

2 Cor 10:1-6 Waging Spiritual Warfare, part 1

Sadly, summer is just about gone, and our Summer Sermon Series is done. After a 3-month break, we are now ready to get back into our study of 2 Corinthians. We've thus far made our way slowly through the first two major sections of the book, and so now we'll consider the last part.

Just by way of review, we might remember that

- A. Chapters 1-7 focus on the relationship Paul has with the church in Corinth. In these chapters, Paul explains what he's been doing and why he's been doing it.
- B. Chapters 8-9 describe an offering Paul is collecting for the poor saints at Jerusalem. The Corinthian church had agreed to participate in this offering, but they needed some encouragement to fulfill what they had promised. Paul warmly appeals to his readers to be generous in their support for this important project.
- C. In the final part of the letter, Paul defends his ministry and denounces those who opposed him. Some of this material is the most personal writing that we have from Paul in all of Scripture.
- D. Paul's tone changes dramatically in this last part of the book. He transitions from a warm-hearted appeal to a strong and vigorous attack of his enemies. In the first two verses, he uses the word "bold" three times. This gives us a hint about what is to come—a bold, vigorous defense of himself against accusations coming from a small group of false teachers who had infiltrated the church.
- E. The Corinthian church had a number of serious spiritual problems. It was beset by disunity and false doctrine. Some of the members had rebelled against apostolic authority.
- F. In attacking these problems, Paul *saves the worst for the last*; his most severe criticism is in the last part of the letter. In this section of the letter, Paul is ready to wage war against his enemies in the church. He will answer their false charges and expose their error and rebellion.

The first part of chapter 10 deals with spiritual warfare. Note the language here: vs. 3 “war,” vs. 4 “weapons of our warfare,” “pulling down strongholds,” “bringing into captivity.” This is military language. There are distinct parallels between what the Roman military did and what Paul was threatening to do. But what kind of warfare is he talking about? A spiritual battle, and he describes it in military terms.

The main verb in this passage seems to be “we war” (.3). The word (στρατευόμεθα) means “to engage in a military campaign, to fight as a soldier.” In verse 4, he describes this struggle as “our warfare.” So Paul is telling us here how he wages spiritual warfare. He’s ready to fight against the false teachers who had infiltrated the church.

Like Paul, we are engaged in a great spiritual struggle. Our situation is not the same as Paul’s, but we are part of the same war. We have the same goals as Paul. We use the same weapons in this spiritual battle. Hopefully, we don’t have to deal with false teachers; but if we did, Paul gives us an example of how to fight them.

This passage tells us some things about how to wage war in the spiritual struggle for the faith against our spiritual enemies.

This rather short passage, vss. 1-6, contains a great deal of information and application, so we’ll break it down into two parts (I have 20+ pages of notes!).

Let’s consider how we wage spiritual warfare.

I. Wage spiritual warfare with Christlike meekness and gentleness. .1

A. Paul appeals to them personally.

.1 “Now I, Paul, myself...” – As I said, this is a very personal part of the letter. He’s appealing to his readers based on the fact that he’s an apostle and that he himself founded the church. They know who he is. The believers there in Corinth, of all people, should recognize his love for them as well as his authority over them.

1. .1a He’s pleading with or exhorting (παρακαλῶ) them to listen to him.
2. .2a He’s begging or urging (δέομαι) them to listen to him. This is an urgent request/appeal. He is entreating these people gently but with great urgency.
3. He’s appealing to them on the basis of their personal relationship to him. He loves and cares for the people of this church. He desperately wishes that they’d listen to him.

B. Paul appeals to them on the basis of the “meekness and gentleness of X.” He’s trying to be Christ-like in his attitude and behavior toward the church. He mentions two particular attitudes:

1. Meekness (*πραοτητος*) is humility, mildness, or moderation; the opposite of harshness or severity. A meek person is considerate, patient, and gracious—just like Jesus was.

Quote: Meekness is the humble and gentle attitude that expresses itself in patient endurance of unfair treatment. A meek person is not bitter or angry, and he does not seek revenge when wronged.¹

2. Gentleness (*επιεικειας*) is almost synonymous with meekness. Someone defined gentleness as “sweet reasonableness.”² A gentle person is mild, fair-minded, and easy to get along with.

3. When these two words are used together in other ancient literature, the sense seems to be “lenience” or “forbearance.” Paul would like to be gracious and patient with these people and their problems. He’d like to be lenient toward them.

4. Why does Paul make this kind of appeal?

C. .1b – this is likely the accusation some in the church were making against Paul—“When he’s with us, he’s humble and gentle; but when he’s absent, he’s bold and stern. He’s *severe* from a distance but *spineless* up close. He’s bold on *paper*; bashful in *person*.” This is an accusation of weakness or even cowardice that Paul’s enemies were making against him.

Cf. vs. 10—here is the accusation clearly stated. He was timid, fearful, and feeble in person, but strong, bold, and courageous in his letters.

Illus.: We see this today in that people might write something on social media that they would never say in person. It’s easy to fire off a few blistering sentences from the comfort of your own home, knowing that you will never face your adversary in person.

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 2 Co 10:1.

² Matthew Arnold, as cited in *RWP*.

Paul reminds his readers that Jesus himself was meek and gentle. Paul was trying to be Christ-like when dealing with the problems in the church. He was intentionally trying to be kind and lenient when interacting with these people, not strict and severe.

Jesus was very bold and assertive at times, but normally he was meek and mild. Jesus had “all power” at his disposal—he was the Lord of glory—yet normally, he dealt with people in great humility and grace. He was lenient with most people, not severe and strict. He saved most of his severity for the religious hypocrites, not for repentant sinners.

App: Our normal way of dealing with people should be with Christ-like meekness and gentleness. We should strive to be kind and lenient as much as possible, and especially when we are dealing with conflicts. People often respond much better to gentleness and kindness rather than sternness and severity. “You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.” So this should be our default setting—to be humble, gentle, kind, and gracious. These are Christ-like attitudes that we must imitate, especially when dealing with conflict in the church.

All our personal interactions should be marked by humility and good will.

However, sometimes we must ...

II. Wage spiritual warfare with boldness and confidence. .2

Paul wanted to be gentle and lenient, but he was very capable of boldness and sternness. If the meek and mild approach doesn't solve the problem, he can be strict and severe. He's an apostle, and he's not afraid of exercising his apostolic authority over a church that he started. But...

A. .2a He's hoping *not* to be bold and stern when he is with them. He'd rather avoid having to use his authority. He'd rather spare them and spare himself the unpleasant duty of dealing with these problems. He's begging/pleading with them (.1) that they avoid a painful experience.

1. You may recall that he had visited them previously and had a bad experience. Some of the people there had treated him poorly, perhaps disrespectfully, and he had left early rather than cause further conflict. After that, he wrote them a rather severe/stern letter. Now he's writing again, saying that he wants to avoid conflict if possible when he visits them the next time.

2. .2 The *first* word “bold” (θαρρησαι) means to be courageous or firm in the face of danger. He does not want to exercise his courage. He’s begging them to respond properly to him so he won’t have to be firm/severe with them.
3. The *second* “bold” here (τολμάω) is often translated as “dare.” He dares to be bold and courageous if necessary. One thing Paul was not lacking was courage.
4. Why was Paul boldly confident? Because he was an apostle of IX. He had the God-given right to exercise authority over the churches—**read** 10:8, 13:10.
5. Paul would rather be stern and severe on *paper* so that he could be peaceful and gracious in *person*. He did that intentionally; it was not a weakness of character. But if things did not change, he would not hesitate to exercise his authority over the church.
6. In fact, he’s intending to be bold in his actions against the false teachers. He uses three words here (θαρρησαι, πεποιθησει, τολμησαι) signifying boldness, courage, or confidence/daring. So he’s not afraid to confront his opponents.

Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:21 *What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

- B. .2b Who has made this charge against him? “Some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh.” I.e., people in the church who opposed Paul—false teachers, rebels against Paul’s authority.

Perhaps the charges were that Paul was too authoritarian, dictatorial, proud, and inconsistent.³ Ultimately, they are charging him with not living under the control of the Spirit—he “walked according to the flesh.” He’ll answer those charges/accusations in vs. 3.

App: Christlike humility and gentleness does not prohibit us from being bold and firm. If people fail to respond when we approach them in meekness and gentleness, then we have to approach the conflict with boldness, courage, and confidence.

³ Kent, 151.

It would be nice if we never had to confront people boldly and sternly. If we could just say a gentle word and give a hint here and there, and if people would respond appropriately to that kind of interaction, it would be great. But people often don't respond very well to quiet suggestions and mild hints. Some people need a strong, direct, confrontational approach; they need a proverbial 2x4 across the top of the head to get their attention.

False teachers and rebels in particular often require bold and severe rebuke. Paul does not really want to do that, but he's ready to do it if necessary.

We find this theme several times in the Bible:

1Tim 5:20 *Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.*

Titus 1:13 *... rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith;*

Titus 2:15 *These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.*

Sometimes, strong, bold courageous confrontation is necessary.

Illus.: In the book *Caddie Woodlawn*, one part of the story deals with a very badly behaved boy, Obadiah Jones. In the one-room school house, this unruly boy threatens the young, rather timid female teacher. But the teacher gathers her courage and boldly deals with this boy: "She whipped out her ruler, and laid it sharply across that section of Obadiah's person on which he was accustomed to sit." That bold action has an amazing effect on the boy.

Trans: I'm not advocating violence, but I am advocating boldness, courage, and authority when necessary. Spiritual warfare often requires daring, bold action, especially when confronting error and rebellion. It's not easy or fun to confront error that way. But when it's necessary, we have to gather up the boldness and courage we need to confront the enemies of Christ and the Gospel sternly and vigorously.

III. Wage spiritual warfare spiritually. .3-6

A. Paul admits that we "walk in the flesh." .3a

Remember that Paul's critics were accusing him of walking/living "according to the flesh" (vs. 2end). Paul freely admits that he walks "in" the flesh—notice the prepositions here—"in" as opposed to "according to" the flesh.

To walk “in the flesh” simply means that we are in this physical world. We are limited to normal human experiences and abilities. We are “earthen vessels” (4:7), just clay pots, subject to the normal human weaknesses, frailties, and failures. Paul admits that we are living in this present world, with all its limitations.

App: We, like Paul, walk “in the flesh.” We are just as limited and frail as any other humans. We have nothing extraordinary about us. As James says, “We all stumble in many ways.” No one is expecting sinless perfection. We admit that we are limited, frail, fleshly people.

However...

B. We do not wage war “according to the flesh.” .3b

There’s a big difference between doing something “in” the flesh and “according to” the flesh.

We by necessity live in this world—we are “in” the flesh—but we wage warfare differently from this world—we don’t fight “according to” the flesh.

Quote: We may *walk [softly]*, but we [*war*] *strongly*.⁴

Cf. Teddy Roosevelt: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” That was Paul’s strategy—be meek and gentle until you need to be bold and aggressive.

Paul describes this potential confrontation between him and his opponents in military terms—this is a war. This whole section of the letter is full of military language and imagery. There are parallels between typical Roman military maneuvers and spiritual warfare. His language is laced with military metaphors.

1. .3 As I said earlier, the main verb in this section is “we war/we wage warfare.” I.e., we are engaged in a military campaign. He’s describing this spiritual struggle in terms of a military battle or war.

⁴ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 435. Quoting Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 66. Edited.

App: The Christian life is a battle or a struggle. We have spiritual enemies—primarily, the world, the flesh, and the devil. In Paul’s case, his enemies were the false teachers who had infiltrated the church and were leading people astray. Paul is ready to go to war with these spiritual adversaries. He’s not going to tolerate them or allow them to have any influence in the church. His intent is to destroy their false ideas.

Some people claim that the Christian life is more like a luxury vacation or an amusement park rather than like a war. We should expect to live our “best lives now.” We should expect God to make us healthy and wealthy. We should expect God to solve all our problems and make life easy. But Paul asserts here that the Christian life is a war, a series of battles, a continual struggle. And the question is not whether we will engage in war but how we do so. How do we wage spiritual warfare?

2. We don’t wage this warfare “according to the flesh,” i.e., “from a human, worldly perspective.” I.e., like unsaved people, using human resources, using dirty tricks or underhanded tactics, using worldly wisdom or clever methods (1 Cor 1:7; 2:1-4). He does not “war according to the flesh.”

Quote: The follower of Christ cannot allow his conduct to be controlled by the considerations of [convenience] and self-seeking which were characteristic of the unregenerate [world] To revert to [the flesh] is nothing less than an undoing of the gospel.⁵

3. So although we live in this wicked world, we do not fight our battles according to the standards of this world. We are *in* the world but not *of* the world. We fight our battles using God’s methods and standards. We don’t fight our battles using the tactics of the unsaved world.

App: We must be very careful and always on guard not to adopt the world’s way of doing things. The unsaved world often uses methods that are unfair, dishonest, and even illegal. We may be tempted to use those same methods that the world finds so effective, but we must not do that. We must not depend on evil, worldly methods to gain a spiritual victory. We must not conduct spiritual warfare with fleshly weapons.

⁵ Hughes, 349.

Sadly, the evangelical church especially has often employed fleshly, worldly methods to accomplish its goals. Church leaders often observe what the secular world is doing and then import that into the church. They see what's popular, what is attractive, what the world finds entertaining, and then they try to make a Christian version of that. They import the world's values into the church.

Evangelicals in particular are notorious for adopting whatever new fad, craze, or trend that shows up in the popular culture. If the world finds something attractive or entertaining, someone will try to import it into the church with the hopes that it will attract people to Jesus.

Illus.: The film *Jesus Revolution* shows some of the history of the Jesus People Movement from the 1960s and 70s. The film shows how some churches adopted and imported a revolutionary movement—the hippy culture—into the church. They adapted the church to appeal to that subculture. Although there were positive aspects of the Jesus People Movement and many people were saved, it also represented something of a compromise or capitulation of the church to the culture.

Adopting secular methods and standards usually has at least some negative results. Unfortunately, people often are willing to accept changes in the church as long as it brings “success” – people in the pews, money in the offering, greater acceptance in society. But that success often comes at the expense of truth and good order.

We should *not* try to imitate or mimic the unsaved world in the church. That would be an example of using the world's methods and tactics for spiritual purposes. Usually, that does not work out so well. We must not wage spiritual warfare by using fleshly, worldly methods.

Thus far, we've seen that

1. We should approach our battles with meekness and gentleness. We want to be humble and gracious, patient and lenient as much as possible, especially when dealing with conflict. We want to be meek and gentle like Christ.
2. If that kind of approach does not solve the problem, then we need to be bold and assertive. In some cases, a stern and severe approach is appropriate.
3. Ultimately, we wage war spiritually. We live in this human world with its limitations and weaknesses, but we don't approach our battles from a human point of view. We must use the spiritual weapons that God provides, as Paul will discuss in the remainder of this passage.