

The Power of Obedience

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 10. We move into the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians, and I know many of you will be vastly disappointed that we move off the topic of money.

It's a bit confusing going into these last chapters for this reason, that there are two audiences. One is the majority of the congregation who were led astray from Paul but have come back in repentance.

And the other are the false teachers, a group who are still present trying to undermine the apostles' work. And as the apostle Paul writes, it's very clever, it's not a popularity contest for Paul between him and those teachers who are there.

He's about to go and visit them, and it's not a competition. He's not worried about his image. The issue, as you'll see, is far deeper, far more serious. It's the issue of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself. And just to remind you, what was so attractive about the false teachers is that they embodied the Corinthian social, cultural values and customs of the day.

[1 : 13] They were, well, let's look at two little texts which show us a little about them. Just go back to chapter 5, verse 12 for a moment. Back on page 966.

The apostle says, We're not commending ourselves, this is 512, we're not commending ourselves to you again, but 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 these new teachers were physically very impressive. And they said, Paul isn't. And that just, I mean, that resonated in Corinth.

Do you know, in the literature of the day, Corinth is called the city of beautiful people. Really. They had spas and baths and plenty of places you could display your physical beauty.

And what the false teachers taught was, that's what it's about. And God wants us, it's his will for us now to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous. Let's go to chapter 11.

[2 : 19] And there's a whole bunch of things here about the false teachers. Let me just pick one of them, which is a bit of a surprise. Chapter 11, verse 20. He says to the congregation, You bear it.

If someone makes slaves of you or devours you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or strikes you in the face. Now, what is that about?

Well, in those days, Greek public speakers were one of the primary sources of entertainment in the Corinthian context.

And the way that they gained entertainment is they'd take some disciples with them. And when they were speaking out in the public square, they would encourage their disciples to get into a brawl with the disciples of other speakers.

And the best thing you could possibly do is actually to get into a brawl with the other speaker yourself. Now, that really drew crowds. Believe it or not, it's a little like ultimate fighting, ultimate preaching out in the marketplace.

[3 : 24] And there's record of speakers whacking people on the face. And the false teachers were doing that. And the Corinthians sort of thought, well, this is a good and strong way to preach.

And can I say, Dan has been very tempted with it. So, through these last four chapters, Paul distinguishes you as the larger congregation.

And some people, some who say, are the false teachers. And what's very, it's amazing is that Paul never writes to the leaders at Corinth as he does in other letters.

He goes straight past the leadership and goes to the congregation because the ultimate responsibility for whether the gospel is being preached and the Bible faithfully taught in a church lies with the congregation.

You should know that. And one of the most remarkable things about this letter, as we've seen again and again, is that the criticisms and accusations against the apostle are not religious.

[4 : 25] They're cultural. They're social. They reflect the prejudices of the day. And we've seen again and again how the apostle, he doesn't just reply angrily, bashing them and overwhelming them.

But what he does is he takes every accusation and everything he possibly can to the cross of Jesus Christ. And when he takes it to the cross of Jesus Christ, the cross turns it upside down.

We saw that with suffering. We saw it with weakness. We've seen it with money. We've seen it in all sorts of ways. And here in chapter 10, the apostle faces two particular criticisms and the way he deals with them is to show how subversive the power of Jesus Christ is to both these criticisms. Now, in many countries, if you are subversive, you'll end up in prison. As subversive means you want to overthrow the established order.

But the preaching of Jesus Christ in the Christian gospel, when it comes with the power of the Holy Spirit, is always subversive. Maybe not primarily politically subversive at first, although it will happen, but primarily spiritually subversive.

[5 : 46] And the chapters, I've divided in half at the end of verse 11. And the first half is about the subversive power of Jesus' humility. And then the last section from 12 onwards is about the subversive power of Jesus' approval.

So let's look at these two things together. Firstly, then, the subversive power of Jesus' humility, verses 1 to 11. And as it was read, you can see that the first accusation the apostle faces is basically that he's a two-faced weakling.

He only has the courage to say what he really means when he's at a safe distance writing letters, but when he comes, he's full of weakness and gentleness. And the false teachers say, we know he brought the gospel to you, but come on.

He's just using, he's just using this whole grace language to cover his own feebleness. We can show you how to have spiritual power. Don't give any more money to him.

Give it to us because we'll show you how to get ahead. Just, I'm putting it in modern parlance. Look at the way Paul brings out these accusations directly and indirectly.

[6 : 59] In verse 1, in the second half, Paul says, I, Paul, who am humble when face to face with you, but bold when I am away, exclamation mark. That's what they're accusing him of.

In chapter 2, sorry, verse 2, at the end of the verse, he says, some suspect us of walking according to the flesh. They say Paul's ministry is just skin deep, it's superficial, there's no real power, there's no punch, there's no performance in it.

And perhaps most directly in verse 10, he kind of quotes them. In verse 10, he says, they say, quote, his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account.

Yes, his letters, oh, they're frightening. But, you know, when he's with us, he's just so easy to ignore. He doesn't seem to know how to draw a crowd or how to dominate.

And if you add to this the fact that in the Greek culture, humility was not a virtue. They despised humility.

[8 : 08] Put yourself in Paul's shoes, what do you do? What do you do with that accusation? Do you write a really blistering letter? Because as soon as you write a blistering letter, they're going to say, you see, he's strong when he's away but weak when he's here.

So what Paul does is this. He takes aim at what is behind all this and it is pride, pure and simple. And he shows how the humility of Jesus Christ overthrows and overturns pride. And he begins the whole section speaking about Jesus.

It's very interesting. He begins and ends the section with Jesus. Look how he starts chapter 10 in verse 1. This whole section begins here. I, Paul, myself entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

He is talking about the powerful Son of God. The Son of God who could walk on water, change water into wine, who could heal the sick, who could raise the dead. But you know, throughout Jesus' ministry, there's only one time when he reveals or he speaks about what is in his heart and what his heart is like.

[9 : 18] Do you remember it? Matthew 11. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn for me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and

you will find rest for your souls.

He's the Lord of heaven and earth. He will be the judge of the living and the dead, but his heart is full of meekness and gentleness. He has all authority in heaven and earth, but how does he use his authority?

His authority is used to raise up those who are heavy laden. To all of us who feel like we are bruised reeds, he strengthens us. Look at Jesus in his ministry.

This is exactly what he does. He does not bypass the individual. Have you ever thought about how he treats Judas? He treats Judas with gentleness and kindness, knowing he's going to betray him. And when they come to arrest him in the garden, he could easily call on ten legions of angels to come and protect him, but he says to Peter, put away your sword, and then he heals the ear of the servant that Peter has chopped off.

And as he's being nailed on the cross, he prays for the guys who are nailing him there and he says, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. He is gentle and he's lowly in heart.

[10:39] But here's the thing. We must not mistake meekness for weakness because meekness means having power but using it for what is good for others.

And no sooner has Paul explained a little bit about the meekness of Jesus Christ when he says the meekness of Christ is at war with pride.

Look down at verses four to six, please. Actually, look at verse three. 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. We destroy arguments, every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Christ. The meekness and gentleness of Jesus Christ is conducting a campaign. It's waging war on pride and everything we raise up against the knowledge of God because it's only through humility, both Christ's and ours, that we come to a true knowledge of God.

[11:58] Now, that is true of pride generally but here the Apostle Paul is speaking about religious pride and we have religious pride, you know, you can have denominational pride or you can have theological pride or you can have pride in Christian experience.

I mean, take denominational pride for example. You know, we should be thankful for the Anglican heritage that we're in but once you start to begin to feel superior to others and it becomes a source of pride, then you start to think to yourself, Lord, I thank you that I am not a Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Baptist, whatever.

That's a stronghold or take theological pride. I thank you, Lord, that I am not a fundamentalist. I thank you, Lord, that I am not a liberal.

I'm not like them because I have a generous, thoughtful, integrated faith that's open to new things and I go to a Bible studying church that's not wishy-washy and takes a stand on certain issues. What's going on at Corinth and what's going on at St John's and what's going on in every church is that the meekness and gentle of Jesus Christ in the gospel is at war with all forms of spiritual pride and it destroys the lofty opinions that we build up about ourselves because what we do is, you see, we build those lofty opinions as a way to protect ourselves from God, protect our brittle and insecure hearts.

[13:31] We do it all the time. There are areas that we fortress and say to God, it's off limits, sorry. We build towers, high towers. I mean, the last three weeks we've been talking about finances.

Finances can become an area of spiritual pride where we hold God away. Family, the precious gift of family. You can say to God, I'm going to do this my way, I'm not going to do it, I'm not going to even allow you access to it.

Retirement, career, friendships, sexuality. But the apostle says that it is the humility of Christ that can shatter those high towers because at the cross, the place of the greatest humility and the greatest meekness of Jesus, Christ takes us captive and leads us in triumphal procession.

And this humble Lord cannot be Lord without it impacting our lives. You know, Jesus' attitude is not the Canadian attitude of live and let live. He will be Lord.

He will bring everything under his rule. How does it work? Well, we get an idea of how it begins to work in verse 7. He says, look at what's before your eyes.

[14:41] If anyone's confident that he's Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so are we. This is brilliant. The cross of Jesus Christ brings a radical equality.

It means, it changes forever how we think about ourselves and how we think about other people. If you claim to follow Jesus Christ, you stand on exactly the same ground as every other Christian does.

And it completely undermines all the grounds that we try and build our proud distinctions on. If you're new to Christianity, you may be interested to know, there's no first class Christians and second class economy, whatever.

There's no frequent flyer, platinum, gold, inner circle Christians. We're all the same.

We're all struggling the same way. And the way we are conquered by Christ's meekness is surrendering our pride to the one who died for us because every single one of us came to Christ on our knees.

[15:43] We all had to get down. We've all understood what repentance and faith is. We've all entered by the narrow door. And if that has happened and we've received the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, you look at yourself and you look at other people differently.

But the purpose of the meekness and humility of Christ is not negative. It's not just destructive. It is to build up. Christ doesn't want us to grovel before him.

He wants to build us up. And you see in verse 8, that's exactly what Paul says. The authority the Lord has given me is for building you up and not destroying you. You see, the weapons of the spiritual war, and there are many of them, there are just two mentioned in this chapter, the weapons of war do destroy strongholds, but they don't destroy people.

The only way to build people up is for us to tear down, is for Christ to destroy the anti-God pride that we have. It's a beautiful picture. Building up, it's this, it's from house construction, strengthening walls, stopping leaks, and that's what we're meant to do with each other.

That's why, in case you don't know, that's why we come to church. We come to church to be built up in our most holy faith and to build up others. And if you say, I'm not really a good enough Christian to build up others in their faith, then you don't believe verse 7 in the radical equality of Christians.

[17:15] Or if you say, I've got so many lofty towers in my heart, I couldn't be of any use, I'd be a harm to anyone else. There's a very easy solution to that. But don't you find that it's when you seek to build up others, your own lofty, stronghold high towers become obvious and theirs as well.

And then we both call on Jesus Christ to help us with his meekness and gentleness. And I think, you know, if we finish the sermon there, it'd be very disheartening.

Because the question I have now is, how do I deal with my pride? And how do I practically build up others? It's one thing to talk about the subversive power of Jesus' humility.

What do I do? Do I try harder? Be humble? Be humble? Be humble? That's why the second half of this chapter is so important. It belongs to the first half and they're not complete without each other.

Because the key weapon at the center of the gospel is not just the humility of Jesus, but the approval of Jesus. And so we move to the second point. Verses 12 to 18, the subversive power of Jesus' approval.

[18:27] And Paul here moves from spiritual pride to social pride. It takes very careful reading. It's full of the language of social status, honor, social worth, where you stand on the Corinthian ladder of status.

Thirteen times he uses words of measurement, how we measure ourselves and measure each other. Now, I think this works a little bit differently in our day today.

There's no one agreed standard of honor apart from money in our culture today. And I think it generally is career specific. So if you're an engineer, the markers of status are different than if you're in medicine.

If you're a teacher, they're different than if you're in sales or technology or hospitality or arts. Do you know, there are even markers of status in ministry. Did you know that?

Dan Gifford is a higher ranking minister than I am. He is an archdeacon. He is the reverent venerable, the venerable reverent archdeacon Gifford.

[19:39] And he's become a pain in the neck, frankly. He's not really. In Corinth, this was a massive issue because there was a strong feeling fed by the false teachers that the apostle Paul had gone beyond his social limits.

There was a sort of agreed feeling. He's stepping out of his place. He doesn't have anything to commend himself. Again, what does the apostle do?

He doesn't stand up on his high horse and says, you have absolutely no idea. I was part of the elite. I've got more education than the bunch of you put together. No, no, he doesn't do that. He won't play the game.

What he does is he brings Jesus Christ to bear on social status. And as he does so, he exposes and subverts the basic measurement of the Greek honor system, the basic metric.

Look at verse 12, please. not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who are commending themselves. When they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

[21 : 01] This is very important. The word commend is a key word in Greek culture. That's why the false teachers brought letters of commendation. The word literally means true substance, having the right stuff, looking in the eyes of others that you've gained approval.

And the Apostle Paul says in verse 12, there's just one problem with that, it's the horizontal metric. Every culture is a closed system and if you're just comparing yourself with each other, there's no real substance to your honor.

The sense of approval that you have if you just get it from others has no weight to it. That's why he says there without understanding, there's no measurement stick by which you can have honor and commendation that way.

And it's like the old story which I understand Aaron Roberts told here some months ago about the battleship that's going through the water at night, if you remember it just phase out for a minute.

And the report comes to the captain, there's a light on the starboard bow and the captain asks down, is it stationary or is it moving and it's stationary so the captain immediately orders his signalman to signal the other ship.

[22 : 19] He says, we're on a collision course, we advise you to change your course 20 degrees east. And the response comes back, you change your course 20 degrees west. And the captain signals back, I am ship's captain, you change your course 20 degrees east.

And the response comes back, I am a second class seaman, you still better change your course 20 degrees. The captain says, I am a battleship, change courses.

And the response comes back, I am a lighthouse. So the captain changes course. See, we were made for approval and we all seek approval from something, we all want something to tell us we are worth.

But what we need is approval grounded on solid rock. We need the approval of God. And verse 13 is not very easy to translate, but that's what it's about.

I'd read it to you literally if you just looked at it. He is talking about the fact that there is a place where we know of God's commendation, the substantial approval of God.

[23 : 47] It is the cross of Jesus Christ where he became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. God. Because at the heart of the Christian faith is the word of approval from God.

There is commendation from God. He's taken so much time. Did you notice chapters 2 to 7, the radioactive heart of 2 Corinthians is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And because Jesus has died for you and me and because he's risen again, we can say there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He's placed his spirit within us.

We call God our heavenly father. And that means that we don't look at ourselves or each other from a purely human point of view as we did once with Jesus. There's a different evaluation metric.

There's a different rock for us to look to for approval. It is the approval of God. And that is profoundly subversive for all markers as social status.

[24 : 47] The cross of Jesus Christ just levels everything. You know, if we are saved through the cross of Jesus Christ, all of us are equally undeserving of God's grace.

He does not give his approval through the usual social measurements, but through Christ, irrespective of where you stand in the honour rankings in your culture. So what Jesus does, what God has done in Christ, it upsets every social estimation of true worth.

It calls into question the very cultural estimations that we live in. It gives us a different reference point, which has really come from heaven, that is Jesus himself.

And that's why he finishes with this great sentence of relief in verse 18. It's not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

This is great. none of us live outside the social perceptions and measurements of our culture. You just can't do it. It's like we're fish in water all the time.

[25 : 59] But when we hear the word of God's approval from the gospel, it doesn't suddenly throw off all our desire for social approval. You don't become immune to what other people think.

But we begin to try and live out the reality of the cross of Jesus Christ in the midst of our social context. And as we believe it more and more, it erodes the fear and anxiety that social perception creates in every single one of us.

That's why we need to come back to Jesus Christ again and again. We need to hear the word of commendation and approval again and again and again. We've heard it, I suppose, a dozen times in the service already.

And it reminds us that all our horizontal comparisons, which we do all the time, they one day will bow the knee to God's estimation.

And that the ground of our true evaluation and our true worth and our true honour is Jesus Christ. It's not our achievements. It's not our social standing. So here are two subversive weapons.

[27 : 06] One is the humility of Christ and the other is the approval of Christ. And the Christian life is a daily growing deeper in grasping both of those things.

It's transferring our trust from all the things that are horizontal onto Jesus Christ himself. There is great power in the humility and the approval of Christ.

And I just point out to you as we finish, as you read chapter 10, what's under threat. It's not Paul. It's not the gospel. It's the spiritual and social pride of Corinth that's really under threat as is ours today. And so we say, thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift. Amen. Amen. Amen.