

2 Corinthians 10:1-11
Isaiah 2
Psalm 42

“Christian Boasting”

June 12, 2016

“The haughty looks of man shall be brought low,
and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled,
and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

Where do you put your confidence?

Do you trust in your wealth or your abilities?

Do you put your confidence in the political process?

(or, for that matter, are you upset because you have now *lost confidence*
in the political process?!

If the current political situation is causing you distress,

then that may indicate that you have put too much trust in the process!)

Isaiah says that “people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground,
from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty,
when he rises to terrify the earth.” (2:19)

Sure, Isaiah was speaking of the coming judgment upon Israel –

“concerning Judah and Jerusalem” –

but as we’ve seen in our Jeremiah series on Sunday evenings,

the destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day

was a picture of the final judgment.

Indeed, the book of Revelation will take up Isaiah’s language

to speak of how people will seek to hide from the final judgment in Revelation 6.

Psalm 42 provides us with a proper approach to boasting in the Lord –

in the midst of trial and difficulty,

in the midst of depression and struggle –

our hope and our trust is in the Lord.

Sing Psalm 42a

Read 2 Cor 10

I want us to think about the context of what Paul is saying.

Paul spent the opening 7 chapters in an extended defense of his ministry –

laying out the character and content of what *Christian ministry* is all about.

The pattern of Christian ministry is found in the cross of Jesus.

From suffering and affliction to comfort and glory.

And the pattern of the cross is demonstrated first in Jesus,

second, in the ministers of the gospel,

and third, in the church of Jesus Christ.

From Christ to us to you.

God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself (5:19).

Paul preaches that the incarnation – where the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – sets the pattern of humility.

And the atonement – “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21)
this is the good news – the gospel –
that God has reconciled the world to himself.

And so Paul urges the Corinthians “*be reconciled to God*” (5:20)

and Paul says that God makes his appeal *through us*
[through Paul and his fellow ministers] (5:20)
since we are *ambassadors* for Christ.

And all of this led up to Paul’s admonition –

warning the Corinthians not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (6:14).

If the people of God are the temple of the living God –
the place where God dwells with humanity –
then we need to live as that new humanity!

We cannot continue living like the old humanity – the idolatrous and corrupt humanity.

We must look different – we must act different – we must *smell* different!

As Paul had said back in chapter 2,

“we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved
and among those who are perishing,
to one a fragrance from death to death,
to the other a fragrance of life to life.” (2:15-16)

And that fragrance – that holiness – is to be expressed in the way that care for one another,
both in our own congregation and around the world.

That’s why Paul spent the last two chapters (8-9) urging the Corinthians
to finish preparing their generous gift for the saints in Jerusalem.

Our first priority is *not* the economic well-being of our city – our country –
but the economic well-being of the saints – our new world-wide family in Jesus.

Now Paul comes back to the theme of boasting and commending.

Back in chapter 1, verse 12, Paul had asserted that their boast was this:

“that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity,
not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.”

Likewise in chapter 3 he spoke of how they were *commending* themselves to the Corinthians,
because the Corinthians were not properly defending them against attacks.

Indeed, in chapter 4, verse 2, Paul says,

“we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word,
but by the open statement of the truth

we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”
And in chapter 5, verse 12 Paul says that they are
“giving you cause to boast about us,
so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance
and not about what is in the heart.”

So having laid out the character and content of Christian ministry,
having said everything else that he wants to say to the Corinthians,
Paul now zeros in on the final thing – the hardest thing – that he needs to deal with.

He needs to address his critics.

It would be so nice to ignore them.
But avoiding conflict is not an expression of love.
Paul has serious pastoral concerns for these people.
He cannot come to Corinth immediately,
but he cannot wait any longer,
so he writes.

And in this final section of 2 Corinthians,
we see an example of how to handle conflict in the church.

We’ll only get through our first two points this morning –
and then we’ll come back to point three next time.

1. In the Flesh, Not According to the Flesh – the Eschatological Foundation of Christian Ministry (v1-6)

And the first thing that we see is the eschatological foundation of Christian ministry.
Paul says that some have accused him of walking according to the flesh.
Namely, that he is just interested in power and control.

But Paul says that they have used the wrong *preposition!*

Paul says that it is true that we walk *in* the flesh.

Of course!

We are still in the body!

But we do not walk *according* to the flesh.

The flesh – our desires and drives, corrupted by sin and misery –
is not the pattern for Christian ministry.

The pattern for Christian ministry is the cross of Christ.

And the cross of Christ (as Paul has already shown in chapters 3-6)
is the eschatological foundation for Christian ministry.

“Eschatological” is a helpful word.

Eschatological means “having to do with the last times.”

The reason why the cross is the eschatological foundation for Christian ministry
is because in Jesus the last-days judgment has already come.

The last days – the end times – the “Day of the LORD” –

has come in Jesus.
In the cross, Jesus has endured the eschatological wrath of God.
The final judgment that *we deserved* was poured out on Jesus.
He bore – in his own flesh – the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin.

And so those who are *in Christ* no longer walk *according to the flesh* –
though we still walk *in the flesh*.

a. Meekness Is Not Weakness (v1-2)

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—² 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.

Notice that Paul shifts into the first person singular.

This is personal.

In so much of this letter, Paul has emphasized the corporate nature of Christian ministry.

But Paul is not going to “hide behind” his traveling presbytery.

At the heart of the controversy in Corinth is Paul himself.

And so Paul will deal openly and straightforwardly regarding that controversy.

In verse 10, Paul quotes directly from those who oppose him.

They say:

*“His letters are weighty and strong,
but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”*

So it is clear that his reference in verse 1 is somewhat ironic:

“I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away.”

Paul entreats them “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” –

which could also be translated “by the leniency and clemency of Christ.”

The first word, “meekness” or “leniency”

is generally opposed in Greek literature to roughness or severity.

“the word describes the virtue of a person who,

through self-mastery, moderation, and flexibility,

can deal graciously with other people in conflict...” (Guthrie, 467)

The second word, “gentleness” can also be translated “clemency.”

It speaks of “the quality of making allowances

despite facts that might suggest reason for a different reaction.” (G, 467)

Paul’s contemporary, Seneca, wrote his treatise “On Clemency” to Emperor Nero,

urging Nero to use “clemency” or “mercy” –

as a means of controlling people.

After all, if you show mercy, you make someone your debtor!

But this only works in certain circumstances.

If a man deserves death for his actions, what will happen if you pardon him?
Some will feel obliged to you – they are now in your debt and will be loyal.
Others simply hate you.

So Seneca urges Nero to use clemency wisely
for the ends of furthering his power.

Now, I mention this because Seneca's brother, Gallio, was prefect in Corinth –
and Paul had come before Gallio during his stay in Corinth! (Acts 18)
And Gallio had exercised clemency and wisdom exactly as Seneca advises,
with the result that the Christians in Corinth were indebted to Gallio!
Sure, maybe *technically*, Christianity was an illegal religion,
but Gallio recognized that there was no threat to Roman authority,
and therefore used clemency to ensure
that the Christians would respect Roman authority.

There are some similarities between Paul and Seneca,
but you can see the importance of the cross in shaping Paul's attitude toward clemency.

Meekness does not mean weakness.

It may look like weakness.

And that's okay!

After all, the meekness of Christ – the mercy of Christ –
took the shape of the cross!

But the cross is *not* the end of the story!

Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead.

If you will not accept the mercy of the cross –

then you will face the judgment of the exalted Savior.

And *both* the mercy and the judgment are exhibited in the ministry of the church.

There is a *boldness* – a confidence – in Paul's ministry
that is rooted in the exaltation of Christ.

And that is why Paul describes spiritual warfare in verses 3-6:

b. Taking Every Thought Captive – Spiritual Warfare by the Word (v3-6)

³ *For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.* ⁴ *For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.*

Jesus is King.

Jesus is the Divine Warrior who has cast down the principalities and powers –
he is the great Son of David who has defeated the demonic Goliath once and for all.

Jesus is King!

And therefore, there *is* an authority – there is a divine power in the church of Jesus.

We walk in the flesh.

We live life in the body.
But we do not wage war according to the flesh.
We do not follow the strategies and patterns of the earthly city.

We do not use fleshly weapons – but that does not mean that there are no weapons!
We do not wage warfare *according to the flesh*.
We do not use the strategies of earthly politics.
But the weapons of our warfare “have divine power to destroy strongholds.”

What does this mean?

Well, in Ephesians 6, Paul describes spiritual warfare in more detail.
And in Ephesians 6, Paul is clear that the *weapon* of our warfare
is the word of God.

Of course, here in verses 5-6, we see the same thing.
What does it mean for Paul to “destroy strongholds”?
“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.”

That’s what Paul has been doing for the last 9 chapters!
Paul is engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of God’s people.
And he believes that the *word of God* is the only weapon that can win this battle.

There are strongholds of unbelief in your heart.
There are patterns of thinking that are disobedient to Jesus.
I say this because these patterns exist in all of us.
And we need the word of God to besiege these ungodly patterns!

This is why I am engaged in preaching a 17 year series on the whole Bible.
And when we finish this 17-year series in another couple years,
I will simply go back and start again.

We *need* to know the Scriptures.

How much time are you spending in reading the Bible?

(And not just reading a chapter for devotions –
but *studying* the word of God?!)

How much time do you spend in listening to the Word of God being preached?

Compare that to how much time you spend watching sports – or listening to music –
or watching movies.

Whose voice is winning the war for your heart?

If all I have is an hour on Sunday, I’m going to lose that one!

You *cannot* grow in grace if you are only spending an hour a week in the Word.

There are too many other voices that you are allowing to have preeminence!

You can easily double your Bible intake by coming back on Sunday evening.

(And that's where we do most of our Old Testament preaching).
And then, through Sunday school, Bible studies, and family worship,
you can double that again.

Our family has not been especially diligent in family worship over the years.
We probably average 2-3 times a week.
But even with our sporadic efforts,
we have read through the Bible as a family
three times over the last dozen years.

Spiritual warfare is not particularly glamorous.
It takes place in the trenches of ordinary life –
taking one bit of scripture and applying it to one bit of life –
gradually learning to reinterpret *your life* in the light of what God says.

But in order to do that – you have to *know* the scriptures!
Get a good study Bible (the ESV Study Bible is excellent).
Get to know the story.
Start with the big narrative – Abraham, Moses, and David –
and then start plugging in the details.
Because this is *your* story!

And there are three things that Paul says in verse 5 that we do by the word:
we destroy arguments,
we take captives,
and we punish disobedience

⁵ *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,* ⁶ *being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.*

Notice how personal this is.
It's not that the "word" does all this by itself.
No, Paul says that *we* do this *by the word*.

First, we destroy arguments – like the siege warfare of the day –
it requires overwhelming force to bring down the fortresses of enemy thought.
If you are constantly bombarded by the *words* of our culture,
then it is no wonder that you are overwhelmed by modern thought!
The arguments and lofty opinions of our day *will win*
if you allow them preeminence in your everyday life.

That's why Paul says that "we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion
raised against the knowledge of God,
and take every thought captive to obey Christ..."

When the stronghold falls – when the fortress is destroyed –
then you take prisoners.

But the prisoners here are *thoughts*.

Paul wants to take your thoughts captive as prisoners of war!

I want to capture your thoughts!

What does this mean?!

Paul has already said in 4:4 that the god of this age has blinded the minds
of the unbelievers.

Paul does not want the Corinthians to be led astray by false teachers.

Jesus is King.

And your thoughts – your heart – your mind –
is the battleground where we preachers wage war.

Do you believe that Jesus is King?

Are you a citizen of his heavenly city?

Then why are you listening to other voices?

Why are you settling for something less than the glory of Jesus?

Why are you pursuing the American Dream?

Why are you focused on stuff and status and pleasure?

It's a poor substitute for the kingdom of God!

I will wage war for your heart!

I want to take your thoughts captive to obey Christ!

And yes, we need to be ready

to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

There will be a dividing line between the faithful and the rebellious.

And Paul says that we will punish every disobedience

“when your obedience is complete.”

In other words, the *time* for punishment is when that dividing line is clearly drawn.

Everyone needs to have a fair chance to obey.

You don't punish disobedience until the proper time.

But Paul is serving notice that even as there will be a judgment day –

when Jesus returns –

even so, in the everyday life of the church,

there is a need for times of judgment.

And Paul explains this in verses 7-11

as he shows how the authority in the church

is nothing less than the authority of Jesus himself.

2. The Authority in the Church Is the Authority of Jesus (v7-11)

a. Remember Whose “We” Are (v7)

⁷*Look at what is before your eyes.*

The opening line of verse 7 might be better translated as a rebuke:

“You are looking at what is before your eyes” –
in other words, “you are focusing on superficial things.”

After all, the following line is clearly a warning:

If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we.

What is Paul dealing with here?

Jeremiah 31 had said that in the new covenant,
“no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and every man his brother,
saying ‘know the Lord’ – for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest...”
Undoubtedly there were some who were using this against Paul –
saying, we belong to Christ – therefore we don’t need to listen to Paul.

If you take Jeremiah 31 to mean that in the new covenant

there will no longer be a teaching ministry,
then Jesus is *not* the promised Messiah,
and the New Testament is simply a pack of lies!

Because the *whole* NT emphasizes the importance of the teaching ministry of the church!

And that teaching ministry is rooted in the apostles themselves.

The apostles’ teaching and ministry is absolutely essential for the church.
(That’s why we say in the creed, “we believe in one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic* church”)
The apostles’ teaching and fellowship (Acts 2) is at the heart of the church.

So anytime anyone says that they wish to dispense with some aspect of the apostles’ teaching,
you *know* that such a one is *not* sent by Christ!

As Paul says in verse 8:

b. The Lord Gave Us Authority to Build You Up (v8)

⁸ 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.

Paul rarely emphasizes his apostolic authority.

He sets the pattern that wise Christian ministers have followed ever since.
Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome from 590-604, said well
that the pastor should treat “the laity that live well” as his equals –
and not exalt himself over them.

Paul had done the same thing.

He recognized that in his own person, he is just one of the faithful.
The only distinction was in his *office* of apostle.

Christ Jesus *gave* him authority to build up the saints.

Or more precisely, Paul speaks of *our* authority.

Because Paul is not speaking here only of *apostolic* authority.

All *ministerial* authority is in view here –

the authority of Paul’s traveling presbytery –

which is the same authority that Christ has given to your session –
your presbytery (the Great Lakes Presbytery).

There is an authority in the church – and particularly in the ministry of the church –
which Christ has given for the edification – for the building up – of the body.

And Paul says that you need to pay attention to those to whom Christ has given this authority.

(But *do remember* what Paul has demonstrated earlier in 2 Corinthians –

this authority is exercised *together*.

It is not a matter of individual authority –

it is not *my* authority –

but *Christ’s* authority,

exercised by the eldership *together*.)

And Paul goes on to add in verses 9-11:

c. Don’t Mistake Meekness for Weakness (v9-11)

⁹*I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters.* ¹⁰*For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”* ¹¹*Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.*

Paul will explain what he means by this in chapter 13, verses 2-4:

“I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent,
as I did when present on my second visit,

that if I come again I will not spare them –

since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.

For we also are weak in him,

but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.”

Some people think that Paul is talking about doing some sort of miracle –

perhaps like what happened with Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts.

That is possible –

but it is important to note that even in the case of Ananias and Sapphira,

it was the *word* that Peter spoke that was powerful.

After all, the *word* of God is powerful

because it is God’s own authority in Christ that is exercised.

In the big picture – in the whole course of your life –

the only way to glory is the way of the cross.

But also in every little picture – in every small situation –

the only way to glory is the way of the cross.

What this means is that there is a proper place for the exercise of Christ's kingly authority now.

But notice where that is:

In the church.

“in dealing with you,” Paul says.

The pattern of Christian ministry is the pattern of the cross.

When we are relating to the world, we simply endure the cross –

showing them that this is what Jesus has done to reconcile the world to himself.

But within the church – when people are refusing to live cross-shaped lives,

when people are embracing the world – being yoked unequally with unbelievers –
that is the time for the *power* of Christ to be exercised in discipline.

When unbelievers live like pagans, we should not be surprised!

We recognize that unbelievers will live according to the flesh!

But when those who call themselves Christians live according to the flesh,

then we must call them to repentance – we must call them to new obedience –
and if they refuse to repent,

then we must give them a foretaste of the final judgment!

The meekness – the clemency – of the cross is the pattern for how we minister in Christ.

But that does *not* mean that we allow the enemies of the cross to take over the church!

Christ *has* given authority to his ministers – to the pastors, elders, and deacons of the church.

And that authority is to be used for the building up of the body.

The church is not a democracy.

For that matter, the church is not a republic.

The elders do not “represent” the people.

The elders and pastors represent Christ.

The church is a monarchy – with Jesus as the only king –
the only head of the church.

The goal of Christ's authority in the church

is the building up of the body.

What does that mean?

The result of the spiritual warfare waged through the ministry of the word

should be that the people of God obey God.

What did Jesus say?

“Make disciples of the nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Where you see a church growing in their obedience to Jesus –

there you see spiritual warfare being practiced according to the Word.