**GOSPEL-CENTERED MINISTRY: SERVING IN WEAKNESS AND POWER**

**(A Study in 2 Corinthians)**

**2 Corinthians 10:1-18**

***Introductory Remarks:***

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***Present or absent, Paul’s authority is the same (10:1-11)*** –

* *“I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ…”* – Paul’s opening words in this section highlight both his desire to address the issue at hand in a personal and straightforward manner as well as in a manner that reflects the character of Jesus Christ.
* *“…I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!” (10:1)* – Paul’s opponents (false apostles) have attacked his integrity in a number of ways and we see one of their attacks reflected in this verse. In what we might call sarcastic language, Paul deals directly with the idea that he is timid when he is with the Corinthians, but bold when he is away from them. Apparently his opponents were trying to convince the Corinthians that Paul is a weak and “two-faced” type of leader who is not worthy of being followed. He is very unimpressive in person, but tries to show his strength and authority through his letters when he is away from them.

We have to be careful to avoid falling into the same trap. People tend to follow those who have a great deal of charisma and self-confidence. Those who are impressive in person and are polished and captivating speakers are frequently embraced as being spiritual leaders even in our churches. This does not mean that a person with these “attractive” qualities is automatically to be considered fake or ungodly, but it does mean that these are not required by God to be a true leader. At any rate, Paul did not seem to fit this criteria, but apparently some of his opponents did and were using this to disparage Paul and his ministry. And, just like in our own culture, it seemed to be impressive to at least some of those in the Corinthian church.

All of this makes it more important that Paul starts this section by appealing to the “meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Such an emphasis has been central to all he has been saying in 2 Corinthians about himself and his ministry. It is the Christlikeness of his ministry that marks it off as being authentic. It is not his personal charisma or ability to captivate an audience that validates his ministry. This should be no surprise to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul made it very clear that he came to them not in “lofty speech or wisdom” but in “weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” Why? He wanted to keep the focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified. He wanted the power and wisdom of God to be front and center. He wanted his ministry to be a demonstration of the power and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit and not himself (Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16). And it is these things that he is continuing to focus on in 2 Corinthians as he writes this letter.

* *“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 walking according to the flesh.” (10:2)* – One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter is to prepare for his impending visit to Corinth. In this verse he emphasizes one of the ways he wants the Corinthians to respond so that when he does come it will be a more joyful visit and not one where he has to boldly correct them. In his desire to serve in the meekness and gentleness of Christ, he does not want to use his authority in this way. He would rather have the authority of God take root in their hearts before he arrives. So he “begs” them to respond in repentance (if necessary) and to reject the false teaching of these “apostles.”

However, Paul is not so optimistic when it comes to the false apostles themselves. He sees no indication that they will do anything but continue what they have been doing. Therefore, he says that He “counts on showing” this type of authority and boldness toward them. They are teaching that Paul’s ministry is simply a worldly ministry. They are accusing him of having a ministry that is carried out “according to the flesh.” In other words, as we have already noticed in 1 Corinthians 2, they are saying that Paul’s ministry is devoid of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Once again we must be careful not to do what these teachers are doing when it comes to evaluating ministry. The church at Corinth had seen God work in many powerful ways. Paul points out in the opening to 1 Corinthians that they “were enriched in him in all speech and knowledge’ and were “not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). In that letter he had also taken the time to teach them about their special gifting and how to approach these gifts in the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12-14). He does not in any way disparage the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but he does emphasize that the presence of certain gifts do not indicate a spiritual superiority in the Body. In fact, the gifts themselves are given to build up the Body and to unite it in love. If love is not at the heart of the use of these spiritual gifts they are worthless. So Paul has already had to deal with similar tendencies among the Corinthians. It is a lesson to all of us not to fall into the same trap. Paul has been holding out the transformation of the Corinthians lives through the gospel as the mark of their ministry. Now it is being called a “fleshly” ministry by his opponents!

* *“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” (10:3-4)* – Paul now takes their use of the word “flesh” and uses it to emphasize the truth about their ministry. He admits to “walking in the flesh,” but makes it clear that what he is talking about is the fact that they carry out their ministry in this world. He and his companions are certainly ministering as human beings in this physical world, but they do not let themselves conduct their ministry by merely human methods or with merely human resources.

To make his point he adopts the language of warfare. This is an interesting twist for someone who is being accused of being weak and timid. It also allows him to adopt more of an offensive approach to the controversy created by his opponents. He is engaged in a warfare and he has at his disposal all of the firepower that he needs. The problem is not his lack of boldness and power, it is the false apostles’ idea of where the true battle lies and how it should be fought. It is a spiritual battle and it requires spiritual weapons and a spiritual battle plan. Paul sees life as spiritual warfare and he frequently uses this type of language concerning the Christian life (Romans 13:12; 1 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Corinthians 6:7; Ephesians 6:10-18; Philippians 2:25; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; 1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:3-4; 4:7; Philemon 2).

The weapons they use are far from “fleshly” in the sense that his opponents are saying, they are full of divine power. In this verse Paul completely turns the table on these false apostles. He points out that they are not only falsely accusing him of a merely worldly ministry, they are actually engaged in a worldly ministry themselves. Their entire value system is distorted. They are the ones who are evaluating things by the wrong criteria and that includes him and his ministry to the Corinthian church.

* *“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.” (10:5-6)* – Contrary to the weapons emphasized by his opponents (charisma, impressive oratory skills, purely human knowledge and wisdom, etc.), the weapons Paul uses are God’s weapons. They are empowered by God to win this type of battle. And it is this type of battle that should matter the most to the Corinthians.

These types of weapons are not directed toward winning merely earthly battles, they are completely designed to win spiritual battles. They are able to “destroy strongholds” as he said in the last verse. Strongholds were secure places within a city that could be defended by relatively few soldiers. They tended to be high places with strong fortifications that cut off the possible avenues for the opposition to attack. When a city’s walls were breached, soldiers could retreat to the stronghold to survive. Thus these types of spiritual weapons are so effective that they are able to destroy such strong fortifications by the enemy (see also Proverbs 21:22).

Now, in verses 5-6, Paul clarifies what he means by this destruction of strongholds. What is at the heart of this battle is the true “knowledge of God.” This is more than simply academic knowledge. It is a true relational and experiential knowledge of God. It is the knowledge of God that is emphasized in places such as Jeremiah 9:23-24 and John 17:3. It is the type of knowledge that is made possible by the power of God in the gospel (Romans 1:16-17). Therefore, it makes sense that this type of knowledge would be central in our spiritual battle. Thus, what is being fought against is “arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.” To win such a battle “every thought” must be taken captive in obedience to Christ. These two things must go together. Sinful thinking and attitudes are to be fought against (see Romans 1:18-32) and thoroughly Christ-centered thoughts must replace them. Here is where we see the necessity of God working through his Word to renew our minds and hearts. We must have our minds saturated with God’s truth so that we can take every thought captive in obedience to Christ. It is a spiritual battle to be fought with spiritual weapons. Paul’s opponents (and apparently some of the Corinthian church) are fighting the wrong battle and, therefore, are using the wrong criteria to evaluate what true God-honoring ministry and leadership looks like.

This means that Paul also must be prepared, if necessary, to point out the flaws in his opponent’s attacks. Again, this is not the approach Paul wants to take toward the Corinthian believers. He wants them to reject this false teaching before he arrives, but he knows that for the good of the gospel and the spiritual lives of these believers, it may be necessary to directly condemn these destructive leaders. Unfortunately, there are times when such authority must be utilized, but it is not something that should be seen as comfortable nor desirable in the normal course of ministry. Throughout this book we see the reluctance of Paul to defend his ministry and to take such forceful actions. However, Jesus had to do it at various times in his ministry and Paul knows it is sometimes necessary for him to do the same for the sake of Christ and his church.

* *“Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ’s, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ’s, so also are we. For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed.” (10:7-8)* – In verse 7 we seem to have Paul fighting against what he sees to be a merely external appraisal of himself and his ministry. He calls on the Corinthians to take another good look at what is right in front of their eyes. The wording of verse 7 is difficult to put together, but may simply be a way of saying that even though these “apostles” are claiming to be sent by Christ, so are we. Therefore, it is necessary to take a good look to see whose claim is authentic.

Since it is important for them to embrace the right gospel and the right leaders, Paul feels it is necessary to defend his ministry and authority. So even though he is being forced into such “boasting,” it is for the sake of the gospel and the Corinthians’ spiritual welfare. Therefore, since their whole ministry is carried out for the building up of the Corinthians in Christ and not for tearing them down, Paul will not be ashamed of defending it. Even with that said, we still see how cautious he is about boasting too much. It is necessary to do and he will not be ashamed of doing it, but it’s still very uncomfortable for him.

* *“I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’ Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.” (10:9-11)* – In verses 9-11, Paul picks up the attack on his ministry that he mentioned in verse 2. He first of all counters the idea that he is trying to intimidate them in his letters. His letters were written for their spiritual welfare and not to harm them in any way. But he is adamant that his letters are not overly bold while he is weak in person. A careful reading of his letters would show that this is not true. His care for the Corinthians is constantly communicated in his writing. However, it is easy for us to take any strong correction as being harsh. This is especially true in our modern climate. We as believers have to be very careful about being resistant to correction. We actually should welcome it. We should want our brothers and sisters in Christ to care so much about us that they would want to see us flourishing in Christ. This includes a lot of encouragement in our faith, but it also includes a desire to see us freed from any of sin’s strongholds on our lives. Paul’s letters were not overly harsh; they were biblically loving!

Paul concludes his thoughts here with a warning to those who would embrace the message of the false apostles. He desires for them to repent and reject their teaching, but if they don’t, he will handle it directly and straightforwardly when he comes. And he wants them to know that this type of authenticity is not only what he is going to do in the future, but has always been his approach as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

***Proper and improper boasting (10:12-18)*** –

* *“Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.” (10:12) –* In these verses Paul takes his opponents to task more directly. He has set this up throughout the book, but now he is meeting it head on. He begins by referring once again to the ways these leaders boasted of their qualifications. Again we detect a note of sarcasm in his words. As we have previously noted in our study of 2 Corinthians, these “apostles” seemed to put high stock in their letters of recommendation. They would secure such letters from others (perhaps each other) and use them as ways to convince others of their authoritative position. Paul both mocks this practice and makes it clear that he will have nothing to do with it. In this type of boasting, they are only proving that they are really impressed with each other. Their whole basis for commending each other is their own minds and humanly devised criteria. Thus the whole foundation for their authority as apostles is false. They have no true understanding of God and his standard for authority, ministry, or anything else.

Once again, though, we must notice Paul’s caution with this defense of his apostleship and his ministry. He is still trying to make it clear that he does not consider self-commendation to be valid. That’s one of the reason he is uncomfortable with this kind of “boasting.” He knows his calling is from Christ and his ministry is validated not in what he himself declares, but in the one who called him and the transformed lives of the Corinthians and others.

* *“But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.” (10:13-14)* – As he has already emphasized in this letter (2 Corinthians 3:3-4), Paul points to the transformed lives of the Corinthians as proof of the authenticity and authority of his ministry. He will not engage in the popularity battles of the false apostles (“we will not boast beyond limits”). What he will point to is the ministry God has given him among the believers at Corinth. Here he reminds them of that ministry and how God used him and his coworkers to bring the gospel to them and to continue to build them up in the faith. They don’t need letters of recommendation because they have living letters in the church at Corinth.
* *“We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another’s area of influence.” (10:15-16)* – It is possible to see in the first part of this verse another jab at his opponents. They could be said to be taking credit for what God had done through Paul and his companions. Therefore, Paul’s statement about not boasting beyond limit in the labors of others could be directed at these opponents. However, the main point is that he has been called to take the gospel to places where it has never been preached before. This is what he has done in Corinth and he hopes that they will allow his ministry to continue to grow and flourish. In this way, not only will it be beneficial for them, but it will also give him a chance to preach the gospel in even more places where it has never been preached. They are a vivid testimony to his God-given apostolic ministry and this could be another launching pad for him to reach out even further.
* *‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” (10:17-18)* – The heart of this entire section is found in these two verses. Paul is very clear throughout his letters that all self-centered boasting is completely excluded in the Christian life (Romans 3:27). The whole nature of the gospel and how God saves his people leaves no room for such boasting. The Corinthians have already been taught this lesson (1 Corinthians 1:18-32) The only type of boasting that is allowed is boasting in the Lord. Perhaps no other passage in Paul’s letters makes this clearer than Galatians 6:14: *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.* The cross leaves us nothing to boast about. It is a message of our utter sinfulness and God’s great grace in saving us from that dreadful condition. It is a message that rings with the totally undeserved mercy and kindness of God in sending his Son to die for our sins and to gain victory over sin and death through his resurrection from the dead. Far from being something that we can boast about, it is something that compels us to declare the greatness and glory of our Savior. It is only a boast in him.

All of this leads to a complete rejection of any self-commendation we might attempt. We must look to the Lord alone for our commendation. And this is also something that Paul has already emphasized about his own ministry to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:1-6). We are to look only to God when we want to evaluate the authenticity of our Christian confession and our ministry.