

OUR SECRET WEAPONS

by Ray C. Stedman

This last section of Second Corinthians contains some of the strongest language against people that the Apostle Paul uses in any of his letters. Because of the severity of that language, and the fact that it seems to contrast with some of the earlier passages in the letter where he expresses joy over the Corinthians' repentance, many scholars have felt that this is a fragment of another of his letters that has somehow been tacked onto Second Corinthians. Some have even thought it may be the "severe letter" that Paul mentions earlier in this letter that he wrote to the Corinthian church and which has been lost to us. We ought to remember, however, that when he wrote this, as happened with many of his letters, he was traveling about from place to place. He would dictate his letters at night, and this is probably the cause of some of these sudden changes of subject which we run across in his writings from time to time.

It is obvious that here he does, indeed, change the subject very sharply from what he has been talking about in Chapters 8 and 9. When we note also that the sharp words he uses in this last section are not addressed against the church as a whole, but against a special group of teachers in the midst of the Corinthians who were teaching false doctrine, you can understand that this is a subject that might well engage his attention as he concludes this letter.

This is a very helpful passage to us because we have many false teachers in the church today as well. Some of them are blatant and open and easy to recognize. In every congregation we have people who are being influenced by the Moonies, under Sun Myung Moon, the Korean "messiah." He is now capturing the attention of many young people, especially here in the Bay area, inspiring them with the hope that he is going to be the expected Messiah to deliver the nations. Then we have the Mormons. They are going about from door to door trying to convince people that the Book of Mormon is authentic history. They teach strange doctrines that have no correspondence with Scripture, and yet they try to hide under the general guise of being evangelical Christians. Some are being misled by them. Then there is the Hare Krishna group. They meet you in the airport, pin a nice flower in your buttonhole, and seek to engage you in conversation on spiritual matters to set forth their teaching. There are the Scientologists, the followers of Est, and so many other groups today.

Some are more subtle. They are within the church itself, such as those who espouse transcendental meditation and various self-improvement movements. There are the "Christian homosexuals," as they call themselves, who have formed churches which teach that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle among Christians. Then there are many who are, perhaps, unquestionably evangelical, and yet they are teaching legalism, spiritual elitism, or pushing some special experience as a shortcut to spiritual power. So you see that these passages in Second Corinthians are relevant to us. We can understand something of the apostle's concern about this kind of thing in the church at Corinth.

Now all these groups and all these individuals have one thing in common. Whether they know it or not, they are being used as a tool of the devil to derail the church, if he can, to rob individual Christians of their liberty and joy in the Lord, and to oppose and defeat the gospel in its powerful ministry of deliverance within a community or a nation. So the apostle writes with considerable feeling about this.

We will see this now as we look at the opening words in Chapter 10:

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ -- I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold to 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 acting in worldly ambition. For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. {2 Cor 10:1-6 RSV}

You can see that these are the words of a faithful shepherd who sees his sheep under attack from wolves in sheep's clothing. They are among them and are appearing as Christians, but they are teaching some very destructive heresies. Paul does not normally speak sharply or severely. In fact, in this first verse he refers to himself in the same way his enemies in Corinth were describing him: "I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold to you when I am away!" That is what these teachers were saying about him in Corinth: "Don't pay any attention to Paul. He's just a paper tiger. He sounds very impressive when he writes, but when he comes he is very meek and inconsequential." Paul says, "That is what they are saying about me, but..." He links this with the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

Our Lord was indeed meek and gentle, but there were times when he spoke very severely. When he drove the moneychangers out of the temple his eyes were blazing and his arm was lifted up in violent action against those who were destroying the people of God. Paul says, "When I come, that is the way I will behave as well. I am fully prepared to employ all the weapons at my command."

The great question, of course, we have to ask about this passage is, what are those weapons that Paul refers to? What can Christians use to counteract the cults around us? How do we respond when we see a loved one or a whole community of believers threatened by error, by a false idea which may take over a church, a community, or even a whole nation? I submit to you that these are very relevant issues. Right here in Santa Clara County today we are being faced with a powerful threat from the homosexual community to impose, by law, an unrighteous lifestyle upon our young people in schools and in public institutions. Christians are rightly asking "How can we oppose this? What weapons can we employ?"

Not only that, but we find ourselves harassed and bombarded daily by sexual themes implying that any form of sexuality is acceptable. We are constantly assaulted by crude and offensive slogans on bumper stickers on cars, on billboards and on television commercials. *Time Magazine* recently admitted that it is impossible to watch the evening news without being treated to a stream of thirty-second treatises on hemorrhoids, tampons, feminine deodorant sprays, cures for bad breath, and constipation. Drug pushers do their best to hook our young people on narcotics. Pornographers push their wares at us at every news stand. Teachers openly espouse Marxism and revolution in our classrooms. Inflation depletes the value of our dollar every day while politicians continue mouthing empty words and doing nothing about it. Do you ever feel like I do sometimes, a great sense of frustration, an increasing sense of desperation at being so helpless? I am sure you do. How do we stem this downward slide into national disaster? Well, listen again to these words.

For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. {2 Cor 10:3-4 RSV}

I do not know why the Revised Standard translators substituted the word "world" for "flesh" here. The text does not say, "We are not carrying on a 'worldly' war." What it really says is, "We are not carrying on a 'fleshly' war for the weapons of our warfare are not 'fleshly.'" But in a sense I can understand why they have changed that word, because "the flesh" and "the world" are very closely linked.

The "flesh," as you might define it in the Scriptures, is what we would call inherited selfishness, that self-centeredness of life, which all of us have without exception that wants to pursue our own interests at the expense of everybody else. Now when you put a lot of self-centered individuals together and ask them to work and plan together you get a fleshly governed society. That is what the Bible calls "the world," a society committed to the defense of its own interests, to protecting its own rights. It is thus, inevitably, engaged in eternal conflict. That is "the world," and that is what the translators undoubtedly had in mind when they used the term "world" here.

So Paul says we do not employ the weapons of the flesh. What are those weapons? What does the world use to try to solve the problems it recognizes in society? Well, you know what it uses: Coercion, manipulation, pressure groups, compromises, demonstrations that ultimately result in raised voices, in clenched fists and

outbreaks of conflict, boycotts, pickets and strikes, in attempts to pressure people into doing what others want. These are the weapons of the world. It does not have any others. So it is understandable why those who are governed by the flesh would seek to employ fleshly weapons to get things done. But the universal testimony of history is, these do not work. We still have the same problems we have had for centuries. We never will get rid of them. We only rearrange them by these methods so that they seem to take another form for a little while but soon we are right back with the same problems, if not worse. That has been the unbroken experience of history. No one can deny it.

Well, then, what are our weapons? Paul makes it clear that they are not those. Christians are not to use coercion, manipulation, pressure groups, compromises and conflict to oppose the evil in our midst. We have other weapons, he says. They are mighty, they are powerful, they accomplish something. They will "destroy strongholds" of evil, he says. But when you ask yourself, "What are these weapons?" you find that there are no answers in this passage. The apostle evidently understands that the Corinthians know what they are. He has referred to them in various places in his letters. We find them scattered all through Scripture so we have to go to other passages in order to understand what he is talking about here. But we do have spiritual weapons that are mighty against these forces of darkness.

The one we would put first, I am sure from the Scriptures, is truth. The Christian is given an insight into life and reality that others do not have. We know what is behind the forces at work in our society today, and we ought to know how to go about overcoming them. As Paul put it in Ephesians, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood," {cf, Eph 6:12a KJV}. Our problem is not people, much as we identify, like the world around us, with people as the problem. Scripture says, "No, it is not people," but rather, "principalities, powers and wicked spirits in high places, the world rulers of this present darkness," {cf, Eph 6:12b RSV}. We wrestle with spiritual powers behind the scenes. We need to understand that.

That is what truth is all about. Truth is realism. The wonderful thing about the Word of God is that, when you understand the world as the Bible sees it, you are looking at life the way it really is. I do not know anything more valuable than that. That is why it is so important that we understand the Scriptures, that we refresh our minds with them all the time, for, in this constant bombardment with illusion and error that we face every day, it is easy to drift back into thinking the way everybody around us thinks. Unless we are finding our minds renewed by the Spirit, and refreshed by the reminder of what life is really like and what it is we are really up against, we will find ourselves acting just like everybody else. So, the first and greatest weapon of all is truth: Truth as it is in Jesus.

As we read the Gospels, we see that Jesus is a man who understands life. He does not act like anybody else because he really sees what is happening. He ignores much of the visible symptoms and strikes right at the heart, at the cause of certain events. That is why what he did was so different from the world around. If we are going to follow him, we will not adopt these methods, and fall heir to some of these fatal approaches to problems. We will begin to see things differently.

And, everywhere in Scripture, the Word of God links truth with love, "speaking the truth in love," {Eph 4:15}. Love is a powerful weapon. When you begin to treat people with courtesy instead of anger, when you accept them as people with feelings like yours, and understand that they too are struggling with difficulties and see things out of focus as you yourself often do, when you begin to treat them as people in trouble who need help -- that is what love is -- then you change the whole picture.

That is one of the reasons why Christians must be very careful how they approach the homosexual community today. These are desperate, hurting people who have been greatly hurt by factors that they think are right, but which are very destructive. We need to understand that, and treat them tenderly and courteously, even though we oppose the convictions that they are trying to impress and impose upon us. Love is a mighty force. We pay lip service to it in quoting First Corinthians 13, but how often do we put it into practice?

Then linked to that, everywhere in Scripture, is faith. Faith is the recognition that God is present in history. He has not left us alone to stumble on our own way. God is at work. The Lord Jesus sits in control of all the nations of earth. "He opens and no man shuts. He shuts and no man opens," {cf, Rev 3:7 RSV}. Faith believes that, and expects him to do something. In the 11th chapter of Hebrews we have the great record of the

plain, ordinary men and women like you and me who found, by faith, that they could stop the mouths of lions, open the doors of prisons, and change the course of history. Faith is not a religious entity merely for churchgoing people. Faith comes right down and lays hold of ordinary, human events and changes the course of history through them.

Linked to faith is prayer. The power of prayer is everywhere held before us in Scripture. We are constantly exhorted to expose the situations in which we find ourselves to the prayers of believing people, both individually and corporately, praying together that God would move in and change things. Again and again the record testifies that events have been drastically altered by Christians who pray.

With that we would also link loving service. Scripture says, "Do good to those who hate you; pray for those who spitefully use you," {cf, Matt 5:44, Luke 6:27-28}; and minister to those who treat you wrongly or misuse you. Do something good back. When is the last time you did that? That is what changes history, when Christians act differently. You will never find non-Christians doing that. Their demand is to get even, to demand justice. Christians are to remember that if we had justice all of us would be in hell. Therefore, mercy is what is required. To return good for evil is a potent weapon that we can employ.

Paul uses a very vivid word to describe the errors that we are attacking. He calls them "strongholds." That is a word taken out of the military life of the time, and it is used only once in the Scriptures. It describes a castle with its moats, its walls, its turrets and its towers, that is defended by a handful of resolute, determined men. History records that many times a castle like that has held out for weeks and months and years against an attacking force because it was so difficult to dislodge its defenders. So that word vividly describes some of the evils we are talking about this morning.

Why is it so difficult to handle the homosexual issue today? Why do we find it so hard to get hold of this matter? The break-up of the home and the rising divorce rate is another stronghold of evil. Drug traffic is another. What do you do against these things?

Paul describes in Verse 5 some of the things that lend strength to these powers of evil. He says,

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. {2 Cor 10:5 RSV}

The first is *arguments* ("Reasonings" is literally the word). It means the rationalizings by which a point of error is supported and defended. Have you ever noticed that when you get upset about some of the things that are happening in our day and you decide to do something about it, you are soon confronted with arguments that the other side uses to defend itself which sound almost unassailable?

I saw a pamphlet just the other day put out by the homosexual community in San Jose to defend their right to public acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle. It was headed with these words, "Dare We Lose Our Right To Love?" A right to love. What could be wrong with that? After all, don't people have a right to love? It went on to show that all those who are trying to take away this "right to love" in a homosexual lifestyle are narrow-minded, bitter bigots who are out to deprive other people of a very beautiful and wonderful thing. As you read it through, it sounds logical. Who doesn't want to retain the "right to love"? It is very difficult to answer these arguments.

But Paul says that is what the truth and love and prayer and faith will do. They will reveal that behind these arguments are vain suppositions, unrealistic assumptions that are not true. It can be demonstrated that homosexuality, for instance, is not really love. Honest homosexuals admit that they are not satisfied, their lives are not enriched by this lifestyle. Rather, they find themselves hopelessly launched on a search for something they can never find, and experiencing increasing depression and disappointment as they pursue it.

That is where a Christian can come with a loving touch, and a truthful word, and point out that that is exactly the case. That is what the Lord Jesus did with the woman at the well at Samaria. He dealt with her unending search for happiness in marriage by showing her that she was on a wild-goose chase that could never end in anything but utter frustration. But he had the true gift of satisfaction that he would give to her if she would take

it. That is the Christian approach. It destroys these arguments, these reasonings.

The second thing Paul mentions is, "proud obstacles to the knowledge of God." Do you know what they are? If you read the writings that defend error in our day you will see, every now and then, some arrogant statement of the ability of man that is far beyond reality. You will read claims that men are smart, that they understand life, that they can handle all their problems, and do not need any help. These arrogant assumptions of right, or might, are what Paul is referring to, this strange insanity that makes men think they can handle the world, and handle life, without any wisdom beyond their own. Again and again you run into this, and people get offended if this is attacked in any way.

Then the final thing is a very personal matter, the thoughts that come into our own minds and hearts. We learn to, "take captive every thought to the obedience of Christ." The word Paul uses and the reference he is making here is to the imaginings of our minds. These are the fantasizings we indulge in, the daydreams of power and of accomplishment that we feed upon endlessly, the lustings by which we attempt to satisfy inward sexual desires by feeding upon pornography, mentally if not openly. You will never win the battle as long as you allow yourself to indulge in those kinds of fantasizings. That is why the apostle, with all realism, faces us with the fact that we must bring these things captive unto Christ, and no longer permit them to engage our minds and hearts. These are conquered by truth, by love, by faith, by righteousness, by prayer and service. These are the weapons of our warfare.

Now, once these things are conquered, once we really face up to them, and no longer permit them to govern our lives because of the truth that God has shown us, then we must be quick and alert to maintain a promptness to deal with the return of any of these evil things. That is what Paul is referring to in Verse 6:

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

That means that once you have been delivered from your inner weaknesses which make you unusable in the spiritual warfare of our day, then you must maintain an alertness to deal promptly with any return of these things. I do not know anything more practical than this.

Many people struggle for years against weaknesses in their lives and wonder why they can get nowhere. But they are trying to stop the act, not the inward thought that precipitates it. They permit themselves inward dalliance with ugly and hurtful things, ambitious projects where they see themselves as the hero on the white horse, always riding out to deliver the damsel from distress, winning the attention of all the multitudes around, or giving way to lust and playing it over on the record player of the mind. Then they wonder why they are so weak when an opportunity comes to indulge in an act. The battleground is our thought life, that is what Paul is telling us. When we win that battle then we must be careful to punish every disobedience after our obedience has been made complete, after we have learned what it takes to walk with God.

The problem is not the world. It is the church, isn't it? It is we who do not use the weapons at our disposal. Instead, we give way, and go along with worldly approaches, using pressure-group tactics, and petitions, to seek to overcome with legislation the wrongs of our day.

May God help us to understand the nature of spiritual warfare. The weapons of our warfare are not those kinds of worldly tactics. They are mighty. The cause is not hopeless. We are not helpless; there is much we can do.

Let a single Christian begin to act along the lines of the revelation of Scripture in this regard, and things will begin to change. Any one of us can begin to change things, in our lives individually, in our homes, in our communities, where we work, whatever. Let us begin to learn the truth about life from the Scriptures, to act in love instead of in rivalry and competition, to trust God that he will work as we work in faith, to pray, and to join others in prayer, that he will do so. Let us begin to live righteously ourselves, to see that we maintain integrity in the midst of these deviations, and lovingly serve those who are opposing us. We will find tremendous changes beginning to occur quickly as God allows these weapons to destroy the strongholds of darkness and evil around us.

Do you know anything more challenging for our day and time than that?

God has placed in our hands the opportunity to change our nation, our communities, our homes, wherever we are.

May God grant that we will do it.

You are the salt of the earth, {Matt 5:13a RSV}. You are the light of the world, {Matt 5:14a RSV}

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for this honest look at who we are. Forgive us for our failure to believe it. Help us from here on to begin to use the weapons of our warfare, to act like we ought to be acting and react the way we should react. Call us to this great and challenging work of changing the world of our day by the power you have vested in us by means of the Holy Spirit and the truth of your Word. We ask it in the name of Jesus, our Lord, Amen.

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