

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

Fighting

(2 Corinthians 10)

Study #15

Introduction: Fighting words...

In his State of the Union address in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared that we were at war with poverty. In 1971, President Nixon told us that we were at war with drugs.

The use of battlefield terminology by our Commanders-in-Chief - *warfare* - is significant.

People use the word *war* to get across the idea that we are in an all-out effort. In these cases, it was American presidents telling us how committed we were to blotting out poverty and the problem of drug abuse.

Nothing says “serious” like the word *war*. In many realms of life we use “fighting words” to highlight how serious we are about a problem.

I’ve heard that the oncologist has declared war on cancer. He brings all of his chemical and radioactive weapons to bear in his fight against tumors and malignancies.

The cardiologist declares war on heart disease by wielding a sharp scalpel and by threatening his patients against a sedentary lifestyle.

We might say that the sanitary engineer has declared war on garbage, the environmentalist has declared war on pollution, the police have declared war on crime, and the physical fitness fanatic has declared war on flab.

The Bible frequently uses military terminology to describe the Christian life. Paul likens us to soldiers at war (2 Timothy 2). He urges us to “*fight the good fight of faith*” (1 Timothy 1). Our pursuit of personal holiness and against sin is sometimes couched in terms of a pitched battle (Romans 7; James 4).

We are also told that we face an opponent who is crafty and cruel, and that we must fight him. We are at war with him.

Of course, how we prosecute a war depends on what or who we are fighting. We don’t fight Al Qaeda the same way we fight cancer. And different weapons are used against pollution than against crime.

So, how do we wage spiritual warfare? What are the “weapons systems” we must learn in order to successfully combat spiritual forces arrayed against us?

The Apostle Paul hands out some sage battlefield-tested advice in the passage in front of us this morning. We had better pay attention, too, because if we are “all in” for the Great Commission we will find ourselves in the crosshairs of a very determined enemy.

Authenticity

Throughout the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul has been describing Christian authenticity in all realms of life. Among other things, Christians who are living authentically:

- ...live out the implications of the New Covenant with thanksgiving and integrity and are marked by an undeniable reality.
- ...relate with others genuinely and transparently. No masks allowed.
- ...share their material resources generously, as God has been generous.

Now, he describes Christian authenticity when it comes to fighting.

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

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

To Fight FOR or to Fight WITH... (vv. 1-2)

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians

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

Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth founding and grounding the church. He led them to faith in Christ. He was the spiritual obstetrician who birthed them. He brought the Gospel and introduced them to Jesus.

They knew him well and he knew them well. They were close to his heart. He loved them!

But here, in the tenth chapter (!), Paul refers to himself by name.¹

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

Paul’s self-identification is definitely intended to grab their attention. He is planning a trip to Corinth and he wants them to know that they will determine what kind of a visit it will be.

It might be warm and tender (which is what he would prefer) or it might be marked by what he calls “boldness” - but it is their call!

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 propose 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.

Once, Jesus said [*Matthew 11:29*] “***Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls.***”

Paul really wanted to come to Corinth gently. But he was willing to show another side, if that was necessary...

Jesus sure showed a more severe side on occasion. He sometimes spoke very harshly to audiences of Pharisees and Scribes (see, especially, Matthew 23). On two separate occasions He made a mess out of the Temple in Jerusalem when the buyers and sellers had already trashed it with their merchandising.

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

Paul’s willingness to be severe

We don’t know exactly what kinds of problems there were in Corinth, but we could have a good time guessing.

Based on what we discover in the first letter (1 Corinthians) it could have been polluted doctrine, libertinism, legalism, sexual immorality, pride, arrogance or any one of a dozen other 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!

¹ 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

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

Paul affirms as much in the words that follow.

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 war according to the flesh, [4] for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh...

Of course we have a flesh and blood existence. But that doesn't mean that we "make war" in a "fleshly" way. The term "fleshly" denotes something negative, and Paul says that he doesn't fight a spiritual battle with "fleshly" weapons.

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

It probably would involve looking for ways to gain advantage, either 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 use none of them.

But that's OK, because God has placed other, more potent weapons at our disposal for waging warfare for the hearts and souls of men and women. Listen as Paul describes the effect of these spirit-based weapons.

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

Destroying fortresses

[4b]...but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.²

Every major city in the ancient near east was surrounded by walls that could withstand months or even years of assault by an invading army."

So, "fortress" captures the idea of walls that men and women construct around their hearts, walls that keep them from coming to God.

The weapons Paul uses in his fight for people's salvation or for their spiritual growth target these fortresses so that - just like the walls of Jericho - these walls come a-tumblin' down, too.

The application of these weapons leaves a person exposed before God, vulnerable to His love, with a heart receptive to the need to change.

These weapons also make an all-out loving assault on the mind that is far from God and they help people develop a biblical worldview.

Destroying speculations

[5] We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up 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.

Force and coercion and manipulation may well bring about a change in behavior. But the weapons that we will see in a couple of minutes are the tools God is pleased to use to bring about deep, lasting heart and soul transformation.

² Perhaps a reference to Proverbs 21:22

So, given their super-effectiveness, why do we sometimes neglect to use these weapons? Paul suggests that it is because we are looking at things only from a physical and material standpoint.

That was evidently what the Corinthians were doing.

Fighting a Visible Phantom Enemy (v. 7a)

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

In addition to 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. But we are given a glimpse behind the curtain and discover that there was more going on than would have ever met the eye.

There was a cosmic battle going on and Job's life was the testing ground. Will he or won't he be faithful to God, 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 the Corinthians fell. They looked at things only from an outward viewpoint and were deceived.

We are called to more than that. We are called to recognize spiritual conditions. We are to learn to discern, to be perceptive, to be sensitive.

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

First off, I believe Paul would tell us something like, "Choose your style of relating carefully." Or maybe he would just say, "Love!"

A Veteran Warrior's Tips for Fighting (vv. 7b-18)³

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, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. [8] For even if I should boast somewhat further 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 wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters.

The key thing to note here is Paul's focus in life: to build people up.

Paul, as an apostle, had certainly been given this authority to build others up. But I believe that every believer in Jesus has been given that same authority. 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 something refreshing and satisfying about swinging a sledgehammer at some structure for the purpose of knocking it down.

³ Barrett calls the remainder of the chapter "a declaration of war on the counter-mission."

In fact, during our second trip to Uruguay, while the young women who were on the trip (Shannon Babiak, Erin Smith, Nicole Treadwell) beautifully added multiple coats of paint to the church, Bob Babiak and Gaby Beker and I had a great time tearing down a couple of dilapidated buildings at the church we had gone down to serve.⁴

It takes skill, wisdom and strength to take a hammer and 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 opposition, 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 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.

In the hands of a Spirit-led believer, love has the power to destroy fortresses and strongholds.

This, in a nutshell, was the life of Jesus.

Look through His life and you 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.

In one instance, with a person 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 might 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 and would be aimed at moving them toward God.

This is the *authority* we have been given by God to exercise - to build up.

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.

And if you and I 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 single situation targeting the people around us with love.

Love - a consuming passion to build up and to bless - liberates us to deal with people in effective and creative ways. Love energizes us to handle what life hands us in a way that tears down fortresses.

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

They are being helped, strengthened, released, and delivered. They themselves are being equipped to love.

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.

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

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

[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, and a leadership style defined by impressive, erudite, articulate speech and a PRESENCE marked by dignity and power and authority.

Instead, Paul came to Corinth demonstrating meekness. His speech was nothing to get excited about. He talked funny. There was no PRESENCE about him at all.

The Corinthians thought it was just ugly 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, or articulate (Paul certainly was that on Mars Hill - Acts 17), or a country bumpkin.

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 necessarily in a way that ensures that we are well thought of.

By what Paul has to say in the remainder of the chapter, he 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 are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are without 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 less appealing than listening to someone toot his or her own horn.

In the *Wittenburg Door* magazine (Christianity's answer to the current online magazine, *The Onion* - and no, I don't recommend surfing to *The Onion*) a number of years ago - 1980, to be exact - 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.

Phrases such as “The most satisfying of all translations” (The Jerusalem Bible) and “The best of all modern translations” (The New English Bible) and “The world's most understandable Bible” (The New Life New Testament) and “The only true study Bible in a modern language available anywhere” (The Ryrie Study Bible) abounded. Yucch!

I receive promotional material advertising Christian ministries, speakers and singers almost weekly. Sometimes the mailings come direct from the source and include such phrases as “*dynamic speaker*” and “*world-renowned preacher*” and “*universally acclaimed.*”

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. No brag, just fact.

Facts are our friends (vv. 13-14)

[13] But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned 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 Corinth with the message of the Gospel. No exaggeration or embellishment.

To that point in time, no other Christian had gone as far as Macedonia and Achaia with the Gospel.

But Paul doesn't take that factoid and rub it in their 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 - and he wants to go farther!

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

[15] not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, 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 sphere 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.

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

It's all about God (vv. 17-18)

[17] But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD.⁵ [18] For it is not he who commends himself that approved, but he whom the Lord commends.

Paul was "all in" when it came to living for God's pleasure. That was his focus. And it was this focus 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 expected to discover than was love.

⁵ Similarly, Galatians 6:14 says that appropriate boasting is boasting about what God has accomplished in and through us.

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 of lightning flashes and blazing swords in the heavenlies wielded by strong angels against demonic hordes. OK - where do WE fit in?

How do you and I fight for God, God's way?

Well, we 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 are all about God and are all in for the Mission.

We are left to chew on this thought:

The power of God is released as we love and keep a single-eyed focus on God's MISSION.