

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

August 7, 2022

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Credentials of Authenticity

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 10-13)

Fighting

(2 Corinthians 10:1-18)

Study #1

Introduction: Fighting words...

In his State of the Union address in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson announced that the United States was declaring war - not on North Vietnam, but on poverty. Then, in 1971, President Nixon told us that we were at war with drugs.

In the years since, presidents have declared war on lots of other things - the national debt, racism, even Covid-19.

When Commanders-in-Chief use the word *war*, they are using a vocabulary that sends a message. They are telling the nation that they are thoroughly committed to erasing this or that evil from our midst.

Nothing says “serious” like the word *war*. If we want to emphasize how serious we are about something, we use fighting words. War. Go to the mat. All-out assault. Leave no prisoners.

And it isn’t only presidents who pursue their policies with the seriousness of battle. We could say that...

- ...the oncologist wages war on cancer.
- ...the cardiologist wages war on heart disease.
- ...the sanitation engineer declares war on garbage.
- ...the environmentalist wars against pollution.
- ... the physical fitness fanatic is at war with flab.

And the Bible follows suit, often using military language to describe the seriousness of a life of following Jesus.

Paul likens Christians to soldiers (2 Timothy 2:3-4) who are willing to die for Jesus.¹ He tells us to “**fight the good fight of faith**” (1 Timothy 6:12).

But this warfare terminology is not all metaphorical.

As we read through our New Testaments, we learn that we have an actual opponent. He is a spiritual opponent and is both crafty and cruel. He has set himself against us - and he doesn’t fight fair.

His aim is to derail us from following Jesus.

He will use anything - health problems, business failure *and* success, marital tensions, problems with kids, sex, money, worry - in short, anything! - to get us to take our eyes off Jesus. He wants to “**steal, kill, and destroy**” you because of your Jesus-following ways. (John 10)

So, we are to fight him. We are at war with him. But how do we fight an enemy we can’t see? Good question, because different opponents require different fighting strategies.

We wouldn’t fight the Taliban the same way we fight cancer. And different weapons are used against pollution than against crime.

So, how do we wage spiritual warfare? The Apostle Paul hands out some sage battlefield-tested advice in the passage in front of us this morning.

And we each must pay attention, too, because every one of us is the target of this very determined enemy.

Our chapter begins with a reminder of the strong ties that connected Paul and the Christians at the church in Corinth.

¹ In the New Testament, there is never a hint that Christians are to kill for Jesus, something that has tragically happened over the centuries by misguided zealots.

A “Spiritual Warfare” Primer (vv. 1-7a)

Fighting Strategically (vv. 1-2)

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians

[1] Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ

Remember that Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth establishing the church. He brought the Gospel and introduced them to Jesus. He was their spiritual father.

Paul and the Corinthians knew and loved each other.

But here, in the tenth chapter of this long letter, Paul refers to himself by name.²

Does that seem weird to you? When would you ever do that in a letter?

After writing pages and pages and pages, why would you ever stop and say, *“Oh, and by the way, this is me, Dave, writing.”*?

Well, I might insert, *“Hey, it’s me, Dave, writing this!”* IF I really wanted my readers to pay attention to what I was about to write or IF I wanted to emphasize that what I’m about to write is super important.

Calling attention to himself would have definitely gotten the attention of the Corinthians, especially since they knew that Paul was planning a trip to Corinth to visit them.

Here he tells them that the tone Paul adopts for that visit is completely up to them.

It might be warm and tender (which is what he would prefer) or it might be something else.

Paul’s eagerness to be gentle

[1] Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ - I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! [2] I ask that when I am present I need not be bold with the confidence with which I intend to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh.

Arriving with gentleness and tenderness would be good. After all, gentleness marked much of Jesus’ life and ministry.

He dealt gently with children and with widows. He wept over the fate of unrepentant Jerusalem. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus.

Paul wanted to come to Corinth gently. But he was willing to show another side, if necessary, just like Jesus did on occasion.

He often spoke harshly to audiences of Pharisees and Scribes (note Matthew 23). And, on two occasions He made a mess out of the temple after it had already been defiled by buyers and sellers.

Paul assures the Corinthians that if things are not set right before he arrives, he is willing to be severe.

Paul’s willingness to be severe

We don’t know exactly what kinds of problems there were in Corinth but based on what we find in the first letter (1 Corinthians) it could have been any of a dozen or more serious issues.

Whatever the specific problems were that had arisen in Corinth, Paul was willing to address them when he arrived. He will go to war.

He will employ every weapon in his arsenal against the problems that have surfaced in Corinth.

But how will he fight? What weapons will he bring to bear on the problems he’ll face?

² Paul only rarely refers to himself by name in a letter, and then only when he is sorely exorcised. Galatians 5:2; 1 Thess. 2:18.

Obviously, problems in a church call for an entirely different set of responses than do problems of national security or crime.

God's Battles Fought God's Way (vv. 3-6)

Our warfare is not "fleshly" (vv. 3-4a)

[3] For though we walk in the flesh, we do not wage battle according to the flesh, [4] for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh...

Yes, we have a flesh and blood existence; that doesn't mean that we "make war" in a "fleshly" way.³

He doesn't tell us exactly what a "fleshly" warfare would look like, but we could imagine...

It would involve looking for ways to gain advantage through intimidation or coercion or manipulation.

Or he might be thinking of brute force. War has historically been about projecting force on the battlefield. Brute force can work really well in a physical battle.

But force doesn't work well in a spiritual conflict. Force doesn't produce peaceful, loving people and it doesn't change hearts.

So, while we have access to all the weapons of the flesh - coercion and force - we don't use them.

That's OK, though, because God has placed other, more potent weapons at our disposal for waging war for the hearts and souls of our friends and family.

Listen as Paul first describes the effect of these spiritual weapons.

³ The term "fleshly" denotes something negative. Paul doesn't fight a spiritual battle with "fleshly" weapons.

Spiritual weapons - powerful! (vv. 4b-6)

Destroying fortresses

[4b]...but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

Major cities in the ancient world were surrounded by big, thick walls that could withstand months of an assault by an invading army.

So, "**fortress**" captures the idea of walls that people construct around their hearts, walls that keep them from God's ways. Believers and non-believers alike can build thick, high, strong walls that harden them, that insulate them against God.

The weapons Paul uses in his fight for people's spiritual welfare target these fortresses so that - just like the walls of Jericho - God may bring these walls a-tumblin' down, too.

Using these weapons makes it more likely that someone might expose himself to God's love, might make himself vulnerable to that love, might have a heart receptive to the need to change.

These weapons also make an assault on the mind that is turned from God.

Destroying speculations

[5] We are destroying arguments and all arrogance raised against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,

[6] and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

The weapons Paul employs target both the heart and the mind. They expose motives. They bring a person's innermost thoughts to the surface. They produce change from the inside out.

Force and coercion and manipulation may well bring about a change in external behavior. Something else is needed to produce deep,

lasting heart and soul transformation. That “something else” is the set of weapons Paul is about to describe.

So, given their strategic effectiveness, why do we Christians often neglect these weapons? Paul suggests that it is because we are looking at things only from a physical standpoint.

That was evidently what the Corinthians were doing.

Fighting an Invisible Phantom Enemy (v. 7a)

[7a] You are looking at things as they are outwardly...

It is always true that layered on top of outwardly visible conditions, there are ALWAYS unseen spiritual realities.

The Old Testament book of Job shows a man facing unimaginable hardships, including intense physical pain, loss of all property and wealth, and the death of all of his children in a freak act of nature.

That’s what was happening *outwardly*. Then we get a glimpse behind the curtain. We discover that there was more going on than would have ever met the eye.

There was a cosmic battle going on in which Job’s life was the testing ground. Can God find a man who will be faithful to Him, NO MATTER WHAT?

When the trials hit, Job didn’t know all of this. But we know that he would have been wrong to have assumed that he had just fallen victim to a string of unbelievably tough luck.

The Bible calls each of us here today to approach every situation we face with eyes wide open to the reality that there is more going on than meets the eye.

You’re facing a health crisis? A loved one has cancer? Someone has set himself against you as an enemy? You’ve lost your job?

Don’t stumble where many Christians have fallen. Don’t look at things only as they appear, outwardly.

We are called to more than that. We are called to take into account spiritual conditions. Remember that there is an enemy who wants to leverage your pain - or even your victory - for your spiritual defeat.

Now, with our spirits sensitized to spiritual realities, we come to the point of learning Paul’s counter-intuitive Kingdom-of-God savvy weapons.

First off, Paul would tell us something like, “*Purposefully choose the way you deal with people. Choose your style of relating carefully.*”

A Veteran Warrior’s Tips for Fighting (vv. 7b-18)

Weapon #1: Chosen Weakness (vv. 7b-11)

Apostolic authority to build up (v. 7b-9)

[7b]...If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ’s, have him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ’s, so too are we. [8] For if I boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame [9] for I do not want to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters.

Don’t miss the key thing here. Paul’s focus in life, as given to him as a stewardship from God, was to build people up.

I believe that every believer in Jesus has been given that same assignment. We are to build others up by the resources God provides and we are to resist the temptation to tear down.

Spiritual demolition

I have been party to a few demolitions in my life. It may be “a guy thing,” but I have always found it satisfying to swing, not a

hammer, but a sledgehammer at some structure for the purpose of knocking it down.

In fact, on a Missions trip to Uruguay (2008), the women on our team were assigned to add multiple layers of paint to the church building while the guys had a great time tearing down a couple of dilapidated buildings at the church we had gone down to serve.⁴

It takes skill to do **CON**struction. **DE**struction requires none of that. It takes time to construct something of worth. Demolition is quick.

After construction, you stand back and admire the work. After demolition, somebody's got to come along and clean up the mess.

When we face hardship, we may want to lash out. When we are opposed, it is so tempting to seek our opponent's demolition.

It would seem to be so enormously satisfying to take out a relational sledgehammer and tear that other person down - through cruelty or biting sarcasm or lashing out or getting even.

Instead, Paul says that when he goes to war he brings a hammer, not a sledgehammer. He has resolved to build up and not to tear down.

Spiritual construction

How do we wage war that is not "*according to the flesh*" and so "*build up*" those around us? By using the weapon of love.

Love has the power to destroy fortresses and strongholds. And this, in a nutshell, was the life of Jesus.

Look through His life and you will see an unbroken commitment to bring blessing to those around Him - disciples weak and strong, prostitutes, tax-collectors, faceless multitudes, and even those who opposed Him.

He sized up every person He dealt with as He prepared to engage and then entered the fray with a commitment to do construction on that person's soul.

With someone who was grieved over loss or over their own sin, He would build up with gentleness and tenderness.

The next day, equally aiming at soul construction, He would take a hard line with a stiff-necked Pharisee.

Both styles of relating were prompted by a loving commitment to build the other person up.

This is the *authority* God has given us: to build up. A commitment to build up is a powerful spiritual weapon God can use to bring about something beautiful and redemptive.⁵

If we would be Christ-like in our response to the evil we face and to the opponents we face; if we would wage war effectively in the spiritual struggle, we will come to every situation targeting the people around us with love.

Love - a consuming passion to build up - liberates us to deal with people well. Love energizes us to handle what life hands us in a way that tears down fortresses erected against God.

The fruit of any church's ministry where the weapon of choice is love is seen in the lives of the people who make up that church. They are being set free. They are growing into a wholesome, loving people.

In fact, and here is where this gets really practical, it was Paul's passion to love that explains how strangely he had acted when he had been in Corinth.

A certain style of relating (vv. 10-11)

⁴ The word we translate "destroying" was used in the first century of tearing down a barn.

⁵ Note that Paul had not been given authority by Jesus to tell people what to do or to order others around or to be their boss. His authority was to be a Holy Spirit-led tool in God's hand, loving as Jesus loved.

[10] For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible.”
[11] Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present.

The Corinthians had been thoroughly un-impressed with how Paul had conducted himself when he had been with them.

They were looking for LEADERSHIP, a style defined by erudite, articulate speech and marked by dignity and power and authority.

Instead, Paul came to Corinth demonstrating meekness.⁶

His way of speaking didn’t excite an audience. There was no PRESENCE about him at all.

The Corinthians thought it was plain old weakness. Paul says that he purposefully chose this style of relating so as to build them up.

He didn’t want to terrify or intimidate. So, he presented himself as a weakling. It was the loving way to relate to these people.

When you embrace the idea that love is the key weapon in your arsenal for effecting change for God, you can choose to be weak or strong or gentle or tough, articulate or a country bumpkin, reserved or extroverted.

Love grants us the freedom to be chameleons who adjust our style of relating to meet the need of the person we are seeking to serve for Jesus’ sake.

So, the first weapon we bring to the fight of spiritual warfare is a willingness to relate to others in a way that best ministers life to them, NOT in a way that ensures that we are well thought of.

⁶ This is opposed to the way he interacted with the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens. He was eloquent, articulate, and revealed his familiarity with Greek thinking. When he came to Corinth, he determined to know nothing, but Christ crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

Now Paul turns our attention to a second “weapon.”

Weapon #2: All about Mission, NOT Reputation (vv. 12-16)

The comparison trap (v. 12)

[12] For we do not presume to rank or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they have no understanding.

He is warning us against the “comparison trap.”

Comparing ourselves with others leads either to depression or arrogance.

Evidently, in the case of the Corinthians, it led to arrogance. (It can do the same for any of us if we are *very* careful about whom we choose to compare ourselves with...)

The Corinthians were tooting their own horns, and there are few things in life less appealing than listening to someone toot his or her own horn.

I receive promotional material advertising Christian ministries, speakers and singers all the time.

Sometimes the mailings come direct from the source and include such phrases as “*dynamic speaker*” and “*world-renowned preacher*” and “*universally acclaimed.*”⁷

⁷ In the *Wittenburg Door* magazine (Christianity’s answer to the current online magazine, *The Onion*) a number of years ago the editors poked fun at the various study Bibles that were just then becoming all the rage. They inserted a “matching game” in the magazine where readers were challenged to “Match the Bible to the Hype.” In the left-hand column were descriptions used to promote the Bibles and in the right-hand column were the names of the Bibles. The reader was to try and connect the appropriate phrase with the Bible. The descriptions included: “The most satisfying of all translations” “The best of all modern translations”

Self-commendation is condemned in Scripture as, at the very least, unwise. Solomon tells us,
[Proverbs 27:2] Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.

So, if one temptation when we are opposed is to tear another person down rather than build them up, another equally tempting tactic is to paint ourselves so that we always wind up looking pretty good - and the other guy looks pretty bad.

But spiritual impact flies out the window when we pat ourselves on the back. It is far better to not compare and to not boast. It is far better to just state the facts of the case.

Paul leads the way, reminding his audience of his accomplishments.

Facts are our friends (vv. 13-14)

[13] But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the domain which God assigned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. [14] For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ;

There is nothing wrong with telling what you have done.

Paul was the first person to travel as far as away from Jerusalem as Corinth with the message of the Gospel. So, he said it. No exaggeration. Just fact.

But Paul doesn't take that factoid and rub it in his readers' faces to get them to **finally** respect him. No, he moves on.

Clearly, for Paul, the biggest game in town was not what he had accomplished. It was about what was left to do. It's not about him. It's all about the mission!

The MISSION is the thing (vv. 15-16)

[15] not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other people's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our domain, enlarged even more by you [16] so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the domain of another.

Catch this. He doesn't linger at all at the issue of what they thought about him or if they appreciated him.

He moves straight to the biggest game in town - taking the Gospel where it had never been before.

His dream is that as the Corinthians' faith grows, he will be enabled (perhaps by their financial support?) to go to other places with the Gospel.

That's focus.⁸

It is focus when, at the end of the day what we are really excited about is what our amazing God has done and all we care about is what's next.

It's focus when we keep our eyes on the only One whose opinion really counts.

Weapon #3: It's all about God (vv. 17-18)

⁸ I got a lesson in focus years ago when a man in our church wanted to help host a Concert of Prayer for Missions. I was in favor of the event but wasn't confident of this brother's fitness to serve as host. We discussed my concerns about him at length. He conceded the point of his need to grow. And then, never missing a beat, asked, "So, can we have the Concert of Prayer for Missions?" That's focus.

[17] But THE ONE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD.⁹

[18] For it is not the one who commends himself that is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Paul was “all in” when it came to living for God’s pleasure. And it was this that unleashed God’s power for the tearing down of fortresses.

There is no question about it. Focus is a force multiplier. Clarity and single-eyed devotion are powerful.

And this is the second weapon we see today. It is no more the weapon we might expect to discover than was love.

But Paul’s very clear message is that if we are willing to be “all in” for God, then God will turn that zeal into a force capable of making life-changing impact for Jesus.

Conclusion:

The term “spiritual warfare” may conjure up images in our minds of lightning flashes and blazing swords in the heavenlies wielded by strong angels against demonic hordes. OK. But when Paul writes about spiritual warfare, that isn’t the picture we get. It’s of something else entirely.

It’s about becoming the Jesus-imitating person God saved us to be. Defeating our unseen enemy involves using a whole different set of weapons than defeating an enemy on the field of battle.

Our warfare calls us to reject “fleshly” fighting. We don’t fight “fire with fire.” We fight the way Jesus fought.

- We adapt our style of relating to meet the need of the person we are with. In short, we love.

- We care nothing about personal reputation, and we focus on the mission.
- We live for God’s, “*Well done!*”

⁹ Similarly, Galatians 6:14 says that appropriate boasting is boasting about what God has accomplished in and through us.