

# The Meekness of Christ

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2 Corinthians 10:1–6  
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If I were teaching a class on composition, there's no way I would use 2 Corinthians as a model. Why? Because Paul's style of writing is atrocious. This evening's text is a good example of what I mean. Paul had just spent the last two chapters talking about the importance and privilege of giving, then he immediately switched to a completely new subject in chapter 10 and his only transition was, *Now, I Paul myself*. No writing teacher would accept this.

On the other hand, if I were teaching a class on reasoned thinking, persuasive argumentation or submitting our minds to the Word of God, 2 Corinthians might be at the top of my list. In it, the apostle encouraged his readers to put on the mind of Christ and he showed us how to do it. He wrote the rest of this book to defend his ministry, and he did so by subtly ripping apart the absurd claims of his detractors.

This evening's text begins this discussion, focusing mostly on Paul's attitude toward the ministry of the gospel and how to deal with false teachers.

## Boldness or Weakness?

Paul's transition in verse 1 may not be good style, but it was one of his favorite formulas. He used it in the first verse of Romans 12, another transitional passage. There he wrote, *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service* (v. 1). In both, he cited God's characteristics — his mercy in Romans, and *the meekness and gentleness of Christ* in our text. This shows how much God's favor to his people had molded his thinking and exhortations.

This was especially important in today's text because the false teachers who rejected Paul's ministry claimed that his in-person, mild-mannered presence was his greatest weakness. He mentioned this in verse 10: *For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible*. These false teachers had, no doubt, bought into the common Greek notion that real men should always be bold, assertive and aggressive. So, Paul silenced their foolishness by citing the example of Jesus himself. If it wasn't a weakness for Jesus to have been meek, how could it be wrong for the apostle Paul?

Of course, neither meekness nor gentleness were wrong for either of them. Moses was meek. He described himself as the meekest man on the face of the earth in Numbers 12:3. Likewise, Jesus emphasized his meekness because he had come not to do his own will, but his Father's. He spoke meekly when he invited men to come to the Father through him, saying, *Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls* (Matt. 11:29). In another place, Matthew cited a prophecy of his meekness. He wrote, *He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory* (Matt. 12:19–20; cf. Isa. 42:2–3). This reflects his redemptive work, for he had come as a lamb to be led to the slaughter (Isa. 53:7).

Meekness isn't the same as weakness. Even a meek man will stand up for the truth because he can separate his own private opinions from God's self-revelation in Scripture. Moses and Jesus never backed down when men opposed the Word of God. And neither did Paul. He was bold against those who misrepresented the gospel, but not against God's people who had, for whatever reason, fallen under their spell.

## Christian Warfare

It's hard to imagine that false teachers had actually accused Paul of adopting the ways of the world. Yet, that's exactly what they did, according to verse 2: *which think of us as if we walked according to the flesh*.

Was Paul carnal? Had his supposed carnality weakened his preaching of Jesus Christ? Did he lack the unction of the Holy Spirit, which would have been a sign that he had usurped his apostolic office? Anyone who spouted such foolishness obviously knew nothing about Paul. He had given his whole life to the ministry of the gospel. About the same time that he wrote 2 Corinthians, he described his work to the elders of Ephesus as follows: *Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 20:18–21). He said this even as the authorities were transporting him to Jerusalem in chains.

Here, again, Paul subtly exposed the foolishness of his opponents. It's true, he wrote, that we *walk in the flesh*, as every man does. Even the false teachers do this. As human beings, we live in a

physical world with real needs to meet, real challenges to face and real responsibilities to satisfy. This is an unalterable reality of our present life.

But we must not and cannot *war after the flesh*. The church of Jesus Christ should never adopt the world's standards for warfare or use the world's weapons in our battles. The world lies, using deceit to take out its enemies. It resorts to violence, vicious personal attacks, name-calling, *ad hominem* argumentation, the destruction of history and traditions, canceling culture, and much more. The world uses carnal weapons, but *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal*.

Can you see what Paul did here? He exposed the weakness of his adversaries, who insisted he was weak. They were weak because they weren't using the mighty weapons that God had given them. They chose their own, instead. But all their clever arguments couldn't destroy Satan's strongholds because they were just toy tanks going up against the Pentagon. Actually, they weren't even that good.

The right way to fight spiritual warfare is to use God's tactics and God's weapons. But what are God's weapons? A few years after writing 2 Corinthians, Paul was taken to Rome and confined to house arrest. There he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, in which he applied the weapons he saw on his guard figuratively to the church. Each weapon advanced the truth of the gospel because only that wins the battle. But in today's text, he focused more on the objectives of spiritual warfare. He wrote, *Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*. So, consider each of these objectives.

*Casting down imaginations*, or literally destroying reasoning. Of course, not all reasoning is bad. I began this evening's message with Paul's masterful ability to reason. But there's a vast difference between Paul's reasoning and that of his opponents. The difference is very simple. Paul reasoned from God's revelation of himself in the Bible. With the help of the Holy Spirit, he started with Biblical premises and deduced Biblical conclusions. But his opponents began with fleshly, carnal and worldly premises and arrived at conclusions contrary to the gospel but pleasing to the world.

As God's people, we must tear down every thought that stands against the God of the Bible and the work of Jesus Christ. Romans 12, which I cited earlier, requires the same. Paul wrote that we must present our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord, and then described this process as our *reasonable service*. Here the word *reasonable* comes from the same root as the word translated *imagination* in today's text. What does this mean? Paul explained: *And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God* (v. 2). It's all about separating ourselves from the way the world thinks and learning to think according to God's will.

J. Gresham Machen put it well in his address to the students at Princeton Seminary in 1912. He challenged them as follows:

The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God.... The church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man.<sup>1</sup>

*Every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God.* High things are the enemies' towers, i.e., what they regard as their greatest strengths. After we've disrupted their military, we have to tear down everything that remains. After all, what good is it to explode the theory of evolution, for example, if we let the humanistic reasoning that produced it survive?

Nowhere is this more important than in the battle over the truth of God's Word in the church itself. Many years ago, a large denomination was well on its way to unbelief when a few conservative congregations broke away from it to start a more conservative denomination. About that time, I had the privilege of spending a few days with one of our most respected ministers, Rev. Norman Hoeflinger, on the campus of Wheaton College. As we talked one day at lunch, he said, "Do you know why this new denomination won't last very long?" I was somewhat puzzled by his question and asked him why he would say such a thing. He replied, "The seeds of the devil are still there." By 'seeds of the devil,' he meant a practical exaltation of the confessions over Scripture and allowing science to interpret creation and the roles of men and women both in the family and in the church.

We can't be like Uzziah in the Old Testament, whom God himself described as having done *that which was right in the sight of the LORD* (2 Kgs. 15:3), yet failed to remove pagan centers of worship and was stricken with leprosy because he didn't guard the holiness of God. And then what happened? His son Jotham followed a similar path. By the third generation, nothing was left. Ahaz *walked in the way of the kings of Israel, yea, and made his son to pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out from before the children of Israel* (2 Kgs. 16:3). He even gave the silver and gold of God's temple to the king of Assyria, thinking it would protect him from the king of Damascus better than God could.

Declines of faith and commitment don't take very long. Paul wrote highly of the church at Ephesus in AD 60, but just seven or eight years later Jesus declared that it had left its first love and was tolerating doctrinal error (Rev. 2:4). He called it to repentance.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bill Crouse, "The Conversion of the Mind," *Reformation and Revival* 3:3 (Summer 1994), 62.

*Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.* With these words, Paul reminded his readers again that we must follow the Lord with the whole heart. Everything in our lives must serve Jesus Christ and advance his kingdom. He exempted nothing because it all belongs to God and must serve his purposes. Jesus Christ is Lord not only of every square inch of real estate in the universe, as Abraham Kuyper famously said, but he's also Lord of every aspect of our existence, including our thoughts and plans and desires.

This is how we must fight the battle. No other strategy will do.

Even with all this, Paul added one more thing in the last verse of our text. Verse 6 says, *And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.*

One commentator described this verse as a court-martial. After the dust of battle settles, the church must hold men accountable for their disobedience to Jesus Christ: it must punish disobedience. I'm not entirely sure that a court-martial is the right picture, though. A court-martial assumes that we're trying men who were once on our side. To me, it seems more like the Nuremberg trials — holding enemies accountable for their war crimes.

But even so, this verse doesn't sound quite right. Did Paul really want the church to punish the enemies of the gospel? Is it the church's job to do this? I don't think so. I prefer looking at it another way. The word translated *revenge* in our text could also be nothing more than a call to duty. Now, certainly, the church has a duty regarding the enemies of Christ. In the Old Testament, God's people broke fellowship with Korah and his men for rebelling against Moses' authority, but it didn't cause the earth to swallow them up. God did that. Likewise, in the book of Acts, the apostles denounced Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Ghost, but they didn't kill them. God did. Now, it so happens that both of these examples had negative outcomes, but that's not always so. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul instructed the church to turn the incestuous man over to the devil. It appears they excommunicated him, but God granted him repentance.

What does this have to do with false teachers? Simply this: God calls his church to promote and defend the truth of Christ, which requires us also to expose the world's lies. We also announce what the Lord will do to those who have taken a stand against him. But then we leave the results in his hands. Maybe he'll punish them, or maybe he'll have mercy on them and open our hearts to the gospel. Remember that Paul himself was once blinded to the truth, but the Lord Jesus broke through his blindness and gave him the light of life. Jesus died on the cross for all his people, even those whose sins make it appear early on that they couldn't possibly be covered by the Lamb's blood. That's why we don't give up. It's why we preach and preach and preach. Amen.