

Christian Character and Assignment

2 Corinthians 10:1-18

Turn to 2 Corinthians 10 please. This sermon will have five points, because that's how 2 Cor 10 looks to me. The first two work together, and the last three work together. A better preacher than me would do this in two Sundays, or bypass some of what's here, but I am not able.

1, Christian character; 2, spiritual warfare; 3, comparing ourselves; 4, the Lord's assignment; and 5, boasting in the Lord.

I will be using the ESV today, which is a more literal than the NIV. The NIV is a fine translation, but I always read the Scripture in Greek though the week, and this time the things I wanted to say to you were clearer in the ESV.

Christian Character 10:1-3, 9-11.

I, Paul, myself plead with you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—² I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. ³ For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

Paul was correcting something here. The Corinthians were making two mistakes, one about Christian character, and one about Paul. About Paul, some of them had decided that he talks big and strong in his letters, but when he shows up he's quiet and gentle. They say, "We don't have to worry about Paul coming and not sparing us. He says he won't spare us – but don't worry."

V10 expands on this: *For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."* Mistake: Paul was different in his letters than in person.

Second, about Christian character, they assumed that someone usually gentle and kind and humble was simply weak, and could not ever be bold and confident and filled with God's power. But Paul was gentle and humble and kind because Christ was gentle and humble and kind, and that's what God's power prefers, not because Paul was timid or lacked confidence.

Paul is modeling Christian character for us here. This is how Christ shows himself in us: *I plead with you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—² I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing.*

In Christian character, meekness and gentleness and humility have nothing to do with being weak, with lacking boldness or confidence. Nothing. They are imitation of Christ. And in the kingdom, being loud and demanding is not strength. Some of us find it almost impossible to be meek and gentle. Others of us find it almost impossible to be bold and confident. That's okay, we are what we are. But as Christ changes us more and more, he leads us to both.

Paul much prefers to be meek and gentle. If they do not repent, he will be bold and confident when he does not spare them, but he pleads and begs that they will turn to God before he gets there, so he does not have to do this. But: if they don't turn, he won't spare them. This is Christian character, because this is how Christ was and is.

One more thing about Christian character: consistency. 10:9-11 *I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. ¹⁰ For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." ¹¹ Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.*

Paul would far rather they repented because he warned them in a letter, then confront them face to face. But he was the same Paul either way, guided by Christ, doing the same thing for the same reasons. Christian character is tied to spiritual warfare, which comes next.

2, Spiritual Warfare 10:3-8 [I am using v3 for this section too.] *For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have the power of God to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.*

The "flesh" here means common human weakness. God's people live in common human weakness, but we do not wage warfare with common human weakness. For the weapons of our warfare have God's power to destroy strongholds.

When we hear about spiritual warfare, we perhaps imagine some kind of bold confrontation and taking charge in the Lord's name. That is NOT how this Scripture puts it. The power of God to destroy strongholds operates normally and most effectively in people who are gentle and humble and kind.

Paul described his spiritual weapons back in 2 Cor 6. In 6:6-8 we read this: *in purity and understanding, in patience and kindness, in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love, in truthful speech and in the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness on the right hand and the left.*

Those ARE the weapons of righteousness, they are the same as the character of Christ in 10:1-3, and they are much the same as the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5. These are how we wage war and these are how the power of God brings down evil strongholds: purity, understanding, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, sincere love, truthful speech. That's how the Spirit's power works.

In the words of Christian character in chapter 10, the meekness and gentleness and humbleness of Christ. God uses people living this way to change other people, to tear down strongholds in our lives. We here have all been much changed and shaped by other believers treating us like this. It is the power of God to tear down strongholds.

Christian character, kind and gentle whenever possible, bold and confronting only when absolutely necessary, are the weapons God uses to tear down darkness. You know it is true. Christian character is not human weakness. It is the power of God.

Notice 10:8. *The Lord gave me authority for building you up, not for destroying you.* “I’ll use this authority to confront you, if I must, and not spare you, but that’s not why the Lord gave me spiritual authority. He gave it so I could build you up.” That’s how spiritual warfare works.

Christian character and spiritual warfare are completely tied together in our Scripture. Now, with this as a foundation, let’s look at our assignment from the Lord.

3, Comparing Ourselves to each other 10:12 *Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.*

A group of leaders had come into the Corinthian church. They were a big problem. They will likely have been the ones saying that Paul wrote big letters but was nothing when he showed up, don’t worry about him. Apparently there was also some spiritual competitiveness between them. Who had the most visions, seen the most miracles, had the most converts, etc.

That’s just silly. It is meaningless. The Lord has called each of us, and given each of us a different assignment. In a sense the call to Christian character is common to all of us, but our individual personalities are so different from each other, which is apparently just what God loves, that comparing ourselves with each other in matters of character is silly as well.

Some believers don’t have the weaknesses you have. Doesn’t make them better. Some believers have struggles you don’t have. Doesn’t make them worse. Leave it alone.

Listen to this conversation Jesus had with Peter in John 21. V18 *Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.* ¹⁹ *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”* ²⁰ *Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”)* ²¹ *When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”* ²² *Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”* Did you get that? Jesus says, “Follow me. If I want something different of that disciple, it is not your business. You. Follow. Me.”

4. The Lord's Assignment 10:13-16 *But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.* ¹⁴ *For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.* ¹⁵ *We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged,* ¹⁶ *so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.*

It seems that this intruding group of troublesome leaders were also saying that the Corinthian church was not in Paul's jurisdiction. They were now the spiritual leaders in Corinth, not Paul, so the Corinthians did not need to worry about what Paul might say to them.

These sentences use *area of influence* three times. V13, *the area of influence God assigned to us.* V15 *we hope our area of influence may be enlarged.* V16, *without boasting in another's area of influence.*

Each of us has an area of influence, a combination of three things: 1, our physical abilities and limitations; 2, the abilities and limitations of our minds and souls; and 3, the people we spend time with in an ordinary week or month.

That's our area of influence: 1, our bodies, with the strengths and weaknesses they have this week, 2, our minds and souls, with the strengths and weakness they have this week, and 3, people we were with the last week.

Seen this way, our areas of influence are quite different from each other. They are entirely individual. We are very different people from each other, and we are in contact with our own set of people. The Lord's assignment is to be faithful to him in the area of influence he assigned to us. Be faithful to him in the area of influence he assigned to us. The Lord with Peter and John.

What does it mean to be faithful to him? What is his assignment? It is mostly the Christian character we read about at the beginning. For the most part the meekness and gentleness and humility of Christ, when necessary the boldness and confidence of Christ.

In the words we read from 2 Cor 6, *In purity, in patience and kindness, in sincere love, in truthful speech.* These are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and how the power of God works, these are the weapons of righteousness.

Again, the assignment is to be faithful the Lord in our area of influence. Paul hopes in v15 that his area of influence will be increased. But that depends on God and other people, Paul's not in control of that. I have had to reduce my area of influence, because I did not have the energy of body and mind to keep up.

Our area of influence might change when we want it to stay, it might stay the same when we want it to change. That's normal. We cannot control very much of it. It is the Lord's assignment. Paul spent a lot of time in prison; a massive change to area of influence. Be faithful to the Lord.

This is why it makes no sense to be comparing ourselves to other believers. We are so different, our areas of influence so different from each other, it is always comparing apples to oranges.

5, Boasting in the Lord 10:17-18 "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*"¹⁸ *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

Paul talked about boasting 6 times in vv13-18: v13 (2x), v15, v16, v17 (2x). Boasting in the Lord looks something like this: we say to ourselves, "the Lord has given me this area of influence, this much strength and ability among these people. And he has given me grace and help to serve him faithfully *in my area of influence*. By his grace and strength, I am fulfilling his assignment."

I know that our minds quickly go to the ways in which we are not faithful to the Lord, the ways in which we all stumble in many ways. It is a perverse habit, I hope you quickly catch yourself, and tell yourself: "that is NOT the Lord's voice."

There is in this room a huge amount of people fulfilling their assignments. There is a huge amount of people showing Christian character in their areas of influence. Compare yourself to what you'd be if you had never met Christ, if you did not love God and want to follow him. What would you be like then? I would be very different, and so would you.

And for all of that difference, the Lord commends us. Boast in the Lord! Every time we are patient and pure in our area of influence, we are completing the Lord's assignment, and he commends us. When we show kindness and sincere love, the Lord commends us. Paul was confident about this, and got satisfaction from it, and God invites us to do the same.

And remember that our gentleness and humility and kindness not only imitate Christ, but are the weapons of righteousness, they are the power of God to tear down strongholds and take every system of thought captive to Christ.

Don't commend yourself because you are better than someone else. Don't trash yourself because you are worse than someone else. That's all silliness. Exactly as you are right now, strength and weakness together, that's your area of influence, marked out for you by the Lord. Your assignment is to be faithful to him there, right now, and you are doing much of that.

Say this: "The Lord gave me this area of influence, this much ability, among these people. And he has given me grace and help to live in his ways *in my area of influence*. By God's grace and his Spirit, I often complete his assignment. For this he commends me, and what could be better than that!" That is boasting in the Lord, and I hope you will make a point of it. Amen.