EVERY THOUGHT OBEDIENT TO CHRIST

(Spiritual Warfare I)

2 Corinthians 10:1-11:15

Key Verse: 10:5

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

In chapters 8-9 Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to participate in the grace of giving for the sake of spiritual unity between the Jerusalem Church and the Gentile churches. In doing so, he explained the meaning of offering in relation to the grace of Jesus and in terms of the character of God who makes us rich so that we can be generous and a blessing.

Now, in chapters 10-12, Paul defends his apostleship against the false charges brought by the false apostles. False apostles tried to destroy the work of God in Corinth by discrediting Paul and the gospel he preached. So Paul could not but defend his apostleship to defend the work of God in Corinth. In making his defense, Paul fights like a spiritual general against the spiritual forces of evil. There are many kinds of warfare: military conflicts between nations, psychological warfare, economic warfare, political warfare, internet warfare, and domestic warfare between husband and wife, and so on. However, we can categorize that there are two kinds of warfare: human warfare and spiritual warfare. Paul engages in spiritual warfare to defend the flock of God’s sheep in Corinth and to render glory to God. In this passage Paul tells what kinds of weapons he fights with, and what the target is, and how to discern the true nature of the spiritual conflict. May God give us spiritual discernment and equip us to engage in this spiritual warfare and win the victory.

I. Weapons of spiritual warfare (10:1-6)

Look at verse 1. “By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am ‘timid’ when face to face with you, but ‘bold’ when away!” Paul had served God’s flock with the meekness and gentleness of Christ. He did not raise his voice or try to exercise authority harshly, but was tender and compassionate like a mother. So he was misunderstood. Some people criticized him for being ‘timid’ in face to face meetings but ‘bold’ when writing letters from a distance. Verse 10 says, “For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speech amounts to nothing.’” They saw Paul from a human point of view, not God’s point of view. They did not know how much Paul struggled to imitate the meekness and gentleness of Christ. In the world, “survival of the fittest” is the rule and “only the strong survive.” The weak and sick and sinners are despised and ignored and cannot survive in this society. They are crushed and have wounds and scars in their hearts that came from the oppression of the strong. Jesus, who is the Son of God, the Almighty Creator, came into the world as a human being and understood our weaknesses and embraced us with compassion. Jesus healed the sick and bound up the brokenhearted. Jesus did not condemn sinners who are weak and helpless. Jesus was full of compassion toward weak people. Finally Jesus forgave all of our sins and gave us a chance to live a new life. In a word, Jesus did not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick (Mt 8:17; 12:20). Jesus invited the weak and weary to find rest in him (Mt 11:28-29). However, Jesus was also strong and courageous in dealing with those who opposed the gospel ministry. Once, in rebuking the religious leaders of Israel, Jesus said, “You snakes! You brood of vipers!” (Mt 23:33a) Paul wanted to imitate Jesus. In the past Paul had been a Pharisee who was strong and legalistic. He was far from being compassionate and merciful and meek. But after meeting the Risen Christ he struggled hard to imitate Christ, especially his meekness and gentleness. However, when Paul fought against God’s enemies he was like a prowling lion, ready to pounce on the prey (Ac 13:7-11). In this way Paul became both meek and gentle, and also courageous and bold. In fact, Paul was concerned that he might have to be bolder than he wanted to be when he visited the Corinthians.

Look at verse 2. “I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.” Some people thought that Paul was a coward who would do nothing while present with them but who was threatening in his letters from a distance. Paul was prepared to be bold and decisive when he came to visit the Corinthians. However, Paul would not wage war the way the world does (3). Paul would engage in spiritual warfare. Paul knew that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). In verses 4-6 Paul explains what the weapons of spiritual warfare are and how to fight.

Look at verse 4. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” In this verse Paul draws a contrast between the weapons he fights with and the weapons of the world. The weapons of the world are boasting, deception, pretension, a rebellious spirit and a disobedient heart. The root of all these is pride that exalts oneself to dominate others, tear them down and enslave them. That is why Augustine said that pride is the root of man’s sin. Romans 1:21a says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him….” On the other hand, Paul’s spiritual weapons were that he depended on God’s power and shared only the truth of God (11:7,10; 13:8), love for others that built them up (5:14; 10:8; 11:11; 13:10), and sacrifice in order to serve others (11:7). Underlying all of these was humility (10:1, 13, 17-18). This humility was derived from Jesus (Php 2:5-8). Once people asked Augustine what was the qualification of God’s servant. He said, “The first is humbleness. The second is humbleness. The third is humbleness.” Proud people try to live by themselves without God. They want to pile up their own ideas which are against the knowledge of God. They are disobedient to God. They argue against God’s truth. They try to rationalize their thoughts and actions by constructing their own belief systems, such as theories of evolution that deny God’s existence. In that way they try to build up strongholds from which they can spread their ideas throughout the world. If one is caught by their forces, he or she cannot get out of it by their own power. We need divine power in order to demolish such strongholds. That is why Paul said in verse 4b, “On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”

Paul went on to say in verse 5a, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God….” Not only did Paul demolish strongholds, but he said in verse 5b, “…and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.” Paul helped people to repent of their pride and selfishness and to surrender their lives to Christ. Paul helped them to get rid of their rebellious spirit and to be submissive to Christ’s Lordship. Paul helped them to repent of their disobedient heart and to have an obedient heart toward Christ’s words so that they would make every thought obedient to Christ. How could such a work be done? One must be equipped with God’s weapons. In his epistle to the Ephesians (6:14-18), Paul described these spiritual weapons well: “...the belt of truth...the breastplate of righteousness...the gospel of peace...the shield of faith....” All these are defensive weapons. Paul also told us to take up “the sword of the Spirit...and to pray....” These are offensive weapons. We need both of them to fight against spiritual forces. Our weapons are not missiles or atomic bombs, but the gospel truth. Our weapons are the word of God and prayer. The gospel truth is the most powerful weapon of all spiritual weapons. We should be equipped with gospel truth so that we can demolish everything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and win the victory. In verse 6 Paul clearly said that those who remained disobedient would be punished.

II.  Objects that we fight in spiritual warfare (10:7-11:15)

In part 1, Paul talked about the principle of spiritual warfare. In part 2, Paul talks about the specific objects that we should fight against.

First, boasting (7-18). Some people criticized Paul based on their own superficial view. They claimed that Paul tried to frighten them with his letters by using authority as an apostle. They claimed that they belonged to Christ, so they had superior spirituality (1 Cor 1:12). This idea came from the influence of false teachers (11:23). It was a sneaky form of rebellion by means of which they wanted to avoid Paul’s spiritual authority. Paul wanted them to realize two things. First of all, Paul’s spiritual authority came from Christ and it was real. Secondly, Christ gave him this spiritual authority to build them up, not to tear them down. So they did not need to feel threatened by his spiritual authority, rather they should seek to receive the full measure of blessing that Christ wanted to give them through him. Some people wanted to ignore Paul’s letters, saying that though his letters were weighty and forceful, when he came to them in person he would be weak and unimpressive (10). Paul assured them that he would be the same in person as he was in his letters (11).

In verse 8 Paul boasted somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave him for building up the church. In verses 12-18 Paul contrasts his boasting with the boasting of the false apostles. The false apostles boasted according to their own standard and for their own glory; in fact, it was groundless (12). Furthermore, their boasting went beyond proper limits. They claimed credit for work done by others. At the root, they boasted out of their pride, without any real contents. Pride is to think of oneself too highly. So Paul said in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” We can see this sober judgment in Paul’s boasting. Paul confined his boasting to the field God assigned to him and he did not go beyond proper limits. Nor did he boast of work done by others. His only hope was that as their faith continued to grow his area of activity among them would greatly expand. Finally, he gave the principle regarding boasting. Look at verses 17-18. “But ‘Let him 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.” Paul knew that he had nothing good in himself. But he could not deny that God had done mighty work in and through him. So he boasted about what God had done to glorify God and encourage others.

People boast about themselves a lot. They are proud of what they have and what they are doing. They boast about their money, their cars, their houses, their computers, their children, their grades, their musical abilities, their beauty or handsomeness, their height and eloquence in speech, and so on and so forth. The contents of most conversations is self-boasting. These conversations begin with “I” and end with “me.” And in between is “my” and “mine.” In summary, it is “I, my, me.” However, our conversations should begin with “our Lord Jesus Christ,” and end with “Thank God.” In between we should tell how God used us in spite of our sins and shortcomings. Jeremiah 9:23-24 tells us the contents of what we should boast about. It says, “This is what the Lord says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the LORD.” What we really have to boast of is the knowledge of the Creator God and his beautiful character. What we really have to boast of is our Lord Jesus Christ, who shed his blood on the cross and died for us and his great humility, gentleness, mercy and compassion. Jesus is worthy to receive all glory and honor and praise, now and forever. Thank you Jesus!

Second, a different gospel (11:1-15). Paul asked the Corinthians to put up with a little of his foolishness. Then he began to boast about his godly jealousy. He loved the Corinthians very much, yet not in a self-centered way but in a godly way. So he wanted to introduce them to one husband, Christ, so that as a pure virgin, they could have a pure and sincere relationship with him and give Christ their full devotion. Paul did not bring them to himself, but to Jesus Christ so that they could be united with Christ and enjoy eternal blessing in him. The problem was that Satan wanted to lead them astray through false apostles who preached a Jesus other than the Jesus Paul preached, and a different gospel with a different spirit. When the Corinthians heard this different gospel, they put up with it easily enough. They did not discern the difference between “the Jesus” and “the gospel” which Paul preached and “a Jesus” and “a gospel” which false apostles (super apostles) preached.

There is one God and one mediator between God and us, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). There is only one way to come to God; it is through Jesus. So Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). No one can solve our sin and death problem except Jesus who died for our sins and rose again. Jesus is the unique Savior who rescues us from the dominion of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of light. This is the gospel. There is only one Savior: Jesus Christ. But there are many different gospels: Gnosticism, many cults derived from Christianity, new age religions, secular humanism, materialism, salvation through science, Buddhism, Bahai, Islam, Hinduism, and so on and so forth. So Paul was worried that the Corinthians would be deceived by the serpent’s cunning and that their minds might be led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ. False apostles speak eloquently but they lead people to false hope and finally to destruction. Their goal is to exploit foolish people for financial gain. We must discern the difference between “the Jesus” and “a Jesus,” and “the gospel” and “a gospel,” so that we may not be led astray from sincere devotion to Christ. We also must help our Bible students not to be deceived by a different gospel.

In verses 7-12 Paul talks about his self-supporting ministry in a way that would make them think clearly so that they could understand his motive and discern the difference between him and the false apostles. Paul preached the gospel of God free of charge especially to the Corinthians. When Paul needed something he received help from the Macedonian Church. The Corinthians were different than the Macedonians. They were not spiritually mature enough to support their shepherd Paul financially. So Paul preached the gospel to them free of charge. He didn’t receive any support from them so as not to be a burden to them. But he received support from the more mature Macedonian church which was willing to support him joyfully. Paul’s motive was love. So he would continue to serve them as he had been.

Paul told the Corinthians plainly that he was not inferior to the super apostles (5). He was not a trained speaker, but he had knowledge of the gospel, which is revealed by God (6). The super apostles had planted doubt about Paul (11). In verses 13-16 Paul exposed who they really were. They were deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. What they did was not a surprise, because Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. Though they might have deceived people, they could not produce good fruit. Their end would be what their actions deserved. By their fruit we can recognize who they are.

We must realize that Satan works behind the scenes to plant doubt, fear, rebellion, a disobedient spirit and pride. We must hold on to “the gospel” and “the Jesus” so that we may serve Christ with sincere and pure devotion. Especially we must struggle to take captive our thoughts and make them obedient to Christ. Then we can be fully equipped with “the gospel” or the spiritual weapons, so that we may preach “the gospel.” Then God will empower with his divine power to demolish Satan’s strongholds. Let’s pray that we may engage in spiritual warfare in preaching the gospel so that the kingdom of God may be extended.