

The Power of Obedience

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[0 : 0 0] As advertised, we continue in the Corinthian correspondence today, specifically the second letter, chapter 10.

It begins, as we've just heard, 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.

So he begins. Pausing here is of value. Paul entreats, he says here, he entreats, he asks for serious attention.

And he asks this by the meekness and the gentleness of Christ. The apostle appears here quite familiar with the, what shall we call it, the remembering tradition, which came to expression in Matthew's Gospel, famously chapter 11, where, as you know, the Lord says to the church, to us all, to his contemporaries, come to me, for I am meek and gentle of heart.

This is not an idle invoking of the Lord of both Paul and the Corinthian church. We can be sure of that. By the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

[1 : 3 8] No. Paul does not state here merely a fact, obviously, does he? A bit of information for them. Language as it's been put outside the world and asserting a way about the world.

No, again, this is language in a particular mode. It's good to note this right off the bat in this chapter. Paul often does this kind of thing.

It's a way of words, if you will. This is now called by linguists and philosophers of language. I've always found it so very helpful. This is now called performative language.

This is not language, again, for information, but a language which intends to bring about change. Yes. Yes. Yes. The chapter is at a very deep level, and this is quite obvious, isn't it?

The chapter is about change. We must move on into this chapter, but we should remember this as we go through it. Paul wishes to change things in the Corinthian church.

[2 : 5 2] The great John Henry Newman said, To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. Surely that is true.

The Corinthian church, like all churches in a measure, perhaps like our own church, needs to hear a message of change on a regular basis.

Indeed, a message of transformation. I entreat you. I, Paul, myself, by the meekness and the gentleness of Christ.

He entreats us, does he not? He entreats us this morning, the great apostle to the Gentiles. Yes. Our American cousins.

I'll bet you've noticed this. Our American cousins are in the midst of an election. I don't know if you've noticed that. And it is a kind of pleasure, perhaps a perverse pleasure.

[4 : 0 1] I'll confess to you that I indulge in it frequently. A perverse pleasure to watch the rhetorical scheming of it all. We do a bit of this in Canada, too, during elections.

And one principle always at work in this business is simple. Of course, we all know this. Put your opponent on the defensive. Do it all the time.

Frequently. It's good for them, Amy. Put them on the defensive. Force them to explain themselves. In politics, alas, as in much of life, when you are explaining, it's been said, you are losing.

Paul has opponents in Corinth, as we know. But the whole letter's about. It's what motivated the letter. He has opponents there. And some in the church and others, it would appear, traveling teachers desire to challenge Paul.

To put him on the spot. There are many guesses about these teachers. Some perhaps thought Paul was lacking in a subtle knowledge of the law. Or he was lacking in signs of authority, is more clear here.

[5 : 16] He is indeed under suspicion, Paul. He's been called worldly, apparently, in Corinthian circles. A man in the flesh, as Paul says here.

So his opponents accuse him. Paul, you are a crafty fellow. We hear it in the reading.

You raise our suspicions, Paul. You are humble when present. Yeah, that's nice. But then when you write us a letter, you're kind of weighty and strong. Talking out of both sides is out of your mouth, aren't you, Paul?

A bodily presence is commented on. Apparently, the apostle to the Gentiles was not at all impressive. End your speech, Paul, is rather meager. This sounds like a debate, an election, doesn't it?

Would super apostles, who are mentioned in the next chapter, these guys thought of themselves apparently as super apostles. Would they want you in their club, Paul?

[6 : 16] Well, it's unlikely. So again, Paul is asked to explain himself. And the chapter is about Paul beginning to explain. With some reluctance, you feel that in the text.

It's in the tone. That is quite evident here. With some sadness, this should not really be necessary. But yes, the apostle of Jesus Christ answers.

And he answers with power, I think we can safely say. He answers more precisely with a promise of power. His future presence in Corinth, and Paul is anticipating a visit to Corinth fairly soon apparently.

He will now re-describe, and he's going to do this when he arrives in person. He's going to re-describe the authority of an apostle, what it looks like.

So he writes in anticipation of his visit. He writes again to describe, to re-describe apostolic authority, what it really looks like.

[7 : 22] We are not waging war, he says, according to the flesh. A direct contradiction of what he's been accused of. He begins here. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, he says, but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

What words those are. What a rhetorician Paul is. Does it startle us to hear the Lord's apostle describe his authority in terms of waging war?

Not a worldly war, he says right away. Not in the flesh, some Pauline language there that we're familiar with. But nevertheless, he calls it a war.

A war with weapons, divine power weapons, if you will, which destroy strongholds. Strongholds. These strongholds, he immediately describes, tells us, are arguments.

They are lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God. In our time, I think we can look into this just a moment here as we look at Paul here in 2 Corinthians 10.

[8 : 34] In our time, certainly in our culture, such language causes a measure of alarm. I'm sure you've heard it from friends, relatives, others. Why war?

Why weapons? Why strongholds? Why these metaphors of conflict? In our time again, this is a lively issue.

Is the one Paul serves coercive? Is he dangerous? Is he perhaps hostile to peace? What is this war language all about?

These are not trivial questions. And the church must become gracious and wise in response to these kinds of questions these days. Because religion is questioned in our culture, isn't it?

Christianity in particular. It's a popular literature in our culture right now. Is religion cause wars? Is Christianity a warlike religion?

[9 : 35] Paul is indeed in conflict with a segment of the Corinthian church. And as he says here, he uses, he will use weapons of divine power.

Again, he promises to use them when he arrives in person. But here's why looking at that opening bit of the chapter is so important.

Already, Paul has revealed the nature of these weapons and the kind of purpose they're used for. Yes, in this passage, he entreats.

It is in the spirit of the one who is meek and gentle of heart that he entreats. As he says in this passage, he wants to build up, not to tear down.

It's interesting to notice this. I just did notice this this past week as I was looking at this passage. Paul here, it seems to me, follows his Lord very closely.

[10 : 37] In Matthew 11, referred to earlier, the source of that glorious invitation, come to me, come to the one who is meek and gentle of heart.

In that very chapter, you'll recall, the Lord speaks to the great conflicts in Israel during his ministry.

Conflicts regarding recognition, which is really the same thing as a conflict regarding authority. Who is John the Baptist?

Matthew 11 raises that question. Who is the one that he reveals to Israel? And there, again, as you recall, the meek and gentle one says, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force.

Apparently, our Lord teaches, and I think Paul echoes him here in 2 Corinthians 10. There is no easy road to truth, you know. It's not really possible to get at truth easily.

[11 : 53] No. Why is the kingdom subject to force? Why do the violent take it by force?

It's because we, people, build strongholds. We love lofty opinions that hide us from the truth.

Our God is not coercive. Never. He beckons. He is meek and gentle in the person of Jesus. But he knows that if you want to get at truth, you have to take on a kind of violence.

You've got to sacrifice to know truth. There are strongholds in us, lofty opinions in us, that will hide us from the gospel.

Our God, again, is never coercive. Kevin Van Heuser says in defining the Trinity, the well-being of the other. This is revealed by God as Trinity.

[12 : 58] The well-being of the other is constitutive of the identity of God. God always comes to you wishing, working for your well-being.

He is not a coercive presence. He, our Lord, approaches in meekness and gentleness, he says. He appears to give us rest, the perfect Sabbath rest of the seventh day of the creation.

And in like manner, Paul would approach a troubled church. He does not coerce Paul, but he persuades.

The question of tolerance or intolerance, writes a theologian familiar with interfaith discussion in our time, the question of tolerance or intolerance is a matter of attitude, not of truth claims.

Something to keep in mind. In our time, we need the meekness of doves, the wisdom of serpents to address these things. Paul, it seems to me, exhibits this here in this passage wonderfully.

[14 : 15] So, Paul has begun his defense in the face of these accusations, hurled at him. He says, I am in a war. My weapons have divine power.

I entreat you. I entreat as in Christ, in meekness and gentleness. We move on here.

Paul's next word is a word of caution. And it could not be, again, simpler, at least on its surface. He speaks of those who challenge his authority as an apostle again.

And he says, and here Paul goes, if you will, on the offensive. We, he says, is that the royal we or his apostolic circle?

We, he says, will not compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by one another, he says, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

[15 : 27] A blunt word, but it's apparently necessary for some at Corinth to hear this. Since Paul uses war metaphors, if you, and in this passage, it might be appropriate to use one now in exposition very simply.

Paul now, it seems to me, is laying a bomb, if you will, under the arguments of his opponents. Those demanding, again, that Paul explain himself in his ways.

He says here, I do not compare myself with others. No, I do not do that. He says, do you recall, God assigned to me a task.

Indeed, he calls it an area of influence. Paul always knew himself, of course, the apostle to the Gentiles. He'd been assigned that broad ministry.

And then Paul says, I will measure myself by my response to this commission, not by comparing myself with others.

[16 : 38] It seems like such a simple word. I'm sure there's deep wisdom in that. Was it Soren Kierkegaard who said, it is always evil to compare. To compare yourself with others, what they, their gifts.

Why do I have this? They don't have that. As if we're challenging the very providence of God and his way. We must never compare. God gives us a calling.

We measure ourselves by our response to his call. Paul then says, I reached you first with the gospel.

He means in obedience to my call. Look, he says, at what is before your eyes. I wonder if some at the Corinthian church at this point began to feel very uneasy.

The more sensitive amongst them probably hung their heads in shame. We have been doubting the one who brought us the gospel of Christ.

[17 : 48] A bad thing to do. No. I will not boast beyond limits, Paul says, but I will boast of this in your presence.

I brought the gospel to you. I brought it to you. And in summarizing, Paul says, let the one who boasts, quoting the prophet Jeremiah here, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord, not by comparison with others.

That is foolishness. Yes, the demolition of his opponent's arguments is well underway here. For sure. their lofty appraisal of him.

Oh, Paul is so insignificant. It's about to fall if it hasn't already fallen. The wisdom of the apostle does that kind of thing, tears down arguments and high things.

But Paul, of course, has a deeper purpose to unfold. I think I can call it deeper. And don't miss the next couple of Sundays. If you've read on in Corinthians, if I may put it this way, the really exciting stuff starts to happen.

[19 : 07] They gave me the prologue here. I won't compare myself with the future preacher. I hope I'm not. Paul has a deeper undermining of his opponents about to be unleashed, if you will.

He will now take every thought captive, he says, to obey Christ. You can sort of be half a follower of Jesus, but there's further growth to happen.

So, I can't just say that and leave it there, can I, as we head towards our conclusion, just a little anticipation of what's coming, just an outline, the clergy will allow this.

He will describe, as you know, in the next chapter, apostolic ministry as humiliation. To be an apostle of Christ, your calling card is humility.

You become nothing as a servant of Christ. It's like being, as he summarizes that passage, which we'll hear from next week, it's a little bit like being let down in a basket over a wall in Damascus.

[20 : 22] It's ludicrous work. It's nothing to be proud of, except in the Lord. Yes. And then, later, we'll hear about the same man caught up into the third heaven, hearing things which man may not utter.

a life which repeats always in the life of an apostle and in the life of a Christian. It could be likened to baptism.

At Learner's Exchange, we're going to hear about baptism this morning. You know, dying with Christ and being raised with him, it couldn't be simpler. Let down in a basket, raised up into heaven.

There's a narrative picture of the Christian life. So, the Lord's apostle continues to entreat, as we conclude.

He continues to entreat his Corinthian congregation. Again, as we said at our opening, it's all about change. Paul wanted to change the Corinthian church.

[21 : 33] Did the change Paul longed for come about? Do you think we could speculate about that? Just a bit. The transformation, the restoration that he prays for right at the end of this epistle.

The best clue we have, is it not, perhaps it's the most optimistic clue, is before our eyes today. Paul's letter evidently survived.

We have it in front of us today. It was, we may surmise, in time, treasured. probably by the Corinthian church itself.

And the church of Jesus Christ continues to treasure its teaching. It is so wise in the things of the gospel. Every little moment of it seems to me wise, very wise.

Paul is still, of course, an object of controversy in the church. Things never change, do they? still there are some who arise in the holy catholic church who seek to denigrate Paul.

[22 : 41] In my time, I've heard it often. Oh, Paul, let's put him aside, who seek to set aside his witness. Some churches won't read passages from Paul.

Imagine, that may have gone on in Corinth. It's going on today in the church. But the church itself, when it's faithful, the spirit over time will not allow this to really happen.

The gospel shines here. The very fragrance of Christ is here. The meekness and the gentleness of Christ is here. Dying and behold we live is a great moment.

Paul describes the Christian life. Was that Paul's watchword, his motto? Something like that must have been, surely. Do we not see it at work here as he writes to the Corinthian church?

As indeed his witness survives by means of the spirit to St. John's Vancouver this morning. Dying and behold we live.

[23 : 55] May it be so with us always. Dying and behold we live. Thanks be to God.