

Paul Vindicates Himself to the False Teachers

2 Corinthians 10

2 Corinthians 10: Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you. 2 But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh. 3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. 7 Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we are Christ's. 8 For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed— 9 lest I seem to terrify you by letters. 10 "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." 11 Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present. 12 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. 13 We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. 14 For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; 15 not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men's labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, 16 to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment. 17 But "he who glories, let him glory in the Lord." 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends."

Background Notes

2 Corinthians 8 and 9 emphasize Christian giving -- principles of Christian giving in chapter 8, and rewards for Christian giving in chapter 9. In chapter 10 Paul returned to a subject that he touched on earlier in the letter – in fact, it was one of his main reasons for writing this epistle to the Corinthians.

When Titus returned from Corinth with the good news that the Corinthian Christians had responded well to Paul's "sorrowful letter," he also brought the bad news that some false teachers had infiltrated the Corinthian church, and they were questioning and undermining Paul's authority as an apostle.

Who were these false teachers? They were probably Judaizers from Jerusalem, who preached the importance of keeping the Law of Moses. Were they true believers or unbelievers? Probably some were and some were not. Verse 7 indicates that at least some of these detractors were true believers, but they were involved in false teaching: *“Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ’s, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ’s, even so we are Christ’s.”* This verse would certainly indicate that some of these detractors were true believers, but they were involved in false teaching.

On the other hand, 2 Corinthians 11:13-14 says that some of these false teachers were definitely unbelievers: *“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”* So it seems that a mixture of believers and unbelievers were involved in the false teaching and in the questioning of Paul’s apostolic authority.

Remember, they accused Paul of vacillating in his plans (chapter 1). And they said that Paul did not have the proper “letters of commendation” (chapter 3). Look again at 2 Corinthians 3:1, *“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?”*

In chapter 10, we see that the false teachers were saying that Paul’s “bark was worse than his bite.” Look at verse 10: *“For his letters,” they say, “are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.”* In other words, the false teachers were saying that Paul wrote powerful letters but didn’t back them up with power when he was present - and that he certainly didn’t have the impressive personal appearance that was befitting for an apostle! Paul refuted all this “bad press” as he defended his apostleship.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should not fight with weapons of the flesh.

Verse 3: *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.”* Obviously Paul was talking about spiritual warfare here. This verse certainly reminds us of the well known “spiritual warfare passage” in Ephesians 6. Ephesians 6:12-13, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”*

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul viewed his conflict with the false teachers who were questioning his apostolic authority as **spiritual warfare**. The Corinthians were very impressed with outward appearances (v7), but Paul wanted them to know that they were on the wrong track. He acknowledged that his personal appearance and speech were not impressive (v10), but those attributes were the sphere of the flesh - and that outward appearances were not what really mattered!

In spiritual warfare, our weapons are not of the flesh - such as eloquence, and good looks, and impressive credentials. No, it is by prayer and obedience to the Word and through the power of the Holy Spirit, that *"arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God"* are cast down – thus *"bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"*(v5).

Spiritual warfare would include punishment for disobedience there at Corinth, because of the false teachings of the false apostles. "So Corinthians," (Paul said in essence), "I don't want to scare you (v9) but the false apostles there who are claiming that I am not an apostle had better be warned. This is ***spiritual warfare!***"

As in Paul's day, so it is in our own day. Believers should not fight with weapons of the flesh. Whether it be spiritual warfare refuting the secular humanism or godless evolution that pervade our culture and society, or whether it be spiritual warfare in confronting false teaching in the church, believers should not fight with weapons of the flesh.

2. Believers should not take credit for the work of another.

In reference to spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 says, *"There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all."* In reference to spiritual gifts, God has given believers different kinds of spiritual gifts, and different ministries in which these gifts are used, and different affects, or out-workings, that God provides. It's our responsibility not to try to use gifts that we haven't been given, and not to infringe on, another believer's ministry, or hurt it in any way.

In 2 Corinthians 10 Paul taught that God also gives different spheres or different fields of service. We are not to invade or take credit for the fields of Christian service that God has given to other believers. "Sheep-stealing" is unbiblical - and that's exactly what Paul's antagonists were doing. Paul had established the church at Corinth (v14) and now the Judaizers had come into Paul's sphere of service and were trying to take credit for Paul's labors. That was wrong then, and it's wrong today. There is plenty of space and opportunity in this world for you to have your own sphere or field of service for God.

Paul's future plans were to move on beyond Corinth and preach the gospel in new territory (v16). He would not take credit for some other believer's sphere of service.

Obviously there will be some overlap in our different spheres of service, but keep in mind that God has given you certain spiritual gifts to be used in the ministry that are unique to you. He has also given you a sphere of service in which to use your God-given spiritual gifts - and your natural talents as well, as you dedicate them to the Lord. There's plenty of room to serve the Lord with both your spiritual gifts and your natural talents. We don't have to steal some other believer's field of service. Believers should not take credit for the work of another.

Practical Application

Don't let any thought escape!

Verse 5 once again, *"Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."* Notice that it does not just say that we should take every **action** into captivity to the obedience of Christ. No - even every **thought** is to be taken into captivity to the obedience of Christ!

How is your thought life? Suppose others could read your thought life? Listen, your thought life is an open book to God. How pleasing it must be to the heart of God when we make **every** thought obedient to Christ!

If ever there was a verse in the Bible that warns us to guard what movies, DVDs and TV programs we watch, and what books and magazines we read, and what video games we play, this is it. 2 Corinthians 10:5: *"Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*

Once again the question – how is your thought life? Bring every thought under the obedience of Christ – and **don't let any thought escape!**