

Weapons of Divine Power

2 Corinthians 10:1–6

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The Shift at Chapter Ten

Today we continue our study of 2 Corinthians. We have been in this letter since Easter, and our passage today marks a major shift in the book. For the first nine chapters, Paul has written with warmth, gratitude, and encouragement. He has spoken about reconciliation, generosity, and the comfort of God. But when we arrive at chapter ten, the tone changes. The final four chapters of this letter — chapters ten through thirteen — become more direct, more confrontational, and more defensive. Paul is no longer only comforting a reconciled church; he is confronting a dangerous influence still at work within it.

To understand why, we need to remember something of the backstory. A number of years before writing 2 Corinthians, serious problems had emerged at Corinth — division, immorality, confusion about spiritual authority, and distortion of the gospel. Paul had addressed these issues in what we now call 1 Corinthians. Later, he made a painful personal visit that did not go well. After that visit, he wrote a severe letter confronting sin and false teaching directly — a letter we no longer have.

Around A.D. 57, after leaving Ephesus and traveling through Macedonia, Paul met Titus, who brought encouraging news: the church in Corinth had largely responded with repentance and a renewed desire for relationship with Paul. It was that news from Titus that prompted Paul to write 2 Corinthians in a spirit of comfort and thanksgiving. Unfortunately, false apostles and teachers were still influencing the church. The conflict had not entirely disappeared. And so in these final four chapters, Paul turns his attention directly to the ongoing presence of deceptive influences within the congregation.

Our passage today — 2 Corinthians 10:1–6 — functions as a kind of summary statement of Paul's basic approach to that conflict, a conflict he does not hesitate to call war. It is a war against false teaching and distorted thinking inside the church. In these six verses, Paul gives us, in broad strokes, the nature of the conflict and the resources available to us, as well as the target and goal of the war he wages — a war that we are called to wage as well.

The passage is short, but it is full. If you have your Bible, please open it and follow along.

The Nature of the Conflict

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ — I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! — I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

— 2 Corinthians 10:1–4

Notice how this passage begins. We are about to talk about waging war, and Paul opens not with a declaration of authority, not with a display of apostolic power, but with an appeal “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” That is not an accident. Right from the first line, Paul is setting the tone and the approach for how we are to deal with people who are in the wrong — people who have caused problems, people who are stuck in sin, people who have brought false teaching into the church. He does not reach for the sledgehammer of authority. He comes by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

The aside in verse one — *I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away* — I believe Paul is being a little sarcastic here, quoting back the accusations his critics have been making about him. He will address it directly later, in verses ten and eleven, where he insists that he is the same person whether present or absent.

But for now he simply names the reality in verse two: there is still a problem at Corinth. These false apostles have spoken lies about Paul, distorted the gospel, and influenced many in the church with wrong ideas — stinky thinking, bad theology, bad morality, bad ethics. The boldness Paul mentions in verse two will unfold over the next four chapters as he confronts those who have brought discord and toxic religion into the church.

What Paul is setting up to do is genuinely difficult. Have you ever had to confront someone about a behavior or attitude that was hurting them or others? Have you ever had to talk to someone about their sin? Have you ever had to tell someone that their way of doing something was simply unbiblical? If you have, you understand the weight of Paul’s task. This is precisely why our passage today matters so much. Paul is showing us how he intends to confront and address the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that have led to compromised theology and, in turn, compromised lives. And he begins by showing us the nature of the conflict itself.

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

Three things here are critical to hear and take in.

First, notice that we are at war. A battle is being fought, and every follower of Jesus is a combatant. Verse five tells us what this war is about: *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.* This is not a war between nations or ethnic groups. It is a war over what people think and believe — what philosophers call “worldview,” or “the social imaginary.” It is a war over truth. That is the battle we wage as believers.

Second, notice the weapons we are not to use. *The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh.* Paul does not give us an exhaustive list here, but from Scripture and personal experience we know them well enough: control, intimidation, shaming, social pressure, flattery, false promises, lies, constant comparison — these are the weapons of the flesh. These are the worldly tools that people use to get what they want, and when these tools are relied upon long enough, they become the very foundations of lives lived without God. Paul is unambiguous: these are not our weapons. This is not how we wage this war.

Third — and this is the good news — our weapons have divine power. Paul does not give us a full inventory in this passage, but if you look back at 2 Corinthians 6:4–7, you get a clear picture of what they are:

...by great endurance...by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left.

— 2 Corinthians 6:4–7

Ephesians 6 names some of these more specifically — the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. These are the weapons of divine power. Hear this word: when you genuinely love someone, walk by faith, speak truth, practice purity, extend patience, offer kindness, pray, and endure with faithfulness, you are waging war. You are demolishing strongholds with divine power.

The Target of the War

And what are those strongholds? Verses five and six tell us:

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

— 2 Corinthians 10:5–6

The battlefield is the human mind. The strongholds Paul speaks of are not castles made of stone; they are fortresses built out of ideas. They are arguments people have come to believe, assumptions they never question, opinions they hold with certainty, stories they tell themselves, values they have embraced, and frameworks through which they interpret all of reality. Every person lives inside a set of beliefs about God, truth, identity, morality, purpose, the way to happiness, and the meaning of life. Those beliefs become mental fortresses.

From these mental strongholds flow our desires, our choices, our behavior, and ultimately the direction of our lives. This is why Paul does not begin by attacking people's behavior. He goes deeper. He goes after the ideas that produce the behavior.

The word Paul uses for *stronghold* literally means a walled fortress capable of withstanding a siege. Wrong belief is much the same. The people at Corinth were living inside such fortresses — fortresses of pride, of self-justification, constructed by false apostles who knew how to build plausible arguments and lofty opinions against the knowledge of God.

And to these strongholds of ideas and opinions, Paul says we are to destroy them and take them captive. That is the goal of this war. Not a truce between competing ideas. Not a polite tolerance of every opinion under heaven. But the total, glad surrender of the mind to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And here is what I find striking about verse six. The Greek word translated as *punish* — κδικσαι — literally means to banish or send away. And the word translated as *disobedience* is built on a root meaning false hearing — παρακοή. Paul is describing the act of confronting wrong thinking in our own minds and banishing it. Before we confront the strongholds in the world, we must first allow Christ to conquer the strongholds in us. Before we take thoughts captive in others, we must first surrender our own thoughts to Christ.

When we read on through the rest of 2 Corinthians, we encounter many of these strongholds, framed as competing answers to life's basic questions. What is truth? The fleshly view says truth is validated by rhetorical polish and impressive presence. The Kingdom view says truth is revealed by God in Christ and proclaimed faithfully through his Word, regardless of the messenger's outward impressiveness. What is my purpose? The fleshly view says purpose is self-exaltation — recognition, success, comfort, glory for ourselves. The Kingdom view says our purpose is to glorify Christ and enjoy him forever. What am I? The fleshly view says we are fundamentally material beings capable of establishing our own significance and strength. The Kingdom view says we are spiritual beings, created by God, dependent on his grace — and that our greatest strength is found not in self-sufficiency but in his power made perfect in our weakness.

This extends into morality — what is good? — and ethics — what do I owe others? — and personal identity — who am I? These are the strongholds everyone carries. The question is not whether you live by a worldview; you do. The question is whether your ideas, opinions, and beliefs have been taken captive by Christ, or captured by the world.

A Historical Illustration: Ideas Taken Captive

I want to bring this down to earth with an example from history, because thus far this sermon has been fairly abstract. And the example I want to use is the story of our own nation — fitting, given that yesterday was the Fourth of July.

This year marks 250 years since the birth of the United States, but our nation did not come from nothing. It did not spring fully formed from the mind of Thomas Jefferson, or from a late-night discussion among the founders. It came into being through a long historical process of faithful men and women doing exactly what Paul describes in our passage — waging war against strongholds of opinion contrary to the knowledge of God, using the weapons of divine power: endurance, faithfulness, meekness, gentleness, prayer, faith, and the Word of God.

In the days of the early church in the Roman Empire — and in fact, through nearly all of prior human history — the prevailing worldview held that the poor and vulnerable were essentially disposable. Unwanted children were abandoned. The weak were neglected or discarded. Authority was centralized in the state and embodied in the emperor. Human worth was tied to status, citizenship, or power. Religious life was reserved for a small elite, while ordinary work was considered beneath dignity. And human nature, when it needed correcting, could be corrected through law, education, or discipline alone.

These were the foundational beliefs of the Roman world. These were the strongholds.

And it was into that world that Jesus sent his church, armed not with political power, but with divine weapons: faith, endurance, truth, love, prayer, and the Word of God. Over time, those weapons did something remarkable. They dismantled old strongholds and took them captive to obey Christ. And in their place, Kingdom ideas began to take root and spread:

Every human being bears the image of God. The weak are to be protected, not discarded. Authority is ultimately accountable to God. All work can be done unto the Lord. Human nature is deeply broken and in need of grace, not merely instruction. And conscience stands under God's authority, not merely under the authority of human rulers.

These kingdom convictions, formed over centuries in the hearts and minds of ordinary believers, reshaped the world — and they led, eventually, to the birth of the United States.

When you read the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, you can hear those Kingdom truths in the very architecture of the documents. *All men are created equal* — that is the image of God applied politically. *They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights* — rights come from God, not government; government does not create rights, it recognizes and protects rights already given by God. The Declaration grounds its entire case not in raw political will but in *the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God* — authority

accountable to something higher than itself. And the entire system of separated powers and checks and balances is built on the assumption that fallen human nature cannot simply be educated or legislated into virtue — power must be structurally restrained. That is original sin applied to political philosophy. And the First Amendment's protection of religious conscience is the fruit of centuries of Christian conviction that the conscience answers to God first, and to Caesar second.

The United States emerged from centuries of Christian-shaped thinking about truth, authority, conscience, and human dignity — ideas that trace back, in part, to Paul's declaration that every thought is to be taken captive to obey Christ.

To be clear: the United States is neither the Kingdom of God nor the culmination of biblical history. The Kingdom of Heaven is coming, and until that day, there are still many lofty opinions contrary to the knowledge of God that remain as strongholds in the minds and hearts of people. But the historical point stands. The weapons of divine power — wielded by ordinary, faithful, often-forgotten believers across centuries — changed the world.

The War We Are Called to Wage

For us, as followers of Jesus and members of the body of Christ, the difficulty is rarely identifying the strongholds and lofty opinions that stand against the knowledge of God. The difficulty is using the right weapons to destroy them. Too often, the church has reached for the weapons of the flesh — image, control, leverage, intimidation, cleverness — to fight a war that only divine weapons can win.

Paul's charge to Corinth is his charge to us. We are at war — not with people, but with the ideas that hold people captive. And we do not win this war by being louder, sharper, more clever, or more powerful than the world around us. We win it the way Christ won it: through meekness and gentleness. Through endurance. Through purity, patience, and kindness. Through genuine love and truthful speech. Through prayer. Through the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. These are the weapons that have divine power.

So today, as you prepare to come to the Lord's table: What strongholds still stand in your own mind? What lofty opinion — about truth, about purpose, about yourself — have you built up and defended, even against the knowledge of God? The war does not begin out there. It begins here — in the surrender of your own thoughts to the lordship of Jesus Christ.