

2 Corinthians 10:1-6
(Psalm 19:7-14; Matthew 7:24-29)
“Taking Every Thought Captive to Obey Christ”

Introduction

We come to the third and final section of this letter, one with such a different tone and language that many have, quite understandably, thought that it must be a different letter, perhaps the painful letter Paul alluded to earlier in the opening verses of chapter two, simply attached to the end of the letter we have been studying and then passed on down to us in this combined form.

The problem with that view is that it is purely speculative and goes against overwhelming manuscript evidence. There are many ancient copies of 2 Corinthians and not one of them lacks chapters ten through thirteen. It is always best to take ancient manuscripts as they come to us and then see whether they make sense on their own terms. And, in fact, these final chapters actually follow quite logically from what has gone before.

Paul opened the letter with a defense of the gospel of Christ against those who had troubled the church in Corinth with a false, prosperity gospel. He then spoke of his gratitude at hearing from Titus that many of the Corinthians were already repenting of having been so easily deceived and were eager to renew their relationship with Paul (7:6f). That emboldened Paul, in part two of the letter, to call on those who had repented to renew the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. In challenging them to this act of grace, Paul gave his fullest teaching on stewardship and generosity.

Now in chapter ten, he begins to address those who have not yet repented and are still accusing him of being an unworthy teacher and apostle. And the specifics of their accusations against him become clear. The essence of their attack was this: they saw Paul's gentleness and humility as weakness and cowardice, the very proof that he was not filled with the Spirit of God. When confronted, Paul had left Corinth and gone elsewhere concerned that an angry confrontation would simply make a bad situation worse. His letters, his enemies said, were bold and weighty, but when with them face-to-face, he was meek and humble. His physical presence was weak and he lacked eloquence (see 10:10).

The essence of Paul's answer to his critics was this: What they were attacking was nothing less than the meekness and gentleness *of Christ*, the very proof that the Spirit of Christ was at work in and through him (10:1). The source of the problem was a confrontation between two conflicting world-views, two completely different understandings of the nature of the gospel, of the nature of power, of the nature of the weapons a Christian is to use in contending for the faith, and the difference in the goals of those shaped and molded by the world's values as opposed to the goals of those who are being conformed to Christ.

Body

1. The world's view of power versus the Christian's (10:1-2).

When, in chapters eleven and twelve, Paul shows the absurdity of his opponent's arguments by pretending to boast about everything that makes him look weak and foolish to the world, we get a pretty good picture of his enemies' view of power. Clearly, it was a view derived from the surrounding culture and not from the gospel of Christ.

Paul's opponents boasted in battles won, enemies defeated, mystical visions granted, miracles performed, everything that showed them as powerful, successful, spiritual giants. They obviously thought highly of themselves for accomplishing what the Greco-Roman world valued: esteem, success, prosperity. Who would want to share in the sufferings and indignity that marked Paul's life and ministry? What pleasure was to be found in that?

But for Paul, all that the world pursued with such great longing was now considered rubbish. As he wrote to the Philippian Christians,

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7f).

The person shaped and molded by the world gives his life for pleasures and powers that quickly fade away. The Christian gives her life for the power of the resurrection, a power that conquers everything that would separate us from God and his purposes for us.

2. The world's weapons versus the Christian's (10:3-4).

Paul describes the world's weapons in pursuing its pleasures as fleshly, "flesh" in Paul's usage referring to thoughts and actions shaped by the values of a world in rebellion against God. So Paul's opponents use eloquent speech to impress and convince, use supposed visions and miracles to demand obedience, use stories of their power and success to gain followers. Thus it has ever been. Yet how easily the church, then and now, resorts to such things, trying to out-perform the world, eager to show ourselves smarter, more successful, more able to satisfy felt needs, quick to dance to whatever

tune the world is playing if only we can win an audience and gain a few followers.

But that was not Jesus' way. He refused to seek the mighty and powerful, preferring the company of fishermen, tax collectors, people on the fringe, those whom the people in power despised. When he worked miracles out of compassion for the broken, he asked that no one tell of it, because he did not want that to be the focus of his ministry. When the religious and powerful sought him out, he confronted their hypocrisy and sent them away with a prophetic challenge. When the broken came to him he welcomed them and healed them. When the unclean came, he cleansed them. To the world around, he seemed a poor excuse for a Messiah. At the cross, they mocked him: If you are the Messiah, save yourself!

So, says Paul, this is the Jesus way. The faithful church and the faithful Christian will always seem weak and foolish to the world. When we are faithful to Jesus, we will respond to hatred with love, to aggression with gentleness, because – like our Savior who did not wish “that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (1 Peter 3:9) – we too are willing to endure all things for the sake of the mission entrusted to us.

And our weapons? Our weapons are the Word of God, the sacraments of the church, the community of brothers and sisters following Jesus together in “a long obedience in the same direction” (Eugene Peterson), the life of a person yielded to Christ and being changed from the inside out. That life will often appear foolish and weak to those hungry for power and pleasure. But such lives will finally turn the world upside down.

3. The world's goal versus the Christian's (10:5-6).

The world seeks pleasure. Everything tends toward that. It is expressed in different ways: some are pleased through their ego, others through their senses, some would be esteemed, others would be left alone. For one it may be food and drink, for another high adventure, for yet another sexual pleasure. For most it is an ever-shifting combination as pleasures fade and lasting pleasure eludes our grasp.

The Christian seeks the glory of God in the salvation of the world and would, in Paul's words, “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (10:5). What does that mean? The Christian being conformed to Christ is willing to forgo the pleasures that once enchanted her, because she has discovered the only source of lasting pleasure: knowing God in the community of Christ, feasting on his grace and living by his Spirit. All other pleasures become subordinate to these, and when rightly ordered, all other pleasures are intensified and suffused with joy as expressions of our great Creator's love for us, and our great Redeemer's power to make all things new.

Conclusion

Paul demonstrates in these verses a Christ-like balance between justice and mercy. He is waiting for all who will repent and turn in gospel obedience to the paths of life before he visits Corinth and confronts his accusers. He pleads with them to repent and to make it an occasion of joy. But he promises that he is coming again to them, even as Christ has promised to return again, but waits for all who will repent and follow him into life.

Where are you in the light of all this? Whom do you esteem as living a worthy life? What do you see as appropriate power in accomplishing your ends? What weapons do you turn to when you feel thwarted and frustrated? What are the great goals that shape your daily choices and decisions? What do you value? What do you desire? What do you seek?

The goal of salvation is to unite us to Christ, to make his values ours, his ends ours, his weapons ours. He has entrusted to us his life and ministry.

For 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 and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (10:3-5).

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