clamored to hear great public speakers. Many of these were Sophists—teachers of philosophy and rhetoric. They were the rock stars of cities like Athens and Corinth. Crowds flocked to hear them. They made people laugh, cry, groan, and shout. These Sophists were considered wise, and that was the highest virtue of all to them.

Paul defended himself and his ministry. As we'll see, Paul doesn't just play defense; he also plays offense. In fact, he describes his ministry as nothing short of warfare.

By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” toward you when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete. 2 Corinthians 10:1-6

Paul sees himself as waging war. He's demolishing strongholds, taking the enemy captive, and punishing disobedience. The picture he paints is of an army attacking and tearing down the fortified defenses of the enemy. In the ancient world, cities would build a huge wall for their security and, somewhere inside the wall, a fortified tower (a stronghold) that a few soldiers could defend if the wall was breached. In ancient

warfare, these walls were breached with siege machines that acted like battering rams. Sometimes catapults were used to hurl massive stones at the wall.

The Christian life and Christian ministry are a battle. Most of us are aware of that. But as we dive deeper into what Paul says here about this battle, how we engage in it might surprise you.

We fight these ideas with gentleness and meekness

Paul begins by defending himself against some of the accusations of his critics. He uses irony here. He says, *“I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am ‘timid’ when face to face with you, but ‘bold’ toward you when away!”* He's mimicking what they're saying about him behind his back. Earlier, Paul had written them a bold and severe letter while he was away. And to his detractors that didn't match his “timid” demeanor when he was with them. The word timid means to be cowering, weak, and docile. They're saying, “Yeah, Paul, you talk big when you're away, but in person, you can't back it up. When you're away, you sound like some kind of spiritual Rambo, but in person, you wimp out.”

That's also what they mean when at the end of verse 2, he refers to *“people who think we live by the standard of this world”* or, more literally, “according to the flesh.” They said, “Paul, you're worldly, fleshly. We don't see the power of God in your ministry or your life. Where is the Spirit? Where is the power?” Paul quotes them directly in 2 Corinthians 10:10, *“For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive, and his speaking amounts to nothing.’”*

One of the things Paul subtly shows them here is how their values are messed up. They want an authoritative leader, but instead, he appeals to them “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” *Jesus once described himself using these very same words. He said, ‘Come to me...Take my yoke upon you...for I am gentle and humble in heart...’ (Matt. 11:29).* Paul is reminding them the very thing they were criticizing about him were characteristics of Jesus. Paul's critics saw meekness as weakness when in fact, meekness is strength under control.

This begs the question: What kind of leadership do we want? Do we want leaders who dominate us or leaders who serve in humility and meekness? I think most of us grow up as Christians the way we start. If we start the Christian life in an atmosphere of dominating leadership, we grow up with an unhealthy dependence on the spiritual leader's power, wisdom, and influence. But if we start with leaders who serve in humility and gentleness, we learn to depend on the Lord.

But also notice Paul is quite willing to be bold when he visits them, if necessary. In essence, he says: “I'm ready to take a hard line with some when I get there. I can be bold. I can confront. Those who oppose me will

see that." Jesus could be bold too. I think of him driving out the moneychangers from the Temple or looking the self-righteous Pharisees in the eyes and calling them a den of vipers. Jesus was willing to confront when necessary, and so is Paul. He didn't want to be that way. He says, "I beg you when I come, I may not have to be like that."

This is a dilemma Christian leaders face quite often. If you take a position of leadership, you're vulnerable to criticism. People will misunderstand your motives. You'll feel under attack. Some may say you're too soft; others might say you're too hard and demanding. Sometimes you feel like you can't win. Paul tells us we're called to be like Christ in our leadership. He was humble, meek, and gentle. Yes, there are times to be bold and firm and to draw a line in the sand, but that's not our first move. And if we have to have to fight, it's crucial we do so with spiritual weapons and not worldly weapons.

We do not wage war as the world does

And that's what he says in verse 3, "*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.*" He starts with a concession: "*For though we live in the world...*" All he means by this is he's human. He's made of flesh and blood. He's not superman. He's not an angel. He's an ordinary guy with all the limitations of humanity. He puts his pants on one leg at a time.

Then he says, even though that's true, "*we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world*" (vv. 3b-4a). He's saying he doesn't fight this battle on his own with mere human resources. Instead, the weapons he uses are divinely powerful. They're from God and not from man.

You see, though we're just human, we can't afford to fight this battle with mere human means. This is a spiritual battle that requires spiritual weapons. That's what he says, "*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power...*"

We employ weapons that demolish strongholds

Before we look at what these weapons are, I want to point out what those weapons do. These weapons have divine power, but to do what? Paul says they have divine power to do three things. First, to demolish strongholds. What does he mean by "strongholds"? There's a lot of misunderstanding about this. I've heard people say strongholds are areas of sin in your life where Satan has a hold on you. It may be lust, greed, fear, anger, lying, or even something like overeating.

That sounds good, but that's not exactly what Paul is talking about. First of all, notice he says nothing about Satan in these verses. That doesn't mean Satan is absent in this battle, but he's never mentioned. Look at what Paul adds in verse 5, "*...we demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...*" So a stronghold isn't an area of besetting sin, but rather arguments and pretensions erected like a wall against the knowledge of God. We're talking about ideas, philosophies, world-views, and structures of thought opposed to the truth of who God is as our Creator and Savior. These ideas are based on lies which cause disillusionment, discouragement, and disobedience. The walls prevent the mind and heart from

seeing God's love, power, holiness, and goodness. Of course, we know our ancient enemy is involved in this because Jesus called him "*the father of lies*" (John 8:44b).

Ideas have power. Ideas have changed the world. Think of the destructive ideas that have taken root in the human race over time. In the 1800s, a man named Karl Marx had an idea that the workers of the world needed to unite to overturn capitalism, and with it, religion that serves as the "opiate of the people." That idea changed the world. Or think of secular humanism, a philosophy of life that embraces human reason, secular ethics, and philosophical naturalism while rejecting there's a God at the center of the universe who we're all accountable to and who revealed himself in the person of Jesus. I could go on and on. There's materialism, hedonism, Darwinism, relativism, and atheism. All of the different-isms are strongholds we've set up against the knowledge of God.

It's like in the Star Wars movies. I like the movies. George Lucas is a great storyteller, but I don't believe for one minute he didn't have an idea. All that stuff about the force, with a good side and a dark side; learning to just let go and let the force flow through you; visiting a great master to teach you the ways of the force; and the fact that we're all basically one, soon to be absorbed into the great collective consciousness. That is a powerful idea. That is a stronghold.

These ideas allow people to live their lives independent of God, and yet all the while feeling totally justified. Most people today will tell you no one has the right to tell you how to live. If a particular lifestyle works for someone and makes them happy, they should live it to the fullest. Anyone who'd propose to tell them there's one right way to live defined by an almighty and loving Creator will think you're a narrow minded, intolerant bigot. That's a stronghold! It's the old lie of the enemy saying to Eve, "Go ahead, eat the fruit. God doesn't have the right to tell you how to live. He doesn't have your best interests in mind; you won't die." And make no mistake, these lies dehumanize people and lead to all kinds of destructive behavior.

The second thing these weapons have the power to do is found in the next thing Paul says, "*and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*" What does he mean by "thoughts"? Again, these thoughts are the mental structures and paradigms in people's minds that need to be subdued. He's not talking about every little bad thought that pops into your head, but rather the lies and false narratives that take root in our minds and are opposed to the true knowledge of God. The Greek word for taking captive means "to control, conquer, and bring into submission." We take these thoughts and make them submissive to Christ and his word. Notice our minds are important. The Bible talks about a troubled mind (2 Kings 6:11, ESV), a depraved mind (1 Tim. 6:5, ESV), a sinful mind (Rom 8:7, NLT), a dull mind (2 Cor. 3:14, NIV), a blinded mind (2 Cor 4:4), and a corrupt mind (2 Tim 3:8, ESV). That's why Paul tells us in Ephesians "*to be made new in the attitude of your minds*" (Eph. 4:23, NIV).

It's easy to talk about these things as something "out there," but consider how this relates to what goes on in your own mind. What are

the strongholds, the reasoned arguments, the structures of thought you need to take captive and bring into submission to Jesus? What are the lies you're tempted to buy into which might lead you down a dark path and into a life independent of God?

Here's one: "Well, God wants me to be happy, right? So even though I know God says this is wrong, I'll do it anyway because it makes me happy. How could it be wrong if it feels so right?"

Or, how about this one: "What good has it done me to trust God? He never answers my prayers. I'm going to go out and do it myself. Doesn't God help those who help themselves?"

One more: "I'm worthless to God. I fail him constantly. How could he still love me and want to work in my life? I may as well give it up. I'm just not made of the right stuff to be a Christian."

Make no mistake, these lies distort reality and dehumanize people. The lie may be one of self-protection built around a heart broken by abuse and violation. It may be a lie that says my worth is based on my performance. It may be a lie of self-hatred, that makes one feel unworthy of God's love. Every one of these lies will lead to a place of alienation from God. You have to fight against those lies, destroy those speculations and take all those thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ.

Finally, the third thing these weapons have divine power to do is in verse 6. He says, "*And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience once your obedience is complete.*" The idea here is when the Corinthians clear the way with their own obedience, Paul is ready to deploy his troops to take vengeance on the enemy. Notice Paul isn't taking vengeance on people, but rather on disobedience. He's out to get the sin, not the sinner. In none of this does Paul make people out to be the enemy; that's a mistake Christians often make, but the enemy is pictured as those ideas and philosophies which create disobedience. Some of those exist in our own hearts. We need to be ruthless with those.

So that's what our weapons do: they demolish stronghold, take every thought captive, and punish disobedience. That's a tall order! That's why we do not wage war as the world does. As Paul said earlier, "*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.*"

Our weapons have divine power

We might ask, "What are the weapons of the world? What are some of the ways we might be tempted to fight, which are worldly?" For Paul fighting with the weapons of the world meant succumbing to the methods the Corinthians were most impressed by. Back in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul said, "*When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God*" (1 Cor. 2:1). It's so easy to be taken in and fooled by powerful speakers. The Corinthians were impressed by the wrong things. In verse 7, Paul says, "*You are judging by appearances....*" They were focusing on externals. They gave allegiance to strong, charismatic personalities and believed in the weaponry of marketing and manipulation. In our media-hyped culture, we have to be careful of that today.

But there are other worldly weapons as well. Certainly, coercion or force is one. Anytime Christians take up the sword to accomplish God's

purposes, we've lost. You don't fight an invisible enemy with bullets or bombs. There are times when war is just, but never as a way to bring about God's kingdom.

Another fleshly weapon is political power. There's nothing wrong with Christians involved in politics. It's right for us to take an active role in voting and other ways of expressing our convictions. But this isn't how we defeat ungodliness. That's why the church has always gotten in trouble when it aligns itself with and trusts in a political party.

Another fleshly weapon is knowledge. This is huge today. There's a very powerful assumption everyone seems to have that knowledge is power. There's nothing wrong with knowledge. It can be used for great good, but knowledge alone can't reverse the tide of evil.

Let me give you one more fleshly weapon that applies on more of an individual level—anger. James says, "*...human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires*" (James 1:20). Have you ever tried to accomplish God's will through anger? Have you ever tried to do that at work? In your marriage? How about with your children? I have, and it doesn't work.

Instead of waging war with the weapons of the world, Paul chooses weapons with divine power. He says, "*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power...*"

Earlier in this letter, Paul said he did his ministry with "*...with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left*" (2 Cor. 6:7b). What are these weapons of righteousness? What are the weapons that are divinely powerful? Paul doesn't tell us in this passage, but we know the greatest weapon of all is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why Paul said to Corinthians, "*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" (1 Cor. 2:2). And of course, in Romans, Paul said, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...*" (Rom. 1:16a). The gospel has power. The gospel changes lives. The gospel is the most powerful idea ever known. The idea is our Creator God loved us so much he sent his only Son into the world. He died for our sins and rose again, and he's the true Lord and King of the world. Through the gospel, God calls people to salvation out of sheer grace, leading them to repentance and faith in Jesus. This idea, which comes from God's word, the Scriptures, has the power to transform lives.

The word of God is also a weapon. It's through the preaching and teaching and reading and pouring over and applying the Word of God that we thwart the philosophical speculations and lies of this world as well as the lies it feeds us. The Scripture gives us a vision of reality; it cuts through the fog of deceit, compromise, and half-truths and allows us to see life the way it really is.

Another mighty weapon is prayer. The power of prayer is everywhere displayed in the Scripture. We're constantly encouraged to bombard heaven through prayer, believing God can and will move in powerful ways to change even the course of history.

Another divinely powerful weapon is love. Love is expressed from a position of strength and not from a position of weakness. God's love

actually eliminates fear. 1 John 4:18 says, "...perfect love casts out fear..." Unleash the power of love in your family, in your friendships, in your workplace, in your neighborhood, and you'll see strongholds of fear fall. It's these weapons of divine power that allow us to demolish strongholds, take every thought captive, and punish disobedience.

As I was preparing this message, I kept thinking of Ravi Zacharias. For those of you who don't know, Ravi was a well-known international evangelist who led thousands of people to Christ for more than 40 years. He wrote more than 30 books on the Christian faith. Since his passing last year, a four-month investigation found he leveraged his reputation and fame to abuse women over more than a decade while the ministry, led by his family members and loyal allies, failed to hold him accountable. He used his need for massage and frequent overseas travel to hide his abusive behavior, luring victims by building trust through spiritual conversations and offering funds straight from his ministry.

A report released a couple of weeks ago by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) confirms all of this. A limited review of his devices revealed contacts for more than 200 massage therapists in the US and Asia and hundreds of inappropriate images of young women. He solicited and received photos until a few months before he died at age 74. He also used tens of thousands of dollars of ministry funds dedicated to a "humanitarian effort" to pay massage therapists, providing them housing, schooling, and monthly support for extended periods of time. One woman told the investigators after he arranged for the ministry to provide her with financial support, he required sex from her and made her pray with him to thank God for the "opportunity they both received" and called her his "reward" for living a life of service to God. He also warned her if she ever spoke out against him, she'd be responsible for millions of souls lost when his reputation was damaged.

I know hearing that story sickens you just as it has me, and the worst thing is the damage he did to those women, his victims. I mean, he was one of us. I met him personally a couple of years ago, and I was in awe. I've had to ask myself, what would compel a man to live such a double life? I don't pretend to know the precise answer to that question. I'm not Ravi's judge, but somewhere along the line, a lie, a stronghold took root in his mind, and he embraced it; a pattern of thought, a mental structure, a citadel of sinful thinking took him captive and brought him to a place I believe he never thought possible when he began his ministry.

So let God's word encourage you today to drop the weapons of the flesh and take up weapons of divine power to demolish strongholds of thought, take every thought captive to Christ, and punish disobedience. I want you to see there's hope in this passage! We're fighting for freedom, our own freedom, and the freedom of others. And we have the weapons to win this war! We don't have to be held captive behind walls and fortresses. We have the weapons to set people free! With

the weapons of righteousness, we can make a difference in the lives of others. As we engage with people with the meekness and gentleness of Christ, as we speak the word of truth, as the Holy Spirit directs our actions within us, these walls will be broken down, and people will be set free.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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