

This morning, I am in the ninth week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. After he had started the church and built it up, he moved on to start other churches, but visited and wrote letters as issues arose in the church. One of the biggest issues was that false teachers had arisen in their midst who were tearing down Paul’s reputation, winning the hearts of some of the Corinthians, and causing tension in his relationship with this church he loved so much. As we read in v. 10 of today’s reading:

¹⁰ For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

These false teachers accused Paul of writing bold letters when he is at a safe distance but of being cowardly and timid in person, as if he were afraid to say anything challenging up close. Plus, they said that he was a pretty poor public speaker as well, in a time when great oratory skill was expected of a strong leader. And throughout this letter we find many other negative things they accused Paul of. And so, Paul finds himself in a difficult situation. He has to defend his authority and role as their founding pastor without getting defensive, he needs to expose these false teachers without sounding jealous or petty, and he needs to get the Corinthians back in line with the true gospel without offending them and losing their love and trust. Maybe the closest parallel might be if you have been a parent and had to navigate a situation with a child whose heart and mind was being stolen away by someone you knew was bad for them.

In this chapter, Paul tries to navigate this tricky situation, and in the process teaches us something really important about facing the challenges and opposition we face in this world.

Let’s read chapter 10

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 10:1 By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you-- I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" when away! ² 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.

Notice that he references how they have accused him of being bold when away but timid when face to face. In these verses, he turns that accusation on its head by

saying that in this letter he appeals to them in meekness and gentleness – in humility, basically – but says that when he arrives, he expects that he will have to be bold towards these false teachers. The next four verses are where we will focus most of our attention this morning:

³ *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.* ⁴ *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* ⁵ *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.* ⁶ *And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.* ⁷ *You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ **just as much as he.*** ⁸ *For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.* ⁹ *I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters.* ¹⁰ *For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."* ¹¹ *Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.* ¹² *We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some **who commend themselves.** When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.* ¹³ *We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you.* ¹⁴ *We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ.* ¹⁵ *Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand,* ¹⁶ *so that we can preach the gospel in the **regions beyond you.** For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory.* ¹⁷ *But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."* ¹⁸ *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

As you can see, Paul is delicately trying to offer a defense of himself, expose the false teachers for what they are, and restore his relationship with the Corinthians. We are going to mainly focus on verses 3-6 this morning, which is the heart of this passage, in which Paul references a war that we are waging and the weapons we use.

1) We are in a spiritual battle

³ *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.* ⁴ *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* ⁵ *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.*

If you have ever heard the term “spiritual warfare,” this language sounds familiar. Paul knows he is not just at war with false teachers, but that behind all the chaos in Corinth is a spiritual battle, a battle being waged on a whole other dimension:

Ephesians 6:10-12 - *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.* ¹¹ *Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Anyone feel like life is a struggle? Paul affirms that not only is life a struggle, but that we are not just struggling against money problems and relational difficulties and the sorrows of life but against the devil and his demons. As Paul writes, our struggles is not against flesh and blood. There is a spiritual reality. Not only is there a God, but there is also an enemy, the devil or Satan, and there are demons, his fallen angels:

1 John 5:19 - *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*

Although we are God’s adopted children, and even though we know that in the end God will triumph, right now we are living in enemy territory. So do not be surprised that this life is hard! This is not a country club; it’s a battleground, and it will demand courage and perseverance and the help of your brothers and sisters in the fight.

1 Peter 4:12-13 - *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Why is life so hard? Because it is a battle. And there is one whose desire is to destroy you. This reality of life as a battle is a big part of what God has been teaching me over these past few months. Life is not a game. It is not a joke. It is

not something to be taken lightly. This is a war that requires courage, perseverance, and men and women of God who are willing to stand together and fight the spiritual battle for the souls of men and women. And I for one want to be a warrior, someone willing to enter the battle and fight.

We are in a battle. We know Satan and his demons war against us, using tactics like temptation, accusation, and lies, all of which have the goal of pulling us away from God and eternal life and making us his own. He works through our weaknesses to destroy us, to destroy families, and communities.

But in chapter 10, there is a whole other level that Paul refers to:

³ *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.* ⁴ *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* ⁵ *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.*

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul references strongholds, which is the Greek word for fortresses or prisons that must be demolished. We are facing strongholds that worldly weapons will not destroy. Paul writes that we demolish arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge, and thoughts that are not obedient to Christ. In other words, we fight against systems of beliefs or ideologies that are opposed to the gospel, in which people are trapped. In Corinth, these false teachers have come to promote ideologies and ways of thinking that are contrary to the gospel, and Paul expects that when he comes, he will have to go to war, tearing these ideologies down.

In our day and age, our world is filled with ideologies and systems of belief that must be evaluated in order to see if they are Godly or if they are setting themselves up against the knowledge of God. You look around and see belief systems like Catholicism, the charismatic movement, the seeker-sensitive movement, the health and wealth gospel, the New Apostolic Reformation, movements like Bethel Church and Hillsong, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, the New Age, and so on. And our world is filled with other ideologies like consumerism, evolutionary theory, critical race theory, transgender ideology, hedonism, individualism, patriotism, and so on. The world is full of ideologies and belief systems, some which are obvious to see, and some which have become so much a part of our culture that we don't even see it. But Paul declares that we must be at war with any ideology that sets itself up against the knowledge of Christ, and take every thought

captive to make it obedient to Christ. Not at war with the people themselves, but at war with the ideologies and fortresses that have enslaved so many people.

John 8:31-32 - *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

We are in a spiritual battle. Paul is a soldier. He is bold, courageous, and if necessary, willing to go to battle as a last resort. As we have seen, he will appeal and try to persuade with gentleness and meekness, but he is ready to go to battle if necessary. And you are soldiers as well in this spiritual battle. Are you willing to take up your weapons and fight?

So how do we fight this battle?

2) We will not win this battle with weapons of this world

³ *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ 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.*

Paul does not come out and tell us what the weapons of this world are, but we can come up with some pretty good ideas. Looking at what was going on in Corinth, commending themselves, and trashing Paul's reputation. That was their weapon: self-promotion and slander. They elevated themselves, taking credit for what Paul had done, and tried to ruin Paul's reputation.

Our world has many other weapons: force and coercion, political power, controlling the media, manipulation, public shaming. But none of those weapons will win the spiritual battle. In Paul's case, he declared that he would not resort to their methods of self-promotion and slander. He will let God be the judge, the one who commends him. And he's not going to engage in some sort of speaking battle to prove who is best. Instead, he has other weapons that he will fight with.

Our true enemy is not flesh and blood, but is demonic, and so we need to fight with real spiritual weapons. Satan is holding the minds and souls of man hostage in these prison fortresses, and only a spiritual assault will free them. Paul tells the

Corinthians that they have weapons that are not of this world, powerful weapons given to us by God.

Listen to Paul's words:

Ephesians 6:10-18 - Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have **done everything, to stand**. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

So what are the weapons we fight with?

1) **The word of God**

When you look closely at Ephesians 6, the armor of God is all about the gospel and the truth of God. We defend ourselves against the enemy by the protection that comes from the truths of the gospel, that we are saved by the grace of God, right with Him not because of anything we have or haven't done, but because Jesus died for us. And our only offensive weapon is the word of God, the Bible.

¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active. **Sharper** than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

And again in 2 Corinthians 10:

⁵ *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.*

The Word of God is our sword, our weapon. The truth of the gospel is what we fight with. Whether you are fighting the enemy in your life or trying to free someone from false ideologies and beliefs, there is a spiritual power in the word of God that is a greater weapon than a nuclear missile. Do you believe this? Even in his letter, Paul does not slander these false teachers but exposes them by God's Word: **2 Corinthians 10:17-18** - *"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."* ¹⁸ *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

He lets the Corinthians see that these teachers are not operating according to the Word of God and trusts that God's Word will do its job.

The first weapon we have is the Word of God. Know the truth! Remember that Jesus fought the enemy by saying again and again, "It is written."

Luke 4:1-4 - *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"*

Know the truth. Pray His Scripture. Declare it aloud as you resist the devil and submit to Jesus. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but Jesus has come that we might have life to the fullest. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, He has overcome the world. God is always working all things together for good for those who love Him! Know the truth! Surround yourself with people who know the truth and can encourage you and pray for you! Stay alert and keep your eyes on the Lord!

And when it comes to the ideologies of the world, you have to evaluate them by God's Word and respond to them appropriately. Think of the Bereans:

Acts 17:10-11 - *As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Bereans*

were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Everything must be evaluated by the Word of God, by the standard of truth. Do not blindly receive anything you hear, whether from me, another religious leader, or someone in this world. Most ideologies in this world are a mixture of truth and error, and it takes knowing God's truth to be able to sort that out and respond appropriately. Think of the ideologies out there right now. Transgender ideology teaching that gender is a social construct, that a man who declares that he is a woman is a woman, that surgery and hormone therapy makes someone a man or a woman. Is that true or not? What about the American Dream, about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Is life to the fullest really consist of getting your own home and family and living in the suburbs? Is freedom really about having no one who can tell you what to do? What about consumerism? Should we approach life asking "what is in it for me," believing that we are in charge and the best way to approach life is to evaluate it by whether it meets your needs? Or is it better to give than to receive? What about patriotism, prioritizing America above other countries, or a nationalism that merges Christianity with politics? What about individualism? Is putting yourself above your neighbor really the best way to live? EVERY ideology must be evaluated and exposed by the powerful Word of God, the standard of truth. That is the first weapon in our hand.

2) Prayer

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

God can do more in a moment than we can in a lifetime. When we pray, we are calling on God, the Lord of hosts, the commander of the heavenly armies, to win the battle. So, if we take this battle seriously, why would we not stop trying to win the battle in our own strength and dedicate ourselves to prayer?

One Biblical example of the power of prayer is found in Daniel 10. Daniel receives a vision from God about a great battle, and Daniel is so shaken that he prays and fasts for 21 days, wrestling to know the meaning of the vision. On the 24th day he is outside and he sees an angel:

Daniel 10:11-14 - He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been

sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. ¹³ But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. ¹⁴ Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."

Do you hear what the angel said? When you turned to prayer, Daniel, God sent me to you, but I encountered opposition from a demonic entity called the prince of the Persian kingdom for 21 days – the exact amount of time of Daniel’s fast. But an angel named Michael came to help him, and the angel proceeds to tell Daniel what will happen to the people of Israel in the future.

Daniel was praying for wisdom from God and for the people of Israel, and unbeknownst to him, his prayers were causing all kinds of warfare in the heavenlies. Now, I know I am speaking to things beyond my understanding. But could it be possible that your prayers are part of a greater spiritual battle that is going on? Could it be possible that sometimes the lack of answer to your prayer is not because God is not listening or your prayers are not effective, but because you gave up too soon? The point remains – prayer is a powerful weapon in the spiritual battle. Prayer and fasting can have powerful effects. I have seen it in my own life.

3) Obedience

³ *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ 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.*

Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. There is spiritual power in resisting the enemy, repenting of sin, and walking by the Spirit of God.

James 4:7 - *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

It makes sense. If we are in a spiritual battle, and our commander-in-chief is the Lord, then the battle will be won by submitting to His leadership. It reminds me of

the first little booklet I ever read as a Christian, a 1951 booklet by Robert Boyd Munger called *My heart, Christ's home*. Let him be the master over every area of your life. There is nothing you can give up that God will not replace with something better, with more of His presence and power. Think of an athlete coming under the coaching of someone who brings out the best in you. You would willingly submit yourself to his or her leadership.

In Paul's case, obeying God meant sacrificially loving other people. It meant speaking the truth in love to the Corinthians and giving them time to repent and get right. And then it was going to mean exercising church discipline on those who were opposing God and his church. But please recognize that obeying God may mean demolishing arguments and ideologies, but not demolishing people.

You are in a spiritual battle. You will not win the battle with the weapons of this world, for you are fighting against a spiritual enemy. You need to fight with the Word of God, with prayer, and with obedience to the commander in chief.