

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

SHARED LIVES

Shared Danger: The power of Christ to overcome

April 9, 2008 – 2nd Corinthians 10

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The first weekend of spring break we went down to visit Rich's sister Diane and her family in Iowa. I should tell you that Rich and I have 1 son, then 3 daughters. Diane & her husband have first had 4 daughters, then, finally a son. So the 9 cousins have a blast playing whenever we get together. And with 7 little girls running around, the 2 boys have a kind of "male cousin solidarity," even though they're 10 years apart. Luke is 13; Ryan is 3, and they are buddies. And while the girls were playing dress-up and house, the boys were sword fighting. Ryan would say, "You be the bad knight, and I'll be the good knight. Let's fight!" And that was their entertainment for most of the week—staging epic battles between good and evil.

Our topic today is "*Shared Danger: The Power of Christ to Overcome.*" We see Paul here in his fighting mode. As you were reading II Corinthians this week, did you notice how the tone of the letter shifts here? Every commentary that I read emphasized this—that chapters 10-13 of this letter take a pretty abrupt turn; in fact, a minority of scholars think these chapters are actually a cutting of the "severe letter" tacked on to the end of what we know as II Corinthians. That's probably not the case, but I can see how some might think that. We've seen that chapters 1-7 focus mostly on Paul's relief at the restored relationship that has come about with the Corinthian church. Chapters 8-9 are an appeal to give to the poor church in Jerusalem. Now chapters 10-13 are a strong and even confrontational attack on the false teachers that led the rebellion against Paul. Though the "severe letter" had brought about repentance within the church body, it seems Paul knew that some remnants of rebellion remained or that some of the false teachers were still hanging around.

Let's start with verse 1 and read through verse 6: *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! 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. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 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. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.*

First I see **Paul's appeal**.

He makes a plea akin to what a parent might say to a disobedient child—"Don't push me!" Paul writes: "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.” His enemies apparently accused Paul of inconsistency and cowardice—of being timid in person but aggressive in his letters. The notion of Paul’s being timid seems ridiculous when you consider that he spoke boldly for Christ in front of Sanhedrin, the Roman government, and even Herod Agrippa (Acts 23-26). Perhaps their accusation of timidity came because Paul, even when fed up with these people, responded with the “meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Meekness is power under control. And though he hopes otherwise, Paul expects to have to be really bold with these troublemakers! They thought Paul was “living by the standards of the world,” but Paul turns this phrase to say essentially, “I certainly don’t FIGHT by the standards of the world.”

Paul’s battle imagery elsewhere—He urges Timothy to “endure hardness like a good soldier of Christ” (II Tim. 2:3). At the end of his life he says, “I have fought the good fight.” And in Ephesians he urges Christians to “Put on the full armor of God.” So Paul thought of himself as a soldier who needed to fight.

So let’s look at **Paul’s weapons**.

They are different from the world’s weapons; they have divine power; and they demolish strongholds, arguments, and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. In other passages in Scripture we can see a physical element of spiritual warfare—God removing a wicked king or the disciples casting out demons, but I want you to notice that in this passage the emphasis is that spiritual warfare is largely a battle of ideas, and the objective is to change how people think. What strongholds or fortresses do people make today that set themselves up against the knowledge of God? Maybe philosophy, psychology, human intelligence, marketing, pragmatism, evolutionary naturalism, and other ideas. In I Corinthians Paul quotes Isaiah: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Then he goes on: “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1:19, 20). Any unbiblical system of thought is a pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. These unbiblical thought systems must be demolished by spiritual weapons wielded by Christians who are willing to fight.

What is the only offensive weapon that Paul lists in Ephesians 6? The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. You can’t fight falsehood unless you have a thorough knowledge of the truth as expressed in the Bible. James Sire writes in his book The Universe Next Door: “I am convinced that for any of us to be fully conscious intellectually we should not only be able to detect the world views of others but be aware of our own—why it is ours and why in light of so many options we think it is true.” Jesus said the greatest commandment is this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” How are you doing at loving God with your mind? Do you “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”? Are you filling your mind with Scripture so you know the truth? Do you read Christian authors that help you cultivate a thoroughly biblical worldview?

What about the children and grandchildren that God has placed in your life? Preschoolers should hear Old and New Testament Bible stories over and over. Then as children learn to read and move through elementary school, they should learn the books of the Bible and their order, so they can find their way around both Testaments; they should develop the discipline of daily Bible reading and Bible memory. As they pass into middle school and high school, they need to explore the basic doctrines of the faith as well as apologetics—the defense of the faith. We can't leave this task to the church. As dedicated as our Sunday school teachers and youth pastors are, their time with our children is limited. Parents, especially fathers, are called to this task of imparting a thoroughly Christian worldview to our children (Eph. 6:4). When we are too busy to oversee the spiritual training of our children, then we are too busy. Our schedules don't always reflect what we say we value, but we must not send our children into the battle unarmed.

Paul ends this section with a **promise**.

“We will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.” In other words, once you've had time to align yourselves either with the repentant ones or the rebellious ones, I'll come and punish the rebellious ones. This is not an idle threat, but a statement of fact—Paul had the authority and the intention to administer church discipline when the gracious appeals for obedience had been clearly rejected. It is easy to focus on the sin of the world. But the New Testament—from Jesus to Paul—consistently focuses on the sin in the church. Earlier in the letter Paul refers to an incident of church discipline—look at chapter 2:5: If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” This particular person was confronted with his sin and punished for it. But then he repented, and so Paul urges the body to forgive him, comfort him, and reaffirm their love. The goal of church discipline is always supposed to be repentance and restoration. We don't know what the punishment was in this particular incident, and we don't know what punishment Paul has in mind here in chapter 10, but here are guidelines for discipline that Paul gives in his previous letter--I Corinthians (5:9-13): “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.” And then he quotes Deuteronomy: “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

I'd head the next paragraph of this letter "**Paul's pastoral authority**" and it begins in verse 7:

You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he. For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

Again we see evidence of this accusation of inconsistency in Paul's manner, which he denies. The first sentence in the Greek can be taken as a question, a command, or a statement. As a question, it would mean, "Do you judge me from my personal appearance and speech?" As a command, it would mean, "Look at what is obvious—what's right before your eyes." The NIV translates it as a statement—"You look on the surface"—and thus despise me. Later in this letter (II Corinthians 12:7) we read that Paul had a "thorn in the flesh" that he prayed for God to remove. Passages like this paragraph in II Corinthians cause some people to speculate that this thorn in the flesh was a speech impediment or a physical deformity that caused Paul to be unimpressive. Whether this is true or not, it's helpful to know that in ancient Greece and Rome skillful oratory was much prized. Paul evidently fell short of this standard in his speaking ability.

People today are not so different from the ancient Greeks and Romans, are they? We like to listen to a polished speaker. Whether it's a presidential candidate, a news anchor, or a pastor, we like someone who's attractive, well-dressed, not too old. But we need to remember that the content, not the delivery, is the most important thing about any speaker.

It seems that some people were claiming a special relationship with Christ beyond what Paul had. Paul references this back in I Corinthians 1:12. But here in II Corinthians 10 Paul urges these people to "consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he." And then he goes on to emphasize that the Lord gave him authority when he confronted Paul on the road to Damascus. Christ made Paul an apostle, gifted him to plant churches and disciple believers . . . for what purpose? "for building up" not "pulling down."

The final paragraph of this chapter begins in verse 12: *We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do*

not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory. 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.

Here we see Paul's **ministry strategy** as it stands in sharp contrast to that of his detractors.

They commended themselves. They "measured themselves by themselves"—that is, they were their own standard of right. And since they had infiltrated the Corinthian church, they were obviously trying to take credit for a work that was not their own. They were "boasting of work done by others." Paul, on the other hand, confined his ministry to the "field God ... assigned." As far as we can tell, there wasn't an official, formal geographical division that the disciples followed in their efforts to fulfill the Great Commission, but there seemed to be general agreement that Paul would go to the Gentiles and Peter, James, and John to the Jews. (Gal. 2:9). The early apostles were not elected or appointed by a particular church, but rather given their authority by Christ. Paul wrote with the same authority to the Roman church that he did to the churches he himself planted. And according to tradition, John, in his last years, presided over churches in Asia Minor, which he hadn't planted. But as a rule, Paul at least did not want to intrude unnecessarily on another man's work. And whatever ministry successes arise, Paul knows who should get the credit. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah in verse 17 when he says, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." And in contrast to those who commended themselves, Paul closes this chapter with a reminder that "It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." My Sunday school class is working on memorizing Hebrews 11, and that word "commend" appears several times. God commends faith; he commends righteousness; he commends those who please him. But he doesn't commend those who commend themselves.

The best part about teaching Bible study for me is that I spend several weeks pondering and praying about one specific passage of Scripture, and through that, God impresses things on my heart that I need to hear. Sometimes it's comforting or encouraging; sometimes it's challenging or convicting. God's word is indeed "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (II Tim 3:16).

And so here are 6 or so thoughts that have been sticking with me from this passage. You doubtless will have your own to add to this.

1. Life is a battle. What do you do in a battle? You fight or you die! Because we're Minnesotans or because we're women we are programmed to think that all fighting is bad. To be sure, James says fighting among ourselves comes from sinful desires. But we still must cultivate a hatred for the things God hates, and fight them, whether it's sin in our own lives or falsehood that we encounter in the world and the church.

2. It's better to lose the battle of the body than to lose the battle of the mind. In other words, there are worse things than physical death. This is true for us as well as for those we love. In a small group Bible study a long time ago, the question was asked: "What do

you fear the most?” I didn’t speak first, but my thought was—“that one of my kids would die.” And then I was convicted when Al Derksen immediately answered the question—“That one of my kids would reject Christ.” He was right, of course. That would be the worst thing for anyone.

3. The church’s leadership structure does have authority over its members. We individualistic Americans tend not to like that so much. But church discipline for persistent sin and rebellion is necessary and biblical, and submission to that is good for the body. If, when confronted by the elders of a church, a person refuses to repent, that person may have to be removed from a leadership position or even from the membership. This is why church membership is a good and serious thing—it provides an accountability structure within the body.

4. You will be criticized at some point in your life. I’ve deserved most of the criticism that’s come my way—someone told me once that there’s always an element of truth in every criticism you hear. But sometimes you’ll be criticized simply for following Christ. If you’re certain that’s the case, then be gracious and respectful (II Peter 3:15-17), but don’t back down. Paul defended his ministry, and he was ready to administer discipline, but he did it with “meekness and gentleness.”

5. Boast in the Lord. It’s so easy to love to take credit for things. So easy to cultivate prideful motives. John MacArthur tells a story about Martin Luther—after his death a scrap of paper was found in his pocket. On it he had written, “We are all beggars.” We are wise to realize that we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. David writes in Psalm 20:7, “Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God.”

6. God’s commendation is what matters. Before the Super Bowl in February I heard an interview with Tom Brady. He said Super Bowl rings were fun, but they weren’t enough. He said he wished he could find something that satisfies him. Now here is one of the most-commended sports figures today. Tom Brady makes millions of dollars playing football and millions of dollars endorsing products. Sportswriters, teammates, and fans praise him; women flock to him. Yet his dissatisfaction with all that should remind us that we were created to please God. His praise is what we should live for.

The divinely inspired writers of Scripture compare God’s word to many things. It is a lamp to guide us; it is a sword that pierces us; it is a hammer that breaks the rock in two; it is a gentle spring on the tender grass. It is always a seed that bears fruit in fertile hearts, and it never returns empty. So I pray that we all will take whatever the Holy Spirit has impressed on us from this passage and let it change us.

Study Questions for Shared Danger – 2nd Corinthians 10

1. Review.
 - a. Summarize the book of II Corinthians in about 3 sentences.
 - b. What are some things God has been teaching you through your study of this book?
2. Read II Corinthians 10. Some scholars guess that the end of II Corinthians, beginning with chapter 10, was actually part of “the severe letter” and was inserted here. Why do you think some might think that?
3. Verses 3-5—How do you think the world wages war? What are its weapons? What are *our* weapons? (Hint: Start in Ephesians 6).
4. Verse 5—How does one “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”? What is significant about our thought life? Using both Testaments, find at least 3 Scriptures that speak about the life of the mind.
5. According to verse 6, what will Paul “be ready to do”? How does he have the authority to do this? Do church leaders have authority to do this today? Look at that same theme in chapter 2 as well as elsewhere in the New Testament. What is biblical church discipline?

Discussion Questions for Shared Danger – 2nd Corinthians 10

1. How would you summarize II Corinthians? What has God been teaching you through your study of II Corinthians so far?
2. Share practical strategies that you use to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” What Scriptures do you know that speak about the life of the mind?
3. How does the world wage war and with what weapons? How are Christians to fight?

QUESTIONS regarding this lecture or the Women’s Bible Study Ministry of Autumn Ridge Church of Rochester, MN – email: wbs@autumnridgechurch.org