

WAGING SPIRITUAL WARFARE

SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS

By Doug Goins

This morning our children called us to worship thoroughly convinced in their innocence that God is mighty, powerful, and good. The dedication of children and family reminds us of the responsibility we have to these little ones. Whether we are a biological parent or just have influence in a little one's life, we model what these young ones know and understand about God's greatness, goodness, and trustworthiness. The issue of modeling is important as we consider a new series in Scripture together for the next ten weeks, the last four chapters of Paul's second Corinthian letter, chapters 10-13. I have entitled this series *The Importance of Models* because the apostle Paul becomes for us a model of what it means to trust and follow God.

Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth is his most autobiographical but also least systematic in any theological sense, reading much like a personal journal. Here are the words of somebody who freely expresses himself about God, relationships, and ministry. In the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians, which we covered over the last year and a half, we learned how Paul approaches life and ministry and relationships. We saw that he does not model self-confidence or self-sufficiency. Rather Paul represents a wonderfully attractive confidence in Jesus as he lives his life. In 2 Corinthians 3:4 he says, "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God."

In this closing section of the letter, Paul tells us many intimate and personal things about his life which we don't find in any of his other letters in the New Testament. He describes the personal criticism that he endured and the physical suffering which became very commonplace in his life. He talks about the struggles he had with some sort of handicap; we don't know whether it was physical or emotional. In these four chapters we also see the depth of Paul's love for and commitment to people. I want us to look at these issues very carefully because today we desperately need models like Paul.

Two themes are woven together throughout chapters 10-13. The first one has to do with foundations for living, or the basis for confidence in our lives. If you look at 2 Corinthians 10:17, Paul quotes the prophet Jeremiah, "BUT HE WHO BOASTS, LET HIM BOAST IN THE LORD." Paul uses that word "boast" or "boasting" twenty different times in these four chapters, always referring to the basis on which we build our confidence. The second theme is the paradox of God's power working through our frailty, weakness, and inconsistency as human beings. In 2 Corinthians 12:8 Paul says, "...I entreated the Lord..." He is talking about praying. Whenever Paul talks about the Lord he is referring to Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Jesus answers Paul, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" We will deal with this mystery over and over--the power of God somehow working through flawed human beings like you and me. The fact that God can accomplish that is something that Paul never gets over.

I have already begun praying for us as a church family as we anticipate this series together. I want us to examine ourselves individually, and collectively as a church, concerning this first century pattern for authentic Christian living. I am praying that we will commit ourselves to follow Paul's model because he is following and emulating Christ. Our relationships, families, workplaces and ministries can reflect this authenticity. In the very last verse of

the book, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul's benediction reminds us that the same kind of lifestyle is possible for us if we live in "...the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." My prayer is that we will learn how to live this way.

Personally, one of the most difficult times to draw on the supernatural resource of the Godhead--to experience the amazing grace of Jesus, the extravagant love of God, and the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit--is when I am being personally attacked or unfairly criticized. It's difficult to maintain our spiritual equilibrium when we face false accusations. But that's the exact circumstance Paul found himself in as he wrote this closing section of 2 Corinthians. A group within the church was trying to undermine Paul's influence. They had accused him of hypocrisy, impure motives, and manipulative methods. Paul responds to this as he writes these four chapters, writing with a passion and intensity that we have not seen before. Let's read 2 Corinthians 10:1-6:

Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ--I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! I ask that when I am present I may not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

There are three strong contrasts in this opening section. In verses 1 and 2, Paul lays out the conflict between himself and some of the people in the church at Corinth. In verses 3-5 there's a contrast between exercising warfare controlled by the Spirit of God, and controlled by what he calls the flesh or worldly methodology. The third contrast is in verse 6, obedience versus disobedience.

The Paul/Corinthian conflict

Let's look at the conflict between Paul and a group of people in the church at Corinth. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases 2 Corinthians 10:1-2 this way:

And now a personal but most urgent matter; I write in the gentle but firm spirit of Christ. I hear that I'm being painted as cringing and wishy-washy when I'm with you, but harsh and demanding when at a safe distance writing letters. Please don't force me to take a hard line when I'm present with you. Don't think that I'll hesitate a single minute to stand up to those who say I'm an unprincipled opportunist. Then they'll have to eat their words.

The first accusation is in verse 1. Some people accuse Paul of hypocrisy in ministry. Paul is probably quoting his critics when he says, "...I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent!" They criticize him for being forceful when he writes to them but lacking courage when he's with them. Paul quotes them directly in 2 Corinthians 10:10, "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible.'" The implication is that his hypocrisy discounts the apostolic authority of his writing. His critics discredit him so that he is not to be taken seriously as a writer or a teacher.

The second accusation comes in verse 2. Some accuse Paul of fleshly motives in ministry, "...some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh." The New International Version (NIV) translates that "...live by the standards of this world." They accuse Paul of embracing a purely human way of doing things in his life and his ministry which suggests self-interest and living manipulatively. In 2 Corinthians 1:17, Paul had been accused of living according to the flesh because he didn't come to Corinth when he had told them he would: "He doesn't depend on the Lord when he sets his itinerary, so even his travel plans are accomplished according to his own self-interests."

The irony here is that it's not Paul but his critics who have the fleshly motives in ministry. They are the ones who are hypocritical and overbearing in their leadership. Paul's concern is that the majority of the people in the church of Corinth acquiesced to what was abusive spiritual leadership as seen in 2 Corinthians 11:19, "For you, being so wise, bear with the foolish gladly. For you bear with anyone if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face." It is clear here that Paul is pointing to abusive spiritual leadership.

What is striking is that Paul does not fight fire with fire. Remember how he appeals to them personally in 2 Corinthians 10:1, "Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ..." I thought back to when Paul first came to Corinth and established himself with the people there. They didn't know the Lord, and he led them to Christ. From the beginning, Paul's purpose was to lift up Jesus, not to exalt himself. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul reminds them of his attitude toward them:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

It seems to me that we grow up as Christians the way we are born. If we are spiritually born into an atmosphere of dominating leadership, then we grow up with an unhealthy dependence on the spiritual leader's wisdom and strength and influence. If we are born into a community of humility and loving mutuality, then we learn to depend on the Lord.

Paul always wanted to focus on God at work in Christ, not on himself and his work among them. Paul wanted his brothers and sisters in Corinth to trust the Lord, not the Lord's servant, so he deliberately played down his own ability and apostolic authority. Overbearing leadership which took over after Paul left, wanting to replace his apostolic authority, had easily seduced the Corinthian church. The people forgot that true spiritual power is executed in Christ-like meekness and gentleness, not in leaders throwing their weight around. Paul's attitude disarms his critics; in fact, the use of his own name is significant as it's something that Paul rarely does except when opening or closing a letter. The literal meaning of Paul is "little" or "small." He's saying, "I, Paul, the little one appeal to you." The fact that he appeals to the meekness and gentleness of Christ is saying, "If I am a little weakling, then so is Jesus." Jesus said of himself, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS" (Matt. 11:29).

In verse 2, there is a reference to boldness and to the fact that Paul is courageous. He understands the authority God has given him as an apostle. Even his willingness to come and stand for truth, if that is necessary, mirrors Jesus. Jesus could be stern and strong, and stand against lies and what was evil. In verse 2, Paul warns his opponents, in a very loving way and actually closes the letter with the same conciliatory tone: "For this reason I am writing these

things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor. 13:10).

The contrast between fleshly strength and Christ-like meekness draws Paul’s mind to another contrast.

The flesh/Spirit warfare

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

In verse 3, Paul begins his discussion of spiritual warfare by admitting that he does live, or walk, in the flesh. The preposition change from “to” the flesh in verse 2 to “in” the flesh in verse 3 is crucial. Paul says that his sphere of activity is indeed in the flesh which defines the everyday world of human existence with all its frustrations. However, this does not mean he conducts his affairs as the sinful world system around him does nor does he wage spiritual warfare according to the flesh.

The end of verse 4 and the entirety of verse 5 tell us what we are doing battle against. But first, it is important for us to understand the nature of our weapons, negatively and positively. Negatively, our weapons are not of the flesh. The Corinthian Christians had been focusing on fleshly, worldly approaches to ministry and spiritual warfare. Paul’s first words in verse 7 tell us why they were confused, “You are looking at things as they are outwardly....” They were specifically focusing on externals. They gave allegiance to strong religious personalities and believed in the weaponry of human cleverness and ingenuity--organizational psychology--charm, or eloquent speaking--marketing and manipulation. That kind of weaponry is at work all around us in Christian organizations today. It may win superficial religious skirmishes, but it is completely impotent for pulling down entrenched fortresses of evil and driving that evil from its place of dominance. Verse 5 makes clear that strongholds are destructive belief systems in the hearts and minds of people. They are a mind-set built on lies which distort reality and dehumanize people. The fortress may be one of self-protection built around a heart broken by abuse and violation or a fortress of arrogance or self-delusion about capability and adequacy. Fleshly, superficial religion cannot pull down these strongholds.

I was thinking this week and praying for people I know and love in this body. Fortresses in some of those people’s lives, the exhaustion of chronic mental illness, the demoralization of grinding unemployment, the stronghold of confusion and self-hatred which drives a wonderful young person, made in God’s image, to attempt suicide. There is also the isolation and loneliness, which contributes to a self image of worthlessness. A life of sexual fantasy which ultimately destroys marriage and family, and addictive patterns of drug and alcohol abuse. Again, surface religion cannot pull down these strongholds.

But, the good news is that we do have spiritual resources that are categorically different. They are supernaturally powered as verse 4 says, “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.” Earlier in this letter Paul introduced the Corinthians to this powerful weaponry. The NIV translates this, “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness [which are motives, and continuing we get to the weapons we’ve been given] in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech [which literally is the word of truth] and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left” (2 Cor. 6:4a, 6b, 7).

In that passage, Paul gives us five resources we can trust as we enter warfare. First, the Holy Spirit himself is our personal and powerful helper, our counselor, comforter and our encourager. He is the guide that Paul relied on in every setting and relationship in his own life. The Holy Spirit delights to release the life of Jesus Christ in us. Jesus himself, by the Spirit, lived in Paul and upheld and empowered him. He lives in us the same way. He will empower us no matter what the battle is in which we're engaged. Jesus Christ is there by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The second tool we've been given is *agape* or genuine love, sincerity in our love toward people. This love is supernatural in origin. It's God's love poured into us. There is a tough-mindedness about this love. It's not sentimental. It's faithful and it's costly. The same love put Jesus on the cross and kept him there, going all out for the good of the beloved. And God, by his Holy Spirit, is the only one who can sustain the expression of that kind of love in us as we enter into difficult relationship issues to do warfare for the kingdom.

The third weapon, the "word of truth," is the resource of the Scriptures. God's revelation in his word is where we always need to go to understand how God views things. Distortions, deceits and lies are exposed as false against God's word. The Bible attacks speculations, arrogance, and destructive thoughts. Our warfare must be based on constant and consistent study of the Bible as it is only God's word that makes sense of the deceits and delusions.

The fourth weapon, the "power of God," is the divine source from which Paul lived his life and exercised his ministry. He was convinced that in even the simplest things God was there, powerfully at work in him. We can claim that exact same power in every place we go, especially in the realm of human relationships. The power of God at work in us gives us spiritual influence to tear down strongholds and draw others to the Savior as we share the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to him. Only the power of God can break through a stronghold that locks out truth and bring the message to life in somebody's heart.

Paul summarizes this section with the imagery of "weapons of righteousness," our fifth resource. He calls them weapons because we are engaged in a battle for the destruction of fortresses or strongholds. The nature of our warfare is clearly revealed in 2 Corinthians 10:5 as "...destroying speculations...every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and...taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." God will use our spiritual weapons to impact people's lives.

In spiritual warfare we are first "destroying speculations," theories, or arguments, the rationalizations which act as walls around the fortress of lies and destructive beliefs. These rationalizations are based on false assumptions which buttress disappointment, discouragement, and depression. The walls prevent the mind and heart from seeing God's love and power and goodness. Paul is convinced if we lovingly engage with people, if we speak the word of truth, and if our actions are directed by the power of God and the Holy Spirit of God in us, that these walls can be broken down.

The second aspect of warfare in verse 5 is "destroying prideful arrogance," the pride and intellect that exalts itself and keeps people from seeing who God is. Paul is not attacking intelligence, because God gave us intelligence, but intellectualism, the high-minded attitude that makes us think we know more than we do. In Romans 12:16 Paul calls it being "...haughty in mind..." or "...wise in our own estimation." That kind of intellectual arrogance forms an obstacle to the liberating knowledge of God contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the heart of the gospel is crucifixion and death which are obstacles to human pretension. Corinth was one of the most arrogant cities in the ancient East. Yet when Paul first went there, he preached the simple message of Christ on the cross.

The third and final aspect of warfare in verse 5 is "...taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." The concern here is destructive thoughts. I think it's important that we apply this final verse personally to ourselves. Think about our own sinful tendencies to fantasize, to imagine ourselves as successful and powerful, to have sexual lusting, or to daydream that life or relationships are somehow better or different. Christ calls us to clear-minded realism. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 10:5 calls it, "...fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ." It's allowing Christ to take control of our thinking and our feeling, constantly giving our minds and hearts, including all the loose ends, to him to conform them to the love, purpose and power of who he is.

The obedience/disobedience issue

This brings us to Paul's final contrast in our opening section, verse 6, "And we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete." Eugene Peterson paraphrases this, "Our tools are ready at hand for clearing the ground of every obstruction and building lives of obedience into maturity." This last verse is directed most specifically at Paul's critics. Paul's attitude of humility was actually one of his strongest weapons against them because pride always plays into the hands of our enemy Satan. Paul uses spiritual weapons to tear down the opposition: the power of God, *agape* love, the word of God, the Holy Spirit at work in his life, and his own loving engagement with the people in Corinth. Paul did not depend on his own personality, or human ability or even apostolic authority. However, in order that the Corinthians would not think he was skirting the issues of hypocrisy and fleshly motives which they had raised, he does state, in verse 6, that as an apostle he is willing to confront them if it is necessary.

We can apply this verse personally as well. We need to deal quickly with any spiritual rebellion that comes into our lives. Allow these weapons to be expressed in our lives. The weapons of the truth of God and the Spirit of God working in us, as Peterson says, "...for clearing the ground of every obstruction..." to obedience to Christ in our lives. We're not to allow sinful weaknesses to get a foothold through our thought life or emotional life or indulge ourselves with daydreaming, ambitions, lust, or destructive thinking toward ourselves or others. If we use the weapons, the promise is we can be built up into maturity. We can be conformed into the image of Christ. Paul is consistently optimistic about the obedience and spiritual growth of most of the people in the church of Corinth in spite of their immaturity or faulty thinking at points. He knows God will finish what he started with them. We can trust this weaponry too. God will use it in our lives to help clean up our thinking and help us think straight about what is true and real, and where he is taking us. The weaponry is given to fight the battles in others as well as in ourselves for growth and healing, and cleansing our feeling and thought.

Let me conclude by pointing us back to the Lord Jesus, the one who is meek and gentle. Jesus said to his disciples, as he is saying to us this morning, "...If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31b, 32). This Scripture captures the essence of 2 Corinthians 10:1-6, of Christian living and growing in Christ. The life of Christ in us is not a contrived, public display but a deep, spontaneous, invisible, spiritual thing. It's where the invasion of Scripture and the presence of our Lord Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit engage us. Working together they overrun speculations, scale the lofty towers of our hearts and minds, and bring every thought and feeling captive in obedience to Christ. In that process we fully experience the truth of this passage. We learn to experience freedom as fortresses in our thinking and belief systems and in our interior emotional life are torn down. As we experience truth, it will make us free. That's what Jesus wants to do for us. For us it means believing that Jesus is committed to the process!

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