

# BRINGING THOUGHTS INTO CAPTIVITY

by Ray C. Stedman

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We have arrived at that magic moment called the end. This is the final message in our present series. We have been looking together at the relationship of the Christian to the struggles that occupy men in this present age; and we have been doing so in the light of the passage found in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 10, which deals with the weapons of our warfare and their ability to destroy strongholds.

We looked first at the nature of our weapons. "The weapons of our warfare are not worldly," Paul says, "but have divine power ..." {2 Cor 10:4 RSV}. We examined the nature of these weapons of the Christian. They are not fleshly (that is the literal word the apostle employed) or worldly. We saw from other Scriptures that they consist of truth, of love, of righteousness, and of faith-prayer. But, we further saw, they are mighty, effective. They are not weak weapons, not ineffective. The world does not regard them as mighty, but in the eyes of God they are, and the passage of history has proved that they are the one thing that accomplishes results, they are mighty.

Then we looked at the strength of the opposition. We saw that the apostle shows us the reason why we have so many "strongholds," these heavy problems in life, these tough, difficult, knotty problems. It is because they are buttressed, or supported, first of all, by arguments, rationalizations, and reasonings which appear to be logical and thus give strength and solidity to evil. We saw that behind all this is the heart of the matter: human pride, pride which in its essence is independence against God; "that high thing," says Paul, "that exalts itself against the knowledge of God," {cf, 2 Cor 10:5}. That is the basic trouble with the world. It is not nationalism, it is not racism. It is not the color of the skin nor the national origin that creates these basic problems; it is the human heart. It is the pride of man that fancies he can get along without God.

Then we saw that the effect of Christian warfare is, first of all, to destroy these arguments and this pride, to humble it by the preaching of the gospel, the manifestation of truth, love, righteousness, and faith-prayer.

Now we have come to the last two effects that the warfare of the believer produces, in this or any age. The first effect of Christian warfare is, as I have said, to destroy arguments and pride. The second one is given to us in the latter part of Verse 5, "and take every thought captive to obey Christ," {2 Cor 10:5 RSV}. The third effect is given in Verse 6, "being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete," {2 Cor 10:6 RSV}.

Let us now consider together this second effect of the Christian's warfare at work in society. The first effect is to pull down arguments and pride, but the second one is linked to it: It is to take captive every thought to the obedience of Christ. This is extremely important. If we do not understand this second step we shall not be able to carry out the first one. It will have no ultimate effect in our lives, either as individuals or in society, so we must be careful to understand it.

In developing this second step I want to be more personal and individual in application than I have been in the others. Up to now we have focused primarily on the great burning problems of our society. But this effect, by its very nature, takes place within the mind. It is a capturing of every thought for Christ, and is in itself more personal in its application. It is something we must experience in ourselves before we can apply it to society. In a sense that is true of everything we have said in this series, but it is particularly so here.

How shall we explore together what Paul means by this phrase, "taking every thought captive to obey Christ"?

First, let us look at it to see how it relates to the first effect of Christian warfare, destroying arguments and pride. In relation to that, this second one is a mopping-up operation. You remember the figure the apostle is employing here: He is talking about assaulting a castle, a strong, mighty fortress, defended and entrenched, and the first thing that is necessary is to break down those defenses, to destroy the walls and armament of this

fortress and to render it unable to fight. That, says Paul, is done by divine power: "the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power ..." {2 Cor 10:4 RSV}. They are God at work. Only God can destroy pride. Only God can answer these specious reasonings and arguments. Only he can capture the man behind the arguments. That is God's work, through the gospel.

But now there comes a second step which is the Christian's responsibility. It is necessary, in capturing a fortress, after you have destroyed the walls and moved into the center of the fortress, to root out all the remaining pockets of resistance. There will be enemy soldiers that have hidden away in the depths of the fortress, in the dungeons and obscure corners, and these must be rooted out and taken captive or else the whole job will have to be done all over again very shortly. We cannot do the first thing in our own power for it takes God's power to get behind the problems of men and to destroy human pride. This God does by the word of the cross, the word about Jesus, crucified on our behalf. But we must do this other thing. We must pursue each vagrant thought and capture it for Christ.

That is all done in the battleground of the mind, the thought life. That is why your thinking is very important, why you must learn to confront your thoughts as a Christian, examine what you are thinking, pass judgment upon it and act in line with that judgment, either positively or negatively. You cannot allow your mind to give itself to anything it wants to; it must be disciplined or your whole Christian relationship will crumble and be weak. Perhaps you will even have to do the whole job all over again.

I know I am speaking in generalities now. I must because you will have to make the specific application. The possible applications are too wide and vast for me to try to describe them all for you. You must apply these things to your specific hang-up, or problem. I do not know what it is, you know what it is. But you must first bring that problem to Jesus Christ and allow him to set you free, and then you are responsible to pursue each vagrant thought and to bring it into captivity to Jesus Christ, or you will not remain free.

There are several observations we can make along this line:

The first one is, as we have seen, that in relationship to the first step, this is a mopping-up operation.

The second observation is this: It is absolutely necessary to do this if you want to have permanent victory. Allow these unChristian thoughts to remain unconquered, and you will soon have to take the fortress all over again. They will creep out of their hiding places and take over and you will find that that which God has delivered you from has taken control once again. You must employ this second step of capturing every thought obedient to Christ.

Several Sundays ago I was speaking about the strongholds that are present in society which are so evident in our day. After the service a young woman came up and said she had been working with the hippies in the Los Angeles area, especially those who have been involved in drugs. She had had a great deal of experience in working with young people by presenting the gospel to them, seeking to free them from the control of drugs. But she said,

"You know, we found it was fairly easy to bring these young people to Christ. They want to be set free. They're unhappy, they're miserable, they want to be delivered, and they respond quickly to the message of the gospel. But we found out further that they soon went right back to drugs if we did not begin almost immediately to get them started in Bible study and Christian fellowship."

Why was this her experience? Because Bible study and the experience of regular Christian fellowship is one of the ways by which we capture every vagrant thought and bring it captive to Christ. And unless that is done, the fortress will have to be taken all over again.

That is the problem with many people today, in various ways and areas. You have a wonderful picture of this in the story in John's Gospel of the pool of Bethesda, and the impotent man who lay there. That pool has now been excavated, and I recently stood there at that pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, with its five porches, where once, as John tells us, there lay a great multitude of impotent people who were waiting for the troubling of the water. This occurred occasionally and the legend was that an angel came down and disturbed the water, and

anyone who got into it at that time would be healed. You recall that John says Jesus found a man who had been lying there for 38 years. That is a long time to lie unhealed and seeking healing. Jesus singled him out of this crowd and said to him, "Do you want to be made whole?" {cf, John 5:6}. For a time I thought that was a ridiculous question, until, realizing that our Lord never said anything ridiculous, I began to think it through. Then I saw that this was the most important question he could have asked this man, because it was very likely that he did not want to be made whole. There are many people, you know, who do not want to be made whole. I run into them all the time. They like their illnesses. They like the sympathy they arouse in others. They like the feeling of self-pity they can indulge themselves in. When it comes right down to it, they do not want to be set free; they would like to continue on, helpless, impotent, and powerless, because of the momentary enjoyment they get from it. So it was a perfectly proper question Jesus asked this man, "Do you want to be made whole?"

The man indicated that he did, but he didn't have anyone to help him get into the water. He was still thinking in terms of some kind of human help. Our Lord immediately acted when this man responded in this way. Jesus said to the man, "Rise, take up your bed and walk," {cf, John 5:8}. That is the way God acts in human affairs; he does not have to depend on any human resource. He immediately speaks, and the work is done. This man looked at this stranger, and, somehow sensing that here was One who knew what he was talking about, he began to obey. He did what he could not do, and what he could not have done for thirty-eight years. He began to obey the Lord Jesus, he tried to take up his bed and walk. The moment he started to obey, power flowed into his legs and arms, and he arose and began to leap, around praising God for what had happened.

That is the way God breaks the power of pride or evil in our lives. This is that divine power which sets us free when we come to him with some kind of a hang-up, or problem; perhaps some habit that has gripped us, grasped us, and held us. We bring it to him, and he sets us free.

But that is not the end of the story. The man left and went back to his home rejoicing, but we are told that a little later Jesus found him in the temple. Our Lord sought him out for he knew where the man would be. He had to go to the temple to offer thanksgiving and ritual sacrifices for being cleansed of his illness. Our Lord found him in the temple, and said to him these significant words, "Behold, you are made whole." Now Jesus never says that to a man who is not made whole; when he says it, it is true. "Behold, you are made whole. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you," {cf, John 5:14}. What did he mean? He is saying, "Learn to obey now. It was disobedience that brought you into this relationship and held you for thirty-eight years. Now, having been set free, you must address yourself to learning what God wants and how he wants it done, giving yourself to him -- lest a worse thing come upon you." Thus we must learn to bring every thought captive to Christ or else the whole job will have to be done over again, and, perhaps, we will have lost all faith in its possibility by that time.

Surely here is the problem with many. It is absolutely essential that we see that once Christ has set us free from whatever it may be, if we do not begin to bring captive every thought into obedience to him we will be right back in the same place again.

The third observation is that this is nothing but the practical acknowledgment of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the life. I have noticed through the years that the intellectual life is often the last part of a Christian to be yielded to the right of Jesus Christ to rule. Somehow we love to retain some area of our intellect, of our thought-life, reserved from the control of Jesus Christ. For instance, we reserve the right to judge Scripture, as to what we will or will not agree with, what we will or will not accept. I find many Christians struggling in this area.

One of our women told us, a few years ago, of a struggle in this respect in her life. She said she would read through the New Testament and sometimes write in the margin opposite a verse, "I don't agree!" Well, she was honest enough to put it down in writing. There are many of us who do not agree but we do not write it down, or even admit it to ourselves. It was honest of her to do that, but it represents a struggle with the Lordship of Christ; his right to rule over every area of life, his right to control the thought-life, every thought taken captive to obey him.

Sometimes that is manifest by permitting ourselves an inward indulgence while repressing the outward expression of it. That is very common. I find it in my own life, and I am sure you do in yours. Many play

lustful thoughts and pictures over and over on the record player of the mind, but do not allow themselves to engage in the immoral acts involved. What is that? It is a refusal to bring captive every thought to the obedience to Christ. Sooner or later we shall find ourselves in a situation where the act that we thought we could avoid has been committed before we know it. That is what accounts for so many of the moral failures of those who were thought to be strong Christians.

Others manifest that reserve by allowing jealous thoughts and resentful attitudes to take over the thought-life, the mind. Though they outwardly appear to be friendly and cooperative with people, inwardly they are filled with hostility and resentment against them. They do not like them, do not want to have anything to do with them, and seethe with inward resentment. But that is a direct refusal to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. It is refusing to bow to the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord over that area of life.

We often do this by permitting ourselves the luxury of self-pity or self-righteousness, while all the while maintaining a facade of spirituality and piety. Perhaps there is no hypocrisy more abhorrent than that. This is what our Lord attacked most scorchingly, the self-righteousness of those who indulge in inward self-aggrandizement and exaltation but outwardly have a very pious and spiritual attitude. Surely, that is the failure of many. That is why we are unable to destroy strongholds. We bring them to Christ, and he breaks the power of them in our life, but unless we set ourselves to capturing every thought to be obedient to Christ, we are right back in it again. Any degree of this is intellectual disobedience to Jesus Christ and will land us right back in the bed of impotence and weakness that we have occupied for too many years already.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer has put it very accurately beautifully in these words:

Christ is Lord of all, over every aspect of life. It is no use saying He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Lord of all things, if He is not the Lord of my whole unified intellectual life. I am false or confused if I sing about Christ's Lordship and contrive to retain areas of my own life that are autonomous. This is true if it is my sexual life that is autonomous, but it is at least equally true if it is my intellectual life that is autonomous, or even my intellectual life in a highly selective area. Any autonomy is wrong. Autonomous science or autonomous art is wrong if by autonomous science or art we mean it is free from the content of what God has told us. This does not mean that we have a static science or art, just the opposite. It gives us the form inside which, being finite, freedom is possible.

Those are true words. They indicate exactly what the apostle is saying here, the need to bring ourselves into captivity to Jesus Christ, to capture those thoughts for him.

The fourth observation we shall make is that this activity consists of repeated and determined applications of truth. How do you do this? How do you capture your thoughts for Christ's sake? Well, you do it by refusing to entertain the concepts which Scripture rejects and by resolutely acting on those that it approves. You govern your thoughts. You do not let them run you; you run them. You do not let your moods determine how you act or how you feel; you act upon facts regardless of your feelings. That is what the Christian is called to do. That is what James means when he says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you," {Jas 4:7}. Refuse to respond to these improper urges and turn at once, in weakness, to Jesus Christ; bring them to him and ask him to take them and to master them once again and thus allow you to act upon the power he has given. It is really nothing else but praying David's prayer, in the 19th Psalm, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer," {cf, Psa 19:14}. May the inward meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight.

As David put it in the 51st Psalm, "God desires truth in the inward parts," {cf, Psa 51:6}. This requires persistence and patience, either in yourself, or in trying to help some other person. It requires a coming again and again to the truth no matter how many times you have done so before, and quietly, gently, and sweetly, applying that same truth again, saying, this is what it has got to be, this is the way I'm going to move, this is what I shall do, and refusing to do the opposite. That is "bringing captive every thought to the obedience of Christ." I tell you that you will never be free from the things that have burdened you and hampered you for years until you begin that process. I can speak out of my own experience in this. I could never be really free (and was never) from the things God had once delivered me from, for I found myself wrestling constantly and continually with them, until I began to deal with the interior life, with the inward thoughts, bringing captive

every thought to the obedience of Christ.

All this leaves one statement of the apostle yet unexplored. It is the last effect of true Christian warfare, found in Verse 6,

**being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. {2 Cor 10:6 RSV}**

We will never understand that statement apart from the whole context. It links with Verse 2 of this passage, where the apostle says,

**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 acting in worldly fashion. {2 Cor 10:2 RSV}**

There were some in Corinth who were challenging the apostle's authority, and this whole section grows out of that challenge. Some of them were saying, "He writes very sternly and threateningly when he's away, but when he's with us he never carries it out. He is always meek and mild when he comes." They accused him of inconsistency. Paul is dealing here with the role of punishment in correcting the problems of the individual life and also those of society. In effect, what he is saying to these Corinthians is, when you have bowed to the right of Jesus to be Lord over every area of your life then I'll be ready, even eager, to punish your disobedience!

There are three things I would like to state about that:

First, this is clearly an ironic statement. These Corinthians viewed him as being eager to punish them right now. They thought he was but waiting to get hold of them, that he was threatening them. But he is saying, "No, it isn't that I want to punish you, I don't want to do so at all. I will if I must, and don't think I won't, if it is necessary. When I come I will do what's necessary. But I prefer not to punish you. I want you to learn to obey on your own. When that obedience is complete then you'll find me willing, ready, eager, even to apply whatever punishment may be necessary. But of course, when obedience is complete you do not need any punishment." That is what Paul is saying in an ironic way. Or, if there is any necessity, it is easy to administer to a heart that is subject to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The second statement I want to make about this is that here the apostle is showing the utter inability of punishment to produce obedience. Notice he does not say, "When I come I'm going to punish you until you start obeying." Oh, no, it is quite the opposite. He says, "When you have learned to obey, then I'll punish you." In other words, punishment does not produce obedience; it is light that does that. After all, the obedience that God wants is not the outward conformity that we are so often content with. He wants obedience from the heart. He is not content with mere outward adjustment; he wants the inner life right, the thoughts right, the attitudes right -- all that you are thinking to be acceptable in his sight. That is what he wants. You cannot compel that kind of obedience. You can sit there and look pious and spiritual (and many of you are), but I would give a pretty penny to know what some of you have been thinking these last ten minutes! But God knows.

You cannot compel obedience of this kind for it must come from the heart. It is only light that does that. "If you continue in my word" says the Lord Jesus, "you shall be my disciples indeed," {cf, John 8:31}. And "you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free," {cf, John 8:32}.

- When you learn from the Word of God what life is all about,
- When you see what you are doing to yourself,
- When you refuse to face the things God asks you to face, and what you are doing to those you love and that love you,

- When you learn how you are destroying your humanity and sabotaging the work of the Holy Spirit, making it impossible for him to bring you to the place where you yourself want to come,

then you will see how important it is for you to face up to what God is talking about. It is light that compels obedience, not punishment.

The third observation deals with what punishment does. What is the place of punishment? Punishment is to make us face up to the need for light. Punishment makes people realize there is a problem, and, therefore, it has a place, a very important place. If your children will not take you seriously, you punish them. Why? Because you enjoy watching them writhe and squirm? No. You want them to face up to the fact that there is a serious problem which cannot be taken lightly. And that is the place of punishment in the Christian life also. It is to make us realize that certain things need to be taken seriously. That is what God does. He chastens us as a Father because he loves us, and he wants us to listen.

How many of you can bear testimony to the fact that you never began to take God seriously until you got into some deep trouble? Perhaps you were put into the hospital with some physical ailment, or your whole world collapsed around you in some catastrophe or disappointment, and then you began to listen to God. That is what he uses punishment for, and only for that. But chastisement does not produce obedience. When the punishment makes you take things seriously, then the light has a chance to shine upon your life and show you what is wrong. Then, if you will take it captive for Jesus Christ, bring every thought into obedience to what he is saying, refuse to permit that which he does not approve, you will find that the healing of the Lord Jesus begins to spread throughout every area of your life: your family, your home, your relationships at work, at play, wherever you may be; and you become a healing entity in society as well to cure some of the awful sickness of today.

God calls us to reality. These biblical statements are not merely to entertain us on Sunday morning; they are to explain to us the basic elements of living. May God help us to take these words with utmost seriousness in 1969.

Here is a great passage that shows us the three mighty things that are accomplished by a Christian who learns how to wage a good warfare with the weapons that God has given him. He can destroy arguments and pride; he can take every thought captive to Jesus Christ; and obviate the need for punishment, making it unnecessary in his life. These are the things to which the Apostle Paul called these Corinthians, and to which the Word of God is now calling us.

May God grant that we will listen to him and heed him in these matters.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, there may be present among us many with problems, with hang-ups, with many deep-seated difficulties which they have been struggling with for a long time. There may have been a time when, in grace, you set them free, but they have come right back into bondage because they did not bring captive every thought to the obedience of Jesus Christ. Lord, help us now to learn what is necessary to do to be free, and permanently free, from these things that oppress us, hinder us, and destroy our humanity. Save us Lord, from the prostitution of our powers and make us willing and obedient sons and daughters, bowing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, acknowledging his right to be Lord over every area of our lives. We pray in his name, Amen.

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